1

Chen Village and Its Leaders

The Village Setting

A large rushing stream marks off Chen Village's fields from a delta plain that stretches a dozen miles to the ocean. As the young people from Canton forded the stream (there was no bridge nearby), they thought Chen Village strikingly picturesque. The village pressed up against a range of craggy mountains as in a Chinese painting, surrounded on its nearer sides by fish ponds set amid a golden patchwork of fields of ripening grain.

At close range, however, the village no longer seemed at all inviting. In the wake of the late summer rains, the lanes were awash and slippery with garbage and animal manure. The narrow, steep-peaked houses were built mostly of plastered mud, with only small sections of their foundation walls boasting any real brick. They were dilapidated, dank, and reeked of the sows and poultry that shared the quarters with their owners.

The whole village had come out to greet the young newcomers with gongs and drums. The peasants were all barefoot, and the young people found out later that many did not even own a pair of sandals. Men and women alike were dressed in the traditional Guangdong peasant style of black-dyed shirts and baggy black pants—and these were threadbare, heavily patched, and soiled.

The poverty was even more obvious at mealtimes. The peas-

ants often had to make do with a concoction half of sweet potatoes and half of rice, since Chen Village could not raise enough rice to support its population of just under one thousand. To make the rice go even further and to vary their meals, they sometimes boiled the rice up as a watery gruel, for breakfasts and dinners alike. The monotony of their starch diet was lightened only by bits of tiny salt-dried fish, pickles, fermented bean curd, and fermented black beans, the kind of strong tasting condiments that in small amounts could go a long way on rice or in gruel. Vegetables were eaten only irregularly. (Villagers believed vegetables upset the stomach unless cooked with a bit of oil; and Chen Village grew so few peanuts that each peasant could be allotted only four ounces of cooking oil per year!) An egg, or a fish caught in the stream, was an occasional indulgence. Meat was reserved for special celebrations and festivals.

Their yields were low and their work exhausting because the village had only about five hundred acres of arable lands—and 60 percent of these lay up in small mountain valleys and hollows that suffered from acidity and thin top soils. To get to some of these hill plots required a three-hour uphill walk.

It was known in the villages roundabout that the Chens had to toil for longer hours and less reward than most other peasants in the district. For that reason, the village had always had difficulty finding brides from the neighboring villages for its own young men; and it was traditionally considered taboo for a man to marry a woman from within the village. Women who had had the ill-fortune to be married into the village had a saying: "When dead, most horrifying is the devil underground; when alive, most horrifying are the fields of Chen Village." One of the village women came up to the girls from the city in puzzlement: "If we had to come into such a bad village there were reasons for it; but why did you people stumble into such a place?"

Few Chen Villagers had ever ventured beyond the nearby county towns. This was particularly true of the women, some of whom knew only Chen Village, the market town about six miles away, and the nearby village they had been born into. The men themselves had stayed so close to the soil that they spoke an accent of Cantonese that differed slightly from all the other villages around. One Chen woman curiously asked one of the

Village Lane, 1981

new arrivals that first day: "Eh, so you're from Canton? Where's Canton? Is it in China or in America? Is it as big as Chen Village?"

Less than a decade later, Chen Village would produce more than enough rice. Every day the village households would be able to afford a small dish of meat with their dinners (variously of duck, goose, pork, chicken, eggs, or fresh fish), along with a rich variety of vegetable dishes. They would be building their homes of solid brick, with solid concrete floors rather than the traditional packed earth. By the early 1970s the young women would be wearing flower-patterned blouses. The Chen Villagers' political horizons would be far broader and their knowledge of the outside world far greater. Some of the younger ones would even be taking occasional outings to Canton. In the course of this book, we shall see how these extraordinary changes in the standard of living were accomplished. But in 1964 the village world that the young people from Canton entered was still one of severe poverty and very limited horizons.

On the second day that the young people were in the village, they were given a lesson in "class education." Chen Village's "four-bad types" were summoned by the village's party branch to line up in front of the new arrivals. The four-bad types were the former landlords, the pre-Liberation rich peasants, and anyone officially labeled a "counterrevolutionary" or "bad element" because of serious political, criminal, or social offenses. In all, there were about one and a half dozen such people in the village: two former landlords, several former rich peasants, two "bad elements," and all their wives. The newly arrived youths were to know exactly who these "class enemies" were so that they could be on their guard. They had heard a lot about sinister four-bad types, but few ever had had the chance of scrutinizing any at close range. One of the youths recalls, "When I got to the village and saw these landlords and counterrevolutionaries, I felt that deep in their hearts they still wanted to overthrow everything and kill all of us. In movies, they had awful faces. And in the village, when I saw them I feared them and thought they were repulsive to look at. I guess ugliness is a psychological thing. I felt they were somehow actually ugly."

Tales of the Chen Lineage

That same day, the young people were also briefed on the history of the village. They were told how, before the Liberation of 1949, the village had been oppressed and bullied by neighboring villages; how a great many of the men had had to hire themselves out at starvation wages to big landowners in neighboring richer villages; how other families had been reduced to wandering as beggars when times were bad; how the parents of several households had died on the road; how some of these desperate wandering households had had to sell their children into servitude to keep them alive. The village had been scourged by bandits, by Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang government, and by the Japanese invaders. Exploited and starved, both by outside intruders and local landlords, the village's population had been in precipitous decline in the decades preceding Liberation. Its population had been cut in half. One of the young people from the city recounts: "The

village was almost emptied out. If Liberation had come one year later, there wouldn't have been any village! . . . So when people compared the present with the past, they had a lot to be grateful for to the party."

That, at least, was the history the young city people were told. A very different tale was told to us in Hong Kong by three elderly Chens, all of poor-peasant background, who had emigrated from Chen Village in the mid-1940s. They told us of the bravado of the Chen Villagers; how they were feared by neighboring villagers; how in the 1930s the village's celebrations and festivals were of an opulence and grandeur that was the envy of many of the other villages in the district.

It appears memories play tricks. Reminiscences are embroidered with the images and stories that people want to weave of their own pasts. The old-timers, sitting in Hong Kong and employing the traditional measures of village status, wanted to picture to themselves a native village of sound reputation. The more prosperous and self-assertive their village, the better. But those in Chen Village wanted to paint their village history in the contours and colors of the *new* rural status system. When talking to the youths from Canton, they emphasized (and probably exaggerated) the poverty and wretchedness of the village's past—precisely those qualities that made it worthy of honor in China's revolutionary present. But however much the two sets of reminiscences differ, the testimony of old emigrés and Chen Villagers in the 1960s was alike in the sense that both groups strongly felt that their own status was linked to the status of their native community.

Their sense of identity had been reinforced by the fact that Chen Village is a single-lineage community, all the males of which are descended on their father's side from a single common ancestor. The village was settled some four hundred or more years ago by colonists from an overcrowded lineage village in a neighboring county. According to stories told both by the old Chens and younger emigrants, the village's founders had originally laid claim not just to what today constitutes Chen Village but to rich stretches of land on the far side of the stream that marks the present boundary of the village. But skirmishes broke out between the Chens and neighboring lineage villages; and in that early period the Chens lost, were forced off much of the

contested land, and had to turn to tilling the thinner soil in the mountains.

To honor their ancestors and affirm their common roots in the past, the Chens eventually built a large brick ancestral hall (until the 1970s it was by far the largest structure in the village) within which they kept the sacred tablets and records containing the genealogies of their lineage. Villagers who claimed descent from particular illustrious sons or grandsons of the lineage founder also built smaller ancestral halls to celebrate their ancestry. There were five of these smaller halls scattered throughout the village, corresponding to the five "branches" of the Chen lineage. But only the most populous branch, the Lotus branch, had paid any great attention to its own branch's ritual life. This may have been because the Lotus members held common material interests: the communal lands owned and rented out by the Lotus Hall (to support its branch rites and to divide among its own members) were greater than those of the other branch halls. But even the Lotus members largely celebrated their ties with the past, and their sense of solidarity, through the rituals that centered on the main village-wide lineage hall. This stress upon community-level solidarity probably was necessary to protect the village from its slightly larger and stronger neighbors. An old man may well have been right when he told us, "In my time it would've been impossible for other villages to go around bullying us because we people of Chen Village had such a strong collective spirit." That spirit remains strong today—stronger, perhaps, than for most Chinese communities. Even in the 1970s the Chen Village leaders would be able to appeal to these feelings of village allegiance to check the independence of the village's various neighborhoods.[1]

The range of mountains behind Chen Village had always provided a safe refuge and lair for bandits. In the 1940s these mountains became the home also for Communist guerrillas fighting first the Japanese and then the Guomindang. The old Chens

[1] Our small sample of villages suggests that under socialism, production brigade (i.e., village) leaderships are considerably weaker in localities where, traditionally, village-level organization and cohesion were weaker: for example, in villages where loyalties used to be centered more on the various lineage branches (or different lineages) within the village.

now in Hong Kong have distasteful memories of the Guomindang. The Guomindang militia stationed in a nearby market town used to come by at harvest time to raid the village's crops. But the Communist guerrillas, on the contrary, were disciplined. Recalls an old man, "Those guerrillas never took anything, and wouldn't even accept food if offered any. I wonder where they did get their food. They were peasants like ourselves. We sometimes met up with them when we were out working our mountain plots. Sometimes they even stayed the night in the village."

About half a dozen of Chen Village's men joined up with the guerrilla bands. They were the type of young, poor, self-assertive men who in earlier decades might have associated themselves with bands of brigands when times were bad. Now instead, still only half-understanding the messages brought by the Communist party, they became affiliated to a movement that would alter profoundly their village's economy, social life, and politics. Their activities in the mountains would earn them the trust of the Communist government in the new era and enviable reputations among their fellow Chens.

The 1950s in Chen Village

The new order did not come to Chen Village, though, through the small guerrilla bands in the mountains. It was achieved through the victories of the Communist armies in north China. About a year after Lin Biao's triumphant march southward in 1949 into Guangdong Province, a small "workteam" of Communist cadres was dispatched to Chen Village by the new Communist government.[2] It had come to carry out a land reform in the village.

The Communist workteam's mission was twofold. It had been instructed not just to redistribute landholdings in the village but also to demolish the power and influence of the rural elite. To accomplish this, it needed to bring the anger and resentment of the poor families to the surface. The poorer Chens themselves

[2] *Cadre* is the term used by the Chinese to denote any and all officials.

would have to set aside the traditional notion of lineage solidarity. They would have to be convinced to join with outsiders in attacks against kinsmen. They would have to learn to express themselves in terms of "class hatred."

But many of the village households held back initially from cooperating with this Communist workteam. The peasants were traditionally suspicious of outsiders. And the poorest peasants, who had the most to gain from a land reform, were reportedly intimidated by the power the wealthy families customarily had been able to exert over them.

The Communist workteam needed assistance from within the village to reach these poorer households. The local guerrilla movement provided this link. In particular, the Communist organizers could depend upon Chen Sumei. Sumei had not been born a Chen; but he had been adopted (i.e., sold) into the village as a child. He had survived as a young man by scavenging wood in the mountains to sell in the delta villages for use as fuel. He had begun to work underground for the Communists, delivering secret messages as he climbed up and down with his wood. According to the story that has been handed down about Chen Sumei,

> When land reform came to this area, no one dared to move against the landlords. . . . But Chen Sumei knew who were the poorest and who could be organized to do what. He got together some poor peasants who'd speak out, who dared to do things, and he got them to organize against the landlords, to struggle against them. . . . He helped lead the peasants to be masters of their society. Gained quite a reputation!

In emotional "struggle sessions," angry poor peasants led by the workteam and Sumei finally had humiliated the village landlords and stripped them of all but a few parcels of their land, just enough for the landlord families to feed themselves.

Chen Village had only two landlords, and neither of them had had very extensive landholdings. One came from a long-established landlord family. He had been well versed in the classics (and wrote elegant calligraphy) and had augmented his influence by taking on the duties of village judge. The other landlord was nouveau riche. He had, not long before Liberation, developed a

profitable trade as a rural pharmacist and had plowed his proceeds into land.

In addition to these two landlords, there were five "rich peasant" households in the village. Three of these were part of the same family—a father and his two married sons. A rich peasant was one who worked part of his fields himself, but possessed so much land that he needed to hire field hands or to rent out much of it. The family of this particular rich peasant actually owned more land than either of the two landlords; but the family members did not share the rural elite's traditional disdain for manual labor and had vigorously worked most of their lands themselves with the aid of hired help. Under the land reform regulations of the early 1950s, rich peasants were not to have the bulk of their lands expropriated nor were they to be attacked harshly like the landlords. For the time being, the high agricultural productivity of such households could contribute to China's economic development. The father in this rich peasant family was able to retain enough land that he still had to hire field hands. Fortunately, too, for this man, he had always been comparatively decent to his hands and thus retained a residual respect among Chen Village's poorer families. According to one of his sons, whom we interviewed in Hong Kong, the landlords had gained quite different reputations: "Those landlords were fierce; they'd beaten people who hadn't paid all their rents."

The relative good fortune of Chen Village's rich peasant households was only temporary. Land reform gave each family in the village a class label, which remained with the family. These labels became inheritable in the male line. The former landlord and rich peasant households officially belonged to "bad" untrustworthy classes, and they would be systematically discriminated against and harassed throughout the years to come.

Villagers who prior to the land reform had had just enough land to support their families were labeled by the cadre workteam as "middle peasants," a category further subdivided into upper-middle, middle, and lower-middle. Upper-middle and middle peasants were not considered politically suspect, but they were officially defined as being less trustworthy than the poor peasants (who had owned very little or no land) and the lower-middle peasants (who had owned some land but had had to supplement

this by renting land as tenants or doing field labor for richer families). The former poor and lower-middle peasants belonged to the "red classes." Whenever possible in the coming decades, the government would prefer that members of the red classes be the village officials.

In Chen Village the former poor and lower-middle peasants comprised some 80 to 85 percent of the population. But in the early 1950s, there were not many men from the poorest classes with the necessary abilities to lead Chen Village into the new era. The poor were almost entirely illiterate. Few had ever held positions of responsibility. They had less experience in planning agriculture than the self-reliant middle peasantry. Chen Sumei might have been capable enough to serve as the village's new leader, but he and the few other former guerrillas who had helped carry out the land reform did not remain in Chen Village very long. The Communists had great need for capable men of that sort, and they rose quickly into posts outside the village. Chen Sumei eventually became head of the county's agricultural implements factory, that is, until he fell from political grace in the late 1960s for the sin of philandering and was exiled back to Chen Village.

When the land reform workteam of the early 1950s left Chen Village, the village leadership thus did not pass into the hands of the young, self-assertive poor peasants who had become guerrillas, nor into the hands of the unassertive poor peasants who had remained in the village. Instead, an articulate middle peasant who had been active in the land reform became Chen Village's leader, its party secretary. This man, Chen Feihan, apparently had prestige among his fellow villagers as a capable farmer; but more important, he was literate and would be able to read party directives.

Collectivization

The land reform workteam had already begun processes of change in Chen Village. It would be Feihan's duty to push them forward. The workteam had dismantled the lineage organizations and redistributed to the poor peasants all the lands owned by the lineage and lineage-branch halls. The annual rites were no longer to be practiced. The halls were converted into warehouses. But the

land reform had not equalized the peasantry's landholdings. The former poor peasants still had fewer strips of land than the middle peasants, and they had not been able to receive enough tools or draft animals to work efficiently the new land they acquired.

The workteam had tried to make up for this by persuading small clusters of families who were friends of long standing, poor and middle peasants alike, to begin cooperating in what were called mutual-aid teams. It had been traditional to exchange labor, tools, and animals during the busy seasons, but the workteam pushed this mutual aid concept further than had ever been practiced before. The policy worked. Soon even the more recalcitrant villagers were obliged by the pressures of community sentiment to join in mutual aid.

Feihan, the new party secretary, in 1954 organized a more complicated scheme. He started Chen Village's first cooperative. He apparently did so before such cooperatives had appeared in most other villages in Guangdong. Rather than just helping out in each others' fields, the participants would pool their fields and draft animals for the entire year. The advantage was that the members' tiny plots could be combined into larger fields that could be plowed and irrigated more efficiently. At the end of the year, the member families would divide up the profits, some shares going for the amount of labor each had contributed and some shares for the use of the members' various fields and animals. Each family had previously faced the risk that an infestation or flooding of the family's own small plots might wipe out the family financially. The co-op promised more security.

The idea appealed most to the poorest families, whose assets were fewest and whose circumstances were most precarious. The small plots they had received in the land reform may not have been enough to support them. At first, reportedly, just poor-peasant families joined up with Feihan in the new venture. "But the co-ops got bigger and bigger," one of the Chens recounts. "The richer families didn't want to join, but they were isolated and forced in. The co-ops wouldn't cooperate with them on irrigation—pretty much cut off their access to water—to force them in." Before long, most of the peasants of Chen Village had been organized into two co-ops. But the peasants had little experience as yet in managing large amounts of land or organizing sizable

squads of laborers. The new system proved too unwieldy; and within the year, many of the families had split once more into mutual-aid teams.

In mid-1956, however, a national campaign to inaugurate even more "advanced" co-ops had been started under Mao's prodding.[3] China's regional party organizations competed to get the new collectives organized. Under the new system, only a family's labor inputs would be counted; annual compensation would no longer be offered for the use of land or draft animals. Through this, the poorer households in Chen Village would be getting a better break at the expense of the former middle peasant and rich peasant households. Once again they found the new proposals in their own interest.

The Great Leap Forward

Before the peasants had time to get accustomed to the new collective arrangements, an even more radical social experiment was launched from on high. A utopian mood was gathering momentum in the party. China's leading party officials believed that the bigger the units of rural production, the more advanced in socialism they would be. The collectives were thus to be consolidated with other collectives to form huge "people's communes." Public canteens were to be set up so that the peasants would not have to spend time procuring and preparing their own food. These canteens were to be free, allowing peasants to be fed "each according to his needs" rather than "each according to his work." The extra time gained from this was to go into extra labor: to carry out massive irrigation projects; to plow deeper and plant more closely; and to establish rural industrial schemes like the smelting of crude steel. National party leaders promised that all this would leapfrog China into an era of abundance and true communism.

[3] See the "Draft Program for Agricultural Development in the People's Republic of China, 1956–1967 (January 1956)," in Robert R. Bowie and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Communist China 1955–1959: Policy Documents with Analysis* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

The bulk of the peasantry of Chen Village had retained their faith in a party that had brought them peace, land reform, and mutual aid. They believed the exuberant promises:

> They still have sweet memories of the beginning of communization. "We all worked together, moving from place to place. We ate wherever we happened to be; ah, in the beginning we were all so fat! We could eat any time we liked at the canteens." . . . They really believed that that was communism, that you can have free food wherever you go.

But their enthusiasm quickly soured. The Great Leap Forward degenerated into bureaucratic blundering and organizational chaos. The entire local marketing district of some twenty thousand people had been designated a commune. The cadres stationed at the market town headquarters began issuing a flow of confused, imperious commands. "The whole thing was a mess," an interviewee recalls.

> They pushed a system of planting called "Sky Full of Stars" where a field would be so overplanted the seedlings starved each other out. . . . The peasants knew it was useless, but there was simply no way to oppose anything, because the orders came from so high above. And if one of our Chen Village cadres protested at commune meetings, he laid himself open to criticisms: "a rightist, against the revolution." . . . The peasants were ordered to smash their water jars to make them into fertilizer. They said it was stupid, that the jars were just sterile clay, but they had to smash the jars nonetheless. What a mess! Cut rice was left overnight in the fields [and mildewed] while exhausted villagers were ordered off to do other things. The period was called the "Eat-It-All-Up Period" because people were eating five and six times daily—but there was no harvest that year. Everything had been given to the collective. Nothing was left in the houses. No grain had been stored. People were so hungry they had difficulty sleeping. . . . Some people became ill, and some of the elderly died. Our village became quiet, as if the people were dead.

The villagers had no reason to plant for the next season. With the commune level in charge, most of what they produced would be siphoned off to fill a common pot with eight other villages; and

with no likelihood that the peasants of the other villages would be willing to work, Chen Villagers strongly doubted they would get anything back in return. So the Chen Village peasants let their fields go wild, while they scavenged on the hillsides or sat indoors conserving their energy and nursing their hunger.

Chen Village Production Brigade and Its New Leaders

Production was at a standstill; organization and morale were shattered. It was not until 1961 that the government developed a comprehensive set of policies to repair the damage caused by the Great Leap Forward. In accordance with the new dispensation,[4] Chen Village was divided into five production teams, each composed of about forty neighboring families. Each of these teams received property rights over a fifth of the village's lands. This new system was designed to encourage the peasants to produce. If a team produced more, its households ate more. Each team member would be paid in grain and cash only in accordance with how much labor he or she contributed. Small private plots and private handicraft production, moreover, would be permitted again, and the produce could be sold privately at newly reopened rural markets.

Each of these production teams was managed by an elected committee, its members chosen more for their managerial abilities than for their political "redness." Most of them were not in fact members of the Communist party. These production team committees, located so close to the grass roots, could manage the collective labor of peasants much more effectively than the distant leaders who had tried to supervise the gigantic communes of the Great Leap Forward.

The new programs and new forms of economic organization worked with dramatic effect. Villagers began once more to work

[4] The new "Regulations on the Work of the Rural People's Communes," also known as the "Sixty Articles," were published in a final form in September 1962. See *Documents of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, September 1956–April 1969* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1971), 1: 719-722.

hard and in orderly fashion; and by the end of 1961, the village's famine was ended.

Feihan was not in charge of this new chapter in Chen Village's affairs. Two younger men of stronger character and abilities had supplanted him during the Great Leap Forward. For the next quarter century these two men, Chen Qingfa and Chen Longyong, would dominate Chen Village's politics.

Both of these men held key brigade posts. Chen Village as a whole had now been titled a "production brigade," and its government consisted of a party branch committee and a brigade management committee. This management committee handled daily administrative affairs and oversaw village-wide projects such as irrigation systems, which were beyond the scope of any of the individual teams.[5] But the seven-man (no women) party branch committee was more important. It made the major decisions, supervised the management committee's work, kept close tabs on the five new production teams to ensure that they acted according to official regulations, and took responsibility in the village for carrying out the national party's political campaigns. Chen Qingfa was the party secretary and Chen Longyong the brigade management chief under him. In 1961 both were not quite thirty years old. The clashes between them would be central to Chen Village's history during the next two decades.

Chen Qingfa

Chen Qingfa's class background had been of considerable help to him in his rise to the top leadership post. He had been one of the poorest of Chen Village's poor peasants at the time of land reform. But his origins were "complicated," for he was related to the village's older landlord family. His great grandfather had served as a minor official in Canton and had secured enough bribes to retire to Chen Village as its major landowner. Qingfa's

[5] Chen Village's management committee originally consisted of a brigade chief, two deputy chiefs in charge of economic management, a militia head, a public security chief, and a man who combined the jobs of accountant and secretarial clerk.