

◻ 1 ◻

Chen Village and Its Leaders

The Village Setting

A large rushing stream marks off Chen Village's fields from a delta plain that stretches a dozen miles to the ocean. As the young people from Canton forded the stream (there was no bridge nearby), they thought Chen Village strikingly picturesque. The village pressed up against a range of craggy mountains as in a Chinese painting, surrounded on its nearer sides by fish ponds set amid a golden patchwork of fields of ripening grain.

At close range, however, the village no longer seemed at all inviting. In the wake of the late summer rains, the lanes were awash and slippery with garbage and animal manure. The narrow, steep-peaked houses were built mostly of plastered mud, with only small sections of their foundation walls boasting any real brick. They were dilapidated, dank, and reeked of the sows and poultry that shared the quarters with their owners.

The whole village had come out to greet the young newcomers with gongs and drums. The peasants were all barefoot, and the young people found out later that many did not even own a pair of sandals. Men and women alike were dressed in the traditional Guangdong peasant style of black-dyed shirts and baggy black pants—and these were threadbare, heavily patched, and soiled.

The poverty was even more obvious at mealtimes. The peas-

ants often had to make do with a concoction half of sweet potatoes and half of rice, since Chen Village could not raise enough rice to support its population of just under one thousand. To make the rice go even further and to vary their meals, they sometimes boiled the rice up as a watery gruel, for breakfasts and dinners alike. The monotony of their starch diet was lightened only by bits of tiny salt-dried fish, pickles, fermented bean curd, and fermented black beans, the kind of strong tasting condiments that in small amounts could go a long way on rice or in gruel. Vegetables were eaten only irregularly. (Villagers believed vegetables upset the stomach unless cooked with a bit of oil; and Chen Village grew so few peanuts that each peasant could be allotted only four ounces of cooking oil per year!) An egg, or a fish caught in the stream, was an occasional indulgence. Meat was reserved for special celebrations and festivals.

Their yields were low and their work exhausting because the village had only about five hundred acres of arable lands—and 60 percent of these lay up in small mountain valleys and hollows that suffered from acidity and thin top soils. To get to some of these hill plots required a three-hour uphill walk.

It was known in the villages roundabout that the Chens had to toil for longer hours and less reward than most other peasants in the district. For that reason, the village had always had difficulty finding brides from the neighboring villages for its own young men; and it was traditionally considered taboo for a man to marry a woman from within the village. Women who had had the ill-fortune to be married into the village had a saying: “When dead, most horrifying is the devil underground; when alive, most horrifying are the fields of Chen Village.” One of the village women came up to the girls from the city in puzzlement: “If we had to come into such a bad village there were reasons for it; but why did you people stumble into such a place?”

Few Chen Villagers had ever ventured beyond the nearby county towns. This was particularly true of the women, some of whom knew only Chen Village, the market town about six miles away, and the nearby village they had been born into. The men themselves had stayed so close to the soil that they spoke an accent of Cantonese that differed slightly from all the other villages around. One Chen woman curiously asked one of the



Village Lane, 1981

new arrivals that first day: “Eh, so you’re from Canton? Where’s Canton? Is it in China or in America? Is it as big as Chen Village?”

Less than a decade later, Chen Village would produce more than enough rice. Every day the village households would be able to afford a small dish of meat with their dinners (variously of duck, goose, pork, chicken, eggs, or fresh fish), along with a rich variety of vegetable dishes. They would be building their homes of solid brick, with solid concrete floors rather than the traditional packed earth. By the early 1970s the young women would be wearing flower-patterned blouses. The Chen Villagers’ political horizons would be far broader and their knowledge of the outside world far greater. Some of the younger ones would even be taking occasional outings to Canton. In the course of this book, we shall see how these extraordinary changes in the standard of living were accomplished. But in 1964 the village world that the young people from Canton entered was still one of severe poverty and very limited horizons.

On the second day that the young people were in the village, they were given a lesson in "class education." Chen Village's "four-bad types" were summoned by the village's party branch to line up in front of the new arrivals. The four-bad types were the former landlords, the pre-Liberation rich peasants, and anyone officially labeled a "counterrevolutionary" or "bad element" because of serious political, criminal, or social offenses. In all, there were about one and a half dozen such people in the village: two former landlords, several former rich peasants, two "bad elements," and all their wives. The newly arrived youths were to know exactly who these "class enemies" were so that they could be on their guard. They had heard a lot about sinister four-bad types, but few ever had had the chance of scrutinizing any at close range. One of the youths recalls, "When I got to the village and saw these landlords and counterrevolutionaries, I felt that deep in their hearts they still wanted to overthrow everything and kill all of us. In movies, they had awful faces. And in the village, when I saw them I feared them and thought they were repulsive to look at. I guess ugliness is a psychological thing. I felt they were somehow actually ugly."

Tales of the Chen Lineage

That same day, the young people were also briefed on the history of the village. They were told how, before the Liberation of 1949, the village had been oppressed and bullied by neighboring villages; how a great many of the men had had to hire themselves out at starvation wages to big landowners in neighboring richer villages; how other families had been reduced to wandering as beggars when times were bad; how the parents of several households had died on the road; how some of these desperate wandering households had had to sell their children into servitude to keep them alive. The village had been scourged by bandits, by Chiang Kai-shek's Guomintang government, and by the Japanese invaders. Exploited and starved, both by outside intruders and local landlords, the village's population had been in precipitous decline in the decades preceding Liberation. Its population had been cut in half. One of the young people from the city recounts: "The

village was almost emptied out. If Liberation had come one year later, there wouldn't have been any village! . . . So when people compared the present with the past, they had a lot to be grateful for to the party."

That, at least, was the history the young city people were told. A very different tale was told to us in Hong Kong by three elderly Chens, all of poor-peasant background, who had emigrated from Chen Village in the mid-1940s. They told us of the bravado of the Chen Villagers; how they were feared by neighboring villagers; how in the 1930s the village's celebrations and festivals were of an opulence and grandeur that was the envy of many of the other villages in the district.

It appears memories play tricks. Reminiscences are embroidered with the images and stories that people want to weave of their own pasts. The old-timers, sitting in Hong Kong and employing the traditional measures of village status, want to picture to themselves a native village of sound reputation. The more prosperous and self-assertive their village, the better. Those in Chen Village today want to paint their village history in the contours and colors of the *new* rural status system. When talking to the youths from Canton, they emphasized (and probably exaggerated) the poverty and wretchedness of the village's past—precisely those qualities that made it worthy of honor in China's revolutionary present. But however much the two sets of reminiscences differ, the testimony of old emigrés and present-day Chen Villagers is alike in the sense that both groups feel strongly that their own status is linked to the status of their native community.

Their sense of identity had been reinforced by the fact that Chen Village is a single-lineage community, all the males of which are descended on their father's side from a single common ancestor. The village was settled some four hundred or more years ago by colonists from an overcrowded lineage village in a neighboring county. According to stories told both by the old Chens and younger emigrants, the village's founders had originally laid claim not just to what today constitutes Chen Village but to rich stretches of land on the far side of the stream that marks the present boundary of the village. But skirmishes broke out between the Chens and neighboring lineage villages; and in that early period the Chens lost, were forced off much of the

contested land, and had to turn to tilling the thinner soil in the mountains.

To honor their ancestors and affirm their common roots in the past, the Chens eventually built a large brick ancestral hall (until the 1970s it was by far the largest structure in the village) within which they kept the sacred tablets and records containing the genealogies of their lineage. Villagers who claimed descent from particular illustrious sons or grandsons of the lineage founder also built smaller ancestral halls to celebrate their ancestry. There were five of these smaller halls scattered throughout the village, corresponding to the five "branches" of the Chen lineage. But only the most populous branch, the Lotus branch, had paid any great attention to its own branch's ritual life. This may have been because the Lotus members held common material interests: the communal lands owned and rented out by the Lotus Hall (to support its branch rites and to divide among its own members) were greater than those of the other branch halls. But even the Lotus members largely celebrated their ties with the past, and their sense of solidarity, through the rituals that centered on the main village-wide lineage hall. This stress upon community-level solidarity probably was necessary to protect the village from its slightly larger and stronger neighbors. An old man may well have been right when he told us, "In my time it would've been impossible for other villages to go around bullying us because we people of Chen Village had such a strong collective spirit." That spirit remains strong today—stronger, perhaps, than for most Chinese communities. Even in the 1970s the Chen Village leaders would be able to appeal to these feelings of village allegiance to check the independence of the village's various neighborhoods.¹

The range of mountains behind Chen Village had always provided a safe refuge and lair for bandits. In the 1940s these mountains became the home also for Communist guerrillas fighting first the Japanese and then the Guomindang. The old Chens

¹ Our small sample of villages suggests that under socialism, production brigade (i.e., village) leaderships are considerably weaker in localities where, traditionally, village-level organization and cohesion were weaker: for example, in villages where loyalties used to be centered more on the various lineage branches (or different lineages) within the village.

now in Hong Kong have distasteful memories of the Guomindang. The Guomindang militia stationed in a nearby market town used to come by at harvest time to raid the village's crops. But the Communist guerrillas, on the contrary, were disciplined. Recalls an old man, "Those guerrillas never took anything, and wouldn't even accept food if offered any. I wonder where they did get their food. They were peasants like ourselves. We sometimes met up with them when we were out working our mountain plots. Sometimes they even stayed the night in the village."

About half a dozen of Chen Village's men joined up with the guerrilla bands. They were the type of young, poor, self-assertive men who in earlier decades might have associated themselves with bands of brigands when times were bad. Now instead, still only half-understanding the messages brought by the Communist party, they became affiliated to a movement that would alter profoundly their village's economy, social life, and politics. Their activities in the mountains would earn them the trust of the Communist government in the new era and enviable reputations among their fellow Chens.

The 1950s in Chen Village

The new order did not come to Chen Village, though, through the small guerrilla bands in the mountains. It was achieved through the victories of the Communist armies in north China. About a year after Lin Biao's triumphant march southward in 1949 into Guangdong Province, a small "workteam" of Communist cadres was dispatched to Chen Village by the new Communist government.² It had come to carry out a land reform in the village.

The Communist workteam's mission was twofold. It had been instructed not just to redistribute landholdings in the village but also to demolish the power and influence of the rural elite. To accomplish this, it needed to bring the anger and resentment of the poor families to the surface. The poorer Chens themselves

² *Cadre* is the term used by the Chinese to denote any and all officials.

would have to set aside the traditional notion of lineage solidarity. They would have to be convinced to join with outsiders in attacks against kinsmen. They would have to learn to express themselves in terms of "class hatred."

But many of the village households held back initially from cooperating with this Communist workteam. The peasants were traditionally suspicious of outsiders. And the poorest peasants, who had the most to gain from a land reform, were reportedly intimidated by the power the wealthy families customarily had been able to exert over them.

The Communist workteam needed assistance from within the village to reach these poorer households. The local guerrilla movement provided this link. In particular, the Communist organizers could depend upon Chen Sumei. Sumei had not been born a Chen; but he had been adopted (i.e., sold) into the village as a child. He had survived as a young man by scavenging wood in the mountains to sell in the delta villages for use as fuel. He had begun to work underground for the Communists, delivering secret messages as he climbed up and down with his wood. According to the story that has been handed down about Chen Sumei,

When land reform came to this area, no one dared to move against the landlords. . . . But Chen Sumei knew who were the poorest and who could be organized to do what. He got together some poor peasants who'd speak out, who dared to do things, and he got them to organize against the landlords, to struggle against them. . . . He helped lead the peasants to be masters of their society. Gained quite a reputation!

In emotional "struggle sessions," angry poor peasants led by the workteam and Sumei finally had humiliated the village landlords and stripped them of all but a few parcels of their land, just enough for the landlord families to feed themselves.

Chen Village had only two landlords, and neither of them had had very extensive landholdings. One came from a long-established landlord family. He had been well versed in the classics (and wrote elegant calligraphy) and had augmented his influence by taking on the duties of village judge. The other landlord was nouveau riche. He had, not long before Liberation, developed a

profitable trade as a rural pharmacist and had plowed his proceeds into land.

In addition to these two landlords, there were five "rich peasant" households in the village. Three of these were part of the same family—a father and his two married sons. A rich peasant was one who worked part of his fields himself, but possessed so much land that he needed to hire field hands or to rent out much of it. The family of this particular rich peasant actually owned more land than either of the two landlords; but the family members did not share the rural elite's traditional disdain for manual labor and had vigorously worked most of their lands themselves with the aid of hired help. Under the land reform regulations of the early 1950s, rich peasants were not to have the bulk of their lands expropriated nor were they to be attacked harshly like the landlords. For the time being, the high agricultural productivity of such households could contribute to China's economic development. The father in this rich peasant family was able to retain enough land that he still had to hire field hands. Fortunately, too, for this man, he had always been comparatively decent to his hands and thus retained a residual respect among Chen Village's poorer families. According to one of his sons, whom we interviewed in Hong Kong, the landlords had gained quite different reputations: "Those landlords were fierce; they'd beaten people who hadn't paid all their rents."

The relative good fortune of Chen Village's rich peasant households was only temporary. Land reform gave each family in the village a class label, which remained with the family. Even today, labels are still, in fact, inheritable in the male line. The former landlord and rich peasant households officially belonged to "bad" untrustworthy classes, and they would be systematically discriminated against and harassed throughout the years to come.

Villagers who prior to the land reform had had just enough land to support their families were labeled by the cadre workteam as "middle peasants," a category further subdivided into upper-middle, middle, and lower-middle. Upper-middle and middle peasants were not considered politically suspect, but they were officially defined as being less trustworthy than the poor peasants (who had owned very little or no land) and the lower-middle peasants (who had owned some land but had had to supplement

this by renting land as tenants or doing field labor for richer families). The former poor and lower-middle peasants belonged to the "red classes." Whenever possible in the coming decades, the government would prefer that members of the red classes be the village officials.

In Chen Village the former poor and lower-middle peasants comprised some 80 to 85 percent of the population. But in the early 1950s, there were not many men from the poorest classes with the necessary abilities to lead Chen Village into the new era. The poor were almost entirely illiterate. Few had ever held positions of responsibility. They had less experience in planning agriculture than the self-reliant middle peasantry. Chen Sumei might have been capable enough to serve as the village's new leader, but he and the few other former guerrillas who had helped carry out the land reform did not remain in Chen Village very long. The Communists had great need for capable men of that sort, and they rose quickly into posts outside the village. Chen Sumei eventually became head of the county's agricultural implements factory, that is, until he fell from political grace in the late 1960s for the sin of philandering and was exiled back to Chen Village.

When the land reform workteam of the early 1950s left Chen Village, the village leadership thus did not pass into the hands of the young, self-assertive poor peasants who had become guerrillas, nor into the hands of the unassertive poor peasants who had remained in the village. Instead, an articulate middle peasant who had been active in the land reform became Chen Village's leader, its party secretary. This man, Chen Feihan, apparently had prestige among his fellow villagers as a capable farmer; but more important, he was literate and would be able to read party directives.

Collectivization

The land reform workteam had already begun processes of change in Chen Village. It would be Feihan's duty to push them forward. The workteam had dismantled the lineage organizations and redistributed to the poor peasants all the lands owned by the lineage and lineage-branch halls. The annual rites were no longer to be practiced. The halls were converted into warehouses. But the

land reform had not equalized the peasantry's landholdings. The former poor peasants still had fewer strips of land than the middle peasants, and they had not been able to receive enough tools or draft animals to work efficiently the new land they acquired.

The workteam had tried to make up for this by persuading small clusters of families who were friends of long standing, poor and middle peasants alike, to begin cooperating in what were called mutual-aid teams. It had been traditional to exchange labor, tools, and animals during the busy seasons, but the workteam pushed this mutual aid concept further than had ever been practiced before. The policy worked. Soon even the more recalcitrant villagers were obliged by the pressures of community sentiment to join in mutual aid.

Feihan, the new party secretary, in 1954 organized a more complicated scheme. He started Chen Village's first cooperative. He apparently did so before such cooperatives had appeared in most other villages in Guangdong. Rather than just helping out in each others' fields, the participants would pool their fields and draft animals for the entire year. The advantage was that the members' tiny plots could be combined into larger fields that could be plowed and irrigated more efficiently. At the end of the year, the member families would divide up the profits, some shares going for the amount of labor each had contributed and some shares for the use of the members' various fields and animals. Each family had previously faced the risk that an infestation or flooding of the family's own small plots might wipe out the family financially. The co-op promised more security.

The idea appealed most to the poorest families, whose assets were fewest and whose circumstances were most precarious. The small plots they had received in the land reform may not have been enough to support them. At first, reportedly, just poor-peasant families joined up with Feihan in the new venture. "But the co-ops got bigger and bigger," one of the Chens recounts. "The richer families didn't want to join, but they were isolated and forced in. The co-ops wouldn't cooperate with them on irrigation—pretty much cut off their access to water—to force them in." Before long, most of the peasants of Chen Village had been organized into two co-ops. But the peasants had little experience as yet in managing large amounts of land or organizing sizable

squads of laborers. The new system proved too unwieldy; and within the year, many of the families had split once more into mutual-aid teams.

In mid-1956, however, a national campaign to inaugurate even more "advanced" co-ops had been started under Mao's prodding.³ China's regional party organizations competed to get the new collectives organized. Under the new system, only a family's labor inputs would be counted; annual compensation would no longer be offered for the use of land or draft animals. Through this, the poorer households in Chen Village would be getting a better break at the expense of the former middle peasant and rich peasant households. Once again they found the new proposals in their own interest.

The Great Leap Forward

Before the peasants had time to get accustomed to the new collective arrangements, an even more radical social experiment was launched from on high. A utopian mood was gathering momentum in the party. China's leading party officials believed that the bigger the units of rural production, the more advanced in socialism they would be. The collectives were thus to be consolidated with other collectives to form huge "people's communes." Public canteens were to be set up so that the peasants would not have to spend time procuring and preparing their own food. These canteens were to be free, allowing peasants to be fed "each according to his needs" rather than "each according to his work." The extra time gained from this was to go into extra labor: to carry out massive irrigation projects; to plow deeper and plant more closely; and to establish rural industrial schemes like the smelting of crude steel. National party leaders promised that all this would leapfrog China into an era of abundance and true communism.

³ See the "Draft Program for Agricultural Development in the People's Republic of China, 1956-1967 (January 1956)," in Robert R. Bowie and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Communist China 1955-1959: Policy Documents with Analysis* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

The bulk of the peasantry of Chen Village had retained their faith in a party that had brought them peace, land reform, and mutual aid. They believed the exuberant promises:

They still have sweet memories of the beginning of communism. "We all worked together, moving from place to place. We ate wherever we happened to be; ah, in the beginning we were all so fat! We could eat any time we liked at the canteens." . . . They really believed that that was communism, that you can have free food wherever you go.

But their enthusiasm quickly soured. The Great Leap Forward degenerated into bureaucratic blundering and organizational chaos. The entire local marketing district of some twenty thousand people had been designated a commune. The cadres stationed at the market town headquarters began issuing a flow of confused, imperious commands. "The whole thing was a mess," an interviewee recalls.

They pushed a system of planting called "Sky Full of Stars" where a field would be so overplanted the seedlings starved each other out. . . . The peasants knew it was useless, but there was simply no way to oppose anything, because the orders came from so high above. And if one of our Chen Village cadres protested at commune meetings, he laid himself open to criticisms: "a rightist, against the revolution." . . . The peasants were ordered to smash their water jars to make them into fertilizer. They said it was stupid, that the jars were just sterile clay, but they had to smash the jars nonetheless. What a mess! Cut rice was left overnight in the fields [and mildewed] while exhausted villagers were ordered off to do other things. The period was called the "Eat-It-All-Up Period" because people were eating five and six times daily—but there was no harvest that year. Everything had been given to the collective. Nothing was left in the houses. No grain had been stored. People were so hungry they had difficulty sleeping. . . . Some people became ill, and some of the elderly died. Our village became quiet, as if the people were dead.

The villagers had no reason to plant for the next season. With the commune level in charge, most of what they produced would be siphoned off to fill a common pot with eight other villages; and

with no likelihood that the peasants of the other villages would be willing to work, Chen Villagers strongly doubted they would get anything back in return. So the Chen Village peasants let their fields go wild, while they scavenged on the hillsides or sat indoors conserving their energy and nursing their hunger.

Chen Village Production Brigade and Its New Leaders

Production was at a standstill; organization and morale were shattered. It was not until 1961 that the government developed a comprehensive set of policies to repair the damage caused by the Great Leap Forward. In accordance with the new dispensation,⁴ Chen Village was divided into five production teams, each composed of about forty neighboring families. Each of these teams received property rights over a fifth of the village's lands. This new system was designed to encourage the peasants to produce. If a team produced more, its households ate more. Each team member would be paid in grain and cash only in accordance with how much labor he or she contributed. Small private plots and private handicraft production, moreover, would be permitted again, and the produce could be sold privately at newly reopened rural markets.

Each of these production teams was managed by an elected committee, its members chosen more for their managerial abilities than for their political "redness." Most of them were not in fact members of the Communist party. These production team committees, located so close to the grass roots, could manage the collective labor of peasants much more effectively than the distant leaders who had tried to supervise the gigantic communes of the Great Leap Forward.

The new programs and new forms of economic organization worked with dramatic effect. Villagers began once more to work

⁴ The new "Regulations on the Work of the Rural People's Communes," also known as the "Sixty Articles," were published in a final form in September 1962. See *Documents of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, September 1956–April 1969* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1971), 1: 719–722.

hard and in orderly fashion; and by the end of 1961, the village's famine was ended.

Feihan was not in charge of this new chapter in Chen Village's affairs. Two younger men of stronger character and abilities had supplanted him during the Great Leap Forward. For the next quarter century these two men, Chen Qingfa and Chen Longyong, would dominate Chen Village's politics.

Both of these men held key brigade posts. Chen Village as a whole had now been titled a "production brigade," and its government consisted of a party branch committee and a brigade management committee. This management committee handled daily administrative affairs and oversaw village-wide projects such as irrigation systems, which were beyond the scope of any of the individual teams.⁵ But the seven-man (no women) party branch committee was more important. It made the major decisions, supervised the management committee's work, kept close tabs on the five new production teams to ensure that they acted according to official regulations, and took responsibility in the village for carrying out the national party's political campaigns. Chen Qingfa was the party secretary and Chen Longyong the brigade management chief under him. In 1961 both were not quite thirty years old. The clashes between them would be central to Chen Village's history during the next two decades.

Chen Qingfa

Chen Qingfa's class background had been of considerable help to him in his rise to the top leadership post. He had been one of the poorest of Chen Village's poor peasants at the time of land reform. But his origins were "complicated," for he was related to the village's older landlord family. His great grandfather had served as a minor official in Canton and had secured enough bribes to retire to Chen Village as its major landowner. Qingfa's

⁵ Chen Village's management committee originally consisted of a brigade chief, two deputy chiefs in charge of economic management, a militia head, a public security chief, and a man who combined the jobs of accountant and secretarial clerk.

own uncle was the landlord with the elegant calligraphy. But Qingfa's father had been the family's black sheep. He had been a heavy gambler and drug addict who had quickly dissipated his inheritance. He died while Qingfa was still a young boy, followed shortly by Qingfa's mother. Qingfa had had to resort to begging for a while, before being taken in and fed by a childless widow in the village. (To provide for her old age, it had been, and still is today, the custom for such a woman to show kindness to an orphan; Qingfa, true to the implicit bargain, in the 1960s and 1970s helped to support the old woman financially.)

As a teenager Qingfa had tended cattle for his uncle, the landlord, under conditions he considered degrading. When the opportunity arose, he left to join the guerrillas. But life in the mountains proved too difficult for him, and after half a year he had returned to tend his uncle's cows. During the land reform, Qingfa exacted vengeance for his uncle's maltreatment of him. The workteam used his denunciations of the older man to provide Chen Villagers with an example of how class struggle should take precedence over kinship.

Qingfa not only entered the Communist Youth League during the land reform; he soon propelled himself into the leading post in that organization. He took an early and notable role in the new cooperatives, and Feihan in gratitude sponsored his admission to the Communist party. Barely twenty, Qingfa was already moving toward the top.

In the Great Leap Forward he caught the attention of the new commune leadership, as head of a shock brigade of Chen Village youths that came out best in a frantic competition between villages to help construct a county reservoir. The party normally looks for its new grass roots cadres during the heat of major campaigns; and the commune leaders had been ordered to be on the watch for young men who "dare to think, dare to speak, dare to act." Qingfa clearly fit that bill; and Feihan, the party secretary, handicapped by his "unclean" class origins and his slower and less aggressive ways, was eased aside. But Feihan seems not to have minded particularly. Qingfa was his own protégé; and Feihan himself had grown tired and lazier with the years. He retired to the post of deputy party secretary of the village, and in the years

to come contentedly spent his days avoiding both decision-making and physical labor.

Under Qingfa, Chen Village reorganized after the disasters of the Great Leap Forward more quickly than the nearby villages. Qingfa encouraged the production teams to take advantage of the village's soil, which was especially suitable for growing sweet potatoes. The village was soon awash with them. In fact, it was through these sweet potatoes that many of the young Chen men secured wives. Families in other villages accepted marriage offers from Chen Village so that the brides would be able to carry sacks of potatoes home to their own kin to tide them over the bad period. Well into the 1970s, when lamenting the hard work in Chen Village, some of these women would complain, "If it hadn't been for your sweet potatoes we wouldn't have had to marry into this place."

Qingfa himself took advantage of Chen Village's brief good fortune in 1961 and hired a matchmaker. The bride was homely and not particularly intelligent, but the matchmaker had reported correctly (matchmakers often were notorious liars) that she was a strong and energetic worker, a very competent housekeeper, and had "good class" origins. She possessed the qualities that a Chinese villager considered most important in a bride.

Qingfa was slightly shorter than most of the men in Chen Village. But he was muscular, agile, and had formidable stamina in field labor. People in the village closely judged men in terms of two crucial tasks—the speed at which a man could cut grain and the weight a man could lift and carry on a shoulder pole—and by these standards Qingfa was the third or fourth best laborer in Chen Village. All of Chen Village's other leading cadres are also very capable workers, for as an interviewee notes: "In our village, if your labor power isn't passable you can't lead anybody. Your words won't have any power." Qingfa's outstanding physical abilities considerably bolstered his authority.

So too did Qingfa's articulateness and his decisiveness. He had never been to school and was entirely illiterate. But he had a memory that astonished the urban young people the first time that they heard him speak. He could attend a meeting of several days

at the market town or county capital and on his return recount to the peasants, in an accurate, clear, and convincing style, the major issues that had been discussed and the series of new complicated directives that were being handed down. Moreover, according to one of our interviewees, "he wasn't a 'mouth' doer, the type of fellow who speaks about getting a lot done but never gets to it. When Qingfa said something had to be accomplished he'd move on it the next day by the latest. . . . He had a brisk decisive work-style like that of an army man."

Qingfa exercised a formidable temper to get what he wanted. He purposely let his temper flare at strategic moments to intimidate subordinates into going along with him. Qingfa was supposed to share decisions with the other members of the village's party leadership committee, but he would violently curse and bang the table to dominate every decision.

In Chen Village other cadres used the same type of explosive leadership style to secure compliance from their own subordinates. But Qingfa's temper went beyond that of other cadres; sometimes his temper got the best of him. He even angrily smacked children when he caught them at mischief, knowing that their parents would not dare to protest against a party secretary. He could make life uncomfortable for any household that stood against him.

Qingfa could be gregarious and charming as well as domineering. He enjoyed evenings of relaxed talk with old friends. He felt loyal to old acquaintances and kinfolk. He even remained on good terms with the old bandit-turned-guerrilla who had introduced Qingfa into the mountain band of Communist guerrillas. After Liberation the man had been rewarded with a customs job, but he was caught taking bribes, wounded his superior in a scuffle, and was sent back to Chen Village in disgrace, officially labeled as a "bad element." He was thus now among the four-bad types. But instead of behaving submissively as a four-bad type should, he had continued to put on superior airs and to insult other villagers. Yet Qingfa loyally protected him whenever he obstreperously got himself into trouble. Qingfa did so in the face of the party's strict policy that such a man be treated as a political and social pariah.

Playing Politics with Teams

Qingfa also showed particular loyalty to some of his kin. He was from the Lotus branch of the Chen lineage, the branch that had maintained the greatest sense of identity before the Liberation. Most of the members of the Lotus branch lived in the same neighborhood at roughly the geographical center of the village. In contrast, the memberships of other lineage branches tended to be scattered among the various village neighborhoods, as a consequence of their weaker sense of identity.

Qingfa went out of his way to be helpful to his relatives and neighbors when it was his responsibility as party secretary in 1961 to set up the village's production teams. Membership in the teams was to be based roughly on the various neighborhoods. Qingfa carved out the No. 1 team from the northeast corner of the village, a neighborhood consisting largely of middle peasants. He established the No. 2 team in the southeast neighborhood, which was occupied almost entirely by former poor peasants. He split the western side of the village into two numerically equal teams: No. 4 and No. 5. And he gerrymandered the boundaries of the No. 3 team, where his own house was located, so as to include in it primarily families of the Lotus branch.

Once the team memberships had been designated, all the village lands had to be divided among the teams. The village fields were of a number of different grades, ranging from the nearby fertile paddy lands to only marginally arable plots in mountain pockets far from the village. Qingfa carefully divided each grade of land into five roughly equivalent portions. Because of the complex topography, it was not possible to devise portions of exactly equal size, quality, or distance; so to ensure fairness, representatives from each of the new teams picked straws. Qingfa operated the lottery, and according to what his confederates later confided to a member of Qingfa's own team, Qingfa cheated. He contrived that each time the straws were picked, the team of his own kinsmen and neighbors received plots that were slightly better and closer to the village.

A year later, Qingfa was instructed by the government to divide each of these five new production teams in half, as it was believed that teams with smaller memberships would find it easier

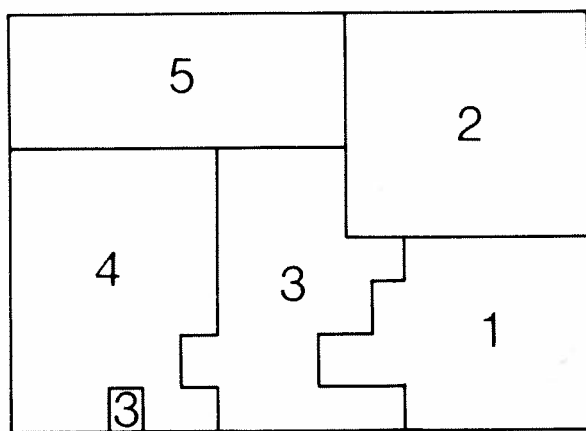


Figure 1. The Production Teams Formed from Neighborhoods, 1961

to organize their own work. There would now be ten teams of about twenty to twenty-five households apiece. Again Qingfa quietly performed his manipulations. When he split his own neighborhood, he made sure that all the kinsmen to whom he felt closest were grouped together in the same team, and he again rigged the straw lottery to ensure that they received the marginally better plots.

Qingfa's manipulations were in no way blatant. He could not afford to alienate the rest of the village. The lands of the new No. 6 team, Qingfa's team, were only slightly better than those of the other nine teams. But his discreet show of loyalty to his kinsmen and neighbors was to set the tone for his political operations during the next several years.

However, it cannot be said that the Lotus branch was being kept alive as a body of kin whose loyalties to one another superseded the newer political or economic arrangements. Qingfa and his fellow good-class team members did not, for example, transgress the new "class line." Though Qingfa's landlord uncle and two former rich peasant families were included in the No. 6 production team, they were treated as social outcasts. Moreover, once the livelihoods of the peasants were tied to cooperation with

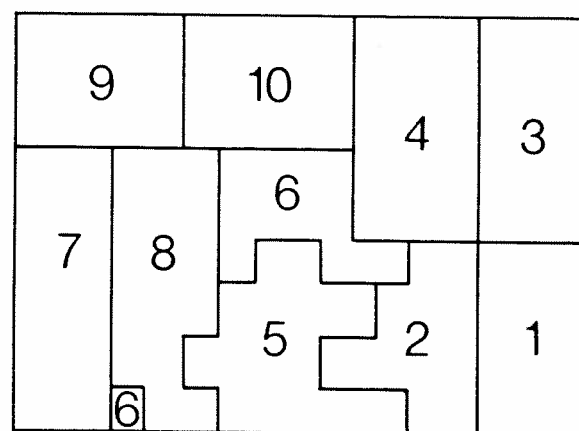


Figure 2. The Production Teams after Division, 1962

fellow *team* members, the families of the Lotus branch who had ended up in team No. 6 realized they had little to gain by continuing to show loyalty toward Lotus branch members who lived beyond the boundaries of their team.⁶

Qingfa initially had played favorites toward his home production team in part because, against official Communist doctrine, he held onto traditional kinship loyalties. But it was also useful to him, both as an individual and as a brigade official. He could expect gratitude and loyal cooperation in return for his patronage.

As brigade party secretary, Qingfa ultimately was responsible to his party superiors at the commune seat⁷ for maintaining law

⁶ Martin K. Whyte has found this to be true of other Guangdong villages, too: "the central economic dependence of peasants on their families and teams, and secondarily on their brigades, creates solidarity and vested interests in these basic level units, and rivalry with other nearby units, even when these are composed of kinsmen as well" ("Family Change in China," *Issues and Studies*, July 1979, p. 56).

⁷ The word *commune* had been retained for the administrative district of nine villages that surrounded the local market town. But the commune level retained little of the power that it had held during the Great Leap Forward. It ran the shops and tiny local industries that were situated in the market town; it organized the flood-control and road-building projects that were bigger than any single village could handle; and its party committee, which had its headquarters in the market

and order in his village; for assuring that each team paid all its taxes and planted and sold an annual quota of grain, peanuts, and sugar to the state at the low prices set by the state; and for laying the foundations for the community's future economic development. But Qingfa had been provided with only modest political leverage to carry out these responsibilities. Beyond its quota requirements, each team was economically self-sufficient. Each production team's leadership controlled the distribution of its profits. Though the brigade administration operated some village-level enterprises, these included only a flock of ducks and geese, a small brick kiln, an orchard, and half-grown stands of pines that had been planted on some of the mountainsides. The salaries of the brigade cadres, including Qingfa's, had to be funded largely through small levies on the teams, and these had to be negotiated annually at a meeting between all the team heads and brigade cadres. For any new village-level projects, separate negotiations with the team heads had to be held to raise the funds and manpower. The weakness of the brigade administration's financial base undermined Qingfa's capacity to dominate the brigade as he would have liked.

In such circumstances, Qingfa could turn to his own No. 6 production team to back him up. But he needed a broader base of support. It became necessary to extend his patronage politics to a few other teams. For instance, he built goodwill and incurred special debts from the No. 1 team, a team that had been carved out of the neighborhood of middle peasants on Chen Village's northeast flank. It was of extreme importance to any team that its team head be a very capable agricultural planner whose daily orders would command his team members' respect. Team No. 1 had a problem here. A team head was supposed to be chosen from among the former poor or lower-middle peasants, the "politically reliable" classes. But in the No. 1 team, "the [several] team members whose class origins were good didn't have the ability, and those with ability couldn't be cadres" because of their class ori-

town, was the next higher link in the party chain that connected Chen Village with national political programs. Commune level officials intruded into village affairs only sporadically, mostly to check that planting quotas were being met. From the perspective of the Chen Village peasants, the commune was an administrative level of far less importance than either their teams (neighborhoods) or brigade (village).

gins. Qingfa cut through the dilemma by approving the election of an upper-middle peasant as team head. But it remained difficult for this team head to get team members of better class origins to follow his directions. Qingfa provided him with the higher-level backing he needed, and in return he provided support for Qingfa. Subsequently the No. 1 team, too, got a slightly bigger slice of whatever largesse Qingfa had the power to disburse. And to strengthen his hand, when recruiting new people for the party or for new brigade-level party posts, Qingfa tended to look toward the teams with which he had established special relationships.

The various teams that did not benefit from Qingfa's favoritism were resentful for good reasons. The most disgruntled were teams No. 3 and No. 4, which had been carved out of the southeastern neighborhood of former poor peasants. They had, by chance, received slightly worse lands than any other teams in the lottery. Moreover, they had no effective agricultural planners who were willing to be team heads. The net effect was that the incomes from the collective fields of the No. 3 and No. 4 teams were little more than half that of the No. 6 team. To compensate for their poor collective performance, they devoted more time and effort to their private plots and their private raising of pigs. So successful were they at this that their members' total incomes almost matched those of team No. 6. But their suspicions that Qingfa had rigged the original lottery festered as a point of conflict. They squabbled with the No. 6 team and resisted Qingfa more often than the other teams.

Chen Longyong

Qingfa had problems also with his immediate subordinate, Chen Longyong, the head of the brigade management committee. Whereas Qingfa's party branch committee supervised Chen Village's affairs, Longyong oversaw day-to-day administrative duties. Longyong also sat on the party committee, where by force of personality he was, second to Qingfa, its most influential member.

As leading brigade cadres, both Qingfa and Longyong shared an interest in strengthening the brigade level of management and developing the brigade-wide economy. But they were uneasy al-

lies. Longyong was a decisive and stubborn man and one of the most talented agricultural planners in the village. He preferred his own opinions to those of Qingfa; and whenever possible he pursued his own course.

Longyong's leadership abilities and strength of personality were on a par with Qingfa's. He was not as smooth a talker, but he was an effective public speaker nonetheless, with almost as keen a memory. (Longyong, too, was totally illiterate.) While Qingfa ranked among the best laborers in Chen Village, Longyong, a powerful man some six feet tall, was perhaps the village's single strongest worker. When he had the time to help a production team with its labor, or when he led a corps of Chen Village's young people to work on a commune irrigation project, Longyong would work at a ferocious pace, pulling his co-workers forward beyond their own normal speed. He had a raw, domineering style of command similar to Qingfa's, and he inspired the same respectful fear among ordinary peasants. But Longyong, unlike Qingfa, had learned to unleash his temper only when it was strategically to his benefit. In the long term, as we shall see, his astute use of this self-control would provide him with political advantages over Qingfa.

As boys, Qingfa and Longyong had "worn the same pants"—that is, they had been inseparably close friends. Qingfa had been Longyong's sponsor to the party, and when Qingfa had taken over the brigade's leadership in the Great Leap Forward, Longyong had stepped into Qingfa's role as head of the shock brigade of Chen Village youths. But their relations had soured in office partly because they were so similar in their capabilities and aggressive natures. Longyong chafed at having to yield to Qingfa's final word at party branch meetings; Qingfa was repeatedly infuriated by Longyong's stubborn resistance.

They had disagreements also over Longyong's sense of self-righteousness. Qingfa did not pass up opportunities to receive small gifts of poultry and other foodstuffs from villagers or to snack with friends at brigade expense. But not Longyong. A hard-driving, unsociable man, he disdained such affairs. He usually was as strict with himself as with others. Whereas Qingfa found the time in the late afternoon or early evening to tend to his private plot, Longyong, in counterpoint, poured almost all of his energies

and time into his public duties. He neglected his private plot, and his family ate the worse for it. It is possible, from what we know of Longyong's character, that he was consciously putting himself forward publicly as the more righteous of the two men.

More importantly, the two leaders apparently came into repeated small conflicts over Qingfa's favors to the No. 6 and No. 1 teams. Longyong was from one of the western neighborhood's former poor peasant families, a member of a small, disorganized lineage branch that to most intents and purposes had ceased to exist. Having no special feelings of identity with any fellow branch members, his loyalties to Chen Village were undivided. "Longyong's base was in the brigade, not the team. You couldn't say the people [in the team where he lived] were his 'own people.' Not like Qingfa who had his foundations a bit in the team, a bit in the brigade." If given the choice, the sectors of Chen Village that had been shortchanged under Qingfa's patronage practices would have preferred a man like Longyong as the village's "local emperor."

Whatever the two men's conflicts, Qingfa appreciated Longyong's abilities as brigade chief and wanted to continue using him; but he apparently felt that Longyong posed a danger to him as a rival. The government's decision in 1963 to carry out a Four Cleanups campaign⁸ in the countryside presented Qingfa with an opportunity to check Longyong's ambitions. He could use the campaign, in the words of one interviewee, to "put Longyong firmly back in his place, to show Longyong what Qingfa could do if he wanted, so that Longyong would be obedient in the future and not dare to challenge him."

The Small Four Cleanups

The Four Cleanups campaign had been organized by the party leadership in Peking to "clean up" the corrupt practices of local rural officials during the "three lean years" of economic setbacks after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward. This was to

⁸ On the Chinese party central committee's announcement of the Four Cleanups drive, see Richard Baum, *Prelude to Revolution: Mao, the Party and the Peasant Question, 1962-66* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 23-28.

be the first step in a series of major efforts that were being planned for the countryside: to repurify the local party organizations; to bolster the peasants' morale after the catastrophes of the Great Leap; and to improve the workings of the rural economy. As a first step, in what the villagers would later recall as the "Small" Four Cleanups, the Chen Village party branch received official directives in 1964 to carry out a drive to stamp out any signs of corruption, great or small, among the village's officers. This drive was to be organized and controlled by the village party secretary, Qingfa.

Qingfa's major targets were team-level cadres, in particular warehousemen, cashiers, and accountants. These were posts that provided few official rewards. Unlike brigade cadres, the team cadres got little in the way of supplementary income for their efforts, and they had to engage in as much manual labor as an ordinary team member. But their jobs did provide them with small illicit perquisites. For example, a warehouseman in charge of overseeing his team's granaries and the distribution of grain rations to all the team's households found it relatively easy to appropriate a little extra rice for himself and his family and to weigh out slightly bigger portions to close friends and relatives. Several of these team cadres whose peculations had been blatant now had to make public self-examinations. A few were relieved of their posts. Qingfa was intent upon showing his own party superiors that he meant business in carrying through the campaign. But only one brigade-level cadre was touched by a charge of corruption, and that was Chen Longyong.

At the end of the Great Leap Forward, some lumber had been left over from the building of a large wall-less shed that served as the village meeting hall. Longyong had asked Qingfa if he could buy some of the surplus lumber to erect a small kitchen for his house. Since lumber was, and still is, in very short supply in Guangdong Province, access to it, even for purchase, is a privilege of some substance. To use one's political position to obtain such priorities was exceedingly common, and at the time few people would have criticized Longyong for making the request. His house was small and run down, and his standard of living below average for Chen Village. According to one interviewee, Qingfa had not only been sympathetic to Longyong's request; he had insisted that Longyong take the lumber free of charge.

Qingfa may have felt that by thus putting Longyong in his debt, he could expect a certain amount of deference in return. But Longyong was not the type to give this. He did not abide by what Qingfa probably considered a tacit bargain between the two men over the lumber; and he still put on an annoyingly righteous front.

Now, during the Small Four Cleanups campaign, Qingfa brought up Longyong's appropriation of the lumber as the basis for attacking him, as if Longyong had furtively stolen it. Longyong was obliged to get up before a mass meeting of the whole brigade to deliver a self-confession. It is normal practice in such a campaign for the accused person to protect himself and seek a lighter penalty not by protesting innocence or turning against the people who control the campaign but by going along with the tide. In a low-key way, Longyong confessed to his use of the wood. He probably expected that he would only be asked to pay for the lumber. But after Longyong had made his confession, an interviewee recalls, the next person to get up was Qingfa:

He said, "The brigade chief is right in what he said about misusing his authority, but what he's done is even worse than he's said. Do you agree?" And the whole crowd yelled out, "We agree!" The people in the crowd didn't have much choice; no way to say they disagreed. Some of them certainly had sympathy with Longyong, but would have been afraid to say anything for fear of getting into trouble themselves.

Because Qingfa painted the incident as a flagrant example of cadre corruption, an appropriately exaggerated version of Longyong's transgressions was dispatched to the commune headquarters. An interviewee from the No. 6 team recalls that years later Qingfa privately "admitted he'd gotten Longyong unfairly."

Qingfa had not fully realized that the commune-level party committee was under pressure to show its own strict rectitude in the campaign. The commune committee took the case more seriously than Qingfa had expected it would. It indicated that it would expel Longyong from the party, putting Longyong permanently under a political cloud. Qingfa still had need of Longyong's strong abilities as a cadre and production planner, and he found himself belatedly having to intervene in Longyong's behalf.

In the meantime, Longyong had felt devastated by the accu-

sation of corruption and by his sudden fall from political grace. He had not cared much for material possessions, but he loved power and very much wanted to be respected and honored for his work on behalf of the village. He wanted "face," and now he had none. He went home and made an ineffectual effort to hang himself. Fortunately, as an interviewee sympathetic to Longyong recalls, "his wife came in and saw him and stopped him. His wife didn't sleep for a couple of days. She stayed awake watching him, for fear he would commit suicide. He had been so fierce and powerful before. Now he'd lost everything all of a sudden and was being condemned."

In future years, Longyong would make a public issue of the ordeal he had been put through, reminding villagers how Qingfa's betrayal and their own ingratitude had almost caused his death. "You elected me to be a cadre," he would tell them, "and I worked as hard as I could for you; but then you turned against me, and if it weren't for my wife, I would have killed myself." In the long term, Longyong astutely would be able to transform the incident of the lumber into part of his own political capital.

In the short term, however, the Small Four Cleanups campaign had been twisted in Chen Village to serve Qingfa's personal political purposes. Qingfa presumed he would be able to retain control of events in Chen Village and that the campaign had, if anything, strengthened his hand. As one interviewee remembers, "Longyong was withdrawn. . . . I remember remarking to a friend one day when we saw Longyong and Qingfa at a distance that Longyong looked like a mouse in front of a cat. [During that period] Longyong seemed obedient." But Longyong was also not a man who would forget or forgive.

The contingent of fifty urban youths had entered Chen Village from Canton just as the struggle meetings against Longyong were getting under way. It was the young people's introduction to village politics. Within several more months they would be witnessing dramatic new twists in Chen Village's political history. The state would intervene directly in Chen Village's affairs to carry out what became known as the "Big" Four Cleanups. It was the beginning of an eventful two years that would dramatically reshape the village's institutions and economic programs, the concerns of its peasants, and the struggles between its leaders.