

## Preface

THE DOCUMENTARY sources for this study came primarily from Qin village of Dongtai municipality (Dongtai county before 1987) in Jiangsu province. These materials recorded the economic and political activities in the community under agricultural cooperatives in the 1950s and under production teams in the following two decades. Among them were the various account books that detailed the collectives' revenues and expenditures as well as labor remuneration and income distribution for individuals; records of different kinds of meetings in the collectives; village cadre notebooks; and official documents about government policies and regulations that had been distributed to the local collectives. The importance of these firsthand documents is evident; they are more reliable for understanding the realities of day-to-day operation of the rural collectives than any kind of official publications on national or regional conditions that were manipulated more or less to reflect the government's purposes.

Unfortunately, despite their exceptional value for studying rural China, such village-level materials have been increasingly scarce in most communities throughout the country since the abolition of the collective system in the early 1980s because they became "outdated" and "useless" in the opinion of the villagers; almost all of them, therefore, were recycled in local paper mills or burned as firewood for cooking, a fact that I realized during my fieldwork in Dongtai and Songjiang. Local county archives also made no effort to collect and preserve them because these documents were so large in volume and so "trivial" in the eyes of the archivists that it was practically impossible and "unworthy" for them to

keep them. Likewise, Chinese researchers, concerned mainly with the issues of the reform era and at the regional or national levels, paid little attention to such local-level sources, nor were Western-language studies of collective-era China able to systematically use the original data of the local collectives, due to the problem of accessibility. I hope that readers will be convinced of the indispensability of the original village data for understanding rural China after reading the chapters on agricultural collectivization in the 1950s, the problem of cadre privilege and abuse, cadre-peasant relations, the collective economy, and household income.

In addition, this study also uses a variety of documents from local county and township government archives that cover the period from the 1950s to the 1970s; they reveal the situation of the entire county or the township (formerly the people's commune) during the successive political campaigns and the condition of the collective economy and socio-political relations under the collective system. These materials allow me to delineate the larger contexts in which the activities of individual villagers and the events of the community took place. Therefore, they nicely complement the materials from the village. Many of the problems revealed by the archival materials were never mentioned in official publications or village records and made known to the villagers.

The villagers' oral narratives are as important as the documentary materials for this study. Growing up in Qin village until age 15 when I left for college, my experience in, and memory of, the community life in this locality was largely limited to the collective era. Though I was able to update myself with the developments in the village and refresh my acquaintance with the villagers during my subsequent annual visits to the village (until I left China for my doctoral study in the United States in 1993), to know systematically what had happened to the community in the past five decades entailed a more serious effort. With a research agenda about the village in my mind, I returned to Qin village seven times in the summers of 1994, 1995, 1996, 2002, 2005, 2006, and 2008, when I studied at UCLA and then taught at the University of Missouri–Columbia and the University of Texas at Austin. Each time I stayed there for a few weeks or up to a few months. As a native of the village, I felt free to stroll around the community and chat with the villagers whenever possible. Many of my informants were those in their sixties and seventies, who lived through the entire collective period. I found that the best time for me to converse with them was in the evening after supper when they continued the old habit of “enjoying the

cool" (*chengliang*) outside their houses, unlike the youngsters in the village who preferred to stay inside watching TV or playing mahjong. I visited with them from household to household on different evenings for a chat that often lasted for hours and attracted villagers from neighboring families. The number of people who joined the chat thus varied from a few to more than a dozen. Our casual conversations often began with their curiosities about my family and life in the United States and then moved to my questions about their experiences and recollections of different events from the early 1950s to the present.

While turning to the elderly for answers to questions about the collective era, I spent more time with young and middle-age villagers on various questions about their life and recent changes in the village since the 1980s. Many of them were my childhood friends and classmates, who made a living as farmers, small business owners, cadres, contractors, and so forth. Their conversations with me were much more informative than the limited statistics and documents from the village government office. After the collapse of the agricultural collectives, detailed and reliable records of the economic activities of individual households and of the village as a whole were no longer available. As the accountant of the village government admitted, the annual reports he compiled about the local economy, especially the income of individual households, were based on his gross estimates, because most villagers were unwilling to tell him how much they had earned. In the opinion of many villagers, even the village government's records of its own economy were questionable, such as those about its payments to individuals for using their labor or resources; the rents it received from villagers for using the village's public land, pond, and other resources; and other sources of its revenue. By contrast, many of the villagers with whom I talked knew their neighbors and their economic conditions better than the cadres did, and they did not hesitate to share with me their thoughts about the cadres and others in their neighborhood when we talked individually.

But this study is not limited to Qin village. In my examination of local reactions to agricultural collectivization in the 1950s, I expanded the scope of my investigation to the larger Dongtai county as well as Songjiang county in southern Jiangsu (now part of Shanghai municipality), in order to show the contrasts between areas of different socioeconomic settings in the evolution of village-state relations during the critical years when an institutional foundation was laid for further developments in the following decades. All other chapters in this book,

while concentrating on Qin village, frequently refer to the conditions in the township or the entire county and view them against the backdrop of nationwide political and socioeconomic trends.

This project originated in 1994 when I first wrote about the work-point system in Qin village. That initial attempt convinced me of both the promising prospect for conducting research of this sort and the necessity of tracing the transformation of rural society and village-state relations in contemporary China back to the pre-1949 period. My first book, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford University Press, 2005), therefore, is about North China villages during the late Qing and Republic years. This book is a sequel to that title not only in terms of the time period it covers but also because it addresses the same kind of issues and employs the same approach as does my first book. Both projects examine the patterns of peasant behaviors and the complex relationship between the state and village from a micro-historical perspective. Both focus on individual villagers and perceive their choices in a social, historical milieu in which the values, norms, and practices indigenous to the peasant society interplayed with the systems and demands imposed by the state to shape their motives and actions in local economic, social, and political activities.

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