



The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China

Kevin J. O'Brien; Lianjiang Li

China Quarterly, Volume 0, Issue 143 (Sep., 1995), 756-783.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0305-7410%28199509%290%3A143%3C756%3ATPOLCI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J>

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

China Quarterly is published by School of Oriental and African Studies. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/soas.html>.

China Quarterly

©1995 School of Oriental and African Studies

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2003 JSTOR

The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China*

Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li

It all began when angry villagers accused the Party secretary of turning off the electricity to an ice lolly (*binggunr* or popsicle) factory whose owner had refused to pay bribes. The lolly maker had not been paying his rent but that was no reason, they said, to melt his stock and to cause the bank to foreclose on the village's most profitable enterprise.¹

It then escalated the following spring when township birth control inspectors came to investigate early marriages and a villager named Zhang defied them. Zhang and the village Party secretary, who was named Wang, were neighbours and the two men had sons who had been born a few months apart. Both sons had married before the legally-allowed age, but only the Zhang family's violation had become known to the township authorities because Wang had secretly backdated his own son's birth. Zhang, in full view of neighbours who were helping him corner an escaped pig, confronted the township inspector and slyly asked: "is everyone equal before the birth control policy?" Zhang expected the birth control inspector to understand his hint (and his implied threat to expose Wang) and to leave. When the inspector instead stepped into his trap and said "of course everyone is equal before the birth control policy," Zhang jumped up and said his son would pay his fine so long as Wang's son paid his first. The inspector backed off (Wang's son had married *his* daughter!) and left without fining either man, but the villagers who had watched the argument unfold knew he would soon return. Too many people had witnessed the confrontation, Wang's reputation was at stake, and the township's authority had been challenged. Zhang, for his part, feared reprisals from Wang and his friends in the township government and immediately began organizing villagers to lodge complaints against Wang. Although Wang ultimately bribed Zhang to keep silent,

*We should like to thank Thomas P. Bernstein, Donald Clarke, Daniel Kelliher and Lei Guang for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. For generous financial support we are indebted to the Henry Luce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Ohio State University. O'Brien would also like to thank the Ford Foundation and Pacific Cultural Foundation for supporting his fieldwork in 1992 and 1994, while Li would like to acknowledge the China Times Cultural Foundation and the Sun Yat-sen Culture & Education Foundation for sponsoring his dissertation field research in 1993. Essential assistance in the field was provided by many individuals, including Yang Aimin and Fu Xizhong at the Hebei Academy of Social Science, Gao Shan and Li Changqing of the Hebei People's Congress, Wang Zhenhai and Yao Dongfang at the Shandong Academy of Social Science, Bai Yihua and Wang Zhenyao of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Mi Youlu and Wang Aiping of the *Xiangzhen luntan* editorial board, Zhang Houan of Huazhong Normal University, and Che Mingzhou and Zhu Guanglei of Nankai University.

1. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1993. Throughout this article, all personal and place names related to "Wangjiacun" have been altered. Wangjiacun is a middle-income, medium-sized, largely agricultural village in north China. For further information on our interviews and methodology see the appendix at the end of the article.

some of the villagers Zhang mobilized decided to go to the township and to lobby for Wang's removal.²

In autumn 1993, when asked why they had failed to press their complaints concerning the ice lolly meltdown, several villagers had said it was pointless. Only a few people supported the lolly maker, and no one had compelling evidence that Wang was corrupt. It was also commonly assumed that Wang had bought off the township officials, since they frequently drank and gambled together. To cap it all, nearly two-thirds of the villagers shared one surname and Wang was one of the highest-ranking clan elders; even the most disgruntled relatives of the ice cream baron were far from confident they could successfully challenge Wang, particularly since he was the sort of man who would certainly attempt to settle scores if he was not removed from power. "Why risk so much to remove one corrupt cadre," said a villager, "when it's better to be governed by a full tiger than a hungry wolf?"³

But by the summer of 1994 their assessments of Wang's vulnerability had changed and their confidence in their own abilities had increased. A public argument had generated a temporary leader and an issue to mobilize around. Many villagers now had proof that Wang's child had violated the birth control policy – a "national policy" that no village leader could openly ignore. A number of villagers, who had been dissatisfied with Wang for one reason or another, now felt empowered and were willing to risk Wang's wrath. Dozens of villagers joined together and showered the township (and later the county) with letters of complaint outlining Wang's corruption and other abuses. Among the witnesses to his misdeeds were more than half the current village cadres, one of whom even admitted to being an accomplice in a serious act of fraud.

In the intervening nine months, a group of 20 "activists" had formed (ten Party members and ten other villagers) to gather evidence against Wang. Individuals outside the village had been mobilized, audiences with higher levels had been sought, and 30 or 40 villagers had paraded through the village's streets with a banner proclaiming "down with corruption, looking for clean cadres." By late summer 1994, delegations from the village were visiting the county government every day and discussions about filing a formal, collective lawsuit were under way. Some villagers were now saying: "when a full tiger leaves we won't tolerate a new hungry wolf."⁴

What emboldened the activists to organize and seek redress? How did they convince others to support them? What tactics did they use to tilt the odds in their favour and how did Wang and the township officials respond? More generally, what can this and other similar cases reveal about the logic of popular action in China's countryside?

This article explores the dynamics of seeking audiences and lodging

2. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1994.

3. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1993.

4. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1994.

collective complaints at higher levels (*jiti shangfang gaozhuang*). It considers a range of activities, legal, or at least not illegal, that are both more open and organized than typical “everyday forms of peasant resistance”⁵ and more channelled (and smaller in scale) than outright rebellion.⁶ It highlights the critical early stages of lodging a collective complaint, when a few individuals become aware of an opportunity to stand up to village cadres and exploit it. Relying on extensive interviews in one north China village (which we will call Wangjiacun), archival materials, and recent field work in Fujian, Hebei and Shandong, the article focuses on the parties involved: the individuals who defy grass-roots cadres and initiate action, the villagers who wait and watch the situation develop, and the village cadres who are the principal targets. To a lesser extent, it explores the role of various actors outside the village (township and county cadres, journalists, visiting work teams) as they enter the fray.

Lodging a Collective Complaint

Most rural *shangfang gaozhuang* are formal, written complaints physically carried by a group of villagers to higher levels (usually the township or county town).⁷ The complaint cannot be anonymous and must be signed or thumb printed. In addition to a core group of activists, who agree to pursue the matter in person, the document frequently lists witnesses, who offer to provide evidence supporting the complainants’ allegations.

Letters of complaint that we have seen run from a few to a dozen pages or more, and have been handwritten. They typically begin with a story of cadre malfeasance, continue with detailed charges, and end with specific demands. One collective complaint often describes several incidents in a series of letters that are assembled and filed together. At the bottom of each letter the complainants’ signatures are affixed, along with witnesses’ names and thumb prints. When the charges involve corruption, such as in

5. On “everyday resistance,” see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Forrest D. Colburn (ed.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989); James C. Scott and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 1986).

6. On “in-between forms of resistance,” see Andrew Turton, “Patrolling the middle-ground: methodological perspectives on ‘everyday peasant resistance’,” in Scott and Kerkvliet, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia*, p. 45. Several treatments of peasant rebellion in dynastic China include Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1913* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1976); Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China 1845–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Robert Marks, *Rural Revolution in South China: Peasants and the Making of History in Haifeng County, 1570–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); James Tong, *Disorder under Heaven: Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). A useful analysis of millenarian, class conflict and local politics approaches to rebellion is available in Daniel Little, *Understanding Peasant China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 145–186.

7. In Wangjiacun, one of the key activists retained the original complaint, while photocopies made in the county town were passed on to township and later county officials.

Wangjiacun, letters of complaint often conclude with copies of alleged, phone receipts and other written proof of cadre wrongdoing.

Letters of complaint may concern any grievance, but in practice they usually target rural cadres who have violated a Party policy, a law or a state regulation.⁸ Express reference to official documents (or sometimes leadership speeches) is useful inasmuch as it makes it difficult for local leaders to ignore a complaint; it also increases the danger that villagers may appeal up the state hierarchy and eventually receive a sympathetic hearing. In one of the poorest villages in Henan's Sheqi county, for example, a group of villagers showed State Council regulations printed by the prefecture to county officials when protesting against 37 different fees which far exceeded the 5 per cent limit.⁹ Their implicit threat was to go to the prefectural city and to demand that prefectural officials enforce regulations they themselves had publicized.

Lodging complaints does not appear to be an effective way to express displeasure with a national policy or with ordinary, state-sanctioned revenue collection; rather it is a tool primarily used to combat illegal local impositions and unauthorized "local policies" (*tu zhengce*), and to ensure that village leaders act according to official norms and implement state measures that benefit villagers.¹⁰ No sane person would seek an audience, for example, to denounce a cadre for implementing the birth control policy (though one might attack her for favouritism in allocating birth quotas or some other offence).¹¹ Instead, villagers lodge complaints against public security cadres who beat them up, factory managers whose enterprises pollute their farmland, cadres who buy luxurious cars, and Party secretaries who favour their lineage when allocating state-supplied fertilizer. Cadres who embezzle public funds have drawn particular attention recently and have become a perennial source of collective complaints.¹² Although a flood of letters and visits on a single topic may occasionally prompt leaders at higher levels to take some sort of remedial action, for example concerning excessive fees, typical complainants do

8. This is one reason that corruption charges are difficult to pursue; many cadre actions exist in a "grey area" and are subject to several interpretations. A pattern of mass letters "mirroring elite concerns" and helping policy implementation has also been identified for 1962–84. See John P. Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 151. On succeeding by arguing that "cadre behavior conflicted with the formal values or laws of the current regime," see David Zweig, "Struggling over land in China: peasant resistance after collectivization, 1966–1986," in Colburn, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, p. 170.

9. Cheng Tongshun, "Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin de zhengzhi canyu" ("Political participation of current Chinese peasants"), pp. 11–12, unpublished Master's thesis, Nankai University, March 1994.

10. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and popular resistance in contemporary China," *Modern China*, forthcoming.

11. Displacing dissatisfaction to an acceptable issue is a common tactic. In a township near Wangjiacun, villagers ousted a Party secretary who was a model implementer of the birth control policy by publicizing a retaliatory theft of another village's transformer he had organized, to most villagers' acclaim, several years before.

12. See Fang Guomin, "Dui dangqian nongcun jiti shangfang qingkuang de diaocha fenxi" ("Investigation and analysis of the current situation of groups seeking audiences at higher levels"), *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 12 (December 1993), p. 36.

not question the legitimacy of central laws and policies, not to mention the right of unaccountable leaders at higher levels to promulgate laws and policies. Complainants, by and large, seem to direct their attacks at over-eager or dishonest grassroots cadres who have harmed their interests – and, then, mainly those cadres who are vulnerable because they have proven themselves unwilling (or unable) to comply with directives issued by higher levels or the “spirit of the Centre.”

In recent years “hot topics” for seeking audiences and lodging complaints have included: excessive fees; favouritism in contract disputes and land distribution for new housing; and preferential enforcement of birth control measures.¹³ In less serious cases, the complainants may demand that a cadre rescind a fee or revise an exorbitant ploughing contract.¹⁴ In more serious cases, such as in Wangjiacun, frustrated villagers may seek to oust a cadre they believe is corrupt, excessively partial, overly dutiful or incompetent.

Complainants tend to target the top leaders in a village and to defer action until a significant number of villagers can be mobilized. In one Henan municipality, of 170 *shangfang gaozhuang* that reached Hebi city authorities in the first nine months of 1993, 95 per cent named a villagers’ committee chairman or a village Party secretary. The number of villagers from each village seeking an audience ranged from seven to 145, with an average of 20 to 30, while larger delegations often had 60 to 70 members. In this small survey, most (“about 80 per cent”) collective complaints were initiated by residents of suburban or relatively prosperous villages.¹⁵

Why Are Collective Complaints Becoming More Common?

Although no nation-wide data are available, the frequency of collective *shangfang gaozhuang* appears to be rising.¹⁶ In a Hebei county, for instance, there were 193 collective complaints against village cadres in 1992, while in the first seven months of 1993 the number of complaints jumped to 243.¹⁷ According to a Chinese analyst, “in recent years, seeking audiences has become an increasingly popular form of rural

13. These “hot topics” are drawn from Cheng Tongshun, “Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin,” p. 11. For a long but far from exhaustive list of forms of cadre corruption and abuse, see Jean C. Oi, “Market reforms and corruption in rural China,” *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 22, Nos. 2–3, (Summer 1989), pp. 221–22.

14. Interviews, Shandong, July 1994; Cheng Tongshun, “Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin,” pp. 11–12.

15. Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” p. 36.

16. Surveying written channels of peasant participation in the commune era, John Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China*, (pp. 148, 151) concluded: “petitioning was not well developed or widely used by the peasants,” and “probably few peasants chose to participate in politics by writing to authorities.” More recently, Thomas P. Bernstein has argued that farmer grievances grew in the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. See Bernstein, “In quest of voice: China’s farmers and prospects for political liberalization,” paper presented at the University Seminar on Modern China, February 1994. On a “high tide” of complaints in one Henan city, see Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” p. 36.

17. Zhonggong cixian xianwei zuzhibu, “You zhuanggao zhibu shuji yinchu de sikao” (“Thoughts on lodging complaints against Party secretaries”), *Ganbu yu rencai*, No. 12 (December 1993), p. 36.

political participation”; in one Hubei county alone, collective *shangfang* reportedly generated more than 500 visits to county offices in 1988 – a 28 per cent increase over the previous year – and nationwide “the number of times peasants seek audiences are too many to count.”¹⁸

Some of the reasons for this growth are obvious and probably universal. The national focus on economic growth, for example, has made village cadres vulnerable to many new charges. Where rapid development has occurred, village leaders may be sorely tempted to steal from public coffers or to favour family and friends. Where rapid development has not occurred, pressure to promote economic growth has increased and cadres who fail to measure up may become targets for mass complaints.¹⁹ In many locations, cadre favouritism associated with lineage resurgence has also reportedly led to an upsurge in complaints by members of smaller or disadvantaged lineages.²⁰

The aetiology of other complaints is more particular and undoubtedly varies from place to place. (An assortment of idiosyncratic factors, as shown below, certainly motivated the activists in Wangjiacun.) Even so, complaints are not purely the result of misunderstandings and happy (or unfortunate) coincidences. Structural changes in cadre–villager relations related to the dissolution of communes, marketization, increased mobility, administrative and political reforms, and improved legal protections lie at the root of much villager unrest.²¹

State extraction has become both more visible and more contentious in recent years. Since the demise of the commune, village cadres must implement unpopular policies with fewer (and often cruder) tools to

18. For the quoted text, see Cheng Tongshun, “Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin,” p. 11. For the original reference to 500 visits and a 28% increase, see Tang Jinsu and Wang Jianjun, “Nanyi huiyi de redian: jinnian nongcun ganqun guanxi toushi” (“Hot issues that are hard to avoid: perspectives on rural cadre–mass relations in recent years”). Investigation report prepared for the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1989, p. 4. A shortened version of this article appeared in *Difang zhengzhi yu xingzheng*, No. 3 (March 1990), pp. 15–20, No. 4, pp. 13–17 and No. 5, pp. 56–60. See also Ministry of Civil Affairs official, Wang Zhenyao, “Woguo nongcun de lishixing biange yu cunmin zizhi de biran qushi” (“Our country’s historical reform and the inevitable trend of villagers’ autonomy”), in Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshe si nongcunchu (ed.), *Cunmin zizhi shifan jiangxi ban shiyong jiaocai* (*Teaching Materials for the Study Group on Villagers’ Autonomy Demonstration*), November 1991, p. 44. Anecdotal evidence of increasing numbers of *shangfang gaozhuang* also exists. In one village outside Shijiazhuang, in the years up to 1990, over 40 mass complaints were lodged with higher levels each year. Groups of villagers visited the township daily and one delegation even travelled to Beijing to seek an audience. See Bao Yonghui and Li Xinrui, “Cunmin zizhi shifou fuhe Zhongguo guoqing?” (“Does villagers’ autonomy accord with China’s conditions?”) in Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshe si, *Cunmin zizhi banfa tansuo* (*An Exploration of Methods of Villagers’ Autonomy*), July 1991, pp. 49–50. A slightly shortened version of this report appeared in *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 6, (June 1991) pp. 11–13. For information on rural complaints shortly after the Cultural Revolution, see He Li, *Beijing gaozhuangqun* (*Complainants to Beijing*) (Hong Kong: Jingbao wenhua qiye youxian gongsi, 1991).

19. Interviews, Shandong, July 1994.

20. Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” pp. 36–37.

21. These structural changes can also be considered changes in the “political opportunity structure.” See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17–18 and ch. 5. See Zweig, “Struggling over land in China,” pp. 162–170, for an argument that increasing awareness of exploitation, weakening collective controls, and improved legal protection have made peasants more willing and able to protect their land.

persuade reluctant villagers. In the new environment they have to “ask” villagers for grain and taxes instead of siphoning off revenues largely hidden from watchful eyes.²² Class labelling and job assignments no longer hold the unruly in check, and cadres’ monopoly and monopsony powers have disappeared. Aware of their reduced dependence and seeing that wasted or stolen funds come directly from their pockets, so-called “*dingzihu*” (nail-like households, that is defiant villagers) may refuse to obey cadres or to part with even small sums. Impatient village cadres may then all too frequently “resort to force, educating and persuading for the first three minutes” and then “letting loose a hurricane.”²³

In many places, villagers freed from communes have come to question why they need any state representatives, let alone troublesome ones, in their villages. Villagers in these circumstances often lodge complaints (under one pretext or another) against so-called “three want cadres” (*san yao ganbu*): cadres who want their grain, their money and their (aborted) children, but who provide few services or benefits in return.²⁴

Villagers newly-attuned to market signals are also increasingly aware of price scissors that keep them poor and of policies that prevent them from exploiting desirable market niches. Rural residents who have visited cities have seen urban subsidies and may resent the low prices and low levels of state investment they receive. Villagers all know that the Centre is promoting marketization, yet they still must meet many township and

22. In one wealthy Hebei village we were told that it was not uncommon for cadres to make ten visits to a family before the grain tax was paid. On 35 township representatives surrounding 78 family homes for three days in order to collect 5.5 *yuan* per household in fees for education and military dependents, see Hebei sheng minzhengting diaocha, “Guanyu sanlei cun guanhe cunweihui zuzhifa de diaocha” (“An investigation of the implementation of the organic law of villagers’ committees in third class villages”), pp. 46–47, in Minzhengbu cunji zuzhi jianshe zhuangkuang diaocha, *Cunji zuzhi jianshe zhuangkuang diaocha xuanbian* (Selection of Investigations of the Situation in Village Level Organizational Construction), December 1989.

23. A researcher associated with a prefectural Party organization department in Hunan defines *dingzihu* as “rural households which reject the guidance of national policy and refuse to carry out national, township and village tasks.” See He Weiliang, “Jiceng dang lingdao bixu zhongshi zuo nongcun ‘dingzihu’ de zhuanhua gongzuo” (“Grassroots Party leaders must attach importance to transforming rural *dingzihu* into their opposite”), unpublished paper, April 1992, p. 2. He also cites estimates that 5% of rural households nationwide are *dingzihu*. The quotation cited in the text continues: “Whomever doesn’t fulfil tasks provided for at higher levels has a large force bear down on them. Cadres seize their grain, confiscate their appliances, tear down their homes and surround their houses so pregnant women cannot escape.” For a discussion of *dingzihu* and their singularly disruptive form of resistance, as well as their relationship to so-called *diaomin* and *shunmin*, see Lianjiang Li and O’Brien, “Villagers and popular resistance.”

24. *San yao ganbu* are discussed in Wang Kean, “Cunmin weiyuanhui de xianzhuang yu gaige” (“The present situation and reform of villagers’ committees”), in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong (eds.), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe* (Power Construction of Chinese Towns and Townships) (Chengdu: Sichuan chubanshe, 1992), pp. 187–88. On village cadres who demand much but provide little, see Yang Xuejun and Sun Xinmin, “Lishun xiang zhengfu yu cunmin weiyuanhui zhijian de guanxi” (“Rationalize relations between township governments and villagers’ committees”), in Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan jianshe yanjiuhui (eds.), *Shijian yu sikao* (Practice and Reflection) (Shenyang: Liaoning chubanshe, 1989), p. 114; Zhang Houan, “Cunmin weiyuanhui de xianzhuang, wenti yu duice,” (“The current situation of villagers’ committees, problems and policies”), in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong, *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe*, pp. 204–205.

village targets. They naturally blame grassroots cadres who force them to grow unprofitable crops or to pay unreasonable shares of road-building levies. Continuing discrimination against rural areas, combined with marketization, means that villagers must pay a disproportionate share of infrastructure expenses and for virtually every social service they receive. Although direct attacks over extraction and increasingly visible discrimination can be unwise (unless higher-level patrons are available), villagers may still mobilize public opinion to lodge complaints against cadres who fail to help them wriggle out of commitments or who fulfil them with undue enthusiasm.²⁵

In the new more marketized environment, villagers also travel more and have greater access to information on state policy and the plight (and strategies) of villagers elsewhere.²⁶ Travelling business people and day labourers may discover regulations and laws designed to protect villagers, some of which are never officially transmitted below the county.²⁷ Roving reporters from *Nongmin ribao* or stringers from journals like *Xiangzhen luntan* may investigate cadre abuses and can become focuses for protest or change – if their reports are published.²⁸ Sympathetic editorials and commentaries in newspapers and magazines may also convince some villagers that the environment is favourable to press complaints, while highly-visible television reports about anti-corruption campaigns may provide inspiration to others. In Wangjiacun, for example, one of the activists acquired a cadre work style manual, read it carefully, took it remarkably seriously and used it to mobilize fellow villagers to attack Wang's corruption.²⁹

News of successful cadre challenges also spreads quickly and may embolden villagers elsewhere to lodge complaints. One official in a township neighbouring Wangjiacun explained that he had to defend even the most corrupt village Party secretary in his township to prove he was tough and to deter other villagers from rising up against their leaders.³⁰ On a larger scale, one of the reported reasons that Renshou county was closed tightly after the riots in 1993 was that nearby villages were “sending ‘inspection teams’ to learn from the rioters’ experiences”!³¹

Villagers, accordingly, are more knowledgeable about their exploitation and less dependent on village cadres than they were during the commune era. They have a better appreciation of interest conflicts with local representatives of state power and more ability to act on them. Even

25. This argument is also suggested in Tang Jinsu and Wang Jianjun, “Nanyi huibi de redian,” pp. 3–6, and Duan Zhiqiang and Tang Jinsu, “Gansu sheng nongcun jiceng zuzhi zhuangkuang diaocha baogao” (“Investigation report on the current situation in grassroots rural organizations in Gansu province”), unpublished paper, 1989.

26. In the 15 villages we visited in coastal Shandong and coastal and inland Fujian, typically one-third of the villagers were said to be “away on business” at any given time.

27. Such measures may be unknown because township and village cadres have chosen to withhold documents or to ignore oral communications they have received from higher levels.

28. Cheng Tongshun, “Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin,” pp. 12–13; Interviews, Beijing, 1994. Bao Yonghui and Li Xinrui (see nn. 18, 41) are Xinhua reporters.

29. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1994.

30. Interview, township official, 1993.

31. Interview with a rural researcher, July 1994.

in places where cadres still control vital resources (such as richer villages with many collective enterprises), villagers are better placed to protest against excessive extraction, corruption, harsh treatment, incompetence and “cronyism.”³²

Decollectivization, marketization and increased mobility may be said to have transformed the “political opportunity structure”³³ (to borrow concepts from the literature on social movements) in ways that encourage villagers to employ collective action. At the same time, additional political-legal reforms have also begun to constrain village cadres and galvanize villagers to experiment with “tactical innovations” that may ultimately expand the existing rural “repertoire of contention.”³⁴ The Chinese government, in reforming itself, has begun to give villagers more protection against cadre retaliation and more laws (and other directives) to point to when filing charges. Most notably, a series of administrative, electoral, and legal reforms have inspired villagers to *shangfang gaozhuang* while limiting the ability of cadres to deflect complaints, punish complainants and defend themselves.

Long-standing regulations have always prohibited cadres from exacting revenge on activists who file a complaint – by statute, seeking an audience and lodging a complaint is a “lawful action” rather than “rebellion.”³⁵ What is new, however, is that cadre responsibility systems and village charters (where they exist) have begun to alter the criteria for measuring cadre performance. Responsibility systems set up in the late 1980s now enumerate “hard targets” (*ying zhibiao*) that must be met, but also oblige grassroots leaders to respect villagers’ legal rights. Particularly since maintaining social stability has recently been made a “hard target” in many places, yearly or quarterly assessments (which affect salary and promotion) may be downgraded if too many complaints are filed, if they are not handled well, or if force or other inappropriate methods are used against complainants.³⁶ Village charters and codes of

32. The extent of villager dependence on village cadres since reform has been a lively subject of debate. For several perspectives, see Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Jonathan Unger, “State and peasant in post-revolution China,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 17 (October 1989), pp. 133–35; Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Elisabeth J. Croll, “Reform, local political institutions and the village economy in China,” *Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 3 (December 1987), p. 47; Jonathan Unger, “The decollectivization of the Chinese countryside: a survey of twenty-eight villages,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 58 (Winter 1985–86), pp. 585–606. On farmer “interest conflicts” with the state, see Thomas P. Bernstein, book manuscript, in progress.

33. For discussions of this concept, see Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, ch. 4; Herbert P. Kitschelt, “Political opportunity structures and political protest: anti-nuclear movements in four democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 16 (1986), pp. 57–85.

34. On tactical innovation, see Doug McAdam, “Tactical innovation and the pace of insurgency,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48 (1983), pp. 735–754. A recent discussion of “repertoires of contention” can be found in Charles Tilly, “Contentious repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 253–80.

35. Interview, township official. 1993.

36. Interview, Shandong, 1994. In a paper compiled by the Party committee and people’s government of Zhangqiu county, Shandong, recent efforts to reduce collective *shangfang* are discussed in a section focusing on “social stability.” See “Jiaqiang he gaishan dang di

conduct likewise lay out the rights and responsibilities of villagers and cadres in painstaking detail, and though partially designed to “reconstitute the power they were intended to circumscribe,” also provide explicit standards for supervising cadres and may become a source of leverage for aggrieved villagers.³⁷

Electoral reforms, in some localities, play a similar role in encouraging popular action and increasing the likelihood that complainants will not be ignored or dismissed. Under provisions of the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees (1987), village cadres are not included within the state hierarchy and villagers’ committee members are subject to election and the supervision of Villagers’ Assemblies or Villagers’ Representative Assemblies.³⁸ Discussions with Ministry of Civil Affairs officials suggest that public knowledge of the Organic Law has improved over the last few years and villagers in some locations are learning how to use it to back up *shangfang gaozhuang*. According to provincial officials in Shandong, for example, hundreds of collective complaints concerning election irregularities were lodged by villagers during the 1993 villagers’ committee elections. In one Shandong village, where a Party secretary placed his relatives in administrative positions, outraged villagers voted them out at the first opportunity. When the township annulled the election, villagers lodged a complaint with the county bureau of civil affairs and ultimately forced the election’s original results to be reinstated.³⁹ In a similar Hebei case, over 50 villagers went straight to the Central Discipline Inspection Committee in Beijing with complaints about a Party branch monopolizing nomination of candidates for villagers’ committee elections and candidates accompanying a mobile ballot box as it moved from place to place. They were heard out by CDIC officials and referred to the Ministry of Civil Affairs where an investigation was begun.⁴⁰

footnote continued

nongcun gongzuo de lingdao shixing yi fa jianzhi, yi zhi zhicun, minzhu guanli” (“Strengthen and improve the Party’s leadership of rural work, establish institutions according to law, use institutions to govern the village, and manage democratically”), paper presented at the National Conference on Ruling Villages According to Law, 1992, p. 15.

37. On village “compacts” of various kinds, see Ann Anagnost, “Socialist ethics and the legal system,” in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992). The quoted text appears on p. 178. See also Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing political reform in China’s villages,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994), pp. 43–44.

38. On the operation of Villagers’ Committees and Villagers’ Representative Assemblies, see O’Brien, “Implementing political reform,” pp. 33–59; Susan V. Lawrence, “Democracy, Chinese style,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994), pp. 61–68.

39. Interview with a provincial and a municipal civil affairs official, July 1994. In the past few years, *Xiangzhen luntan* has reported many collective complaints concerning election irregularities. See Wang Jianfeng, “Fa da? quan da?” (“Which is bigger: law or power”), No. 10 (October 1992), p. 32; Tian Yuan, “Zhongguo nongcun jiceng de minzhu zhilu” (“The path to grassroots democracy in rural China”), No. 6 (June 1993), pp. 3–4; Shao Xingliang, Cui Suozhi, Meng Baolin and Sun Xueliang, “Yi min wei tian” (“Regarding the people as sovereign”), No. 4 (April 1994), pp. 10–11. Complaints over election irregularities can also be found in Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshesi nongcunchu, *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin weiyuanhui huanjie xuanju yanjiu baogao – taolun gao* (Draft Research Report on Rural China’s Villagers’ Committee Re-elections), August 1993. This report was published by Zhongguo shehui chubanshe in June 1994.

40. Interview with a Ministry of Civil Affairs official, Beijing, June 1994.

Complainants appear to use whatever openings and whatever legal and political tools are available. They challenge officials to implement the Organic Law and lodge complaints when their rights are violated; they also link the Organic Law with other, unrelated grievances. In both western Hebei and in a township near Wangjiacun, villagers used complaints focused on other charges (such as incompetence or corruption) as a springboard to demand that township officials hold elections prescribed by the Organic Law.⁴¹

The last major new weapon in villagers' arsenal is the Administrative Litigation Law (1990). This grants Chinese citizens the right to sue state officials who act arbitrarily or who employ undue coercion.⁴² Though typically a last resort, relied on only in desperation after lodging complaints and seeking administrative review have failed, recent reports speak of villagers filing lawsuits against government departments that sell fake fertilizer, seeds and pesticides, as well as township cadres who demand excessive fees or require that fees be paid years in advance.⁴³ Of most import for village governance, the Law has made it clearly illegal (and potentially costly) for township officials to beat up villagers who will not obey orders or to tear down illegally-built homes without going through legal procedures. More than a few township officials we have encountered have expressed real concern that if they continued to tackle problems in their usual fashion they would be sued by villagers under the provisions of this Law.⁴⁴

A telling example of the leverage provided by the Administrative Litigation Law (or at least its potential) came from a township official who was sympathetic to the Wangjiacun activists. After they were told they could not bypass the township and go to higher levels, he advised the activists:

This is a lie. It's your right to go to the county, and they dare not do anything to you. If they hit you with one finger you should sue them. If they handcuff you, you should bring the handcuffs to court. If the procurator wants to protect them, you should sue the procurator, too.... In fact, if you go to higher levels the cadres will be criticized and this will affect their performance evaluation under the cadre responsibility system. If you want to push them, you should do what they are most afraid of.⁴⁵

41. Bao Yonghui and Li Xinrui, "Shenhua nongcun dierbu gaige de qiji" ("The turning point in deepening the second stage of rural reform"), in Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshe si, *Cunmin zizhi banfa tansuo (An Exploration of Methods of Villagers' Autonomy)*, July 1991, p. 44. A slightly different version of this article appeared in *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 5 (May 1991), pp. 17–18; Interview, township official, 1993.

42. For western analysis of the Law, see Pitman Potter, "The Administrative Litigation Law of the PRC: changing the relationship between the courts and administrative agencies in China," *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 3–21; Susan Finder, "Like throwing an egg against a stone? Administrative litigation in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Chinese Law*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 1989), pp. 1–28; Stephen G. Wood and Liu Chong, "China's Administrative Procedure Law: an English translation with comments," *Administrative Law Review*, Vol. 43 (Winter 1991), pp. 89–111.

43. For citations to rural lawsuits, see Cheng Tongshun, "Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin," pp. 14–15.

44. Interviews, township officials, 1993 and 1994.

45. Interview, township official, 1994.

Higher levels which are responsible for implementing laws and evaluating cadres can be valuable allies for villagers who seek to have a Party chairman or villagers' committee director sanctioned or removed. With legal documents and evidence of leadership intent in hand, complainants can sometimes draw ranking officials into their disputes and may be able to generate considerable pressure on a charged cadre.

Although village and township cadres still hold far more cards than villagers, the prospects for villagers contemplating formal, open petitioning are less bleak than those described by Burns, Falkenheim and Townsend for an earlier era.⁴⁶ Recent political-legal reforms and rapid socio-economic change have provided more than a few openings for knowing villagers to exploit. Hybrid forms of what Burns calls "contacting" and "writing" (such as *shangfang gaozhuang*) appear to be widely employed and to be more effective than either contacting or writing alone were in the past.

Villagers, though far from free to pursue every grievance, have more reasons to file a complaint and fewer reasons to be afraid when a cadre strikes back at them. Village cadres have more places to stumble and villagers have more channels of protest (and protection) when they do. For many villagers, the expected pay-offs of lodging a complaint have increased while the expected costs have declined, at least somewhat. Retribution of some sort is still likely but it is neither quite as sure nor quite as costly.

Villagers Who Stand Up to Village Cadres: Activists and Their Motivations

Who lodges complaints is not the sort of information often shared in Chinese accounts of rural political action. This section relies mainly on interviews concerning the efforts in Wangjiacun to remove secretary Wang to profile one group of activists. How typical these 20 complainants are is difficult to guess.

Research conducted before the rural reforms began suggested that the villagers most likely to participate in politics included individuals with good class backgrounds (such as lower and middle peasants), ambitious young idealists with few family responsibilities, men near the peak of their labour power, and the better-educated (though education also made

46. Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China*, pp. 139–152; Victor C. Falkenheim, "Political participation in China," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 27 (May–June 1978), pp. 18–32; James R. Townsend, *Political Participation in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). For a nuanced treatment of peasant participation in the Maoist era and an argument that current "peasant discontent is unlikely to be canalized in the service of broader goals," see Marc Blecher, "The contradictions of grass-roots participation and undemocratic statism in Maoist China and their fate," in Brantly Womack (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Politics in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 129–152. For a contrasting perspective on "peasant democratic potential," see Edward Friedman, "Deng versus the peasantry: recollectivization in the countryside," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 39 (September–October 1990), pp. 30–43.

individuals more vulnerable to criticism).⁴⁷ More recent studies of Chinese political participation have highlighted the activism of workers, intellectuals and other urbanites.⁴⁸

In Wangjiacun, the core group of activists are all men.⁴⁹ Most are reasonably well-educated by rural standards and most are middle-aged or younger. All 20 farm at least part-time (including the ice lolly maker), and many are engaged in sideline work such as transportation and peddling. Four of the activists are PLA veterans, while one has spent time in prison and two are former cadres. Two older cadres and several younger and middle-aged cadres have also become involved in the action against secretary Wang.

The activists appear to have been drawn together by several motivations. First, a number of them are ambitious; they aspire to become cadres and perhaps even to replace Wang. This is not a preposterous aim. The leader of a group who successfully overthrew the village leadership in 1990 in Hebei's Liang village was a peasant who discovered the existence of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees and used it to force an election which he later won.⁵⁰ In Wangjiacun, one of the activists is downwardly mobile; his father was a deposed county official and his brother-in-law is a township official, but he is just an ordinary farmer. He hopes, perhaps even expects, to become a cadre if Wang is removed.

Several of the activists who served in the army also have dreams of village office. Like demobilized soldiers in many villages, they believe they are more capable than the current power holders, they tend to look down on village cadres who have never left the village, and they feel they know more about the outside world and have received superior political and ideological training than the current leaders. Yet they are frustrated; each of the four veteran-activists is a Party member but none serve on the village Party committee. They consider themselves to be more politically sophisticated and capable than ordinary villagers, yet their political status is hardly higher. Like returned middle school graduates in many Chinese villages, these men say they are ready to take on official position but they see few positions available now or in the future in Wangjiacun. They do not, as far as can be ascertained, enjoy the confidence of the current village leaders, who seem to believe the veterans would never have become Party members if they had not served in the army. The veterans,

47. John Burns, "Political participation of peasants in China," in Victor C. Falkenheim (ed.), *Citizens and Groups in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1987), pp. 113–15; Falkenheim, "Political participation in China," pp. 27–29.

48. Tianjian Shi, "Political participation in Beijing: a survey study," Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1992; Wenfang Tang, "Workplace participation in Chinese local industries," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (August 1993), pp. 920–940; Wenfang Tang, William L. Parish and Guansan Yang, "Interest articulation and political participation in urban China," unpublished paper, September 1993. More generally, on political culture, see Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural requisites for democracy in China: findings from a survey," *Daedalus*, Vol. 122, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 95–124.

49. All the information on Wangjiacun in the remainder of this account is drawn from interviews conducted in 1993 and 1994.

50. Bao Yonghui and Li Xinrui, "Shenhua nongcun dierbu," p. 48.

for their part, have decided that lodging complaints against Wang provides their best chance to win a place in the village leadership and to improve village governance. They appear to be acting partly out of ambition, combined with a measure of public-spiritedness and moral righteousness derived from strongly-held beliefs about how villages should be run and how cadres should behave.⁵¹

Secondly, some of the activists claim that Wang has mistreated them or denied them favours or privileges they deserve. When Zhang began assembling the complainants, he scoured the village for anyone with a personal grudge or a long-standing claim against Wang. Among the first complainants, he found a villager Wang had denied land for house building while he was in prison, a young man Wang had prevented from cutting down a tree to make a coffin for his father-in-law, a veteran whose request to join the village leadership Wang turned down on grounds that he was unfilial, two older cadres whom Wang was about to force to retire, an electrician Wang had sacked for adultery and theft, and one younger, former cadre Wang had embarrassed and ultimately induced to quit his post. Zhang himself had tried to bribe Wang to backdate his son's birth, but the size of the proposed bribe was misunderstood and Wang had snubbed him. Intense, personal hatred and a sense that they have been wronged clearly motivate many of the Wangjiacun activists, and this should not be surprising. The activists have set out on a dangerous and uncertain course, and many of them are not wholly selfless, but rather ambitious and embittered men with scores to settle.

Resentful older cadres should be highlighted in this regard. Wang has been trying to force the two most senior cadres in Wangjiacun to retire for some time, and one of the old cadres has now become a key figure among the activists. When he was approached to witness the original complaint this former cadre was seriously ill. Zhang and several of the earliest activists drew him into their group with the request to "do one final service for the village before going to your grave" and with the plea "you shouldn't leave this world without sharing your secret" (that is, his participation with Wang in various corrupt activities). The old cadre was also judged a likely prospect to join the complainants because he had long argued that the *sihua* policy discriminates against "revolutionary veterans who have contributed so much but received so little." Like many older cadres, he seems to feel that he has not shared adequately in recent economic growth and he resents the high-handedness and corruption of younger leaders "who haven't been tempered by the political campaigns of old."⁵²

51. The role of demobilized soldiers in rural political action deserves more attention. It is worth noting that a retired soldier also initiated the complaint against the cadres in Liang village, Hebei that was discussed above. See *ibid.* Reports also suggest that a PLA veteran was instrumental in leading the 1993 unrest in Renshou county. Bernstein, "In quest of voice," pp. 67–72.

52. A Ministry of Civil Affairs official also emphasized the importance of political campaigns for combating cadre corruption, Beijing, July 1994. Older cadres may not have prospered as much as younger ones, but cadres who retired before decollectivization have

Thirdly, there are ethical concerns. Many of the activists argue that their cause is just. According to traditional values, cadres should be moral exemplars – something which Wang obviously is not: he is known to be corrupt, he was caught using public funds to frequent prostitutes, and he is widely suspected of diverting village monies to fill his personal storeroom with expensive appliances and hundred of bottles of beer. Outside his following in the village, few regard Wang to be an “upright official” (*qingguan*) and even more importantly, many believe that his dissolute life style is not simply a private affair. One former cadre who is now an activist, for instance, has claimed that Wang’s dishonesty has cost villagers dearly, while another complainant has argued that Wang’s moral failings have led him to ignore his duty to speed development of the village economy. Wang, in their view, falls short according to both traditional and developmental standards and does not deserve to be a village leader. At the same time, he is also perceived by some villagers to be an “unqualified” Party cadre, at least according to one of the Wangjiacun activists who truly professes to be moved by “Communist values.” He has seen films and television programmes that propagate model behaviour for officials, and has read a Party propaganda manual that explains appropriate cadre work style. He believes that Wang is not a “real Communist” and should be removed.⁵³

Ambition, personal dislike, a sense of justice, a desire to improve village governance and moral disapproval appear to be the main factors that enabled a core group of complainants to form in Wangjiacun. But there are also considerations such as personality and political competence. Many of the activists are strongly assertive, risk-takers; most are also unusually well-informed. Several are aware that central laws and policies have granted them certain privileges and protections, and they act on this awareness to engage in what might be called “policy-based resistance.” They may not be telegenic intellectuals who quote Montesquieu, but they are tough and knowledgeable individuals who are demanding entry into the local polity and a share of grassroots power – people who recognize which policies and laws are potentially beneficial and which have been “stolen” (*tanwu*) or poorly implemented. Instead of treating Wang as if he were a simple agent of the township, who must be obeyed as if he were dispatched from above, they treat him as if he is constrained by policies and laws to respect villagers’ legitimate interests and legal prerogatives. As shown below, the Wangjiacun activists do not view policies, laws and leadership speeches solely as instruments of domination that facilitate control and promote the exercise of political power: they also see “clean government” campaigns and village-level electoral reforms, for example, as political ammunition to be deployed in their action against Wang.

footnote continued

often received even less. See Yunxiang Yan, “The impact of rural reform on economic and social stratification in a Chinese village,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (January 1992), pp. 10–11.

53. Wangjiacun interview, 1994.

Several of the Wangjiacun activists might even be considered the “shrewd, recalcitrant and bold” individuals whom some rural cadres use the feudal term *diaomin* to describe.⁵⁴ Many of them have certainly been watching Wang closely for years and were quick to pounce once a promising opening appeared. The activists all have an abiding interest in determining when and where the opportunity structure allows for successful popular action. When force or other strategies are used against them, they appear willing to employ whatever tools are available and whatever tactics might work.

The villager who served time in prison and the cadres who lost their position also feel that they have already been disgraced and have little left to lose. The activists, in general, appear to be less worried about face than many Chinese and, provided they avoid illegal acts, most claim they do not fear prison unduly.⁵⁵ As one former thief who is now an activist said, “we’re already peasants. How much lower can we go?” Many of the complainants also argue that they have received few benefits or favours from Wang, and even if they fail to topple him, their lives will not worsen. In the words of one activist: “What can he do? Can he expunge us from planet earth (*kaichu qiuji*)?”⁵⁶

The Wangjiacun complainants have more political aspirations and fewer fears than most Chinese villagers. They are willing to risk reprisals because they base their attacks carefully in regime norms, policies and promises and because they want a lot. They recognize that the likely costs of their action are bearable so long as they act together and win others to their cause.

Winning Support in the Village

It is certainly true that many Chinese villagers would never think of lodging a complaint against a village cadre. They may not be satisfied in every way, but they are reluctant to take overt political action – to sign a letter, to join a petition or protest, or to take part in a collective complaint. In the condescending words of a township official, “the vast majority of peasants are *shunmin*” – that is, obedient, reasonable and tractable; individuals reminiscent of imperial subjects who passively accepted new rulers after a dynasty fell.⁵⁷ Some villagers in Wangjiacun even use the term *shunmin* to describe themselves. This occurs, for

54. Yue Chao, “Diaomin yu diaoguan” (“Shrewd and recalcitrant peasants and officials”), *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 8 (August 1993), p. 21; also interview, township official, 1993. While many officials and analysts use the terms *diaomin* and *dingzihu* (see above) interchangeably, several township leaders and rural experts we have spoken to make a further distinction. They point out that although many *dingzihu* or *diaomin* are lawless near-rebels, others are defiant yet law-abiding. For further analysis of the distinction between *dingzihu* and *diaomin*, see Lianjiang Li and O’Brien, “Villagers and popular resistance.”

55. Avoiding illegal acts is so important that one activist even gave up gambling once the complaint was filed. Interview, Wangjiacun, 1994.

56. Interview, Wangjiacun, 1994.

57. Interview, township official, 1993.

instance, when fellow *shunmin* self-mockingly explain why some act of justified defiance will not occur. Villagers who are not activists say things like: “we’re all *shunmin*, what can you expect us to do?”⁵⁸

Such villagers obviously believe that the rewards of lodging a complaint are uncertain or likely to be insignificant, while the costs in time, money and damaged relationships are certain to be high. They may look down at the instigators of a complaint as people of questionable character and dubious motives, or they may feel that lodging complaints reflects a slightly shameful disregard for established norms and is likely to create discord.⁵⁹ They may even be members of a cadre’s following who have benefited from his rule, or they may simply fear retaliation. Villagers in Wangjiacun know that village cadres often have “sworn brothers” (*meng xiongdi*) at higher levels who will defend them against mass charges, and they have good reason to be concerned when village leaders or township officials seek to isolate a group of complainants and to discourage others from joining them.

In Wangjiacun, the township government has actively sought to protect Wang and to delegitimize his opponents.⁶⁰ When township officials received the initial complaint, they immediately showed it to Wang, who then vowed in front of a large gathering to deal with the complainants one by one if he was not deposed. The activists thus swiftly lost their path of retreat, and Wang and the township authorities knew it.

Attention at this point turned to the solidarity and size of the group of activists. With Wang’s prodding, township leaders worked to discourage new recruits in several ways. Most notably, they induced several women who had married before the legal age and subsequently become pregnant to have abortions – even though in each case it would have been their first child. The township officials explained that the abortions would not have been required if the complaint had not been lodged: the *shangfang gaozhuang* had allegedly brought village non-compliance with marriage age regulations to the attention of higher levels and now they had to enforce the policy strictly. This cynical ploy, according to several of the activists, worked all too well. It turned the affected couples and their extended families against the activists and increased the fears of many fence-sitters. That Wang’s pregnant daughter-in-law was initially excluded from having an abortion only further convinced many villagers

58. Interview, Wangjiacun, 1994.

59. For villagers, to *gaozhuang* can mean to lodge a complaint or to file a lawsuit. On the aversion of pre-1949 peasants to *songshi* (litigation-mongers) and lawsuits, see Fei Xiaotong, “A society without litigation,” in *From the Soil* (a translation of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 101–107. For a recent explanation of why many Chinese “dread” or “find lawsuits disgusting,” and how officials discourage lawsuits (e.g. call the complainant a *diaomin* and the lawyer a litigation-monger, return the complaint to the charged party, disguise retaliation such as being sent to a frontier area as an honour, countersue, and so on), see Dong Leshan, “Wei ‘daguansi’ jiaohao” (“In praise of lawsuits”), *Suibi*, No. 4 (1993), pp. 23–28.

60. As above, all the following information on Wangjiacun is drawn from interviews conducted in 1993 and 1994.

that the activists were only strong enough to cause trouble for innocent villagers, not for Wang.

Wang also mobilized village public opinion in other ways in an effort to cast doubt on the activists' capabilities and motivations. He and his followers spread rumours and embarrassing information about the complainants: much was made, for example, of the criminal record of one activist and the fact that several complainants were disaffected office-seekers who harboured personal grudges. Wang and his allies also brought up the adultery of one of the activists and the selfishness of an old cadre who worked little yet refused to retire. Finally, they called into question the truthfulness and mental fitness of the ice lolly maker, who had sunk into a deep depression after his factory went bankrupt.

Wang also appealed to fairness. He reminded villagers that he, unlike village cadres in many places, had not collected excessive fees. He urged relatives of several activists to dissuade them from pursuing the complaint on the grounds that he had always been reasonably even-handed in dispensing favours within the village. He approached one activist's sister, for instance, and urged her to speak to her brother, arguing that he had not treated their family poorly – particularly considering the family was not a member of his lineage. He reminded her that he had recently attended their father's funeral and had served as a lead pallbearer, something he rarely did and a true honour.

In time, some villagers came to agree that the activists were acting at least partly out of selfish motives and to doubt that if Wang was replaced village governance would improve or corruption would decline.⁶¹ Other villagers acted like free-riders, hoping that a beneficial change might occur, but staying clear in case the complaint failed. Some villagers continued to profess apathy and regarded the dispute from a bemused distance. One young man said, "it's useless – even if the Kuomintang comes back, it doesn't matter: I'll still eat three meals a day."⁶²

Persuading other villagers to endorse the activists was crucial, however, if the complaint was to succeed. Larger groups of activists, witnesses and behind-the-scenes supporters can be more courageous and may be taken more seriously by higher levels, which do not want complaints to be pushed higher. According to one long-term township official, it becomes much more difficult to suppress or dismiss a complaint as soon as five to ten activists decide to pursue it. When a large, collective *shangfang* occurs, the activists cannot simply be sent home, nor can they be easily bribed or worn down with interminable delays.⁶³ Once a number of villagers are involved, the activists can also maintain a presence in the township even during the busy season, and they may also feel more protected against retaliation.

61. That complainants frequently become corrupt soon after they replace incumbents, and that this commonly leads to another round of complaints, is discussed in Fang Guomin, "Dui dangqian nongcun," p. 37.

62. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1993 and 1994.

63. Interestingly, the original leader of the activists in Wangjiacun, Zhang, dropped out as soon as Wang offered him a sufficient bribe.

A sizable group, moreover, confers credibility and raises the costs of official inaction.⁶⁴ Higher-level officials appreciate the difficulty of mounting collective action and know that township and county governments often actively discourage it. Without egregious wrongdoings to unite them, few large groups can maintain themselves in the face of official foot-dragging and efforts to undermine their solidarity. Like Qiu Ju in Zhang Yimou's recent film, persistence is powerful evidence that serious improprieties have occurred, and when the number of complainants and witnesses are large, higher levels are likely to be concerned that village leaders are truly inept or corrupt and that inaction may contribute to "social instability."

Widespread support in the village confers one last important advantage. With several village cadres and former cadres on their side, the activists in Wangjiacun were able to obtain conclusive proof of Wang's corruption. Shortly after he was recruited to join the complainants, one elderly cadre provided a signed statement that exposed how Wang had conspired with a number of his colleagues to defraud a state oil prospecting team. He explained that late one night when the team was visiting Wangjiacun, Wang and several village cadres had fouled the village's best water well with 40 kg of salt. They had then demanded and received compensation from the prospecting team, which they accused of ruining the well. Some of the compensation they had received went for village road-building; much of it went into the cadres' pockets. The old cadre who revealed the fraud admitted that he had participated in the scheme but then he turned around and implicated Wang as one of the planners and leaders.

In sum, a large group of complainants and popular support within a village can help protect the initial activists and may provide them with opportunities to generate evidence to back up their complaint. It also tends to increase the activists' resolve⁶⁵ and the likelihood they will eventually receive a fair hearing. For a cadre under attack, a counter strategy aimed at discrediting the complainants is equally important. Other villagers must be prevented from joining the complainants or providing evidence, the cadre's following and township officials must be mobilized in defence, and, most importantly, the cadre must show that he or she is able to withstand the pressure and exact revenge.

The Wangjiacun complainants, of course, responded to Wang's cam-

64. A Ministry of Civil Affairs official explained: "when 50 or 60 villagers have signed a *gaozhuang* that has reached the Centre, it's invariably a justified complaint." This official also added the appearance of groups of farmers at the Central Discipline Inspection Committee in Beijing (there were three ongoing cases from one province in 1994) made it easier for him to urge attention to villagers' rights. He explained that he used large, collective complaints to convince cadres in other "systems" and at lower levels of the dangers of ignoring farmer's interests and failing to implement the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. Interview, Beijing, 1994.

65. In this vein, Barrington Moore has written, "A very small degree of social support ... is sufficient to shatter the mystique of oppression and deception and permit a critical response to surface." Barrington Moore, *Inequality: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), p. 116.

paign against them with their own counter strategies. Like Wang, they sought to frame public opinion and sway the undecided. They spread embarrassing, little known information about Wang, including that he was once disciplined for visiting prostitutes. They countered his claim that the funds defrauded from the prospectors were spent for public purposes by arguing that only a small portion was devoted to road-building, while much of the money was stolen and the construction materials were diverted into house-building.⁶⁶ To “demonstrate” his corruption, they publicized Wang’s small salary and pointed out the disparity between his stated income and his affluent life style.⁶⁷

Finally, several of the complainants coupled their demands for improved accountability with faithful demands for implementation of relevant laws and policies. They decried Wang’s unwillingness to convene elections and his blatant corruption, and astutely linked their complaint with a “clean government” drive that most villagers had not taken seriously. For similar reasons, the Wangjiacun activists sought to locate their resistance in a protected zone of loyalty to the state and commitment to implementation of The Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees: to this end, they promised, among other things, to hold villagers’ committee elections if Wang is ousted and to set up a village “discipline inspection committee” on which only ordinary villagers would be allowed to serve.⁶⁸

In other villages, complainants have gone far beyond peaceful appeals to cadre obligations and villagers’ common interests. It is apparently not uncommon for complainants to mislead illiterate villagers about the topic of a complaint or to bribe families to participate in a tractor procession to a county office. Desperate complainants in some locales have also threatened to use violence or have used it. Township officials tell of activists throwing rocks through the windows of villagers who refuse to sign a complaint, and of activists burning down cadres’ homes or poisoning their livestock.⁶⁹ In one village, after the township ignored hundreds of letters of complaint filed over several years, four villagers fire bombed the homes of a village cadre and three of his brothers. When the county police came to investigate, one villager said his only regret was that the culprit, whom no one would name, did not blow up the cadre’s other four brothers’ homes as well!⁷⁰

66. To this day, the activists do not know how much Wang received from the prospecting team. Wang claims that the records have been lost.

67. This is also a common tactic used by complainants in Hebi city, Henan. See Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” p. 36. Wang is particularly vulnerable to financial scrutiny because he has bought an urban household registration, has no land, and has no visible income from farming or any other source, save his small cadre subsidy.

68. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1994.

69. Interviews, township officials, 1993.

70. See Zhang Chenggong, “Cunzhang si yu chunjie” (“Village heads die at Spring Festival”), *Landun*, No. 3 (March 1993), pp. 23–27.

Pursuing the Complaint: Involving Higher Levels and Outsiders

The first skirmishes surrounding a complaint typically occur in a village. Occasionally, village-level pressure may succeed in hounding a cadre out of office or forcing an election. But usually, however committed and enterprising they may be, groups of complainants need the support of higher levels if they are to prevail. Without a breakdown of elite unity and a relaxation of systematic repression, most groups of activists are too easily discouraged, and are dispersed before they can secure a favourable judgment.

Efforts to locate influential allies often begin at the township – where most complaints are initially filed – but these first contacts infrequently bear fruit. Ties between village and township cadres are usually too close and, particularly in unstable areas which generate many complaints, township officials may believe it is difficult to recruit village cadres who will implement township-assigned tasks. In the words of one township leader:

Of course, I side with village cadres even if I'm not sure which side is right. As a township official I must protect the morale of village cadres. Many village cadres don't want to be cadres; if I recalled a village leader as soon as some peasants rose up, who would I find to serve?⁷¹

In Wangjiacun, it is true that ambitious activists have been eager to seize power, but in many “semi-paralysed” villages, underpaid, overworked cadres have threatened to abandon their posts, and no one is willing to replace them. Township officials, in such circumstances, must “do everything possible to back village cadres and use legal means [i.e. state power] to handle troublemakers.”⁷²

Should the township fail to offer immediate support when a cadre is charged with some offence, village leaders have many ways to obtain it. Most directly, they may bribe township officials to become “protective umbrellas” (*baohu san*) or to engage in a cover up.⁷³ Or they may blackmail superiors who may be implicated in corruption cases themselves or who are at least partly responsible for economic mismanagement. Finally, they may simply continue cultivating old friends at the township who appreciate how difficult it is to govern a village. To win allies in the state hierarchy, village cadres under attack may invite officials to their homes, give them gifts and fine meals, and use their time together to explain why they had to engage in questionable undertakings.⁷⁴

Once the township agrees to defend an accused cadre, pressure and outright coercion are the most direct ways to derail a complaint. Without

71. Interview, township official, 1993.

72. On cadres abandoning their positions, see Hebei sheng minzhengting diaochaazu, “Guanyu sanlei cun,” pp. 45–49. The quotation appears on p. 48. On “paralysed villages” more generally, see O'Brien, “Implementing political reform,” pp. 51–53.

73. On using public funds to entertain higher-level officials, and bribing them to become “protective umbrellas,” see Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” p. 36.

74. Interviews, Wangjiacun and township officials, 1994.

further delay, the township police force may be deployed to frighten or rough up particularly visible activists. Although it is technically unlawful to suppress complainants, only unimaginative officials cannot find other pretexts for harassing an activist or a witness to a complaint. In a township near Wangjiacun, for example, the township sent a policeman to handcuff and humiliate a complainant for a crime he had committed many years before.⁷⁵ Or in Wangjiacun, secretary Wang convinced the township to recall the elderly cadre who had exposed the prospecting team scam, had the township publicize his removal to embarrass him and warn others, and convinced the county procurator to require that he be the first person to repay his share of the fraudulently received funds.⁷⁶

In order to quash a complaint, townships may also encourage county procurators to conduct a perfunctory (or lengthy and inconclusive) investigation, or they may spend years taking testimony and inordinate time auditing village finances. Delays, of course, make the process of lodging complaints extremely time-consuming and require extraordinary patience from villagers who lose income every day they visit the township, but who know if they stop appearing the “audit” or investigation may never be completed.⁷⁷

Villagers may counter delays and other township efforts to discourage them by lodging complaints during People’s Congress or Party Congress sessions, or on national holidays – times chosen to maximize attention and embarrassment for officials busy announcing their achievements. Villagers may also deal with foot-dragging and other opposition by photocopying dozens or even hundreds of copies of a complaint and sending it to any relevant department at the Centre, the province, the city or the county. And they may continue to write or besiege a government office again and again – even after a county procurator or township government has declared a case closed.⁷⁸

When township authorities are not responsive to a *shangfang gaozhuang*, activists may proceed to the county town. Here, their likelihood of achieving success often improves. County officials, in the view of at least one township cadre, are often “paper tigers” who become frightened when a few peasants appear. They are comparatively timid and unaccustomed to dealing with incensed villagers of the sort that he sees every day.⁷⁹ They may be afraid that prefectural authorities will hold them responsible for “social unrest” and that their careers will be harmed by public disclosure of rural instability. Problems that reach the county may also draw the attention of the media or generate internal reports, particularly when hordes of villagers block traffic and cause a disturb-

75. Interview, township official, 1993.

76. Interviews, Wangjiacun, 1994.

77. Interview, Wangjiacun, 1994. In Hebi city, Henan, in 1993, about 60% of the *shangfang* resulted in villagers demanding an audit of the village’s books – sometimes up to ten years of records. Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” p. 36.

78. The information in this paragraph is drawn from Fang Guomin, “Dui dangqian nongcun,” pp. 36–37.

79. Interview, township official, 1993.

ance. In Wangjiacun's county, for example, villagers from one village carried their bedding and cooking supplies to the county to show their resolve when pursuing a collective complaint. In a Hebei county, villagers were even more disruptive: they camped out in front of a county magistrate's home after a series of complaints demanding the removal of a village cadre went unheeded for three years. After several days of unrelenting appeals, the county government finally gave in and ordered the township to recall the offending cadre.⁸⁰

If the county fails to give way, ignoring prescribed procedures and "skipping levels" (*yueji*) can sometimes be an effective strategy. In fact, in Hebi city, Henan, 60 per cent of 200 groups of rural complainants in 1993 bypassed at least one level on their way to the municipal government.⁸¹ And this makes perfect sense. Contrary to understandings of Chinese politics that assume the central state weighs heavier on villagers than its local representatives do, many villagers believe that the higher they go the more likely they are to receive a satisfactory response. In fact, this may be one reason why a popular maxim in the countryside holds: "the Centre is our benefactor (*enren*), the province is our relative, the county is a good person, the township is an evil person, and the village is our enemy."⁸² If villagers are able to reach higher levels, either directly or through visiting journalists, relatives outside the village, passing inspection teams, or even through visits by provincial or national leaders, their chance of gaining a hearing and redress may indeed improve.⁸³

Direct attention from higher levels is invaluable insofar as officials at the county level and above can simply order a township to redress a grievance. Yet even if they are unwilling to side with disgruntled villagers, intervention by higher levels can shine a spotlight on otherwise hidden wrongdoings. If inspection teams are dispatched from above, for instance, they may serve as a magnet for complaints. One fearful township official near Wangjiacun kept a provincial work team sent to investigate his reasonably good record handling rural instability in a county hotel for six weeks. He offered to visit them every day and threatened to quit if they visited even one village. He did not want them to enter his township because he was sure they would be exploited by "malcontents" and would foment "instability." In Renshou county, Sichuan, the fears of grassroots cadres that the presence of outsiders

80. Interview, 1993. On the practice of "sitting quietly" (*jingzuo*) at the gate of a county government, see Wang Zhenyao, "Woguo nongcun," p. 44.

81. Fang Guomin, "Dui dangqian nongcun," p. 36. On *yuesu* in the Qing Dynasty, see Jonathan Ocko, "I'll take it all the way to Beijing," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 291–315.

82. For one of many versions of this saying, see Zhang Houan and Meng Guilian, "Wanshan cunmin weiyuanhui de minzhu xuanju zhidu, tuijin nongcun zhengzhi wending yu fazhan" ("Perfect the democratic electoral system of villagers' committees, advance rural political stability and development"), *Shehuizhuyi yanjiu*, No. 4 (August 1993), p. 42; also interview with a rural researcher, 1994.

83. On villagers questioning Jiang Zemin about excessive fees during his tour of Hubei in December 1992, see Cheng Tongshun, "Dangqian Zhongguo nongmin," p. 11. On whether grievants bypass local cadres because they trust the good intentions of higher levels or out of desperation, or both, see Bernstein, "In quest of voice," p. 58.

might stir up trouble went even deeper. Shortly after the disturbances in 1993, local officials reportedly restricted the freedom of movement of a Ministry of Civil Affairs investigator on the grounds that his appearance might instigate another riot.⁸⁴

Once a complaint is filed, any outsider may, in fact, tip the scales against a village cadre and his or her supporters in the township government. Activists' relatives who live outside the village may have contacts in high places, while journalists always bring the possibility of provincial or national attention. The articles by Xinhua reporters cited in footnotes 18 and 41, for example, were first written as internal reference materials, were then distributed as an internal document of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and were finally published (in a shortened form) in *Hebei nongcun gongzuo* and *Xiangzhen luntan*. They were also circulated to civil affairs offices nation-wide with the following words from Wan Li attached: "these three reports deserve serious attention. In the process of deepening rural reform we should strengthen this kind of work. Please consult with concerned departments to decide whether these reports should be disseminated internally and publicly, for example in *People's Daily*."⁸⁵

The first battle concerning a complaint goes on within a village and focuses on the credibility of the activists and their charges. But complaints are filed at the township (or higher) and the involvement of township and county officials and other non-villagers almost always strongly affects the final outcome. A village cadre can be removed only if the township government agrees to a recall or permits an election. So winning support from the township and higher levels (and outsiders who can influence them) is just as important as winning support in the village.

Outcomes

Shangfang gaozhuang end in many ways. A cadre may be cleared, protected, warned, removed or even gaoled. The activists may give up, be bribed, be repressed, resort to violence, be imprisoned or even become cadres themselves. In a notorious recent Henan case, four village cadres (who were later executed themselves) murdered a 58-year-old complainant who for 18 months had been imploring officials from the township all the way to the province to reduce excessive "peasant burdens" and end "power abuses" inside his village.⁸⁶

Whether a collective complaint succeeds or not doubtless depends on many factors. A strong "legal" case is certainly indispensable, but it is

84. Interview, township official, 1994; interview, Beijing, 1994.

85. Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshe si (ed.), "Chengxiang jiceng zhengquan jianshe gongzuo jianbao" ("Briefings on urban and rural basic-level political power construction work"), 11 June 1991, pp. 1–16. Wan Li's words are followed by weaker recommendations from Peng Chong and Wang Hanbin to investigate the truthfulness of the reports and to consult Xinhua and the editorial board of *People's Daily*.

86. Zhang Sutang and Xie Guoji, "Shahai shangfang cunmin guofa nanrong, Henan siming cun ganbu bei chujue" ("National law does not tolerate murder of villagers who lodge complaints – Four village cadres in Henan are executed"), *Renmin ribao* (Haiwaiban) (*People's Daily* (Overseas Edition)), 29 March 1995, p. 4.

hardly the only consideration, since serious charges supported by compelling evidence can still fail to produce a judgment favouring the complainants. Far more critical than the legal case *per se* are the political resources skilful complainants manage to mobilize when applying pressure on township authorities or higher officials. Lodging a complaint is a lawful action that takes a quasi-legal form, but adjudication is essentially a political matter, whose outcome hinges on whether a given group of complainants works out how to blunt the many advantages village cadres have by organizing effective collection action.

In the normal course of affairs, given the existing political opportunity structure, it might be expected that village cadres would usually prevail over aggrieved villagers; however, when skilful complainants join together and cite patently illegal or “undemocratic” behaviour, or open evasion of leadership intent, they may be able to generate considerable political pressure on township and county authorities, thereby reducing the probability their complaint will be rebuffed. In one Hebei county, for example, collective complaints have been so effective that the county organization department has criticized township officials for being terrified of complainants. In their own words: “some township leaders have developed a ‘collective complaints syndrome’ (*shangfang kongjuzheng*); they scratch their head whenever they see the masses come, ... and appease them by recalling a village Party secretary as soon as a complaint is lodged.”⁸⁷

In Wangjiacun, however, the township government has decided to defend secretary Wang. Township leaders have demonstrated their support most recently by recalling the old cadre-activist and publicizing his removal. Township officials continue to visit Wang’s house and to dine with him, and a former village cadre who works in the township government has appealed to a “sworn brother” in the county procuratorate to defend Wang. In response to these and other entreaties from Wang’s supporters, the county procurator has, according to the complainants, reversed his original open-mindedness concerning the complainants’ case and has seconded the township’s support for Wang, publicly stating that many grassroots cadres have cheated state enterprises and that Wang’s prospecting team swindle does not merit prosecution. In August 1994, the county procurator accepted a final set of receipts (said by the activists to be phoney) and testimony from Wang’s supporters about Wang’s high ethical standards, and declared the case closed.

But, to this point, the activists have refused to accept the procurator’s judgment. The deposed elderly cadre, who was originally reluctant to join the complainants, has become one of their leaders. When the township demanded he repay the money he received from the prospecting team before they would investigate Wang, the old cadre refused and said he would not pay until Wang’s case was resolved. A scuffle broke out, and after the old cadre’s son stepped in to defend his father, the son was

87. Zhonggong cixian xianwei zuzhibu, “You zhuanggao zhibu shuji yinchu de sikao,” p. 36.

briefly detained at the township police station. A planned assault on the station to free him was narrowly averted only when the activists realized that this would provide precisely the excuse needed to imprison them and put an end to their complaint.

The old cadre and the other complainants, however, have still not given up; they have taken their complaint to other county departments and to the municipal letters and visits office. Some other villagers, after seeing that Wang has been weakened and the activists have not been seriously harmed, have also promised to help the current activists, whom they consider to be unskilful and even an embarrassment to the village. At the same time, the activists have also begun raising funds either to hire an attorney or to invite a journalist to visit Wangjiacun. Most ominously, from the township's viewpoint, the complainants have begun to explore alternatives to seeking audiences and lodging complaints; they have contacted other complainants in nearby villages to discuss a co-ordinated effort to topple Wang's staunchest supporter at the township.

As of spring 1995, Wang remained in office and the Wangjiacun *shangfang gaozhuang* continued.

Conclusion

If the evidence we have gathered is representative, lodging complaints is a common (and potentially effective) way for Chinese villagers to defy grassroots leaders. Even without meaningful democratization, structural changes in mass–elite relations appear to be enabling villagers to say “no” more often and with greater effect. Village cadres, who previously had enormous discretion, may be increasingly caught out by villagers who live outside communes and travel widely to market, who hear about defiance elsewhere, and who use the cadre responsibility system, village charters, the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees and the Administrative Litigation Law to protect their interests.

Village cadres are most vulnerable when they have violated a state policy or law or have refused to recognize legal protections and privileges granted by the Centre. When a promising opportunity arises, enterprising villagers struggle to find ways to surmount obstacles to collective action and engage in far more than “everyday forms of resistance.” Occasionally alone, and more often in groups, ambitious, frustrated villagers and marginalized elites go to higher levels and lodge complaints against village cadres. When challenging incompetent, corrupt or over-eager grassroots leaders, aggrieved villagers draw on a range of tactics from a rich and evolving “repertoire of contention.”⁸⁸ They employ traditional forms of protest and symbols (such as appealing to higher levels), while

88. For a discussion of “repertoires of contention,” see Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

also adding a modern “proactive”⁸⁹ twist to their “policy-based resistance” (such as citing laws and policies to back up their claims for a greater share of local political power). Nearly every move undertaken by a group of complainants is likely to be countered by a targeted cadre and his or her supporters.

However able and desperate they are, a handful of activists can rarely topple a cadre simply by lodging a complaint. After a *shangfang gaozhuang* begins, village public opinion becomes critical. The core group of complainants must convince other, less bold villagers how weak grassroots cadres have become – and then they must use the support they have acquired to pressure higher levels to champion their charges. As soon as a complaint is lodged, a battle of reputation begins. Previously uninvolved villagers are asked to consider two key questions: first, is the cadre an honest, fair, and competent leader who has a claim on obedience, or a corrupt and grasping agent of local authorities interested primarily in extraction and/or personal aggrandizement? Secondly, are the activists “troublemakers” who will undermine village governance and draw unwanted attention from higher levels, or are they bold and righteous petitioners who by defying unjust authority will improve village life? How villagers outside the original circle of activists and the cadre’s following answer these questions is one of the most important factors that affects how a *shangfang gaozhuang* develops and is resolved.

As a complaint proceeds up the state hierarchy, other considerations become relevant. Who has more influential allies? Can the township be courted or bypassed? Can the complainants force township or county officials to choose between acquiescing or risking their own careers? Can the activists skilfully work the territory between different levels of government? It is important to remember that villagers do not experience the Chinese state as a single entity with a single face. At (and within) the township, county and higher levels, complainants encounter actors with diverging interests and multiple identities. The same central state that discriminates against villagers can be a “benefactor” that listens to their complaints. The same village cadres who at times mediate state power and protect villagers can be an “enemy” when lodging complaints. Successful complainants must identify and make the most of institutional pressure points that prompt central officials to be good listeners, counties “paper tigers” and townships typically unsympathetic. Their strategies of resistance must adapt to the contour of a reforming authoritarian state as they discover which openings can be exploited and where their best opportunities lie.

89. For definitions of “competitive,” “reactive” and “proactive” contention, see Charles Tilly, “Rural collective action in modern Europe,” in Joseph Spielberg and Scott Whiteford (eds.), *Forging Nations: A Comparative View of Rural Ferment and Revolt* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1976), pp. 9–40. These concepts have been applied to rural China in Elizabeth J. Perry, “Rural violence in socialist China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 103 (September 1985), pp. 414–40, and Lianjiang Li and O’Brien, “Villagers and popular resistance.”

Appendix

We conducted our interviews in 1992, 1993 and 1994. Many of the sessions were tape recorded (with permission of the interviewee), but in some cases we had to rely on notes that were translated and transcribed afterwards. Our interviews were conducted in both formal and informal settings, and were in-depth and open-ended. Most interviewees saw us alone, though in some cases we met several village cadres, for instance, with township and county officials present. Several individuals spoke with us on as many as three occasions for a total of more than five hours. The most important interviews (those concerning the action against secretary Wang) were conducted in the pseudonymous village of Wangjiacun and the surrounding area. Access to this site was obtained through personal contacts (none of whom is listed in our acknowledgements) who were guaranteed anonymity. To our interviewees, particularly those in Wangjiacun, we are most grateful.

We also interviewed villagers and cadres in areas outside Wangjiacun. With the help of Chinese colleagues and other friends, we visited 22 villages in three provinces, and gained access to numerous conference papers, local circulars, blunt, often hand-written, unpublished contributions to journals and newspapers, personal and institutional archives, and field reports by Chinese researchers. The best of these sources, many of which are cited in the text, detailed how particular complaints originated and developed. Archival materials and interviews in other locations also helped us gauge to what extent events like those in Wangjiacun may be generalized, and broadened the basis for our conclusions.