Power, Patronage, and Protest in Rural China

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The Chinese countryside at the turn of the millennium presents observers with a perplexing puzzle. On the one side, significant increases in agricultural production have been recorded. In the most recent available statistics, the output of grain, for instance, stood 55 percent higher than when Mao died in 1976,1 while rural industrial production has leaped eightfold during the past decade alone.2 Yet in the face of these gains, evidence has mounted of increasingly open discontent among villagers in many parts of the countryside, and word has sporadically leaked abroad of violent incidents of protest in the rural hinterlands. Why this widespread discontent?

It will be seen in this chapter that one major reason is the failure of China’s rural political system to adapt successfully to the post-Mao era. When farming was decollectivized in the early 1980s and villagers returned to tilling family farms, the Chinese government largely retained the framework for governing rural China that had been established by the Chinese Communist Party during the 1950s and 1960s. This had been designed under Mao as a top-down structure to enforce central control. But today power has become more decentralized under the post-Mao regime, and it will be seen how the Mao-era apparatus have transformed themselves into local satraps who make use of their strategic position between state and society to develop new bases for their own power and prosperity. It will be seen, too, that this is occurring in very different ways in the rich and poor regions of China. Finally, the chapter will examine why and how the central government

is attempting to counteract the tactics of grassroots officials by making them more accountable through a new system of village elections.

But crucial to any understanding of these shifts in the countryside is the essential fact that, until this new electoral effort began, surprisingly little in the structure of rural government had been transformed since the period of Mao’s rule. It is therefore necessary first to examine briefly the shape of rural political life under Mao.

The Rural Scene in Mao’s Day

When the Chinese system of communes was consolidated in the 1960s, a hierarchy of administrative levels was established to ensure that the central party’s writ penetrated all parts of the countryside. Within every village of a commune, the lowest level at which the farmers were organized was the “production team,” each of which comprised a hamlet or village neighborhood and contained some fifteen to sixty households. The team owned blocks of agricultural land, and its member households worked the land together and shared in the proceeds. To encourage the farmers to accept their team head’s leadership in their daily work, the head was normally either elected to his position from within the team or informally selected by consensus, on the basis of his knowledge of agriculture and personal leadership skills. To this extent, the teams were democratic—which had no parallel in any other part of the Chinese political system.

However, the teams were dominated by the next-higher level in the chain of command of party rule that reached from Beijing into each and every village. Sitting atop the production teams, each large village (or in the absence of sizable villages, each cluster of small neighboring hamlets) was designated a “brigade.” This was the lowest level at which a Communist Party branch operated, and the branch’s party secretary was empowered to supervise the workings of the village government and the production teams. Although each village had a brigade head, deputy brigade heads, and other official posts, these were supposed to take second place to the party branch and its party secretary. To keep the party secretary of each brigade attuned to the wishes of the party, he (few party secretaries were women) was always selected by higher levels of the party.

Above the village and its party branch sat the commune government. A commune consisted of a small rural market town and the dozen or so agricultural villages that surrounded it. The commune
administration sometimes owned and operated some small rural factories and perhaps a few orchards, ran the local secondary school, and sometimes established a rudimentary hospital. But the commune served most essentially in the role of a political watchdog: it served as the seat of a local party machine that kept a close watch on the villages within its jurisdiction and relayed the state’s policies and commands to the village party secretaries. The commune and its party secretary were needed as a “bridge” between the rural community and the central state. This was because the rural county, which constituted the next higher level in the chain of political command, normally contained upward of a hundred villages, too large a number to be supervised directly by the government organs in the county capital.

The higher in the rural administration an official sat, the more he or she found it personally worthwhile to abide by the party-state’s demands, even when these conflicted with the local populace’s interests. For one thing, the officials at the commune and county levels, unlike the village-level brigade leadership, did not necessarily feel attached to the rural district where they were stationed. In fact, the commune heads normally were rotated from one commune to another rather than allowed to serve in their own native commune district, just as the county’s leaders were rotated in from elsewhere. (This was very much in keeping with the longstanding practices of the Chinese emperors, who had sent officials to rule counties and regions of which they were not natives so as to circumvent the dangers of localist loyalties and connections.) And if we can intuit anything from the policies that these county and commune officials sometimes pushed, it would seem that their jobs were not jeopardized by crop failures in the villages or stagnating peasant living standards as long as Beijing’s demands were met. Rural bureaucrats who were eager for promotions or anxious to keep their posts obediently looked to see what Beijing’s wishes might be. Whenever the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in Beijing issued a set of directives, or even indirectly indicated its preferences, far-flung counties and villages shifted in the same direction at the same time as if, to use the Chinese term for this phenomenon, there had been a “single stroke of the knife.”

A consequence of this top-down responsiveness was that even the question of which crops to produce in which fields sometimes was not left to the good sense and experience of the team heads and farmers. If need be, compliance to the party’s diktat was enforced through
political threats: team leaders or members who balked could be accused of resisting the revolution. In a political system wracked by periodic “struggle” campaigns and the uncertainty and fear that these aroused, such a threat was effective. When I first began conducting interviews with Chinese from rural areas in the 1970s, during the commune era, the interviewees saw the strength of China’s central authorities as overwhelming and irresistible.³

While the uncertainty and fear generated by the recurring bouts of campaign fever strengthened upper-level controls over the lower levels and a cowed populace, some of these campaigns were also turned by Mao against the local officialdom itself, to keep officials in line. A massive campaign of this type, the Four Cleanups campaign, shook the countryside during the first half of the 1960s; it was orchestrated by so-called work teams of higher-level officials who took over villages for the duration of the campaign.⁴ This campaign was followed shortly by the Cultural Revolution upsurge of 1966–68, during which villagers were given a freer rein. In both campaigns, local officials who had abused their positions and engaged in corruption were pulled up short, as ordinary people responded to the calls from China’s top leaders to level accusations. Such campaigns served, intermittently, as the main buttress against corruption in a system that had few other safeguards. But for the most part, political campaigns tightened controls on the rural populace rather than loosened them, demanding even greater conformity from the populace than in ordinary times. By targeting both ordinary people and officials, the campaigns in China served a role not dissimilar to the centralizing function filled by the secret police in Stalin’s Soviet Union.

This Maoist system could not persist over the long term, however. Year after exhausting year of periodic campaigns and irrational, unchecked interference from above in agricultural practices led by the 1970s to stagnating rural living standards.⁵ Irritated and frustrated,

³ Almost all of this interviewing during the 1970s with respondents from the countryside was conducted from Hong Kong. From the 1980s onward, such interviewing could be conducted from within China, and I was able to confirm what I had earlier been told.

⁴ This is described in Richard Madsen, Morality and Power in a Chinese Village (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 3; and in Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, Chen Village under Mao and Deng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), chaps. 1–3.

many farmers began to slack off in their work. In a downward spiral, by the mid-1970s the collective agriculture of a great many villages was operating with ever decreasing effectiveness. Faced with this, after Mao died in 1976, his successors, under the emerging leadership of Deng Xiaoping, began to contemplate a dramatic break with the past.

**Rural China under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin**

Over a four-year period between 1979 and 1983, a decollectivization drive swept through rural communities in much the same way as previous campaigns had: in a “single stroke of the knife,” almost all villages across China ended up adopting exactly the same system of family farming. Under these egalitarian Deng-era reforms, the production team land and the team animals were divided among the households free of charge, normally on a per capita basis.

Up to the present day, however, the families remain harnessed to quotas of agricultural produce, most often grain, that must be sold to the state at below-market prices. Under Mao, each production team as a whole was responsible for meeting such quotas. When the land was distributed to households during the 1980s, the teams divided these quota deliveries among the individual families by attaching a quota to each plot of distributed land. This crop-quota system continues to impinge upon the living standards of a great many farmers. This is especially the case in the poorer parts of China, which depend most heavily upon grain production. It will be seen in later pages how this has become one of the factors that translate today into growing disgruntlement with local officials.

In one very important respect, though, decollectivization was the final act of a passing era. Even though most of the political structure remained in place, with the return to family farming in the early 1980s rural officials lost control over the daily work of the peasantry. As one interviewee observed, “If those so-called cadres tell us to do something today we don’t always carry it out. We farmers are practical: if we don’t depend upon earning collective work-points that you control, why listen so much to you?” In short, one of the beneficial conse-

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quences of decollectivization was that the arbitrary power of the state and rural officials to exact cowed compliance from the peasantry was weakened.

A second beneficial change was the near abandonment by the government of political campaigns as mechanisms of top-down control. The state would no longer be so intrusive, with the single exception of family planning. Beijing under Deng Xiaoping’s guidance was intent upon giving a politically exhausted populace the sense that they had greater regularity and security in their lives. In practically all respects, this has meant a much more relaxed stance by Beijing toward the grassroots of rural China. In this milieu, villagers have turned back toward traditional anchors—reconstructing lineage halls and local temples, giving ancestral altars pride of place again in their homes, and once again participating in lavish ceremonies to mark weddings, funerals, and the other key events in the life cycle.

The party-state simultaneously enacted steps to reduce the party’s primacy over all aspects of rural administration. There was now to be a “separation of party and government” (dang zheng fenkai) to allow local government functions to operate more routinely. As a symbol of this, the politically laden titles “commune” and “brigade” were abolished, and these levels of government reverted to the prerevolution titles of “township” (xiang) and “administrative village” (xingzheng cun). But to a certain extent this can be considered a case of old wine in new bottles, consisting as it did of new official titles and new declarations of intent while the actual content of the rural political structure remained largely intact. In most localities, the party secretary remains a very powerful figure, often more so than the local government head, and continues to play a direct role in setting policy. In addition, village officials still often operate in an authoritarian style reminiscent of earlier times, to the extent that villagers, a quarter century after Mao’s death, frequently continue to refer to the village government as the “brigade.”

Another form of continuity lies in the rotations of county-level and township-level leaders, in a system similar to what had prevailed under Mao and, before that, in imperial times. The consequences are similar, too: such officials do not feel any particular attachment to the populace.

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of the districts they command. Many of them today put energy during their tenures into showy projects to impress visiting officials. They pour money into launching impressive-looking new economic projects and into erecting taller public buildings and widening and prettifying streets in the county capitals and township market towns, in the knowledge that promotions depend upon making a splash. Within a few more years they have departed, leaving behind debts that must be paid out of future local revenues. Such a scenario is surprisingly common today, particularly in the richer districts, but is found even in relatively poor areas. It is the modern variant of the dam-building and backyard steelmaking campaigns so vigorously pursued in Mao’s day by promotion-seeking county and commune officials.

In a departure from previous practices, however, starting in the early 1980s the central government’s more relaxed posture toward rural society was paralleled by its approach to rural officials. Among other things, anticorruption campaigns that targeted local officials for public exposure and purge were no longer unleashed. Calling off such campaigns was, in one respect, all to the good, in that it moved China away from a politics of unpredictability, fear, and arbitrary retribution. But the national government appears tacitly to have had a separate motive also in mind. Abandoning its major technique for combating corruption meant it could buy the rural officials’ cooperation for economic reforms—by allowing them to benefit illicitly from those reforms.

As expected, local officials have taken advantage of the central state’s pullback to favor their own private interests and those of their favorites. Sometimes this takes the form of outright corruption, such as the siphoning off of publicly owned assets into their own pockets. But an alternative and even more common means to augment their own incomes—and their authority—is to establish patronage relationships with villagers. In doing so, the officials can bank upon the fact that even after decollectivization, they retain at least some administrative leverage over the rural population. The latter remains dependent upon the goodwill of village and higher-level rural cadres to get access to fertilizers, credit, new housing sites, and licenses to engage in business. Chinese peasants frequently need to resort to currying the favor of local officials through gifts, quiet offers of money, and shows of deference.8

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Previously, under the communes, the range of potential patrons was greatly restricted. Because only a small group of grassroots officials controlled all of a village’s economic and political affairs, all patronage flowed through them. Now a more pluralistic structure of patronage has developed. For different sorts of favors, peasants can go to different patrons. For example, peasants who hope to get regular preferential access to special fertilizers or bank loans develop guanxi (personal connections) and personal favors-trading with various marketing-bureau personnel or bank staff. Procurements and loans no longer need to be funneled through a single set of village cadres. This growth of diffuse patron-client networks provides the peasants with considerably greater freedom to maneuver, and in some districts their autonomous building of patronage links has eroded the former rigid structure of rural power.

This is true only to a certain extent, though. In some districts, the officials as a group have developed new ways to extend their powers of patronage and to assert a new form of dominance. But the wherewithal to do so varies dramatically across localities. Under Mao, when central policy was enforced far more strongly, there was a sameness to rural circumstances across China: the very same government programs were pursued throughout the great bulk of the villages, everywhere using the very same mechanisms of control. Today, in contrast, different villages and townships follow very different drumbeats.

**The Industrializing Rural Districts**

Under Deng, local rural governments were granted the leeway to take greater initiative to develop their localities economically in diverse ways. Especially in the coastal regions and in districts near the cities, they have been able to take advantage of this. As the Mao-era political machinery atrophied, the rural officials in those regions have been able to establish new bases for their authority and power by developing industry.

Under Mao, they had received mixed signals from above. On the one side, they were encouraged to start local factories, but on the other, they were denied access to most kinds of industrial inputs, which were largely reserved for China’s state-owned enterprises. They also were usually forbidden to erect factories that produced goods that competed with the lumbering state-owned industrial sector. Under Deng, these restrictions gradually disappeared, and the countryside was given the
go-ahead to take advantage of its lower administrative and labor costs. A huge surge in rural industrialization ensued, starting in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s. For most of the past two decades, the rural industrial sector has been the fastest-growing portion of the most rapidly developing nation on earth.

Much of the new rural industry is owned by township governments. Through this industrialization, some of the townships that are in striking distance of coastal and urban markets have developed their own substantial sources of revenue and their own large constituencies of workers. Officials in such townships have used the budget surpluses and their control over hiring to develop a homegrown political base. To cement local support, they have spread largesse in the form of public-welfare benefits, in particular through schools and health clinics. Whereas under Mao they had to rely upon coercive political campaigns to sustain their authority, which at the same time reduced them to serving largely as instruments of the state, the wealthy township administrations now are in a financial position not only to assert their own authority locally but also to use their budgetary independence to attain greater autonomy from the pressures of higher-level bureaucracy. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

At the same time, the township government today gains from the fact that the market town, the seat of its administration, has taken on greater importance in the lives of the local populace. Before the revolution, peasants frequently gathered in the town on market days to buy and sell. But during the period of collective agriculture, there was little need to visit the town. Agricultural produce was sold directly to the state in bulk by the production teams, and the state also became the farmers’ main provider of consumer goods, often through rationing. Free markets often were shut down, and lateral trade between villages was all but cut off. The “intermediate world” beyond the village—the local marketing district—shrank in importance to the peasants, while their own village and production-team community as well as the central state and its policies became increasingly significant to them.

That “intermediate world” has reemerged today in their lives. In the 1980s, farmers again became responsible for marketing most of

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9. The fixed assets of the rural enterprises increased at a phenomenal rate of 27 percent per annum in the five-year period between 1985 and 1990 and then at an even more sizzling rate of 37 percent per year between 1990 and 1995. Jean Oi, *Rural China Takes Off* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 82.
their own produce (they even are required to carry their own quota grain into town), and they must purchase their own inputs in town as well. They now congregate in the market town at frequent intervals, make social contacts there with people from other villages within the township, and through this have come to identify more closely with the territory of the township. In sum, decollectivization and the increased scope of commercialization during the past two decades have significantly increased the salience to farmers of the township—and the higher the level of commercialization and industrialization in a given township, the more this is the case.

The village government has similarly been restrengthened markedly in those villages that own profitable factories. In such villages, the leaders have sometimes created mini-welfare states based on the revenues. Some have also established a high level of control over villagers dependent upon them for largesse. One example among many is a Sichuan village in which village-government-owned factories have been flourishing since the 1980s. The system of patronage there has created a situation in which clusters of families who are related to the officials through kinship or friendship occupy the village’s economic and social upper crust, and the village’s other families make up a resentful but powerless and dependent lower stratum.¹⁰

There are also village governments that are more even-handed in their largesse and have built up broad-based loyal constituencies within their villages. Local leaders in such cases may feel emboldened to resist township policies that run counter to their village’s interests. In other cases, in contrast, village leaders have squandered their base of support within their village but can get away with local abuses of power because they are protected by their immediate superiors in the township and county. As the central state has pulled back, independent networks have arisen of local officials who scratch each other’s backs and cover up for, and enrich, each other. To both the central government and the local populace, this has proven a worrisome development.

The tensions and disappointments of the last decade of Mao’s rule left as its heritage an atmosphere of cynicism and opportunism among

many of the county, township, and village officials. Over the years, in many parts of rural China, this has translated into officials living well at public expense. This can be seen in well-off and impoverished districts alike. County and township officials in particular tend to exhibit a palpable desire for perks, be it expensive cars that are put at their disposal or lavish meals and entertainment that are billed to their government budgets. They help each other's kith and kin to obtain good public-sector employment or to win local government contracts. It is partly a matter of private favors trading and partly that each rural level of government—village, township, and county—finds that it pays off in terms of its own governmental interests to ingratiate itself with officials in the levels above and below it. This cooperation extends to policy matters, in which the different levels of rural government often work together informally to protect local interests and to bend central-government programs to their own liking. To a slight extent, these various types of bureaucratic behavior and linkages had been true, too, of Mao's time. But they were constricted then by the harsh, unpredictable nature of upper-level party rule, which was intent upon retaining a whip hand over the connivances of lower-level officialdom. That hand has largely been stilled.

As the self-interested bonds strengthen between officials occupying the different rural levels of government, the local political scene in many districts has been turned on its head. During the period of Mao-era collectives, village officials could not ignore central-government directives and orders but instead could attempt much more readily to side-step or resist commands that originated only at the commune level, knowing that the commune administration, when acting on its own, was the weakest level in the party-state's chain of command. Interviewees during the Maoist period observed that a commune generally held few economic assets of its own, had no natural constituencies that its leadership could turn to for support, and had to depend upon the borrowed power of the state to get its way. Today the opposite situation sometimes prevails, in which village cadres find themselves tied to the programs of the township (formerly commune) officialdom through compacts of mutual interest and mutual support, while they feel less pressure to conform to the preferences of the faraway central state. As will be seen most clearly when we examine the poorer districts, these cadres can ride roughshod over the local populace today, no longer on behalf of the party-state but rather to serve
their own ends. Mao-era central tyranny enforced by locals was supplanted in some parts of the countryside during the 1980s by local tyranny indulged by the center.

The lowest level of local rural organization, the production team, collapsed throughout China as a locus of activity when the agricultural fields were distributed to the households to farm. The teams continue to exist today only in the sense that they remain the de jure owners of the land. Each year they divide among their member households the proceeds, if any, from fish-pond rentals and the ground rents of industrial sites. But they no longer count as part of the political equation in villages, as the team heads no longer oversee or represent anyone. Although the teams were not able to adequately protect the interests of the peasantry under the collectives, their effective disappearance as a meaningful institution leaves the farmers even more disorganized and vulnerable in the face of local officialdom.

Taking advantage of this, officials sometimes overplay their hand, leading to violent outbursts. One scheme that has been reported many times in the Chinese press occurs when officials at the township level, sometimes with the assistance of village officials, connive to rob farmers of valuable land. The officials first decree that stretches of local farm-land must be sold at a low price for the inauguration of an “industrial development zone”; this land is then handed over at that price to semi-private “development companies” that the officials themselves establish and largely own; and the land is immediately resold at a very high profit for use as industrial sites. Throughout the past decade, Chinese newspapers have reported on farmer riots in several provinces in reaction to this form of corrupt land expropriation.

Such outbursts, and also nonviolent forms of protest (to be discussed later in the chapter), appear to be on the increase in the more rapidly developing parts of the countryside. One reason is that the effectiveness of patronage systems is beginning to erode. For one thing, the enterprises that are owned by rural governments no longer can provide as many jobs to local people as in the past. In the 1980s, the wages provided to local workers were higher than what they could earn in the fields. Gaining access to such coveted jobs cemented the fortunate workers’ loyalty. The local factories enjoyed local protectionism against competing goods from outside, and with monopoly profits they could afford to be generous to the local workforce. But that local protectionism has largely broken down over the years as the
national economy continues to marketize. To remain profitable, the local factories need to be competitive in their labor costs, and so increasingly they have turned to hiring people from the poorest parts of China at low wages. In some districts, only the supervisory jobs in industry remain in local hands, and the local authorities are left with far fewer patronage jobs to dispense.

In many of these same townships, the patronage networks have been further weakened because lucrative livelihoods outside of agriculture have emerged that are beyond the control of the officials. In particular, the latter part of the 1980s witnessed the rise of private enterprises, and this trend has accelerated in the 1990s. In fact, during much of the 1990s, rural private industry has developed at a faster rate than the collective (township- and village-owned) enterprises. As a result, by the close of 1997, according to official statistics, the value of production of private industry in the countryside reached 300 billion yuan, almost as large as the total production value of China’s rural collective industry (360 billion yuan), and the total profits of the private sector already stood higher than those of the collective sector.11 Sometimes these private businesses are tied to the officials, but increasingly they are not. The proprietors are becoming an increasingly independent, affluent, and influential constituency on the local scene, a counterweight to the unilateral power of officialdom.12 These several trends provide political and social “space” for the expression of protest.

The Poorer Districts

The parts of the countryside in which villagers have a deeper cause for discontent are the nonindustrialized, less affluent districts. They have little reason there to be grateful to rural officials and, as will be seen, considerably more reason to be resentful. It comes as no surprise that the great bulk of rural protests have arisen in these poorer parts of China.

For one thing, the villagers who depend entirely upon agriculture for a livelihood have not shared in China’s boom times. Initially, in the

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first half of the 1980s, the central government increased the prices paid for farm produce, but during most of the years since 1985 the prices have not kept up with inflation, farm incomes have stagnated, and in some areas they have even dropped.

The low profits from agriculture have been more than a cause for peasant discontent: in the nonindustrialized rural areas, this pinch on household earnings has also jeopardized the capacity of local governments to raise tax revenues from households. Under the Mao-era collectives, such exactions were quietly siphoned off from each production team’s pool of postharvest income before the remainder of the proceeds were divided among the village households as wages. The farmers thus were not even fully aware of the taxes. Today, in contrast, village officials must seek tax funds openly from independent farmers, going from household to household to collect them, and these are households that are already struggling economically.

In some of these poorer districts, village leaders do not have the willpower or capacity to coerce the farmers to pay up. Chinese government publications refer to these as “paralyzed villages.” In some of these, so few funds are collected that village medical care and schooling are no longer available. In one village in Yunnan province that I visited in the late 1980s, a site without a drinkable water supply, funds had been raised by the village in the early 1970s, under the Mao-era collectives, to install a system of pipes leading from a spring a mile away. More recently the pipes have begun to leak badly, but the village government can no longer raise enough money from households to fix the pipes, and the farmers once again must laboriously haul buckets of drinking water from the spring by shoulder pole.13

Officials at the county and township levels, however, still normally push to have their own tax revenues collected in full. They not only have legitimate government outlays to cover but also often want a share of the bureaucratic perks available in better-off locales, including the fleets of cars, the wining and dining, and the relatives slotted into public-sector jobs in a bloated bureaucracy. To accomplish these ends, they resort to coercion to extract funds from villagers.

Their performance thus differs markedly from that of officials in the rich industrialized rural districts. Whereas local officials in the lat-
ter districts advance their own interests by keeping local household taxes low and by setting aside enterprise profits to create mini-welfare states, in the poor districts the county and township officials frequently find it in their interest to engage in predatory behavior. They concoct an imposing array of local fees, taxes, and fines—say, for reforestation, for owning radios or motorcycles or bicycles, policing, road building, population planning, slaughtering household animals for personal consumption, you name it. A survey of one thousand peasant households in twenty counties of Sichuan province, undertaken by the provincial government, disclosed that the average household’s burden had increased from 64 separate fees and local taxes in 1985 to 107 in 1991. Since then, the situation has, if anything, worsened. A national party journal reported in 1998 that recently “these three categories of burdens (fees and taxes, quota apportionments, and fines) have increased markedly, and the amount of the increase has far outstripped the farmers’ gains in cash income.”

During the 1990s, the central government began increasing the amount of low-priced quota deliveries demanded on a number of crops, including cotton, silk cocoons, and even grain, and provincial and local authorities could not resist getting into the act. Some localities have added their own extra share of quotas, and in some other districts the county or township government, as monopolist middleman, has gone so far as to force farmers to hand in their entire crop (tobacco is a good example) at prices far below those of the free market. The local government then sells these extra deliveries at a high market price.

Township and village cadres alienate their neighbors by collecting the extra revenues and crop deliveries, and so they have good reason to resist doing so—unless driven by pressures and inducements from above. Since the Mao-era political levers over cadres through campaigns and control through party committees no longer are effective, the county and township elicit the cooperation of lower-level rural officials today by setting job-performance quotas each year. This tech-

nique is a carryover from Maoist times, but with a twist. Officials today are rewarded monetarily, as well as through promotions, for fulfillment and overfulfillment of their assignments’ quotas, and they are penalized monetarily if they do not meet their quotas. One consequence of this mechanism is that “charts of targets and progress towards those targets are ubiquitous features of township meeting rooms, offices and bulletin boards.”17 The most stringent example of such target setting is in the area of birth control, where level by bureaucratic level, pressures are imposed upon cadres to enforce central decrees by meeting fixed birth quotas. The other type of assignment that most often receives this type of priority, with rewards and penalties attached, is, not surprisingly, the collection of taxes, locally levied fees, and quotas of agricultural products.18

In some impoverished villages, the officials themselves have so little incentive to stay in office that they prefer to ignore higher levels. In such cases, the revenues simply do not get collected or, more often, county and township officials periodically raid the village with police officers in tow. One way or another, then, even in very poor villages, money usually gets squeezed out of households.

The central government is well aware of this, and a bit worried, especially since the tax and fee burdens sporadically spark protests in these poor regions. The response of the government has been to decree an upper limit on local taxes and fees: cumulatively, they cannot exceed 5 percent of the average income in a village. This is an unrealistically low figure, since even minimal public services and local government expenses normally cost more than that amount. This is especially true in poor areas, where that “5 percent” benchmark represents a smaller absolute amount of money than elsewhere. This may be a


18. See Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China,” Comparative Politics, vol. 31, no. 2 (January 1999), pp. 167–86. The pressures on grassroots cadres are also frequently discussed in the Chinese news media; as one example, “When funds are collected from the peasants, every penny must come from door-to-door collections by village and hamlet cadres. Some locales give them time limits to make their collections. If any amount is still uncollected at the end of this period, the cadres are penalized or their salaries are withheld.” Liaowang (Outlook Weekly, Beijing), issue 14, 1998, p. 38, trans. in Inside China Mainland, June 1998, p. 61.
moot point, however, since the 5 percent limit does not usually seem to be adhered to. Local officials either ignore the central government’s decree or rewrite local statistics to show far higher average incomes than actually exist, so as to claim falsely that they are sticking within the government’s 5 percent limit.

**Peasant Protests**

As the impositions upon peasants have grown, they have reacted violently in some places. Between January and July 1998 alone, a total of 3,200 incidents of collective protests were sufficiently serious to be recorded at the national level, and more than 420 of these involved conflicts in which rural government buildings were surrounded by angry crowds. During that half-year period, casualties were officially reported as topping 7,400, including more than 1,200 cadres and police wounded.\(^{19}\)

In their demonstrations against local officialdom, farmers regularly point to the central government regulation about the 5 percent tax maximum. It is a handle they can use in order to place the local officials on the defensive: they, the farmers, legally are in the right, and the local cadres are in the wrong. In fact, the largest peasant protest movement thus far recorded, in Renshou County, Sichuan province, was sparked when a villager confronted cadres with the 5 percent rule, refused to pay anything beyond this, posted the national regulation so that others would know about it, and rallied other farmers to his cause.\(^{20}\) (After the protest movement was crushed, the villager ultimately went to prison for having instigated a public disturbance.)

Rural governments, as in the above case, often try to conceal information about central policies from the peasants.\(^{21}\) But it is obvious that channels of information no longer can be tightly or effectively controlled by local authorities. Literacy is too widespread today, and villagers no longer are confined to their own small localities but go out in large numbers to the cities to work, where they mingle and exchange

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information with migrant workers from other parts of the countryside.  

Armed with such information, by far the greatest number of farmers' protests today are entirely within the letter of the law. They include signature petitions, appeals to courts of law, approaches to national newspapers and magazines, and delegations of peasants traveling to seek out high-level officials to lodge direct complaints.  

Most of these peaceful protests—and also many of the violent ones—involves implicit or explicit appeals to the central government against local policies, even when central policies are in part the reason for disgruntlement.  

Farmers who in Maoist times lacked protection from the central state feel today that they lack protection by the central state, and they want more of an assertion of central power in order to enforce central edicts.  

For this very reason, the rural unrest, no matter how severe it may become, does not appear to pose any imminent danger to the central government. The disgruntlement, after all, is not aimed against the government; and the protests are localized and isolated from each other.  

Beijing, for its part, is increasingly willing today to promote the viewpoint among disgruntled peasants that errant local cadres are to blame for their plight, painting itself as a good, caring government. National leaders see the sense of posing as allies and protectors of the farmers, just as the farmers see the sense of appealing to the central authorities in hopes of playing them off against the local officialdom. In point of fact, already by the mid-1980s, after the reforms to decollectivize the countryside had been accomplished with the local offi-

24. Even when the main complaint of farmers involves heavy centrally imposed crop-quota burdens, local cadres more safely get blamed. A researcher in rural Xinjiang province who found precisely that situation observed that “Many times I was told [by farmers], ‘the policies issued at the top are good, but they are not implemented as they should be.’” lidiko Beller-Hann, “The Peasant Condition in Xinjiang,” Journal of Peasant Studies, vol. 25, no. 1 (October 1997), p. 103. Chinese farmers throughout much of history have had a reservoir of such faith in distant rulers. In an interesting article, Lucien Bianco points to parallels in European history: “Criticizing the local authorities by appealing to the decisions of the Politburo is the reappearance, within a Communist regime, of older beliefs deeply held by the subjects of all absolutist regimes: the King of France (or the Tsar of Russia) is thought to be betrayed by his servants.” Lucien Bianco, “The Weapons of the Weak: A Critical View,” China Perspectives, no. 22 (March–April 1999), p. 8.
cials' acquiescence, the central government no longer saw as much need to placate the rural cadres. As the years passed, Beijing instead expressed increasing concern that the independent back-scratching networks of local officials impeded central authority, and the national news media was regularly encouraged to publish exposés about local officials' impositions upon the peasantry. It was within this context that the 5 percent rule was decreed and that provisions were written into the 1993 Law on Agriculture stating that farmers could legally “refuse” (jijue) to pay the excessive, unauthorized fees and taxes.25

The Inauguration of Grassroots Elections

Reformers in Beijing are willing to go beyond these measures. They have urged the creation, at the village level, of an institutionalized check on cadres' power. Beginning in the mid-1980s and extending into the 1990s, they have argued that villagers would be more willing to abide by national-level taxes and quotas and birth-control policies if they were given an organized voice to overturn the grassroots abuses.26 In 1987 the reformers in Beijing were able to push through an official regulation calling for the establishment of “village representative assemblies” (that is, grassroots legislatures that were supposed to monitor the village cadres). It was subsequently directed, more importantly, that not just these representative bodies but also the body of village officials—the so-called villagers committee—should be elected by village residents, and it was decided, even more importantly, that the village heads themselves should be elected for three-year terms of office through multicandidate elections.27

These were major political reforms, especially since the Communist Party tradition is, by its very essence, antidemocratic. The Marxist-Leninist belief system had always stressed that the party leadership held a special mission to push history forward through its supe-

rior knowledge of Marxism and its commitment to the revolution, and that the party stood far in advance of the at times “feudal” ideas held by ordinary people. To select a local government by majority vote, as in “bourgeois democracy,” would only reflect the average, unprogres-
sive, unenlightened views of the people. Today, the party does not hold to that Marxist ideology any longer in reality, but it still firmly believes in its unilateral right to power—now at the helm of a “developmental state.” The very notion of multicandidate elections goes against the grain of the party’s long-entrenched aversion to democratic processes.

The Communist Party is not alone in its distrust of democracy. Even the bulk of China’s university students and intellectuals, who normally are portrayed in the West as pro-democracy, do not believe in a one-person-one-vote universal franchise. They share in an urban antipathy and disdain for the countryside, afraid that the peasants are ill-equipped to vote and would be prone to support demagogues.28

It is ironic, then, that the peasantry is the only group in China allowed to select local leaders in multicandidate secret ballots. But it perhaps is even more ironic that urban dwellers should have disdain for the farmers’ capacity to participate in such elections. The farmers, after all, are the only portion of China’s population who have had experience in local democracy, since they were allowed under Mao to select their own production-team leadership. Now, in the 1990s, with the production teams hollowed out and rendered irrelevant by decollectivization, they were again to choose their grassroots leaders, raised one degree to the village level.

To issue directives in Beijing is one thing, but to actually carry them through in the provinces and localities is another, and it is not known how many of China’s 930,000 villages have experienced genuine elections in which the residents get to nominate the candidates. For one thing, many of the incumbent officeholders in villages understandably did not see the electoral reforms to be in their own best interests, nor did many of the provincial, county, and township bureaucrats. In most parts of the countryside, all of these levels of officials were slow to implement village elections. Indeed, Guangdong, the last hold-

28. At Tiananmen in 1989, when they called for democracy, what they meant by the word was “freedom”: freedom of the press, of assembly, and of association, and an impartial independent court system. They wanted the government to take into account a wider range of voices, with a widening of the decision-making elite to include them as an educated constituency.
out among China’s provinces, did not begin to require any elections for village committees until 1999.

In many other parts of China, even when elections are held, local officials often conspire to keep the new representative bodies toothless. In some villages, the deputy village head, for instance, serves as the head of the village representative assembly even though the assembly is supposed to oversee him and his superior, while in a large number of other villages the assembly is rarely called into session. In a great many places, thus, they remain ineffective or inactive or serve as a tool of the village leadership. In yet other villages, the new direct elections for village officials are dominated by the township administrators or by the village incumbents, and potential rivals for office are not allowed to run on one pretext or another. And even when elections are fairly held, in some villages the selections are dominated by members of the largest lineage group, which only reinforces longstanding patterns of favoritism and intravillage antagonism.

Perhaps most important of all, in only some of the villages do direct multicablete elections take place to select the village leaders. In many other villages, the residents are just provided with a list of six or seven candidates from among whom five are to be selected to serve as the village’s officials. Thus the residents’ influence over the composition of the village leadership is effectively minimized—their choice confined to the essentially negative role of vetoing one or two disliked candidates.

Nonetheless, in many of China’s villages, corrupt cadres have been ousted through such elections, and in the best of cases entirely fair full-scale elections have been held. In some of these latter villages, the popularly elected village representative assemblies have even gained a say in supervising the village budget. Given all this, reports from China suggest that in an increasing number of rural districts the electoral reforms are serving their purpose, which is to assuage peasant disgruntlement by restoring a sense of legitimacy to village government.

In all of these elections, whether they be for village assemblies or for village leadership posts, no political parties are allowed, nor slates of candidates with common platforms, nor any overarching electoral organizations transcending the village. Elections are allowed in vil-

lages, rather than in cities, precisely because the villages are atomized. China’s top party leadership appears to hold to the premise that if elections can be restricted to a local level and isolated from the all-important structure of party rule, they cannot provide the seeds for any organized challenge to higher-level party rule.

The problem the party faces, however, is that the example set by the village-level elections is contagious. Already, some reformist provincial, prefectural, and county leaders have been willing to go beyond Beijing. They can observe that in many villages the present sets of elections are not sufficient to restore legitimacy to village governments. The most important village figure under the Chinese political system even today, after all, is often not the village head but the village party secretary, who is still insulated from popular opinion. The village elections may be of little importance when the party secretary retains control over village enterprises and the village’s purse strings and his power triumphs that of the village head and villager committee.30

Thus, despite Leninist antipathy to allowing non-party members to elect party leaders, the logic of the village-level electoral reforms has led to a further step, starting in rural Shanxi province, with elections for village party secretary.31 Other provinces have picked up the cue. By late 1999, direct elections for village secretaries and village party committees were being conducted throughout a section of Shandong province containing 6,500 villages.32 Despite the discomfiture of the party organization in Beijing, democracy is creeping into previously taboo areas.

The electoral process is also creeping upward out of the villages. The level of rural administration that most alienates many farmers in the less prosperous parts of China is the township: it appears to them to be the source of most of the local fees and fines. Village-level elections cannot assuage peasant discontent against township leaders; so if the process of electing officials at the lower level proves successful in restoring farmers’ goodwill, why not attempt elections for rural town-

ship leaders? Even some of the top leaders in Beijing are enticed by such a notion. Jiang Zemin, China's Communist Party secretary and president, himself tentatively endorsed the idea in 1997, although the measure has not yet been officially approved. However, with support from reformist officials and mass-media outlets in Beijing, in league with reformist regional officials, efforts have begun in selected areas to set the stage gradually for this next shift. Thus, bucking the official policy in Beijing, prefectural officials in Sichuan province successfully conducted elections for a rural township chief in late 1998 and garnered widespread favorable publicity among reformers elsewhere. Within months, a township in Guangdong had followed suit. We may be witnessing the initial building blocks for the emergence of higher-level democracy in China. If village and township elections can be conducted, and if rural party secretaries are not immune from elections, then pressures and demands can begin to grow from within the ranks of political reformers for elections to be initiated to resolve the problem of unpopular and unresponsive county governments.

These should not be interpreted as bottom-up initiatives by the villagers themselves; they are not in a position to play any precedent-setting part in the initiation of new electoral reforms. There is a mistaken belief among some people outside China regarding this, just as there exists a similar mistaken belief that the farmers were able to take the initiative into their own hands to decollectivize in the early 1980s. But still, elections are quietly being instituted at levels above the village, through the connivance of political reformers in the upper echelons of government, officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs (the government organization that is supposed to organize and oversee elections) and middle-ranking officials out in the regions.

In short, democracy by stealth, strategically engineered first in rural districts at a distance from Beijing and creeping upward level by

35. A report on this election is contained in Zhongguo shehui kexue jikan (Chinese social science quarterly), no. 26 (summer 1999), pp. 27–30.
rural level, seems to be under way. The structure of rural governance, which has largely stood unchanged since the end of Mao's era, is beginning to crack. If present trends continue, the Chinese polity may, gradually, change immeasurably.