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Unrest in Rural China: A 2003 Assessment

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By the early 21st century, social unrest had become a normal feature of Chinese society.¹ Whether defined as unrest, protest, or resistance, members of major social groups became increasingly assertive in their quest of redress of grievances. In the cities, laid-off workers, pensioners, and residents subject to urban renewal programs took to the streets to protest their treatment by the government. In the countryside, financial burdens in the form of taxes and fees were the major but not the only source of unrest. Villagers downstream protested against pollution of rivers by upstream village factories. In areas subject to rapid industrial or residential development, especially in the suburbs of major cities, peasants protested the taking of their land without adequate compensation for their houses and lost livelihoods. The land issue has become a major source of unrest. Peasants also protested when development projects encroached on traditional burial grounds, riding roughshot over deeply held customary beliefs.

In all these cases, it was acts by government, especially local officials that aroused popular anger, fury, and rage, often further inflamed by repressive responses of police. Popular unrest, therefore, was largely reactive to acts of commission or omission, especially abusive policy implementation by state agents or by officials who were on the payroll of predatory developers. Although directed at government, a defining feature of popular protest was that it did not challenge the political system as such. Instead, protesters typically legitimated their actions by invoking rules, regulations, and policies promulgated by the authorities, especially the Center, and which in their view were violated by officials. (The major exception to this was minority protest against Han rule, which, if it actually did aim at separation from the PRC, challenged the system itself and hence invited an especially harsh response.) The aim of many of the protests was to call the attention of top-level leaders to particular grievances.

This paper, which focuses on peasant responses to extraction of taxes and fees, exemplifies this point: peasants and their leaders asserted themselves against local officials in the name of the Central leaders' edicts to reduce peasant financial burdens. This close identification of protestors with the Party was in part a deliberate protective stratagem, given the readiness of the authorities to arrest people for allegedly trying to overthrow the state or undermining state power. But it also was based on reality: with regard to taxes and fees, the Center regularly sided with the peasants, realizing that local officials were driving people to revolt (*guanbi minfan*). Regardless of whether protestors actually identified with the system or did so instrumentally, the result was the same: it confined societal protest to demands that governments take remedial steps to alleviate the grievance in question. Not only did protest have a "self-limiting" characteristic—reminiscent of Eastern Europe during the late communist period—but protest also did not coalesce across social groups or regions. This meant that protest demonstrations, although destabilizing, did not in fact threaten the stability of the regime.

¹ This paper was presented at the conference on "Beyond the Party-State: State, Law, and Society in Contemporary China," Center for East Asian Studies, Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, June 30-July 1, 2004

Hence, the term “stable instability” is appropriate. These limitations were not cast in stone and could change, and indeed, by 2003, there were some indications that while protest still did not challenge the system, it was becoming more politicized.

Protest fell into two categories, more or less legal efforts to seek redress of grievances, and those that were clearly considered illegal. Legal efforts included petitioning higher levels through the Letters and Visits offices, of which a part was collective petitioning (jiti shangfang), which was strongly discouraged but tolerated. Other legal avenues included bringing lawsuits, or ousting village-level leaders in an election. For illegal activities, see below.

Although comprehensive data did not become available, there is little doubt that the society-wide frequency of unrest grew significantly the past decade. An authoritative analysis of both urban and rural protest published in 2001 by the Central Committee’s Organization Department stated that “frequently hundreds and thousands and even up to 10,000” persons were participating, adding:

What is especially worthy of attention is that at present the frequency of collective incidents (quntixing shijian) is rising more and more, their scope is broadening more and more, the feelings expressed are becoming fiercer and fiercer, and the harm they do is becoming greater and greater... The organizational level is visibly becoming higher. Formerly, incidents were mostly spontaneous and fairly loose (songsan). Now, many have leaders, are organized, and behind the participants there are core elements who exert influence and control. Some even hire lawyers and seek media support.”²

The frequency of unrest and the organizational coherence of collective actions increased, but as noted, the impact of protests was limited by the lack of horizontal linkages and coordination between different groups of protestors, thereby weakening their overall impact.

Collective Protest and Violence over Financial Burdens

Extraction of excessive taxes and fees (T and F) combined with brutal collection methods led to protest and violence.³ Peasant strategies ranged from evasion of taxes or fees and attempts to delay and postpone payment, to demonstrations, sit-ins and blockades of roads and railroads, the sacking of Party-government township compounds, and the detention and beating of cadres. T and F protests occurred mainly but not exclusively in the major agricultural provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi, Henan, Anhui, Shanxi, and Shaanxi. These provinces differed from those on the East Coast in that their rural level of industrialization lagged far behind. In the East, since the 1980s, township and village industries had grown very rapidly, yielding resources which local officials could use to build infrastructure or fund education. In agriculture-dependent areas where there were few or no such resources, officials found themselves compelled to rely on informal exactions, fees, fines, apportionments, and informal taxes in order to fund public goods for which neither the Center nor the provinces were providing adequate funding. The lack of predictability

² Zhongguo Zhonggong Zuzhibu Ketizu. 2001. Zhongguo diaocha baogao, 2000-2001: Xin xingshi renmin neibu maodun yanjiu (China investigation report, 2000-2001: Study of contradictions among the people in the new situation). Zhongyang Bianshi Chubanshe, 67, 285, and 385-6.

³ This paper is in part based on Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, Taxation without Representation in Contemporary China (Cambridge UP, 2003) but also on significant new data.

and accountability, together with frequently brutal and sometimes ruinous enforcement, provoked widespread resistance.

In the fall, winter, and early spring of 1996-1997, confrontations in the form of parades and demonstrations as well as petitioning erupted in nine provinces in 36 counties, with 380,000 participants. Two hundred thirty were labeled cases of “turmoil, riot, or rebellion.”⁴ Between mid-May and mid-June 1997 and again in late July and early August, another major wave of unrest occurred in four provinces involving a reported aggregate of about a half a million participants:

Protests in 1997

Place	Dates	People Involved	Collective Actions
Anhui	May 20 to June 17, 1997	70,000	Peasants living in 40 townships in five counties in three prefectures staged some 60 incidents. Aside from attacks on official buildings, in two counties, peasants seized guns and ammunition. In Xiaoxian, 500 blocked a cargo train and seized goods, resulting in armed confrontation with the Public Security branch of the railroads. The cost was 40 injuries and 11 deaths, five of whom were police.
Henan	May 17-22, 1997	200,000	In Yiyang and Changde prefectures, peasants in 80 townships in five counties staged 80 incidents of assembly (jihui), demonstrations and submission of petitions. In several instances, peasants burned vehicles and attacked county governments elsewhere. Three deaths and 54 injuries resulted.
Hubei	May 14-19, 1997	120,000	Peasants in 60 townships in four counties in Jingzhou prefecture staged 70-odd demonstrations in opposition to peasant exploitation and official appropriation of peasant fruits of labor. In Tianmen county, 3,000 villagers attacked County Party-government buildings; 90 injuries resulted.
Hubei	July 30-August 2, 1997	200,000	Peasants demonstrated, petitioned and protested. This involved 12 counties and 75 townships. In 8 of the latter, the protests were labelled saoluan and baodong (riots and rebellions). The main cause was payment in IOUs, overpriced inputs, and 21 taxes and levies that violated national policy. In one prefecture, peasants from a local armory participated in a bloody fight in which more than 40 of them were wounded or killed.

⁴ Li Zijing. 1998. “Duifu jihui shiwei de xin zhenglin” (new government decree on deal with demonstrations), *Cheng Ming*, no.5: 17-18. For a report on one major outbreak in September 1996, in Qidong county, Hunan, see *Shijie Ribao (SJR)*, November 11, 1996.

Jiangxi	Mid-May to mid-June, 1997	100,000	Peasants in three prefectures—Jiujiang, Yichun, and Jian—in 70 townships in five counties staged a hundred protests. Peasants occupied county Party and government buildings, attacked Supply and Marketing cooperatives, plundering fertilizer and cement. In Yifeng County, 800 people attacked the Public Security bureau. In some cases, leading cadres from the province and the prefecture were surrounded and had to be rescued by the military.
Jiangxi	July 28 to August 5, 1997	200,000	Peasants in 15 counties and 78 townships. The target were IOUs, low grain prices, the high cost of inputs, and increased taxes and levies. In four counties, bloody clashes occurred when thousands attacked county Party-government buildings. 200 peasants were hurt, as were 50 Public Security and PAP personnel. In two counties, peasants torched township Party-government compounds. In one of them, Yongfeng, the county Public Security opened fire allegedly because peasants had explosives, causing 70 peasant casualties.

Sources: Li Zijing.1997. “Si sheng wushiwan nongmin kangzheng” (half a million peasants resist in four provinces), Cheng Ming, no.4:19-21) and Yue Shan. 1997. “Gan E wushiwan nongmin baodong” (half a million peasants rebel in Jiangxi and Hubei), Cheng Ming, no.9: 21-23. Note: although taken from a Hong Kong source, the fact that such incidents happened can easily be confirmed from Mainland sources but the same is not true of the aggregate numbers.

In 1999, various sources report that 53,000 rural incidents occurred with a claimed participation of over five million participants. In 2000, major disturbances took place in Jiangxi and again in April 2001.⁵ In the late fall of 2002, more than 80,000 peasants in 15 townships in Yulin prefecture, Shaanxi, protested against “exorbitant taxes, harsh levies and exploitation.” They appealed to provincial leaders and to the State Council for help, claiming that they had been forced to rebel like the bandits who went up to Liangshan.⁶ And in 2003 and early 2004, similar reports appeared.⁷

Cases of Collective Actions. Five types of collective actions appeared in the data: collective boycotts or refusal to pay, spontaneous eruptions; actions characterized by a high level of prior organization, collective actions in response to demands for even more funds, and violence in connection with collective petitioning. The following are three examples.

⁵ Yue Shan.2000. “Shehui zhuangkuang ehua de jingren shuzi (worsening of the social situation is indicated by alarming numbers,”Cheng Ming no.2: 21-23; Agence France Press, August 29 and 30, 2000; Baltimore Sun, February 12, 2001, quoting the Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy, Hong Kong; Baltimore Sun April 18, 2001; NYT April 20, 2001.

⁶ Yue Shan, “Shiliu da hou kangzheng liangchao biandi yong” (a valiant wave of resistance sweeps over the county in the aftermath of the 16th Congress), Cheng Ming no.1, 2003: 17-19. Liangshan was the bandits’ lair in the novel Water Margin.

⁷ Yue Shan, “Jin erbaiwan nongmin canyu kanzheng” (nearly two million peasants took part in resistance), Cheng Ming, no.12, 2003: 16-18, and Li Zijing, “Hu Jintao xiexiang mudu canguan,” (Hu Jintao goes to the countryside to see for himself), Cheng Ming no.1, 2004: 10-11.

Case 1. Daolin town in Ningxiang county, outside Changsha, Hunan, had a history of abusive tax collection and resistance. Sometime in 1996-1997 farmers from several villages formed an organization, innocuously named “Volunteer Propagandists for the Policy of Reducing Burdens.” Each village had at least one member, who regularly met and studied documents. They used tape recorders to reach households and rented a loudspeaker truck to propagate the official policy of reducing burdens.⁸ Similar groups were formed in at least 4 of the 12 other townships in Ningxiang county. The leaders of these groups were known as “peasant heroes” or “burden reduction heroes”.⁹ In June 1998, a large and peaceful demonstration was staged in Daolin, which reportedly led to a reduction in school fees, a success that no doubt inspired villagers to engage in further protest.¹⁰

Organizers planned another rally on January 8, 1999. They put up posters asking peasants to attend. One poster invoked the support of the Central leaders for the lightening of burdens: “Resolutely unite around the Center of the Communist Party headed by President Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Zhu Rongji.” Another account claimed that the police planned to arrest the ringleaders and disband the group. On the 8th, approximately 4,000 villagers gathered at the town government compound to demand lower taxes and an end to corruption, but before the protest leaders were able to speak, the crowd surged towards the compound.

The authorities mobilized an overwhelming force of 1,000 police officers and 500 soldiers. Police ordered the crowd to disperse and used clubs and tear gas. A tear gas canister killed one peasant, many were injured and hundreds were arrested.¹¹ A different report claimed that the peasants’ efforts to prevent police from arresting the organizers was the source of the clash.¹² Apparently, protesters reassembled on the following day but were dispersed. A week later, 200 village representatives petitioned the Changsha government, demanding to know the identity of the officer who had caused the death. Three demonstrations against official violence were held outside the Changsha government, which responded by paying the family of the victim 60,000 yuan in compensation. Three of the protest leaders went surreptitiously to Beijing to petition national government offices and to contact the popular investigative TV Program Jiaodian Fantan (focal point), hoping to have their case publicized. They wanted a Central work team to be sent to Ningxiang. At the 1999 NPC meeting, Premier Zhu expressed deep concern about rural stability in Hunan but also anger at violent repression.(see section on repression).¹³

Two leaders hid in the village until summer, when they were arrested. In August, nine organizers were sentenced to terms from two to six years for attacking government agencies and holding illegal rallies.¹⁴

⁸ Banyuetan (neibuban) no.4, 1999: 10 See also New York Times (NYT), January 16 and February 1, 1999)

⁹ Banyuetan (neibuban) (no. 2, 2000: 8-30. An article on Daolin appears on pp 8-10.

¹⁰ NYT February 1, 1999.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² NYT January 16, 1999, SCJP January 15, 1999.

¹³ NYT Feb.1, 1999; SCJP Feb.1, 1999 and April 3, 1999) and Nongmin Ribao (NMRB), March 8,1999.

¹⁴ NYT June 16, 1999; Reuters August 13, 1999, in Current@aol.com.

The next case is one of collective violence in response to cadre violence.

Case 2 In 1998, in Liangping county, Sichuan, the chief of Xinsheng town and several cadres from the Land Bureau argued with a farmer, Luo Changrong, who refused to pay land taxes. The cadres beat him and he died two days later. Several hundred villagers carried the body to the town government building. Police sought to remove the corpse. A clash ensued; one villager was killed and others were wounded. The county investigated.¹⁵

Case 3 illustrates the fury and rage that accumulated among some peasants:

Case 3: Tuanbao town, in Lichuan city, Hubei, during the Spring Festival in 2001. Four months earlier, Zhaijiawan villagers had refused to pay the annual tax, led by a former village teacher, Dong Mingyong. On numerous occasions he had led obstruction of the tax collectors sent by the government. The Party committee and government of Lichuan city kept sending representatives to the village, resulting in numerous conflicts.

Before dawn on February 7, the City public security bureau suddenly sent police to arrest Dong and others. This infuriated the villagers, more than 300 of whom surrounded the town government building at around 10 am. Bricks and stones rained down on the cadres and police, shattering the windows of the building. Cadres inside the building were hit by glass and rocks. An officer who wanted to help the town government was tied up and, having been hit by stones, dropped to the ground unconscious. This took place amidst cries of “beat them to death, beat them to death.” At the same time, villagers blocked State route 318 from Shanghai to Lhasa. A rock thrown at a police vehicle smashed its windows, and the driver was pulled out and cruelly beaten, losing consciousness. 8-9 peasants turned the car over and threw it into the river. Around 12:30 pm, villagers blocked and overturned another car front of the Tuanbao state tax sub-bureau, viciously beating the passengers, including a woman who ran into a gully and who was so badly beaten that she was covered with blood. At around 12:40, a propaganda vehicle parked in front of the town government was set on fire. The gas tank exploded and the car burned for more than 2 hours.

Around 2 pm, some peasants smashed in the gate of the movie theater, picked up hollow bricks (kongxin zhuan) stacked on the side, ran up to the third floor of the theater and threw them down at town government cadres who had apparently taken refuge in the theater. When the bricks were gone, a young man picked up roof tiles and threw them down as well. Some people rushed into the projection room, picked up the projector and containers of film, which they emptied out and threw down.

After 4:00 pm, five traffic police officers on patrol passed by, whereupon a group of peasants attacked them, using wooden clubs, steel bars, and stones as well as their boxing skills. Two women officers were beaten so badly that they couldn't walk and a male officer also suffered a bloody beating.

At 5:00 pm, the Zhou government despatched 200 police, who arrested a leader and more than 10 peasants, thereby forcing the demonstrating peasants to disperse. Thus ended an eight hour riot.

¹⁵ South China Morning Post (SCMP), November 3, 1998.

Violence also erupted in connection with collective petitioning. When groups of villagers visited county authorities to seek relief, officials might refuse to meet with their leaders, fop them off with empty, placating promises of investigations, or simply pass the buck by sending them to other offices. In such cases, anger might be publicly voiced, and more villagers might arrive to reinforce their vanguard. Public Security officials might then order the group to disperse and violence would ensue.¹⁶

Leaders. Leaders of collective protests came from three groups: respected villagers who did not hold office, to a lesser extent from among village cadres and Party members, and also, perhaps increasingly so, from elected village officials. With regard to the first, in early 2000, the internal edition of a popular journal, Banyuetan, gave this introduction to a 22- page report on and analysis of informal leaders, called “peasant heroes,” in Hunan:

In recent years, in some villages where cadre-mass relations were tense, “peasant leaders” have appeared. Under their leadership, organization, and slogans, peasants engage in collective petitioning, accuse cadres, even surround and attack basic-level Party and government organs. What are they, heroes or troublemakers? Where does their “magic power” come from?¹⁷

Also called “burden reduction representatives” (jianfu daibiao) or “collective petitioning representatives” (jiti shangfang daibiao), or “representatives of peasant interests” (nongmin liyi daibiao ren), such leaders had a record of outspoken advocacy on behalf of peasants. They remonstrated with township officials, and, when this didn’t work—township Party and government had the greatest interest in extracting peasants funds—they led groups to petition higher levels, often all the way to Beijing in order to make their case. They frequently were involved in clashes with the authorities.¹⁸

These leaders were better educated than ordinary peasants, were between 30-40 years old, and came from fairly prosperous families. Many were veterans who had acquired organizational and communications skills in the army. One had been decorated during the 1979 war with Vietnam. In a Shanxi tax outbreak, several hundred peasants confronted local authorities led by a PLA veteran.¹⁹ Many veterans did not have positions commensurate with their background and experience, a possible motivation to lead or participate in protests.

Other leaders were or had been teachers. (Low pay and especially widespread arrears were undoubtedly a motivation to become active.) In Ningxiang, Hunan (Case 1), one of the “peasant heroes,” Yang Yaojin, a veteran who became a teacher in a locally-funded school.²⁰ Dissatisfaction with the leaders of the school prompted Yang to hold meetings with parents to check school accounts, which apparently helped him build a network of supporters in the villages

¹⁶ For other complex cases of this nature, see Chen Daolong.1994. “Xiangcun zai huhan” (cries from the countryside). Yuhua, special reportage issue: 2-22.).

¹⁷ Banyuetan (neibuban).2000: no.2

¹⁸ This section draws on several research papers published in 2003 by Chinese scholars who did lengthy field investigations. For the first, see case 3, note 14. For another, see Yu Jianrong. 2003. “Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng jiqi zhengzhi fengxian”—Hunan sheng H xian diaocha,” (peasants’ organized resistance and its political risks—investigation of Hunan’s H county). Zhanlue yu Guanli, no.3: 1-16). Yu investigated 20 townships in H county over a three year period.

¹⁹ SCMP (June 26, 1993, FBIS 122: 19).

²⁰ Banyuetan (neibuban)2000. no. 2: 8)

of Daolin town. In a case from Hubei, a schoolteacher who had been dismissed had for some time led resistance to taxation, including beating up of tax officials and organizing demonstrations. Another, Huang Guoqing of Lianyuan city, Hunan, had run afoul of the authorities by opening a school and hiring teachers without permission. In order to “assist” higher administrative agencies in reducing burdens, he set up a “board of directors” which formulated demands on government. Huang had failed his college entrance examinations by one point (reminiscent of Hong Xiuquan who led the massive 19th century Taiping rebellion).²¹ Still others had worked in the cities.

Peasant representatives understood national policy, having read central documents that called for burden reduction or relevant speeches by central leaders. They legitimated their roles by claiming that they were acting in the name of the Center and that they were only opposing local officials who were grossly violating Party-state policies. They saw themselves as upholding the interests of the Party and state, which were not separable from the peasants’ legitimate rights and interests. Because of this, Chinese researchers emphasized their fearlessness and readiness to sacrifice. One, by the name of Hong, had led peasants to resist handing over a local tax, resulting in a physical altercation with town cadres, which angered peasants. Although Hong tried to restrain them, they overturned a town-owned jeep. Hong was blamed and sentenced to three years for disturbing public order. After his release in September 2001, He resumed his leadership of petitioning for burden reduction. He is quoted as having said that even if they kill me, there’ll be others who will follow me. “As I long as I have life in me, and as long as the CCP hasn’t collapsed, I will petition to the end... To die for the Party and peasant interests is glorious.” Peasants praised him highly for voicing his outrage at injustice (bao buping.) Their reputations for courage were a significant political resource.

Villagers were emboldened to engage in strategic, rational collective action in the correct belief that the central authorities themselves opposed excessive burdens and therefore sided with them against their own agents. Central leaders’ assurances that they did care about the plight of the peasants added to peasants’ incentives to engage in what Li Lianjiang and Kevin O’Brien called “rightful” resistance.²² The central authorities naturally did not deliberately encourage illegal collective actions, which were an unanticipated consequence of the shortage or ineffectiveness of legal modes of securing redress. Nevertheless, when peasants protested on a large enough scale, there could well be a response. For instance, during the July-August 1997 riots in Jiangxi and Hubei, NPC Chairman Li Peng sent a powerful work team to investigate. It ordered payment of all IOUs (there official promises to pay for grain and other commodities sold to the state) and abolished 21 taxes and fees. It also ruled that most peasants who took part were not to be held responsible. Premier Zhu accused the provincial leaders of the two provinces of dereliction of duty and ordered swift punishment of “local tyrants” who had abused their authority. “In the majority of cases,” Zhu acknowledged that peasants engaged in violent protest because of the acts of local government leaders who violated Central policies and were corrupt.²³ The hope for such higher-level intervention encouraged villagers to assert themselves. Peasants’ positive orientation towards Central authorities turned more and more negative as one moves down the hierarchy, as this verse suggests:

²¹ Banyuetan (neibuban). 2000: 2).

²² Lianjiang Li and O’Brien.1996. “Villagers and popular resistance,” *Modern China* 22: no.1: 28-61 and O’Brien and Li.1995.”The Politics of lodging complaints in rural China,” China Quarterly (CQ), no.143: 756-83. See also O’Brien 1996, “Rightful resistance”, World Politics 49: 31-55.

²³ Yue Shan.1997.”Gan E wushiwan nongmin baodong”

At the Center the sky is blue,
in the provinces clouds are gathering,
in the counties there is flooding,
in the townships people are drowning
and are running for their lives.²⁴

This helps to explain cases of violence that occurred in the course of peasant search for help from the higher levels using such channels as collective petitioning. Peasants needed to be able to inform the higher levels of the hierarchy of their plight. But since the township and often county cadres against whom peasants were complaining had a vested interest in preventing information from reaching the higher-level authorities, violence often became part of the process. Besides, leaders of a locality that experienced numerous cases of collective petitions were given black marks in their performance evaluations, strengthening the incentive to prevent petitioners from going higher up. From the peasants' perspective illegal forms of protest such as sit-ins, blocking automobiles or railroad lines were often the only way to get attention from higher-level authorities.²⁵

In some cases, the arrest of a peasant leader precipitated rescue mobilization. In Yizhang county, Hunan, about 2000 peasants assembled in the town after an arrest. They surrounded 100 Public Security officers and smashed the town government compound, including the living quarters of the cadres. In an incident in H county, Hunan, town leaders convened a large "struggle" meeting against six such leaders, who were bound and displayed on a stage. The son of one of them charged the stage to rescue his father, whereupon the masses joined in a fracas in which ten county and town cadres were beaten, two vehicles burned, and a group routed that had been recruited to defend the authorities routed. Women joined in the riot.²⁶

Elected Leaders and Unelected Cadres. The introduction of liberalized, democratic village elections altered the interest calculus of village leaders. When elections allowed peasants to make a genuine choice rather than one explicitly or implicitly dictated by the townships and the village Party branches, the chairpersons and members of the village committees (henceforth VC) were more likely to promote the demands of their constituents rather than respond only to orders from above. Sometimes this culminated in their leading protest demonstrations. Li Lianjiang found cases of chairpersons of village committees who not only lobbied on behalf of villagers but who led protest activities. In Shandong, the liberalization of nomination procedures in 1999—in so-called "sea elections," local organizations such as the Party branch were not allowed to nominate candidates—led to the election of leaders of collective protests. By October 1999, elected cadres had organized so many protests against township governments that the provincial organization department warned in an internal circular that elections had caused

²⁴ Yang Hao. 1999. "Nongmin de huhan," (peasants' cries). *Dangdai* no.6: 63- 90. See also Li and O'Brien.1996: 43. A 2000 survey by Li Lianjiang confirms this. See Li Lianjiang.2001. "Peasant views of the Chinese Party-state," unpublished paper.

²⁵ Author's interview, September 10, 1998.

²⁶ Yu Jianrong. 2003, "Nongmin you zushi kangzheng..."

widespread chaos.²⁷ In late 1999, four elected protest leaders in Shandong were reportedly arrested.²⁸

A trend—possibly growing—emerged towards the end of the 1990s of elected village leaders, leading collective actions. If they did so, they risked arrest, but then the regime also deprived itself of leaders of proven effectiveness in reducing the endemic cadre-peasant conflicts. The dilemma was compounded because top leaders had approved village elections on the grounds that they would promote stability. If, in contrast, elected leaders also acted on a wide scale as protest leaders, this rationale would be severely undermined. On the other hand, a Chinese analyst, writing in 2003, concluded that the state put the village committee system in place and that the VCs were essentially tools of the townships and could not speak for the peasants.²⁹ Whether VC leaders do turn to increasing protest activity in the future bears watching. If yes, China's leaders could well reconsider their commitment to village democracy.

As for unelected cadres, accounts published in the Hong Kong press in the mid-1990s claimed that "in almost all the serious incidents in Shanxi, Henan, and Hunan, the 'ringleaders' were local cadres," while in some villages and townships, virtually the entire cadre force was guilty of inciting to riot.³⁰ In the Jiangxi disturbances in 1997, township and village Party and government cadres also were said to have "participated and encouraged peasants to protest."³¹ Official investigations also mentioned cadre and Party member participants.

The image of cadres as protest leaders, however, is counterintuitive, given the powerful evidence of conflict between local officials and the masses. The bulk of the available evidence emphasizes the severe tensions between peasants and cadres as the major line of cleavage. In perhaps the majority of cases, village cadres, not to speak of township-level officials, tended to enforce the collection of levies.³² Career considerations, especially on the part of township cadres, stood in the way of support for or leadership of protest movements. This was less true of village cadres but in their cases, Party discipline could be invoked, since village branch secretaries were subordinate to the township Party committees.

Cadre morale suffered not necessarily from pressure from peasants but also from lack of support from above when higher authorities, especially the Center, repudiated their actions. In 1993, when major riots erupted, the Center swiftly sought to placate the protestors by ordering reductions in financial burdens. This prompted many cadres to complain angrily: "The central authorities have betrayed us."³³ Concern about the damage that was being done to the regime's political base by pitting farmers against officials was voiced in the fall of 1993 by two State Council officials.³⁴ This is not to deny that there were village cadres who identified not only with their superiors but also with their clients with whom they had personal and family ties.³⁵ Some

²⁷ Li Lianjiang. 2001. "Elections and popular resistance in rural China," *China Information*, vol.15, no.2: 1-19, and also Stratfo Report.1999. www.stratfo.com, November 1999.

²⁸ *Washington Post* Foreign Service, November 12,1999.

²⁹ Yu Jianrong. 2003."Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng."

³⁰ Guan Jie. 1996. "Peasant riots in Shanxi, Henan, and Hunan," *Dongxiang*, no.124, trsl.in *China Perspectives* no.3, Jan-Feb :6-9.

³¹ Li Zijing.1997. "Si sheng wushiwan nongmin kangzheng."

³² See Berrnstein and Lu. 2003.

³³ Jung Sheng. 1993. "Great impact of agricultural issue—tracking incident of peasant riots in Sichuan's Renshou county," *Hsin Pao*, June 10, FBIS no.111: 10-15.

³⁴ RMRB 1993, September 17, FBIS no.199: 39

³⁵ See, e.g., Jean Oi .1989. *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* Berkeley: University of California

data suggests that those closest to the peasants at the very lowest level of the hierarchy, the former production teams, now called “groups (zu) were more likely to sympathize with and side with the peasants. In a case in Hubei in which officials harassed a peasant to the point of driving him to suicide, the group chief, who was a member of the fee collection team, told a Xinhua reporters that he “was very ashamed to have been an accessory to this crime. These days, when the masses see me approach, they say ‘the devils are coming’ (i.e., the wartime invading Japanese), hurry home and dig tunnels.”³⁶

At the township and higher levels, younger, better educated, and more open minded township or county officials were also more likely to sympathize with the peasants’ plight. A famous case is that of the Hubei township Party secretary, Li Changping, who “spoke the truth to the Premier” by reporting on the desperate situation in his township.³⁷ But township officials were under intense pressure to extract funds both for career reasons and because townships were greatly dependent on such funds. It is not plausible that they would risk their careers by leading peasant protests. Li Changping, it is important to note, did not lead peasant protests but simply sought to alert the Center to the crisis in his township. In any event, he was hounded out of office. Again, how officials above the village will behave is an important issue for the future. Thus a Chinese scholar pointed out in an interview that if planned severe cutbacks in the township bureaucracies actually took place, then laid-off and disgruntled cadres might end up supporting peasant protests.

Staying Power, Networks, and Organization What is most noteworthy about the more recent cases of collective protests led by peasant representatives was their staying power, made possible by sustained networks of contact among activists and leaders. In Yuntan county, Jiangxi, a village sustained a tax boycott for three years, fending off police invasions, the latest occurring in April 2001.³⁸ In a town in H county, Hunan, studied by a CASS researcher, peasant leader Peng Shuangxiong started his network with meetings of his group (the ex-production team), at which he read documents and made concrete demands for transparency in village financial and other public affairs, which earned him popular support. Gradually, he expanded his influence, so eventually, not just his village but 12 others had individuals willing to take part in meetings. Because of fear that officials might accuse them of forming an illegal organization, they decided against formalizing their activities and not to designate responsible persons (fuzi ren). Peng appointed “conveners” (zhaoji ren) for meetings. This and other such networks did not keep records of meetings. They assembled materials on burdens and engaged in collective petitioning. In this case, during a county market fair, they used loudspeakers to spread news of central and provincial documents. The glue that held them together was the reputations and authority of the leaders.

An attempt by the county authorities to use the “strike hard” anti-crime campaign as a pretext to crack down on the peasant representatives backfired in that furious peasants joined networks in other villages until peasant representatives had a presence in the entire county. This enabled petitions to be written in the name of a county-wide constituency and also to the drafting of proposals for county-wide burden reduction measures which were then sent to the authorities.

Press.

³⁶ Xinhua Neican Xuanbian no.2, 1996: 16-18.

³⁷ See Li Changping. 2001. Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua (I told the truth to the Premier), Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe.

³⁸ NYT April 20, 2001 and Baltimore Sun April 18, 2001.

On January 22, 2003, 27 representatives met in Peng Shuangxiong's village to discuss establishment of a peasant association. They met again on Feb. 14 and formulated a request to the county leaders for formal establishment of an association. The peasant representatives and their followers did not seek to set up an underground organization but sought to function as openly as possible. This, as the Chinese researcher who wrote on County H pointed out, was testimony not only to peasant organizational capacities but also indicated that organizations outside the political system might arise when the state proved unable to solve a major problem, such as the burdens.³⁹

The case of H County in Hunan is, as far as I know, the only instance of a county-wide resistance network. Most of the anti-tax and fee protests were confined to one village. Increasingly, however, there were cases of joint action by several villages within a town or township and also of protests that straddled the boundaries of towns. There were also signs of deliberate coordination of protest demonstrations in several townships. In Pengzi county, Jiangxi, in 1997, close to 5000 peasants from five townships and villages engaged in a protest that reportedly led to violence and deaths, indicative of significant coordination.⁴⁰ However, instead of explicit coordination, a contagion effect operated as news of protest spread to nearby villages and townships. This was more likely if peasants heard that the grievances of villages in which collective protests occurred were subsequently remedied without the imposition of punishment. (It is also worth mentioning that at various times in the 1990s, protests erupted in adjoining counties but no evidence of coordination has apparently come to light.) If rural protest movements were ever to pose a significant challenge to the regime, cross-county and cross-provincial organization and coordination would be required. The important point at present is that unofficial peasant leaders dedicated to protecting peasant interests had emerged in some places that in effect constituted an alternative source of authority. In December 1993, in the Hong Kong journal Cheng Ming reportedly based on the internal journal Neican, claimed that peasant organizations in ten regions, led by township and village cadres had set up organizations that could mobilize tens of thousands of peasants to surround and occupy county Party and government offices, persisting in this for up to eight days, dispersing only after higher-level officials made commitments to address their grievances.⁴¹ This suggests a further increase in peasant organizational capabilities.⁴²

Goals and Demands. The peasants' positive orientation towards the Center legitimated protests but also limited their goals. Most evidence suggests that their demands were specific and narrow. Peasants wanted relief from oppressive burdens and accountability of the uses to which their taxes and fees were put. If this was granted, they tended to be satisfied and protest subsided. Their actions were defensive and restorationist in nature. Peasants wanted to restore a proper balance between the claims of the state and their own. They had always "obediently" paid their taxes, but the burdens "have forced the broad masses of peasants not only to negate the tradition

³⁹ Yu Jianrong, 2003, "Nongmin you zushi kangzheng..."

⁴⁰ Yue Shan, 1997. "Gan E wushiwan nongming baodong."

⁴¹ Yue Shan, 2003. "Jin erbaiwan nongmin canyu kangzheng"

⁴² See, e.g., Yu Jianrong, 2003. "Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng...." See also the unpublished paper by Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "Popular Contention and its Impact: Evidence from the Chinese Countryside," July 25, 2003.

but to go against it."⁴³ This mindset built on a long tradition of tax resistance against illegitimate extractions.⁴⁴

At the same time, researchers have noted the emergence in recent years of a more political stance among some villagers in recent years. The rise of peasant leaders who gained support and popularity for challenging the local authorities signified villager awareness that it was conceivable to think about alternatives to the present local authorities. Others included a growing rights consciousness, i.e., awareness that officials were violating legal rights, and hence willingness to bring law suits and demands for greater accountability, not just with respect to village finances but more importantly with regard to the townships.⁴⁵

Hong Kong sources claiming access to internal documents report that more radical political demands were voiced in many places already in the mid-1990s. In the disorders in Shanxi, Henan, and Hunan in the fall of 1995, rural underground organizations reportedly adopted political slogans that aimed at peasant autonomy and emancipation from the control of outsiders: "all wealth of the land should go to the peasants;" "end the exploitation and oppression of the peasant class;" and "long live the peasant communist party and the unity of the peasants."⁴⁶ In August 1993, 2,000 odd villagers from seven villages in Qingyang and Ningguo counties in southern Anhui reportedly held prolonged meetings to protest the issuance of IOUs and other abuses. Some township cadres took part, displaying banners similar to the ones already mentioned. Other read "down with the new landlords of the 1990s," and "[oppose] the 10,000 taxes" of the CCP.⁴⁷ In the May-June 1997 disturbances in Jiangxi, some county and village cadres reportedly put up these slogans: "Down with the urban bureaucratic exploiting class," "divide the wealth of the new rural despots," and "establish peasant political power."⁴⁸ In the July and August disturbances, slogans were said to have included "down with the county bosses" or "down with the county tyrants." In Lianhua county, peasants called for a "third revolution," the first having been land reform and the second decollectivization.⁴⁹ In late 2003, a report by the same author, Yue Shan, claimed the establishment of a "peasant democratic government," a "peasant land committee," a "rural peasant land reform committee," a "peasant revolutionary government," and most astonishingly, a "TV station to give peasants a voice" (nongmin zhisheng dian)⁵⁰

The claims in these slogans far transcended the tax-and-fee issue, and some were directed against the existing political order. In the absence of confirming indicators from the Mainland, these reports must be treated with caution. Still, what is interesting about them is that the demands were directed against the cities, indicative of deep rural resentment of the urban sector.

⁴³ *NMRB* September 23, 1988, FBIS no. 193: 25-27).

⁴⁴ See R. Bin Wong .1997. China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP) chpt.10.

⁴⁵ For a skeptical analysis, see Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien.2002. "Suing the local state: administrative litigation in rural China," paper prepared for Conference on "Law and Society in China," Berkeley, September 19-21.

⁴⁶ Guan Jie. 1995: 18-19. "Peasant riots in Shanxi, Henan, and Hunan."

⁴⁷ "Anhui nongmin kangshui shijian." (Incident of peasant tax resistance in Anhui).1993. Cheng Ming, No.9, September, p.93.

⁴⁸ Li Zijing.1997, "Si sheng wushiwan nongmin kangzheng," citing Neican of Xinhua News Agency.

⁴⁹ Yue Shan.1997. "Gan E wushiwan nongmin baodong."

State Responses to Rural Unrest

The regime perceived peasant reactions to excessive burdens as an ongoing threat to social stability. A Center document issued as early as in 1985 complained that the Central Committee and State Council had “time and again” called for reducing peasant burdens, only to see them increase. It warned that burdens greatly exceeded peasants’ capacity to pay and damaged peasant incentives, i.e., interest in farming. Burdens damaged Party-mass relations and the worker-peasant alliance, lowered the prestige of Party and government, caused severe discontent, and threatened rural stability and public order. Burdens constituted “a major political problem.” If burdens were not checked, even greater harm would be done to Party-peasant relations. In 1993, when rural rioting was widespread, some top leaders voiced fears that widespread rebellion could bring the regime down. Less apocalyptic but still alarming diagnoses were frequently made in the 1990s and into the new century. In 1996, burdens were causing “extreme anger;” in 1997, they were “a problem that still arouses the most vehement peasant reaction.” In that year, Premier Zhu warned officials that “underestimating the strength of the peasants would be to make a historic mistake.” In 1998, conditions were “extremely unfavorable to the maintenance of overall social stability.”⁵¹ Similarly, anxious statements were made since then as well.⁵²

Two problems presented themselves: what to do about the unrest itself and second, what to do about the financial burdens that caused it. With regard to popular disturbances, one response of course was repression. As Charles Tilly noted, a high risk of repression and severe punishment is a strong deterrent to participation in collective action, especially in violent form. Conversely, awareness of governmental reluctance or incapacity to use force stimulates participation.⁵³ In the Chinese countryside, the swiftness, certainty, and harshness of repression and punishment appeared to have attenuated in the later 1980s and into the 1990s. As social instability became a growing regime concern in the 1990s, major efforts were made to strengthen the security apparatus, the police, the People’s Armed Police, township-based militias, and also local PLA garrisons. One goal was to develop capacities for rapid deployment of overwhelming force; another, training in riot control techniques that would obviate the use of massive, lethal force as at Tiananmen.⁵⁴ The thumbnail descriptions given in Table 1 above of disturbances indicate a high degree of police mobilization. In early 1999, the Ningxiang disturbances (see Case 1) elicited the deployment of a reported 1,000 police and 500 troops. They used clubs and tear gas, resulting in one death.

In another case, in late November 1998, 700 police were sent to Shaocun village in Weixian county, Hebei, a poverty-stricken area, to arrest four “criminals” accused of having obstructed officials in the performance of their public duties. The Weixian county Party committee decided on the crackdown because it felt that problems in Shaocun village were undermining the stability of the whole county. This village had a long history of cadre-peasant tensions going back to 1989, when cadres had contracted an orchard out to themselves, yet required all villagers to pay the special products tax. One of the four “criminals” had lodged

⁵⁰ Yue Shan. 2003. “Jin erbaiwan nongmin canyu kangzheng.”

⁵¹ For references, see Bernstein and Lu (2003): 119-120

⁵² Luo Bing. 2003. “Hu Jintao chi ‘guanbi minfan,’” Cheng Ming, no.1: 7-8, and also an accompanying article in the same issue, pp.17-19

⁵³ Charles Tilly. 1975. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. NY: Random House: 158.

⁵⁴ Shu Szu, “CPC works out anti-riot contingency plans.” Chengming. April 1993: 34-35, in FBIS 63: 28-30).

complaints with higher levels, resulting in his house being searched and property confiscated. Villagers complained that the conflict with cadres was due to the lack of democracy. Elections for the village committee and within the Party branch had not been held in twenty years. When the police came, they carried a lot of rope and handcuffs, indicating intent to arrest numerous people, not just the four suspects. A clash with villagers ensued in which police fired 53 shots, killing one of the suspects and wounding five others. Police also inflicted beatings. Provincial-level agencies investigated the incident.⁵⁵ And in another Jiangxi riot in April 2001, two peasants were killed by police and 17 injured.⁵⁶

Chinese officials were divided over the issue of how far to go in cracking down if only because the protests were based on recognized grievances. In November 1997, a Sichuan Party secretary spoke about an incident in which peasants in Zhongjiang county had vandalized the township government compound and the police station. "Because of this, some comrades advocated sending troops, but I resolutely disagreed. I believe that the peasants were not rebellious, but simply angry about some of our work." He blamed the township leaders for delays in paying peasants for their grain while insisting on early tax payments.⁵⁷

In April 1998, the State Council promulgated regulations on how to deal with rallies, parades, demonstrations, and petitions. These forms of protest were rapidly increasing, and in some cases local authorities were unable to handle them. Each outbreak was to be analyzed by differentiating between those that constituted "contradictions among the people" and those that involved "contradictions with the enemy," using Mao Zedong's distinctions. An immediate report was to be made to the central and provincial authorities. Most cases, according to the document, fell into the within-the-people category in that they were apolitical, unorganized, and not premeditated. Such cases were often characterized by misunderstanding or dissatisfaction with government work and policies. They might have been caused by encroachments on the masses' legitimate rights and interests or failure to find a legal and reasonable solution to their grievances, but they could also be the result of unreasonable peasant demands that could not at present be met. In such cases persuasion was to be used, lawful grievances were to be resolved and bureaucratic styles of work corrected. The goal was to pacify the masses and avoid exacerbating and escalating the outbreak.

Cases which had a hostile component, included those in which protestors resorted to violence, engaged in "beating, smashing and looting"(a phrase from the Cultural Revolution) e.g., by attacking organs of party and government, and blocking railroads, roads, or bridges. Hostile cases were also those that were characterized by political organization and goals, linking up (chuanlian) with people in different jurisdictions and departments, a very important point since one of the main strategies of the regime for maintaining stability was to prevent escalation in the form of cross-society coalitions (cf last section). Connections with "hostile forces" within China (i.e., dissidents) and those from the outside world also warranted enemy treatment. The 1998 document focused special attention on those who organized and planned collective actions and on their political backgrounds, and called for arresting the ringleaders. But it did not specify

⁵⁵ Lian Jimin.1999. "Qiangkou buneng zhi xiang qunzhong" (guns can't be pointed at the masses. Minzhu yu Fazhi, February 21: 10-12.

⁵⁶ NYT, April 20, 2001.

⁵⁷ Chen Weihua. 1998. "Cong xinfang gongzuo jiaodu dui dangqian jianqing nongmin fudan wenti de zai sikao,"(reexamination of the question of lightening the burdens from the vantage point of letters and visits). Renmin Xinfang, no.9: 28-31

whether all cases of peasant organization should be treated as “hostile.”⁵⁸ Three years later, an assessment by the Central Committee’s Organization Department claimed that as “contradictions among the people have become visible rather than hidden, enhanced contradictions of an antagonistic character (duikangxing) have become a prominent feature...” of incidents.⁵⁹ As collective protests increased in number, size, and organization, suspicions arose that conspirators and plotters must be at work, suspicions that were well-rooted in Communist political culture. In any event, the guidelines left much of the interpretation to the discretion of local officials. Judging by the Ningxiang county example, some local authorities were quick to assign an enemy label and therefore to resort to force.

Premier Zhu Rongji’s 1999 Work Report to NPC suggested that in the handling of within-the-people cases, excessive force had been used. Zhu said that legal, economic, and administrative means should be used combined with “in depth” ideological and political work. “Under no circumstances should we take an oversimplified or blunt approach to exacerbate a problem. Still less should we use dictatorial means against the masses of people.” This apparently was a reference to the Ningxiang incident, with the handling of which Zhu was reportedly dissatisfied.⁶⁰ Central authorities similarly responded to intense unrest in late 2002 with calls to rectify state actor misconduct, especially corruption rather than repression.⁶¹ The regime thus continued to send out mixed signals on the management of disorders, calling for the use of soft and hard methods. To be sure, the regime attached overriding importance to the maintenance of social stability. Local officials’ promotion chances were adversely affected if their bailiwicks became known for a high frequency of collective protest. This gave them an incentive to use overwhelming force to crush large-scale collective protests. Yet, since officials were also criticized for excessive harshness, villagers could not be sure just how officials would respond and this may explain why collective protests continued to erupt. Inefficiency is another explanation for continuity of protests. Despite the intentions to act quickly, the reaction of the authorities to large protests continued to be slow. In Case 3, the “Tuanbao incident” in 2001, a full eight hours was required for a large police force to arrive. Similarly, in 2000, in Yuandu township, Fengcheng city, Jiangxi, hundreds of farmers protesting against taxes and fees ransacked the township government offices on August 16 and 17. Thousands more villagers—some estimates claim 20,000—participated in the protest. But the police, including People’s Armed Police, took a full week to respond.⁶²

One approach to pacification was to co-opt informal leaders into formal positions, thereby taking advantage of their popularity and organizational abilities. This happened in a village in Hongshi Town, Hengyang County, Hunan. In 1996, one of its natural villages was invaded by a team of 200 township and village cadres on a mission to collect levies. When they began taking hogs and grain, they were blockaded by several hundred peasants organized by “peasant hero” Yi Shunlao, who had earlier led collective petitioning. A work team investigated and learned that township and village cadres wanted to make Yi the target of attack. Instead, the

⁵⁸ Li Zijing, 1998. “Duifu jihui shiwei de xin zhengling” (new government decree on dealing with demonstrations). *Cheng Ming*, no.5: 17-18.

⁵⁹ Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu Ketizu (2001: 67-8).

⁶⁰ CCTV, March 5, 1999, in BBC-FE/3478.S /11 and SCMP April 3, 1999.

⁶¹ Luo Bing, “Hu Jintao chi guanbi minfan” (Hu scolds cadres who drive people to revolt. *Cheng Ming* no.1, 2003 and Yue Shan, “Shiliu Da hou kangzheng liangchao biandi yong” (a widespread wave of valiant resistance), *Cheng Ming* no.1, 2003: 17-19

⁶². AFP: August 17 and 30, 2000; SCMP: September 9, 2000; and NYT: September 17, 2000.

team interviewed Yi and mobilized him to run for election to the village committee. He won hands down. Together with the accountant, also a veteran at organizing petitions, they instituted an open finance system, informing villagers of how their money was spent. Henceforth no further collective petitioning took place and the village was designated a model. The price was that township and some village cadres saw their authority undercut and that villagers could take satisfaction that their protests had yielded positive results.

Addressing the Burden Problem. Ever since the mid-1980s, Central leaders tried to lighten the burdens of the peasants but despite years of effort, the state was unable to solve the problem as of the year 2003. Over time, the state adopted several strategies to address the problem,⁶³ First, the war on burdens was waged by means of exhortation, promulgation of rules and regulations, and campaigns. These were efforts to pressure and constrain local officials to reduce burdens. This approach was important. It served to call widespread attention to the problem and to indicate to lower-level officials that the issue was a core concern of the central leaders and that therefore, it had to become part of their agendas. And, it served to inform the peasants that the Center was on their side. But it failed because the underlying structural causes, especially the funding of public goods and the spiraling cost of rural administration were not addressed.

A second strategy was to allow peasants themselves to seek redress. The major ones were first, the “Letters and Visits” system, which enabled peasants to lodge complaints with the local and higher authorities in the hope of enlisting their aid in curbing burdens; second, by making the legal system more accessible to villagers in the hope that legal intervention, including lawsuits, would remedy particular grievances; and third, by promoting village democracy so as to enhance the accountability of cadres. These measures, however, were also not adequate to solve the problem.

A third strategy was to address some of the institutional roots of the burden problem in the financial and bureaucratic systems. This included administrative streamlining, reform of township and village financial management, and conversion of fees into regular taxes. Streamlining was directed at the extraordinary bloating of the township bureaucracies. If at the end of the 1980s, each township had 30 cadres; as of the year 2000, the number had risen to 300.⁶⁴ A large proportion of these people were not on the authorized table of organization (bianzhi wai). They were paid out of extrabudgetary funds which in agriculture-dependent areas were squeezed from the peasants. Fundamental restructuring of the townships was required and in the spring of 2003, Chinese leaders expressed determination to tackle this issue. Scholars and officials discussed the possibility of outright abolition of the towns and townships as the lowest level of state power and transferring its functions to the counties and to the villages in the hope of attaining administrative economies of scale and therefore significant savings in personnel. Moves in this direction have been under way since the early 1990s in the form of merging towns and townships. In 1990s, there were 55,838 towns and townships; in 2002, only 39,054. However, according to Han Jun, head of a State Council institute, by the end of 2002, there were “more than 19 million staff paid from local budgets” in the then 37,896 township-level units, i.e., 501 per unit.⁶⁵

A fourth, recent, approach was designed to eliminate the informal taxes and fees, which

⁶³ See Bernstein and Lu. 2003,chapter 6.

⁶⁴ Wen Tiejun in Nanfang Zhoumo, August 24, 2000.

⁶⁵ Quoted in chinaelections.org, from China.org.cn, “China to streamline village and township governments, July 16, 2003. In the 1990s, there had been 55,838 such governments. See Zhongguo Tongji Zhaiyao, 2003.Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe: 112.

were more numerous than “hairs on an ox,” by consolidating all peasant payments into the agricultural one. Partially to offset the loss of revenue from cancellation of fees and local village and township taxes, it would be raised to seven or eight percent. This reform was launched experimentally in Anhui in 2000 and is now in progress in most provinces. The fees-into-taxes reform did succeed in significantly cutting peasant burdens, usually by a third. However, its crucial flaw was that despite the increase in the agricultural tax, the townships lost a vital source of revenue. The result, for instance, was a “huge shortfall” in the funding of education, greatly exacerbating the already serious crisis in rural education.⁶⁶

This time, however, central leaders publicly acknowledged from the spring of 2001 on that major infusions of money would have to be provided to the countryside to offset the losses suffered by local budgets from burden reduction. This was a major change in orientation, an admission that the long-standing policy of allowing some to get rich first worked in the East but not as well as in the Central and Western provinces. In 2002, in 2003, and again in 2004, significant funds were allocated. Thus, townships that had since the 1980s been responsible for a major part of the costs of rural education—tuition, school building and maintenance, etc—and which were a major source of burdens, often the major one, would now be relieved of this responsibility. As of the late summer of 2003, however, “appropriations from the higher administrative level could not be put in place in time and in full.”⁶⁷ Still, there is no question but the Central leadership is now determined seriously to address the burden problem as well as related issues, including rural education and medical care.⁶⁸

A fifth strategy may also be emerging but it is still under discussion, both within the government and among academics. This would consist of substantial political reforms in the countryside. As Chinese social scientists noted, political reform would recognize the reality of the gulf between the peasants and the local Party-state, that peasants were becoming more independent minded, and that there was the possibility that illegal or semi-legal organizations might arise in place of dysfunctional local governments. One idea was to allow establishment of local peasant associations, thereby strengthening the countervailing power of peasants vis a vis local state. This reflected demands in at least some localities, such as county “H” in Hunan. Another was to extend direct elections from the villages to the towns and townships in order to insure accountability and transparency, a possibility that has been tried in several locations. Premier Wen Jiabao proposed in April 2003 that farmers should have the right to supervise township government budgets and personnel, observing that without pressure from above and below, the success of the new subsidies would be in jeopardy.⁶⁹

This reform menu signifies the clearly serious intent of China’s leaders, especially the new ones that came to power after the 16th Congress, finally to tackle a very serious problem comprehensively rather than piecemeal. Whether this will work, however, remains to be seen.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ RMRB August 3, 2003, reported in [China Daily](#), August 28, 2003

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ For details, see Jin Renqing’s report on the budget given to the NPC on March 6, 2004, in www.china.org.cn, Xinhua, March 17, 2004.

⁶⁹ Wen Jiabao, April 24, 2003, Chinagate in Chinaelections.org.

⁷⁰ Cf., see T. Bernstein. 2003. “Can the burden problem finally be resolved? A preliminary assessment of new policies and their implementation,” paper for the “40 Anniversary Reunion Conference: The State of

The Lack of Urban Allies

As noted at the outset, in major parts of Chinese society there were large groups of people who had severe grievances that stemmed from state actions of one kind or another. If they were to act together, their demands and actions would pose a far more serious challenge to the Chinese state than is now the case. This applied particularly to rural-urban linkages, the existence of which has in the past been a critical ingredient in successful revolutions and in effective social movements more generally. As of 2003, however, as far as is known, no rural or urban leaders had emerged who sought to forge an urban-rural alliance around a common set of grievances. One reason is that the prospect of the emergence of linkages that cross the boundaries of social groups had long been a major worry of the regime. One of its control strategies was to block social groups from forming alliances with one another, and punish severely dissident intellectuals who sought to make contact with workers or peasants (see above) But there were deeper causes as well.

In contemporary China, the major and overwhelming reality was the absence of linkages between urban and rural protest.⁷¹ The underlying source of the obstacle to urban-rural cooperation was the deep cleavage between the two sectors that developed during the Mao era and that continued to persist in the reform era. Most urban residents had enjoyed privileges since the mid-1950s—lifetime employment and welfare benefits—from which peasants were excluded. Stark status differences developed between urban and rural residents. From the mid-1950s on, peasant migration to the cities was large forbidden. Peasants were bound to the land, separated by strict enforcement of the rural and urban household registration system (hukou). Many peasants came to harbor deep resentment at their second-class status and towards the urban sector. These distinctions broke down to a significant degree during the reform period, as lifetime employment and guaranteed benefits for state workers were phased out and migration permitted. But the unequal status was maintained. Migrant workers were for the most part not allowed to establish urban residence. They were, in Dorothy Solinger's words, excluded from "urban citizenship," a situation that is only now beginning to change.⁷² Thus while important urban-rural linkages were restored, there was no accompanying rise in urban-rural solidarity. Urbanites looked down on the migrants, blaming them for crime and disorder.

Moreover, the massive layoffs of industrial workers that began in the later 1990s had the potential of exacerbating worker-peasant tensions. Previously, a two-tier labor market developed as peasants took jobs disdained by urbanites. But with unemployment and increased desperation among unemployed workers, competition between them and rural migrants began to develop. Some cities began to impose restrictions on migration, barred peasants from a number of occupations, and mobilized migrants to return to their native villages. Were this to occur on a large scale, rural resentments towards the urban sector would no doubt increase, all the more because migrant remittances constituted a large proportion of the recent, modest, increases in peasant incomes.

During the Chinese Communist revolution, urban intellectuals and students went to the

Contemporary China," Universities Service Centre for Chinese Studies and Chinese University of Hong Kong, January 5-7, 2004.

⁷¹ However, according to one report in Liaoyang, collective actions of unemployed workers were joined by suburban farmers who protested failure by bankrupt factories to pay them for their lands. See Houston Chronicle, March 21, 2002

⁷² See Dorothy Solinger. 1999. Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market. (Berkeley: University of California Press).

countryside to mobilize peasants, providing leadership, organization, coordination and a vision that linked parochial rural grievances to broader, national and even international goals. Such links were absent in the unrest of the 1990s and early 21st century. In the reform period those in the urban sector, including the students and intellectuals who were the mainstays of the Tiananmen protest movement in 1989 were not interested in rural grievances or in making contact with rural people. Urban protest was thus isolated from the countryside. Although there was some rural participation during Tiananmen, urban protestors did not reach out to the peasants. Of course, there were constraints, such as fear of repression and the sheer lack of time for detailed planning in a rapidly evolving situation. But Elizabeth Perry's observation about Tiananmen is telling: "In failing to take seriously the peasantry's capacity for collective action, would-be democrats deny themselves a powerful and essential ally."⁷³ On the rural side, one peasant's contemptuous comment about the 1989 protests to a foreign anthropologist probably was probably typical of rural attitudes.

What did they have to complain about? They are jumin (urbanites). They live in cities. They have jobs. They eat the state's grain. We can do without them but they cannot do without us. We peasants are the pillars of the state.⁷⁴

Urban-rural income inequality, which rose significantly from the late 1980s on, no doubt also contributed to rural resentments against the urban sector.

Many Chinese intellectuals had strongly elitist attitudes. They disdained peasants and their superstitions. They blamed Mao's despotism on their "feudal" backwardness, that is, peasants' propensity to put all their trust in an emperor or savior. Many urbanites, including officials, intellectuals, and students, were often not willing to accept backward, poorly educated, and "feudal" peasants as legitimate participants in the political process.⁷⁵ In the 1990s, these attitudes were reinforced by neo-conservative thinking and the rejection of popular mobilization as too dangerous to China's development. In 1994, a book entitled Viewing China Through the Third Eye predicted that lifting restrictions on peasant mobility would plunge the country into chaos.⁷⁶ Not all intellectuals shared these condescending and fearful attitudes; some strongly defended peasant interests, but by all accounts, negative attitudes were dominant. Formation of alliances between the countryside and the cities faced formidable obstacles.

Conclusion

Peasant demonstrations against financial burdens increased over the years and in a subset of cases displayed increasing coherence, coordination, and duration as peasant leaders emerged. If

⁷³ See Teresa Wright.1999. "State repression and student protest in contemporary China." CQ no.157: 142-72, and Elizabeth Perry.1992, "Casting a Chinese 'Democracy Movement': the role of students, workers, and entrepreneurs," in J.Wasserstrom and E.Perry, eds. Popular Protest and Political Culture in China. Boulder,Co: Westview Press: 153, 74-92.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Gregory Ruf .1998.Cadres and Kin: Making a Socialist Village in West China. Stanford:Stanford UP: 162.

⁷⁵ See Daniel Kelliher.1995. "Keeping democracy safe from the masses: intellectuals and elitism in the Chinese protest movement." Comparative Politics 25, no.4: 379-396).

⁷⁶ Lo Yi Ning Ge Erh (pseud.) 1994. Disan zhi yanjing kan Zhongguo (seeing China through the third eye), Wang Shan, trsl.Taiyuan: Shanxi Chubanshe: 27 ff.

such trends gain in strength, the Chinese leaders would face a much more difficult situation. Even if the number of protests mushroomed but still remained fairly localized, their sheer number could conceivably overwhelm the regime's capacity to repress and control. However, a true challenge from below to the regime's existence can probably only arise if there is a political opening from above which would provide opportunities for cross-societal mobilization, thereby turning "stable instability" into something far more volatile. In the meantime, the ball is in the Party-state's court. If it can enact and implement at least some of the reforms outlined above, especially reforms that redistribute resources to the countryside, the end of this important part of China's social unrest could be in sight.