



*Red Flag Commune and Half Moon Village.*

# CHINA'S URBAN VILLAGERS

## *Life in a Beijing Commune*

By

NORMAN A. CHANCE

*with*

HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON

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CASE STUDIES IN  
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

GENERAL EDITORS  
George and Louise Spindler  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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CHINA'S URBAN VILLAGERS

*Life in a Beijing Commune*

*Cover photograph:* A young peasant farmer from Half Moon Village.

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To My Parents

Harold and Wanneta Chance

## Foreword

### ABOUT THE SERIES

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed to bring to students, in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways and in different places. They are written by men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. The authors are also teachers, and in writing their books they have kept the students who will read them foremost in their minds. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and other universal categories of human social behavior become meaningful.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman A. Chance is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Connecticut. He was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, and studied anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania before receiving his Ph.D. degree from Cornell University in 1957. He taught previously at the University of Oklahoma and at McGill University, where he also served as Director of the Programme in the Anthropology of Development until 1968, when he moved to Connecticut to head the newly formed Department of Anthropology. Prior to developing an interest in China, he undertook research in the southwest United States, Alaska, Canada, and Mexico. He is the author of an earlier case study in this series, *The Eskimo of North Alaska*.

### ABOUT THE BOOK

This case study of Half Moon Village within Red Flag Commune near Beijing is largely based on two visits to the People's Republic of China. Periods of residence and participant observation in the village include time spent in agricultural field labor as well as sharing in the social and cultural life of the people. Fifty in-depth interviews were also conducted with a wide range of personnel including peasants, factory workers, students, local leaders, government officials, and intellectuals. Few field researchers have been able to learn enough about modern China and its complex history to write knowledgeably about more than one small aspect of it. That aspect, for Norman Chance, is a mid-sized village in a large

commune in the shadow of China's capital city. Half Moon village is an understandable and relatively manageable unit for study from an anthropological, ethnographic point of view. That this case study is credible is attested to not only by Dr. Chance's professional status as an experienced anthropologist but also by extensive reviews by other students of modern China and by qualified individuals in the People's Republic who gave their assistance while the manuscript was taking shape.

The study is remarkable for its combination of two quite unlikely themes: One is the effort to analyze socialist political and economic processes aimed at developing viable solutions to the country's pressing problems. The other is a study of family and kin, the nature of sex roles and marriage, the events and contexts of socialization, and going to school. This combination makes the case study much more than it could have been were only one of these themes emphasized. Without the direct observation in the field and participant interaction with the people—two constant features of the anthropological approach—the latter theme would not have appeared.

The style of presentation in this case study contributes to readability and understanding. The author not only draws on his own direct observations in telling anecdotes that enliven the pages and evoke images—he also uses dialogue extensively, permitting the people themselves to tell about their lives and circumstances as closely to their own way as translation and the ethics of field research permit. The reader feels close to the concerns of everyday life as well as to the issues of socialism at the grass-roots level in modern China.

There is no country in the world today about which Americans are more curious than the People's Republic of China. And there is no country about which we have more misinformation, more hazy understandings, and gross misunderstandings. This case study is a step in the direction of improving our knowledge and understanding.

It is also a demonstration of the capabilities of anthropology as an approach to the study of complex societies. Though Half Moon is only one of many villages in China, knowing about it permits us to form some relevant perspective on the complex whole of which it is a part. If relations between the People's Republic and the United States improve, we may acquire enough comparative material from other village studies to make firmer judgments about the whole. For the present, we are fortunate to have this study of a village in the vicinity of a large urban center—one that is neither the poorest nor the richest, nor the most backward or most progressive of its kind.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER  
*Editors*  
Calistoga, California

## Preface

Fieldwork is a hallmark of anthropology. Living with the people, experiencing their work, social patterns, thought, and values is what often distinguishes our approach from that of other social sciences. Yet on-the-scene rural studies of China's mainland by Western anthropologists or other social analysts have been almost nonexistent since 1949.

Even within China itself, few government-sponsored ethnographic and sociological investigations are made available to the public. The actual teaching of cultural anthropology was abandoned in 1952 (Whyte and Pasternak 1980:148). The resulting loss of a generation of scholars trained in comparative investigation and social science methodology is only just now being realized as academic institutions seek to reestablish cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, and similarly oriented disciplines into their curriculum.

From the early 1950s through the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, such fields of inquiry were perceived as reactionary and therefore unworthy of recognition in a revolutionary society committed to socialist transformation. Instead of making the more common Western distinction between the development of anthropological knowledge and the uses to which it could be put, Chinese leaders of the time placed the whole subject matter outside the bounds of political acceptability. They assumed that such intellectual activity challenged the views of Marx and Lenin, and opened the door to new forms of foreign colonialism.

The slowness with which cultural anthropology and related fields are now returning to the academic fold is only partly due to established priorities and the limited availability of trained teachers and researchers. Although the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has recently emphasized the importance of these subjects in strengthening the country's drive toward modernization, some still express concern over the possible emergence of a scholarly elite committed to challenging the present direction of Chinese society in the name of objective social science—emphasizing that objectivity cannot be separated from politics and its impact on human beings. Such issues are not just academic, but reflect important problems in how best to build a modern socialist society.

Needless to say, questions of objectivity in the development and utilization of knowledge are raised in the United States and other countries too. A well-known American example is the heated debate carried on by members of various social (and physical) scientific societies on the role of their professions in the Vietnam War. Still, social research in the United States receives continuing recognition and support, whereas in China it is just now reemerging within universities and institutes. The fact that so little field research has been undertaken in rural China for the past thirty years—whether accomplished by Chinese social scientists or others—is one reason to encourage more in-depth village studies. Chinese peasants

represent one-fifth of the world's population. It would certainly behoove the other four-fifths to learn more about them. Still, paucity of knowledge is not the only reason for studying rural China.

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present, a dramatic increase has taken place in the comparative study of economic development. Many years ago, when I first began teaching a seminar on the topic, I kept coming across references to China's alternative "model" (see Frolic 1978). Why is it, I asked myself, that China—the most ancient of civilizations—has stimulated such great interest among Western social scientists and intellectuals of the increasingly independent Third World? Is it the case, as many sympathetic analysts proposed, that China has found a more humane way of developing, one that places a higher value on meeting social needs over rapid economic growth?

Can underdeveloped countries like China improve their standard of living without succumbing to the myriad problems of expanding urbanization, with its attendant dislocation and unemployment; heavy industrialization, with its heightened exploitation of the rural sector; increased economic dependence on outside capital, with the all-too-frequent inflationary spiral that accompanies it; and the subtler but powerful cultural blandishments of Western consumer-oriented society? Some knowledgeable economists, historians, and China specialists thought so (see Gurley 1971; Stavrianos 1975; Nee and Peck 1975). Others, such as Simon Leys, were far more critical of China's post-1949 development, calling the Mao-led efforts at socialist development "essentially totalitarian and feudal bureaucratic" (Leys 1977:xi).

Having become deeply concerned over the seeming inability of Western-based development programs to meet the needs of the people to whom they were directed, I wanted to learn more. I hoped that a first-hand visit to China would provide some enlightenment and perhaps even a few tentative answers. At least it was worth a try.

In 1971, following the advent of "ping-pong" diplomacy (in which the Chinese government invited an American table-tennis team to play in Beijing), the process of renewing formal ties between China and the United States was begun. I immediately applied to the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa to undertake a brief study of changing patterns of education resulting from the Cultural Revolution policies then being implemented. Having recently become head of an anthropology department, I was particularly interested in academic administration and felt that I could learn something from China's seemingly innovative efforts in this regard. Given the existing political climate, it was also clear that more in-depth field research by an American anthropologist was out of the question. At that time, even a one- or two-month field trip to China was uncommon (see Schell 1977).

The following spring, I learned from the embassy in Ottawa that my proposal had indeed been approved and that I was expected in Beijing in the next two weeks! Shortly thereafter, in April and May of 1972, together with Nancy F. Chance, also an anthropologist, I had the rather heady experience of traveling to five major cities and many towns and villages, visiting schools, colleges, research institutes, and universities, interviewing faculty, administrators, and students, and gathering initial data on the impact of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" on the social and educational life of the Chinese people.

As one of the first American anthropologists to visit China in over twenty years, I soon found myself being treated as "an honored guest"—an experience perhaps best described as "un-humbling"—complete with an overwhelming array of culinary delights, flashbulb lights, and breathtaking sights. Introduced to many of the country's scientific leaders in the Academy of Sciences and other key educational institutions, I was quickly presented with an overview of China's recent academic innovations. Almost impossible to achieve in the politically rarified atmosphere of the capital city, on the other hand, was an insight into the educational system from the perspective of students, teachers, administrators, and other participants not so imbued with the official policy.

However, I did have several lively discussions with faculty members of the Beijing Central Institute of Minorities, including the anthropologist Fei Xiaotong. Fei, an internationally known social scientist trained in England and the United States, had only recently reestablished ties with Westerners after having undergone a long period of intellectual isolation in China's countryside following his active criticism of the government (Fei *et al.* 1973; Fei 1980; and McGough 1979).

Invited to give a formal lecture on "Minority Life in America" to the student body of the Institute, I soon found myself engaged in a four-hour discussion that dramatically illustrated how limited East-West scholarly contact had been in the past two decades, and also, how different were our perspectives on the relationship between minority and majority cultures.

After leaving the capital for politically less intense areas of the country, I was able to undertake some preliminary research of the sort that had originally brought me to China—though, of course, not all that I had hoped. Still, this first trip helped me to appreciate the immense historical complexity of China that has led some in the past to describe it as "unfathomable," "unpredictable," or simply "unknowable."

However, on returning to the United States, I was soon asked to put aside the complexities in favor of simple generalizations. That is, as one of the few academic visitors to China at that time, I was immediately (and temptingly) called upon to draw large-scale conclusions based on a modicum of experience. Indeed, symptoms of "instant expertise" were showing up in many literary and scholarly circles at that time.

Actually, it was rather easy to report on the positive aspects of China's development effort, given the ease of access to those models and experiments deemed successful by the initiators and participants. Many people, including myself, were impressed with Mao Zedong's strategy of reducing economic inequalities through the immense collective effort of the people (Chance 1973). It was the failures—economic, political, and personal—which were barely glimpsed, if seen at all, that I found difficult to assess, and that knowledge was also necessary to any well-rounded picture of contemporary China. Unfortunately, all other requests to return to China for more in-depth anthropological investigation were either ignored or rejected. Obviously, I had to settle for what had already been accomplished. Looking back on these years, I now realize that my initial evaluation of China was based more on what I had hoped was occurring than on what was actually happening—hardly a scientific appraisal. As a result, my interpretations were often more illusory than real.

Six years later, I joined millions of other Americans in observing a major turn-around in China's internal government policies. External relations, too, were changing as the country decided to open the door wider to foreign visitors. In just a few years, over a quarter of a million tourists had savored the country's cultural fare. Government and scientific delegations began formal talks culminating in a proliferation of exchanges, including a few of an educational and scholarly nature. In August and September of 1978, I led a delegation of academic and professional people to Beijing and northeast China, focusing on education, population control, and related issues. Changes in the six years since my first trip were striking. The revolutionary fervor of the late 1960s and early 1970s had dissipated significantly as post-Mao China sought to quell old conflicts and instill a new sense of purpose directed toward realizing the "Four Modernizations" in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. Talks with village leaders, agricultural specialists, population planners, educators, and health professionals suggested that, at least for the moment, a new openness was in the air and that prospects for the kind of wide-ranging discussion and expression of varied opinion necessary to sound anthropological field research might well become possible in the not-too-distant future.

As changing international affairs continued to draw China and the United States closer together, culminating in the establishment of diplomatic relations, a proposal was submitted to China by Fred Engst and Nancy Chance: that an opportunity be provided for a small group of Americans of differing socioeconomic, occupational, and racial backgrounds to live and work with the Chinese people for several months in the fall of 1979. Approval was eventually given. The group then took up residence in a small village on one of the larger communes on the outskirts of Beijing City and within the municipality. Members lived in different households, eating and working with peasant families and spending at least some time each day as part of an agricultural work team, as well as conducting their own research on different aspects of village life. A month and a half later, the group spent several weeks working in a textile factory in adjacent Hebei Province, interspersed with travel to other cities, rural areas, and a brief stay in a banner village in Inner Mongolia.

The book draws extensively on research undertaken in this and nearby villages during the fall of 1979, including one additional month that Nancy Chance and I spent in China after the conclusion of the group trip. Between September and December of that year I taped and transcribed over fifty detailed interviews conducted with people from a wide range of backgrounds, including peasant leaders, factory workers, young, middle-aged, and older men and women, students, teachers, paraprofessional "barefoot doctors" and many others who I felt could help in putting together a picture of changing village life in a North China commune.<sup>1</sup>

This research data was then compared with earlier information accumulated on

village and commune life during previous trips—including interviews with two members of the commune in Beijing Municipality dating back to the spring of 1972; data gathered on a short trip to the commune headquarters and outlying agricultural and industrial sectors in the late summer of 1978; and other information received from Chinese and Americans who had lived, worked, or visited the area during this time—including several Chinese exchange scholars to the United States who earlier had resided in nearby villages as "educated youth."

Finally, in the summer of 1979, just prior to leaving for China, I had the unique experience of traveling with several leaders and agricultural workers from that same commune while they were visiting rural farms in Pennsylvania studying the latest techniques of dairy mechanization. This opportunity enabled me to observe a little of how the Chinese respond to and gain from exposure to greater knowledge of the advanced agricultural practices followed by many American farmers. But what particularly stood out in my mind was not the technological transfer, as important as that was, but the open, generous, and helpful attitude that characterized the members of these rural Pennsylvania farm families as they offered to explain their means of livelihood. It was the same open and sharing attitude I had found among Chinese peasants halfway around the world.

N. A. C.

<sup>1</sup> These and other interviews all required the use of a translator. However, in the chapters that follow, accounts of dialogues with villagers seldom make reference to this fact. This was done for literary convenience, so as not to distract the reader by having to introduce an interpreter at each instance. Obviously, Fred Engst and the others who helped me with translation were essential to the success of the study.

## Acknowledgments

The fieldwork on which this book is based was conducted between the years 1972 and 1979; more specifically, in April and May of 1972, August and September of 1978, and September through December of 1979. The data is drawn from several different settings in North China, the most important of which is a well-known commune located approximately 25 miles from the capital city of Beijing.

It should be noted at the outset that the names of individual Chinese, as well as those associated with communes, villages, and other localities, are fictitious, so as to protect the privacy of the people involved. Their anonymity should not be construed to mean that their efforts were not appreciated.

Of the numerous people providing assistance, I am particularly grateful for the support of the director and staff of the commune where much of the research was undertaken, as well as that of the leaders of the several village brigades that were studied. All gave considerably more aid than was either required or expected.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the villagers themselves, who were so helpful in home, field, factory, and school: answering the continual questions, correcting mistakes, and responding to census forms and questionnaires. Students from the First Foreign Language Institute and several other educational institutions in Beijing were also of assistance, aiding in interviewing, translating, and gathering statistical data. In different ways, these individuals illustrate why it is that anthropologists so often speak positively about the experience of living with the people they wish to learn from and understand—that is, the sharing of one's life with others promotes a common cause.

Many people have stimulated my interest in and knowledge of China, including Professor Paul T. K. Lin, past director of the East Asian Studies Centre at McGill University; William Hinton, author of the classic ethnography *Fanshen* (1966), one of the early detailed studies of revolutionary change in a Chinese village; Sid Engst and Joan Hinton, who went to China in the late 1940s, and after a period of work with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, decided to remain; and their son, Fred Engst. Born and raised in China prior to his coming to the United States in 1975, Fred Engst was a co-leader of the 1979 "work-study" delegation of which I was a member. He was also a key translator for most of the in-depth interviews conducted in the commune. Given my inadequate knowledge of Chinese, his frequent assistance in translation was invaluable.

Also acknowledged should be Isabel and David Crook of the English Language Section of the Beijing Foreign Language Institute, authors of several volumes pertaining to the North China village Ten Mile Inn (1959, 1966, 1979), who helped in many ways both in the field and in the analysis and write-up phase of the research; Professor Clifford DuRand, Daniel Sipe, and other members of the 1979 delegation who assisted in gathering field data; and most of all, Professor Nancy F.



Chance, co-leader of the 1979 trip, co-worker with me for over thirty years, and the person who first introduced me to the intellectual adventure called anthropology.

Of the North American China scholars whose suggestions and criticisms of earlier chapters and drafts of this book have helped clarify my thinking, I particularly want to thank Robert Dewar, Norma Diamond, Christina Gilmartin, Frank Kehl, Julia Kwong, Vera Schwarcz, Mark Selden, and Peter Seybolt. In addition, I express my appreciation to Charles Cell for his statistical analysis of village census data; to Clifford DuRand for sharing his analysis of economic life; to Nancy Chance for sharing her research on education and women; and to Stephen C. Chance for his line drawings.

Similar acknowledgment is due to three young Chinese scholars from Beijing, who, while attending the University of Connecticut as graduate students, graciously shared their knowledge and experience with me. They are Jia Liling (political science), Yang Haiping, and Zang Junhong (anthropology).

Appreciated, also, is the aid of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, whose invitation and arrangements for the 1972 and 1979 field trips were essential; of the China Travel Service; and of the University of Connecticut Research Foundation and Department of University Computer Systems for their generous financial support offered in the years 1972-1974 and 1979-1983.

Grateful acknowledgment is due as well to Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. for permission to use five lines from "A Worker Reads History," from *The Selected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, translated by H. R. Hayes.

Finally, I want to thank George and Louise Spindler, editors of the Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology, for the many suggestions they offered while this book was being written. Their insightful blend of constructive criticism and continuing encouragement was always helpful and much appreciated.

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## A Note on Romanization

For rendering Chinese characters into English, this book utilizes *pinyin* (literally: "combination of sounds"), the official Chinese system of spelling. A major advantage is that it assists people who are unfamiliar with the Chinese language to pronounce it more accurately than do other systems, which tend to confuse the unfamiliar reader. In the *pinyin* system, most letters are pronounced approximately the same as in those languages using the Latin alphabet, including English. There are a number of exceptions, such as *c*, which is pronounced *ts* (as in *its*); *x* is pronounced as *sh* (as in *show*), *zh* as *j* (as in *jump*), *e* as in *her*, and *q* as *ch* (as in *cheese*).

A few well-known names romanized from the Cantonese, such as Chiang Kai-shek, retain their more common spelling, as does the Kuomintang (Party) in order to preserve its familiar association with the acronym KMT.

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# Introduction

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?  
The books are filled with the names of kings.  
Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks  
of stone? . . .  
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished.  
Where did the masons go? . . .

Bertolt Brecht

A little over one billion people live in China—more than one-fourth of the world's population. Of that number, 80 percent are men and women who seek their subsistence largely from the soil in an agrarian pattern that has changed rather slowly for much of the past 2000 years, from the abolition of an ancient form of feudalism in the third century B.C. to the penetration of Western capital and culture in the nineteenth century.

Beginning in the 1920s and continuing through the 1950s and 1960s, the pace of change increased significantly as China's villagers became involved in a massive revolutionary transformation that produced a sufficiently impressive increase in their standard of living to eventually draw recognition from other Third World countries and even from the West. Still, China's development is very limited, as any visitor who has passed beyond the usual tourist sights can quickly attest. Just how limited is it? If we compare the level of agricultural productivity in China with that of the United States, the comparison is striking: whereas one American farmer feeds almost one hundred city dwellers, it takes the intensive labor of between three and four peasants to feed one urbanite in China. With little more than 11 percent of China's land arable, and needing to feed over four times the American population, it is no wonder that the country is studying how best to modernize its agricultural sector.

Note too, the different use of the words "farmer" and "peasant." The distinction is important. Farmers produce primarily for others—exchanging what they make for quite different goods and services, often at the national and even international level. Peasants, on the other hand, produce more for themselves—for their own use—and only secondarily for others through the medium of local and regional markets, rent, taxes, and the like. In China today, the agricultural work force is changing from peasant to farmer, producing both for their own use and for exchange. What part peasant and what part farmer? It varies greatly, not only between regions, but between communes and even villages. In the large majority of instances where grain



*Women field workers at Half Moon Village, Red Flag Commune.*

is the major agricultural crop, a rough indicator of the degree of transition from peasant to farmer is the amount of grain kept and the amount sold.<sup>1</sup>

Another significant measure of the difference between old and new China is seen in the increasing number of peasants now working in small village sideline enterprises and larger commune and state-owned industries and factories that are rapidly emerging in semirural areas surrounding China's big cities. Young men and women, peasants in upbringing and outlook, but occupationally workers with newly acquired technical skills, represent a potentially vibrant force in the development of China.

This dialectic of cyclical and developmental change, of persisting in old ways while at the same time being increasingly involved in the larger modern society is not limited to China's rural population. It sums up the dilemma of contemporary peasants the world over. One important difference in China, however, is the active role played by the peasantry in revolutionizing the countryside in order to better their own economic and social conditions.

## THE RISE OF REVOLUTION

What social conditions led to the assumption of power by China's revolutionary leaders? While such a complex question cannot be addressed here (see Bianco 1971), two historical factors should be stressed since they continue to have an important bearing on the daily life of the peasants described in this book. One is the impact of foreign capital, technology, and occupation on China for a period of over 100 years. The other is the social turmoil occurring in the country during that time, generated in part by that contact.

<sup>1</sup> Of the 300 million tons of food grain produced each year by the peasantry, approximately 250 million tons are self-consumed (Vermeer 1982).

For many centuries, China was ruled by powerful dynasties. But in the mid-1850s, following defeat by the British Empire in the so-called Opium War, Qing dynasty officials were forced to open China's ports to foreign trade, including the importation of opium, to consent to a customs tariff fixed by treaty, to grant extraterritoriality (the right of foreign consular officers to try their own nationals in China), and to agree to other unequal treaties that dealt crippling blows to the country's sovereignty and economy.

The eventual collapse of the dynasty and the rise of a new Republic of China under Sun Yatsen and the Kuomintang (KMT) Party in 1911 instilled hope for a stronger centralized government. However, its success was hampered by many factors.

Foreign capital severely disrupted the internal economy, promoting inflationary spirals, which then forced large rent increases. For peasants and others unable to pay, this meant land foreclosure. Taxes and surtaxes rose, not only dramatically but, from the villager's point of view, inequitably.<sup>2</sup> The introduction of Western technology into an expanding urban textile industry brought a sharp decline in the need for rural handicrafts, with a resulting further loss in peasant income. Problems of corruption in government and the military increased the unpredictability of rural life.

Large landowners began moving out of villages to the more attractive life of nearby towns and cities. This disrupted traditional economic relations between landlord and peasant, an arrangement once based on a clearly recognized pattern of reciprocity. Lawlessness increased. Finally, as perceived by Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the KMT government after the death of Sun in 1925, the most serious threat of all was the rapid rise of the Chinese Communist Party, first organized in 1921. ~~However, to Chiang's constant frustration, numerous attempts by the KMT military to rid the country of these "bandits" were unsuccessful.~~

For China's villagers, on the other hand, increasing impoverishment and threat of famine led some to accept the proposal of the CCP that only by following their policies, summed up in the slogan "Land to the Tiller," could the lives of the vast majority be improved. Mostly illiterate and lacking contact with the outside world, these rural people knew little about socialism. But they did know that their existing world held few benefits for them. And so the Communist Party's rural ranks continued to grow.

Then, in the mid-1930s, after the Japanese occupied Manchuria, promoted the "autonomy of Inner Mongolia," and threatened much of China's Northern Plain, communist leaders changed their strategy, urging that past differences between the KMT and the CCP be put aside in favor of a "United Front" against Japan's military expansion. Under great difficulty, the alliance held until the defeat of

<sup>2</sup> Chesneaux reports that in Sichuan Province in 1933, peasants were forced to pay taxes in advance up to the year 1971. Actually, such taxes reflect a much deeper inequity pervading at least part of China's countryside at that time. For example, a study undertaken in Wuxi (near Nanjing) found that in 1929, poor peasants, comprising 69 percent of the population, owned less than 14 percent of the land; whereas landlords, representing 6 percent of the population, owned 47 percent (Chesneaux 1973:78-79). Other scholars have questioned the pervasiveness of such inequities within peasant villages (see Myers 1970).

Japan in 1945, when the question of who was to lead postwar China again returned to the fore. The result of that civil conflict is now well known. The KMT was simply unable to gain sufficient support from the people to achieve its goal. By the autumn of 1949, Mao's communist forces had achieved victory. It was a time of exhaustion. But it was also a time of dramatic opportunity.

### THE NATURE OF CHINESE SOCIALISM

October 1 is celebrated in China as National Day. On this date in 1949, in front of a huge crowd of supporters at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Its first task was an all-out effort to remove the national ills that had led to the stigma of being called "The sick man of Asia." This was to be accomplished by a revolutionary transformation in the economic and social relations of the country, resolving long-festered internal problems caused by a combination of foreign intervention and social decay. Mao predicted that out of this massive upheaval would emerge a highly productive socialist society whose collective endeavor could enable the people to significantly raise their standard of living and whose political structure could provide them with the tools to more fully determine their own lives. This book is largely concerned with how villagers living in Red Flag Commune, located on the outskirts of Beijing, are responding to that challenge.

Among the rural issues first addressed by the CCP leaders following their assumption of power, the question of land reform was central. In those areas of the country not previously under their political control, the government immediately initiated a massive new program aimed at completely restructuring land ownership. Millions of needy peasants, including future members of Red Flag Commune, participated. Those whose lives of hardship had been economically dominated by landlords, large or small, began reversing the relationship—taking the latter's property and redistributing it to the poor and landless.

By the mid-1950s, many peasants throughout northern China had joined elementary agricultural producers' cooperatives (APCs). These cooperatives, organized under the leadership of the Party, comprised 20 or more households, which shared labor, land, and small tools for their common benefit. In Chapter 2, we will learn more of how these cooperatives were formed, who supported and who opposed them.

In nearby Beijing, small-scale industries were also turned into economic cooperatives. Larger private industrial holdings were purchased by the state, the previous owners often receiving salaried positions in the enterprises, plus five percent annual interest on the surrendered property for a period of ten years. Foreign-owned industries had already been nationalized.

As can be imagined, the changes brought about by this transformation were considerable. The whole structure of economic relations between peasant and landlord, on the one hand, and urban worker and proprietors of large industries, on the other, was altered dramatically. However, among private business leaders, high-level man-

agers, and bureaucratic officials outside the Party, political support for these economic efforts was less than enthusiastic. Yet their expertise was needed to administer the country's economic, educational, and local governmental institutions, which had been disrupted by years of war.

This issue posed a serious problem for China. Some Party officials urged that further changes be delayed. By allowing existing developments to mature, more traditionally minded leaders, workers, and peasants could be incorporated into the process. Others differed. In 1955, Mao Zedong, then President as well as Party Chairman, concluded that the process was moving too slowly. Indeed, it was tottering along "like a woman with bound feet." Progress could always be undermined. It was better that the momentum be maintained.<sup>3</sup>

Until this time, Party leaders had generally agreed that the low-level APCs, based on the voluntary participation of its members, were the major stepping-stone to a fully functioning socialist society in the rural areas (see Shue 1980). The steps involved in this transitional process moved from private ownership, through mutual aid teams, elementary and advanced cooperatives, and concluded with collective and state ownership of the major means of production. In this manner, it was reasoned, the continued poverty of many peasants, rooted in inequitable ownership of land, animals, tools, and machinery, could be reduced and eventually eliminated and the reallocation of resources through state planning be initiated.

In practice, of course, there were many problems. How necessary was it to have the active participation of most peasants? Should the more well-to-do peasants be encouraged to participate? What level of consensus within the cooperative was desired before moving on to a higher level of socialist ownership?

In Half Moon Village, a community we will look at in depth throughout this book, poor peasant families usually joined the cooperatives, viewing them as economically beneficial. However, when several "middle" peasant families were asked to join, they refused, preferring to work their own land with their own tools and their own labor. (Rich peasants and landlords were initially excluded from participation.) How important was it to draw these middle-level peasants into the cooperative? If the APC leaders were patient and moved more slowly in setting them up, could these households—with better land and tools—be persuaded to join their poorer brethren? Or, reminiscent of old women with bound feet, was it more likely they would hardly move at all? Even worse, might they set up roadblocks, thereby limiting the success of others?

This type of response occurred in Half Moon Village when the head of a more well-to-do family refused to allow the members of a mutual aid team (a precursor of the APCs) to construct an irrigation ditch across his land. The man recognized that the proposed water system would enhance the productivity of the team, perhaps at his own expense. The response was repeated following the formation of more advanced cooperatives several years later.

Problems of a quite different order were faced by local Party cadres newly placed in positions of leadership. Most cadres were villagers themselves, with

<sup>3</sup> Actually, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mao himself warned of overeagerness and "left opportunism" in completing the socialist transformation in rural areas (Mao 1949:367 and 419). His views changed in the mid-1950s (see Mao 1955:394-404).

relatives and friends in the area. Occasionally, the responsibility to implement a Party or government policy conflicted with their views and those of friends. Should one's action always be guided by Party policy determined "from above"? What if your evaluation of local conditions leads you to a different conclusion? Such dilemmas were common in Half Moon Village then and still are today.

In one incident discussed later, we find Party members being informed by agricultural officials in Beijing to have the peasants begin implementing "triple cropping" during their next planting season. Local leaders passed on the plan to the villagers, even though some of them felt it was basically unsound. The villagers definitely opposed it. Learning how the problem was resolved helps us understand day-to-day relations within the Party and between the Party and the people. Furthermore, it provides a practical illustration of a rather complex political process—the relationship between centralized planning and democratic decision making. On several occasions throughout this study we will address this important topic.

While villagers attempted to resolve day-to-day problems posed by the societal changes of the mid-1950s, China's national leaders grappled with a far more difficult issue: What direction should the country take following the conclusion of land reform and the establishment of the elementary cooperatives?

Was an increasingly more collectivized labor force the key to advancing the country's economic development—and through that effort, the people's social well-being and standard of living? Specifically, should the government encourage the consolidation of APCs into larger, more advanced units, thereby expanding the cooperative base still further? Or, was the mechanization of the country's productive forces a necessary precondition for advancing the social cooperation of its members toward a more fully socialist society? That is, should the society focus its limited energies on rapidly expanding its urban industrial infrastructure and (to a lesser extent) its agricultural technology in the countryside?<sup>4</sup>

The two approaches were intimately linked, both collectivization and mechanization being seen as necessary steps in the socialist development of rural China. Still, the question remained: Which should receive the greater emphasis?

Under Mao's leadership, the Party and government opted for an acceleration of rural collectivization—a "Socialist Upsurge in the Countryside" (see Mao 1978), in which mutual aid teams and low-level cooperatives (still a minority throughout the country) were to be combined into larger, more advanced units.

## PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT

Problems stemming from this effort to accelerate the process of socialist ownership were substantial. For the poorer peasantry, representing between 60 and 70 percent

<sup>4</sup> A good illustration of the latter perspective that mechanization is a necessary prerequisite for socialist development in agriculture is contained in a book written by an American who served as a teacher at a state-run tractor driver training school in Hebei Province. When the school first opened in 1953, the director announced to his new students: "Our task is to build islands of socialism in a vast sea of individual farming. We are the ones who will have to show the way for the whole country" (Hinton 1970:45–46).

of Northern China's rural population (Mao 1955:403), so too were the benefits.<sup>5</sup> Owing the least (or none at all), these people had the most to gain by furthering collectivization, since under the advanced APCs, ownership of land and other means of production ceased being a factor in income distribution. At that moment a turning point was reached. From now on, how hard the members worked rather than what they owned could be the deciding factor in the distribution of collective income.

When production was high, well-to-do peasants also gained; but when it was low, they benefited less. In addition, such peasants occasionally found that their contribution of land and other goods did not result in the compensation promised earlier by local Party officials. Finally, considerable pressure was placed on them to join the larger, more advanced cooperatives—a policy that contrasted sharply with the more voluntary nature of earlier efforts (see Selden 1982a). Such a shift in strategy not only increased conflicts between the peasants, but raised important questions about the extent of their participation in building a new socialist society.

Of the many development problems faced by the government, perhaps the most difficult one to resolve has been the attempt to unite the twin goals of socialism and modernization. The results of this effort, both positive and negative, appear throughout Red Flag Commune. Successes include the widespread mechanization of simple stationary tools collectively owned by community members; extensive irrigation canals shared by different brigades; a rural health system that provides care for every individual on the commune at a cost of less than fifty cents per individual per year; an education system that now assures a full eight years of schooling for all resident children wanting to attend; and tall shade trees that line roadways between villages like Half Moon and Little River—trees planted twenty-five years ago as part of a cooperative intervillage reforestation project.

Failures are represented by the continuation in office of highly prejudiced bureaucratic officials who look down on the peasantry as hardly able to care for their own affairs, let alone contribute knowledge and experience toward improving the larger society. They are seen in hundreds of fading revolutionary slogans staining commune walls, slogans such as "Carry the Revolution Under Dictatorship of the Proletariat Through to the End"—whose tendentious meaning probably eluded the painter as well as those villagers who still pass by these relics of an earlier era on their way to work. Such failures sometimes appear in more poignant form, as in the life history of an "educated youth" who came to Half Moon Village after trying to help develop a state farm in a province far to the northeast, or in the furious denunciation of a local Party cadre by a young woman who was unfairly passed over for a factory job in favor of the official's niece.

However, merely listing concrete examples of the pluses and minuses of China's development effort does little to help us understand the basic issues underlying these events. Much remains beneath the surface. For example, one important theme introduced shortly after the advanced APCs was Mao's call for a mass mobilization of the people to make a "Great Leap Forward." This national campaign

<sup>5</sup> In some areas surrounding Beijing, including Half Moon Village, the figure ran as high as 80 percent.

of 1958–1959 was partly undertaken to raise grain and steel output, and in other ways to increase the country's economic development. In its rural manifestation, it also encouraged peasants to transform their lives by mobilizing local resources and labor in the construction of water conservation and reforestation projects, and in the setting up of small sideline industries to process crops and manufacture farm tools. The profits created by these self-reliant efforts could then be used to mechanize agriculture, thereby freeing peasant labor for small-scale industrial development.

Furthermore, the Great Leap provided the impetus for one of the most intriguing social experiments in human history—a nationwide consolidation of the country's newly formed APCs into 42,000 communes. At this time, the *xiang*, or township, encompassing a population of 20,000 or more, was the lowest level of rural public administration. With the formation of communes, agricultural and small industrial enterprises came under their control, as did responsibility for commerce, the militia, education, health, and other human services. The commune soon subsumed the political administration of the *xiang* under its jurisdiction as well.

Though reduced in size and revised in form, both economically and politically, communes have continued in rural China until the present day. However, as we will learn shortly, the failures of the Great Leap far outweighed its few successes. As a result, Mao found his economic policies increasingly opposed: first by Party leaders such as Peng Dehuai (then Minister of Defense), and later by others such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. In the early 1960s, China's development focused on increasing economic productivity through means more conventional than Mao's revolutionary strategy of collectively oriented mass mobilization, utilizing the spirit of hard work and plain living.

Becoming increasingly concerned over the possible resumption of power by a bureaucratic elite within the Party itself, not unlike what he perceived had happened in the Soviet Union, Mao launched in 1965–1966 his last big campaign: "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Its stated aim: to replace ingrained bourgeois, bureaucratic values with socialist ones and remove from power those individuals—"class enemies"—who would turn China away from its socialist path. In the minds of many critics, it was also an attempt by Mao to remove from Party leadership any individuals who might challenge his authority.

With this massive political movement, the door opened wide for a kind of ideological dogmatism that drenched the country with extremist slogans, promoted a personality cult of Mao, encouraged sharp attacks on many thousands of Party cadres (including a purge of China's then-President Liu Shaoqi), and in other ways drove a powerful wedge between leaders at all levels, which in turn generated factionalism among the people. Schools and universities closed down. Many young students, undirected and restless, traveled freely throughout the country, using Mao's instruction to "use society as the classroom" as their justification. Millions of urban youth volunteered or were sent to rural villages and isolated border areas to work and "learn from the peasants." Although economic production continued, the Party and government reached such an impasse that it was barely able to function. Arguments over what was the correct socialist course of action



*Harvesting corn with a hand scythe, Half Moon Village.*

raged. By 1967, Mao had begun to bring the politically well-disciplined People's Liberation Army (PLA) into leadership positions in many institutions in order to restore order.

Over the next nine years, until Mao's death in 1976, the Chinese people were called upon to participate in a series of related campaigns reflected in such slogans as "Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" and "Grasp Revolution and Promote Production" (which basically meant: while pursuing revolution, don't forget production). Many people in cities and countryside had already turned away from such strident efforts, preferring to live out their lives far removed from the warlike turmoil. Others, unable to escape, were caught up in accusations, charges, and countercharges, leading all too frequently to public humiliation, beatings, and loss of life. It was only following Mao's death in 1976 and the arrest of several Party leaders associated with the Cultural Revolution—referred to as the "Gang of Four"—that China rejected active political movements in favor of an economically focused modernization program.



Today, Red Flag Commune is more flexible in its treatment of the relationship between individual and collective economic development, including the promotion of family and individual enterprises outside the collective sphere; it is more experimental in testing different interpretations of how best to increase the standard of living; and it is tentatively exploring how to encourage a more decentralized, "grass-roots" democracy in the decision-making process at the local level. Older cadres, earlier removed from their positions in Party and government, have returned, while some of those more closely associated with Mao and his ideas have been transferred. Furthermore, most villagers appear glad to see the demise of the sharp political battles that led to such conflict and factionalism.

Still, others in Red Flag look more positively at the Cultural Revolution's goals, such as the effort of the commune to reduce inequalities between poor and well-to-do villages; the expansion and development of primary education; the bringing of improved medical care to the villages; the recruitment of peasants and workers into technical and higher education; reforms such as "combining work and study," which aimed to stimulate people of all ages to think for themselves and examine and test well-established theories in practice; and finally, the challenge to Confucian-inspired cultural patterns that continued to place women in a subservient status in village life. These people acknowledge that the extremism of the Cultural Revolution brought chaos to the country and personal tragedy to many. But they distinguish that result from what they think it was meant to achieve or should have achieved. Nevertheless, no matter how appealing the aims of the Cultural Revolution were to some, for most, the overall result was appalling, illustrating once again the intimate connection between ends and means.

This brief historical picture of China's recent experience in socialist development provides a necessary backdrop to the unfolding of daily life in Half Moon Village and Red Flag Commune. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the people of Half Moon, the setting in which they live, and the history that brought them there. Two old peasants tell of early hardships, how land reform and the agricultural cooperative movement brought new opportunities to their lives, and how village sons and daughters are beginning to work in small sideline industries and in larger factories emerging on the outskirts of Beijing. We find that Half Moon is only one of 116 villages comprising Red Flag, a particularly large commune with a total population of over 85,000. Finally, attention is given to the important role of the Chinese Communist Party: how it is organized and how it provides leadership in village and commune affairs.

In Chapter 3, the focus is on work: how families make their living in private household, collective brigade, commune, and state-owned enterprises. We learn how income is generated and distributed in field and factory, what is appealing about employment in a state-owned factory, and why it is so difficult for rural villagers to obtain jobs in the state sector. And in both field and factory, we gain a little insight into the kinds of conflicts that divide leaders and the people from each other and how they go about trying to resolve them.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 take quite a different tack, presenting a view of the village from an ethnographic "life-cycle" perspective, tracing the process of growing up, going to school, getting married, having a family, and growing older. In con-

trast to the dramatic political and economic transformation described earlier, this section of the book highlights what anthropologists and other students of China have so often emphasized in the past—the importance of the family in village life.<sup>6</sup>

The next chapter on changing political economy brings together two themes of the book—the interpenetration of change and continuity—and how this dialectical process bears on China's effort to become a modern socialist society. We find, for example, that any decision to further mechanize the production of field crops immediately raises the question of what to do with the peasant work force.

This leads to a discussion of how to stimulate alternative forms of employment, including small village sidelines and large state-run factories. An analysis of how three villages address this question illustrates quite clearly that distinct paths of socialist economic development can be followed even within the same commune—an important reminder for those tending to view socialist society as monolithic. Nevertheless, political institutions enabling villagers to increase their input into the local decision-making process are still in their infancy.

Finally, the concluding chapter (and postscript) address several recent changes in government policy such as the re-establishment of peasant markets, maximizing individual initiative by means of bonuses, and increased shifting of responsibility for rural production to smaller economic units like the household. What advantages are gained by these changes? What problems occur? Are traditional family ties reinforced by the policy of breaking up work groups into smaller units? If so, what are the implications for the future of larger collective endeavors? And importantly, what happens when the "responsibility system" emphasizing greater household productivity is combined with the population planning policy emphasizing the limiting of family births to "only one." As we will see, the latter policy finds little favor among most people in Red Flag Commune. However, other questions need further investigation before attempting an answer.

As we come to know these people throughout the pages of this book, one point will become increasingly clear: they are "urban villagers" in a geographical sense only. Socially and culturally they retain many of their life-ways intact. Does this mean that they bear a close resemblance to millions of other peasants living on the edge of cities throughout the Third World? No, not at all. Actually, the differences are quite striking.

<sup>6</sup> Numerous studies of Chinese village life have been written since the late 1800s. Those pertaining to the pre-1949 period include: Smith (1899); Fei (1939); Yang (1945); Lin (1947); and Gamble (1954). Those focusing on post-1949 Chinese mainland include: Yang (1959); Myrdal (1963); Crook and Crook (1959, 1966, and 1979); Hinton (1966 and 1983); Chen (1973); and Bennett (1978). The more extensive post-1949 village studies of Chinese Taiwan include Gallin (1966), Wolf, (1968), and Diamond (1969).