

Seeing Like a Village:  
Local Leadership, Survival, and the Great Leap Famine in China

by

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Local Leadership, Survival, and the Great Leap Famine in China

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## Abstract

This thesis examines grassroots leadership during China's Great Leap Forward, which Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched in 1958 to industrialize and transform the People's Republic of China (PRC) into a communist state. Owing to the CCP's competitive political culture, the campaign incentivized the exaggeration of harvests and the violent punishment of anyone who dared criticize the state's new policies. Food shortages led to famine, and by 1962 over 30 million people had died from unnatural causes. Ignoring its own role in perpetuating an ideology that valued orthodox thinking over the truth, the state blamed the famine largely on the excesses of unscrupulous or fundamentalist cadres. Because research on atrocities is often concerned with the identities of perpetrators, many scholars have also rightly emphasized the role played by these grassroots leaders.

Nevertheless, investigations carried out by the state indicate that many leaders also prioritized the well-being of their communities over the interests of the state. I argue that the grassroots leaders who put their constituents first were acting in accordance with an intangible body of localized expectations, practices, and beliefs called the local logic of survival. This logic was always embedded in the rhythms of daily life, accommodating of new situations or crises, and tied to the physical and historical space in which it operated. Because it existed within rural people's assumptions and values and was never necessary to document in full, this thesis positions the experiences of a rural intellectual named Geng Xiufeng from Hebei as a case study.

When the Great Leap Forward upended life in the countryside, leaders who shared Geng's worldview and experiences worked hard to ensure their communities' survival. They tolerated people eating raw crops from the field, distributed larger rations than were permitted, used what had worked in the past to shape village policy, and valued the knowledge and

expertise of seasoned farmers. Their actions illuminate longstanding continuities in the history of China's countryside and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of a contentious moment in the country's past.

## **Lay Summary**

This thesis examines the role of rural leadership in surviving the famine produced by China's Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1962. While many grassroots leaders succumbed to ideological pressure and exaggerated harvests or violently punished villagers, some continued to adhere to the longstanding expectations, practices, and beliefs that had helped their communities survive natural disasters for centuries. Scholars have emphasized the former group because they are responsible for much of the devastation caused by the campaign, but a close look at the latter makes new contributions to historical knowledge of the Great Leap Forward and China's countryside more broadly. The existence of this group of leaders shows that rural values and assumptions co-existed with the revolutionary zeal and excesses of the Mao era, and it helps sketch out the logic that had undergird life in China's countryside for centuries.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jakub Mscichowski.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Lay Summary .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Methodology and Sources.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Local Logic of Survival: Sketching the Undocumented .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Conceptualizing the Undocumented.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Historicizing the Undocumented.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Mapping the Undocumented .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Learning about China, Identifying with Wugong: The Early Years of Geng Xiufeng .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Thinking Nationally, Acting Locally .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>A Rural Intellectual at Work .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Seeing Like a Village: The Local Logic of Survival Confronts the Great Leap Forward ...</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Seeing Like a Village in Wugong .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Seeing Like a Village throughout China .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>64</b>

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## Introduction

In 1953, just four years after Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the People's Republic of China (PRC), the young country's leadership launched its ambitious First Five Year Plan. The state's primary goal was the development of industrial production. Crucially, Mao and other high-ranking leaders understood that the 1949 Revolution was won on the backs of China's rural population. Because of the group's political significance, the state had not originally intended to burden rural people with overzealous requisition policies—industrialization was not supposed to be achieved at the expense of rural livelihoods, and the state was not to demand more grain than China's rural people could spare.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, by the first months of 1954, the implementation of unified purchase and sale (统购统销) was already turning villagers against the state. When the First Five Year Plan finally concluded in 1957, the CCP's demands on those inhabiting China's countryside grew even more exorbitant.

In 1958, Mao spearheaded the Great Leap Forward, a revolutionary campaign that was intended to rapidly usher the PRC into the modern age. In addition to industrialization, collectivization and the advancement of "true communism" were now on the agenda.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the state's previous Five Year Plan, which had generally left alone aspects of village life unrelated to harvests, the Leap was designed to maximize industrial and agricultural output and completely transform the countryside. Mao understood the traditional concept of family as a vestige of private property and believed that the establishment of an authentic communist state necessitated

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bernstein, "Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurements during the Great Leap Forward," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 340.

<sup>2</sup> By 1959, upon witnessing some of the initial excesses brought about by the radical spirit of the new campaign, the CCP leadership "clarified that the present goal of the Great Leap Forward was the construction of socialism rather than the transformation to communism." Nevertheless, revolutionary zeal continued to inform policy and communization continued unimpeded; see Kimberly Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, introduction to *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberly Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 7.

its transformation. Responding to John Foster Dulles' assertion that the PRC has implemented "slave labor and the destruction of the family," Mao charged that, in fact, "capitalism has long destroyed the family." Under the new communist system, people would take "care of our old and thereby other people's old; take care of our young and thereby other people's young."<sup>3</sup> The CCP sought to realize these radical ideas throughout the countryside, and villages and counties were soon labelled communes and production brigades. Children were raised collectively in nurseries, while dining halls were established so that production teams could work, live, and dine together. Mao was prepared for these new institutions to fail in certain cases:

Without a few collapses, there will not be consolidation. For example, if a few infants die in the nurseries or a few oldsters die in the happiness halls, what would be the superiority of such institutions? If cold rice is served in the dining halls, or if there is only rice and nothing else, a group of them will also collapse. To feel that not one should collapse is not practical. Collapse due to bad handling is rational. Generally speaking, collapses are partial and temporary, not permanent. The general tendency is development and consolidation.<sup>4</sup>

That some people would lose their lives or face hardship as a function of Great Leap policies was baked into the cake of the campaign. But ultimately, China's leadership believed that these radical changes "would inaugurate a pure and perfect society"—one that had successfully emerged from centuries of humiliation, backward thinking, and inequality to become a major player on the international stage.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, within a year, the Great Leap Forward inspired a political environment so toxic and hostile that many local leaders would rather endanger their communities and violently

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<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, *Miscellany of Mao Tse-Tung Thought (1949–1968)*, (Arlington, VA: Joint Publications Research Service, 1974), 1:134.

<sup>4</sup> Mao, *Miscellany of Mao Tse-Tung Thought*, 1:46.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 217.

punish dissenting voices than risk their own careers with the Party. It was, as James C. Scott observes in *Seeing Like a State*, one of the “well-intended schemes to improve the human condition [that] have gone so tragically awry.”<sup>6</sup> Inspired by claims such as Mao’s proclamation that the country’s steel production would surpass Britain’s within fifteen years, as well as the campaign’s initial successes, ideological fundamentalists labeled anyone who dared criticize the Great Leap’s flaws as “rightist-opportunists” and “counter-revolutionaries.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Mao repudiated criticism and demanded that media outlets continue publishing reports that lauded specific communes for producing immense quantities of grain. Under pressure to emulate these harvests, underperforming communes exaggerated their own yields and surrendered more food than they could spare.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the political climate engendered by a series of recent political campaigns had generated a human-made famine that would result in tens of millions of deaths by the end of 1961.<sup>9</sup> The journalist Yang Jisheng, whose book contains the most comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of China’s demographics during these years of unnecessary scarcity, argues that the final death toll, which includes deaths by starvation, beating, suicide, and other unnatural causes, was around 36 million.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Manning and Wemheuer, introduction to *Eating Bitterness*, 7–9.

<sup>8</sup> Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958–1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 99.

<sup>9</sup> As Ning Wang argues, the preceding Anti-Rightist Campaign, itself a response to the Hundred Flowers campaign, was one of many movements that persuaded people to adopt orthodox thinking and behaviour rather than tell the truth. Those sanctioned for speaking out against Party policies or beliefs would go on to victimize others as a display of their ideological transformation. In the CCP’s campaign culture, “victim and perpetrator (or target and activist) changed places in various local struggles to make sense of the political campaign, adapt to each new climate, stay out of trouble, use the campaign for personal advantage, or all four.” As the Great Leap Forward unfolded, it is no surprise that anyone caught up in this cycle exaggerated yields or meted out violent punishment to less loyal constituents. See Ning Wang, “Victims and Perpetrators: Campaign Culture in the Chinese Communist Party’s Anti-Rightist Campaign,” *Twentieth-Century China* 45, no. 2 (2020): 190–93.

<sup>10</sup> Yang, *Tombstone*, 430.

Historians generally agree that many rural cadres inflated crop yields, hoarded communal grain for their families, and punished those they perceived as disloyal to the Party—all as a function of political pressure.<sup>11</sup> In his comprehensive history of the famine, Yang emphasizes this narrative and places blame squarely on Mao’s leadership and the fanaticism of lower-ranking officials; in his view, Mao established “a secular theocracy that united the center of power with the center of truth” and generated a political environment in which people lived in fear of deviating from official policies and orthodox thinking.<sup>12</sup> Cadres then took on the role of ideological enforcers. Throughout China, they subjected constituents who deviated from policies or resisted communization to violent beatings and other punishments.<sup>13</sup> In another account, historian Frank Dikötter contends that these grassroots cadres were consistently guilty of a “callous disregard for human life.”<sup>14</sup> And in their work, Cao Shuji and Yang Bin emphasize the many acts of sexual abuse and exploitation committed by corrupt local leaders. In the end, they conclude, the “overlap of an authoritarian power and a new patriarchal system created a new form of gender domination in Mao’s China.”<sup>15</sup> Even Ralph A. Thaxton, whose work frequently touches on acts of grassroots agency during the famine, contends that scholarship “cannot explain the speed or scope of the unbelievable savagery unleashed in rural communities during the Great Leap period without reference to Mao’s willing accomplices in the countryside.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout Xinyang County, for instance, campaigns against rightist deviation resulted in a seemingly endless pattern of inflation and punishment. Leaders exaggerated yields and delivered more grain to the state than their community’s could stand to lose. When others criticized these dangerous actions, the same leaders were quick to punish them for their “right-deviating conservatism”; see Yang, *Tombstone*, 24–25.

<sup>12</sup> Yang, *Tombstone*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Yang, *Tombstone*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2010), 299.

<sup>15</sup> Cao Shuji and Yang Bin, “Cadres, Grain, and Sexual Abuse in Wuwei County, Mao’s China,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph A. Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao’s Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25.

While Mao is frequently blamed for condoning ideological excess and continuing to advocate for Great Leap goals after being confronted with the campaign's abject failures, these histories all position regional and local cadres as the actors most directly responsible for making life hell in China's villages.

Because investigations carried out by the state also blame cadres, the CCP has never fully taken responsibility for its role in promulgating irresponsible policies and fostering a political culture that prioritized orthodox thinking over effective action. In 1960, for instance, the chaos into which Fengxian County descended is emblematic of the types of overreach regularly practiced by local leaders.<sup>17</sup> A CCP report maintained that cadres throughout Fengxian, located just outside of Shanghai, were “carrying out unsanctioned torture” (进行非刑). Specifically, the report charged cadres with “binding, hanging up and beating, fighting chaotically, forcing people to kneel, parading people through the streets, and withholding food” (捆绑、吊打、乱斗、罚跪、游街和停餐)—all acts of violence that were becoming “common phenomena” (普遍的现象) throughout the region.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have emphasized these acts of violence, as well as the blind political fervor that was responsible for the famine, because histories of atrocities are susceptible to distortion and manipulation by state perpetrators. Over the years, the PRC's official narrative has repeatedly placed blame for the famine on unscrupulous cadres, unfair deals with the Soviet

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<sup>17</sup> Although administrative transformations during the Great Leap Forward's collectivization efforts transformed many counties into communes, I use “county” whenever the authors of the documents I examine retain the term.

<sup>18</sup> “Shànghǎi shìwěi pī zhuǎn shìwěi jiān wěi guānyú Fèngxian xiàn yánzhòng wéifǎ luàn jì cuòwù de jiǎnchá qíngkuàng hé chǔlǐ yìjiàn de bàogào” [上海市委批转市委监委关于奉贤县严重 违法乱纪错误的检查情况和处理意见的报告], 28 March 1960, *Chinese Great Leap Forward and Great Famine Database* (Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, 2014).

Union, and bad weather. Getting the story straight is crucial, particularly when the state has a vested interest in silencing criticism and erasing victims.<sup>19</sup>

While necessary, such a sweeping negative characterization of China's rural leadership sidelines the actions of the many cadres who prioritized their communities over their commitment to enacting official policies whatever the cost. If, as Yang argues, the famine was largely a consequence of "the degeneration of the national character of the Chinese people"<sup>20</sup> produced by the CCP's totalitarian impulses, then the existence of cadres who critiqued, modified, or disregarded official policy suggests that this degeneration was not as pervasive as earlier accounts of the period have suggested. However, a crucial question remains: what allowed these local leaders to ignore political pressure and the threat of punishment to put the survival of their communities ahead of Great Leap goals?

I argue that communities that practiced a variety of life-saving measures, including letter-writing, adjusting rations, lying about mortality, underreporting harvests, or eating unripened crops directly from the field, were aided by two key factors: the presence of leaders with a strong personal relationship and sense of responsibility to the community, and the existence of a longstanding body of knowledge and expectations about the vicissitudes of rural life, survival strategies, and cultural beliefs that tied one villager to the next.

For generations, rural people had no choice but to walk a fine line separating survival from starvation. One particularly bad season could spell hunger and death for the members of a community living on the margins. Over time, these communities developed a localized logic that equipped them with the values and tools necessary to survive natural disaster and the predations

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<sup>19</sup> Yang notes that documentation, records, and studies were written so as to erase knowledge of the famine, and that the government invited "friends of China" on tours that were "meticulously planned" so that the visitors could return home with stories of a happy and healthy communist state; see Yang, *Tombstone*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Yang, *Tombstone*, 19.

of the state. I call this logic the “local logic of survival.” Combining elements of Prasenjit Duara’s cultural nexus of power and James C. Scott’s work on moral economy and *mētis*, this concept helps us understand how some communities in the late 1950s and early 1960s willingly disobeyed Party policies and engaged in practices that were explicitly deemed antagonistic to the spirit of communization.

Leadership was often critical to the deployment of the logic. Just as the ideological fundamentalism of a grassroots cadre determined whether a community would jeopardize its own survival by exaggerating harvests and violently cracking down on political disobedience, those in power at the village and county levels also determined whether a community could effectively draw on its local logic of survival. Most villages had likely generated their own logics over time, but the Great Leap Forward presented a unique challenge because the effects of its policies—a transformation of rural beliefs and practices, as well as an increased identification with the goals of the state—frequently disrupted connections to tried and tested survival practices.<sup>21</sup> In this light, rural leaders who were long-time residents of their villages, whose own subsistence was dependent on the village’s well-being, and who had strong community ties that prevented CCP work teams from handing power over to outsiders or the inexperienced were vital to community endurance. The existence of these grassroots cadres demonstrates that the series of reforms

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to eliminating the family unit and private production to produce a population that lived and worked together, the Great Leap was also designed to eradicate every element of rural society that the CCP perceived as superstitious or feudal. Beliefs and religious practices were discouraged, while sites of religious and cultural importance were destroyed or salvaged to provide space and materials for top-down projects. Prasenjit Duara argues that leaders typically gained legitimacy and the trust of their constituents from their connection to a “hierarchy of cosmic authority” signified by these beliefs and cultural sites; at the same time, these leaders were instrumental in mediations between the state and the village and for leading survival strategies. In this way, survival was often interlaced with cultural institutions and the rhythms of everyday life. A community’s relationship to its local logic of survival was undeniably tested by the erasure of these longstanding practices and spaces. See Zhou Xun, *The Great Famine in China, 1958–1962: A Documentary History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 91; Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 135.



implemented by late-Qing officials, the Kuomintang (KMT), and Communists during the twentieth century did by no means produce a totalizing transformation of society. Even as the Great Leap Forward decimated families, eliminated private cultivation, transformed the rural landscape, and promoted identification with the national agenda, some leaders rejected the state's dangerous modernizing policies and continued to see their community's well-being and development from the perspective of the village.

### *Methodology and Sources*

As a framework that sets out to understand a moment in time as traumatic, chaotic, and politically contentious as the Great Leap Famine, the local logic of survival is not without shortcomings. As Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley writes of her own work on China's Incredible Famine (1867–1879), “it is impossible to grasp the totality of the famine through any one theory, or even through a combination of many analytic approaches... This difficulty in neatly analyzing the famine may have something to do with the nature of famine itself.”<sup>22</sup> That the identities of rural leaders and the existence of such a logic curtailed a community's suffering does not bring us closer to fully understanding the countless fears, unthinkable decisions, and moral compromises that shaped rural life in China between 1958 and 1962. Not all leaders shared the same background and pursued the same agenda, not all communities reached back into the past in the same way for the same set of strategies, and not all were equally successful in their efforts. Some historians have emphasized resistance as a corrective to narratives that emphasize hunger and violence, but it, too, has limitations. Rural people resisted the state, but they also tolerated its

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<sup>22</sup> Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 7.

intrusions, took advantage of ambiguities, and accepted its support.<sup>23</sup> By emphasizing survival as a broad array of strategies undertaken by leaders in conjunction with their villages, this paper's framework makes sense of a complex phenomenon while accommodating a myriad of regional, cultural, and historical differences.

The moral and historical complexity of the Great Leap Forward also necessitates a nuanced approach to sources. Dozens of investigations and reports collected in the *Great Leap Forward and Great Famine Database*, edited by Song Yongyi, point to a widespread pattern of leaders deviating from policy to alleviate famine conditions. They led their constituents to eat unripened crops directly from the field, distributed extra rations, reinstated private family plots, turned a blind eye to black-market activity, and wrote letters to higher-ranking leaders. But because the activities of these cadres have been recorded by state actors who perceived them as “rightist-opportunists” and “capitalist-restorationists,” there is little indication as to how they understood these actions and if they knew of their consequences. The microhistorical approach taken by Carlo Ginzburg to understand the cultural environment and worldview of a sixteenth-century Italian miller is useful for thinking about the obstacle posed by these Party documents. Written sources that describe the lives of “common people,” Ginzburg argues, “are doubly indirect for they are *written*, and written in general by individuals who were more or less openly attached to the dominant culture. This means that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through

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<sup>23</sup> Wemheuer draws on Lynne Viola's observations of rural resistance in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and argues that these patterns existed in China during the Great Leap Famine as well. Ralph Thaxton and Gao Wangling have both emphasized the importance of resistance during the famine, but Wemheuer suggests that “it is difficult to evaluate how transferable the experience of a single village is to that of the entire country” given the malleability of rural survival strategies. See Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 80–81.

distorting viewpoints and intermediaries.”<sup>24</sup> In the Great Leap reports, the values and vocabulary of the CCP inevitably distort the actions they document. Taken together, these sources do point to a meaningful pattern of cadre agency—one that complicates pre-existing narratives of the Great Leap Famine and enriches our understanding of rural identity and experience—but their interpretation remains fraught with challenges.

To connect the documented Party condemnation of cadres willing to deviate from policy to aid their communities and the undocumented process that produced this pattern, this study positions the memoir of a rural leader as a meeting point between a longstanding yet largely invisible historical process and the activities of a group of historical actors silenced by the state. Geng Xiufeng (耿秀锋), a rural intellectual and cadre from Hebei’s Wugong Village—the site of Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden’s landmark study of rural transformation in the PRC, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*—spent nearly fifty years compiling fifty-five volumes of memoirs, journals, and letters. His leadership experiences were diverse, but by the 1950s he remained stationed at the grassroots level. He was involved in Wugong’s transition from village to co-op in 1953, and by 1958 had become a commune-level cadre, although much of his thinking on rural matters had developed long before he joined the CCP. After holding the position for the entirety of the Great Leap Forward, Geng served two more years. In 1964, a bout of tuberculosis “forced him to retire from his state job at the age of 53.”<sup>25</sup> His wartime development of “land partnership groups” (土地合伙组) had turned Wugong into a model village, and he continued to believe in the capacity of these organizations to improve the lives of

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<sup>24</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xxii.

<sup>25</sup> Paul G. Pickowicz, “Memories of Revolution and Collectivization in China: The Unauthorized Reminiscences of a Rural Intellectual,” in *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, ed. Rubie S. Watson, (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1994), 130.

China's rural people up until his death in 1999. The body of writing he left behind—and most important, the attitudes, beliefs, and values expressed within—provide a detailed window into the mind of a local leader who prized the self-determination of rural communities and advocated for the well-being of rural people across the country.

Geng's memoir, *The True Path* (人间正边), is singularly dedicated to positioning Wugong's experiences with land partnership groups as a means of “correcting the party's style of work to benefit the country and the people” (为了端正党风有利国家和人民).<sup>26</sup> While it is filled with recollections of Geng's experiences, encounters with others, and second-hand stories—much of it rendered as dialogue—the memoir is constantly circling back to this thesis. Much of the text is undated, but chapters describing events that occurred in 1986 indicate that Geng continued writing into the second half of the 1980s. The memoir was unpublished, handwritten, and clearly a work in progress. Each volume has a new table of contents, some chapters have been repositioned and given new page numbers, and large sections of text have been crossed out, although the content of Geng's excisions remains legible. These changes are emblematic of the fact that the memoir is, at all times, Geng's own presentation of himself and his actions.

Nevertheless, the manuscript is an invaluable and relatively unfiltered repository of rural experiences. In *The Gender of Memory*, Gail Hershatter theorizes that many people understood their pasts according to a shared temporality that she calls “campaign time.” Through campaign time, people organized their recollections of daily life in the countryside according to the implementation and goals of the period's numerous political movements, “cordoning off the pre-

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<sup>26</sup> Geng Xiufeng, *The True Path: Advancing on the Road to Inspiring and Guiding Peasants to Become Rich*. [人间正边: 在启发诱导贫农变富的大边上前进]. Unpublished manuscript available at the University of California, San Diego's Geisel Library, 1302–15.

1949 past with the term ‘before Liberation’ and measuring the present by state initiatives and popular participation in them.”<sup>27</sup> The memories of all rural people were to some extent shaped by campaign time, given how deeply political movements penetrated into everyday experiences, while gendered social structures tended to make men’s memories adhere even more closely to this narrative.<sup>28</sup> In some ways, Geng’s narrative adheres to Hershatter’s conception of campaign time. Yet, according to Pickowicz, who met Geng and collected his diaries, one incredible value of the memoir is that “it conflicts with virtually all state narratives and mythologies that discuss the transition to socialism in the rural sector.”<sup>29</sup> In this context, the memoir is an important chronicle of rural experiences precisely because it deviates from the chronology of campaign time. That its contents are inevitably filtered through Geng’s perspective at the time of writing is useful because the leader’s worldview, the filter itself, is what concerns us. The formative incidents of Geng’s life were by no means unique to Wugong Village, and similar experiences likely occurred across the country. As a result, this memoir reveals how other rural leaders may have come to hold similar attitudes about knowledge, self-determination, and community survival.

Structurally, this thesis resembles a bridge that links two indistinct and imperceptibly linked historical patterns. On one side sits the local logic of survival—a force with both cultural and material dimensions that undergirded everyday life throughout China’s countryside. Chapter One draws on the work of Duara and Scott to chart the parameters of this logic. It also demonstrates how the institutions and expectations that held this logic together began to break down as a series of modernizing states penetrated and attempted to transform rural life. Chapter

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<sup>27</sup> Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 24–27.

<sup>29</sup> Pickowicz, “Memories of Revolution and Collectivization in China,” 130.

Two, the bridge itself, charts Geng Xiufeng's formative years, including his education, career path, and intellectual development. Geng's experiences and worldview serve as an embodiment of the ways the local logic of survival persisted well into the twentieth century, and they reflect how others may have confronted the transforming world around them. At the other end of the bridge sit the grassroots leaders who risked their lives and reputations to aid their communities. Chapter Three begins by outlining Geng's objections to Great Leap policies and alarm at the double-bind in which the state had placed low-ranking cadres, and concludes by bringing similar dynamics buried in state reports to light. To be sure, a single case cannot hope to capture the all local variables, historical contingencies, and accidents that influenced the Great Leap cadres who, at great risk, worked for the survival of their communities, but it does sketch an outline of the sorts of expectations, practices, and beliefs that drove their actions.

## Chapter One

### The Local Logic of Survival: Sketching the Undocumented

The same old thing. Why do some do so well, and some do so poorly? What's the reason?  
(一样的事。为什么有的办得很好, 有的办得很糟。啥原因?)

Geng Xiufeng, *The True Path*<sup>30</sup>

This chapter draws on geographically diverse historical case studies to map out a blueprint of the local logic of survival in action during the century immediately preceding the Great Leap Forward. The first section draws on Prasenjit Duara's concept of the cultural nexus of power and James C. Scott's work on moral economy and *mētis* as theoretical models that explain how the local logic of survival emerged as rural people's primary mechanism for ensuring survival, while the second section takes a closer look at how the logic was affected by the modernizing policies of the late-Qing and Republican states. The third and final section identifies three persistent characteristics of the logic: it was ingrained in everyday life, adaptive to new situations, and fixed to particular places and histories.

#### *Conceptualizing the Undocumented*

For many in China's countryside, natural disasters were as certain as agricultural cycles and taxes. In Hebei's Raoyang County, where Geng Xiufeng spent virtually all of his life, disasters devastated the region's villages "an average of once every seven years" from 1368 to 1749.<sup>31</sup> Neihuang County, in Sichuan, where a cadre named Wang Fucheng served during the Great Leap Forward, endured similar trials. A chapter of the *Neihuang County Gazetteer* called "Good and Bad Fortune" includes "fourteen droughts, eleven floods, six locust plagues, three

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<sup>30</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 4.

earthquakes, three major wind storms, and one major disease epidemic” that occurred between 1513 and 1611.<sup>32</sup> The proximity of rivers and these counties’ unique ecological features were responsible for these particular calamities, but the persistence of environmental hardship was a reality for rural people everywhere. Even after the implementation of large-scale modernization projects initiated by late-Qing and Republican governments, these lessons of the past persisted. As Edgerton-Tarpley observes, between 1877, when the Incredible Famine devastated parts of Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, and present-day Hebei, and 1960, the peak of the Great Leap Famine, “the basic assumption that natural disasters would occur on a regular basis and must be prepared for had not changed.”<sup>33</sup> Over time, a community’s expectations and knowledge about enduring famine and other environmental hardships could not help but crystalize into a local logic of survival.

Ultimate responsibility for dealing with the consequences of these crises fell on the state, but the remote nature of rural life meant that local leaders could not afford to idly stand by while the capital took charge. In theory, should the emperor have failed to rescue his constituents from starvation, his legitimacy, bestowed upon him by the “Mandate of Heaven,” would be lost.<sup>34</sup> In many cases, state relief from the effects of natural calamity came through, although it did not always take the same form. Of the thirty-three entries describing the variety of natural disasters experienced by Neihuang County in the sixteenth century, ten refer to government aid, while others refer to the county magistrates’ petitions for extra grain and taxation relief of up to 80 percent.<sup>35</sup> However, the welfare of rural people was not always at the top of the state’s list of

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<sup>32</sup> Peter J. Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse: Portrait of a Village Leader in China, 1923-1995* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 232.

<sup>34</sup> Manning and Wemheuer, introduction to *Eating Bitterness*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from his Horse*, 7–9.



priorities. In 1877, as the Qing court debated how best to deal with the Incredible Famine, authorities were torn between allocating resources to aid afflicted provinces and using them to defend against foreign threats—while many, including Empress Dowager Cixi, advocated using resources for famine relief, the court generally pushed forward the state’s national security agenda.<sup>36</sup> When the state failed to supply aid, or when the aid was insufficient, local leadership was inevitably deemed responsible. Because rural leaders had spent generations enduring what Wemheuer calls the “myth of the good emperor who wants the best for the people and evil local officials who are driven by selfish motives,” rural communities had folded their expectations about leadership and how it functioned in both times of normalcy and times of crisis into the logic that ensured their survival.<sup>37</sup>

Expectations about a leader’s role were woven into the culture of China’s villages, and as a result, they were instrumental in a locality’s development of its logic of survival. Duara’s image of the cultural nexus of power offers some insight into the relationship between leaders and their constituents, as well as on their critical role as mediators. Broadly, Duara’s concept explains how power functioned in rural communities before the Qing state’s implementation of modernizing reforms at the dawn of the twentieth century. This nexus, in Duara’s words, “was composed of hierarchical organizations and networks of informal relations that constantly intersected and interacted with one another.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, it was not a fixed system that rural elites and ordinary farmers consciously followed; rather, it emerged informally as a function of the various cultural “symbols and norms” that defined daily life in North China’s countryside.

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<sup>36</sup> Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Felix Wemheuer, “Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People’s Republic of China,” *China Quarterly* 201 (2010):181.

<sup>38</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 5.

These symbols and norms, which were expressed through everyday contexts like religion, relationships with neighbors and kin, and the local economy, were codified and legitimized by institutions like markets, temples, and infrastructural necessities, and by networks linking different segments of the village population. Because these institutions and networks had material as well as cultural value for rural communities, leadership was not simply a function of a local elite's material assets. Instead, these leaders' actions were also driven by "considerations of status, prestige, honor, and social responsibility"—all of which were embedded in and legitimized by the symbols and norms that had emerged from local beliefs, practices, and conditions, and which were believed to be common-sensical and important by community members.<sup>39</sup> Both ordinary people and leaders made decisions according to the nexus because it conformed to their expectations, aligned with their moral code, and, generally, worked well. Leaders needed wealth and prestige, but they also needed to fulfil the expectations held by the rest of their communities—expectations that were legitimized by the symbols and norms that constituted the vocabulary of daily life. They were responsible for "providing medical services, making contributions to community religious events, mediating disputes, and providing access to outside economic and political centers."<sup>40</sup> Without fulfilling these expectations, leaders would quickly lose their status among their communities and be replaced. Their hold onto power was secure only when they operated according to the cultural nexus of power and fulfilled their expected roles.

Given the frequency with which Chinese villages were struck by natural disaster, the capacity of leaders to help navigate their constituents through these trying periods was essential. But while Duara's insights into the bonds between rural leaders and their constituents shed light

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<sup>39</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power and the State*, 180.

on the critical position of leadership in virtually all village operations, they fail to account for the actual development of a reliable and time-tested body of practices that constituted a local logic of survival. As he points out in his own study, “it is not easy to generalize about the nature of collective consciousness from institutional data.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, Scott’s conclusions about moral economy and *mētis* as the universal driving forces of rural life are helpful. The “subsistence ethic” is particularly useful for conceptualizing how the knowledge and practices that developed in pre-twentieth-century Chinese villages became the foundation for the survival and resistance strategies that would eventually be deployed by rural cadres when famine struck in the late 1950s. Scott defines the subsistence ethic—one of the principal outcomes of a moral economy that prioritizes community survival and anticipates precarious conditions—as “the *technical arrangements* evolved by the peasantry to iron out the ‘ripples that might drown a man.’”<sup>42</sup> These include agricultural knowledge about plant varieties, seasonal cycles, and food substitutes, as well as how to structure a year’s work to ensure that there will be enough left over from the harvest to sustain the family unit. In addition to these technical arrangements, which rural people developed over a long stretch of time, “social arrangements” that Scott defines as patterns “of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing helped to even out the inevitable troughs in a family’s resources which might otherwise have thrown them below subsistence” also determined how rural people operated in their environments.<sup>43</sup> Scott’s work on *mētis* documents these claims by describing how these various technical and social arrangements functioned according to knowledge and expertise gleaned from experience. In his view, the concept “represents a wide array of practical skills and

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<sup>41</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 2–3.

acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment.”<sup>44</sup>

While the moral economy and its subsistence ethic explain the values and considerations that undergirded rural life, *mētis* suggests that the survival techniques that emerged from this worldview were by necessity flexible, local, and embedded in everyday practices like agriculture and small sideline operations.

Nevertheless, just as Duara’s cultural nexus of power is not concerned with the informal application of a broad array of survival strategies—many unique to a particular locality’s history and environment—Scott’s sweeping assessments of rural life are not without their shortcomings. Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden suggest that “if moral economy is taken to mean that peasants are rooted tillers concerned only with subsistence, then [their] book’s data on the centrality of markets sidelines, temporary labour, and remittances must weigh against an essential element of moral economy.”<sup>45</sup> Because Scott’s work begins in Southeast Asia and generalizes outward into different models of rural life, he also fails to account for the cultural elements that Duara emphasizes. Likewise, Thaxton suggests that an uncritical application of Scott’s findings would overlook “the real nature of Leninist relations” that increasingly came to define relationships between high-ranking CCP officials and grassroots leaders.<sup>46</sup> At no point in space or time are Scott’s findings an exact fit for China’s unique and diverse countryside.

Yet, when examined in conjunction with Duara’s assessment of the way leadership functioned in villages throughout North China, the idea that forces resembling Scott’s moral economy and *mētis* sustained rural communities does accord with what Vivienne Shue has observed generally about the underlying logic of China’s countryside. In her view, “on a

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<sup>44</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 313.

<sup>45</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 270–71.

<sup>46</sup> Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 117.

question of local administration, a village head may choose a particular course of action as much because it fits with a folk-Confucian concept of upright behaviour as because it is what the Communist Party and Chairman might recommend.”<sup>47</sup> Cultural and ideological influences were always in play, as Duara’s cultural nexus of power demonstrates, but they were frequently drawn upon in concert with the longstanding material imperatives underlined by Scott. Taken together, these theoretical models bring us closer to an understanding of the intangible collection of expectations, practices, and beliefs that constituted the local logic of survival of China’s villages—a body of knowledge that, by its nature, was always embedded in the vicissitudes of everyday life and that state officials never found necessary to document in full.

### *Historicizing the Undocumented*

The suggestion that this informal, ever-changing, and deeply localized force reliably guaranteed the survival of rural communities is insufficient. Only by tracing its appearances throughout China’s recent past can we construct a more thorough understanding of how it actually functioned throughout villages during the Great Leap Forward. A community’s logic was always growing, changing, and adapting to new and unprecedented developments. Because much of China’s countryside had been transformed by expanding infrastructural and economic systems, a series of regime shifts, and an influx of novel ideologies in the century leading up to the Great Leap Forward, including this recent history is necessary step for understanding the world of Geng and his village. Moreover, to suggest that that the logic has always been one particular set of expectations, practices, and beliefs would be to reinforce what Paul A. Cohen

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<sup>47</sup> Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 64.

has called the “old picture of a stagnant, slumbering, unchanging China.”<sup>48</sup> Village organization and values may have been consistently informed by a local logic of survival, but each manifestation of the logic was consistently attentive and adaptive to new situations and threats.

State-led relief had been a mainstay throughout the countryside since at least the Song dynasty (960–1279). Joanna Handlin Smith notes that local granaries and “state-sponsored poorhouses,” as well as religious institutions like Buddhist monasteries and local temples, were the most common resources for rural people in times of crisis.<sup>49</sup> By the final years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), however, regional benevolent societies proliferated throughout the country and were encoded within the broader system of relief programs. With the support of the central government, these societies were explicitly predicated on relationships between leaders and villagers. Wealthy elites were expected to offer their support to the needy and morally upright so as to improve the spiritual and material well-being of the entire community. These societies were designed to aid entire localities rather than particular lineages, and they were premised on the notion that “the wealthy of each locale should save the poor of that locale.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, benevolent societies linked with the network of relationships and institutions that constituted a community’s cultural nexus of power. Consequently, they entered the even more dynamic and variable body of expectations, beliefs, and practices that comprised a local logic of survival. By the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the logic was perceived as the most substantial safeguard against starvation and death. Liu Xing, a contemporary chronicler of the Incredible Famine, cited village disunity as the chief cause of the disaster. Although his assessment was

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<sup>48</sup> Paul A. Cohen. *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 57.

<sup>49</sup> Joanna Handlin Smith, “Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch’ing,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (1987): 310.

<sup>50</sup> Handlin Smith, “Benevolent Societies,” 329–30.

couched in the moral and spiritual dimensions of Confucianism, Liu was clear about the breakdown of relations between ordinary villagers and leaders: “The rich were not benevolent and teachers were not strict.”<sup>51</sup>

These arrangements between villagers and wealthy rural elites persisted up until the beginning of the Republican period (1912–1949), during which the state pursued modernizing projects to an even greater degree than their immediate Qing predecessors. During its final decade, the Qing had implemented the “New Policies” (新政), which demanded that villages subsidize the construction of “modern schools, administrative units, and defense organizations”—all in addition to paying a new tax for which the entire community was responsible. These transformations in education, governance, and military operations were compounded by “extensive railway construction [that] facilitated closer economic integration than had heretofore been possible.”<sup>52</sup> The transnational connections facilitated by this network of railways represented a staggering shift in the development of many rural regions throughout the country. A fishing village named Qingdao had, after joining China’s network of “inland economies” and “major treaty ports” a century before, grown into “a city of 592,000 by 1938.”<sup>53</sup> Not every village transformed into a bustling metropolis, but the impact of these changes was felt nearly everywhere.

Longstanding expectations about local governance—one of the bedrocks of a functioning local logic of survival—were upended as national developments created a new class of village leaders. Pressure exerted by the state or by avaricious warlords on rural gentry to extract more taxes from their constituents created power vacuums. Many educated and wealthy elites whose

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<sup>51</sup> Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 75.

<sup>52</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 1–3.

<sup>53</sup> Philip C. C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 136.

families had long occupied positions of power were increasingly driven to poverty, while others began to feel that leadership was not worth the ire of their neighbors.<sup>54</sup> Duara notes that one North China villager described the new generation of leaders as “those who did not have a fixed occupation, those who smoked opium and liked to gamble.”<sup>55</sup> Local power structures in Sichuan were undergoing a similar shift. In Neihuang County, an absence of traditional leaders created space for opportunistic villagers to turn longstanding survival strategies into mechanisms of exploitation. Civil militias, which had long been a recourse in periods of strife, were intended to protect villagers from the predations of marauding gangs of bandits, yet the fees they demanded from the population were often as extortionate as outright theft. Paradoxically, Peter J. Seybolt notes, the “militia was the principal beneficiary of the tax as well the principal agent to enforce payment,” and they served their own interests without fear of reprisal from a largely absent government.<sup>56</sup> As villages grew increasingly connected to an unstable state undergoing an unprecedented array of changes, those same changes destabilized the logic that had sustained them through disaster for centuries.

Even so, the local logic of survival continued to guide rural life, even if the dearth of leaders who cared for their constituents had diminished its prevalence and dampened its efficacy. In the countryside around Chengdu, where Paoge Brotherhoods enjoyed a powerful hold over rural villages, and where ordinary people were subjected to exorbitant tax rates levied by warlords, the local logic of survival persisted in unusual ways. Farmers owed their landlords a percentage of their harvested rice and vegetables that would have been devastating in a region like North China, and they were not granted any reprieve in times of scarcity. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>54</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 192.

<sup>55</sup> Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 172.

<sup>56</sup> Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse*, 16.



geography of the Chengdu Plain was especially amenable to different kinds of planting, and the yields produced by the region's farmers were much higher, making such exploitative taxation relatively tolerable. Not surprisingly, neither ordinary people nor Paoge Brothers in leadership positions were willing to risk disrupting this stability to acquire food that was not absolutely essential for community survival. As Wang Di writes, "rural people recognized this fortunate situation and, to prevent disruption, followed their established systems of social organization and order," which had reliably sustained them thus far.<sup>57</sup> Other villages were simply lucky enough to retain elites who abided by the logic. Although Neihuang County was not without its share of opium-smoking and work-averse village leaders, Xi Bailian, a representative of the KMT and local landowner, was well-known for providing aid to distressed villagers. As a manager of Baimapu Township's Dongyue temple, he frequently used the space to house those who had fallen on hard times.<sup>58</sup> The cultural foundations of the local logic of survival had clearly been imperiled by the currents of modernity, but these examples indicate that this driving force of rural life would not disappear so easily.

### *Mapping the Undocumented*

Expressions of the logic were typically inextricable from a community's normal operations, innately flexible and accommodating of change, and closely tied to the particular history and culture of the area for which they worked. This latter characteristic was also responsible for the relationship between villagers and leaders through which the logic was

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<sup>57</sup> Wang Di, *Violence and Order on the Chengdu Plain: The Story of a Secret Brotherhood in Rural China, 1939-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 109.

<sup>58</sup> Gregory A. Ruf, *Cadres and Kin: Making a Socialist Village in West China, 1921-1991* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 27.

channelled to aid in a community's survival. One of the most critical features of the local logic of survival—and the chief reason for its invisibility in documentation—is that it was woven into the fabric of everyday life. In Henan's Da Fo Village, the site of Thaxton's case study, most rural people subsisted on the crops they produced and from profits obtained by selling salt. For some, this was not always enough. Many gained additional income by engaging in highly skill-dependent trades such as producing furniture and sewing clothes. When disaster struck and the village plunged into periods of scarcity, as it did during a famine in the first few months of 1920, these same skills also proved critical. To be sure, the village secured loans from landowners and benefited from international aid agencies, and villagers frequently supplemented their diets by relying on knowledge of local wild plants—itsself an essential strategy that sprung from Da Fo Village's local logic of survival. But crucially, the clothing and furniture that in times of normalcy would simply provide an additional income became an essential lifeboat in times of crisis.<sup>59</sup> It is no surprise the CCP initially earned the trust of Da Fo villagers, and likely that of other rural people throughout China, by supporting people's desires to maintain essential sideline occupations.<sup>60</sup>

As the multimodal utility of Da Fo's sideline occupations suggest, the local logic of survival was always intricately linked to a village's regular routine, but this does not mean that it was not also dynamic and adaptive. In this way it bears a strong resemblance to Scott's concept of *mētis*. *Mētis*, in his view, is “plastic, local, and divergent. It is in fact the idiosyncrasies of *mētis*, its contextualness, and its fragmentation that makes it so permeable, so open to new ideas.”<sup>61</sup> During Wugong Village's wartime experimentation with agricultural co-ops, for

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<sup>59</sup> Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 26–27.

<sup>60</sup> Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 332.

example, its leadership, including future Great Leap cadre Geng Changsuo, agreed that accommodating those wishing to drop out was better than pressuring or penalizing villagers who expressed disappointment with their returns.<sup>62</sup> In line with the essential motivation underlying the local logic of survival, the goal of the co-op was not to enrich certain individuals but rather ensure survival for of the entire village. Creating divisions was antagonistic to these goals, Wugong’s leaders concluded, and what “counted was to learn from the experience, admit mistakes, and run the co-op better in the future.”<sup>63</sup> Village unity was of paramount importance, and the logic would adapt to the competing desires and diversity of thought found among Wugong’s population.

And just as the logic was embedded in daily life and sufficiently flexible to cope with new situations, it was also deeply connected to the community in which it operated. Even after the implementation of modernization projects that created stronger ties between villages and the state—and, in the process, produced a type of rural leader that did not necessarily prioritize the community’s interests—rural governance continued to exist independent of state control. Local elections, infrastructural projects, religious functions, and legal procedures were typically organized at the grassroots level, and rural people opposed any reforms or policy suggestions that nullified “the solidarity and autonomy of their communities (or, at least, of community

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<sup>62</sup> Like most cadres, Geng Changsuo would eventually struggle to balance his obligations to Wugong villagers and the pressures of senseless Great Leap expectations. During the war, his desire to maintain village unity and work for the benefit of all was clearly his top priority. By the time the Great Leap had taken off, Geng was more willing to endanger his constituents in order to impress the Party. When the famous model village, Dazhai, had sold enough grain to the state that villagers were left with 360 catties per person—an already paltry amount—Geng changed Wugong’s allotment to 359 catties. Throughout all of China, this example suggests, a community’s local logic of survival was frequently in competition with “the logic of the entrenched system, [which] still led people such as Geng to seek ways to display revolutionary zeal to please state leaders.” See Freidman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 264.

<sup>63</sup> Freidman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 74.

leaders).”<sup>64</sup> Sociologist Gregory A. Ruf speaks to how a person’s local environment came to constitute their sense of self and relationship to the rest of the world:

From the perspective of officialdom, only clustered market settlements...were recognized places in the countryside. But for local inhabitants, the vernacularly named topography of the local landscape marked their ancestral roots, and the houses, ancestral halls, and graves that they and their ancestors had built on the land stood as monuments to forms of social community that had developed and endured despite the pervasive insecurity that haunted many families over time.<sup>65</sup>

In this light, the village was a repository for an immense body of knowledge about lineage relations, survival strategies, and the successful organization of rural life. Everything within a community’s logic was bound up in the stories, customs, and relationships that made up the fabric of everyday life. In this way, the precise locality of a village contributed to the body of expectations, practices, and beliefs that constituted its local logic, and it also forged an inextricable link between villagers and the communities in which they lived and died.

The kinds of expectations, practices, and beliefs that shaped village life were instrumental to survival, and their gradual decline prior to and during the Great Leap Forward did contribute to increased deaths in many villages. Yet, this is not the same as suggesting that China’s leaders, intellectuals, and activists should never have advocated widespread reform or infrastructural growth. Indeed, in his writing, Geng Xiufeng demonstrated no interest in maintaining a state of affairs that left China’s rural people perpetually teetering between bare subsistence and outright

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<sup>64</sup> Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern*, 17–18. Whether or not this reflected the will of entire village or simply that of local elites who stood to benefit from pre-existing arrangements is difficult to conclude. Nevertheless, the fact that compromises between ordinary rural people and leaders were sometimes preferable to instability and conflict, and that the leaders who worked for the general wellbeing of the community did not disappear entirely, suggests that some villages were genuine in their opposition to disruptions of the sufficiently stable status quo.

<sup>65</sup> Ruf, *Cadres and Kin*, 29.

starvation. He contended that being from the countryside had always meant “being dirty, hungry, and subject to the cold; begging and fleeing famine; resorting to selling off one’s children; and dying of cold and hunger” (挨饿受冻, 要饭逃荒, 卖儿鬻女, 甚至冻饿而死的).<sup>66</sup> For many like him, socialism did represent liberation from centuries of exploitation and living right at the precipice of death. As Scott points out, revolutionaries not unlike those who fought for a new vision of China in 1911 and 1949 “had every reason to despise the feudal, poverty-stricken, inequalitarian past that they hoped to banish forever.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the self-serving behavior of some Republican-era leaders and the fundamentalism of some CCP cadres were not necessarily a novel challenge for rural people, even if the historical circumstances were new. As Shue notes, unscrupulous local elites, among other things, “beat up their tenants, seized other people’s land or public land, collected unlawful fees, and levied their own private taxes” under Qing rule as well.<sup>68</sup>

Rather than uphold a misguidedly pastoral impression of traditional life in China’s countryside, Geng’s experiences reflect how the logic existed simply to sustain communities that were always confronting one disaster or another. Life in the countryside throughout much of China’s history was hard and unforgiving—the local logic of survival developed not as an ideal model for prosperity and growth, but rather as a means of defending against all kinds of risks, whether they took the shape of natural disasters or the predations of an especially rapacious state. As Geng absorbed a nationalist education that emphasized China’s potential for rejuvenation while surrounded by immiserated farmers who toiled endlessly for little gain, he formulated a philosophy designed to relieve rural people of this life of constant struggle. He wanted

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<sup>66</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 311.

<sup>68</sup> Shue, *The Reach of the State*, 101.

something more for the countryside than bare subsistence. But unlike the ambitious authors of the Great Leap Forward, who shared his hopes for the country, Geng's conduct generally prioritized the welfare and self-determination of his community. In this way, his beliefs and actions remain an excellent window into the underlying principles of the local logic of survival.

## Chapter Two

### Learning about China, Identifying with Wugong: The Early Years of Geng Xiufeng

Victory comes from struggle; happiness comes from the people's own two hands.  
(胜利是争取来的，幸福是人们用自己的双手创造出来的。)

Geng Xiufeng, *The True Path*<sup>69</sup>

Geng was a lifelong adherent of the principles of the local logic of survival. By the time he wrote *The True Path* in the 1970s and 1980s, Geng's rural identity, belief in rural self-determination, and respect for rural experiences had been crystalized for decades.<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, his belief in the correctness of his thinking was unshakable. By “criticizing former mistakes to prevent their reoccurrence” (惩前毖后) and “making advances by reviewing the past” (温故出新), he positioned his memoir as a vehicle for proposing solutions that would improve life for all of China's rural people.<sup>71</sup> But despite these nationwide ambitions, his sense of self remained firmly rooted in the place of Wugong Village. Setting the stage, and reflecting Ruf's observations about the ways that particular places constituted social identities, Geng wrote:

On the vast plains of North China, 400 *li* south of the capital city Beijing, 360 *li* southwest of China's second biggest major city, Tianjin, 240 *li* east of Hebei's capital, Shijiazhuang, and just 25 *li* south of the Raoyang county seat, lies my hometown Wugong Village.

(在辽阔的华北大平原上，在首都北京以南四百里。在全国第二大城市天津西南三百六十里。在河北首府石家庄以东二百四十里，在饶县城南二十五里，就是我们的家乡五公村。)<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 80.

<sup>70</sup> Pickowicz indicates that *The True Path* is a loose translation, but it is an effective summary of Geng's primary goals; see Pickowicz, “Memories of Revolution and Collectivization in China,” 128.

<sup>71</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 12.

The particular space of Wugong no doubt meant a great deal to Geng, and the precision in this passage evokes his sense of the importance of localities. Places were tied to specific knowledge, practices, assumptions, and relationships—all instrumental to their local logics of survival—and only by respecting and understanding these elements could leaders and their communities develop reasonable solutions for local problems.

Geng's ideas were presented as solutions for contemporary readers on a national scale, but they reflected longstanding dynamics between rural communities and the state. In a presentation of the arguments others have levelled against his plan for China's countryside, he differentiated himself from the "intellectual circles" (知识界) and "Party dogmatists" (党内教条主义者) who drew on ideological arguments and sweeping generalizations.<sup>73</sup> This disagreement with outsiders evokes the dynamic that Scott observes between a modernizing state and those at the local level. According to Scott's framework, Geng's critics would be classified as proponents of high modernism backed by an authoritarian regime. Lacking knowledge that mattered in particular localities, they demonstrated the same kind of "self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and...the rational design of social order" that galvanized proponents of the Great Leap.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Geng drew on his experiences as a grassroots leader and his wartime successes with cooperative agriculture to develop a strategy that would benefit all rural people while underscoring their experiences, knowledge, and agency. Looking forward to China's future, he advocated that rural people "only rely on their own mind and hands, self-reliance, and mutual aid and cooperation methods—then they will put a

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<sup>73</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 6–7.

<sup>74</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 4.



permanent end to thousands of years of destitution” (仅靠自己的一个脑袋两只手，及自力更生，互助合作方法，就跟值了几千年的穷病).<sup>75</sup> Geng believed this strategy could work because it prioritized the interests and unique contexts of individual communities. And it was no different from the worldview that guided his actions throughout much of his life.

On their own, the articulation of beliefs and chronicle of experiences found in Geng’s memoir cannot speak to the precise actions, attitudes, and identities of other cadres during the Great Leap Forward. China’s countryside was, and remains, simply too diverse. Yet, the memoir nevertheless lends itself well to a methodology that Shue has called social intertexture. She describes the approach as a juxtaposition of individual experiences and collective patterns:

We must train ourselves to see *at once* both the minutest of minor details and the most grandiose of grand designs. We must search, with magnifying lenses, deep in the fabric of the social intertexture for the winding paths taken by each and every filament; but also step back to appreciate the art and meaning of the overall pattern of the social tapestry.<sup>76</sup>

Drawing on Shue’s framework, this chapter traces Geng’s life from childhood to the period immediately preceding the Great Leap to shed light on how a generation of grassroots leaders may have come of age in the first decades of the twentieth century. The particularities of Geng’s formative years were his own, but in the context of something like the local logic of survival, they also reflect how other future cadres were being shaped by local knowledge, national narratives, and the everyday rhythms of rural life.

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<sup>75</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Shue, *The Reach of the State*, 28.

*Thinking Nationally, Acting Locally*

Born into a wealthy Wugong Village family in 1913, and a beneficiary of the reforms that transformed so many temples into schools throughout China, Geng grew up surrounded by discourse about China's national humiliation and its repeated losses to European empires. Throughout childhood, he was constantly inundated with nationalist narratives and messages to put China's national goals first. While Geng was in elementary school, teachers described to their pupils how imperialists from all over the world—Britain, France, Japan, Russia, Germany, and the United States—exploited and murdered China's people. Upon hearing these aspects of their country's history, Geng remembered, the stomachs of the entire class had begun to bulge with anger (真气的俺们一群小学生的肚子一鼓ㄤ哩).<sup>77</sup> After the Northern Expedition passed through Hebei in early 1928, when Geng would have been fourteen or fifteen, posters praising collective farming and proclaiming the Republic's struggle against the forces of imperialism and corruption adorned the walls of his classroom, further instilling a narrative of humiliation, struggle, and the desire to restore the nation to its former greatness.<sup>78</sup> One teacher taught the class a song meant to inspire and charge pupils with nationalist energy. Its lyrics included praise for the “overthrowing the great powers of history” (打倒列强) and the “success of the national revolution” (国民革命成功).<sup>79</sup> Imagery and knowledge about China's past humiliations and path towards national rejuvenation followed Geng wherever he went. At least in the realm of learning, the local was nowhere to be found.

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<sup>77</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 22-23.

<sup>78</sup> When they arrived in Zhili, the Nationalists ousted the warlord Zhang Zuolin and renamed the province as Hebei. After forming a Raoyang County branch, they turned their attention to “establishing a salt monopoly” and “crushing the Communists” throughout the region. The zeal with which the new state government demanded people's support is evident in all of Geng's educational materials. See Freidman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 24.

At the same time, Geng was also exposed to communist, anarchist, and utopian thinking, and these became significant influences on his understanding of local conditions.<sup>80</sup> In his school, along with paintings calling for the elimination of “traitorous dogs who sell out the country for cheap” (汉奸走狗卖国贱) and “local bullies and evil gentry” (土豪劣绅), there was hung on the classroom wall an especially elaborate illustration expressing the virtues of the popular modernizing ideologies of the moment.<sup>81</sup> Numerous large-character expressions were written on the painting, including one for communism. People from all walks of life were “stretching their arms and cheering” (伸着胳膊欢呼) beneath this panoply of new ideas.<sup>82</sup> These recollections adhere to Kate Merkel-Hess’s account of the Mass-Education Movement, which was based in the nearby city of Dingxian and operated throughout Hebei’s countryside for much of the 1920s and 1930s. Citizenship was a critical new idea, and reformers designed educational materials such as textbooks to stress the relationship between a single person and the entirety of the nation.<sup>83</sup> China’s humiliation at the hands of imperialists and the promises of the revolution were narratives that tethered the country’s rural people to their country’s broader goals. Geng was not unaffected. After finishing the school year, he realized two things: first, that he wanted to continue his education, and second, that he wanted to help China “become rich and powerful and achieve its dreams” (国家富强而出力的愿望).<sup>84</sup> Ideally, this nationalist education should have aligned him firmly with the ideological currents that eventually paved the way for the CCP’s top-

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<sup>80</sup> Pickowicz, “Memories of Revolution and Collectivization in China,” 129–30.

<sup>81</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 23.

<sup>82</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Kate Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 39.

<sup>84</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 26.

down implementation of collectivization, but his memoir indicates a recognition that rural realities did not always gel with the aspirations of modern reform.

Geng recalled this time as one filled with mixed emotions. Throughout this period, he witnessed many whose “hearts were filled with joy” (心里非常高兴) and who felt that there was still hope for China. Inspired by the energy of the moment, two villagers had hoped to start an agricultural cooperative in Wugong. But Geng felt that no real progress was being made. The cooperative failed to materialize, and local despots and bandits continued to harass ordinary rural people, all while “the rich remained rich and the destitute remained destitute” (富的还是那么富，穷的还是那么穷).<sup>85</sup> As Geng wrestled with his ambivalent feelings about the country’s future, a Wugong elder named Li Tonglian with a decrepit home was kidnapped for ransom by a gang of local bandits. Li was an “expert farmer” (种地的好手) and embodied Geng’s admiration for rural self-determination and practical knowledge. A villager with many talents, he was also well-known for crafting axles for carts and using a grindstone, and he single-handedly maintained more than twenty sections of farmland. Clearly, rural communities included industrious labourers equipped with the right knowledge and instincts—Li’s labour frequently produced a surplus, and many felt that “nothing could stop him” (没有难住他的事).<sup>86</sup> What left Geng despondent was that extraneous forces engendered by rural poverty frequently butted up against the community’s intrinsic capacity to thrive. This incident marks one of the first instances of Geng’s struggle to bring his ambitions for China’s development into accord with the local logic of survival. How could the country thrive while preserving local interests and self-determination?

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<sup>85</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 25.

<sup>86</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 29-30.

Socialism seemed to offer up a solution. Geng spent much of his spare time listening to travellers tell stories as they passed through Wugong Village's stores and tea shops. Often, news of China's struggles with opium smuggling, addiction, and banditry proved deeply upsetting, but not all the news was bad.<sup>87</sup> One day, a man quietly smoking in a store stunned a bustling crowd into silence with what he described as the story of an "uncommon affair" (稀罕事).<sup>88</sup> Eagerly anticipating a retelling of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Geng was surprised when the man smiled and told the crowd that Russia had successfully carried out a revolution and become a socialist country. Landlord properties, capitalist factories, banks, and other institutions had all been nationalized, and exploitation, oppression, and cheating had all been eliminated. Everyone had access to a livelihood and food. Nobody had any worries. The news enlivened the spirits of the listeners, and one man even set up a notice proclaiming the goals of the CCP above the door to his small shop. Nevertheless, Geng's apprehensions about the plight of China's countryside remained: "Won't imperialism still dare bully us? When will the Red Army arrive?" (帝国的主义还敢欺负我们吗? 红军什么时候来到我这里?).<sup>89</sup> Socialism's emphasis on equal distribution of wealth and the elimination of exploitative practices held promise, but the lessons of rural life had taught most people to avoid counting on solutions from beyond the village gates.

Geng continued to think of his work in local contexts. In 1932, when he was nineteen years old, the village placed him in charge of managing a nearby primary school. He was pleased because his experiences had taught him the importance of education in the countryside. To create a strong country, he believed, it was necessary to educate rural people, and to educate rural

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<sup>87</sup> Freidman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 54.

<sup>88</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 45.

<sup>89</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 47.

people, it was “necessary to manage primary school education well” (必须办好小学教育).<sup>90</sup>

This relationship between ensuring a good quality of life in one’s own village and strengthening the entire nation was common among Geng’s generation. For example, Neihuang County’s Wang Fucheng derided the Party’s injunction to learn from far-off model villages in the 1970s by pointing out his own community’s homegrown strategies: “Our main purpose was to raise the standard of living of our own village and to make more contributions to the country. It didn’t matter a lot if we learned from Xiaojinhuang. I never did go.”<sup>91</sup> Both men were raised heeding the KMT and CCP’s calls for rural people to think of themselves as citizens of a nation, but they saw the well-being of their communities as the primary indicators of a healthy state. Geng’s work as the school’s administrator brought him into contact with the nation to a degree unmatched by any of his experiences as a pupil. He learned about the encroachment of Japanese forces, the rise of collaborators throughout the country, the establishment of a “fake government” (伪政府) in Manchuria, and the December 9th Movement led by student protestors in 1935.<sup>92</sup> Geng’s work made it increasingly difficult to disentangle the affairs of Wugong Village from the broader challenges faced by a country at war. Yet, his adherence to the tenets of the local logic of survival ensured that all his efforts went into his community.

Mobilization efforts to support China’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression threw the often fraught relationship between rural self-determination and China’s national interests into even sharper relief. Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden argue that Wugong’s participation in the resistance activities lagged behind that of neighboring villages because it

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<sup>90</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 48.

<sup>91</sup> The fact that Geng and Wang saw socialism as an ideology with genuine value also precludes the misperception that all cadres who committed atrocities during the famine were “true believers” while those who worked for their communities did not believe at all; see Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse*, 74.

<sup>92</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 48–49.

lacked a sufficiently robust CCP branch.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, mobilization efforts did produce some changes in the everyday experiences of villagers. In 1937, soon after the war had officially begun, Wugong officials formed the Peasant Anti-Japanese Patriotic League and other associations intended to mobilize everyone in the village. By 1938, these wartime organizations launched an agricultural project designed to fortify local communities against attack. Local knowledge of the region's vegetation likely contributed to a project that relied on hemp's rapid growth rate to construct a series of interlaced leafy walls along the roadside. In Geng's eyes, the project transformed Raoyang County's villages into an army of "spiders, poised waiting to capture the invaders" (巨大蜘蛛, 净々的等待捕捉来犯之敌).<sup>94</sup> The transformations incurred as a result of wartime mobilization were not confined to infrastructure, either. Wugong Village implemented a series of economic reforms, including "reasonable burden" (合理负担), "rent and interest reduction" (减租减息), and a "unified progressive tax" (统一累进税).<sup>95</sup> In a fairly short span of time, villagers had experienced both efforts to improve the quality of life in their locality and a powerful new connection to the anti-Japanese sentiments sweeping the country alongside mobilization and resistance efforts. Integrating the welfare of his community and the prosperity of his country would continue to occupy Geng Xiufeng for the remainder of his life.

### *A Rural Intellectual at Work*

By the end of the decade, Geng's career had brought him even closer to the frontlines of anti-Japanese education. In 1940, he was transferred from his largely administrative role and

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<sup>93</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 57.

<sup>95</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 56.

took up a teaching position at a nearby elementary school; he also spent some time working at the Raoyang county seat during a lull in the Japanese presence in 1942. By autumn of that year, Geng had been asked to take charge of managing a secret education program throughout several schools in the area. The focus of these lessons was the “implementation of anti-Japanese and patriotic thinking” (贯彻抗日爱国思想).<sup>96</sup> That same autumn, he was also recruited as a writer and typesetter for a local tabloid responsible for reprinting the international edition of Victory Magazine (胜利报). Not surprisingly, Geng’s work in this period continued to bring him into contact with China’s broader agenda. Still, it was not until almost a full year into his position at the tabloid that he experienced an epiphany that finally united his interest in national rejuvenation with his deep-rooted concerns for the plight of those in the countryside. In the summer of 1943, he was assigned “Rectify the Work Style of the Party” (整顿党的作用), a speech that Mao Zedong had delivered more than a year earlier, in February 1, 1942. Although this text was only the second piece of the Chairman’s writing that Geng had read since the beginning of the war, it left an enormous impact on his thinking.<sup>97</sup>

His engagement with Mao’s speech is an excellent example of the local logic of survival as a way of thinking about rural life that incorporates new and novel information, draws on a pre-existing body of wisdom, and prioritizes the concerns of the immediate locality. As Geng’s recollections of his younger years indicate, he was never an uncritical devotee of tradition for its own sake; at the same time, he recognized that centuries of hard-won rural knowledge had value, and that the state could not be counted on to rescue his community. His exploration of these problems seems to have crystalized into a coherent path forward upon reading “Rectify the Work

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<sup>96</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 76–78.

<sup>97</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 78.



Style of the Party.” In particular, he was struck by Mao’s assertion that “so long as our Communist ranks are in good order and march in step, so long as our troops are crack troops and our weapons are good weapons, any enemy, however powerful, can be overthrown” (只要我们共产党的队伍是整齐的，步调是一致的，兵是精兵，武器是好武器，那末，任何强大的敌人都是能被我们打倒的).<sup>98</sup> Geng’s first reaction was to apply Mao’s conclusion to rural life. United like China’s military, and equipped with the right tools and knowledge, rural people would be far better situated to deal with the natural challenges of life in the countryside. But how might rural communities realize this vision? For Geng, simply emulating the Soviet Union was out of the question until the war concluded. But waiting was not the right solution, either; after all, as Geng wrote, “*Shaobing* don’t fall from the sky: Victory comes from struggle; happiness comes from the people’s own two hands” (天上又不会往下掉烧饼：胜利是争取来的，幸福是人们用自己的双手创造出来的).<sup>99</sup> Rural people would have to generate and enact more effective strategies themselves.

From Geng’s perspective, the sideline occupations practiced by Wugong villagers every slack winter season actually contained the seed for a model of rural organization that would mitigate the dilemmas of rural life. Each year, when cold weather diminished the frequency of agricultural labour, villagers found partners with whom to produce steamed buns, open oil workshops, and run cotton gins. Profits were split evenly, and partnerships were dissolved when

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<sup>98</sup> Mao Zedong, “Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,” February 1, 1942, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19420201.htm>. The majority of my translation of this quotation is borrowed from the English translation available on Marxists.org, but I have made changes to one phrase (兵是精兵) for clarity; see Mao Zedong, “Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,” last modified by Marxists.org 2004, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_06.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_06.htm).

<sup>99</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 79–80.

work resumed in the spring. But, Geng thought, there was no reason that spreading out the burden of subsistence across a larger number of villagers had to end with the winter season:

If farmers could be enlightened and induced to voluntarily merge their land, this would bring about a long-term foundation for collaborative work; everyone would work to the best of their abilities, land would generate the most profit, and everything would be used to the fullest. In this way, the transformation from poor to rich would be inevitable.

(如能启发诱导农民自愿把地合起来种，就会造成长期合作的基础，就能作到人人尽其才，地尽其利，物尽其用。由穷变福，会成为必然。)<sup>100</sup>

Pickowicz is careful to differentiate the spirit of this kind of thinking from Scott's articulation of moral economy on the grounds that "Geng does not celebrate an earlier, pre-capitalist rural economy, nor does he express any aversion for market activity."<sup>101</sup> This is true: Geng looked toward the future and to new developments that would alleviate the burdens of rural life, and his ideas were premised on the existence of functioning markets that could sustain villagers' sideline occupations. Nevertheless, Geng's positioning of collaborative sideline work as a model for the reorganization of rural life remains firmly in line with the local logic of survival. The skills necessary for these occupations—and the occupations themselves—had long been a part of everyday life in Wugong Village. Moreover, the collaborative farming necessitated by the hardships of life during wartime, as well as Geng's advocacy for them as a blueprint for new and improved methods of ensuring rural survival, were both instances of the malleability underlying the logic.

Yet, Wugong Village and rural China were in a bind. Geng was skeptical that farmers had the resources and organizational capacity to carry out such a fundamental transformation of

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<sup>100</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 81.

<sup>101</sup> Pickowicz, "Memories of Revolution and Collectivization in China," 135.

the fabric of everyday life. He accepted that rural people were knowledgeable: “How else could they plow, sow, hoe, and weed” (怎样耕耩锄耨) their land?<sup>102</sup> But the knowledge on which they relied was confined to what they could see around them—they lacked a “theory” (理论) to consolidate this knowledge and generate a plan for improving life in the countryside. University professors and economists were equipped with this kind of theoretical knowledge, but Geng found it unlikely that they would ever make their way to Wugong. Luckily, “Rectify the Work Style of the Party” presented Geng with a solution for this problem as well:

It turns out, theory emerges from investigatory research. Aside from lazy people, who wouldn't do research? If there was more investigatory research, wouldn't there be more theory? Then you can take what you believe and try to put into practice; what's correct you can keep, and what's wrong you can adjust. Isn't this the right way? As I thought about this everything suddenly became clear; I could finally see the sun through the dense fog that had filled the sky.

(原来，理论是从调查研究中得来，除懒汉外，谁不会作调查研究呢？多作点调查研究，理论不就多了吗？再把自己认为对的，拿到实际中去试々，对的就坚持，不对的就改正过来，不就又对了吗？想到这里，脑子豁然开朗，真好漫天迷雾中突然见到了太阳。)<sup>103</sup>

As with the broader goal of developing a more robust quality of life in the countryside, farmers would simply have to conduct the research themselves.

Mao also noted that Marx's theoretical conclusions arose from a lifetime of meticulous research into the most essential element of capitalism: the nature of commodities. In the

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<sup>102</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 82.

<sup>103</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 84.

countryside, Geng concluded, research would have to begin with the most essential element of rural life: “Shouldn’t our studies begin from the often ignored question of the day-to-day existence of a single household” (我们就不能从一家一户过日子这个熟视无睹的问题开始研究吗).”<sup>104</sup> The gulf between Geng’s assessment of rural knowledge and the kind of theoretical knowledge he believed was necessary to produce a radical change in everyday life is emblematic of the local logic of survival’s functionality in China’s countryside. The logic was never meant to make “the poor become rich” (穷变富).<sup>105</sup> It consisted, as Geng mentioned, of the skills necessary to plant, tend to, and harvest important crops, as well the assumptions and expectations that made it expedient to engage in and collaborate with others in a number of sideline ventures. In short, it ensured community survival. A comprehensive theory of rural life based on this body of knowledge would ensure rural prosperity. Geng’s synthesis of these rural realities and Maoism can itself be framed as an instance of the logic. Scott describes farmers as being “polytheists when it comes to agricultural practice...quick to seize whatever seems useful from the epistemic work of formal science.”<sup>106</sup> The rural intellectual was drawing on his background as an educated elite when he analyzed Mao’s speech, but his decision to adapt its insights to the particularities of Wugong’s situation positions him firmly in line with rural leaders operating according to their communities’ own local logics.

In the same way, the principles of the logic and the principles of socialism were not necessarily incompatible. Geng’s methodical reading of Mao reflects Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden’s observation that “socialism in the countryside still worked best when it harmonized not with imported Soviet organizations and policies but with China’s peasant household economy

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<sup>104</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 83.

<sup>105</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 84.

<sup>106</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 304.

and traditional values.”<sup>107</sup> Conflicts generally arose only when the state imposed policy that did not take into account local practices and expectations. Indeed, Geng’s engagement with “Rectify the Work Style of the Party” indicates a strong affinity with the tenets of the CCP’s platform and its underlying ideals; he never doubted Mao’s assertion that Marxism-Leninism was the “arrow” (箭) that revolutionaries needed to fire into the “target” (靶) of the Chinese Revolution. The chapter ends with a declaration: “Henceforth, when I talk to people, I won’t talk nonsense. My resolution of rural problems must always revolve around this ‘arrow,’ regardless of whether I’m raising issues or settling them” (今后再和人们说话，可别再胡诌人裂了，一定要围绕着解决农村问题这个《的》，去提出问题，解决问题).<sup>108</sup> It is likely that cadres across China were drawing similar connections between improving the quality of life in their home villages and the broader goals of the CCP’s revolutionary project. In this light, Geng’s reading of Mao suggests that the Party simply had to listen more carefully to rural voices. Geng listened. When Marx’s emphasis on European commodities made no sense for Wugong Village, Geng adapted by positioning the vicissitudes of everyday life as the basic unit of analysis for his intellectual project. Unfortunately, the CCP did not. As the Great Leap Forward permeated villages and sought to upend longstanding ways of life, the CCP continued to issue orders that were fundamentally at odds with the knowledge and practices of rural communities. As time passed, cadres who shared some of Geng’s formative experiences were well-positioned to bear witness to the growing chasm between top-down policies and rural needs. “I still don’t have any doubts about the Party’s general policy,” Wang Fucheng recalled, “but I knew in my heart that that was not the way to plant crops.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 184.

<sup>108</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 85.

<sup>109</sup> Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse*, 54.

### Chapter Three

#### Seeing Like a Village: The Local Logic of Survival Confronts the Great Leap Forward

The team captain said, “This isn’t for private distribution, nor is it for concealing production. It’s just to leave some room.”

(队长说“这不是想私分，也不是想瞒产，只是想留点余地。”)

Agricultural Production Office of the CPC Guizhou Provincial Committee,  
1961<sup>110</sup>

Shue describes the cadres who emerged in China’s countryside in the wake of land reform as those “who started as young peasant fighters in the war against the Japanese and the Guomindang, or who emerged as audacious young activists in their local land reform struggle, were spotted and recruited by Party members, cultivated, trained a little, and then thrust into the tasks of mass organization and local governance.”<sup>111</sup> Sometimes, as was the case in Henan’s Da Fo Village, the suffering and trauma that characterized these trajectories engendered an approach to grassroots governance that emphasized force and duty. In the mid-1940s, at the same time that Geng was collecting data and carefully working with villagers to carry out collective farming, Da Fo’s leading cadres repeatedly requisitioned land and made decisions without the input of their constituents.<sup>112</sup> What Geng’s experiences—participating in his village’s resistance against Japanese occupation, reckoning with and applying the contents of Mao Zedong Thought, and researching and implementing various models of cooperative production and agriculture—demonstrate, then, is that there was also a segment of the PRC’s first generation of cadres who

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<sup>110</sup> Guānyú liángshì zuòwéi bōzhòng jìhuà wánchéng qíngkuàng de bàogào [关于粮食作为播种计划完成情况的报告] [Report on the completion of planting]. September 22, 1961. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>111</sup> Shue, *The Reach of the State*, 106.

<sup>112</sup> Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 9. By the time Da Fo Village cadres exercised their power over the rest of the community, the village had already endured decades of strict and self-interested leadership following the disintegration of the cultural nexus of power. Rather than exercise benevolent leadership according to the patterns identified by Duara, Bao Zhihai, a local elite and wealthy landlord, was known to charge “exorbitant interest rates on loans made to villagers in the time of spring hunger,” penalize hungry villagers for taking some food from the field, and demand public praise from the community; see Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 36.

continued to take the welfare of their communities seriously. They valued, promoted, and implemented what was positive about rural life, and they confronted the policies of the Great Leap Forward equipped with their village's local logic of survival. In short, they represented their villages in their dealings with the state, not the state in its dealings with their village. Histories of the Great Leap Famine have tended to emphasize the destruction to lives and villages caused by hardened radical leaders like those working in Da Fo.<sup>113</sup> Owing to the nature of research on atrocities and the PRC's erasure of this group from the historical narrative, they have missed the significant role of those who worked to save their communities.

Geng's formative experiences as a youth, an intellectual, and a village leader have functioned as a bridge that joins the unsystematic and largely undocumented local logic of survival to the frequently silenced voices and distorted of actions of this group. This chapter demonstrates how these leaders, who were frequently investigated and penalized for their anti-revolutionary acts and rightist-opportunism—that is, for encouraging unsanctioned practices, distributing extra food, and leading their constituents to eat directly from the field—may have conceptualized their actions. Its first section demonstrates how Geng's adherence to the principles of the logic drove own his responses to the Leap; at the same time, it pairs some of his experiences with patterns emerging throughout the country. Finally, the second section reads

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<sup>113</sup> Poverty and struggle did not necessarily lead to more authoritative and state-centered grassroots governance, however. Yan Guifang, a women's cadre in Sichuan's Qiaolou Village, grew up in a poor household and remembered the physical toil that characterized her formative years. Her desire to maintain a healthy and unified community may have been a function of her remaining in her natal village after marriage: "My meetings fostered human feelings (*renqing*)," she recalled, "and many people did not want to leave after we adjourned. They would sit and talk, complaining about this problem or that, sharing their concerns on a large scale for the first time. Those meetings were like tea parties. When conflicts arose that required mediation, I would convene a big family meeting. All were encouraged to speak their hearts (*tan xin*), and in this way all views were aired and discussed. I would listen to opposing arguments and then pass my judgment as arbitrator. Any criticism that was due I passed along privately. That way nobody lost face. This was very important." See Ruf, *Cadres and Kin*, 75.

expressions of the logic between the lines of the countless investigations produced by the state to deflect blame from its failure to heed rural voices.

*Seeing Like a Village in Wugong*

The establishment of the Wugong People's Commune in the autumn of 1958 was a joyous occasion. The sound of drums and gongs echoed throughout the streets as firecrackers exploded and villagers waved red flags in the air. Geng Changsuo, already well-known for his participation in Wugong's agricultural cooperatives throughout the preceding decade, was elected as the commune's part-time president. Geng Xiufeng thought that village leaders were growing increasingly indifferent to the demands of their constituents. Although some were quick to criticize unpopular and unreasonable policies, it was hard to deny that "the noxious influence of formalism was getting worse and worse, and Party newspapers had yet to write any serious critiques" (这股形式主义歪风越刮越大, 党报并没作过严肃批评).<sup>114</sup> Because Wugong was a model village and likely to serve as example for other villages to emulate, a cadre named Qiu demanded that Geng Changsuo carry out the Party line on collectively educating and rearing children: "Tell the children to study together, eat together, sleep together, and they'll cultivate collective habits from an early age" (叫孩子们一块学习, 一块吃饭, 一块睡觉, 从小养成集体习惯).<sup>115</sup> Though perfectly in line with Mao's call for the elimination of the nuclear family, Wugong lacked the resources to house that many children in one place. The village simply did not have enough blankets. Qiu was unperturbed and managed to convince a few households to participate, but the plan soon fell apart. At around the same time, Secretary Yin from the

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<sup>114</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 817.

<sup>115</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 816.



commune Party committee “lost control” (沉不住气了) and began repeatedly urging Geng Xiufeng to uncover new ways of increasing harvests, including moving already existing crops from one field to another to inflate numbers.<sup>116</sup> Within months, as this kind of blind implementation of policy and exaggeration became common throughout the country, the music and fireworks that inaugurated the establishment of Wugong People’s Commune would give way to an oppressive silence marked by pangs of hunger and flashes of violence.

According to Geng, Secretary Yin’s formative years as a rural cadre were marked by China’s wartime experience. He had “cultivated an aggressively competitive style of work, only overpowering enemies, never letting himself be overpowered” (养成了争强好胜的作风, 只能压倒敌人, 而不能被敌压倒的性格).<sup>117</sup> This characterization reflects what both scholars and rural observers have noticed about the way that differences in a cadre’s training and background manifested a wide array of identities and approaches to governance. In a study written by historian Kimberly Ens Manning, for instance, the presence of various women’s associations determined whether or not cadres were willing to “countenance ideas of physiological difference” in their decision-making.<sup>118</sup> In the eyes of cadres not exposed to women’s associations, special considerations for pregnancy, child-rearing, and menstruation were deemed incompatible with Marxism’s fundamental adherence to equality. As for Yin’s case, his experiences as a wartime cadre predisposed him to using intimidation and force. It is no surprise that his insistence on following policy to the letter echoed the behaviour of the group of leaders who regularly immiserated ordinary people in Da Fo Village. In addition to gender and military

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<sup>116</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 817.

<sup>117</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 817.

<sup>118</sup> Kimberly Ens Manning, “The Gendered Politics of Woman-Work: Rethinking Radicalism in the Great Leap Forward,” in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, eds. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 73.

experience, the degree to which cadres identified with the communities over which they held power was also critical. A villager from northern Sichuan named Li Anyuan recalled a clear distinction between cadres with strong connections to the community and those dispatched by the state. One notable outsider frequently beat and forced villagers to participate in spectacles of public humiliation; in contrast, Li's father, a local brigade captain, ensured that everyone received extra rations of sweet potato to welcome the New Year.<sup>119</sup> Li's neighbor, Wang Lishi, also remembered that after Li's father had been denounced and punished for distributing the extra food, a group of higher-ranking cadres "divided up the sweet potatoes handed over by the farmers and shared them among themselves."<sup>120</sup> Clearly, the strong ties between leaders and communities on which the local logic of survival was predicated remained a critical factor for survival during the Great Leap.

As the state's policies transformed Wugong, villagers were left to deal with the consequences. Common sideline occupations like oil production and ropemaking were now subject to Party oversight, and the commune organized new hospitals, paper mills, distilleries, waterworks, and pig farms. Production teams quickly learned that trading amongst themselves was now prohibited under the provision that "production teams selling livestock must have commune approval" (生产队员卖牲口必须由公社批准).<sup>121</sup> Geng thought that the commune's plan to consolidate villages and create residential areas was wasteful and made farming more difficult, but its organizer was blinded by the Great Leap's outsized promises: "Why are you so afraid of distance? When people go down to the fields in the future, they'll take cars!" (远点怕

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<sup>119</sup> Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958–1962: An Oral History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 96–97.

<sup>120</sup> Zhou, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine*, 98.

<sup>121</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 824–25.

什么？将来人们下地，都坐汽车）。<sup>122</sup> The creation of “backyard furnaces” (土法炼钢) was particularly catastrophic. Virtually everyone in Wugong could see that it was a wasteful enterprise that deprived people of essential cookware, but because this and other policies came straight from the pen of Chairman Mao, nobody dared to stop.

Not only did strong local connections bind cadres to their constituents, inspiring them to speak up when policy did not support the interests of the community, but they also ensured that leaders were equipped with knowledge of local conditions and efficacious practices.<sup>123</sup> Given Geng’s history of operating according to the local logic of survival, it is no surprise that he conceived of a plan that brought Great Leap policies into accord with local conditions:

Thinking about the dissatisfaction of the masses, the confused thinking of commune and production team cadres, and the inevitability of production losses in the next year—these things aren’t trivial! It’s necessary to solve this problem with an appropriate strategy.

Recalling my experiences running large collectives, I wrote “The Commune’s Implementation of Fixed Quota Management for Production Teams.”

(想々群众的不满情绪，想々社队干部的混乱思想，明年生产必然受到损失，这可不是小事。必须想个什么办法，妥善的解决这个问题，回忆办大社的经验，于是我写了《公社对生产大队实行定额管理。》)<sup>124</sup>

The plan called for democratic consultation between commune, production brigade, and production team administrations. Together, they would determine fixed quotas for production,

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<sup>122</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 826–27.

<sup>123</sup> This is not to suggest that production team- and brigade-level cadres who worked for the interests of their communities were motivated exclusively by their concern for others. Shue notes how this class of grassroots cadre were also materially invested in the ability of their constituents to stay healthy and continue working: “They did not earn state salaries but were as dependent on the crop for their family income as were the other peasants they led. They were most unlikely to be promoted to jobs outside their locality, and so their standing in the community—local values and moral judgements—weighed as heavily on them as ever before.” Shue, *The Reach of the State*, 67.

<sup>124</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 829.

expenditures, and public reserves. Once autumn came, these quotas would be the standards according to which all teams would settle their accounts, increase or decrease production, and balance profits and losses. The policy would also account for the unexpected impacts of natural disasters. In this way, Geng believed, responsibilities would be clear-cut, farmers could engage in production with peace of mind, and the commune's economy would strengthen and grow. Wugong's Party committee had read and approved Geng's plan by the spring of 1959, but because high-ranking authorities had not signed off, they refused to put it into effect. Geng was despondent. More and more cadres were "unwilling to display initiative and creativity; unwilling to display an elevated spirit of responsibility for the people" (不愿发挥个人的主动性创造性, 不愿发挥对人民高度负责的精神).<sup>125</sup> Those who saw things from the perspective of their villages were cut off from communication with representatives of the state. As the Great Leap Forward marched on, the desire to protect and even improve the quality of life of China's rural people—the same desire that fueled Geng's understanding of leadership—was becoming increasingly hard to find.

Geng's pessimism may have been justified, but resistance to misguided policies was by no means confined to villages where rural intellectuals lived. Indeed, Geng's province was at the forefront of the Chairman's anxieties about how the Great Leap was progressing. Mao recorded concerns that approximately 50 percent of Hebei's population found at least some part of the Great Leap Forward objectionable.<sup>126</sup> While it is unclear where Mao got his figures, this does suggest that expressions of dissatisfaction among rural people were loud and widespread enough to capture his attention. Throughout the entirety of the famine, pockets of rural China proposed

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<sup>125</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 830.

<sup>126</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 222.

grassroots modifications to top-down policies that were designed to ensure their survival. By 1960, when it was clear that Great Leap policies were failing and even reform-minded Party officials at the state level were implementing correctives, some farmers continued to insist that all top-down directives be implemented on their terms. Nanbai Commune, in Guizhou, was home to a group of farmers who refused to accept the state's version of *baochandaohu* (包产到户)—the “fixing of farm output quotas for individual households,” which echoed the spirit of Geng's plan for Wugong from the previous year—on the grounds that the Party had already failed them by handing over power to those without agricultural experience. They presented the commune party committee with four acceptable variations of *baochandaohu*. In each case, the central idea was that “the farmers wanted *baochandaohu* to work primarily for them and only secondarily for the state...they wanted to calculate the harvest, stake their moral claim to it, and *then* decide how much they could give to the government.”<sup>127</sup>

The local logic of survival once again confronted the abstract and idealistic dictates of the state when Party leaders advocated “close planting” (合理密植) as an agricultural practice in early 1959. To demonstrate their fealty and revolutionary zeal, some Wugong leaders argued that the more densely seeds were packed into the soil, the more bountiful the harvest would be. Those who opposed the initiative were labeled with all sorts of political epithets, including “Right-wing Conservative” and “Anti-Chairman Mao.” Commune members who took pride in their mastery of the skills and knowledge necessary to live in the countryside were incensed by the state's presumptions. One villager claimed, “I've been a farmer for half my life, and now I don't know

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<sup>127</sup> Ralph Thaxton, “How the Great Leap Forward Famine Ended in Rural China: ‘Administrative Intervention’ versus Peasant Resistance,” in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 265–66.

how to work the land!” (咱当了半辈子庄家人，到不会种地了!).<sup>128</sup> For the most part, however, Wugong’s cadres and commune members carried on planting “according to their experiences” (照自己的经验办), certain that any other agriculture practice would only lead to ruin.<sup>129</sup> Only the local Party branch’s youth wing insisted that their experimental field adhere to dense planting, but they soon ran into problems; by spring of 1959, they were instructed to take out half the seeds they had planted. On April 29, not long after the policy was announced, Wugong received word that Mao himself had revised the call for close planting. Villagers met the announcement with jubilation: “As soon as I heard Mao’s words, it was like I’d just eaten happiness pills!” (一听毛主席这浩，真象吃了顺气丸).<sup>130</sup> Despite the efforts of village leaders to maintain longstanding practices and adhere to what worked, the narrative that the benevolent Party leadership had liberated people from the oppressive rule of local tyrants persisted.

Geng recognized this pattern again in January 1961, when Secretary Kang of the prefectural Party committee called a meeting of all the communes and production brigades in the administrative unit. The weather was growing colder and more people were starving to death. Kang sought to address the excesses caused by the “Five Winds” by “smashing walnuts” (砸核桃). The severity of the famine and unhappiness of the people were a function of bad elements among the low-ranking leadership, the prefectural committee believed, and they would have to be exposed and publicly criticized. Presumably fearing for his future, one cadre committed

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<sup>128</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 831–32. Similar conflicts between experienced farmers and inexperienced leaders occurred throughout the country, although not every village had leaders who operated according to the local logic of survival. Deng Xiansheng, from Dongguan in Guangdong Province, recalled that all “the old farmers had warned the officials that crops needed space to grow. They didn’t listen, and insisted that we must plant the crops as tightly as possible. In the end hardly anything grew.” See Zhou, *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine*, 119–20.

<sup>129</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 832.

<sup>130</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 836.

suicide by leaping into a well. For Geng, the committee’s approach “shirked responsibility, lacked perspective, and served no purpose” (这是推脱责任, 是轻重倒置, 无济于事).<sup>131</sup> As Geng himself had witnessed, low-ranking leaders were indeed responsible for pushing bad ideas and meting out violent punishment on dissenters. But they did so on the Party’s behalf. And those lacking the same level of ideological conviction frequently found themselves caught in a difficult position.<sup>132</sup> If grassroots leaders who knew better grew too afraid of questioning policies that did not accord with rural realities, how could the Party learn from its mistakes? Geng tried to steer his commune’s discussion group towards these issues, but despite his efforts, criticism of the higher-ranking leaders remained out of bounds.

The dynamic at work in the 1961 meeting reveals the situation in which rural leaders had found themselves a decade into the PRC’s existence. Some, as Geng’s experiences suggest, continued to see the world from the perspective of their home village—they paid attention to local needs, spoke out against wrong-headed policies, and saw themselves as representatives of their communities. Simultaneously, thanks to a historical trajectory that cleared space for a new generation to exploit their positions and encouraged others to advance the interests of the nation above those of their village, many grassroots cadres confronted the famine by prioritizing themselves and their careers. And ultimately, as political scientist Lü Xiaobo contends, these grassroots cadres who pushed the Party line at any cost fared about the same as those who fought

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<sup>131</sup> Geng, 人间正边, 887. Indeed, Thaxton argues that this class of low-ranking cadre was exactly the type of grassroots leader that was “most susceptible to siding with tillers.” See Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*, 336.

<sup>132</sup> The decision to speak out or stay silent could often spell the difference between bare subsistence and starvation. Liushu, who was a teenager in rural Sichuan during the famine years, recalled that many villagers, including some cadres, knew that the Great Leap Forward’s policies were foolish. But they were unwilling to compound their hunger by risking denunciation, severe beatings, and the loss of their positions within the Party. “There was nothing we could do,” he said, “If anyone spoke out, they would be getting themselves into big trouble.” See Zhou, *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine*, 94–96.

for their communities: “Both got the blame.”<sup>133</sup> The historical narratives that have sprung from the state’s imprecise allocation of culpability have missed the way that longstanding rural beliefs and practices continued to play an essential, albeit diminished, role into the Mao years. Seen from above, and in the context of Geng’s experiences in Wugong Village, the state’s exhaustive reporting on the countryside reveals a constellation of rural leaders who operated according to the local logic of survival to safeguard their communities.

*Seeing Like a Village throughout China*

One of the most important survival practices throughout the famine—and one that constantly drew the ire of Party investigators—was *chi qing* (吃青), which literally translates to “eating green.” Generally, *chi qing* refers to eating unripened crops directly from the field. Thaxton estimates that during the Great Leap’s worst periods, rural people throughout the country obtained between 50 to 90 percent of their sustenance “by going to the fields and eating the collective’s unharvested wheat and corn crops.”<sup>134</sup> Although the local logic of survival was not expressed exclusively through *chi qing*—regional craft specialties and sidelines, community market participation, and the essential passing down of stories, skills, and successful practices were equally important—it is a useful measure of the logic’s persistence throughout China because it was forbidden, and therefore frequently documented, by the Party.

*Chi qing* is also a useful example of the local logic of survival at work because it reflects how the logic undergirded rural life at all times and in all situations. Rural people perceived it as a relatively innocuous everyday occurrence in times of plenty, and it had long been practiced as a

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<sup>133</sup> Lü Xiaobo, *Cadres and Corruption: The Organizational Involution of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>134</sup> Thaxton, “How the Great Leap Forward Famine Ended in Rural China,” 259.



survival technique when hardship struck.<sup>135</sup> Several investigations carried out years before Mao had initiated the Great Leap Forward speak to the prevalence of *chi qing* in rural communities prior to the calamitous starvation and devastation produced by the Great Leap. For instance, a 1953 report on Huayin County, in Shaanxi, found that “farmers had begun to eat unripened sprouts” (农民开始吃青苗) after a bad harvest.<sup>136</sup> And after a bad drought in 1955, farmers from several areas in Anhui were also charged with eating unripened sprouts directly from the field.<sup>137</sup> Because these documents predate the onset of the Great Leap Famine, they demonstrate that *chi qing* was not just the recourse of rural people facing an unprecedented crisis; rather, *chi qing* was a dependable strategy that communities regularly implemented to ward off the consequences of natural disaster.

In report after report, investigators explicitly stated that grassroots leaders were responsible for their communities’ decisions to eat unripened crops. This confirms that survival knowledge and practices continued to be negotiated and carried out through relationships between local leaders—whether they were elites under imperial and Republican rule or cadres after the establishment of the PRC—and ordinary rural people. In some cases, a village’s practice of *chi qing* could occur under direct supervision, as was the case in Luxi County, Yunnan. In this instance, investigators charged that “some team captains were leading part of the masses to eat unripened beans” (有的队长领着群众分吃青蚕豆).<sup>138</sup> But even in cases for which the writers

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<sup>135</sup> As Thaxton writes, “villagers were accustomed to nibbling a few green wheat spears or a few ears of unripened maize in the periods before they harvested the mature crop.” See Thaxton, “How the Great Leap Forward Famine Ended in Rural China,” 260.

<sup>136</sup> Shǎnxī guānzhōng qū fāshēng chūnhuāng [陕西关中区发生春荒] [A spring famine has occurred in Guanzhong District of Shaanxi], January 22, 1953. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>137</sup> Ānhuī shěng duànchūi rénrshù dá liùbǎi bāshíliù wàn rén [安徽省断炊人数达六百八十六万人] [As many as 6,860,000 people in Anhui Province have run out of food], March 25, 1955. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>138</sup> Yúnnán Lúxī jiǎnchá zǔ jiǎnchá qián Lúxī xiàn wéifǎ luàn jì wèntí zǒngjié bàogào [云南泸西检查组检查前泸西县违法乱纪问题总结报告] [Report by the joint inspection team of the provincial, prefectural, and county Party committees of Yunnan province on the previous lawlessness in Luxi county], February 28, 1959. *CGLFGFD*.

of reports failed to mention what role, if any, local leaders had played in the consumption of unripened crops, it is clear that many cadres turned a blind eye to their constituents' political indiscretions. This toleration was a tacit agreement by which the special relationship between rural people and local leaders created conditions conducive to survival. The situation that investigators working for Tan Qilong, the governor of Shandong, discovered in Juye County would have been impossible without the knowledge and toleration of at least some local leaders. In 1959, of the 115 villages in the commune, "77 had eaten unripened crops, and 3,904 *mu* of peas had been dug up" (巨野龙固公社一百一十五个村有七十七个村吃青, 已挖掉扁豆苗三千九百零四亩).<sup>139</sup> How could so many officials, who Yang and other scholars argue were typically fanatical in their efforts to ensure that their communities followed Party dictates, miss such a widespread and conspicuous breach of policy? More than likely, they did not.

Investigators who produced reports for high-ranking authorities also noted a tendency to pass on knowledge about previous experiences with hardship. In 1953, investigators working in Jiangning County, in Jiangsu, listened to farmers speaking about the importance of always maintaining a stockpile of extra grain. "Food should not be sold casually," the farmer is quoted as saying, "You have to remember the years of scarcity, years of eating grass heads (citron daylily), the bitter days of eating grass" (粮食不要随便卖掉, 要记住往年荒年吃草头 (黄花菜)、吃青草的苦日子).<sup>140</sup> This insistence on remembering past hardships and passing on stories of warning and strategies of coping was not uncommon. In Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley's

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<sup>139</sup> Tan Qilong, *Tán Qilóng guānyú Jīnǐng dìqū gōngzuò zhōng jǐ gè wèntí de bàogào* [谭启龙关于济宁地区工作中几个问题的报告] [Tan Qilong's report on several issues in the work of Jining Prefecture], March 1959. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>140</sup> *Jiāngníng xiàn nóngmín xī liángshí de liù zhǒng yuányīn* [江宁县农民惜粮食的六种原因] [Six reasons why peasants in Jiangning county are reluctant to sell their grain], September 5, 1953. *CGLFGFD*.

account of the Incredible Famine, which devastated parts of Northern China in the 1870s, an observer named Liu Xing recorded his impressions because he worried that people would “forget and thereby allow such horrors to recur.”<sup>141</sup> Almost a century later, elderly members of Wugong Village, in Hebei, remembered their own local words of wisdom: “If you pass bumper years like lean ones, in lean years you won’t starve.”<sup>142</sup> This desire to transmit local histories and respect the hard-won knowledge produced by ancestors reflects how the local identities channelled the local logic of survival. It is also a pattern that emerges frequently in documentation of deviations from the Party line.

Multiple investigators noted that this kind of close identification with one’s community and local history was a key factor in a grassroots leader’s reluctance to blindly implement foolish policies. For instance, several reports charged cadres throughout Guizhou with behavior that suggested a lack of concern with national interests. A report published on October 11, 1960 on the situation in Qingzhen County, for instance, charges that cadres were regularly permitting canteens to increase the size of the rations they were allowed to distribute. They also tolerated their constituents engaging in *chi qing* and eating “midnight-snacks” (宵夜) while delivering food to state granaries. Because the labour involved in agricultural work was particularly grueling at the time, these grassroots leaders reasoned that their constituents needed these additional opportunities for sustenance. Some even outright lied about their populations in order to benefit their communities. The report charged that, in just ten days, one small production team of 150 people had received 1,500 *jin* of grain. Guizhou’s disloyal cadres, the investigator

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<sup>141</sup> Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 66.

<sup>142</sup> Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 239.

lamented, had “a great influence on the masses” (对群众有很大影响).<sup>143</sup> A year later, in a report published on September 22, 1961, investigators continued to find similar patterns throughout the province. Rural people were collectively concealing grain, lying about outputs, and eating or pocketing unripened food while working the land. In Xiuwen County, Zhazuo Production Brigade was explicit in placing the needs of its members above national quotas. The brigade’s cadres were only willing to give up grain to the state once their constituents were guaranteed a sufficient amount food, “regardless of whether taxation goals had been accomplished” (不管征购任务是否能够完成).<sup>144</sup> Like Geng, whose own community-centered amendment to Great Leap production was stifled by the indifference of his superiors, these grassroots leaders wanted policies that dealt in village realities, not state demands.

While these kinds of leaders were being penalized for their actions, some high-ranking Party officials began to engage with the fact that cadres who possessed strong community attachments and real experience working the land were more capable than their uninformed peers. In a 1959 report designed to educate grassroots leaders in Shandong through “the most practical and most vivid teaching materials” (最实际最生动的教材)—the experiences of rural people very much like themselves—Governor Tan Qilong identified a worrying pattern. Too many new cadres were selected for their literacy and “loud voices” (好大呼隆). To rectify this trend, he highlighted the accomplishments of a local official from Heze County:

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<sup>143</sup> “Zhōnggòng Guìyáng shìwěi bàngōngshì guānyú Qīngzhèn xiàn yīxiē shítáng chāoguò dìngliàng biāozhǔn chīliáng de íngkuàng” [中共贵阳市委办公室关于清镇县一些食堂超过定量标准吃粮的情况] [Information from the Office of the Guiyang Municipal Party Committee on the above-quota consumption of grain in some dining halls in Qingzhen county], October 11, 1960. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>144</sup> Guānyú liángshì zuòwéi bōzhòng jìhuà wánchéng qíngkuàng de bàogào [关于粮食作为播种计划完成情况的报告] [Report on the completion of planting], September 22, 1961. *CGLFGFD*.

The things that Comrade Duan Qinghua does look ordinary, and there is nothing extraordinary about the place...He has no special skills, he is illiterate, and has not received any training. It's just that he has a relatively high production experience, has experienced days of destitution, hasn't forgotten his past.

(段清华同志做的这些事情，看起来很平凡，没有什么了不起的出色地方...看起来他也没有什么特殊的本领，他既不认字，又未受过训，只是由于他有比较丰富的生产经验，有过穷苦日子的经验，没有忘本)。

Of course, Tan added, Comrade Duan also “maintain[ed] the proper moral character of a Communist Party member” (保持一个共产党员应有的品德).<sup>145</sup> Evidently, it was politically untenable for Duan's positive qualities to be associated with his rural identity alone. Yet, in the end, the substance of Tan's report does indicate that those with strong ties to the stories and practices that comprised a community's local logic of survival were better equipped to deal with the famine. Having made this statement in 1959, Tan was in the minority.

But as the Great Leap wore on, many high-ranking leaders came to recognize that rural people were right to have to rejected foolish Great Leap policies. Even so, tens of millions of rural people would die before these leaders began to produce self-criticisms for failing to take rural knowledge seriously. In August 1961, Pang Peiqing, who oversaw Jieshou, Mengcheng, and Linquan Counties in Anhui, acknowledged that, alongside a series of other failings, he “did not proceed from reality, listened only to big talk and boasting, didn't listen to those who were honest, and even criticized them for conservatism and retrogression” (不从实际出发，愿意听

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<sup>145</sup> Tan Qilong, “Tán Qilóng zhì shāndōng jìníng de wěi bīng xībù dìqū gè xiànwěi de xìn” [谭启龙致山东济宁地委并西部地区各县委的信] [Tan Qilong's letter to the Jining Prefectural Party Committee of Shandong and various county Party committees in the western region], May 31, 1959. *CGLFGFD*.

高的，听大的，爱听说大话的；对说老实话的就不听，甚至批评，认为他们保守落后）。<sup>146</sup>

Some high-ranking leaders even conceded that the Party bore some responsibility for China's crisis. Liu Shaoqi, who served as President of the PRC before drawing Mao's ire in the wake of the famine, acknowledged this lesson. In his notes on a Changsha County people's court report published in June 1961, he wrote that the Party must "not only listen to how grassroots cadres reflect their situations, but also carefully and deeply survey the masses, and find and have conversations with people" (不仅要听取基层干部反映的情况，而且要逐个深入群众调查，找本人谈话)。<sup>147</sup> The efficacy of the local logic of survival had been vindicated, but only after state had spent years criminalizing its expression and cracking down on those who dared draw upon it.

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<sup>146</sup> Pang Peiqing, "Ziwǒ jiǎnchá" [自我检查] [Self-criticism], August 17, 1961. *CGLFGFD*.

<sup>147</sup> Liu Shaoqi. "Húnán shěng gāojí rénmin fǎyuàn zhuǎnfā Chángshā xiàn rénmin fǎyuàn guānyú rénmin fǎtíng gōngzuò qíngkuàng de bàogào" [湖南省高级人民法院转发长沙县人民法院关于人民法庭工作情况的报告] [Transmitted by the higher people's court of Hunan Province: report by Changsha County people's court on the work of the people's court (tribunal)], June 18, 1961. *CGLFGFD*.

## Conclusion

For their role in blindly carrying out bad policies and violently disciplining those who protested, the grassroots cadres were vilified by the state. And while noting the indisputable role played by the CCP in generating those policies and enthusiastically fostering the atmosphere that made violence necessary, historians have followed suit and emphasized how the catastrophic consequences of the Great Leap were largely a function of their willingness to oppress their constituents. As Geng Xiufeng noticed while attending Secretary Kang's 1961 meeting, grassroots leaders occupied a mediating role that pulled them in two directions at once. Some, like the knowledgeable grassroots cadre praised by Tan Qilong, seemed to have struck a balance, maintaining good standing with the Party while competently leading their constituents through famine. Others, like those without production experience or strong connections to the local community, or who had developed a style of work that emphasized force over unity, spent the duration of the famine prioritizing state demands or their own well-being. This thesis has attempted to explain the actions of a third group: the cadres who, in spite of a decades-long trajectory pulling them in the opposite direction, continued to see like a village.

Reaching back into their localities' collections of expectations, practices, and beliefs—an amorphous and community-dependent force that I call the local logic of survival—these grassroots leaders acted on their sense of responsibility for their constituents and their hard-won understanding that rural communities had to look out for themselves. A close look at the way Geng saw the world, the way he drew on both his village's pre-existing logic and the exciting new ideas flooding China in the first half of the twentieth century, and the way he faced the excesses of the Great Leap Forward provides a necessary glimpse into the minds of other cadres in this group. Of course, this case study cannot explain every act of survival or gesture of

resistance. But as Thaxton writes of his own work in Da Fo Village, the “value of any case study is that it can help us generate new theories, disprove overly deterministic ones, and shed light on previously unknown causal processes.”<sup>148</sup> Geng Xiufeng’s story does all three. It illuminates the logic that has, in one incarnation or another, sustained rural people living in dire conditions for centuries. It demonstrates that a belief in socialism and the transformation of rural society did not preclude one from prioritizing crucial local interests over the misguided ambitions of the state. And it helps us understand the small but not insignificant group of grassroots leaders who, in the face of relentless pressure to walk the Party line, implemented life-saving and time-tested strategies when it mattered most.

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<sup>148</sup> Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 9.



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