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Village China Under Socialism And Reform: A Micro-History, 1948-2008 (Book Review)

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Li Huaiyin: *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948–2008*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), xvii + 402 pp., no price. ISBN 978-0-8047-5974-8.

This study examines the interactions between state policies, local cadres, and villagers in China's communist era. Its findings challenge the view that peasants lacked resources with which to counter state initiatives and cadre activities that threatened their interests.

The conventional approach to understanding Chinese rural political economy draws an explicit distinction between the collectivist period of the 1950s and 1970s and the reform era of the 1980s and 1990s. According to this interpretation, during the former period China's peasants were at the mercy of an aggressive state that extracted resources from villagers to support its ambitious plans for industrial development as well as local cadres who expanded their influence by controlling collective resources upon which peasants depended for their livelihood. Meanwhile, state policies severed the link between effort and rewards, with the result that cultivators neglected farming tasks, the rural economy underperformed, and peasant living standards stagnated or declined. By contrast, during the reform period Chinese peasants were liberated from the constraints of collective farming and achieved a degree of economic independence that placed them in a position to recover a significant measure of control over their lives and local affairs. This was accomplished at the expense of cadres whose weakened grip over the levers of economic power made it difficult for them to continue to influence peasant behavior.

Li suggests that this interpretation is the product of stereotypes fostered by Chinese reformers and pro-reform scholars who have portrayed the collective period as a failure while casting the reform era policies in as positive a light as possible. He believes that the truth is more complicated than the conventional paradigm suggests, and he offers a revision that is based on a close look at what he terms the "subinstitutional social basis" of China's rural political economy—the complex of "social relations, customs, work norms, collective consciousness, and identities" that condition peasant behavior (p. 3). His research is derived from extensive fieldwork in his native community in rural Jiangsu Province from 1994 to 2008, a period during which he consulted many individuals and reviewed a wide range of records that detailed peasant behavior during the collective and reform periods. His findings indicate that even during the collective period Chinese farmers were far from powerless. They employed various forms of resistance to policies and power holders that threatened their interests, and as a result the state made repeated and substantial accommodations to peasant demands. Peasants were capable of deciding for themselves which state policies, collective or otherwise, were in their best interests and which were not, and when those policies were advantageous to them, as even collective policies sometimes were, they implemented them successfully. When such policies were not in the farmers' best interests, they successfully employed mechanisms for resistance, such as the deeply rooted tradition that justified peasant resistance to government policies and the assertion of cadre power either in the face of threats to their right to subsistence or in association with practices that were consistent with the Maoist call for "bottom-up supervision by the masses" (p. 6; see chapter 5).

Interestingly, the reform era saw a decline in peasant efforts to supervise cadre performance as the collectives were dismantled and practices that enhanced cadre control over peasant life were allowed to lapse. One consequence, Li argues, was that during the reform era cadre corruption and malfeasance increased to a level that exceeded that of the collective era.

One of the more important of Li's findings is that collectivization did not necessarily destroy peasant incentives. For example, when piece rates rather than time rates were used to calculate work point values and the bulk of peasant income came from collective sources peasants re-

sponded to the incentive structure by increasing their productivity. They were perfectly capable of taking advantage of features of the collective economy that were aligned with their self-interests, and often the result was an improvement in rural living standards. The economic stagnation for which collective methods are typically blamed was not due as much to the lack of incentives caused by the state's egalitarian policies as it was the state's excessive extraction of rural resources and the creation of dysfunctional relationships between cadres and farmers. Collective farming could work well when there was "an identity of interest between the leaders and the led" (p. 207).

The book is a sequel to the author's well-received 2005 monograph, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford University Press). Together, these two extraordinarily detailed works have done a great deal to illuminate the interior dynamics of Chinese rural political economy in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

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