

Chen Guidi & Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*. Translated by Zhu Hong. New York: Public Affairs, 2006. xxvi + 229 pages.

The media in the West inundates us with news of China's economic miracle. There are glowing reports of the tall skyscrapers and the new technological marvels of Shanghai and Beijing—wonders such as the world's fastest train that whips travelers from the Shanghai Pudong International Airport to downtown in just a matter of minutes. Conversely, we hear about the unbelievable pollution found in China's air and about China's unbelievably dirty waters; but what we do not often hear about is the misery still prevalent among the nation's hundreds of millions of peasants.

Historians often describe Mao's (1893–1976) communist movement as a revolution of the peasants and the land. Deng Xiaoping's (1904–97) reforms were supposed to give the peasantry rights to their own land and greater

control over their destinies. When I accompanied a Fulbright seminar across much of China in the summer of 2006, I heard that, since 1980, the country's per capita gross domestic product had increased ninefold and that hundreds of millions of Chinese had been lifted out of poverty. But when wandering the streets of Beijing and other towns and villages, one sees signs of poverty, much of it very intense, everywhere.

Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, two leading Chinese writers and investigative journalists who are a husband-and-wife team, have written a book, originally published in 2004 in Chinese (*Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* 中国农民调查 [Investigation into China's peasants]) but recently translated into English by Zhu Hong as *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*, where they conclude that China's economic miracle is happening despite, not because of, China's 900 million peasants. Several years ago, they went to Wu's native Anhui Province, one of the poorest areas in China, to investigate the conditions of peasants there. They asked one very basic question: Have the peasants been betrayed by the revolution undertaken in their name by Mao and his successors? Their response is a very disturbing and emphatic "Yes!" Told principally through four dramatic narratives of particular Anhui people, we get a vivid portrait of the pain, poverty, and corruption that China's peasants face every day.

We see that the living conditions of many peasant families have not really improved at all since the Communist Revolution—that was supposed to have been realized on their behalf—and that Chinese leaders today are just as oppressive and corrupt as they were before the revolution. Chinese peasants are, note the authors, truly the voiceless in modern China. They are also, perhaps, the reason that China will not be able to make the great social and economic leap forward, because, if it is to leap, it must carry the 900 million with it.

The four case studies described in this book offer very detailed portraits of the struggles that peasants face in various villages. The story of one corrupt and cruel village official, Gao Xuewen, gives one much of the flavor of the book:

To begin at the beginning, Gao Xuewen was universally hated in Gao Village. Ever since worming his way to the position of village chief, the man had been walking on clouds with his nose in the air, seeming to have even forgotten the surname of his own ancestors. No matter how many documents and directives were passed down from the Party Central Committee on relieving the peasants' burden, the amount of taxes and dues in Gao Village still depended on Gao Xuewen's word. You had to pay exactly what he ordered, and not a cent less. Opposing Gao was tantamount to opposing the people's government, even the Party. If you were so unfortunate as to get into his bad books, he had no compunction against cursing and striking you. Not enough to be beaten and abused, the injured party was obliged to apologize before the matter was allowed to end. (p. 68)

Readers of this book may well reach the conclusion that China's Communist Revolution, rather than being a particularly good thing for the nation's peasants, was in fact an unmitigated disaster for most. We see how local authorities abuse, cheat, vastly overtax, and physically abuse peasants in their villages and regions. Those so abused have no recourse; and when a few brave souls do raise their voices, they and their families are often arrested on trumped-up charges or even physically attacked or killed. The writers help us understand some of the corruption, bribery, and intimidation undertaken by dishonest local officials against those Chinese citizens who can bear it the least: the poor peasants. The book also shows the courageous efforts undertaken by some peasants to achieve basic justice in order to be able to get on with their lives.

Chen and Wu have produced an enlightening but highly disturbing book. Their work, for understandable reasons, was banned soon after its publication in China, but tens of thousands of underground copies have circulated throughout the country. It is exactly the kind of book that anybody even remotely interested in China should read, because it gives a much more realistic portrait of the underside of China's economic miracle than is available elsewhere. I have added this book to the reading list for my courses on modern China, and I would urge every other Asian studies instructor to do likewise.

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