

**From Righteous to Rightful:  
Peasant Resistance to Agricultural Collectivization in China in the 1950s**

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ABSTRACT

*Drawing on government archives from two counties in Jiangsu province, this study examines local resistance to agricultural collectivization in the 1950s and demonstrates that ordinary peasants, rather than their “class enemies,” were the major participants in the protest. Characteristic of their resistance were both the continuity of the traditional pattern of “rightful resistance” based on the values and practices innate to the village society and the emerging pattern of “rightful resistance” that appealed to government policies and regulations. In addition to the confrontation between the state and the peasants, the article also emphasizes their conciliation in the course of collectivization, as manifested in the state’s definition of the resistance as “contradictions among the people” and hence its avoidance of coercion in dealing with the peasants as well as the villagers’ recognition of the state’s legitimacy and their avoidance of open challenge to the new regime.*

Peasant protest and unrest, ubiquitous and chronic in imperial and Republican China, continued into the 1950s during the transition to socialism and, after three decades of overall silence under the agricultural collectives that effectively controlled the rural population and resources, resurged in the 1980s in the wake of decollectivization. Past studies have well documented the riots and rebellions against the state and local authorities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Recent literature on reform-era China has further brought to light peasant disgruntlement against abuses in taxation and village administration.<sup>2</sup> What remains largely obscure is popular resistance to agricultural collectivization in the 1950s, when the villagers were grouped into different organizations of agricultural production. Conventional wisdom has it that the collectivization drive, beginning with the creation of mutual-aid teams and culminating in the creation of advanced-stage cooperatives, encountered little resistance from poor and lower-middle peasants, owing to the government's economic and financial measures that benefited the majority of rural residents and the effective working of the Communist Party's

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Roxann Prazniak, *Of Camel Kings and Other Things: Rural Rebels against Modernity in Late Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); and Lucien Bianco, *Peasants without the Party: Grass-roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For recent discussions on peasant resistance in the reform era, see Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation Without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

grassroots organizations.<sup>3</sup> The resistance, if any, came primarily from the “class enemies” in the countryside, namely former landlords and rich peasants. Elizabeth Perry, for example, demonstrates how the landlords and rich peasants, who controlled various kinds of local sects, prevented their followers from joining the collectives or instigated them to rebel against local governments.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, the government newspapers and other official sources, which informed much of the earlier generation of rural China studies, necessarily spoke for the policies and ideology of the socialist state, which assumed the class struggle between peasants and landlords to be the major contradiction in the countryside. To accentuate the role of the “class enemies” in rural discontent was in perfect accordance with that ideology. Sabotage and uprisings of the former landlords and rich peasants, to be sure, did occur and in certain areas were serious as those sources revealed. But they were far from representing the overall picture of rural resistance in the 1950s. As we will find in this study, the vast majority and the most active of the

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas P. Bernstein, “Leadership and Mass Mobilisation in the Soviet and Chinese Collectivization Campaigns of 1929-30 and 1955-56: A Comparison,” *The China Quarterly*, 31(1967): 1-47; Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development Toward Socialism, 1949-1956* (University of California Press, 1980); Frederick Teiwes, “Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 14, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 5-86; and Madsen, Richard, “The Countryside under Communism,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 15, part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 619-681.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “Rural Violence in Socialist China,” *China Quarterly*, 103 (1985): 414-440.

participants in the resistance to collectivization, in both the country on the whole and the localities under examination, were ordinary peasants rather than their class enemies.

Drawing on government archives from Dongtai (东台) and Songjiang (松江) counties in Jiangsu province as well as recently released official documents that reflected nationwide situation, this article examines continuity and change in peasant resistance to collectivization in the two counties.<sup>5</sup> Rural disgruntlement before the communist revolution usually took the form of either “collective violence,” such as riots and rebellions that openly challenged the state or local power holders, or “everyday resistance,” in which the individuals vented their anger against, or sought protection from, the powerful with “weapons of the weak,” including rumors, curses, and sabotage, or, alternatively, bribing, illicit sex, fictive kinship, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Both types of resistance, however, were rooted in the values and shared assumptions innate to the villagers, as manifested in their sense of right and wrong, collective memories, popular cults, folklores, or social practices, and therefore was believed to be moral and just in their opinions. Together, these forms of actions constitute what we may call “righteous resistance.” The hungry

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<sup>5</sup> I chose these two counties because, as shown in the following discussion, they contrasted sharply with each other in ecological conditions, land fertility, and class relations. Despite the fact that the communist revolution and the land reform in the early 1950s drastically changed the social and political landscapes in both counties, those disparities continued to dictate the different experiences of the peasants in dealing with the government. Combined, these two localities permit in this study a more complete and balanced picture of peasant-state relations in the course of agricultural collectivization.

<sup>6</sup> James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Form of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

villagers in southern Jiangsu, for example, felt it righteous to “eat the great households” (吃大户 *chi dahu*) in the early 1930s when the prices of rice had reached such a level that looting rice shops was no longer an action of bandits, and indeed the rioters made every effort to distinguish themselves from true bandits.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the deprived and dislocated villagers in Qing China joined rebels of various “heretic” organizations because “the officials compel the people to rebel” (官逼民反 *guan bi min fan*); rebellion was the only option for them to escape the government’s unscrupulous exaction and outrageous cruelty.<sup>8</sup> In all those cases, the peasants invariably resorted to the right to survival to justify their claims and actions.

The villagers continued their “righteous” actions after the communist revolution, as seen in the campaign of “unified purchase and sales” of grain in the early 1950s, when the villagers resisted the program by either underreporting their harvest, hiding their grain, bribing grassroots cadres to reduce their duties in grain procurement, or openly gathering together to protest against the program and demand food supplies from the government.<sup>9</sup> This study demonstrates that the

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<sup>7</sup> Bernhardt, Kathryn, *Rents, Taxes, and Peasant Resistance: The Lower Yangzi Region, 1840-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Bianco, *Peasants without the Party*, 159-161.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1976); Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China* and *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (M. E. Sharpe, 2002); and Roxann Prazniak, *Of Camel Kings and Other Things: Rural Rebels against Modernity in Late Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Huaiyin Li, “The First Encounter: Peasant Resistance to State Control of Grain in East China in the Mid-1950s,” *The China Quarterly*, 185 (2006): 145-162.

same kind of actions continued during the collectivization drive in Dongtai and Songjiang, where the protesters, mostly ordinary peasants, surrounded government offices for more food, beat or cursed the unpopular cadres, and “illegally” divided the grain or cut the crop of the collectives. In those events, the villagers defended their action with the same oldest yet strongest reason, their right to subsistence.

Yet, this study also sheds light on the new methods and appeals that the villagers employed in their resistance to collectivization in the 1950s. We will find that, as the socialist state established its control of the villages through administrative reorganization, social restructuring, and ideological indoctrination, the villagers gradually changed their strategies for dealing with the state. In both counties, the peasants increasingly turned to the notions and channels promoted by the socialist state to articulate their interests. Those who were most active in the resistance were usually the “elite” members in their community, such as teachers, retired soldiers, family members of soldiers in active service, former village leaders, doctors, or Party members. With access to newspapers, broadcasting, or other forms of public media, the elites were familiar with government policies and events outside the community. They were able to use the language that they had learned from the official media and take advantage of the channels allowed by the government to make their actions appear legal and justifiable. Therefore, the villagers never openly challenged the policies or systems imposed by the state; instead they focused their attacks on local cadres who had abused their power in carrying out government policies or running the collectives, especially their favoritism in income distribution, malfeasance in managing coop finance, and inability to increase production and food supplies. Even when petitioning for quitting coop membership, which was officially allowed, the villagers would promise to fulfill their tax duties and abide by state laws while excluding landlords, rich

peasants, and other “bad elements” from their ranks. Their activities, therefore, spearheaded what O’Brien and Li call “rightful resistance” that prevailed in rural China the 1980s when the increased burden of taxes and fees and rampant cadre abuse again drove the villagers to act collectively in defense of their interests.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, not only did the peasants change their strategies in dealing with the socialist state, the latter, too, adjusted its methods in handling rural discontent. In its earlier attempts to curb the unrest in grain procurement and cooperativization, the government tended to use the same methods that they had used during the preceding campaigns of land reform and suppressing counterrevolutionaries to treat those involved in the disturbance. They presumed any action against the campaigns to be an “antagonistic contradiction” between the communist state and its traditional enemies in the countryside, including landlords, rich peasants, and counterrevolutionaries, and dealt with them with violent suppression and punishment. However, as the government soon realized, those who opposed state policies were rarely the conventional enemies; instead, resistance came primarily from ordinary villagers, mainly poor and middle peasants, who had allied with the state during the earlier years of the communist revolution and land reform. The increasing inapplicability of its old conception of rural problems to the new realities caused the state to adjust both its representation of the new challenges and its strategies for handling them. Instead of suppressing the discontented villagers with violence, the state redefined their grievance as “contradictions within the people” and emphasized the use of “persuasion and education” to handle the problem. To pacify the villagers, the government would openly censure the grassroots cadres for their mistakes and malfeasances, remove the unpopular village leaders from office, or ask them to make self-criticism at public meetings. The

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<sup>10</sup> O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*.

state itself also adjusted its rural policies regarding financial management, income distribution, and local cadres' participation in labor work. The process of agricultural collectivization, therefore, not only witnessed the continual confrontation between the state and the peasantry but also occasioned their mutual accommodation that had a long-lasting impact on their relationship in the decades to come.

### THE NATIONWIDE DISTURBANCE

In response to the Party leaders' call for a "high tide of socialism" in the winter of 1955, collectivization in rural China accelerated, turning nearly 90 percent of peasant households into members of agricultural cooperatives in just one year. What was totally unexpected to the optimistic Party leaders, however, was a wave of unrest that swept many provinces and involved millions of peasants, persisting until the summer of 1957. According to a report by the Rural Work Department of the Party's central committee, at least one to five percent of peasant households in provinces such as Liaoning, Shaanxi, Henan, Hebei, Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Guandong, successfully exited their coops, and in some areas up to twenty percent of households wanted to withdraw around the "autumn harvest" in 1956.<sup>11</sup> The nationwide disturbance continued into 1957. In Jiangsu, peasant riots took place in both northern counties such as Xuyi, Yancheng, Binhai, Ganyu, Xinyi, Dafeng, Hai'an, Qidong, and Shuyang and southern counties such as Yixing, Wuxi, Wujiang, and Chongming. The biggest trouble

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<sup>11</sup> Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian, 1949-1957* (A compendium of important documents on agricultural collectivization, 1949-1957) (Beijing: Zhongguo zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1981), 655.



occurred in Tai county, where protests swept 73 xiang (82 percent) and 502 coops (47.4 percent), involving more than 30,000 households or 1/6 of all households, who took away a total of 37,500 cattles of grain from their coops and beat 224 local cadres. 6,400 people petitioned to the county government within five days in May, and almost 10,000 households successfully quit their coop membership.<sup>12</sup>

The worst situation occurred in Xianju county of Zhejiang province. From mid-April to the end of May, unrest took place in 29 out of the 33 xiang or township of the county, where the peasants beat local cadres and attacked government offices when their request of withdrawing was rejected, and they dissolved the coops on their own. As a result, 116 out of 302 coops in the county “completely collapsed” and 55 coops “partly broke down.” The number of coop members dropped from 91 percent to 19 percent of local households. 107 cadres suffered beating, and 430 cadres’ homes were searched by the angry villagers.<sup>13</sup>

Several reasons explain the widespread resentment in rural China following the “hide tide” of cooperativization. First, some peasant households, especially the well-to-do, found that their income declined significantly after joining the advanced coop. The central government estimated at the end of 1956 that in general about ten to twenty percent of coop members in every province had seen a decrease in their incomes, and most of them were prosperous middle peasants, petty traders and peddlers, and skilled craftsmen. These households, therefore, were most determined to withdraw from the coops. An investigation of the Yongning Cooperative of

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<sup>12</sup> Lin Yunhui and Gu Xunzhong, *Renmingongshe kuangxiangqu* (The rhapsody of the people’s commune) (Kaifeng: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1995), 213; Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 686-687

<sup>13</sup> Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 692.

Zhongshan county, Guangdong province shows, for example, that among the 113 households (26.9 percent of all households) who wanted to get out of the coop, 96 households, or 85 percent, were upper-middle peasants. Other coops of the province where troubles took place show similar percentages of well-to-do middle peasants exiting the collective. They quit coop membership for a simple reason. “Cooperativization,” in the eyes of the upper-middle peasants, was “to let the rich support the poor and to let the strong support the weak,” or “a great leveling” (大拉平 *da laping*).<sup>14</sup>

However, the participants in the incidents were not just limited to the well-off peasants. In Guangdong, poor and lower-middle peasants also wanted to withdraw from the coop for the decreased production and family incomes. In Jiangsu, poor peasants in need of food and support were active in demanding grain and money from the government. In the hilly Zhejiang province, independent peasants had been able to make 0.70 or 0.80 yuan a day for cutting firewood; after becoming coop members, they earned only 0.30 to 0.40 for a workday. About 80 percent of peasant households in Xianju county received no money from their coops at all and instead owed to their collectives.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the villagers were disgruntled also because of the unfair distribution of the coop’s income among different production teams. As the reports from Henan and Jiangsu provinces indicate, it happened usually to large-size coops that comprised several villages, where the coop adhered to a universal standard of income distribution to all coop members without considering the different conditions and performances of individual teams or villages. Rich villages or production teams thus felt unfair that the coop took away their “surplus land, farm

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 650, 687, 694.

tools, animals, and grain” to support other villages or teams in need. Disputes also took place between different xiang or different coops for controlling water resources, fertilizing plants, or fishing rights.<sup>16</sup>

Third, the villagers widely complained of their loss of freedom after cooperativization. The Party’s Rural Work Department admitted at the end of 1956 that coops throughout the country imposed “overly strict” requirements of work hours on coop members, and the farm work for the coop was “excessively strained.” “Peasants had no time to do family sidelines and it was difficult for them to get pocket money for daily expenses; nor did they have time to do household chores. Some of them even could not find time to wash and sew cloths or grind grain. Some felt extremely exhausted.” The report mentioned several complaints from peasants in Liaoning province: “the coops may be good; but you have to put up with the restraints, oppression, and bullying;” “To join the coop is no better than staying in a labor camp; after all, the labor camp allows a Sunday;” for many peasants, to join the coop only caused “increases in sufferings rather than income.”<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the peasants were strongly discontented with coop cadres’ irresponsibility in managing accounts and coercion in dealing with coop members. Without much experiences and skills in accounting, cadres of the newly established coops often paid little attention to the management of the collective’s finance and individual members’ labor contribution. They failed to set up a reasonable criterion for awarding workpoints and fairly distribute workpoints among different teams or workers of different abilities. They spent public funds carelessly and failed to maintain and publicize coop accounts. Embezzlement of coop monies and stealing of collective

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 662, 687.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 656.

properties abounded. Even more intolerable to coop members was the cadres' rude manner in treating them. Cursing, beating, tying-up, and hanging were among the many methods they used to deter and punish the disobedient peasants.<sup>18</sup> Peasants also complained of the contrasting attitudes of the cadres before and after the cooperativization: "Before joining the coops, the cadres made lots of empty promises, saying that no difficulties could not be resolved. Now they are treacherous and ruthless. Instead of resolving problems for coop members, they treated them with a tongue-lashing."<sup>19</sup> The harsh attitudes only made the peasants even more resentful, who had already suffered hungry and been disappointed about their decreased income.

The rise and recession of rural disturbances in late 1956 and early 1957 also had to do with the changing situations of domestic politics. For Mao Zedong, 1956 and 1957 were "troubled times" (多事之秋 *duoshi zhi qiu*).<sup>20</sup> In response to Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union in February 1956 that triggered liberalization and mass riots in its eastern European satellite states, Mao implemented the "hundred flowers" policy in April 1956 and later the campaign of "free airing of views" (大鸣大放 *daming dafang*). Aimed at pacifying the resentful intellectuals, these measures only incurred their harsh criticism of the Party's policies as well as petitions, strikes, and riots by workers and students in the cities. Mao reacted to these developments with his famous speech, "On the correct handling of contradictions among the people," in February 1957. Mao argued that after the completion of socialist transformation of all economic sectors in China, massive, violent class struggles were

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 677, 687, 695.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 656.

<sup>20</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected works of Mao Zedong), vol. 5 (Renmin chubanshe 1977), 339.

over. Most conflicts that remained in the society were “contradictions among the people,” which were rooted in the gap between the advanced relations of production and the backward forces of production. These contradictions, Mao proposed, should be handled with the approach of “unite, criticize, and unite” and should be distinguished from the “contradictions between ourselves and the enemy,” which had to be settled with coercion and suppression.<sup>21</sup>

The emergence of peasant disturbances in the same period should be perceived in this context. Although the poor management of coop economy and the decline of peasant income were major reasons leading to the unrest, the political atmosphere in the cities no doubted encouraged many informed elites in the villages to take action. And the nonviolent approach in handling the “contradictions among the people” also encouraged the discontented peasants to air their resentment and act freely.

The anti-rightists campaign that started in June 1957, however, soon brought the political liberalization to an end, when the Party claimed that “the struggle between proletariats and capitalists, and the struggle between the socialist and capitalist roads, remain the major contradictions in the country,” and that suppression remained necessary to handle such contradictions.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, hundreds of thousand intellectuals who had criticized the Party were branded “rightists,” and many of them were imprisoned or sent to labor camps. In the countryside, the government increasingly treated the activists in peasant disturbances as enemies

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<sup>21</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji*, vol. 5, 363-402.

<sup>22</sup> Liu Shaoqi, *Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui xiang dibajie quanguo daibiao dahui dierci huiyi de gongzuo baogao* (Work report of the CCP central committee to the eighth national congress) (Renmin chubanshe, 1958).

of the socialist system, and had them sentenced and punished. Peasant protests that had lasted for a year and swept most of the country vanished after the summer of 1957.

Although peasants throughout the country showed similar disgruntlement over their decreased income, the poorly managed accounts, the corruption and harsh leadership of coop cadres, there were significant differences between different regions in the major reasons leading to their resentment. To show how different social and economic settings caused the regional variations, let us first look at the situation in Dongtai county.

## DONGTAI COUNTY

Located in the poverty-stricken “inner lower rivers” (里下河 *lixiahe*) region of northern Jiangsu, Dongtai county was known for its harsh environment and low yield. Agricultural output of the county was usually 20 to 30 percent less than the level of Songjiang county. In 1956, the county’s land yield averaged only 347 catties per mu, or 41.6 percent less than that of Songjiang. During the mid-year distribution in 1957, 30 to 60 percent of households in different coops of the county received no payment in kind or in cash from the coops and instead owed to the collectives. Some households, therefore, had no grain at all and had to eat vegetables as their three meals. The most common words of their complaints were “we’ve suffered enough” or “we are hungry to death!” For many of them, to exit the coop was the only way to avoid starvation. They called their withdrawal as “being driven to join the Liangshan rebels” (逼上梁山 *bi shang*

*Liangshan*) (legendary rebels of the Song dynasty, who had their stronghold on Liangshan mountain).<sup>23</sup>

The peasants in Dongtai showed their discontent in two ways: dividing the coop's crops and quitting coop membership. During the summer harvest in 1957, 205 incidents took place, in which the villagers "illegally divided" and "stole" a total of 211,200 catties of grain from their coop. Members in Tangwang Cooperative of Xixi district, for instance, divided 17,700 catties, to prevent their coop from paying too much grain as taxes to the government. Among the 489 production teams in the county who were required to provide free "surplus grain" to other teams, 358 teams faced strong resistance from their members, who beat coop cadres and "looted" the grain being transferred to other teams. A wave of withdrawing from the coops took place in the county during the short period from May 25 to June 5. It started from Sitang Cooperative of Chengdong district, where 45 households tried to get out of the coop, and soon spread to thirty coops of seven xiang in the district, involving 654 households. In response, villagers in neighboring districts demanded independence from their coops as well. Throughout the county, 328 coops (53 percent of all coops) reported incidents to leave the coop, involving 2,209 households (1.35 percent of all households in the county). The scale of those incidents varied. According to the county' party committee's report, 239 coops had incidents with less than 10 participating households, 67 coops suffered disturbances involving 10 to 30 households, and 12

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<sup>23</sup> DT1 (Zhonggong Dongtai xianwei guanyu dangqian nongcun renmin neibu maodun de fenxi he zhengque chuli renmin neibu maodun wenti de cailiao [CCP Dongtai county committee's analysis of current contradictions within the people in the countryside and materials on correct handling of contradictions within the people]) (Dongtai shi dang'an guan, 1957).

coops had incidents involving 30 to 50 households. Two coops saw collective actions of 50 to 70 households and one had more than 70 households involved.<sup>24</sup>

### *Dividing the Harvest*

Cutting the coop's crops or dividing its grain without the cadres' permission frequently took place in Dongtai county. It was reported that 737 households in different coops harvested a total of 902.5 mu of collective wheat fields from May 25 to June 5, 1957. To guard themselves and fend off intervening cadres, the 147 villagers from three coops of Chengdong district, for example, displayed their "weapons" such as shoulder poles, forks, and manure buckets on the field where they were cutting wheat. The head of Xinqin Cooperative, Haiyan xiang, thus was showered with a bucket of manure, and the head of the same xiang suffered a bite and a stroke of shoulder pole by angry peasants, when he was "persuading" the latter to stop cutting.<sup>25</sup> Another event from Zaoxi Cooperative was more illustrative of peasant discontent of this nature.

The Zaoxi coop, located in Zaodong xiang of Chengdong district, had 380 households and a population of 1,400, including 169 households with "poor-peasant" status, 144 "middle-peasant" households, 19 "rich-peasant" households, and four "landlord" households. With 2,711 mu (80 percent of its fields) growing cotton and 442 mu growing mint, the villagers had been better off before joining the advanced coop in January 1956. Since then, however, crop failures in the collective had reduced its members' grain rations to as low as 330 catties per person that

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



year. During the wheat cropping season, twelve instances took place, in which the villagers divided collective crops. The most dramatic one occurred on May 31.

In the afternoon of that day, more than ten hungry villagers from the No. 2 team entered the coop's farm to pick broad beans on their own. Soon, more than one hundred people from the No. 1 team joined them. In response, members of other teams wanted to cut the coop's wheat for themselves. To pacify the villagers, Zhang Yongsheng, head of the xiang, decided to distribute to each coop member 10 catties of wheat on the threshing ground. Many peasants complained, however, that 10 catties were far from enough. Without proper preparation and explanation, the distribution was chaotic. People scrambled to sack grain for themselves and quarreled with each other when weighing their shares. Some grabbed grain to their sacks even after weighing. Others took away their stuffed sacks without weighing at all. On the excuse that a former primary coop had owed her household for using its ox, the wife of peasant Jiang ran away with two sacks of wheat. Realizing that the situation was out of control, Zhang and some team leaders stopped the distribution and walked away in anger, leaving the wheat unattended. The villagers decided to continue the distribution by themselves, and more than 700 catties of wheat was orderly distributed. In addition, they distributed to each household two decaliters (*dou* 斗) of vegetable seeds, and more than 900 catties of vegetable seeds were thus distributed.

Zhang and other cadres came back to the threshing ground in the evening to find that the wheat and seeds were gone. They interrogated Bi Baoqia, the watch of the ground. Bi refused to tell what had happened and in turn blamed the cadres who had failed to seal and stamp the pile of grain before leaving there. A quarrel thus started and escalated when Zhang pulled the screaming Bi to the xiang office. "Catch the thefts! They're beating people to death!" Bi's son rushed out from his home and yelled to the neighborhood, soon gathering more than sixty men.

The crowd quickly surrounded Zhang, tied him up, and beat him soundly. After venting their anger, the villagers left the xiang leader standing alone on the ground, a way to punish him.

Then they went home and Zhang soon fled to the xiang office.

Afterwards, the county's party committee and the prefectural party committee sent a joint "work team" (工作组 *gongzhuo zu*) to the coop for an investigation. Frustrated, Zhang insisted on arresting the most active persons in the incident, especially Bi and his son: "If nobody is arrested, the masses will be out of control, and it makes no sense for me to stay in office." The vice head of the coop also threatened to resign: "Having worked [for the coop] for years, the xiang head earned nothing less than a beating. We won't work any more. Better to go home and be a good coop member." Other cadres had the same feeling; two of the three coop accountants and two of the nine team leaders wanted to quit their jobs and all others felt frustrated and pessimistic about the future of the collective. The work team, however, declared the incident as a "contradiction among the people" and arrested nobody. They only asked the Bis and the other two who tied or beat the xiang head to "make a self-criticism" and "admit their mistakes" at a meeting, and to visit the xiang head's home for an apology. Meanwhile, the work team conducted an investigation of the illegal distribution, and asked all households involved to return the grain and vegetable seeds that had been distributed, or counted what they had received as "advance payment," which would be deducted from future distributions. These measures, according to the county party committee's report, were satisfactory to both the cadres and the

masses, who allegedly worked even harder after the incident and finished the “Summer Sowing” ten days earlier than they did in the previous year.<sup>26</sup>

### *Withdrawing from the Coop*

A more threatening form of resistance was organized withdrawal from the coop. The county’s party committee noticed an important feature of peasant actions in this regard that made them different from mass protests before: “in the past, disturbance took place in a scattered and unorganized manner. The recent troubles, however, were well organized, with a plan and leadership, and were seriously done. Some of them had a representative, who was elected to bargain over the terms [with the government], and others involved secret meetings and the signing of agreements.”<sup>27</sup> Among the 554 households of different coops in Chengdong district who wanted to quit their coop membership, for example, 315 participated in such organized activities. The leading members of Nanxin coop planned their actions so well that they always shot a flame in the night as a signal to gather team members for secret meetings in the neighboring reed marshes. The discontented villagers agreed at one of the meetings to treat the cadres discriminatively. To cadres at the district level and above, they would behave nicely, admitting to them that government policies were good. At the same time, however, they would blame local coop and team cadres for their failure to carry out those policies and for the hunger

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<sup>26</sup> DT3 (Chengdong qu Zaoxi nongshe guanyu chuli yufen liangshi zhong fasheng bufen sheyuan naoshi de baogao [Report on handling peasant disturbances during the advance distribution of grain in Zaoxi Cooperative of Chengdong district], Dongtai shi dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>27</sup> DT1.

that the masses had suffered. Members of other coops voluntarily raised money and food to support their representative's travel to the county or prefectural seat for complaining of corrupt and abusive local cadres. Meanwhile, they dispatched people to the neighboring districts and counties to check the situation in those places. The activists also assigned to each of themselves a couple of households, persuading those households to join their efforts. To illustrate how the villagers organized themselves to get out of the coop, let us consider the example of Sitang Cooperative.

The Sitang coop, located in Chengdong district next to the county seat, was founded in February 1956, including 103 households from four former primary coops and 154 independent households. 99 households (38.5 percent) of them had the "poor peasant" status, and all others were "middle peasants" (149, or 58 percent), "rich peasants" (eight, or 3 percent), or "landlord" (one household). Because of local cadres' poor management, the coop, with about 2,000 mu of land, produced only 504,132 catties of grain in 1956, or 252 catties per mu, which was 35 percent less than in the previous year. The grain ration for coop members was as low as 355.5 catties per person. Dissatisfied with the limited food and coop cadres' poor performance and crude manner in dealing with them, two coop members, Xia and Zhou, gathered 45 households to collectively withdraw from the coop in May 1957. Among them were 37 "middle-peasant" households and 8 "poor-peasant" households, including one cadre, one veteran soldier, the wife of a soldier in active service, two Youth League members, and two sub-team group leaders. They requested a grain ration of 600 catties per person and termination of coop membership for reasons such as the coop cadres' "undemocratic style of leadership," the mess-up of collective accounts, and the hardship of their lives.

To make their action more defensible and successful, the villagers held three secret meetings, in which they decided to timely fulfill grain taxes for the government, exclude rich peasants and the landlord from their activities, and take care of households in poverty.<sup>28</sup> They also enforced an agreement to prevent any participant from giving up and to punish the “traitors” by removing the straw from the roof of their houses. The peasants had a strong sense of acting “rightfully” or in conformity with the policies and regulations of the government.

To make the participants confident in their actions, Xia claimed that thirteen coops in the neighboring district had broken down and that the yard of the prefecture’s government office was full of petitioners for quitting coop membership. He also collected 0.10 or 0.20 yuan from each participating household as funds to file a complaint against the coop cadres. Xia further assured his followers: “With your support, I have no fear at all. If there has to be someone to be beheaded, I’ll be the first.” Because of his efforts, 51 more households showed their willingness to join his action, including all of the ten households from Group No. 2 of the No. 7 production team. Later it turned out, however, that only about 20 percent of the participants were firmly supportive of Xia. Others who joined Xia were skeptical of his success in the future, but they also found it difficult to leave him, worrying about the possible retaliation from him and his followers or ridicule from the rest of team members for the futility of their efforts.

As a major step of their plan to withdraw, the forty-five households all refused to work on May 26. Instead, they cut the wheat on fields that had belonged to them before cooperativization and immediately divided among themselves what they had harvested. Threatening to beat any intervening cadres, the participants cut 26 mu of the coop’s wheat on that day. Other coop members lost confidence in the collective. 74 percent of them failed to

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<sup>28</sup> DT1.

work for the coop that day. Three households took back the ox that they had turned in to the coop. In the following two days, no one worked for the coop at all, despite the urgent tasks of cutting wheat, weeding the peppermint field, replanting cotton seedlings, or sowing maize seeds.

The coop cadres' initial reactions were mixed. Some were sympathetic to the villagers; three of them even wanted to quit their jobs. Others wanted to suppress the "troublemakers" by arresting at least the most active individuals as quickly as possible. They all knew, however, that without the government's support, they alone were unable to deal with the disgruntled fellow villagers, who were well organized.

A "work team" appointed by the county's party committee soon came to the coop. It first gathered all of the fifteen coop and team cadres, asking them to conduct a "self-criticism" for possible faults and mistakes, while assuring the cadres that the work team would side with them to deal with the troublemakers. On the work team's instruction, the local cadres agreed to treat the disturbance as a "contradiction among the people," to be settled by "education and persuasion" rather than punishment as they had expected. The work team then gathered the discontented villagers, asking them to complain of their difficulties and the cadres' problems. After two such meetings, in which the angry members were gradually placated, the work team assigned to each of the local cadres a couple of households who had participated in the incident. The cadres visited those households and apologized for their rude manners in treating the villagers or mistakes in managing the coop.

The next step was to hold a meeting of both the households who had participated in the disturbance and those who did not, where both groups of households were urged to unite and avoid any ridicule or discrimination against each other. To encourage the disgruntled villagers to rejoin the coop's labor force, the work team asked all coop and team cadres to take the lead in

doing farm work. Most coop members thus reportedly resumed farm work in a few days. As a final step of its mission, the work team selected 14 coop members, including the two leading troublemakers, to form a group responsible for investigating and clearing the coop's and teams' accounts. The incident was completely handled when the group finished its task and publicized the coop's accounts. To improve the relationship between coop cadres and ordinary members, the work team nominated thirteen candidates for the election of new coop and team cadres.<sup>29</sup>

The cases examined above suggest the continuity and changes in peasant resistance after the Communist Revolution. The villagers' unauthorized cutting of coop crops and distribution of collective grain were not too different from their looting of the "big households" and smashing of rich shops in the old days, to the extent that all those actions were driven by their hunger and backed by a shared assumption of the right to survival. And the coop members beat, cursed, and humiliated local cadres who blocked their actions in the same way as they had dealt with the unpopular village heads (保长 *baozhang*) and rent collectors before. However, the unrest during cooperativization as we have seen in Dongtai county, especially the collective actions to withdraw from the coop, showed significant changes, for not only did their organizers try to limit their activities within a scope allowed by the government and even justified their claims with state policies, but the state also avoided using coercive measures to deal with the discontented villagers. This conciliatory relationship, in fact, reflected a subtle balance of power between the two sides in the course of collectivization. While the state's growing influence in the countryside through land reform, ideological indoctrination, and the unprecedented effort of

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<sup>29</sup> DT2 (Zhonggong Dongtai xianwei guanyu Chengdong qu Sitang nongshe chuli sheyuan tuishe wenti de tongbao [CCP Dongtai county committee's report on handling coop members' withdrawal from Sitang Cooperative in Chengdong district], Dongtai shi dang'an guan, 1957).

administrative reorganization forced the villagers to accept its new legitimacy and therefore make their own actions “rightful,” the state had to be cautious in handling the protests of the disgruntled peasants and, whenever possible, satisfy their demands in order to stabilize the existing coops and absorb more households into the coop. However, once collectivization was finished and the villagers lost their means of production, the balance would tilt to the state, causing its termination of the appeasement policy.

## SONGJIANG COUNTY

Songjiang was one of the core counties in the high-yield Yangzi delta, where peasants had long enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. Before the wide creation of advanced coops, agricultural output in Songjiang had reached 594 catties per mu or 902 catties per capita in 1956, way above the national levels (188.5 catties per mu and 620 catties per capita in 1956).<sup>30</sup> Although the full-scale transition to advanced coops caused a significant decline in the county’s land yield in 1957 (491 catties per mu or 732 catties per capita), most households had no problems to support themselves with grain rations from the coop (419 catties per capita, or 13 catties more than the national level, but 26.7 percent less than the county’s 1957 level) and their own grain reserves from previous years.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Songjiang xianzhi* (Gazetteer of Songjiang county) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991), 9.1.3; Guojia tongjiju, *Xin Zhongguo wushi nian nongye tongji ziliao* (Statistics of agriculture in the fifty years of New China) (Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2000), 40, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Nongyebu zhengce yanjiushi, *Zhongguo nongye jiben qingkuang* (The basic condition of agriculture in China) (Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1979), 105.



What dissatisfied Songjiang villagers was not hunger or the absolute shortage of food as seen in Dongtai but that they had received much less from the coop than what they had expected. To pacify the peasants and stabilize the coop, many cadres paid grain or cash to coop members in advance so frequently that by the time of mid-year distribution many households found that they had been overpaid, and instead of receiving further payments, they actually ran debt to the coop. Discontent thus often occurred because of the overpayment at first and then nonpayment and indebtedness at the end.<sup>32</sup> Because of the gap between their expectations of the coop and the limited income they actually received, the peasants were particularly sensitive to, and intolerable of, the possible embezzlement of coop grain or funds by the cadres, the uneven partition of coop income shared by different teams, and the unfair use or possession of their land, water, and other resources by neighboring coops or teams.

The party committee of Songjiang county reported on June 4, 1957 only 24 incidents of “mass disturbance” (群众闹事 *qunzhong naoshi*) in the county during the preceding twelve months, including nine incidents to withdraw from the coop; eleven fights between members of different teams or coops for disputes over the ownership of land and other properties or the right

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<sup>32</sup> SJ7 (Guanyu chuli xinwu xiang xinwu she naoshi wenti de qingkuang baogao [Report on handling the disturbances in Xinwu cooperative of Xinwu xiang], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957); SJ9 (Fengjing qu chuli naoshi wenti de chubu zongjie [A preliminary review of handling disturbances in Fengjing district], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957); SJ11 (Tiankun qu renmin neibu naoshi qingkuang dengji biao [Records of disturbances within the people in Tiankun district], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957); SJ13 (Jin yinian lai quan xian qunzhong “naoshi” qingkuang jianming biao [A brief statistic of the “disturbances” of the masses in the whole county in recent year], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957).

of using water, fishing, and gathering weeds in border areas; two collective petitions against local cadres' maltreatment of coop members or indifference to their hardship; and two collective protests or strikes for coop cadres' coercion, corruption, and mishandled accounts. Those who wanted to quit coop membership ranged from 30 to 85 individuals; turf wars between neighboring collectives often involved dozens or as many as hundreds of people; and collective protests or petitions also attracted dozens or up to hundreds of participants.<sup>33</sup>

The county's party committee report, however, was far from complete. Many more incidents took place in local districts. During the few months from March to July, 1957, for example, Fengjing district reported eight "collective disturbances" in the form of group quarrels, strikes, feuds, and withdrawal from coops, involving 15 out of its 43 coops and 2,080 participants.<sup>34</sup> In Chengdong district, 32 incidents took place from late 1956 to April 1957, involving 10 coops and 1,036 people.<sup>35</sup> In Tiankun district, 1,890 members from 24 coops participated in 51 incidents, and the biggest one involved about 800 people.<sup>36</sup> Sijing district reported 65 incidents during 1956 and early 1957, mostly collective withdrawal from the coop,

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<sup>33</sup> SJ13.

<sup>34</sup> SJ9.

<sup>35</sup> SJ4 (Chengdong qu guanyu nongmin naoshi qingkuang baogao [Report on peasant disturbances in Chengdong district], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957).

<sup>36</sup> SJ1 (Tiankun qu zi hezuohua gaochao fazhan yilai dui nongyeshe naoshi qingkuang [Report on disturbances against agricultural cooperatives in Tiankun district since the Hide Tide of cooperativization], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957).

protests against coop cadres, or quarrels.<sup>37</sup> Sheshan district listed nine incidents in its report of “people’s disturbances,” including eight conflicts between different coops and one that involved more than fifty villagers wanting to exit the coop.<sup>38</sup> There is no doubt that in addition to these five districts, the other four districts had similar instances of disturbance, though no documentation about those districts are available. The total number of incidents that happened to the whole county in the second half of 1956 and the first half of 1957 might be around two hundred.

### *Demanding More from the Coop*

Xinwu Cooperative, located in Xinwu xiang, comprised five administrative villages, 6,146 mu of land (averaging 2.29 mu per person), and 595 households, mostly poor-peasant households.<sup>39</sup> It was one of the few large coops with more than 500 households (the average size of advanced coops in the county was 248 households). The coop consisted of 16 teams, originating from 15 former primary coops, most of which had been set up as late as the autumn of 1955 and had not experienced any collective production activities before merging into the advanced coop in January 1956. Nevertheless, owing to the hard work of 22 coop cadres and other “activists,” including 28 Party members and 57 Youth League members, the coop

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<sup>37</sup> SJ2 (Zhongguo Sijing quwei guanyu qunzhong naoshi qingkuang de baogao [Report of CCP Sijing district committee on disturbances of the masses], Songjian xian dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>38</sup> SJ11.

<sup>39</sup> The coop had 505 poor peasants households (85 percent), 83 middle peasant households (14 percent), 6 rich peasant households (one percent), and one landlord household.

performed quite well in 1956: its agricultural production yielded 603 catties per mu, a bit higher than the county's average level (594 catties). In addition to distributing to each coop member 535 catties of grain as their "basic ration" (口粮 *kouliang*) through the sixteen teams, the coop kept 43,000 catties as reserves. Its sidelines also developed well: it raised 120 pigs and 1,300 ducks, which contributed to twenty percent of the coop's total income. In addition, individual households owned 116 tools to make straw sacks for building dikes and 63 tools to make straw ropes. More than thirty percent of the households engaged in bird hunting during slack seasons. Overall, most members in the coop lived a life above the average level of the county. And they were definitely well-to-do by national standards.<sup>40</sup>

However, the coop did a poor job in financial management. Since May 1957, the individual teams of the coop had regularly distributed the rationed grain and money to its members every ten days, on the first, eleventh, and twenty-second days of each month by a coop-wide standard. The villagers called the grain thus distributed as "customary grain" (习惯粮 *xiguan liang*). Over time, they became dependent on their respective teams for any amount of grain they needed. They also turned to the coop for a small amount of loan on any pretext. One member, named Qian, for instance, borrowed from the coop five times only to buy a wok. Another person borrowed eight times with the excuse of curing a tiny ulcer on his leg. Some villagers asked for a loan even when they actually did not need it, such as a Xia who demanded a loan only ten days after he had sold a big pig. Once they obtained the money, however, the

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<sup>40</sup> The grain production in the whole country yielded only 188.5 catties per mu in 1956 (Guojia tongjiju, *Xin Zhongguo wushi nian nongye tongji ziliao*, 40); and the average level of grain rations of rural residents in the whole country was 410 catties in 1957 (Nongyebu zhengce yanjiushi, *Zhongguo nongye jiben qingkuang*, 105).

borrowers never planned to repay the coop. The wife of Gan Defa was thus badly beaten by her husband when she tried to repay the coop a small loan by selling two pheasants that he had hunted. Those who failed to borrow money from the coop felt unfair, saying: “squeaky wheels get the oil while honest people have nothing.” Demands for loans and grain thus increased steadily: the coop and its teams lend money or grain to about 150 households in April, 250 households in May, 334 households in June, and 370 households in July. The cadres yielded so easily to their demands because they allegedly had “five fears” – they feared the coop members’ curses, strikes, accusations, starvation, and exit from the coop.

Because of the repeated loans from the coop, however, many households failed to pay off their debts with the workpoints they had earned. According to the coop’s original scheme of “advance distribution” scheduled for July 10, its sixteen teams should have distributed a total of 8,813.97 yuan of income in kind and in cash to its members. However, because of the numerous loans and repeated distribution of the “customary grain,” they had only 2,600 yuan available for distribution. About 80 percent of households would receive no money. Among the 33 households in the No. 7 team, for example, only seven households would receive money and all other 26 households had become “overdrawing” (透支 *touzhi*) households who owed a debt to the coop. Therefore, in the night of July 10, when the coop head announced the actual distribution plan, many members protested in anger: “What to eat tomorrow if we’re overdrawing households and get nothing from the coop?” “You told us that lots of fields have grown crops for the summer harvest and the yields will be high. So we’ve been waiting for the summer distribution day after day. How could we have nothing left? What’s wrong with you cadres?” The cadres explained hard to no avail. The audience quarreled with them for a long while and then left with strong resentment. All coop cadres knew that something troublesome

was waiting for them the next day when the villagers habitually expected the distribution of grain and money from their teams.

In the early morning of the next day, July 11, Wu Jinyun, a man from the No. 8 team of the coop, built a dike to block the drainage of water from the paddy field so that no job could be done in the deep water after a rain. He then warned fellow team members: "If anybody goes to work today, then that means he has grain, and let's all go to his home to eat." As a result, none of the team members came out to work for the team, and they all gathered at the team's office asking for the "customary grain." Under their pressure, the team leader distributed to each team member 5 catties of grain, which was 2 catties more than the team's customary level. This action encouraged people of other teams, who wanted their team leaders to do the same. When refused, about seventy or eighty villagers gathered at the xiang government office and surrounded the xiang cadres, shouting: "Are there grain and money? If not, pay us for our straw sacks and contributions to pigsties!" Some complained: "With only one cropping a year we ate fish and pork before; now there are two croppings a year but we live a hard life." "You've taken over our farms, controlled our grain, and gripped all the money in your hands. Do you still want us to starve to death?" Three or four villagers announced that they wanted to withdraw from the coop. Three desperate women from the No. 4 team ferociously dragged the coop head to a nearby creek, saying that they wanted to drown themselves together with him. Meanwhile, a boat from the No. 4 team, loaded with wheat to be sold as "surplus grain" to the government, was passing by. A group of men quickly blocked the boat, saying in anger: "We're struggling to find food to eat. For what was the surplus grain to sell?" They dispersed only when the vice head of the coop intervened and warned: "This is the grain of the state! Dare any of you touch it?!"

The news of the gathering, however, soon spread to all other teams of the coop. About 100 more villagers had joined the protesters by 9:00 a.m., and everyone carried a shoulder pole and sacks to get grain. The crowd, now more than two hundred people from thirteen different teams, became even more agitated. They kept shouting at the cadres and threatened to beat them up. Some of them cursed the cadres as bandits, “stubborn and unyielding,” “worse than the former xiangzhang and baozhang [under the Japanese occupation];” the latter, in their memory, had to concede in such confrontations when kinship or friendship was involved. They did not break up until 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. when the cadres finally promised to borrow 750 yuan from different units of the township for distribution five days later to the thirteen teams whose members had joined the protest. The remaining three teams of the coop promised to distribute the next day. Because of the gathering, farm work in most teams of the coop stopped on July 11. It was reported that anyone who tried to work or to say something sympathetic to the cadres soon came under others’ ridicule or denouncement.

The county’s party committee dispatched a “work team” to the coop on the night of the same day. The team members were mostly Mandarin-speaking “cadres-down-to-the-south” (南下干部 *nanxia ganbu*), who came from North China and migrated to the southern region when the Communist Revolution expanded there. The work team first investigated the incident by having several meetings with the cadres of the coop and then the cadres and activists of different teams. All villagers responded to their arrival by changing their supper from the typical steamed rice to porridge, a way to show their dearth of food. They believed that, once the “people from above” arrived, there would be a solution to the problem of grain and money. On the night of July 14, the work team and coop cadres divided themselves into several groups to visit each team and gathered all team members to offer them an opportunity to complain. The villagers

remained resentful of the limited grain they had received from the coop and refused the cadres' suggestion to save on food: "It is already socialism. Does it still make sense to speak of frugality?" "We only want to have enough to eat and care about nothing else!" "The socialist happy life is coming to an end; it's just like beating a gong with a cucumber – the longer you beat, the shorter the cucumber becomes." Many women, beating with chopsticks their bowls filled with porridge, grumbled to the cadres: "Look! We farmers are eating porridge. Don't you feel guilty?" A veteran soldier stood up and shouted: "Why did you set the grain ration to as low as 520 catties? I ate twelve *liang* (两) [1.32 lb.] of rice a day and had fishes and pork everyday when I was a soldier. Now I no longer have meat and enough rice to eat." Others chimed in: "Yes, how could we farmers eat only one catty of rice a day! You cadres never work yet have meat to eat everyday. How unfair it is!" Unable to pacify the disgruntled villagers, the cadres ended the meeting without result. The villagers also left the meeting place disappointed: "We supposed that the northerners had come here with a solution. It seems now that they are helpless as well." "Better not to have them here. We used to get grain and money every ten days. Now after the quarrel we only got the steadfast word of frugality." Nevertheless, they were waiting for the coming of July 16, the day to distribute grain and money that the coop cadres had promised five days ago.

Worried about the possible trouble on that day, the work team and coop leaders met on the night of July 15 and decided to do two things early in the next morning: to summon the most active 50 "troublemakers" to the xiang office for a meeting and to let each team leader drive coop members to work as early as possible. In the early morning of July 16, however, only about ten of the troublemakers attended the meeting, who continued to quarrel with the cadres. Others were more cautious; they reminded each other: "Watch out! The outsiders have carried



pistols. Exhibited rafters erode first: better to stay home and watch things going on around us.” Nevertheless, they encouraged women to go out and ask the cadres for grain. More than 100 women from different teams, all carrying a sack, thus assembled at the xiang office. To their disappointment, no coop cadres who had made the promise appeared there. Only the work team members were greeting the women. Unable to get money and grain, the women were angry, shouting and cursing the work team members: “What a sort of people you northerners are! Unable to understand our dialect, how could you know our sufferings?” After a few hours’ protests, they left the xiang office around 11:00 a.m. with empty sacks.

The “mass disturbance” in Xinwu Cooperative eventually subsided. Farm work resumed in all teams on July 17, and the attendance rate bounced back to 90 percent under the pressure from the work team. The work team then started a thorough investigation of the actual situation of grain shortage in each team. They first tried to get information with the help of local coop and team cadres, but soon found that those cadres themselves had lots of economic problems; what they provided was often unreliable: according to the words of the leader of the xiang, 80 percent of households, or more than 470 households, in the xiang were short of food. The work team adopted the approach of “mass line” (群众路线 *qunzhong luxian*), turning to party members and peasant activists in the coop for information, and found that only 222 households were indeed in need of food. The work team then divided the sixteen teams of the coop into three categories: six teams had enough grain and could be self-sufficient; four teams were short of grain and needed the supply of grain from other teams; six other teams had surplus grain and had to supply grain to the aforementioned four teams. All in all, they believed that there was no need for the coop to ask for grain supply from the state. By July 26, the work team had successfully asked the six teams with surplus grain to provide 5,780 catties of grain to the four teams in need.

Meanwhile, the work team terminated the practice of distributing the “customary grain” and started a program to save food, after organizing a meeting in each team in which the villagers reportedly confessed their “mistakes” during the riot, recalled their distresses before Liberation, and expressed their gratitude to the Communists for their “happiness” under the new government. In the No. 15 team, every member was required to save one *liang* of rice a day, so that all team members could presumably save a total of 4,106 catties a year, which would feed all 182 people of the team for 22 days; to save three and a half feet of cloth a year, so that they could save 637 feet of cloth to make 42 set of clothes; and every household was asked to save five cents and one catty of firewood a day, so that the whole team could save 262.40 yuan and 14,965 catties of firewood. The household of Ni Xingxing, head of the team, for instance, had five adults and used to consume 6.5 catties a day. After the program started, they reportedly ate only five catties a day. At the same time, the coop drastically reduced the loans to its members. Before the incident, the coop normally loaned at least 50 yuan a day. During the seventeen days from July 11 to 27, however, it loaned only 45 yuan in total. Unable to borrow money and grain from the coop, nine households of the No. 11 team had to sell their rice straw and several chickens and ducks to buy food, and to change their meals to eating porridge twice a day.<sup>41</sup>

The local coop cadres found themselves in an awkward situation throughout the process. Before the arrival of the work team, they lacked any effective means to deal with the unruly villagers because of their “five fears.” This was especially true after they were instructed to treat the “mass disturbances” as “contradictions among the people” in February 1957.<sup>42</sup> One of the team heads described himself as having been strong-minded before studying the Party’s

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<sup>41</sup> SJ7.

<sup>42</sup> Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 671.

instruction. After that, however, he could only concede whenever he was confronted with team members' undue demands. Another team head simply left the village during the disturbance, leading a group of 22 team members to hunt birds. Qi, the head of the No. 8 team, wept and slept at home for one day and a half, after he tried to argue with the protesters and had a quarrel with his wife. When the work team arrived, the coop cadres felt that its only purpose was investigating their economic problems. Therefore, they adopted a lukewarm attitude toward the work team. The latter did indeed leave aside the coop and team cadres when investigating the coop's problems and talked directly to coop members. The local cadres, in turn, only "stood by with folded arms and watched the fun" when the work team members were presiding over a meeting and arguing fiercely with the resentful villagers.

*"Contradiction among the People"*

The incident in Xinwu coop was illustrative of the many instances of peasant resentment and resistance in Songjiang county in 1956 and 1957. The villagers protested against coop cadres' poor management of the collective finance, especially their embezzlement of public funds, failure to publicize accounts, and unfair allocation of the collective's grain or funds that benefited only a few. The main way to air their anger and resentment was demanding grain and money, cursing the cadres, and refusing to work for the team. Dissatisfied with their cadres' misappropriation of public funds, eleven members in Xingming coop, in another instance, requested the distribution of rice seeds in March 1957. They cursed the cadres as "blue-head turtles" and "yellow-hair monkeys," and stopped working for more than ten days. When asked to resume farm work, they replied to the team leader: "prepare three meals well for us, if you

want us to work.” Some even threatened the cadres with the demand for withdrawal from the coop. One coop member, Yang Jiyun, thus pulled the ox that had belonged to him before cooperativization back to his home, and even cut two boats of vetch grass (as forage or organic fertilizer) from the coop’s field. Following his example, three more households tried to take back their ox, and thirteen households wanted to quit their coop membership.<sup>43</sup> However, many admitted later when the disturbance was over that they had not really intended to withdraw from the coop; they knew well that doing so was difficult and almost impossible. What they really wanted was only more grain and money from the coop, and the reason was not that they truly ran short of food or money.<sup>44</sup> The aforementioned Yang, for instance, had received a total of 3,308 catties of grain for the seven members of his household in 1956. He also raised thirteen piglets, one sow, and five chickens. The real purpose behind their demands was that they thought it unfair that the cadres had embezzled the coop’s funds or allowed some favored or resourceful fellows to obtain additional grain or money from the collective.

Nevertheless, some middle peasants, unhappy with their decreased income, were indeed determined to withdraw from the coop. Take the four middle-peasant households from Minzhu Cooperative of Zhongsheng xiang, for example. Before joining the coop in early 1956, the four households were “relatively well-off.” Once becoming coop members, however, three of them found that their incomes fell by 20 to 100 yuan in that year. What made them even more dissatisfied was that, unlike the poor peasants in their coop, they were unqualified for loans or

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<sup>43</sup> SJ3 (Zhongguo Caojing quwei guanyu nongmin naoshi ji youguan wenti de qingkuang baogao [Report of CCP Caojing district on peasant disturbances and other relevant issues], Songjiang xian dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>44</sup> SJ9.

advance payment from the coop. Nor could they engage in sidelines such as making straw sacks for two to three yuan a day.<sup>45</sup> Worried about their impoverishment, the four households acted together to withdraw from the coop, complaining that “the coop was good only to poor peasants.” They stopped working for the coop and attending team meetings, and visited the tea house in the neighboring town everyday, where they said “bad words” about the coop. They only cultivated their own plot, refused to lend their ox to the coop, and asked the coop to return their investment in the collective, despite the coop leaders’ firm rejection on the ground that the “Spring Plowing” season was not the right time to quit and that they had to wait until the “Autumn Harvest” was over.<sup>46</sup> Unable to obtain the coop leaders’ permission, some middle peasants even turned to the county’s prosecutor’s office for help.<sup>47</sup>

In most instances, however, participants in rural disturbances were not limited to the middle peasants, but included all kinds of coop members. This was especially true where all coop members suffered from local cadres’ misconduct, such as arbitrary planning of production activities, misappropriation and embezzlement of collective grain or funds, reduction of grain rations, failure to provide coop members with enough fodder for their animals, the uneven distribution of income among different production teams, and the unpaid collectivization of peasants’ private property.

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<sup>45</sup> SJ6 (Chengxi qu naoshi qingkuang [Disturbances in Chengxi district], Songjiang xian dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>46</sup> SJ5 (Jiu Chengdongqu nongmin naoshi qingkuang gei Liu zhengwei de xing [Letter to Director Liu on peasant disturbances in Chengdong district], Songjiang xian dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>47</sup> SJ4.

The villagers were also widely involved in disturbances that took place between different coops or different teams of the same coop because of their competition for using the water, land, or grass in areas along their boundaries or for the right of fishing in rivers or drainage of fields where the two teams or coops met. Such conflicts often involved hundreds of people.<sup>48</sup> The official propaganda described such ordinary participants in the disturbance as “backward masses” (落后群众 *luohou qunzhong*) with “low-level political consciousness.”<sup>49</sup>

However, although most disturbances involved ordinary or poor peasants, those who started or led the resistance or protests were rarely the simple villagers. A report on the riot in the No. 2 team of Guangming Cooperative, Sheshan xiang, reveals the background of the riot leaders. The team had 63 households and their grain ration was 560 catties per person, which was relatively high in Songjiang county. Unable to obtain more grain or receive anything from the coop during the “advance payment” because of their debt and insufficient workpoints, 25 members of the team quarreled with coop cadres and even wanted to withdraw from the coop. Among the most active individuals, three had family members in government offices or state-owned factories, two had family members as doctors, one was a primary-school teacher, and three were peddlers traveling between Songjiang and Shanghai. All these people had wider social connections than ordinary villagers did and were well informed of the political situation

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<sup>48</sup> SJ1; SJ13.

<sup>49</sup> SJ3 (Zhongguo Caojing quwei guanyu nongmin naoshi ji youguan wenti de qingkuang baogao [Report of CCP Caojing district on peasant disturbances and other relevant issues], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957).

outside the village. “They learned news from newspapers and knew the campaign of ‘free airing of views’ in the cities. They thus were encouraged and spoke freely.”<sup>50</sup>

The county party committee’s report on handling the eight incidents in Fengjing district describes the leading individuals in such events as follows: fifteen of them were former cadres who had failed to be reelected or been dismissed and therefore were resentful of the current cadres who took over their jobs; thirteen were veteran soldiers who were dissatisfied with the government’s arrangement of their jobs; 35 of them were team or coop cadres, including 11 party members, who were “selfish, indifferent, and difficult to get along with,” and only two were family members of landlord or rich peasant. The report concluded that “only a few of them were really in need of grain or money or had other difficulties.”<sup>51</sup>

Because most of the leaders and participants of the disturbances were current or former coop cadres or their family members, retired soldiers, party members, as well as ordinary peasants, and because former landlords, rich peasants, and counterrevolutionaries were rarely involved, the government treated their discontent primarily as a manifestation of “the contradiction among the people,” resulting from coop cadres’ poor performance or decreased income. Therefore, it emphasized the use of “education and persuasion,” rather than forceful crackdown, in dealing with the disgruntled villagers. In Songjiang county, the government and party leaders usually reacted to the disturbance with several steps. The first was dispatching a “work team” to the locality. Members of the work team had to be experienced “competent

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<sup>50</sup> SJ8 (Sheshan qu guanyu guangming she manma ganbu naoshi qingkuang de baogao [Report on slandering the cadres and making disturbances in Sheshan district], Songjiang xian dang’an guan, 1957).

<sup>51</sup> SJ9.

cadres” (得力干部 *deli ganbu*), capable of dealing with complicated and capricious situations, sometimes including the county party committee’s secretary himself and his direct subordinates. The next step was to “stabilize the masses’ emotion” and to make them resume work. The work team normally allowed the discontented coop members an opportunity to complain and fully vent their anger through a public meeting, then explained to them the Party’s policies of cooperativization, criticized what they had done, and persuaded the peasants to accept government policies by asking them to compare their lives before and after the Liberation. In addition, the work team also had special meetings with individual leading members of the incident, and “from time to time successfully turned them into activists to help calm down the turmoil.” The government called this approach as “unite, criticize, and unite,” which was understood as a great departure from its traditional method in dealing with rural disturbance that had emphasized the use of coercion and suppression.<sup>52</sup>

To completely placate the villagers, the work team always did something to solve the problems that had caused their resentment. If the incident resulted from poorly maintained accounts, the work team would help consolidate them, and even organize a “financial clearing committee,” which included ordinary coop members, to clear and publicize the accounts. The cadres had to apologize to coop members if they had angered the latter by their coercive or arbitrary style of leadership.<sup>53</sup> Cadres who were found to have the problem of embezzlement or corruption had to return the illicit gain before a deadline.<sup>54</sup> Production teams that had recorded

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<sup>52</sup> SJ9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> SJ12 (Sijing qu renmin neibu naoshi qingkuang dengji biao [Records of disturbances within the people in Sijing district], Songjiang xian dang’an guan, 1957).



excessive workpoints to their members and caused other teams' discontent had to cut down their points.<sup>55</sup> Households that had been overpaid had to return to the coop the difference while those indeed needing help were allowed to keep what they had been paid.<sup>56</sup> Those who firmly wanted to withdraw from the coop, such as the three households from the No. 7 team of Xinmin Cooperative, were allowed to go.<sup>57</sup>

Peasant protests in Songjiang thus showed a similar pattern as we have seen in Dongtai county despite their different ecological and economic settings. Though much better off than Dongtai villagers who lived in absolute poverty, the ordinary villagers in Songjiang turned to the right to survival as well to justify their claims for more grain and money from the coop when their income decreased or lagged behind their expectation after becoming its members. They showed their anger and discontent by beating and cursing in their own language the unpopular cadres who failed to meet their demands. Their “righteous” actions, in other words, were essentially no different from what they had done with the much-hated tax or rent agents or usurers and rice-shop owners who had threatened their livelihood before the Communist Revolution. However, like the elite villagers in Dongtai, the most active in the “mass disturbances” in Songjiang were among the most privileged and informed in their communities, who knew well state policies and nationwide situations and therefore acted tactically to make their appeals and actions “rightful.” The local government, likewise, adopted the same approach

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<sup>55</sup> SJ10 (Sheshan qu renmin neibu naoshi qingkuang dengji biao [Records of disturbances within the people in Sheshan district], Songjiang xian dang'an guan, 1957); SJ13.

<sup>56</sup> SJ11.

<sup>57</sup> SJ13.

as seen in Dongtai, i.e., “education and persuasion” instead of coercion and punishment, in handing the unprecedented protests for the same reasons as seen in Dongtai county.

This similarity in state-peasant relations between the two counties should be seen as a result of the encounter between a peasantry who had yet to lose all of their means of production and still adhered to their traditional ethic of subsistence and the socialist state that had successfully established its legitimacy in the countryside but yet to completely control the rural population and resources. The same kind of relationship between the state and the peasants revived in the reform era for similar reasons: the peasants regained a degree of economic autonomy after decollectivization but faced flourishing abuse and injustice that threatened their subsistence, while the state still maintained its legitimacy in the peasant society but has lost much of its control of the latter after the collapse of the collective system. Thus, what we have seen in Dongtai and Songjiang, the two vastly different areas, were by no means accidental; they reflected a particular form of village-state relations that was rather universal in rural China under the conditions prevailing before and after the period of collectivized agriculture.

## CONCLUSION

Two different cultures shaped the patterns of peasant resistance in rural China in 1956 and 1957, which in turn reflected the changing village-state relations in the course of collectivization. One was the traditional peasant culture that survived the communist revolution. Embedded in the rural community, this culture was characterized by the peasants’ taken-for-granted acknowledgement of the supremacy of the survival ethic in their everyday life and in dealing with authorities in and outside their community. The right to survival, or the claim to

available community resources for the very basic need of subsistence, was above anything else, including imposed systems and assumptions, in defending one's actions, whenever any forms of calamities or ill arrangements had threatened his or her livelihood. The hungry villagers in the cooperatives thus felt justified to cut the collective's crops or divide its grain for themselves without the coop cadres' approval when crop failures and the reduced grain ration had driven them to the verge of starvation; in some instances, even coop cadres themselves had to collude with the peasants to divide the harvest in secret. To demand grain or money from the coop, the villagers usually let women, the elderly, or children act first, for they were the most vulnerable in the community, and their actions were most defensible by the survival ethic shared by all community members.<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, such "righteous" actions were possible only when the state had not yet fully penetrate the peasant society, institutionally and symbolically, and when the villagers still retained a degree of autonomy, evidenced in their private ownership of land and other resources before full collectivization, the legal right to withdraw from the coop until the middle of 1957, and the survival of the traditional peasant culture.

Equally evident in the rural disturbances, however, was a new culture growing among the "elite" villagers, including current or former coop cadres, retired soldiers, party and youth league members, and other literary individuals, who increasingly accepted or acknowledged the legitimacy of the imposed systems and ideologies. What they challenged during the unrest was not the collective system or party leadership but instead coop cadres' malfeasance and

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<sup>58</sup> In both Jiangsu and Henan provinces, according to reports by their respective provincial party committees, women, the elderly, and children were often among the first to take actions in local disturbances; strong adult males joined their actions later or did not act at all (Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 677, 688).

incompetence. Their demand for exiting the coop was also allowable by government policies and therefore legal. To make their endeavors politically correct, they wisely excluded former landlords, rich peasants, and “counter-revolutionaries” from their participants.<sup>59</sup> Their actions, in other words, were presumably legitimate and “rightful.” To be sure, in many instances, the “rightful resistance” was not clearly distinguishable from the “righteous resistance” discussed above. The hungry peasants who joined unorganized gatherings in defiance of coop authorities could not totally ignore government policies. On the other hand, those who wanted to act within the bounds allowed by the government could not completely keep their actions “rightful”; dividing coop harvests or beating coop cadres were often mingled with the efforts to legally withdraw from the coops.

No matter whether their actions were righteous or rightful, however, such open challenges to the collective system almost disappeared after 1957, when the state eventually deprived the peasants of their right to exit the collectives, redefined the “major contradiction” in the country as that between socialism and capitalism, and returned to suppression, rather than “persuasion and education,” in dealing with actions that undermined the collective economy. Nevertheless, rural disturbances in 1956 and 1957 were not fruitless. It was during the heyday of the popular unrest that the state promulgated a series of policies to address the problems of which the peasants were most resentful. On September 12, 1956, for example, the Party required all

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<sup>59</sup> According to a report by the party committee of Jiangsu province, organizers of the disturbances in the province usually only allowed poor and middle peasants to join them, claiming that “what we want is the regular folks, not landlords and rich peasants” (Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 688).

coops to distribute 60 to 70 percent of their incomes to coop members to ensure that 90 percent of them increased their income; on November 30, 1956, it warned against rural cadres' use of coercion and compulsion in dealing with coop members; on March 15, 1957, it asked all coops to timely publicize their financial revenues and budgets; on September 14, 1957, it allowed coop members to criticize the cadres' mistakes at coop meetings and choose coop cadres through a "bottom-up election" instead of Party branch's "top-down appointment"; and on September 25, 1957, it urged coop cadres to join coop members in production and limited the cadres' workpoint stipends to one percent of a coop's total workpoints.<sup>60</sup> All these remedies, introduced during the "people's disturbances," later became part of the regular policies to govern rural collectives, as promulgated by the state in the "Sixty Articles" of the people's commune.<sup>61</sup>

To recapitulate, what characterized the relationship between the peasants and the state during the agricultural collectivization in the 1950s was not only their continual confrontation, evident in the widespread discontent in the countryside, but also a new form of conciliation, in which the peasants, while remaining "righteous" in their resistance, began to accept the legitimacy of the increasingly penetrative state and tried to make their protest appear "rightful" by avoiding direct challenge to its policies, and the state, too, eschewed using violence to deal with the disgruntled peasants before the latter lost their economic autonomy. This conciliatory relationship, no less important than any other factors, explained why agricultural collectivization in China, as swift and massive as it was, did not develop into a nationwide disaster involving a drastic drop in agricultural output and widespread rebellion.

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<sup>60</sup> Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 613, 640, 675, 724, 738.

<sup>61</sup> Guojia nongye weiyuanhui, *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian*, 474-491.