
Preface

Approaching Macheng from the southwest, from the Hubei provincial capital, the visitor first encounters a blue arch over the highway, reading “Welcome to Macheng County.” The quality of the road immediately improves, and the shops on either side begin to offer a larger range of amenities. The people seem better dressed than those in the areas passed along the way, and there are fewer farm animals blocking the road. Soon one sees another blue arch, announcing the Golden Needle Science and Technology Zone of Hubei Province. The county seat is large, sparkingly new, and squeaky-clean. It boasts a three-star hotel and offers a wide array of tourist-promotion literature, in English as well as Chinese. Its citizens look, for the most part, comfortably middle class. The surrounding countryside as well is dotted with newly constructed brick farmhouses, motorcycles parked alongside, and reveals a fertile and productive (though as yet largely unmechanized) agriculture. The impression one gets overall is of considerable prosperity, an activist and attentive county government, and a highly aggressive community boosterism. It is an evident success story of post-Mao China.

On June 10, 1999, the so-called 610 Office was set up in the town of Baiguo, in south central Macheng, and charged with eradicating the practice of Falun gong sectarianism. Subsequently this office was declared a model for the rest of the county. It was headed by the secretary of the Baiguo Township Politics and Law Committee. According to Falun gong sources, the persecution of their membership in Baiguo was especially “bestial” and “insane.” Practitioners were ordered to renounce their teachers in violent epithets and were subjected to “brainwashing classes.” In the unusually hot summer of 2000, they were locked in an unlit furnace of a room for over 100 days, for much of which time they were denied sleep. The following spring, four sect members were publicly tortured to death in the Baiguo town square. They were ordered to

take off their shoes and were beaten on the face with these (some of the females wore high heels) until they were unrecognizable. Two of the victims were tied behind motorcycles and dragged around the square at high speed, until they were flayed alive. One sect member reportedly walked all the way to Beijing to report this incident but was arrested, sent home, and executed. Finally, in April 2001, a female sect member from Fengjia shan Village (most of the sect's members in Macheng County are rural, and many are unemployed) was beaten throughout the day in the Baiguo town square and then, just before sunset, was doused with gasoline and set afire. Township police detained all witnesses until they supported the police claim that this was a case of self-immolation (Clearwisdom.net, 2 July, 21 July, and 31 July 2001).

There is no necessary reason, I hasten to stress, why one should accept as factual these allegations from the Falun gong's sensationalist and highly developed propaganda machine. What is significant, though, is that the sect's proselytizers clearly expect the national and international audiences for their Web site to accept that this kind of behavior, which they themselves admit is extreme for the current Chinese regime, is potentially credible when set in the context of Macheng County. It is this stark contrast—between, on the one hand, a locale blessed with great natural beauty, economic prosperity (at least in better times, such as the present), and an extremely powerful sense of local pride and, on the other, a national reputation for dehumanizing violence that has, for much of the county's history, been well earned—that lies at the heart of this book.

When I began my academic career, in the early 1970s, it was clear to me that the great emphasis of Western historiography of China was on the countryside. It was assumed that China had enjoyed little in the way of a significant indigenous urban tradition before that tradition was introduced by the West. The overriding problems confronted by scholars were to explain the failure of China's "modernization" and to explain the victory of its Communist Party in the civil war, and both of these problems seemed to demand detailed and extensive analysis of rural conditions and agrarian history. In such an intellectual environment, it seemed to me, the most original and productive thing that an aspiring scholar might do would be to investigate, as closely as possible, the history of a large Chinese city, and that is what I did. Over the subsequent three decades, though, the situation appears to have been reversed. In the context of globalization, China's commercially fueled economic boom, and the triumph of "cultural studies" in academia (both in the West and, increasingly, in China as well), historians have come to focus their energies ever more heavily on Chinese urban history, particularly the cultural history of large metropolitan centers in the early twentieth century, a period for which, it is implicitly assumed, the models for post-Mao changes and cultural choices can best be explored. With the important exception of macroanalyses of comparative political econ-

omy, rural history seems, for the most part, to have fallen out of favor. Accordingly, as a dedicated contrarian, I feel the desire to turn my own efforts to the local history of a decidedly rural, even peripheral, area of China. This, then, is my personal *xiafang*.

Like the sent-down youths of a previous generation, I have depended on many people for my survival along the way. These include above all my colleague in the History Department at Johns Hopkins University, Tobie Meyer-Fong, who read the entire manuscript closely and corrected many errors. I thank also my other Hopkins friends Richard Kagan, David Nirenberg, Kellee Tsai, Eva González, and Yuanyuan Zeng. My present and former graduate students Di Wang, Grant Alger, Zhao Gang, Ma Zhao, Peng Juanjuan, Saeyoung Park, and Amy Feng have all provided very helpful advice and remained on the lookout for sources that otherwise might have escaped me. Others who have graciously commented on portions of my work include Timothy Brook, Lucien Bianco, Philip Kuhn, Mary B. Rankin, Keith Schoppa, Peter C. Perdue, Peter Bol, Robert Antony, Mary Elizabeth Berry, Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, Alfred Lin, Elizabeth Sin, Barend ter Haar, Wang Fan-sen, Ernest Young, Frank Dikötter, and my longtime friend and editor Muriel Bell. Odoric Wou, Jin Jiang, Barbara Volkmar, Ch'en Yung-fa, and Xiaorong Han have not only commented but also shared with me impressions gained in the process of their own studies of the Macheng area. An earlier version of portions of chapters 5 and 7 has been published as *From Ming to Ch'ing Along the Great Divide* (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2005); I am grateful for permission to reuse that material here.

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