

## COMMUNISM, CHINESE STYLE: PEASANTS AND STUDENTS

When the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1912 the great majority of Chinese—perhaps 80 percent of the population—lived in the countryside. Farms were quite small by Western standards, averaging from three to five acres (compared with about 150 acres in the United States). Perhaps a third of the rural population was landless; peasants without their own land were forced to rent plots from prosperous landowners, often at very high rates. Many other peasants owned plots that were too small for them to survive on; they too were compelled to rent land.

During the 1930s and 1940s conditions worsened for Chinese peasants in significant ways. The worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s hit the Chinese economy hard and drove down the living standards of both urban and rural dwellers. World War II, which began for the Chinese with the Japanese invasion of 1937, devastated much of the rural economy. Most of the 10 million Chinese who died in the fighting were peasants. In the subsequent Civil War of 1946 to 1949 between the Communists and the Nationalists, the farming economy was battered once again, bringing the suffering of the peasants to a new low.

The question of how Chinese peasants—who remain today the majority of the population—have fared under Communist rule is addressed in the first selection, the brief 1984 memoir of Wang Xin. A peasant who was born near Beijing in 1941, Wang's recollections are somewhat propagandistic, but they nonetheless help us to see how circumstances changed for hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants during the era of Mao (1949–1976) and then changed again as a result of the sweeping economic reforms introduced by Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Deng's economic reforms, which essentially de-collectivized the economy, restored private ownership, and established a good deal of market freedom, triggered a surge of rapid growth that has continued into the 21st century. One of the consequences of the resulting dramatic rise in living standards—which for millions of Chinese now far exceed the level enjoyed by Wang Xin in the early 1980s—was the growth of pressure for political reform and a democratic political system. The most dramatic illustration of the desire for political change in the post-Mao era occurred in the spring of 1989 when university students organized and led a powerful movement for democracy.

Selection I from Wang Xin with Yang Xiaobing, "A Peasant Maps His Road to Wealth," *Beijing Review*, 27 (12 November 1984), pp. 28–30. Reprinted by permission. Selection II from *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement*, edited by Han Minzhu, assistant editor Hua Sheng (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 135–137. Copyright © 1990 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

In April of that year students from leading universities in Beijing conducted peaceful demonstrations following the death of a Party official who had been sympathetic to the cause of reform. Confused by the demonstrations and frightened by possibility that the students might find allies among the broader population, Party leaders dithered for several weeks while the protests grew and spread across the country. In May thousands of students occupied Tiananmen (Heavenly Peace) Square, the vast space that has symbolized political authority in China since the 15th century and the site of famous student protests on May 4, 1919. A speech given on the anniversary of the 1919 demonstrations by Wuer Kaixi, one of the best-known student leaders in 1989, is the second selection. One month after Wuer's speech, on the night of June 3–4, the authorities crushed the demonstrations. Since June 1989 China has been politically quiescent, although the recent huge demonstrations for political reform in Hong Kong, which the British returned to China in 1997, echo many of the goals of the students in Tiananmen.

## CHINESE DOCUMENTS

### I. THE MEMOIR OF WANG XIN (1984)

There is a long story behind my family's prosperity. My family's history is closely linked with the history of the Chinese society. So let me start my story with the rise and fall of the country.

In 1941, I was born to a poor peasant family in Pinggu County. At the time, my family had 10 members from three generations, but we had no farmland at all. My grandpa and his brother had to work for the landlord. My father and his brother wove at home and traded their coarse cloth at the market for some food. While peddling their handmade cloth, they had to be alert and evasive to avoid being forced to bribe the police.

One winter day, my grandpa's brother had two fingers bit off while feeding cattle for the landlord. The landlord simply dismissed him when he saw he was no longer useful. This made our lives even worse. My grandma had no other way to earn money but to pick wild jujubes in the mountains, which were ground up and mixed with wild herbs to make something like a bun.

At the time, my grandparents and parents wanted to work hard and get rich. Their desire, however, was merely a dream.

#### *Bright Dawn*

In 1949 New China was founded and we peasants became masters of the country. Land reform was carried out, the feudalist land ownership abolished and farmland returned to the tillers. All the 300 peasant families in my village got shares of farmland, averaging 0.2 hectare per person [approximately one-half acre]. For us peasants, this really meant something to live on.

During the land reform, the landlords' surplus rooms were confiscated and the extra rooms distributed among the poor. My family moved from a three-room thatched house into a tile-roofed house with seven rooms. Though only a small child at the time, I clearly remember how happy the peasants were.

In 1951 the agricultural collectivization movement got underway in my village. We first got organized into mutual-aid production teams and then into elementary agricultural co-operatives, pooling our land and sharing the dividends. In 1956 we switched to the advanced agricultural co-operatives and put our farmland into public ownership. The principle of "to each according to his work" was followed. The removal of land boundary stakes made it possible to develop a unified farming plan on a larger scale and created favourable conditions for water conservation projects and agricultural mechanization.

With the land under public ownership, all the villagers met to discuss how to use their farmland and how to distribute the income. This was completely different from preliberation days when we had no land at all.

During those years, since everyone worked hard and the government provided the co-operative with preferential loans and farm tools, production grew rapidly. The grain output, for instance, grew from 2,250 kg per hectare [2.5 acres] before 1949 to 4,225 kg in 1956. I remember my family got more than enough wheat that year. We lived quite well during those years.

In July of 1957, our village was hit by a hailstorm. With crops ruined, old people worried that they would have to go begging as they had in the past when natural disasters struck. But when the government heard about our problems, it exempted us from agricultural taxes for that whole year, shipped in grain seeds and potato seedlings and urged us to tide over the difficulty while developing production. By relying on the collective strength of the village and everybody's hard work, no one ran short of food.

In 1957 something important happened to me. I was enrolled in the county's middle school after I graduated from the primary school in my village. Before me, for generations all my family had been illiterate.

#### *Twists and Turns*

In 1958 we got organized into the people's commune, which brought about some desirable changes, but also resulted in some baffling developments.

A people's commune usually consisted of several villages (a village was usually an advanced co-operative). To see many people working on a vast expanse of land was really a spectacular view. Soon after the founding of the people's commune, a tractor station was set up to oversee ploughing and sowing.

The year of 1959, however, was chaotic. Some people said we had arrived at real communism. All the people in my village ate at the same canteen, free of charge. We produced hundreds of thousands of kilogrammes of sweet potatoes. But nobody wanted them. The result was that all the potatoes rotted in the field. Some people were prone to boasting and exaggeration. There was a 0.13 hectare plot of farmland by my middle school. About 2,500 kg of wheat seeds were sown and people said it would yield 100,000 kg. But, in reality, it produced only 250 kg (because far too many seeds were sown). Though the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party later criticized this mistake of being boastful and exaggerating, much of wealth had already been wasted. The negative impacts of such actions were felt for years.

The people's commune authorities also gave some arbitrary and impractical orders. Our village had a piece of land which should have been planted with soybeans. Some cadres of the people's commune, however, ordered us to grow carrots.

Another piece of land which had already been planted with sweet potatoes was designated for soybeans. All these illogical orders resulted in sizable losses.

It now becomes clear that the inclination to boast and give arbitrary orders came from "Leftist" thinking.

Of course, the people's commune did some good. The most visible improvements were the water conservation projects. I myself took part in building several big projects.

In 1960 I came back home after graduation from junior middle school. My family of 10 members was then broken up into several small ones. I moved in with my uncle and his wife. Peasants from surrounding villages were then building the Haizi Reservoir, which would irrigate almost 10,000 hectares, one-third of the county's total farmland. The builders, in addition to getting subsidies from the state, were paid in cash by the people's commune and received food rations. This made it attractive work and made it possible for the people's commune to mobilize enough people to build the big projects. The water conservation projects on which I worked are still benefiting the people.

I got married in 1962 and later had two sons and one daughter. More mouths need more money. I managed to increase the income for my family. The next year, I spent my spare time collecting firewood in the winter and growing melons on my family's private plot in the summer. The extra work brought in more than 400 yuan. Our life was pretty good.

In 1966, the chaotic "cultural revolution" began. I could no longer collect firewood or grow melons because these were seen as capitalist undertakings. We peasants, unlike workers who have regular wages, had to work in the fields or we would have had nothing to eat. So our agricultural production continued as usual.

In retrospect, my life improved steadily after I began working. But I always thought I could have done much better. I was held back. In 1969, I was elected deputy leader of the brigade in charge of sideline production. One day I bought some eggs from a state chicken farm in order to hatch chickens for the brigade. I sold some the surplus eggs and made 100 yuan for the brigade. I was shocked when I was criticized for selling the eggs. I was labelled a capitalist speculator.

#### *Affluence Begins*

It is only in recent years that I have been able to work hard and grow prosperous without restrictions.

In 1979 I learnt from newspapers and broadcasts that the Party had adopted flexible policies in the countryside. The contract responsibility system, which guaranteed more pay for more work, became popular in my village. The new policies allowed us peasants to become the real masters of agriculture and set us free to work hard and make more money. I wondered what I could do to get wealthy.

In 1981, I chose to raise chickens. I spent 380 yuan to buy 500 chicks. I was then a Communist Party member and the brigade's deputy leader. What I did raised some eyebrows in the village, but it didn't affect my job. The policy supported me. I got rich by working hard. Nothing wrong. I earned 850 yuan that year.

I then expanded the scope of my chicken business. The state credit cooperative offered me loans and encouraged me to forge ahead. I read books and

studied to learn how to raise chickens scientifically. I also learnt how to treat chicken diseases such as diarrhoea and typhoid fever. In 1982, I sold the state 6,000 chickens for 9,000 yuan. With my income from the brigade and other household sidelines, I earned a total of more than 10,000 yuan, a figure larger than my combined income for the previous 10 years. The county recognized my achievements and rewarded me.

The Party policy is to bring into full play everyone's enthusiasm for production. It creates more wealth for the country and provides a good life for the peasants. Being among the first in my county to get rich, I'd like to lead others to prosperity.

Wang Shuchen has eight family members, but only two are able men. They have had a hard time. I explained the Party's policy to him and asked if he would like to raise chickens, too. I lent him 580 yuan, saying, "Please use this money to raise chickens. If the chickens die, I won't ask for the money back." Because he was less experienced in raising chickens, I went to his home several times every day to help him write observation notes, make plans for buying chicken feed, keep balance sheets and cure chicken diseases. Last year Wang earned more than 5,000 yuan from his chicken business alone.

So far, I have encouraged 80 families to raise chickens. Last year alone, I lent the families 5,800 yuan free of interest. In addition, I took time to help them treat chicken diseases and teach them how to raise chickens. I was always available whenever I was asked.

My family's life has improved very much in recent years. However, I spent only 400 yuan buying a radio cassette recorder for my daughter to study a foreign language for her college examinations. Other than that, I have spent not a single penny for other electric appliances for my family. I'd rather spend my money expanding production. I bought a walking tractor that cost more than 3,000 yuan.

Not long ago, I was elected secretary of the village Party branch. Since the Party job took much of my time, my chicken business suffered. But it is worth it, because we are helping more people become prosperous.

I am now wondering how to boost enthusiasm even more so that we can turn our village into a village which specializes in chicken raising. We also want to develop other sideline business and to raise other livestock in order to make our village more competitive in commodity production. Our village cadres have decided that whoever comes up with a practical plan to make more than 10,000 yuan next year will be the first to get material assistance from the village.

## II. A SPEECH BY WUER KAIXI (1989)

Fellow students, fellow countrymen:

Seventy years ago today, a large group of illustrious students assembled in front of Tiananmen, and a new chapter in the history of China was opened. Today, we are once again assembled here, not only to commemorate that monumental day but more importantly, to carry forward the May Fourth spirit of science and democracy. Today, in front of the symbol of the Chinese nation, Tiananmen, we can proudly proclaim to all the people in our nation that we are worthy of the pioneers of seventy years ago.

For over one hundred years, the pioneers of the Chinese people have been searching for a path to modernize an ancient and beleaguered China. Following the [1919] Paris Peace Conference, they did not collapse in the face of imperialist oppression, but marched boldly forward [despite Japan's new colonial privileges in China]. Waving the banners of science and democracy, they launched the mighty May Fourth Movement. May Fourth and the subsequent New Democratic Revolution were the first steps in the patriotic democracy movement of Chinese students. From this point on, Chinese history entered a completely new phase. Due to the socioeconomic conditions in China and the shortcomings of intellectuals, the May Fourth ideals of science and democracy have not been realized. Seventy years of history have taught us that democracy and science cannot be established in one fell swoop and that impatience and despair are of no avail. In the context of China's economy and culture, the Marxism espoused by the Chinese Communist Party cannot avoid being influenced by remnants of feudal ideology. Thus, while New China [since 1949] has steadily advanced toward modernization, it has greatly neglected building a democracy. Although it has emphasized the role of science, it has not valued the spirit of science—democracy. At present, our country is plagued with problems such as a bloated government bureaucracy, serious corruption, the devaluation of intellectual work, and inflation, all of which severely impede us from intensifying the reforms and carrying out modernization. This illustrates that if the spirit of science and democracy, and their actual processes, do not exist, numerous and varied feudal elements and remnants of the old system, which are fundamentally antagonistic to large-scale socialist production, will reemerge in society, and modernization will be impossible. For this reason, carrying on the May Fourth spirit, hastening the reform of the political system, protecting human rights, and strengthening rule by law have become urgent tasks of modernization that we must undertake.

Fellow students, fellow countrymen, a democratic spirit is precisely the absorption of the collective wisdom of the people, the true development of each individual's ability, and the protection of each individual's interests; a scientific spirit is precisely respect for individual nature, and the building of the country on the basis of science. Now more than ever, we need to review the experiences and lessons of all student movements since May Fourth, to make science and rationalism a system, a process. Only then can the tasks the May Fourth Movement set before us be accomplished, only then can the spirit of May Fourth be carried forward, and only then can our wish for a strong China be realized.

Fellow students, fellow countrymen, the future and fate of the Chinese nation are intimately linked to each of our hearts. This student movement has but one goal, that is, to facilitate the process of modernization by raising high the banners of democracy and science, by liberating people from the constraints of feudal ideology, and by promoting freedom, human rights, and rule by law. To this end, we urge the government to accelerate the pace of political reform, to guarantee the rights of the people vested in the law, to implement a press law, to permit privately run newspapers, to eradicate corruption, to hasten the establishment of an honest and democratic government, to value education, to respect intellectual work, and to save the nation through science. Our views are not in conflict with those of the government. We only have one goal: the modernization of China.

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... Our present tasks are: first, to take the lead in carrying out experiments in democratic reform at the birthplace of the student movement—the university campus, democratizing and systematizing campus life; second, to participate actively in politics, to persist in our request for a dialogue with the government, to push democratic reforms of our political system, to oppose graft and corruption, and to work for a press law. We recognize that these short-term objectives are only the first steps in democratic reform; they are tiny, unsteady steps. But we must struggle for these first steps, we must cheer for these first steps.

Fellow students, fellow countrymen, prosperity for our nation is the ultimate objective of our patriotic student movement. Democracy, science, freedom, human rights, and rule by law are the ideals that we hundreds of thousands of university students share in this struggle. Our ancient, thousand-year civilization is waiting, our great people, one billion strong, are watching. What qualms can we possibly have? What is there to fear? Fellow students, fellow countrymen, here at richly symbolic Tiananmen, let us once again search together and struggle together for democracy, for science, for freedom, for human rights, and for rule by law.

Let our cries awaken our young Republic!

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did Wang Xin and his family benefit from policies introduced by the Communists after 1949?
2. What evidence is there in Wang's memoir of problems in China during the period of Communist rule?
3. How did Chinese agricultural policies of the 1980s differ from those of the Mao period?
4. What hints does Wang's memoir contain regarding the continuing importance of Confucian values in China?
5. Why does Wuer Kaixi think China needs democracy? Is he correct about the connection between science and democracy, or is this wishful thinking?
6. How does Wuer define "modernization"? Does a society require democracy in order to be modern? Do you think Wang Xin was a likely supporter of the 1989 democracy movement?
7. How do Wuer Kaixi's ideas compare with those of Sun Zhongshan and Mao Zedong (see previous Chapter)?
8. Why did Communism collapse in Russia but not in China (see Chapter 39)?