

CHEN VILLAGE

THE RECENT HISTORY OF
A PEASANT COMMUNITY
IN MAO'S CHINA

Anita Chan, Richard Madsen,
and Jonathan Unger

*The best village study we have of China before
or after 1949. . . . A joy to read."*

—Ezra F. Vogel

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Chen Village

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Production Team Meeting Hall

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Prologue 1

1. Chen Village and Its Leaders 13
 2. The Big Four Cleanups 41
 3. Studying Chairman Mao 74
 4. The Cultural Revolution 103
 5. The Cleansing of the Class Ranks 141
 6. A Leftward Lurch and a Solid Footing 169
 7. The Great Betrothal Dispute 186
 8. Plunging into a New Decade 213
 9. The Troubled Seventies 236
- Epilogue: Entering the Eighties 265
- Index 285

Prologue

This book tells of the changes that have occurred in the lives of the people of a South China farming village over the past two decades. The community, Chen Village,¹ has not been the type of place included in officially planned tourist itineraries. It is not a showcase—not especially progressive nor more prosperous than most other villages in its district. Neither has it been politically backward compared to the other villages around. It has rested obscure because it is just an ordinary place.

In a very important respect, the recent history of this village has been similar to that of many other Chinese villages. They were all shaken by a series of tumultuous government-sponsored political campaigns between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Our study illustrates the impact of these nationwide political movements in one such community; and thus our narrative centers, chapter by chapter, first upon the Four Cleanups campaign of the mid-1960s, then the Cultural Revolution, then the “class struggles” of the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign in the late 1960s, and the events leading down to and past the death of Mao in 1976. In Chen Village, these various campaigns and national upheavals were the dynamos of social, political, and economic change. At times, the

¹ To protect the privacy of the villagers and our interviewees, we have altered the village's name and the names of all the people who appear in this book. We have also disguised somewhat the location of the village.

changes were in the directions promoted by the government. At other times, as we shall see, the village reacted to government policies in ways substantially different from what China's leadership ever could have expected or desired.

Readers should bear in mind, though, that the episodes we will recount cannot in any simple or straightforward fashion be considered "typical" of Chinese rural society. China's villages are too diverse and far too complex to allow that. Each Chinese village will have a somewhat different story to tell. But precisely because of the complexity of all of these stories of rural change, we felt this study should be undertaken. We are convinced that rural grass roots politics and the intricate patterns of development and change in China's villages can most fully be understood and appreciated through detailed microstudies like this.

Methodology

Our study began through chance encounters. We had become socially acquainted with several young emigrants from Chen Village while we were engaged in other research in Hong Kong in 1975. They told us some intriguing anecdotes about their village and whetted our interest to know more. We began to interview them systematically about their experiences in the village, and we asked to be introduced to former neighbors and friends. These in turn introduced us to still other former village residents. Most of these interviews were conducted in 1975 and 1976, but two of us returned to Hong Kong in the spring of 1978 for four more months to round off the interviewing and returned again in early 1982 to bring the village's story up to date. By the end, we had gotten to know and interview twenty-six Chen Villagers who had moved to Hong Kong.

At the time we began our research, it was not possible for Western scholars to live in a Chinese village in order to observe firsthand the daily patterns of village life. The only way to do a study of a Chinese village was through such interviews with emigrés.² More recently, a very limited number of Western social

² During the past few decades, Western scholars of China have conducted a considerable amount of research through interviews with Chinese emigrés. For a

scientists have been allowed into the People's Republic to conduct rural fieldwork. However, we believe that collecting data in the field still cannot entirely take the place of emigré interviewing. Though the information gathered in China will certainly be extremely valuable, it probably will be a different *type* of information than we have gathered. The recent history of China has been turbulent, and it abounds with politically sensitive topics. The peasantry of any Chinese village will have to worry about saying things to a foreign scholar that might offend their neighbors, local officials, or members of the Communist party. Our interviewees in Hong Kong generally did not have these same worries; and we were able to discuss with them the informal and behind-the-scenes political considerations, social networks, and personal feuds that shaped village decisions and the conduct of campaigns.

But our interviewees quite obviously had their own biases on what occurred in their village. How could the three of us, sitting in Hong Kong, discern and filter out those biases? We came away from our interviewing convinced that largely we were able to do so. This conviction is based, for one thing, on our opportunity to carefully cross-check each interviewee's testimony. The three of us repeatedly asked our interviewees to speak about various aspects of the village's recent history in minute detail; the informants independently were in agreement about most of those details. As just one example, one of our most frequent interviewees, a young woman named Ao, had served during the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign as the public prosecutor of another interviewee, Wang, who had been a leader of Chen Village's Rebel Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Wang was made to pay the price through imprisonment during the Cleansing of the Class Ranks. Naturally, Ao and Wang offered us quite different opinions of the campaign; and each had disparaging things to say about the motives of the other. But the descriptions of the campaign that they presented to us during dozens of hours of separate interviewing were largely similar.

We discovered that if properly handled, the differing opinions

discussion of this kind of research and a detailed appraisal of its opportunities and dangers, see William L. Parish and Martin K. Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 344-351. Our work has benefited from the cumulative experience of this research tradition.



Harvesting Lychees. A community near Chen Village in the summer of 1981. Interviewees confirm that this and the other scenes depicted throughout this book closely resemble those of Chen Village.

and attitudes of interviewees could, in fact, help us to comprehend better the conflicting forces and sectoral interests at work in Chen Village. Interviewees such as Ao and Wang very often had retained the perspectives of their own particular social and political positions in the village. Similarly, different types of former village cadres usually recounted events from the vantage point of their former posts; and members of different production teams still seemed to hold to their own team's perspectives on the controversial economic and political issues that divided the village. We shall present these different perceptions, and from them shall build our own description of a complex reality.

To place the events in this one village into a broader context, we also interviewed emigrés from half a dozen other villages in Guangdong Province. There is considerable diversity among these communities. But as mentioned earlier, all the political campaigns that Chen Village experienced were carried out in these other villages, and much the same turmoil, progress, and problems occurred there.

Initially, though, the reports in the Chinese government press seemed to belie the impressions we were getting about all of these villages. Our own interview reports generally drew pictures of economic stagnation in the seventies and declining peasant morale. The Chinese press in 1975-76 was reporting the contrary: agricultural advances, rising rural living standards, and peasant enthusiasm. But more recently the national Chinese newspapers and magazines have reversed themselves. They have begun speaking in new terms of the problems of rural China during Mao's last years. Judging from these recent official publications, Chen Village's experience seems to have been a fairly common one. The perceptions we had gained through our interviews seem vindicated; the veracity of our interviewees from Chen Village and other villages seems at least indirectly confirmed.

Our interviewing was conducted under a wide variety of circumstances, both formal and informal. Sometimes we met with interviewees in our offices at an academic institute and sometimes in coffee houses and restaurants, in our homes, and in the interviewees' own homes. Some interviewees met with us for just a couple of sessions of one to three hours apiece, but some came for many dozens of sessions.

Their motives for talking with us were chiefly those of friendship (several have become quite close friends) or the simple chance to recount to sympathetic listeners some of the more exciting or emotionally charged incidents in their lives. A few who became our friends came so frequently that we insisted upon paying them for the time and effort they put in. But this should not be considered research compiled through "paid informants." The great majority of the interviewees received no recompense at all beyond informal English lessons. Frequently, in fact, we bore the embarrassment of being treated to restaurant meals by them.

About two-thirds of the 223 interviews that we gathered on Chen Village were taped and then transcribed verbatim. The rest were recorded through on-the-spot note taking. All three of the authors conducted their interviews in Chinese without interpreters. Usually the sessions were one-on-one, but occasionally several Chen Villagers met as a group with one or more of us. At such times, we would bring up a topic for conversation and then retreat into the background as passive observers. As the villagers reminisced, we could learn more about the nuances of social and political relationships in the village.

Twelve of our interviewees from Chen Village were of peasant stock, born and raised in the village. The remaining fourteen of the respondents, and a very important source of information, were high school graduates from the city of Canton—five young women and nine young men. Most of them had settled in Chen Village in 1964 as teenagers and lived in the village as regular laboring peasants for a decade and more. While there, about half of them rose into various official political or economic posts. Their knowledge of the village—its institutions and customs, its gossip, policy debates, and production techniques—was both intimate and extensive.

In more than one respect, though, these fourteen interviewees were still outsiders. They were not members of the village lineage, not Chens. Most of them had developed an obvious degree of respect and affection for the peasants and had held a positive regard for life in the village. But many of them also had felt that their urban education and culture made them too good to spend the rest of their lives working as ordinary peasants. Thus, their perspectives on village life were likely to be uniformly colored by

the attitudes they shared. But through our many interviews with a number of the young Chen peasants—"insiders" from Chen Village—we have been able to cross-check testimony in this respect too.

We did, of course, also face one final major problem with these interviewees, urban-born and village-born alike. They had shared a distaste for their personal lot in Chen Village sufficient to drive them to Hong Kong in the years between 1972 and 1981. Four had come as legal emigrants, and the others had illegally "swum out."

They had come for a variety of reasons. For all the young Chen peasants whom we interviewed, Hong Kong had provided their only means to enter the higher-paid job market of a big city; and some of these earnings get remitted to their families back in the village. Among the fourteen urban-born young people, all of whom had left for Hong Kong in the early to mid 1970s, five other reasons for emigrating stood out as most important:

1. Many of them, as single young people, had encountered severe financial difficulties in the Chinese countryside. On their own, without village families to back them up, they could not save sufficient money to get married or sometimes even to support themselves. As they entered their mid-twenties, they began to see no prospects for a better future.

2. Some of them had gotten into trouble in the Cultural Revolution and felt this had irretrievably damaged their standing in the village.

3. Several of them felt that they were no longer needed or wanted by the peasantry. The local peasant youths had been obtaining educations and had begun to take over their posts and responsibilities. The urban-born youths were being shunted aside by the villagers' preference for their own children.

4. Many of the interviewees, peasant and urban youths alike, also shared an important complaint about the Chinese Communist system. They came largely from backgrounds that the Chinese government had defined as politically unreliable. They felt that because of their official class labels, which they had inherited from their families, they were being condemned to "second-class citizenship." Some of them had once felt they could overcome the disad-

vantage of their class backgrounds through personal revolutionary zeal. They had felt betrayed when they perceived this would be impossible during Mao's lifetime. We shall observe their frustrations as our chronicle of Chen Village's recent history unfolds.

5. The faith of many of the young people in Mao and the party gradually had been sapped by the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, the launching of a severe "struggle campaign" in its wake, Lin Biao's downfall, and the subsequent political infighting among the nation's leaders. Many of them remained convinced that socialist agriculture is preferable to private ownership; and few of them felt hostile toward the Communist government. But a number of them had felt confused, disturbed, and disheartened by the political events of the seventies. We now know from more recent reports and wall posters from China that a great many young people throughout the People's Republic had felt similarly perturbed by the same sets of issues during these same years.

Down to the Countryside

Our story begins in 1964, at a time when our group of urban-born interviewees had shared high hopes for both their own and China's future. In that spring of 1964 they had just graduated, variously, from junior or senior high school. Though some of them had failed to get into higher levels of education, they could have stayed in Canton and reapplied to enter a school the following year. But they declined to. They did not want to look "selfish." As one of them has reminisced,

We had been educated to put the country's and the people's interests first; and had been taught that we shouldn't be afraid of suffering; should become revolutionary successors; and shouldn't just want to stay in the comfortable life of the cities. We had learned [from the first year of junior high school onward] that we should go to the countryside to temper ourselves, so as to be people who could take hardship and have stronger class feelings, and thus be able to become revolutionary successors. Also, [we felt] the countryside needed us very much, we who had education and self-confidence. . . . At that time, many people thought that to live in