

CHINESE
VILLAGE,
SOCIALIST
STATE



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AND DEATH STRUGGLE

In spite of all the institutional change, beginning with tax reform in the late 1930s, daily life for Raoyang villagers entering 1958 was still mired in premodern poverty. If it rained, lanes flooded, imprisoning people in their homes. There was no pipe drainage. Food was simple and unvaried. Breakfast was millet gruel. Coarse grain cooked for lunch was eaten again at dinner. There was little meat, fowl, fish, or fresh vegetables. Homes lacked chairs, sofas, beds, radios, and clocks. Women did washing using a rock and icy water drawn from a distant well. Cooks continuously fed straw to a brazier in the middle of the house. The fumes and dust dirtied the dwelling and filled the lungs. Coal powder used for heating had a similar polluting impact. A latrine behind a courtyard wall served even the elderly and the ill in rain, snow, and freezing cold. Simple comforts such as sanitary napkins and toilet paper did not exist. There was no running water and no electricity.

Modernization and Miracles

Citizens and officials welcomed modernization. Baoding officials transferred to Shijiazhuang enjoyed it as a more modern city, where new government buildings installed steam radiators instead of Baoding's coal fires. Raoyang leaders predicted productive wonders as a result of the 1958 aerial spraying of 666 insecticide. In Raoyang insecticides were credited with eliminating the perennial plagues of lice and bedbugs. Villagers hoped for a chemical that would wipe out fleas.

Targeting corn pests, demobilized Air Force pilots stationed in Tianjin flew in to the new Raoyang county air strip. Tents were prepared for the pilots, but the fliers spurned the hospitality, return-

ing instead after work to the comfort of Baoding or Tianjin. Raoyang inaugurated aerial spraying, targeting corn fields where youngsters wearing masks and excitedly waving red flags directed the pilots. The spraying continued for a couple of weeks and drastically reduced corn pests; it unintentionally also diminished fireflies, foxes, and snakes. With their natural predators gone, mosquitoes and rats grew as plagues, the rats competing with villagers for scarce grain.

In spite of modernization, traditional attitudes remained deeply embedded. Although the government propagandized against feudal superstition, legitimate marriages remained patrilineal and patrilocal; marriages within five generations on the patrilineal side remained taboo, regarded as incest. Yet modern sports readily took hold. Tianjin sports leaders saw themselves as pioneers, having introduced basketball in 1896, right after its invention in the United States. Provincewide sports competition began in 1952. The October 1958 Hebei games were divided among the cities of Tianjin, Baoding, and Tangshan. Based on Tianjin's power, Hebei rose in the 1959 national games to finish third in swimming. A peasant from south of Raoyang won regional fame for records in the pistol competition. As traditional martial arts declined, denounced as feudal superstition in the anti-rightist campaign, the youth league popularized modern sports, especially basketball and ping-pong. When rural schools were built, construction workers first put up the basketball court so they could enjoy the modern sport.

China's supreme rulers sought socialist modernization. Mao now saw the traditional Soviet road as leading to an elitism of educated Soviet-style officials. In contrast to reformist officials who in 1956 tried to reverse the losses caused by the forced shrinkage of markets and the disincentives and rigidities brought by collectivization, leaders aligned with Mao. Believing that "only socialism can save China," they sought a path to socialism built not on moneymaking but on the fundamental values of communism.

Such leaders made Xushui county in Hebei, just north of Baoding, their model. From all over China, rural leaders were sent to Xushui to emulate it. Xushui leaders won renown in winter 1957–58 for water conservation work that mobilized rural labor, combined with a drive to enliven militia work. More new acreage was irrigated in China in 1957–58 than in the prior eight years. Young militia members acted as a Stakhanovite labor corps, digging dikes and dams. Claiming they could save the nation as the revolutionary army had a decade earlier, idealistic youngsters sang patriotic songs while working. Writer Kang Zho was sent in to chronicle Xushui's selfless militarized march toward communism.

Mao argued that correct attitudes liberated miraculous productive energies. In January 1958 he declared that all who criticized rapid collectivization as "adventurist" were anti-Marxist rightists. Once rightist thought was overcome, he held, productive wonders would flow. Mao was buoyed by reports

of the success of the big units and big mobilizations of labor for dam construction and irrigation not only in Xushui, but also as orchestrated in Henan province by its provincial party secretary, Wu Zhipu, and by Chen Boda.¹ These reports proved to Mao that Rural Work chief Deng Zihui was wrong in arguing that hand tools and limited managerial know-how made small units, mutual-aid teams, and even household farming suitable and efficient for China. Chinese villagers, Mao insisted, would rally to communist ways of doing things: leveling rich and poor, doing away with money, militarizing labor, wiping out the market, and ending commodity production, in sum, abolishing all forms of private property and exploitation.² When Deng Zihui would not be convinced, he lost his right to speak. Virtually all senior leaders supported the communistic initiatives of Henan Secretary Wu.

Communist Mobilization

Although policy changed, networks of loyalty were entrenched. In February 1958 the Hebei co-op leaders Mao had earlier singled out for highest praise, the Pauper co-op's Wang Guofan and South Kingsboro's Wang Yukun, were featured in a Hebei magazine. On the cover in color, bedecked with party medals, was the favorite co-op leader of Hebei First Secretary Lin Tie, Geng Changsuo.³ Boss Geng acted on Mao's line of struggling against elements of capitalism to advance toward communism. In April 1958 "prosperous middle peasant" Li Qingyong was arrested for plotting to sabotage production. Li was accused of fabricating charges against team leader Li Shuxing, of poisoning team leader Li Zhuang's family pigs, and that ubiquitous act of protest, of uprooting cotton plants. Li Qingyong was prosecuted and jailed. The following month "prosperous middle peasant" Li Can allegedly circulated clandestine leaflets. The Wuyong militia seized Li Can. He, too, was jailed.⁴

When Lin Tie did not press Hebei to the forefront in mobilizing labor and imposing communist institutions, Lin was compelled to resign his concurrent post as governor. The new governor, Liu Zihou, presented a budget at the Hebei People's Congress in May projecting monumental growth. Liu, a Hebei native, was expelled from school in 1931 for protesting Japan's seizure of northeast China. He became a Communist in 1936 and served in guerrilla units in southern Hebei and central China. After 1949 he rose as an administrator in central China under the tutelage of Li Xian'an. When Li moved to Beijing in 1954 to become finance minister and to join the Politburo, Liu succeeded him as governor of Hubei province. In January 1956 Liu was made first secretary of the mammoth Sanmen Gorge irrigation, power, and flood control project.⁵ As with Boss Geng's network, so the Liu Zihou-Li Xian'an connection remained intact through numerous large changes in policy. In May, at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress held in Beijing, Geng Changsuo heard Mao's heir apparent, President Liu Shaogui,

proclaim "Hard work for a few years, happiness for a thousand."⁶ Mao pledged that big collective units would let China accomplish in a day tasks that took others twenty years. China would swiftly surpass Britain, and then, in eight more years, the United States.⁷ Mao turned to gargantuan collectives to send China's economy leaping forward. Meeting at Baoding in June, the State Statistical Bureau was ordered to release only numbers likely to launch high production spurticks, human creations touted by Mao as more important than the mechanical spurticks recently launched by the Soviet Union. Statistical Bureau members became cheerleaders.

On June 14 Mao made clear that the issue was not mere growth but true communism, negating all private property. Treating the family as a remnant of private property, Mao targeted the peasant household for destruction as an economic unit. Household plots of land should be wiped out, as should household sideline production. To replace the social functions of the family, nurseries should be established to raise children and collective dining halls created to end eating as a family unit. Such measures, Mao said, would inaugurate a pure and perfect society. Perhaps, he speculated, men and women for purposes of procreation, need stay together only for a year.⁸ Party propaganda shifted from focusing on high growth to emphasizing building communism.

In July, in the inaugural issue of *Red Flag*, editor Chen Boda styled the mammoth units of Xushui county and Henan province "communes." He claimed that the leap to communes would open a road to communism. Communism meant the end of money. Food was to be free. For villagers, this meant that what was stored or otherwise available could be freely consumed. To those fired with enthusiasm by official exhortation, by stories about Xushui and Henan, and by an expected bumper crop, communism, with its promise of abundance, seemed imminent. Local black-market prices for grain, which had been running at twice the state price, fell precipitously. Other second economy prices followed this trend.

In August Mao toured experimental units in Xushui and Dingxian counties in Baoding prefecture on the Beijing-Wuhan railway, and nearby Anguo county, all readily accessible to leaders in Beijing.⁹ Xushui became one of two key points for national emulation. With the Hebei provincial capital and Party Secretary Lin Tie transferred in 1958 from Baoding to Tianjin, leaders in Baoding, who had been promoting big units and communist forms such as eating in common rather than as private families, could more readily press the fundamentalist line in the region. In spring 1958 Xushui built separate dormitories for men and women. The destruction of the peasant household economy was carried into organizing life as the big collective organized labor. Although the press did not report on the separate dorms, visitors spread the story. Only a few most zealous places would emulate it.

The other key point, Henan province, was said to be sending up high

production sputniks. Mao singled out Henan's big units as organizational forms for a transition to communism. Henan made its Statistical Bureau a subunit of its Bureau of Propaganda.¹⁰

During his tour of Baoding prefecture, Mao was accompanied by Yan Dakai, agricultural chief of the party's North China Bureau, and Xie Xuegong, a rising fundamentalist member of the Hebei party committee in charge of commerce and finance. Mao, his pants hitched high on his portly belly, heard that Xushui expected a fantastic autumn harvest of 550,000 tons of grain. Mao asked, "How can you consume all this food? What are you going to do with the surplus?" He advised taking land out of grain to grow oil-bearing crops and a variety of vegetables to upgrade the diet. "Plant a little less and do half a day's work. Use the other half day for culture, study science, promote culture and recreation, run a college and middle school."¹¹

Mao's instructions sped via telephone conference and newspaper. *Within two days* Dingxian county in Baoding prefecture reported setting up 2,300 fertilizer plants.¹² After leaving Baoding, Mao promoted large organs of labor in Henan. His terse comment, "People's communes are good," echoed across the nation. Mao then went to a Central Committee meeting at the Hebei seaside resort of Beidaihe and declared that the large units he had witnessed proved that China could soon realize fundamentals of communism. Chen Boda proposed doing away with money and commodities, promising that, with the state replacing the market, large rural units would permit the realization of communist distribution, a free supply system giving to each according to need.¹³ The leadership endorsed these policies. The Central Committee predicted a great leap in grain yields to 1,000 carries per person and approved the formation of communes, enormous militarized collective organizations that combined labor in industry, agriculture, commerce, education, and military affairs. Slighting the productive promise of scientific agriculture in market economies, Mao promoted reorganization and vast labor mobilization to win common prosperity. Divisions between town and country and between industry and agriculture would vanish. Communes would provide "the golden bridge to communism." In Raoyang that fall people were taught to sing:

Communism is heaven.
The commune is the ladder.
If we build that ladder,
We can climb the heights.

Ignoring the lesson learned by Wugong adviser Lu Guang that propaganda alone could not get villagers to work hard and well, the party nationally exhorted villagers to harsh semimilitarized labor. In Wugong village, reward and retribution, carrot and stick, were used to induce hard work. Those who worked long hours gathering the most manure were publicly praised. Those

who did not meet high targets were publicly humiliated. Where exhortation failed, party leaders, whose careers depended on delivering the goods, tended to resort to more coercive means.

From August 23 to September 1 the *People's Daily* featured a "Eulogy" to the People's Communes in Xushui." When Agriculture Minister Tan Zhenlin signed an article in the *People's Daily* promoting Xushui, Hebei officials concluded he was Xushui's patron. Its seven communes averaged forty to fifty thousand people. A reporter in Nanliyuan village in Xushui described four hundred women workers, "many wearing jackets of red cloth with pink flowers or white cloth with blue flowers," together with six hundred men, organized as a militia "labor shock brigade." Armed with rifles, they marched to the fields. Drill preceded and followed work. Leaders shouted drill commands, "one, two, three, four," to push militarized labor. Since 1957 Xushui had been presented to the nation as a model of militia building, as Mao put it, of "militarization, combatization and disciplinization." Militias were then promoted throughout the countryside to prepare for a defensive war and to accelerate labor mobilization.¹⁴

Cultural institutions throughout Hebei were reorganized to serve the war communism of the Leap. People were called to defend the nation and destroy its enemies. Defenses were built on both sides of the main north-south railway through Hebei. Hebei's literary journal, *The Bee*, was shut down in June and replaced in January 1959 by the national defense oriented *Literary Guard*. Not only its name was militaristic. The cultural policy attendant to the march into communism was to propagandize the theme of war preparedness. Written works that did not strengthen the nation's fighting spirit became political targets. Liu Zhen's *Yingxiang yuezhan* (A parade of heroes) was criticized for portraying war as hell, which could lead people to shrink from fighting. Hebei people were told that the highest value was steeling themselves to fight enemies. With militarization a central goal of the Leap, writer Ouyang Shan was attacked for writing as if there were a common human nature, instead of distinguishing enemies from friends by building on notions of class war so that people would learn to hate the enemy. In 1959 Hebei writers were summoned to Beijing to learn to write militantly to serve a communism fit to survive war.

Dasigou village in Xushui embodied communism in its four dining halls with "twenty cooks in white caps and aprons" to serve its 124 village households. In Xiefang village the reporter from the *People's Daily* found a kindergarten, "a tall white building," serving 173 children between ages three and seven, most of whom stayed overnight. "The boys are all dressed in blue shorts and white vests with red flowers. The girls are all dressed in white blouses with blue skirts, with colored flowers on their blouses." Twelve old folks were cared for in an immaculate "Happiness Home."¹⁵ China's notion of communism harmonized with its traditional culture of rigid gender divisions and great respect for the elderly.

Since China suffered scarcities of textiles, lumber, and other building materials, news of Xushui's uniforms and buildings caused panic. Villagers guessed that Xushui had traded its grain for the pretty cloth used to make its colorful outfits. The swap, according to the rumor mill, caused grain shortage in Xushui. Worried that the state was confiscating all the private property it needed for construction, villagers rushed to sell property before the state seized it. The market was glutted; prices plummeted. Wood beams used to construct buildings lost 90 percent of their value, bringing a price of only five yuan.

Henan's Party Secretary Wu Zhipu was cited in the national press for promoting deep plowing to achieve wheat yields of 7,000 catties per mu. The top yield in Wuyong was but 400 catties. Xushui county proclaimed that by plowing seven feet deep, sowing 1,000 catties of seeds per mu, and applying 300,000 catties of manure followed by scarce chemical fertilizer dressing, it would produce 120,000 catties per mu. Foreigners were sent to Xushui to see communism.

The state organized units of ten thousand or more households throughout the countryside. Private plots were eliminated along with most private markets. The logic of collectivization, transferring control of the economy from the household to party-designated managers, was carried yet further. At Beidaihe the Central Committee had called for immediate expansion of collective activities, including mess halls, kindergartens, nurseries, sewing groups, barber shops, public baths, homes for the aged, agricultural middle schools, and "red and expert" schools.¹⁶ Chaotic and costly construction followed. The wish was translated into policy that China could quickly stop being a poor place whose development was blocked by scarcity piled upon bottleneck, a place that lacked everything from capital and transportation to skilled technicians, modern agricultural science, and farm machinery.

Veterans were urged to recall that earlier mobilizations had made possible victories against Japan's war machine and the forces of the Nationalist party, Chinese troops had even fought America to a standstill in Korea. Most villagers had happy memories of the gains following land reform. History bred a faith that gave birth to a season of enthusiasm, especially for the young.

Workers were dispatched far from home. Raoyang sent workers to the iron and steel city of Baotou in Inner Mongolia. Villagers who obtained state-sector steelmaking jobs did their best never to return to collectivized farms. A 120-member Hebei opera troupe was dispatched to entertain thousands of Hebei workers patriotically serving in Inner Mongolia. The troupe encamped in the Baotou suburbs in the vicinity of a plant working on China's hydrogen bomb project. The influx of Han workers into Inner Mongolia seemed to Mongolians to threaten their land, culture, and opportunity. Mongols, according to an informant from Inner Mongolia, became nostalgic about the Japanese invaders. National leaders presented the Han influx as closing the

economic gap between coast and hinterland. Industry moved inland would reduce China's vulnerability to attacks on coastal cities with heavy and military industry.

Labor corvées of unprecedented scale tried to reduce Hebei's water problems. In subsequent decades central Hebei relied on the reservoirs and canals built in 1958–59 with the labor of millions using picks, shovels, and hand-carts. Following Mao's denunciation of experts at a March meeting at Chengde, water conservancy stressed mass creativity.¹⁷ The hectic efforts at times backfired, misusing the water table, increasing salinization and alkalinity of the soil, and bringing waste and great loss.¹⁸ As a horrendous flood in 1963 soon showed, the claims of great success for the labor corvée work were much exaggerated.

Reliance on mass energy and folk wisdom was presented as truly communist in contrast to the traditional Soviet way, which was now said wrongly to rely on an elite of officials and highly educated technicians. In Shijiazhuang, officials sought other work for teachers of Russian. Throughout Hebei the schools used to educate illiterate local officials were closed. In August educators from Raoyang and other Hebei counties were called to Tianjin to rewrite textbooks in order to remove unhealthy Soviet influences and to highlight China's communistic reliance on masses, not elites.

Although water control was welcome in flood-prone areas of Raoyang, rounding up and dispatching laborers far away to work for strangers was alienating and destructive. "Shock brigades" toiled around the clock, pushing animals and humans to, and beyond, their physical limits. Loss could exceed gain. To build a dam to irrigate the plain around Shijiazhuang, in 1958 engineers from the Ministry of Water Conservation trekked into the mountains west of that city to Xibaipo, where the 1947 land reform conference had been held. The houses of the top party leaders and the meeting room for the Central Committee still stood. They would be washed away by the planned Gannan reservoir, as would the village of Xibaipo. Residents were peremptorily informed of how the Great Leap would affect them.

Furniture and other historical artifacts of the party leadership, which had been headquartered in Xibaipo between May 1947 and March 1949, were packed and taken to Beijing for safekeeping. Xibaipo households were told to rebuild higher in the hills. The Gannan reservoir flooded the fertile Xibaipo plateau. The state provided little compensation. The county's best land was lost. Even ten years later, villagers stagnated in poverty, worse than before the land reform.¹⁹

In a political atmosphere of zealotry that precluded caution or realism, on September 10, 1958, President Liu Shaoyi arrived in Hebei's model county, Xushui, which claimed to have achieved communism. President Liu applied for commune membership along with Wang Guangmei, his wife, and other family members. Announcing grain yields of 2,000 catties per mu, Xushui

implemented a free supply system. All food, clothing, and services were to be provided at no charge.²⁰

Zealotry

Following six years in which provincial per capita grain output declined 1.8 percent per year, Hebei proclaimed a big leap forward, announcing three-year goals of 2,000 to 3,000 catties per mu.²¹ Beginning in the small leap of 1956, this chronic grain-deficit province whose 1957 grain yields were the second lowest in China, reduced acreage planted in grain. In 1958, officials projected tenfold productivity increases and discussed reducing grain acreage by 50 percent. Anticipated wealth would fund forestry, orchards, animal husbandry, and economic crops, as well as schools, hospitals, and services.

Pondering imminent grain yields of 2,000 to 10,000 catties per mu, Mao Zedong urged a "three-thirds system." "Planting one-third is enough; another third may be turned into grass or forests; let the remaining third lie fallow. The whole country will thus become a big garden."²² Some Raoyang officials recognized the three-thirds idea as that of Soviet agronomist Vasilii Robertovich Williams, who was born to American parents named Williams.²³ In spite of the attacks on Lysenko in the Soviet Union and an open forum in China in 1956 to assess his worth, Stalin's Lysenkoan dogmas still dominated in North China's agricultural circles in the wake of the anti-rightist onslaught against critics of Stalinism. Close planting was fervently promoted as proof that, within a species, members cooperated and therefore prospered. In 1958 and 1959 poor North China peasants, hoping that such tricks as close planting would produce a great leap in yield, heeded Mao's call and dangerously cut back grain acreage.

Leaders competed in zealotry. Hebei promoted units of ten thousand households in plains areas and even sanctioned some units of fifteen thousand and twenty thousand households. Echoing Mao in Xushui, the Hebei government directed communes to run nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, and junior high schools, and even colleges. "Within ten or fifteen years, all people now below twenty-five years of age may reach the cultural standards of a college student."

The euphoria was not universal. Mao privately noted that in Hebei "thirty-five percent basically accept the communes but with objections or doubts on particular questions. Fifteen percent oppose or have serious reservations about them." He blamed the opposition on local leadership in the hands of "prosperous middle peasants or even undesirable elements."²⁴ Following the fearsome anti-rightist movement of 1957-58, it required courage to voice common sense doubts about the gargantuan collectives. The following year Wugong tractor station chief Shi Xisheng argued that deep plowing broke expensive blades and brought up less fertile soil to the surface. He insisted that

the pressure to do jobs quickly and to keep the plows going without servicing produced shoddy work and ruined costly, irreplaceable machinery. Provincial authorities were called in to squelch Shi's disbelief in the Leap. He was dismissed and sent to a factory in a neighboring county. During the subsequent twenty-seven years Shi was seldom permitted to return home to be with his family other than during the New Year.

Hebei's administration was reorganized to further the transition to communism. The provincial capital was moved from Baoding to Tianjin. To facilitate large-scale water conservancy, 147 counties were amalgamated to 80. The North China Bureau temporarily stopped functioning. As illustrated by Raoyang, the organizational upheaval brought administrative chaos.²⁵

In March 1958 Raoyang was transferred from Shijiazhuang to Cangzhou prefecture.

On April 28, 1958, Cangzhou prefecture was abolished. Raoyang became part of Tianjin prefecture.

On December 20, 1958, Raoyang and Wugong counties were incorporated in an enlarged Xianxian county administered by Tianjin municipality.

In January 1960 three former Raoyang communes in the east remained with Xianxian county. The rest were transferred to Shenxian county.

On July 9, 1961, the enlarged Shenxian county was broken up. Anping county, which had been incorporated into Shenxian in 1958, was re-established. The former Raoyang county was taken from Shenxian and given to Anping to the west—except for the three communes that remained in Xianxian.

In 1959 Zhang Kerang, chief of the Hebei Department of Agriculture, was transferred to Beijing to serve as head of the Rural Work Department in a revived North China Bureau. Zhang, Wugong's patron since the 1940s, did not visit Wugong again for fifteen years. Despite organizational chaos, Wugong still had friends in high places. Networks of power held firm.

Red Flag over Wugong

The Red Flag People's Commune, headquartered in Wugong, was proclaimed on September 9, 1958. Soon renamed the Wugong People's Commune, it joined fifty thousand people in the four townships comprising the old Raoyang fourth district. Geng Changshuo was named chairman. But Geng could not effectively lead a unit comprising one-fourth of the county. Transportation was primitive. No motor vehicles were available. Geng could not even ride a bicycle. So wearing his coarse gray shirt and black pants, a customary white towel wrapped around his head, he walked from commune

headquarters in Wugong to Zoucun, almost two miles east, or Xiaodi, five miles southwest. When his comrades presented the fifty-eight-year-old Geng with a donkey, he rejected it. Walking made Geng look unprivileged. Ubiquitous petty corruption was a minor irritant in Wugong, but the consequences of unaccountable power secretly commanding resources were disastrous elsewhere. Neighboring Yanggezhuang's decline into misery was made more painful by a rise in the brutality and thievery of its leaders. To older people, incorruptible Geng remained "the rope-seller from the market." He won a reputation for incorruptibility, walking when others rode, repairing his sandals when others bought new ones, rejecting favors (such as sweet melons), even when they were offered to all officials.

In theory the commune was a way to pool resources, to enlarge the scale of labor, and to defend against catastrophe. By combining the wealth of thirty-six villages, an enlarged accumulation fund could purchase electric power, trucks, factories, and well-drilling machines that no single village could afford. The countryside would catch up with the city, field laborers with mental workers, the destitute with the rich. Massive labor mobilizations would make it possible to level and square the land, improve the soil, dig irrigation canals, construct dams, drill wells, and build roads. Mechanization would then prove profitable. Factories would dot the countryside. Peasant scientists, no longer mistled by bourgeois scientists, would sow with improved seeds and develop superior planting and plowing methods.

In practice the enlarged administrative unit threatened Wugong villagers who had recently grown far richer than their neighbors. They stood to lose more by amalgamation than had members of the original co-op in 1953 when they were merged into the big unit. The August 29 Hebei directive inaugurating communes stipulated that collective property would be transferred to the commune for unified management and equal distribution.

The thirty-six villages of Wugong Commune were renamed brigades. Wugong village's ten teams were reorganized into three. The former teams one, two, and three in Boss Geng's ropemaking east end comprised a new team one. Teams seven, eight, nine, and ten, comprising two insect-bounded regions divided by a lane, formed the largest of the new teams, the third, in the west village where Old Militia Xu, Brains Zhang, and Fierce Zhang resided. Teams four, five, and six in the discontinued vegetable growing center, which was the old bastion of power of the Li lineages where independent tiller households and old water wells were concentrated, constituted team two. The center west, including some of the richest and strongest of preform Li households, was split off from the center to become part of team three, the largest team. The village center was composed of 90 percent Li households, while the east end and west end held a bare majority of Li households.

In Wugong's split, weakened, and disgruntled village center, now called team two, the 1958 yield was 50 percent lower than in the west end, team

three. Despite propaganda about the commune as the unit for organizing labor and distributing income, the three enlarged teams served as the main units not only for labor but also for income distribution. The west end and east end resented and resisted village-wide distribution that meant sharing with the once powerful, but now economically lagging, politically ostracized Li lineages of the village center.

Wugong's intravillage reorganization into larger work units was feasible, if far from popular or efficient, because of a history of enlarged cooperation and mechanization based on neighborhood and lineage. For most of rural China, the gargantuan scale of the new organization was irrational in light of the lack of bonds of trust required for income pooling and labor organization. Big units artificially mixing dozens of villages lacked legitimacy, provided few economies of scale, ignored the imperatives of hand labor appropriate to small fields, and ultimately were alienating.

Wugong village benefited, however, as commune headquarters. Resources were monopolized by nodes in the state hierarchy. An insect control station was established. The thirty-bed county branch clinic with its staff of twenty, previously located in the Zoucun village market, sped up its move, begun in 1956, to Wugong. This would become a bonanza for Wugong when the prefecture richly subsidized Boss Geng's clinic. The Raoyang county clinic, like most rural clinics, became a resource-starved disaster, lacking any claim to an enhanced state budget share, lacking even antiseptics to wash the floors on which patients had urinated because of the absence of toilet facilities. Villagers had no place else to turn for medicine because socialist policy prohibited private doctors from practicing. Politics, however permitted the reporting and predicting only of advance and success.

Between October 25 and 28, 1958, Geng Changsuo attended Hebei's Second People's Congress in Tianjin and heard Governor Liu Zihou praise "high production 'Sputnik' fields," the more than one thousand units whose reported yields exceeded 10,000 carries per mu! Wugong's 382 carries in 1958 did not win sputnik status. Yan Dakai, who had taken Mao to Xushui, then came to Wugong. "You're a model unit. Wugong must become a 'red satellite,'" he told Boss Geng. That is, Wugong should report higher figures than others. But Geng, who in earlier years went along with some exaggerated figures, refused this huge inflation of Wugong's figures. Given his recent tirades against colleagues for declaring embarrassingly high targets, local credibility made it difficult for Geng to trumpet high figures. Yan fumed. "You keep on like this and we won't print a line on Wugong in the press for three years."²⁶

The threat was real. Political standing was the source of access to state-monopolized scarce resources. For two years, between early 1958 and spring 1960, Wugong disappeared from the provincial and national press.²⁷ Still, Geng Changsuo retained his status as a national peasant leader. In November

1958, Geng, as well as Hebei Party Secretary Lin Tie, were again among the Hebei representatives to the National People's Congress.²⁸

For Lin Tie, Wugong's top province-level patron, the Leap was meant to further "four changes" essential to the modernization of agriculture: mechanization, irrigation, electrification, and fertilization. State resources should contribute to these goals. While state propaganda highlighted self-reliance, state structures rewarded the well connected. Lin Tie, without publicity, arranged an extraordinary two million yuan allocation to Wugong to build a power station, expand the tractor station, construct a brick and tile factory with a daily capacity of four hundred thousand bricks, and establish an agricultural tool repair shop and vehicle team. When Mao called on Chinese scholars to record histories of working people in the village, family, commune, and factory, Nankai University in Tianjin sent ninety students to Wugong commune. Living with villagers, laboring in the fields, and conducting interviews at night, they remained from August through December.

One student, Zuo Zhiyuan, later a professor at Nankai, reached Wugong as the commune was established. Zuo concluded that the secret of Wugong's success lay in its origins. From the outset its officials were relatively honest and hardworking, implying a negative assessment of most rural leaders. While in Wugong, Zuo participated in tree planting, part of a national afforestation campaign. The trees planted on both sides of roads provided timber, income, windbreaks, and shaded beauty. Zuo saw ditches dug for irrigation and fields leveled and squared. With so many men away with labor shock brigades, the village was quiet.

Zuo noted that surrounding villages had difficulty accepting Wugong as their leader. No matter how they labored, these villagers could not catch up. If there was a drought, Wugong could count on water from dozens of deep wells drilled with state support; other villages had only a couple of shallow ones. Other villages covered and lacked Wugong's leadership, unity, and, above all, Wugong's public accumulation fund and ties to the state. Wugong had these, others said, because it got started earlier. There was no way to emulate what counted most in the model experience: being rewarded by the state for being first. Hence, the call for model emulation sounded hollow.

In 1959 the Hebei authorities sent another team of historians to Wugong headed by writer Wang Lin and Wu Senlin. Qin Zheng went along to do sketches. A manuscript of two hundred thousand words was prepared.²⁹ Fundamentalist domination of the media kept the Nankai historians and the Hebei writers from immediately publishing on Lin Tie's model village.

Exploiting Labor

During the Leap, night and day, people were thrown into back-breaking labor. In 1958 Wugong Commune conscripted thousands to build major

north-south and east-west dirt roads to link its villages. In keeping with military discipline, each team had to obey the "commander-in-chief" who sent people far and wide according to a "strategic plan." The project ignored equitable remuneration, popular support, physical limits of endurance, and conflicts among units. Where a project promised direct benefits to one's own village, then low wages and physically punishing work might not pose insuperable problems. Returns would come later in higher productivity and income. But in numerous cases there were few local benefits. Whereas the Great Leap promised to expand cooperation, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, overworked and abused people instead turned inward to protect themselves; mistrust and parochialism intensified.

Workers on Wugong commune-organized projects in 1958 received 20 yuan per day. In 1958 the value of the labor day in Wugong village dropped to 49 yuan, down from the three preceding years when it ranged from 71–85 yuan. Between 1955 and 1959, the number of labor days doubled, yet per capita income fell. The state exploited labor as a limitless free good. In September 1958 workers from Wugong and other villages trekked several miles west to Sangyuan to dig an irrigation channel. That winter Wugong people opened 1,980 meters of irrigation channels and dug fifteen wells. Cement replaced bamboo tubing to line increasingly deeper wells. Water seemed to be fleeing.

Precious resources were frittered away. Contemporary reports claimed that in 1958 China constructed 6 million commune factories, about 125 new factories per commune in one year.³⁰ Whatever the exaggeration in the figures, labor and materials were strained to the breaking point. Scarce resources were dissipated; little of value was produced; money was lost. The damage was most acute in poorest places where a surplus was hard to generate.

In August and September 1958, Mao focused China's industrialization drive on iron and steel. Villagers built more than one million crude blast furnaces, known in the west as "backyard steel furnaces." By early September more than twenty million had joined the campaign; eventually ninety million people took part.³¹ Every Raoyang commune was ordered to send two hundred to three hundred men to make steel. In September Wugong village sent forty-five men to the industrial town of Bozhen, ninety miles east, to make steel. People brought their own tools. There was no accounting. Sometimes horses and carts were left at the work site when people returned home. The Wugong middle school constructed a primitive blast furnace. Activists collected "waste" iron and steel to smelt. The state sent teams from cities to pressure villagers all over China to surrender that waste. Wugong villagers were forced to turn in supposedly useless stoves, broken cooking pans, and broken farm tools, anything that could be melted down to feed the furnace. Wugong students at school elsewhere were pressured to convince their par-

cents to donate raw materials. In many communities all pots and pans were melted down, usually including the unique cooking equipment a village could draw on to prepare special banquets for important ceremonies. Youngsters were dispatched from schools in Raoyang to find bricks to build steel furnaces. Surviving temples were destroyed for their bricks, and the ancient town wall of Raoyang was completely dismantled. Even school-building walls were pillaged beyond repair for bricks. Hebei villagers were traumatized and alienated when the quest for fuel led to a seizure of scarce timber, valued wooden gates, and even precious coffins. Since class struggle was routed as the way to communism, in many villages the graves of once prosperous families were pillaged. The bricks were used to build kilns fueled by the coffin wood. Still, the low-quality iron and steel produced was valueless.

The height of the campaign coincided with the autumn harvest. It drew away tens of millions of experienced hands when their labor was needed in China's fields. Skilled farmers made bad steel. The harvest and the planting of winter wheat were left to inexperienced field hands, many of them women. Given the magnificent 1958 weather, record harvests were in the offing. Zhang Kerang told us that 1958 yields of 152 carties per mu were the highest Hebei attained in the 1952 to 1961 decade. In Raoyang, as in many localities, however, with so much labor sent elsewhere, grain was left to rot in the fields. In poor villages that did not even have sickles, the wheat had to be wrenched out of the soil, root and all, by hand, resulting in callused, bleeding, and cut skin. The roots were used for fuel. The stalks were used to make mats, cushions, and mattresses. Inexperienced, weaker workers were not up to the task. More important, if the roots were not pulled up slowly by hand, thereby loosening the soil, seeds for the next crop could not be planted simply by hand. Many poor places lacked draft animals for plowing. Consequently the poor 1958 harvest augured not only an immediate decline in cash, comfort, and fuel but also a poor next crop from bad seeding. This prolonged catastrophe struck water-rich rice regions as well as the northern hinterland because both suffered similar irrational organizations of labor.

By October, as food grew scarce, it became obvious that mass steelmaking was a costly disaster. Within two months furnaces were dismantled. Mao made a token innervary self-criticism for having launched the campaign without investigation. While this one irrationality halted, the campaign frenzy continued. Villagers were prodded into a campaign of deep plowing. Customarily, peasants used shovels on a section of land to dig up clay to mix with sandy soil that could be made into more fertile soil in three to five years. It was grueling toil, averaging a square foot of work per labor day. The race into communism had no patience for slow, partial efforts. Success was needed now. Hebei Governor Liu launched a movement to "sow wheat by shock attack," assuring villagers accustomed to yields of 100–300 carties per mu of 1959 yields of at least 1,000 carties per mu. Liu's slogan was "Learn from

Henan, catch up with Henan, press ahead consistently and win first position."³² Liu directed villagers to plow some fields to a depth of even six feet. But the raw clay soil brought to the surface was not fertile.

In autumn 1958 and spring 1959 Wugong and neighboring Yuanzi pooled labor in a "shock attack."³³ Thousands of men and women dragged plows through the fields. Working day and night, they turned up 2,000 mu of Wugong's rock-hard soil to a depth of 1.5 feet, in a few places 3–5 feet. For two weeks, young militia members from neighboring villages were drafted to deep plow in Wugong, to help the advanced. Such draft labor was deeply resented, so Geng Changsuo halted what he called empty efforts and sent the youngsters home. To the visiting youth, Boss Geng seemed an honest traditional peasant. He greeted them, thanked them, and even sat on the ground with them and shared a typical lunch of mantou, preserved vegetables and soup.

Wugong's technician, Bugs Zhou, without defending the Leap, later claimed that previous plowing to depths of .7 or .8 feet was inadequate for corn and wheat, whose roots penetrate to a depth of 1.5 feet. Deep plowing allowed roots to sink and leaves to grow better; it facilitated irrigation and raised yields. Subsequently, every five years, using tractors, Wugong would deep plow to a depth of 1.5 feet.

The state's demand for "rational close planting" multiplied the disastrous errors of 1956. Wugong, whose highest cotton yield was 74 carties per mu, sowed 5,000 seeds per mu in search of yields of 1,000 carties. In sweet potatoes, the number of plants reached 20,000 per mu, and in corn 12,000 plants. The result was that plants suffered as each stole nutrients from the other. Wugong leaders later found that yields improved from moderately closer planting.

While the Great Leap unleashed an explosion of activity, one sphere was cut to the bone: trade and the household sidelines associated with it. A 1958 Tianjin rectification campaign attacked "capitalist spontaneity" among small traders and shopkeepers. Enterprises and services that had already been squeezed were snuffed out. Services declined or disappeared.³⁴ Throughout Raoyang home spinning wheels to make cloth for clothes and for bags to hold grain were idled. New clothes grew more expensive, old clothes more patched. Women were de-skilled.

Each commune was directed self-reliantly to fulfill basic needs so that commercial units had only to allocate the commune's output among members, dispensing with buying and selling among localities. Each place wastefully sought to produce what could be purchased at higher quality and less cost elsewhere. A new contract system, consistent with Chen Boda's 1958 call to eliminate commodity production, curtailed monetary exchange.³⁴ Eliminating commodities and money was to bring closer a transition to communism. In theory, the multipurpose commune would produce all it needed—

even ball bearings. In practice, crucial gaps widened, production suffered, and cultural imperatives went unmet.

The Zoucun market was forced to stop its big temple fair, which had attracted twenty-thousand people a day in spring. The fair was banned as a manifestation of "feudal culture." Periodic markets shriveled when private plots were eliminated, peddlers and craftspeople were yoked to collective units, and money no longer flowed into the countryside. The destruction of markets was most devastating in the poor mountain areas of north and central China. Leaders proved their faith in Mao and the commune by destroying sidelines and markets root and branch. Tiny surpluses that these poor regions produced were squandered. Food disappeared. People were exhausted. With local markets wiped out, it could take five days to walk to a factory, an intermediate market, or an administrative center to acquire everything from salt and clothing to economic inputs.

Investigators sent to Henan in late 1958 found bare subsistence yields where 7,000 catties of grain per mu had been announced. Worse yet, they found officials so zealously competing in selling grain to the state that almost no grain was left in villages. By January 1959 many places had nothing to eat and no crop to harvest until late spring. And that poorly planted crop could not help but be minimal. Beggars began to flood Henan's cities. Visitors to the communes of Hebei's Xushui county likewise discovered grain shortages and hunger even as the press trumpeted bumper harvests. Villagers fleeing to cities revealed a massive death toll in the making.

Although even Mao was skeptical now of inflated claims, no one dared expose the state's disastrous fundamentalist policies. The political atmosphere smothered criticism of anything presented as leftist, advanced, and socialist. To be critical was to be a rightist, an enemy of progress, a reactionary. It was to be on the side of all the old evils that socialism supposedly was transcending. Anyone who did point to economic irrationality, decline, disaster, and hunger would be accused of throwing cold water on the enthusiasm of the masses and forced to criticize oneself, or suffer far worse humiliation and abuse for stifling the energies China needed to build a better future. Stories circulated about the recent anti-rightist campaign. Few villages lacked victims like Wugong tractor station chief Shi Xishen or hungry Li Dalin and Fan Shutang, or pure scapegoats like Provider Li Peishen. Calling attention to the famine-inducing facts would only make oneself and one's family victims who would share a degraded fate. The sound of politics had the ring of death. The countryside fell silent.

Over the Brink

Instead of slamming on the brakes to save lives, those driving the socialist super express slowed just a bit, still careening dangerously. On December 25,

Boss Geng was a member of the presidium at a congress in Beijing of six thousand village representatives of advanced units. Along with Wang Guofan of the Pauper's co-op and Li Shunda, who had accompanied him to the Soviet Union, Geng heard of new decisions to adjust commune affairs. Mao, in December, agreed to pull back from the brink by allowing some commodity production, restoring some household plots, raising more pigs, limiting what the state could take for investment, and utilizing some responsibility systems that would more directly link a worker's effort with pay. But these suggestions were given neither political priority nor institutional form. No campaigns promoted these suggestions. Gargantuan organizations remained intact. Few North China villagers had private plots to fall back on, most having been abolished in 1958. Mao would not allow China to enter the world grain market to purchase food for the starving. Officials continued to publicize places such as Xushui and Henan as advancing rapidly toward communism. The Great Leap hurtled over the brink.

Winter 1958-59 brought no rest. People were dragged into land leveling and well drilling. Men were dispatched to join large construction brigades and water projects. Night workers in Wugong received an extra meal. Wugong planted 400 mu in sweet potatoes just in time to avert starvation. But at lunar New Year, when villagers traditionally took stock, they found themselves in difficult straits. There were few meat-filled dumplings, although even the poorest households made sure they had some dumplings, often substituting sorghum for wheat flour.

Nonetheless, the favored displayed loyalty. Model villages increased grain sales to the state. In 1959, under the leadership of Zhang Duan, the thirty-four-year-old militia leader who took over as party secretary in April, Wugong sold to the state 180,000 catties, more than twice the preceding peak. Village grain reserves were exhausted in the hungry winter of 1959-60 when more work brought less income. When the commune was organized, the leaders had seized all private stores of grain. Households now had nothing left and nowhere to turn.

The disaster was far worse in Yanggezhuang and other neighboring villages, where grain yields fell to just over 100 catties per mu, below the average harvest prior to the founding of the People's Republic. Yanggezhuang would stagnate at the miserable 1959 level for more than a decade. Generally, the poorest places with bad soil took longest to recover. The worst hit were zealous villagers in such northern and central provinces as Henan and Anhui whose sons had bled to win the revolution and who hoped that Mao's policies of close planting, market abolition, and labor mobilization could save them from poverty.

Governor Liu Zihou declared that Hebei's 1958 autumn harvest broke records. The food-grain harvest was claimed to be 45 billion catties, more than double the fine 1957 harvest. Cotton statistics were more fantastic.³⁵ By

comparison, Wugong's 1958 production gains looked pitiful. Xushui and other model counties near Baoding claimed to have quintupled grain yields and promised to double that the following year.³⁶ Whatever the yield, the inability to harvest the crop, hold on to it, or distribute it made Hebei a disaster area. Per capita grain output actually declined from 470 to 404 catties, and that figure masks the fact that famine was averted only by a late sweet potato crop. Grain output (excluding potatoes) fell from 402 to just 264 catties per person, starvation levels. The bumper harvest claims masked a disaster.³⁷ A quarter of a century later, Hebei would not yet come close to yields of 1,000 catties per person as claimed in that first frenzied year of the Leap. In fact, usable output declined, capital and labor were exhausted, and people were left hungry, tired cynics. The original enthusiasm disappeared.

In 1959 the state reduced its exaggerated national production claims for 1958. Hebei officials still insisted that 1958 grain and cotton yields had increased by 23 and 12 percent, respectively, over 1957. No mention was ever again made of Governor Liu's claims of increases five and fifteen times as large. Hebei's harvest actually declined.³⁸

The central government took half-measures that did not deal with the worsening famine. The government told villagers to economize on food and suggested that local leaders approve some use of private plots and household sidelines. The state insisted, however, that villagers pay taxes in grain, sell grain to the state on the basis of inflated reports, and hew to targets and obligations based on impossibly high grain numbers.³⁹

Focusing on grain yields—almost the only measure of productivity publicized by the state—could disguise a disaster, even if the reporting was accurate. Wugong reported a 1959 record grain yield of 430 catties per mu. Yet per capita income was 46 yuan, compared to 57 in 1957. Income fell, as did exhausted villagers. Fixed assets dropped from 73,000 yuan in 1957 to 47,000 in 1959. Draft animals dropped dead and machines burned out. The state demanded higher investment and higher grain sales. Leaders were pressured to trumpet the high-unit grain yield and to squelch news of empty grain bins and empty stomachs.

Facing a lean winter and impossible targets, local leaders ordered exhausted people to grow crops that would permit them to survive and could be reported in terms of expected production of grain equivalent. Raoyang sent people to see models of sweet potato success in Baoding prefecture, home of the Xushui model. Villagers were also told that in Henan other crops had been cut down and sweet potatoes planted. In Raoyang villages where corn or other crops were doing well in summer 1959, officials commanded commune members to do as people had in these model areas. Coerced, women cried as they cut down good crops in order to grow potatoes. Planted too late, the sweet potatoes often were as small as a finger. The food tragedy intensified. Some Raoyang tillers lay down in the field and refused to work. Some

repeated the saying, "If people cheat the land, the land will cheat people's stomachs."

In August, at a Central Committee meeting in Lushan, Defense Minister Peng Dehuai finally tried to make China's top leaders confront the deepening disaster. In a visit to rural areas of his home province of Hunan the preceding winter, Peng recorded his concerns in a poem:

Grain scattered on the ground, potato leaves withered,
Strong young people have left to smelt iron,
Only children and old women reaped the crops;
How can they pass the coming year?

At Lushan Peng pointed to the economic collapse of Mao's favorite Hebei model, the communes of Xushui.⁴⁰ Although many leaders had come to share Peng's misgivings about the Leap, most either kept silent or joined in when Mao lashed out at Peng. Mao declared that the issue of halting or continuing Great Leap policies was "a continuation of the life and death struggle between the two opposing classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat."⁴¹ To take issue with Mao was to risk being branded as a class enemy. At Lushan few besides Peng Dehuai would risk that. To speak the truth was to court danger. Raoyang people invoked the popular saying, "Disaster exits through the mouth, illness enters through the mouth."

Mao stripped Peng Dehuai of executive positions in army, party, and government and labeled him a right opportunist. Mao then installed Lin Biao in Peng's stead as minister of national defense. Former members of the North China Bureau were, like Peng, criticized for rightist conservatism. Members of the Hebei Bureau of Agriculture who had tried to check the Leap's economic irrationalities were similarly criticized. Rather than pull back from the brink, Mao made the life and death decision to plunge ahead with fundamentalist policies.

In September 1959 Mao promoted Hebei Governor Liu Zihou's idea of sputnik fields, a reference to extraordinary yields claimed for intensive cultivation of 10 percent of commune land.⁴² Despite the dearth, in 1959 Mao ordered another cut in grain acreage. The area planted in grain was reduced by 12.5 million hectares, 9.5 percent of the total area. Great Leap passerter Henan reduced its sown grain acreage by 14 percent.⁴³ A 7 percent reduction in 1959 brought Hebei's total reduction since 1956 to 1.3 million hectares, 14.5 percent of its grain acreage.⁴⁴

The 1959 grain dearth was intensified because the state extracted record sales of 66.5 million metric tons from villagers. Although China's grain output fell 15 percent below 1958 levels in 1959—60, the state would procure 32 percent more than it had in 1958—59.⁴⁵

Mao, having approved some cutbacks from fundamentalism and having arrived at Lushan open to more concessions to necessity, after clashing with

Peng, suddenly ordered officials to continue to institutionalize communist fundamentals. This meant abolishing private plots, eliminating the household raising of pigs, chickens, and ducks, recruiting more labor for big water projects, and creating more collectivized mess halls, in sum, pressing forward with "sharp class struggle in the villages."⁴⁶ All China was urged to leap ahead on the model of the original Sputnik Commune in Henan's Suiping county, which continued to report fantastic successes.

In Hebei that winter, Hualai county villagers were reduced to eating leaves. In mountain areas near Zhangjiakou, people stopped working and even slaughtered draft animals to stave off starvation. But the state, instead of combating the famine, pushed Chinese villagers over the brink.

A Miniature Cultural Revolution

As in the 1930s, economic decline deprived households of the wherewithal to act morally as tradition dictated. Lineages and communities came unglued. Fighting within the family grew nastier. People invoked the expression "qiong jia," the poor fight. Family bonds disintegrated; more families divided. Adding to the sorrows of villagers this time was a state-directed war on popular culture. During the Leap Chen Boda and other fundamentalists launched a cultural revolution linked to Lenin's call to combat "the survivals of the middle ages" in the minds of Asia's peasants. Minds full of feudal superstition were to be refilled with socialist ethics and science. Chen called for a campaign to expose and eliminate religion in order to liberate productive forces.⁴⁷

In 1958 the Catholic church in Xianxian, which earlier had been converted into a hospital, was turned into a factory. The Japanese had only desecrated the church. Chinese patriots defensively claimed to us that in Zhengding, just north of Shijiazhuang, the Japanese had done worse by cutting off forty-two arms of the giant bronze goddess of mercy, smelting the arms into bullets in a Tianjin factory.

The fifty-one-year-old Roman Catholic bishop of Baoding, Monsignor Peter Joseph Fan Xueyan, was arrested in 1958 and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Bishop Fan, one of the last Chinese ordained by the Vatican in 1951, became a prisoner of conscience for his continued loyalty to the pope.⁴⁸ Raoyang's surviving Daoist and Buddhist temples were demolished. In one north Raoyang village the three remaining temples, one Buddhist, one dedicated to the land god, and a third to Guan Di, the god of war, were destroyed in the 1958 steel campaign. The temples' wooden ramparts and rafters fueled the furnaces.

Most believers continued ritual activities at home, thus binding and defining the family as a sacred preserve secure from state intervention. Some older people stubbornly went to sites where temples once stood in order to burn

incense and to worship. Security forces often beat such people away. In a few villages, older women whose sons had died fighting with the Eighth Route Army felt they had the right to resist anyone daring to challenge their public worship. Powerholders were frequently among the most superstitious and least vulnerable to adverse consequences of public display of ritual. When the father of a Raoyang commune party secretary died, the son summoned a Daoist priest. Brandishing a ceremonial sword, the priest directed the soul of the deceased heavenward. The party introduced a "revolutionized" spring festival at the 1959 New Year. After eating dumplings in the morning, villagers had to work as usual. Ritual obeisance to elders and other traditional practices for celebrating the two-week New Year holiday were banned.

Wuyong's leaders still acted on traditional ethical imperatives. When Li Laohan, a father of six daughters, died at the start of the Leap, he murmured, "If there had been but one son, things would be much better."⁴⁹ The household's income now rested on the earnings of a widowed mother of six. She could never save enough to provide proper dowries for her daughters. With state policies making cash scarce, a penniless widow rearing children faced humiliation unless local leaders helped with school books, new clothes at the New Year, and a penny for a sweet when school friends went to a store.

The village provided welfare to Li Laohan's daughters. Having worshipped at Buddhist temples with his mother and having suffered the ignominy of a marriage without ceremony, Boss Geng felt the weight of traditional culture. But since 1948 he had responded loyally to the party's pressure to secularize and sanitize village culture. Nonetheless, Geng helped the fatherless girls find work. Two became army officers, one was given a job at the co-op pharmacy, and a fourth was made a minor village official. Using power to prevent families from disintegrating was how a good patriarch should act. But in less united, less well-off villages, leaders could not halt the decline toward family disintegration.

With the county virtually bankrupt and traditional culture under attack, Raoyang authorities recalled their opera troupe from Inner Mongolia. No longer able to afford to feed the entire troupe, Raoyang disbanded three-quarters of the members. The popular Hebei operas, a glory that had been restored in the honeymoon period, almost disappeared. As in Hejian county, local people were proud that they at least kept the opera going.

No Wuyong leader tried to tell fellow villagers that they were backward feudal reactionaries. Although the local credit co-op stopped loans for weddings, funerals, and holiday celebrations, the cultural issue was presented as leaping forward economically. In summer 1959 Wuyong Party Secretary Zhang Duan assembled villagers to discuss removing burial mounds from the fields. He proposed moving graves to a common site, originally the ninety-mound Southern Li lineage cemetery on the village's southern outskirts. By removing the graves, Fierce Zhang contended, they would be both keeping

faith with the party that had done so much for them and helping themselves. Revolutionary consciousness could produce wealth. More land could be leveled, irrigation and mechanization would improve. Zhang suggested using burial material for productive purposes, but no one wanted to use the lumber. The smell of the grave permeated coffin wood. Of course no woman was invited to dig up a grave. Death was associated with yin, the female element. For auspicious outcomes in mourning, the female dirt had to be balanced by male (yang) activity.

Zhang invited villagers to move ancestral remains. He then opened the meeting for discussion. No one said a word. Villagers were asked to raise their hands if they agreed to move the burial mounds. Everyone raised a hand. But the democratic process was a sham. Even village powerholders sat silent. Almost everyone, especially the elderly, had misgivings, but the party had spoken.

Larger Wugong lineages had their own burial area. The lineage heads met and opposed moving the mounds. Three days later, undeterred, Zhang Duan dug up his grandparents' bones, placed them in a small wooden chest, and carted the load to the Southern Li cemetery for reburial. Under party pressure the lineages subsequently agreed not to oppose the removal of burial mounds. The eighteen mu of Northern Li burial ground were leveled for cultivation. Sections of the Southern Li burial ground were allotted to other lineages. Each would continue to bury its dead with its own lineage members.

The redivision of cemeteries paralleled changes in power. The Northern Li, in decline for nearly a hundred years, lost its burial ground. The Southern Li, whose power was broken in the twentieth century, lost its monopoly on the village's largest burial ground. Its geomantically favored spot was shared with the Gengs, Qiaos, Yangs, Xus, and Zhangs who came to power in the revolution, as well as with the Northern Li.

Almost everyone knew where fathers and grandfathers were buried, but many were unable to locate earlier generations. After removing recent remains, the land was leveled. Each family decided how many generations to move. A few brash people leveled the land without bothering to move the bones.

To show how class warfare produced wealth, Geng insisted that even the dead rich kept living villagers poor. He claimed that the tombs of the more prosperous took as many bricks to build as an average house, some twenty thousand. When villagers balked at using dismantled tombs for home building, village leaders ordered the bricks used in water control. That too was resented. Boss Geng commandeered bricks from a large tomb for irrigation construction. The widow's son-in-law was an army officer, who threatened to report Geng to higher authorities for commandist abuses. But Geng pointed out that the widow, too, had raised her hand in favor of using graves for

economically productive purposes. Checkmated by the empty democratic form, the soldier dropped the case.

The transfer of graves by the end of 1959 increased cultivable land by 60 mu.⁵⁰ Still, numerous mounds dotted the fields. Old people opposed moving burial mounds. The leaders hoped that pressure and the promise of wealth would eventually win all burial mounds to the village cemetery. In other Raoyang villages, digging up graves was far nastier. Coercion undermined community. Since villagers were supposed to be working for communism and not acting on material incentives, no recompense was offered to families that removed ancestral grave mounds from the fields. Some village leaders simply ordered the mounds to be leveled. Other leaders consolidated cemeteries around their own lineage grave site. To salvage something, some households dug up graves, disposed of the bones, and used coffin wood for fuel. Many attempted to find the wherewithal to reinter parents in wooden coffins. Some outraged households insisted on preserving their grave mounds. A few let it be known that anyone who dared move their lineage graves would be killed. To resist state-imposed cultural outrages, villagers relied on the more parodial and violent aspects of tradition.

Tradition included physical abuse. Male patriarchy saw a bloody thrashing as a cure for disobedience. Raoyang men said, "Kneading makes good dough; beating makes good wives." Village social relations were still violent. Just prior to the 1959 lunar New Year, Dog Li and some junior-high friends played hooky. That took courage. A report of an unexcused absence could result in a beating by a father that could bloody a child.⁵¹

Dog Li skipped over to the Zoucun market to buy yellow powder for homemade firecrackers. Halfway back to Wugong, he climbed a tree to set off the packed powder, but it fell from his hands. When he climbed down for the explosive, it went off in his hands. Li's friends ran to find their teacher, who raced to the accident site and carried the bloodied boy to Zhang Ping, recently returned from the army where he had studied first aid. Zhang put antiseptic on the arm stumps, bandaged them, and took the boy to the miserable Raoyang County Clinic, where what was left of his hands were amputated.

Villagers helped Dog Li make a normal life. Teachers rigged up hooks on his arms so he could turn book pages. He practiced using his hooks and mouth to manipulate small tools. Over the decades Li became an adequate repairman. For a wife Dog Li was presented a mentally retarded woman who could do household chores. The Lis raised two healthy children. Life went on with a modicum of decency and self-respect in harmony with Chinese cultural norms.

Revived traditional norms took religious forms. Sects with Islamic and martial arts rituals spread in neighboring counties. In Raoyang a secret eclectic religious sect, combining the teachings of Daoism, Buddhism, and

Confucianism, spread. Young people joined in large numbers. The leader, named Qi and known as the King, was a venerated calligrapher. His family members became lower-ranking royalty. Married women were welcome, but girls who would later marry out of a village were not allowed to join. Local people spoke of "Marrying out a daughter, like pouring out water." All sect members had to go through initiation rituals. Special prayers and ceremonies celebrated marriage and honored the dead. A few times, at midnight, hundreds met secretly, burned incense, spoke in tongues, and prepared for the arrival of a savior. Then the members shared a communal dinner. To prepare for their savior, members had to act honestly and honorably. As bonds fell apart, villagers sought the glue of traditional culture. While crime spread and temptation heightened, sect members supported each other in acting ethically.

The removal of the graves and other such jarring fundamentalist policies as elimination of the temple fair, the destruction of temples, the cutback in traditional opera, the loss of traditional medicine and traditional cooking utensils, and the coerced shrinkage of the market that had brought the goods needed for ritual celebrations all alienated villagers. Raoyang villagers spread the story of one particularly nasty local official who used force, going house to house, to stop the ketou to elders. But when he went to his parents' home for New Year's dinner, his frail mother told him that there would not be even one meat-filled dumpling for the son until he would ketou to every family member. The humbled son did as the elderly mother insisted. Villagers took satisfaction in this small triumph. In many villages, officials outraged people by forcing them to do corvée labor even during the New Year holiday. And the cultural revolution that made war on Chinese culture had barely begun.

Eating Out of One Big Pot

After Mao praised an Anhui commune in which it was "not necessary to have money to eat," the state called for mess halls to substitute for families eating together.⁵² After the 1958 autumn harvest, Wugong village established collective kitchens at ten locations, subsequently consolidated in one place, the former Southern Li lineage temple, but quickly redivided into three mess halls, one for each team. The militarized mess halls had no tables, no roof, and no warmth. Bricks were piled up outdoors and covered with bare planks. People carried their stools, bowls, and chopsticks. In autumn 1958, with so many men away working on construction projects and women forced to bring in the harvest, many welcomed the mess hall with its big stove and cauldron since there was little time to cook. Some young people relished a chance to join friends at meals as a break from subordination to elders in hierarchical households.

Nevertheless, families disliked having to eat with strangers. Defiant house-

holds brought containers to the kitchen and carried food home. Some angry households ate the little grain they had hidden away rather than eat "free" in the mess hall. To many frugal older people, eating free and eating as much as you wanted seemed immoral. Folk wisdom had it that one ate today thinking of the potential natural disasters tomorrow: "If you pass bumper years like lean ones, in lean years you won't starve." It was painful for the elderly or the infirm to walk to the mess for each meal. It was also hard for mothers with breast-feeding or napping children who had to mesh multiple needs with a common eating time. Food for the ill and elderly gone cold by the time it arrived home was hardly appealing. Rain and the long winter made everything worse.

Many poor Raoyang villagers nonetheless ate their fill at the free mess halls after the fall harvest, happily commenting, "This is communism." Some mess halls even offered meat, but meat and grain swiftly disappeared. By the dearth of winter 1958-59, villagers considered themselves fortunate if they had held back a pot from the iron and steel campaign. Most villages in Raoyang kept their mess halls open through winter 1959-60. Wugong kept its three mess halls going a bit longer.

Brains Zhang Chaokai, who embraced the communist vision of the Leap, believed Wugong's public kitchens were a good thing. "When times were hard in 1959 and 1960, they may have saved some from suffering or even from having to go begging," he recalled. But, he said, they never became places with which people identified. In fact, they became soup kitchens, a communism of state-imposed poverty.

The mess halls were linked to a free-food policy that made food available with few restrictions and little bookkeeping. Wugong Commune, like others, printed blue food coupons that allowed the holder to eat free anywhere in the commune. Economist Xue Muqiao later observed that with free supply, some peasants ate until "the skin on their bellies was tight," consuming a year's supply of grain in three months. As a result, "people were hungry" in communes throughout the whole country, and in some villages quite a few people starved to death.⁵³ Sun Yefang of the National Institute of Economics investigated Hebei's Changli county in early 1959. He found that mess halls were "not in keeping with the habits, customs and level of consciousness of rural people, that waste resulted and that it went against national feeling."⁵⁴ Mao, however, insisted that continuing these wasteful and resented institutions was a matter of class struggle.

Wugong cautiously tried to restrict free supply, deducting meal costs from the income owed each household. Still, people ate too many vegetables in the mess hall. Moreover, as economic conditions deteriorated, strangers came to eat in Wugong's mess halls. More prosperous communities such as Wugong village and neighboring Wangqiao experienced free supply as robbery, since the fruits of their labor became handouts to strangers. The dearth caused by

the Great Leap set village against village, household against household. Increasingly villagers relied on customary ties. Lineage members in less badly off villages helped worse-off relatives.

Explaining Famine

Local officials were instructed by the party center on how to explain the famine. They were to blame the catastrophe on bad weather. A grizzled Wugong old-timer told us, "It did rain, but not even enough for water logging." The state scapegoated the Soviet Union for its summer 1960 withdrawal of aid. But people starved to death long before that, trapped and killed by a system promoting rapid progress toward communism. The Great Leap death toll was not a sudden, one-time error resulting from unique policy blunders in 1958, 1959, and 1960. Rather, it was the culmination of institutionalized processes, values, and interests that had previously generated frightening consequences, as in the terror phase of the 1947 land reform and the anti-rightist movement of 1957. State-contrived local combat was celebrated as "class struggle," with the party rewarding zealots. A generalized disaster was made more likely when the state foreclosed ways that villagers could earn money and expand the economy, ending grain markets, eliminating rural handicrafts, sidelines, and processing, and imposing large, alienating, abstract collectives. The cruel treatment of individuals and their families who were branded as class enemies for pointing to hunger and disaster forced people and officials to swallow their cries.

President Liu Shaogqi, an early supporter of the Leap, privately acknowledged that "people starved and families were torn apart" because the state took so much grain away from the peasantry.⁵⁵ Peasants were informed, however, that the party was blameless and that Mao shared their suffering. He had ordered his chef to give up meat. Mao would dine on sparrow and not waste a kernel of grain. Village army men tended to believe the best of Mao.

By late 1959 Wugong villagers were reduced to eating cornstalks. There was little fuel and no cooking oil. It would be two decades before cooking oil became readily available. That winter, vegetables grown in fields fertilized by excrement often had to be eaten uncooked. Sickness and hunger plagued even proud Wugong. Some villagers whispered that "the commune is not as good as the co-op and the co-op was not as good as going it alone."⁵⁶ Privately a few Raoyang people muttered that Mao was doing everything fine, yet they had nothing to eat. Some recalled that during the revolutionary war party officials said their purpose was to see that people could eat their fill. Now bellies were half-empty. If an official approached complaining villagers, they swiftly shut up. One carefree Raoyang villager was publicly criticized and dismissed from the party after muttering, "I want to tell Mao face to face that

we are hungry." And Raoyang, whose officials had restrained Great Leap zeal, fared better than the most desperate regions.

In worse-off regions, weakened, dispirited villagers left some of the meager crop to rot in the fields. By winter and into the next spring, there was no nutrition and no medicine. Sick people died; so did infants and the elderly. By contrast, hungry Raoyang was much better off. With the condiments of cooking gone, rolls and buns in Wugong had no consistency and fell apart in one's hands. With grain stores exhausted, people began to scavenge, grabbing unguarded food. Writer-songstress Shi Guiying, daughter of the former tractor station chief, stole turnips. Villagers rationalized thieving with a dirty, "Lower rations; squash and greens instead of grain; who doesn't steal gets what he deserves." Starving Henan peasants fled to Hebei.⁵⁷ Officials tried to record what the hungry took from Wugong fields, hoping someday to be reimbursed. No repayment ever came.

Many Henan wanderers were women forced out of their husband's village so food would be left for blood relatives. Beggars became ubiquitous. In Hebei's Cangzhou prefecture hungry villagers crowded into train stations hoping to exchange possessions for food coupons. In Raoyang, a few husbands sold wives for food and cash. The poorer the region, the greater the amount of wife selling. To hide the shame, the wives were called cousins. As in the famine fifteen years earlier, in some of the worst-hit areas children with placards around their necks were left at busy places, in hopes that some better-off family would take in the starving young. If the top family earner died, a teenage daughter might be sold to the highest bidder in a distant place to obtain grain to keep the rest of the household alive. Prostitution, which had declined in the early 1950s, revived. One instance of wife selling in Raoyang became notorious when years later the husband returned to reclaim the woman. She refused to budge, so he went to court to collect on his property rights. The court decided for the wife.

Muslim robber bands attacked the grain station in Hejian, just north of Raoyang. Troops were ordered in to the starving region with barbed wire and machine guns to guard grain stations. Along the rail line running from Hebei to Shandong, bands attacked trains in search for food. The state responded by placing twelve guards on each train.

Hungry villagers could see that many were afflicted with dropsy. Facial skin became swollen and shiny. If any pressure forced the skin in, it no longer had the resilience to bounce back. Weakened by hunger, Wugong leaders fell ill. Collectormaniac Geng Xiufeng retired to Wugong with tuberculosis and prematurely prepared to "go and see Marx." Wugong reserved its scarce oil for pregnant women. Healthy young people got by, but the elderly and the ill were in deep trouble. According to Accountant Geng Lianmin, a dozen elderly villagers died prematurely.

Even some in the normally prosperous rural suburbs of Shijiazhuang starved. It was far worse in poorer areas across the border in Shandong and further south in Henan and Anhui. The worst famine counties in Hebei were Yongnian, southwest of Raoyang, and Baxian to the north. Villagers forced themselves to eat things they ordinarily would not feed even to dogs or pigs. Starving, diseased pigs went wild or dropped dead if famished villagers did not risk eating them.

Martens hit bottom in Hebei in 1960. Wugong's yields plummeted to 310 catties per mu. Total village grain production of 720,000 catties barely reached two-thirds of the 1959 total. Grain sales to the state were cut way back. Still, Boss Geng in 1960 loyally sold the state 20,000 catties of wheat. Wugong's 1960 individual grain allocation dropped to the lowest figure since the founding of the big co-op, just 270 catties per person. Facing starvation, villagers turned in desperation to the black market just as prices were driven up by the combination of grain shortage, heavy demand, and the state's crackdown on the market.

Wugong's poor neighbor Yanggezhuang had embraced the Great Leap policy of grain first. Its sidelines had long been squeezed out, its market eliminated. Peanut acreage had fallen 60 percent. In North China from 1956 to 1978, the acreage sown in peanuts fell by 30 percent.⁵⁸ For Yanggezhuang the displacement of peanuts and other commercial crops meant less value produced, less cash available, and less oil in local diets. It meant an un-economic growing of grain in soil better suited for peanuts.

Following collectivization, with no cash and nothing to exchange, Yanggezhuang experienced a chronic grain crisis. In 1958 the poor villagers threw themselves into the Great Leap, hoping to solve their grain problem. By 1960 Yanggezhuang was a disaster, its grain yield barely reaching 100 catties per mu. The prices on its black market skyrocketed as a huge hungry regional demand chased a diminished supply. Corn rose to eighty cents per catty, sorghum from eight to sixty cents, millet from eight to fifty cents, and wheat went from ten cents to well over a yuan—if wheat could be found. The price for a goat soared from 15 to 150 yuan. In one year, real food prices in the hidden economy rose by 600 to 1,000 percent or higher; few had cash.

Some brigades with no food in spring 1959 issued certificates to villagers granting them permission to go begging. The certificates, stamped with the brigade seal, attested to the bearer's good class credentials and explained that begging was caused by the failure of the harvest in the village. This practice continued in periodic hard times in the decades to come.

Throughout Wugong Commune 1960 grain yields averaged well under 200 catties per mu. With less land under cultivation and far more people than during the bad 1930s, when yields averaged just under 200 catties, the crisis was acute. By 1960 and 1961, China produced less grain, cotton, oil-bearing

crops, and hogs than in 1951, far less per capita given the rapid population growth of the 1950s.⁵⁹

Thousands of Hebei peasants fled to the northeast along famine routes pioneered earlier in the twentieth century. Migrants opened frontier land. Some formed new collectives to facilitate the legal transfer of registrations to the northeast, an act that permitted migrants to be joined by family members at first left behind in Hebei. Villagers maneuvered within and around the system.

The semilegal movement of traders and refugees carried stories into Raoyang about peasants in neighboring provinces rising in arms to obtain food. Travelers said that many were killed in Shandong in a historically rebellious region and that the state executed former Nationalist party officials who were in prison, falsely charging them with inciting the rebellions.

The first party secretary of Henan province, Wu Zhipu, who continued to report fantastic production numbers for famine-stricken Henan into 1960, was removed and permanently barred from higher office but never prosecuted or arrested. A few party secretaries in the most devastated counties who reportedly refused to issue travel passes to villagers so they could flee to cities for food and work, and who insisted that all was well and no relief was needed, were publicly tried. Although Mao was exonerated, local officials in Suiping, Xinyang, and other devastated Henan counties were publicly executed. The official word was that local bad elements and counterrevolutionaries who deliberately sabotaged the correct line of the party were to blame for the famine deaths. Soldiers received mail from home describing starvation, family deaths, and the rape of wives; the party explained to them that local toughs were to blame and would be executed. From the famine areas, travelers passed on news of public executions. Informed village gossip seemed more reliable than empty party claims.

A story circulated about a woman in Shanxi province leading starving peasants in the seizure and distribution of grain in the region where Li Zicheng had begun his second uprising against the Ming dynasty three centuries earlier. President Liu Shaogang subsequently commented, "If we do not take emergency measures, we will be back in the situation of the Soviet civil war," when Bolshevik policies of war communism provoked peasant uprising.⁶⁰

The most hair-raising tales reached Raoyang from Henan and Anhui. From Anhui, the province with the highest percentage of famine deaths, came descriptions of starving people digging up corpses for food. From Henan, once the pacesetter in the Great Leap, now the province with the largest number of famine deaths, the tales of horror were almost too numerous to absorb. Each returnee claimed that the county he had been in had been hardest hit. Some said Xuchang, some Xinyang, some yet others.⁶¹ Reports

circulated of villagers where everyone had died. Others told of villages where all the elderly had died. Soldiers doing relief work found people lying on the ground. Some were dead, some dying. Many were too weak to carry in the relief supplies the soldiers had brought. The soldiers rushed those who might be saved to hospitals. Throughout China twenty to thirty million people died, the largest death toll from famine in human history.⁶²

The Hebei rural poor were especially interested in news of Henan villages in which everyone had died. Some were looking for open land to which they could escape. The death toll from starvation was so devastating that the government reportedly sought settlers from overpopulated regions to repopulate devastated villages. Some hundred Raoyang volunteers resettled. Travelers said that a depopulated region of Henan was being turned into a mammoth labor camp. A campaign to induce villagers in the crowded North China plain "to go to the west" led to a large exodus from Hebei's poorer western neighbor, Shanxi province, to the thinly populated, poor northwest. Minorities in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang made way for Han settlers.

Balloons from Taiwan, where Nationalist forces had fled after losing the civil war, were carried by strange winds over the Hebei plains. Villagers hungrily opened the packages inside the balloons desperately seeking food. Instead they found propaganda leaflets, toys, and medicines. Once villagers stared skyward to watch military aircraft crisscrossing the heavens trying to shoot down the balloons.

Yet even as the famine deepened, the state constructed monuments celebrating the first decade of the People's Republic. Hungry villagers gossiped about well-fed urbanites building the headquarters of the central government, the Great Hall of the People. It was rushed to completion in Beijing for National Day, October 1, 1959. On that day the military parade in Beijing featured massed militia and modern weapons made in China, symbolizing how communism kept China independent and strong. China also proved its vigor in international sport competition in 1959 by winning a world championship. The victors in men's table tennis were given a heroes' welcome in the new Great Hall. Proudly heralded victories in international sport competition, military achievements, and continuing growth of urban heavy industry were presented as proof that China could no longer be ridiculed as the sick man of Asia.

In spite of the worsening rural disaster, the Hebei government, at a reported cost of 17 million yuan, began erecting a virtual palace to house high-powered official guests in Tianjin. Similar construction went on throughout the nation. The Tianjin complex was equipped with a large ballroom, luxury carpets, and a film projection room.⁶³ Young women were brought in to dance with officials. The movies shown included what Chinese considered erotic material. The socialist state graded by levels of secrecy what it consid-

ered obscene. The higher the leader, people quipped, the more pornography was available. As with other scarce and expensive consumer items commanded by the state, those at the higher echelons of party, army, and government had priority access. Ordinary villagers were excluded. In Tianjin, as in Raoyang and all of China, the networks of power that channeled resources to those within the orbit of the state were so deeply structured that not even the catastrophe of massive famine could budge them.

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