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Review Essay

COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE

Kevin J. O'Brien*

Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China, by Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü. New York: Cambridge University Press, in press.

Peasants Without the Party: Grass-roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China, by Lucien Bianco. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001. xxvii + 309 pp. US\$64.95 (hardcover), US\$26.95 (paperback).

Model Rebels: The Rise and Fall of China's Richest Village, by Bruce Gilley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xvi + 219 pp. US\$15.95 (paperback).

Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China, by Elizabeth J. Perry. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001. xxxii + 341 pp. US\$27.95 (paperback).

The Transformation of Rural China, by Jonathan Unger. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002. ix + 256 pp. US\$60.95 (hardcover), US\$23.95 (paperback).

The study of popular contention in rural China has become a veritable growth industry. In the last two years alone, a number of articles have explored peasant

* I would like to thank Lianjiang Li, Patricia Thornton and Kevin Wallsten for helpful comments.

challenges ranging from tax resistance,¹ to petitions against land expropriation,² to environmental protests,³ to clashes surrounding local elections.⁴ Although this literature does not yet rival the outpouring of work on China's rural political economy, the gap is closing. Collective action in the countryside, a topic that once seemed to be a sideshow to the main events of economic reform, industrialization and innovations in property rights, is moving closer to centre stage.

Five new books demonstrate how far we have come in the study of rural contention. It is true that collective action is only one of the many topics these books touch upon. Each volume, however, has much to say about what disaffected villagers want, how they pursue it, and what they ultimately get. While the authors' analyses are occasionally at odds and there are different shadings of emphasis among them, the points of consensus far exceed the discordant notes. This suggests it is an opportune time for some stock-taking. What do we know about the aims, means and impact of collective action in rural China? How widespread is it? Who is targeted? What forms does rural popular action take? Who leads it and how organized is it? Why is it occurring? What, more broadly, can the study of rural discontent and its consequences contribute to the understanding of state-society relations in China?

Frequency and Scale

When Elizabeth Perry's study of unrest in the countryside (republished as Chapter 9 of her new book) first appeared in 1985, my students were taken aback. Her account of sectarian violence and cadres leading their communities into battle with nearby villages jarred with the stunning economic growth and peaceful decollectivization that other analysts were busy chronicling. Of course,

¹ Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, "Taxation without Representation: Peasants, the Central and the Local States in Reform China", *China Quarterly*, No. 163 (September 2000), pp. 742–63.

² Xiaolin Guo, "Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China", *China Quarterly*, No. 166 (June 2001), pp. 422–39; David Zweig, "The 'Externalities of Development': Can New Political Institutions Manage Rural Conflict?", in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 120–42. For case studies of disputed wasteland auctions in Sichuan, see Elisabeth Julie Grinspoon, "Socialist Wasteland Auctions: Privatizing Collective Forest Land in China's Economic Transition", PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2002, Ch. 4.

³ Jun Jing, "Environmental Protests in Rural China", in Perry and Selden (eds), *Chinese Society*, pp. 143–60.

⁴ Lianjiang Li, "Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China", *China Information*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2001), pp. 1–19; Yawei Liu, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China: Better Local Governance or More Consolidation of State Power?", *China Perspectives*, No. 31 (September–October 2000), pp. 19–35.

we now know that a wave of rural contention was rising in the early 1980s and has yet to crest.

Lucien Bianco wisely cautions that reports of mounting unrest are partly a result of better access to information during the reform era. But even he concludes that “overall it appears that the Chinese countryside has seen more disturbances during the twenty years of reform than during the previous thirty, that the second half of the 1980s was more agitated than the first half, and that the 1990s have been more unsettled still” (p. 245). Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü concur, noting that reports of rural violence and protest became more common in the 1990s, with especially large spikes of popular action in 1992–93 and 1996–97. In 1996–97, for instance, parades, demonstrations and petitioning took place in as many as 36 counties in nine provinces, with 230 cases deemed “turmoil, riot or rebellion”.

Jonathan Unger, like Bernstein and Lü, underscores not only the growing number of incidents but also the “increasingly open disgruntlement” (p. 197) in many areas and the bloody conflicts that sometimes erupt. He notes that 3,200 collective protests occurred in the first half of 1998 alone, of which more than 420 involved confrontations in which rural government buildings were surrounded, with casualties topping 7,400, including more than 1,200 officials or police wounded. Like the armed standoff in Daqiu Zhuang detailed in Bruce Gilley’s book, many of these provocative, overt acts of insurgency go far beyond the “everyday resistance” that scholars of contemporary China tended to focus on in the past.⁵

Rural discontent is clearly widespread and chronic. And though most collective challenges remain small in scale, some are not. Approximately 380,000 rural residents took part in the 1996–97 protests, and another surge of dissent the following summer drew about half a million villagers from four provinces. Individual incidents can also be quite large. A 2001 Central Organization Department analysis, cited in Bernstein and Lü, speaks of “frequently hundreds and thousands and even up to 10,000” participants. The top of this range is certainly understated. The Renshou rioters in 1993, for example, turned out well over 10,000 people to contest a special road levy. In 1995, 20,000 villagers rose up in Shanxi to protest taxes that were rising faster than incomes. In Jiangxi in 2000, the imposition of a local tax at a time of declining agricultural prices precipitated a riot of up to 20,000 farmers and the ransacking of a township office

⁵ On “everyday forms of resistance”, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). For such resistance in China, see David Zweig, “Struggling Over Land in China: Peasant Resistance after Collectivization, 1966–1986”, in Forrest Colburn (ed.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 151–74. On this type of contention (and more) surrounding decollectivization, see Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Chad Raymond, Mark Selden and Kate Zhou, “The Power of the Strong? Rural Resistance and Reform in China and Vietnam”, *China Information*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2000), pp. 1–30.

compound. (The size of these large-scale actions cannot help but bring to mind the Falun Gong sit-in that occurred outside Zhongnanhai in April 1999—a demonstration whose massive scale, Perry observes, was partly responsible for the harsh repression that followed.)

Smaller, legal and arguably legal acts of contention are also on the rise. As early as 1988, *Farmer's Daily* received about one thousand letters a day, mostly complaints from farmers about local abuses. Interviews conducted in 1998 by Bernstein and Lü suggest that letter writing, petitioning and collective visits have continued to increase. Provincial authorities are receiving hundreds of thousands of complaints from rural districts every year, and 6,047 collective petitions were delivered in Hebei alone in 1997, with each delegation averaging 22 complainants.⁶

Claims, Grievances and Targets

Some years ago, Charles Tilly identified three types of collective claims. Competitive claims take aim at resources held by rivals in society. Reactive claims involve efforts to defend group rights and privileges, most often against agents of the state. Proactive claims assert rights not previously enjoyed.⁷ Taken together, the five books under review offer evidence that all three types are at work in the Chinese countryside today.

Unger, Perry and Bianco draw attention to confrontations rooted in competitive claims. Examples range from trifling quarrels between families, to simmering lineage disputes, to armed vendettas (*xiedou*) that pit whole communities or even alliances of villages against one another. This type of popular action was a perennial feature of social life prior to 1949, but it became less common during the first decade after the PRC was founded. Competitive conflicts gained a new life, however, by the early 1960s, Perry explains, as socialist agriculture was consolidated and feuds based on membership in teams, brigades and communes (which often mirrored pre-1949 marketing areas, villages and lineages) were rekindled. During the late 1960s, such tensions often intensified further. Jonathan Unger attributes the violence that emerged to a lethal brew of traditional and Cultural Revolution notions of uncompromising honour,

⁶ A 1993 analysis of 170 incidents in Henan found that the number of villagers seeking an audience ranged from 7 to 145, with an average of 20 to 30, while larger delegations often had 60 to 70 members. See Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China", *China Quarterly*, No. 143 (September 1995), p. 760.

⁷ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 143–51. Tilly has moved away from this typology, but others continue to find it useful. See Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834", *Social Science History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1993), p. 206; William H. Sewell, Jr., "Collective Violence and Collective Loyalties in France: Why the French Revolution Made a Difference", *Politics and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1990), pp. 529–30.

righteousness, vengeance and intolerance, which engendered a virtual frenzy of communal strife in certain villages.⁸

Collective action based on competitive claims did not die out with the Cultural Revolution. In fact, feuds and *xiedou* remain common, particularly in the southeast. Bianco and Perry identify a number of factors that encourage this: the growing role of the family under the household responsibility system; a resurgence of lineage activity, as seen in renewed temple building, compilation of genealogies and ancestor worship; and new sources of conflict linked to marketization, such as disputes over forests and village boundaries. Religious rituals often play a large part in these rows and can serve to buttress communal solidarity and deepen rifts. Of the six authors, Perry is the most insistent about the prominence of strife that springs from competitive claims. Speaking of the immediate post-Mao period, she sees little proactive contention and a marked decline in reactive, anti-state incidents compared to the 1950s.

Other authors, focusing on the 1990s and collective action directed at local officials, highlight reactive claims. Bianco, Unger, and Bernstein and Lü observe that a large portion of rural agitation is conservative and defensive. Villagers rise up to maintain the existing order when it is threatened. Theirs is an effort to undo activities by cadres that violate popular notions of equity, fairness or justice. Their main aim is to eliminate an encroachment on established practices or principles.

The grievances that inspire this type of collective action are the time-tested ones: first and foremost is excessive and irregular taxation; followed by corruption, arrogance and arbitrariness of local officials; beating; bullying; diversion of funds; and abuses connected with grain procurement. The targets of popular ire are mostly local powerholders, such as tax collectors and grassroots cadres. Actions taken by township authorities, Unger notes, are a particular irritant at present.

While richer, suburban villages have been the primary site of protests over land requisition for development zones, most reactive contention, such as the tax and fee resistance discussed by Bernstein and Lü, and Unger,⁹ occurs in less developed parts of the central grain belt. It is in these agricultural areas in inland provinces that villagers are squeezed hardest and most openly. These are also the localities in which state assistance is low, outside investors are scarce and development targets remain high. There are few thriving township and village

⁸ See also Richard Madsen, "The Politics of Revenge in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution", in Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Violence in China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 175–201.

⁹ For more on tax resistance, both before and after the 1949 Revolution, see R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 231–51; and Patricia Thornton, "Beneath the Banyan Tree: Popular Views of Taxation and the State during the Republican and Reform Eras", *Twentieth Century China*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (November 1999), pp. 1–42.

enterprises in these districts that could help to take on the costs of services and development projects, as they can in industrialized villages along the eastern seaboard. In middle-income “agricultural China” there is still a surplus to be extracted, unlike much of the truly impoverished far west, which is buffered by state relief and policies that provide assistance to ethnic minorities. Not surprisingly, in the grain-producing heartland cadre–peasant relations are particularly tense and farmers have reason to feel resentful toward grasping local officials. It is here that China’s fiscal system and the central government’s demands for rapid development feed discontent by making predatory and parasitic practices virtually irresistible for local revenue collectors.¹⁰

Contention that can be traced to reactive claims, fierce as it can be, is rarely directed at the national government; nor does it typically involve demands for wider political change. Peasant actions are usually a response to a specific and local aggravation, such as the imposition of a new user fee. The demands of protesters tend to be limited and remedial—generally abandonment of an unpopular measure and a return to the old order. Once relief is given (and perhaps a few officials are punished), the participants are usually mollified, and protest subsides.

Of the six authors, Bianco is most emphatic in stating that Chinese peasants almost never rise up to gain new rights or to better their position.¹¹ For him, “reactive movements remain predominant” (p. 250) and rural contention is fundamentally defensive, sometimes competitive, but rarely proactive.

This brings us to Bruce Gilley, the only author who stresses proactive claims. Bernstein and Lü, it is true, mention on their first page “the increased

¹⁰ On distorted incentive systems in less-developed areas, see Maria Edin, “Market Forces and Communist Power: Local Political Institutions and Economic Development in China”, PhD Dissertation, Uppsala University (2000), pp. 145–50; Yali Peng, “The Politics of Tobacco: Relations Between Farmers and Local Governments in China’s Southwest”, *The China Journal*, No. 36 (July 1996), pp. 67–82; also, more broadly, Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1999), pp. 167–87; and Scott Rozelle, “Decision-Making in China’s Rural Economy: The Linkages Between Village Leaders and Farm Households”, *China Quarterly*, No. 137 (March 1994), pp. 123–4.

¹¹ This position has a long tradition in the study of rural collective action. Charles Tilly, for one, argues that “the rural population of Europe has mounted a substantial amount of proactive collective action, but the actors have typically been nonpeasants”. Eric Hobsbawm, in the volume that launched contemporary studies of rural political action, was also unimpressed by the peasantry’s capabilities to imagine a new future—until a revolutionary party came along. See Charles Tilly, “Rural Collective Action in Modern Europe”, in Joseph Spielberg and Scott Whiteford (eds), *Forging Nations* (Lansing: Michigan University Press, 1978), p. 36. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959). For contention in pre-1949 rural China that sought to advance group interests within existing limits but also asserted new rights, see Roxann Prazniak, “Tax Protest at Laiyang, Shandong, 1910”, *Modern China*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1980), p. 59.

assertiveness of society, including demands for accountability, the rule of law, and a voice in policy-making". They also locate, amid a host of defensive claims, occasional calls for democracy and slogans that challenge the status quo and seek greater autonomy. But it is Gilley who makes the case for reactive aims broadening into proactive ones. In his telling, what began as a limited effort to safeguard the prosperity of China's richest village evolved into a "quest for ... political, social, and economic equality for China's peasants" (p. 52). Daqiuzhuang's extraordinary Party secretary, Yu Zuomin, had a vision of China in which country folk were no longer second-class citizens and villages ran themselves as they pleased. To usher in these changes, the Party would be pushed to the sidelines and a new moneyed class would take its place. Political reforms would also be necessary, such as eliminating the Party's Organization Department and giving constitutional status to rural enterprises.

Through conferences and exchanges with other villages (including several Maoist models), Yu circulated his views widely. Gilley asserts that Yu's bottom-line goal of ending discrimination was national rather than parochial, and long-term rather than immediate. Although his antagonists were at first local leaders, Gilley claims that by the time Yu was crushed his efforts were "verging on a genuine social movement" (p. 157) whose target was Party ideology, leftist ideologues and senior officials. (Flemming Christiansen's review elsewhere in this issue makes clear, however, that the extent to which Yu stood for his village rather than himself and the extent to which his defiance was an example of collective action driven by a political vision rather than a cover for criminal behaviour and abuse of power is open to question.)

Unlike contention rooted in reactive claims, popular action with proactive aims is most often found in better-off localities with flourishing township and village enterprises. Contrary to profiles of industrialized villages that emphasize political passivity, Gilley argues that "examples of wealthy villages rising up to defend their interests are now legion" (p. 160). He cites Chinese sources from the mid- and late 1990s that evince concern about fortified villages and village chieftains (*zhuangzhu*) who use economic means to build political capital. I interviewed just such a chieftain a few miles down the road from Daqiuzhuang in July 1998. In an industrialized village where every household owned an automobile and homes averaged 200 square metres, the Party secretary had defied his superiors for years, with villagers united behind him, while county leaders were awaiting an opportunity—that is, a misstep—to take down this "small Yu Zuomin" and corral his wayward village.

Gilley reminds us to be alert for proactive claims growing out of reactive ones. Proactive demands may also come garbed in reactive robes, disguised as requests to honour an existing right. Consider a 1995 wall poster that criticized cadre corruption with these words: "We're citizens. Give us back our citizens' rights". In one sense, the graffiti writer was making a reactive claim against local leaders who refused to recognize his right to inspect the village accounts. In

another sense, he was cloaking a daring proactive claim in reactive terms, demanding citizenship rights he had never enjoyed while making it appear he had just been deprived of them.¹²

Forms of Action

Many of today's protests hark back to pre-1949 practices. Popular action, now as then, often takes the form of collective petitioning, demonstrations, besieging government compounds, sacking offices and the homes of local bureaucrats, destroying official vehicles, and rioting. Bianco notes that obstructing roads and bridges has become more common, while confronting the army has declined and killing tax collectors has inched downward. Still, the overall picture is clear: contemporary protests, in Perry's words, "share a remarkable resemblance to patterns of unrest so familiar to students of imperial and Republican China" (p. x).

Chinese rural agitators have always been conscious of central government rules and adept at seizing on official rhetoric to press their claims. In late imperial China, tenants sometimes used government rulings as a pretext to refuse payment of rent, and villagers also objected to taxes when they felt local authorities had ignored proper collection procedures and were likely to back off when faced with complaints. Such challenges, Bernstein and Lü explain, typically rested on appeals to equity and fairness, focusing on how the tax burden was apportioned, on adjustments for harvest conditions, and on the use of biased measures and conversion ratios.¹³

The books under review document a similar, perhaps heightened, sensitivity to government discourses in the countryside today. Resourceful villagers often couch their resistance in the language of loyal intentions while professing little more than a desire to make the system live up to what it is supposed to be. They object to official misbehaviour in the name of unimpeachable ideals and tender impeccably respectable demands. "As they become better informed and more inclined to think of their relations with the state and its representatives in contractual terms" (Bianco, p. 251), such villagers exploit a yawning gap between rights that have been promised and those that are delivered. In particular, as Unger, Gilley, and Bernstein and Lü explain, they seek to trip up local officials

¹² For more on this incident, see Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China", *Modern China*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (October 2001), pp. 407–35. For urban protests that have both reactive and proactive elements, see Ching Kwan Lee, "The 'Revenge of History': Collective Memories and Labor Protests in Northeastern China", *Ethnography*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2000), pp. 217–37; Lee, "From the Specter of Mao to the Spirit of the Law: Labor Insurgency in China", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 2002), pp. 189–228.

¹³ Also see Wong, *China Transformed*, pp. 235–7; Mi Chu Wiens, "Lord and Peasant: The Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century", *Modern China*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1980), p. 33.

who refuse to acknowledge protections that central authorities have recognized, and demand that rights they have been guaranteed be honoured.

These days, one of the more common protections cited by protestors is the central government's 5 per cent limit on peasant tax burdens. Expert faultfinders rally their neighbours with slogans such as "resolutely unite around the Centre" and claim that they are merely seeking faithful implementation of Party policy.¹⁴ Protestors are often armed with written materials that spell out the relevant laws and regulation, and "by far the greatest number of farmers' protests today are entirely within the law" (Unger, p. 214).

Sometimes, however, peaceful protests turn violent. The 1993 Sichuan riots and the 2000 Jiangxi riots both can be traced to the arrest of activists who dared to inform other villagers about the 5 per cent rule. Farmers in Daolin, Hunan province, who called themselves Volunteers for Publicity about Policies and Regulations, also clashed with local officials over provincial and central directives that capped taxation and that opposed corruption. These "burden reduction heroes" (*jianfu yingxiong*) used tape recorders and a loudspeaker truck to tell their neighbours about their rights. Their efforts culminated with a demonstration in January 1999 that turned into a battle between thousands of villagers and 1,000 police officers and 500 soldiers.

In all these incidents, protesters used the regime's own words as a weapon and combined legal tactics with collective action (or the threat of it) to defend their "lawful rights and interests" (*hefa quanyi*).¹⁵ They ceded the high ground to

¹⁴ On litigious, rules-conscious peasants, see Benjamin L. Liebman, "Class Action Litigation in China", *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 111, No. 6 (April 1998), pp. 1523–41; Minxin Pei, "Citizens v. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China", *China Quarterly*, No. 152 (December 1997), pp. 832–62; Neil J. Diamant, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in China: Beyond Mediation-Centered Approaches", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (August 2000), pp. 523–46. For pre-1949 China, see Guangyuan Zhou, "Illusion and Reality in the Law of the Late Qing: A Sichuan Case Study", *Modern China*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (October 1993), pp. 427–56; Philip C.C. Huang, *Civil Justice in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Jonathan Ocko, "I'll Take it All the Way to Beijing: Capital Appeals in the Qing", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 291–315. On forces that blunt and promote rights consciousness, see Stanley B. Lubman, *Bird in a Cage* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ For more examples of this form of contention, see Andrew Wedeman, "Stealing from the Farmers: Institutional Corruption and the 1992 IOU Crisis", *China Quarterly*, No. 152 (December 1997), p. 826; M. Kent Jennings, "Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 1997), p. 366; Jude Howell, "Prospects for Village Self-Governance in China", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1998), pp. 103–4; Zweig, "The 'Externalities of Development'", pp. 120–42; Liu Yawei, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections", pp. 30–4; Guo Xiaolin, "Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts", pp. 431–7; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China", *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 40–55; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance", *World Politics* (October 1996), pp. 31–56.

official values and shrewdly launched attacks in a rhetoric that even unresponsive elites had to recognize. Their tactics included petitions, civil disobedience and out-and-out violence, used singly, together or in sequence. Bernstein and Lü point out that disruptive acts, such as sit-ins or blocking rail lines, are often the most effective way to communicate grievances to higher levels. And, when as often happens, angry villagers are brushed off, given empty promises or fobbed off on others, the level of violence can escalate rapidly.

Leadership and Organization

Leadership involves skills and action. Effective protest leaders motivate followers, build coalitions and frame issues in a way that resonates. They also size up opponents, seize opportunities and force their antagonists to make mistakes.¹⁶ In rural China, as elsewhere, the catalysts of collective action (like Yu Zuomin) tend to have forceful personalities and more than a dash of charisma. They are seldom, the authors stress, ordinary farmers.

Village cadres sometimes initiate popular action, especially the larger, more organized episodes. According to Bianco, Gilley and Perry, this is the case for many *xiedou* and also for contention orchestrated by managers of village conglomerates. Grassroots leaders may also incite “everyday resistance”, such as illegal lumbering and the looting of bricks and coal. Scattered evidence gathered by Bernstein and Lü indicates that heads of former production teams, now called group leaders, may be more likely than full-time village cadres to side with peasants and spearhead contention.¹⁷

When basic-level leaders themselves are targeted, Bianco, and Bernstein and Lü, note, the instigators often are better-educated members of the community and respected villagers not in office. These include teachers (who can build networks based on ties with parents) and former soldiers (who often have organizational and communication skills derived from their stint in the PLA). Peasants with schooling can compose effective petitions and are more likely to know about beneficial laws and policies. Demobilized soldiers typically feel that they are more worldly and capable than current office holders and are often frustrated that they have been shut out of the village power structure. Most recently, elected cadres have also taken to coordinating attacks on appointed village or township officials who impose excessive fees or who try to implement other unlawful “local policies” (*tu zhengce*). In Shandong, in fact, liberalized nomination procedures in 1999 produced so many “leaders of collective visits” (*shangfang*

¹⁶ This list is borrowed from Ron Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Leadership Dynamics and Dynamics of Contention”, in Ronald R. Aminzade et al. (eds), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 153–4. For China, also see Patricia Thornton, “Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy”, *China Quarterly*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ On the role of group leaders, see Grinspoon, “Socialist Wasteland Auctions”, Ch. 4.

touzi) that provincial authorities complained that contention directed at township officials, organized by elected cadres, was causing widespread chaos.¹⁸

An organized threat of a very different kind are heterodox religious sects, which operated throughout the 1980s and 1990s (well before Falun Gong grabbed the world's attention). Some boasted followers in ten or more provinces, and the six largest had between 100,000 and 600,000 members.

Bernstein and Lü argue, though, that most rural tax protests are spontaneous flare-ups that lack sustained leadership and coordination. Bianco goes further, writing of "peasant furies" and "deficient" or "nonexistent" organization (p. 251). Secret societies and lineage organizations provide grounds for mobilization, but they also divide the population and undermine unified opposition to outside pressure. Bernstein and Lü conclude that while tax protests sometimes spread to neighbouring townships, and school and business ties may one day inspire township-wide or county-wide action, so far there are few signs of the solidarity, coordination and reach of a true social movement.

In recent years, however, a new trend has emerged. A 2001 Central Committee analysis advised that popular contention was becoming "visibly" more organized. Supporting this assessment, a 2002 report by Sichuan's Organization Department claimed that over 95 per cent of the relatively large collective incidents were directed by leaderships that employed a division of labour, fashioned tactics and masterminded unrest.¹⁹ Bernstein and Lü themselves acknowledge that increased "staying power" became a notable feature of rural resistance in the late 1990s.

Outcomes

Gauging the impact of collective action is notoriously difficult. Questions about causality and definition dog even the most careful attempts to link an episode or cycle of contention to an outcome.²⁰ Popular action is always but one factor in a long chain of events, and showing how reformist elites and protesters come together to produce change is always complicated.²¹ Given these impediments, it

¹⁸ Lianjiang Li, "Elections and Popular Resistance".

¹⁹ Zhonggong Sichuan Shengwei Zuzhibu Ketizu, "Zenyang zhengqu chuli quntixing tufa shijian" (How to Deal with Collective Eruptions), *Banyuetan* (Neibuban) (Fortnightly Chats, Internal Edition), No. 1 (January 2002), p. 31.

²⁰ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 231–3; Marco G. Giugni, "Was it Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1998), pp. 371–93.

²¹ This issue lies near the heart of the debate over Daniel Kelliher's *Peasant Power in China* and Kate Xiao Zhou's *How the Farmers Changed China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996). On the interplay of elite and mass initiative during decollectivization, see Unger and Bianco, as well as David Zweig, "Rural People, the Politicians, and Power", *The China Journal*, No. 38 (July 1997), pp. 153–68. These authors show that either-or questions about the impetus

is no wonder that studies of contentious politics (including the books under review) have paid more attention to the origins and dynamics of contention than to its consequences.²²

In China, where popular input into policymaking is limited and organized movements are crushed or pushed underground, locating effects entails looking beyond quick policy or procedural victories and eschewing simple notions of “success” and “failure”, and instead scanning for a range of outcomes. These results may be long-term and indirect, and they may be associated with policy implementation and value change rather than institutional breakthroughs or anything approaching regime collapse.

Although the odds are against it, collective action can sometimes help curb misimplementation of popular policies. On occasion illegal levies are rescinded, rigged elections are overturned, and corrupt or avaricious cadres are reined in. In fact, in one Hebei county, lodging collective complaints was so effective that the county organization department censured township officials for caving in too readily. In the words of a frustrated county official: “some township leaders have developed a collective complaints syndrome: 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”.²³

When the stakes are higher and violence is involved, Bianco, Perry, and Bernstein and Lü find that a more common outcome is detention of the ringleaders followed by concessions on the very subject of the protesters’ demands. After the 1997 riots in Jiangxi and Hubei, for example, Li Peng dispatched a work team, which ordered payment of all IOUs owed to villagers for their crop deliveries and abolished 21 taxes and fees. The highway taxes that provoked the Renshou riots were also rescinded after the unrest ended, although several of the organizers were imprisoned. Rural provocateurs usually pay a high price for their deeds, but not always. There are cases when they are drawn into officialdom, and yesterday’s “peasant hero” becomes today’s elected village cadre.

behind change spring from an unrealistic vision of what popular action can accomplish directly (how often are consequences unmediated by the powers that be?) and thereby impoverish our understanding of outcomes.

²² Paul Burstein, Rachel L. Einhower and Jocelyn A. Hollander, “The Success of Political Movements: A Bargaining Perspective”, in Bert Klandermans and J. C. Jenkins (eds), *The Politics of Social Protest* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 276; Hanspeter Kriesi, Ruud Koopmans, Jan W. Duyvendak and Marco G. Giugni, *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 208.

²³ Zhonggong Cixian Xianwei Zuzhibu, “You zhuanggao zhibu shuji yinchu de sikao” (Thoughts on Lodging Complaints against Party Secretaries), *Ganbu yu rencai* (Cadres and Talent), No. 12 (December 1993), p. 36.

As Unger, and Bernstein and Lü point out, rural unrest may not pose an imminent danger to the regime. And as Bianco suggests, it may be less threatening than urban upheaval and factional infighting.²⁴ But it can play a part in fending off extraction, deflecting predatory behaviour and sending grasping and high-handed cadres packing. Participating in collective action may also bring about what Bianco calls “a positive change in the peasants themselves” (p. 251). While Bianco sees accession to full citizenship as “very remote”, Bernstein and Lü argue that rural people have become much more rights conscious, especially in China’s agricultural belt. It is quite possible that the protests’ greatest impact has been on popular identities and aspirations. Organizers, in particular, undergo a learning experience, become aware of new possibilities and often end up inclined to participate in larger struggles. The recent emergence of “peasant leaders” attests to the presence of a corps of frustrated, assertive risk-takers whose actions reflect heightened expectations and a deep engagement with official “rights talk”.²⁵

Opportunities, Allies and the Media

Collective action is often associated with openings in the political opportunity structure: protest is more likely when institutional access improves, when rifts among members of the elite appear, when influential allies become available, or when the state’s capacity or will to repress dissent declines.²⁶ In rural China, the books under review suggest, the recent upturn in contention is in large part a product of political relaxation, at a time when officialdom is increasingly divided and some members of the government are disposed to champion popular demands. Sympathetic journalists also play an important part here.

Bianco, in particular, argues that the authorities play a bigger role than villagers in determining the amount of resistance. For him, the key change of late is a regime that has become more tolerant of small-scale actions that do not target the Centre. He observes that there has never been a one-to-one relationship between grievances and mobilization, and that during the collective era, when

²⁴ On China’s “rocky stability” or “stable unrest”, see Martin King Whyte, “Chinese Social Trends: Stability or Chaos?”, in David Shambaugh (ed.), *Is China Unstable?* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 160.

²⁵ Tan Wen, “‘Nongmin yulun lingxiu’ shi yingxiong haishi diaomin?” (Are “Peasant Public Opinion Leaders” Heroes or Shrewd and Unyielding People?), *Zhongguo shehui daokan* (Guide to Chinese Society), No. 4 (April 2000), pp. 6–9.

²⁶ Doug McAdam, “Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions”, in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 27; Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 71, 76.

rural discontent was greatest, protest was at a low ebb.²⁷ In his view, which is shared by most students of contentious politics, a demonstrated willingness to crush resistance usually deters popular action, and it is the loosening of controls that stimulates people to pour into the streets. The single most important impetus for collective action, noted both by Bianco, and Bernstein and Lü, has thus been a decline in the swiftness, certainty and harshness of repression, even compared with the early reform period studied by Perry.

The recent surge in contention can also be linked to specific reforms and policies that have reduced the costs of certain kinds of protests and opened up the polity a crack. Bernstein and Lü list a number of institutional departures—the end of collective farming, communes, mass campaigns, class labelling and class struggle—that have left villagers less fearful, reduced their dependence on the authorities and expanded their room for maneuver. At the same time, a series of freshly minted legal restrictions on cadre discretion have given rural people more violations to protest, such as local officials' disregard for the 5 per cent limit on taxes and fees; a stipulation in the Agriculture Law that allows villagers to reject illegal impositions; a clause in the Villagers' Committee Law that authorizes voters to challenge election chicanery by lodging reports (*jubao*); and measures that grant rural residents the right to appeal to higher levels if cadres refuse to open village accounts. A 1998 State Council regulation, cited by Bernstein and Lü, also signalled a conciliatory approach to some types of contention. It concluded that most rallies, demonstrations and parades arose from "contradictions among the people" rather than "contradictions with the enemy", and took local cadres to task for impinging on the masses' lawful rights and interests.

The presence of elite allies and muckraking reporters has also altered the risk-reward ratio for rural activists. Yu Zuomin had backers as highly placed as Bo Yibo and Li Ruihuan to protect him when others called him a "mountain rebel". Villagers who pursue lower-profile disputes have proven adept at ferreting out advocates in various bureaucracies who have a stake in seeing their appeals addressed. They skillfully "venue shop" and press their claims wherever they have the best chance of success. In one place this might be a civil affairs bureau; in another it might be a people's congress; in a third it could be a discipline inspection committee or a procurator's anti-corruption office. These villagers have recognized that state power is both fragmented and divided against itself, and they know if they search diligently, they can sometimes locate pressure points where the authorities' unity crumbles. Official allies, for their part, typically make themselves available when they believe that offering redress will

²⁷ For contrasting perspectives on rural resistance during the collective era, see Jonathan Unger, "State and Peasant in Post-Revolution China", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (October 1989), pp. 114–36, and Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

reduce the likelihood of further unrest while improving policy implementation and cadre oversight.

Journalists can also be crucial allies, often indirectly. Increased editorial freedom and competitive pressures have given rise to a more market-oriented media, and exposés of official wrongdoing can generate a huge audience. In the course of uncovering corruption and other misconduct, television stations and newspapers have, as Gilley remarks, become more willing to report the point of view of protesting peasants. Bernstein and Lü note that *Farmer's Daily* has emerged as an advocate of rural interests and that in the midst of the 1999 Daolin demonstrations several organizers travelled to Beijing to contact the producers of *Focus*—China's most popular television program devoted to investigative journalism.²⁸ Quite a few villagers know by now that bad publicity can affect the official evaluation of a local cadre's performance and his career prospects, and may even precipitate an immediate investigation. In one village where Lianjiang Li and I have done research, a group of complainants have been trying for years to lure (or hire!) a reporter to come and expose several corrupt cadres.

Of course, any gains in political space should not be exaggerated. As Yu Zuomin discovered, allies can be fleeting and journalists can be used to heap calumny on people they once praised. Daring magazines such as *Southern Weekend* can come under pressure and even be subject to editorial purges for reporting aspects of the rural situation that the leadership wishes to keep quiet.²⁹ And the protections granted to villagers may be toothless. The 5 per cent tax limit is often flouted, and the statute that empowers villagers to reject illegal taxes and fees does not specify remedial steps. Rural residents may challenge dishonest elections, but the Villagers' Committee Law does not spell out any punishments for abridging voters' rights. Bernstein and Lü point out that even as collective visits to government offices continue, a 1995 directive limited and regulated them, decreeing that no more than five complainants be sent and instructing villagers to pursue their charges level by level.³⁰

Bianco thus is on firm ground when he writes that although peasants have more room to express their grievances, we should not misjudge the power relations between popular forces and the authorities. Officials at higher levels may present themselves as protectors who are doing their best to control errant cadres, but this is often a pose or an example of good intentions not backed up by

²⁸ For an analysis of the stories covered by *Focus* in 1999, see Alex Chan, "From Propaganda to Hegemony: *Jiaodian Fangtan* and China's Media Policy"; also Li Xiaoping, "*Focus* (*Jiaodian Fangtan*) and the Changes in the Chinese Television Industry", both in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 11, No. 30 (February 2002).

²⁹ James Kynge, "Chinese Newspaper Editors Forced to Quit", *The Financial Times* (London), 5 June 2001.

³⁰ For more on these regulations and the "letters and visits" system, see Laura M. Luehrmann, "Officials Face the Masses: Citizen Contacting in Modern China", PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2000, pp. 76–81, 84.

a capacity to halt abuses (Unger, p. 215). Even contention that appears to be tolerated operates within an “extremely unequal triangle of forces linking the central leadership, the local authorities, and the peasants” (Bianco, p. 253).

The idea that contention is shaped by a distinctly Chinese interplay of state and society appears in several of the books, and is especially prominent in Perry’s volume. In her words, societal initiatives “reflect the heavy hand of statist influences” and protesters are “unusually attentive to signals from the state”. Allies are commonly sought “among the bureaucratic elite rather than among society at large”, and instigators often receive “at least implicit high-level encouragement”. The result is a “state-centric” style of contention in which protesters, unlike their counterparts in Eastern Europe, have not turned away from the regime by refusing to take it seriously, but instead continue to crave official recognition (pp. x, xi, xxi, xxiii, xxix, 315, 324).

A propensity to remonstrate rather than to defy authority inevitably limits most popular claims to those that the central government finds palatable.³¹ But it can also help to bring villagers the modest victories they achieve. Collective action in rural China has little to do with a new revolution and much to do with changing some things that matter in the village. It is above all a way for people with few other resources to work the system for local benefits. Peasants adapt their strategies to the contours of a reforming regime as they discover which openings can be exploited and where their best opportunities lie. Although contention takes the shape that the state gives it, dependence is not necessarily a liability for protesters who are creative and skillful enough to turn it to their advantage.

³¹ On remonstrating in post-Mao China, see Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 24–6; Kevin J. O’Brien, “Agents and Remonstrators: Role Accumulation by Chinese People’s Congress Deputies”, *China Quarterly*, No. 138 (June 1994), pp. 368–77.