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‘Gangster Capitalism’ and Peasant Protest in China: The Last Twenty Years

KATHY LE MONS WALKER

This article first reviews the alliance of money and power in post-socialist China, arguing that it has generated a peculiar form of the (so-called) primitive accumulation of capital – ‘gangster capitalism’ – based primarily on a plundering of public wealth by power-holders and their hangers-on. It then examines the tidal wave of peasant protest in China over the last twenty years. It analyzes this rural social movement, however, as not simply a reaction to the power of the market, but also an independent elaboration of community, articulation of socialist/non-capitalist vision, and critique of urban-centered development.

In 1978 when Deng Xiaoping and other heirs to Mao’s China announced that rapid development and growth could be achieved by using capitalism to develop socialism, they ushered in a new period of so-called ‘market socialism with Chinese characteristics.’ This post-socialist path has entailed the combining of private enterprises and markets with a substantial but dwindling state-owned sector. It has also spawned a plundering of public wealth by state connected power-holders. This article examines this alliance between money and power, or ‘gangster capitalism,’¹ and considers the social suffering it has generated, especially in the countryside. It then examines the response of rural Chinese, spotlighting the virtual tidal wave of contentious political activism and collective protest of the last two decades. These developments, however, are not regarded simply as reactions to the violence and power of the market, but also as independent elaborations of community, a critique of urban-centered development, and a living conceptual repertoire of noncapitalist vision.

THE REAL WORLD OF POST-SOCIALISM

The major economic ‘successes’ of China’s post-socialist path have been applauded and well publicized in the West, including average annual growth

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rates of over 10 percent until the mid-1990s and significant increases in average personal incomes.² The first spurt of economic growth was connected to the dismantling and privatization of the rural communes. They were replaced by a system through which peasant households began growing and marketing their own crops,³ while newly created village and township governments assumed control of the communes' industrial assets; in turn, the assets were restructured as township and village enterprises (TVEs). The new township and village enterprises were immediately successful in light industries such as clothing and foodstuffs, leading to their proliferation. They increased from one and a half million in 1978 to 25 million in 1993, by which time they employed over 123 million workers [*Greenfield and Leong*, 1997: 107]. In the mid-1990s, however, many TVEs began to suffer difficulties and reversals. By 1998, in some provinces, over one-third of them had failed, a trend that contributed substantially to a slow-down in the overall growth rate [*Greenfield and Leong*, 1997; *Ma Xiaohu*, 1999: 1–2; *Shen Haixiong et al.*, 1998: 2; 'Wen Jiabao's Speech', 1999: 7].

In the early 1980s initial increases in agriculture enabled peasants to raise their incomes rapidly. After 1985, however, the rural economy slowed, contracted, and in some places even reversed, with the result that average personal incomes fell in a number of provinces.⁴ Over the next decade this trend worsened. By the later 1990s income growth for a large number of both urban and rural poor had reversed, and a 'floating population' of 120 million poverty-stricken rural people had appeared, many of whom migrated to the cities in search of work [*Liu and Link*, 1998: 17, 18; *Cheong*, 1999: 21].⁵ Their influx to the cities swelled the ranks of laid-off urban workers, whose numbers already totaled over 20 million. By mid-2003 the 'floating population' from the countryside had increased even more, reaching a staggering 150 million people ['An Overview of Unemployment', 2004; *Greenfield and Leong*, 1997: 100].

In the 1990s the economic boom took place mainly in the cities, the areas that had been the true focus of Deng Xiaoping and like-minded developmentalists all along. Indeed, some analysts argue that in making the dissolution of the communes its initial priority the central state sought to reduce its investment in agriculture and, thereby, give fuller support to urban and industrial growth [*Bernstein*, 1994: 14; 1999: 207]. The ideology of 'peasant backwardness' that accompanied this policy line justified urban privileging and the exploitation and oppression of peasants that the state organized or otherwise colluded in [*Bernstein*, 1990: 70; *Walker*, 1999].⁶

Although the boom in private and semi-private development owes much to both the inflow of foreign capital and the creation of many Chinese and foreign 'joint ventures,' it has rested on another central characteristic: namely, the plundering of public wealth by power-holders and their hangers-on.⁷

According to He Qinglian, a Shanghai-trained economist who has authored a comprehensive study of the social consequences of the economic boom, 'the primary target of their plunder was state property that had been accumulated from forty years of the people's sweat and blood, and their primary means of plunder was political power' [*He Qinglian*, 2001a: 85].⁸ As she elaborates:

In the breakneck competition to accumulate wealth...most of the benefits have accrued to power-holders in government who oversee management of the nation's resources and to the managers of state-run enterprises. Also benefiting from this process have been the many middlemen and insiders who are masters at ingratiating themselves with those in power. There is little or no distinction in the minds of such people between 'public' and 'private' as they use their 'skills' in the 'market economy' to quickly transfer the former into the latter. [*He Qinglian*, 2001b: 48]

He Qinglian argues that in the 1980s this 'marketization of power' occurred mainly through officials and managers manipulating the two-track pricing system for raw materials and industrial commodities to their personal advantage. Under that system China maintained controlled prices for state-owned enterprises and significantly higher market prices for all other enterprises. In a typical maneuver, an official or manager procured raw materials or commodities at the fixed price and then sold them on the market for large illicit profits [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 38].

This alliance between power and money and the 'back-alley distribution' that it spawned, as He describes it [*He Qinglian*, 2001b: 6], deepened in the late 1980s and 1990s through three main channels. The first involved the transformation of state-owned enterprises into private shareholding companies. State economic planners touted the move as a means of bringing greater efficiency and productivity and better management to moribund state-run enterprises. But according to He Qinglian none of these occurred. Instead shareholding became the venue through which power-holders at the various administrative levels succeeded in converting 'reform' into an opportunity for shifting huge amounts of state property and assets into their own hands; workers, who were supposed to be included in the process, were virtually excluded except in cases of unprofitable enterprises [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 40; *Lau*, 1999: 52]. In her words:

Firms start out with virtually zero [private] capital, but through very dexterous cooperation with government officials and power-holders, as well as connections to the public notary, they manage to make huge profits from large-scale capital transactions...The enthusiasm among

power-holders in various cities and towns for implementing 'shareholding reform' grew by leaps and bounds.... [a] 'reform' that, in reality, involved huge embezzlement of state assets all over the country.... This new wave of dividing up state property and assets by power-holders swept through China like a storm... From that perspective, 'shareholding reform' was indeed a 'free lunch' served up by the socialist system of public ownership – though the only people seated at the table were the power-holders. [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 45; 50]⁹

The wave of dividing up state property swept through China at the same time that the state introduced changes in property rights. Forming a second key channel for accumulation by emergent gangster capitalists, these changes underpinned what He Qinglian refers to as a 'land enclosure movement.' In the 'frenzy over land enclosure' – through their ability to interfere in the real estate market – power-holders at various levels divided up huge chunks of land. The process involved land resources within municipal boundaries as well as massive tracts of arable land in the countryside – as much as 10 million *mu* of rural land by 1992 (1 *mu* = one-sixth of an acre).¹⁰ In both the cities and townships the frenzy centered on a single goal: to make tracts of land available for lease in 'economic development zones' in order to attract foreign investment [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 59]. And indeed it fuelled foreign as well as gangster capitalist accumulation. According to one estimate, in the early 1990s approximately 90 percent of all foreign investment in China was absorbed into the newly opened land market [*He Qinglian*, 2000].

He Qinglian argues that although the 1980s produced some millionaires, the land enclosures of the 1990s generated 'all kinds of millionaires... and also China's first billionaires and even a few trillionaires' [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 82].¹¹ Much of this money ended up in foreign bank accounts, as foreign partners in joint ventures deposited currency in overseas accounts for their Chinese partners in return for 'back-alley distribution' and other illegal benefits of gangster capitalism. Meanwhile, the loss to the state/people from the illegal transfer of land-use rights and the leasing and pawning of land amounted to 10 billion *yuan* per year [*He Qinglian*, 2000: 64; 74].¹²

A stripping of state enterprises and embezzlement of state funds to set up private businesses formed the third principal channel for the accumulation of capital in the 1990s. It was prompted in part in 1992 by Deng Xiaoping, when he pinned the legitimacy of the regime on even bolder development and called for everyone to go into business and get rich – including party members who previously had been officially excluded.¹³ It likewise reflected the extension and qualitative deepening of corruption among power-holders, resulting in a plunder of public resources several times as frenzied as that of

the 1980s [Lu, 1997: 131; Wedeman, 2004]. In a typical case, according to He, the general manager of a large-scale state-run enterprise would shift 10 or 30 million *yuan* to an individual, often a relative, for personal business for which the manager would receive a commission. If their investment paid off, they would keep the money for themselves; and if they lost, the state-run enterprise would be the one that suffered [He Qinglian, 2001b: 68].

He Qinglian argues that although enterprise managers monopolized the process, overall the majority of assets in state- or collectively-owned enterprises found their way into the hands of township, privately run, and/or individually-owned enterprises where, in turn, they ended up under the effective ownership of individuals who were free to dispose of them at will.¹⁴ In addition to asset stripping state enterprises, officials and managers obtained money for investment in stocks, especially foreign stocks, real estate, business ventures, and personal use from state funds that had been intended for the purchase of state grain, education, disaster relief, and agriculture; it was supplemented by funds raised through usurious loans and illegal fines and taxes, mostly in the countryside ['Supreme People's Court', 1999; 'Workers Protest', 1999; 'Zhejiang Officials Punished', 1998].

In the state-run sector these developments brought few increases in productivity, while the enterprises remained as inefficient and poorly run as before. The chief difference was that as the divested and crippled enterprises fell further into debt, workers were not paid. As He Qinglian writes:

Huge losses by state-run enterprises led many of these firms to the brink of bankruptcy where they could no longer meet minimum salary payments for their workers. And yet even as many employees were unable to make ends meet those in positions of power and influence made a killing on the illicit sale and transfer of assets and ended up laughing all the way to the bank. [He Qinglian, 2001b: 19]

The Chinese government attempted to prop up the debt-ridden state sector with emergency loans from the banking system. Since the enterprises usually could not repay the loans, they remained on the books as non-performing or, more frequently, unacknowledged bad debts.¹⁵ Furthermore, the banks mostly drew the emergency transfusions of funds for troubled state enterprises from the personal savings of ordinary people (who due to the controlled press are generally unaware of the fact). Statistical data issued by the People's Bank of China in late 1995 indicated that the deposits of residents accounted for 60 percent of all loans issued by Chinese banks in the amount of 5 trillion yuan [He Qinglian, 2001a: 27]. By early 1997, almost half the money in personal savings accounts (US\$120 billion) had been lost in this way, leading to a financial crisis and a situation in which by international standards, as

Liu Binyan and Perry Link put it, 'China's banks [were] bankrupt, and, deeply so' [*Liu and Link*, 1988: 22; see also *Holland*, 1999b: 4–5].¹⁶

In short, what He Qinglian presents is an overall picture of the rise of a new robber baron class in league with the Communist Party. Created through the merging of official power and money, the rapid and astonishing ascendancy of this gangster capitalism has played a decisive role in bringing about a highly distorted flow of wealth in China and a mal-distribution of national resources [*He Qinglian*, 2001b: 6]. In the process – the original expectations of post-socialist planners about the 'trickle-down' effects of growth notwithstanding – China moved from having the lowest gap between rich and poor in the world to being a country in which that gap is one of the highest worldwide.¹⁷

Mainstream economists in the West have expressed shock and dismay that the spread of the market they so prize has generated rampant corruption and other undesirable 'by-products' of growth. Marxist scholars have demonstrated a better understanding. Like He Qinglian, for example, Nancy Holmstrom and Richard Smith analyze gangster capitalism as a modern version of *primitive accumulation*, or the process described originally by Marx through which in England, from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, an alliance of landlords, nascent capitalist farmers, and the state used enclosure movements and other methods to separate peasant producers from the means of production, and, thereby, establish capitalist class relations. They argue that, indeed, this modern Chinese version amounts to 'the greatest enclosure movement in history – virtually a continent-wide drive to privatize state-collective property, far surpassing in scope the historic enclosure movements' [*Holmstrom and Smith*, 2000: 4]. They also explain that precisely because Chinese cadres and officials did not have a 'legal' way to make themselves into a 'red bourgeoisie' (since they lacked the personal capital to set up private businesses and likewise did not own the state enterprises they ran), they carried out primitive accumulation through corruption [*Holmstrom and Smith*, 2000: 13]. Their conclusion is that, as in the past, 'primitive accumulation' is 'hot-housing' the emergence of a class of newly rich capitalists. Alongside them stand growing millions of disadvantaged, unemployed, and even starving Chinese [*Holmstrom and Smith*, 2000: 4].

THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

It is in this socio-political and economic context, then, although mostly ignored in both Western scholarship and the Western press, that since the mid-1980s protest, resistance, and outright insurgency have gathered momentum in the countryside. The movement has involved hundreds of thousands of incidents and millions of peasant participants. It reached new levels of intensity in 1993 when, according to the Hong Kong press, there were

uprisings in nearly a dozen of China's 21 provinces and several thousand casualties [Bernstein, 1994: 8; Ngo, 1999: 471–2]. In the cities, strikes, workplace actions, and demonstrations by urban workers have flanked the rural protests.¹⁸ Steadily rising numbers of legal complaints and petitions have likewise paralleled and sometimes intersected with the protest movement. Thousands of petitioners have made the long journey to Beijing from distant parts of the country each year in order to present their grievances (*shang fang*) directly to the central authorities [Sui, 2002: 2]. In 2004 alone the State Council Petition Bureau in Beijing received 500,000 petition cases, and the Supreme People's Court roughly 200,000 [Cai, 2004].¹⁹

Most, though not all, of the rural protests and risings have been localized and relatively small-scale. Yet much like peasant initiatives in crucial moments of the past, their concerns have been strikingly similar. In this sense, their individual narratives have coalesced as a unified discourse. Most of them have directly addressed and resisted 'the veritable orgy of corruption, embezzlement, bribery, kickback, graft, smuggling, currency manipulation, influence peddling, and theft of state funds' that has appeared at the local level in multiple forms [Holstrom and Smith, 2000: 10].

Among the most common themes have been resistance to the issuing of IOUs in lieu of payment of cash for crops by local officials, who used the funds for speculative real estate and business deals (paralleled in the cities by the late payment, partial payment or nonpayment to wages to workers, teachers, and others); cadre diversion of state-allocated inputs for agriculture; the pocketing of TVE profits by local and mid-level cadres; the imposition by local cadres of a host of 'illegal' or 'unaccounted for' fines, fees, and taxes to pay for 'development' projects and/or for personal use;²⁰ the forcible confiscation of the land, belongings, and food of peasants who could not or would not pay the extra taxes and fees; the expropriation of arable land without adequate compensation (for highways, real estate development, and personal use, or to attract industrial investors through the creation of 'development zones'); the issuing of inferior and fake chemical fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and other supplies by corrupt cadres; and finally the pollution of local water supplies by development projects, which has not only angered peasants but affected agricultural production as well [Bernstein, 1994: 14–18; 63–81; 'Dissidents Warn', 1999; 'Five Thousand PRC Farmers', 1999; Goodspeed, 1993; Koe, 1993: 1, 6; 'One Thousand Protest', 1999; 'Peasants Protest Corruption', 1999; Poole, 1993; Wang, 1991; Wedeman, 1997; Wen Tiejun and Zhu Shouying, 1996; Yardley, 2004]. Decreasing prices for agricultural products, increasing prices for inputs, and a rural inflation rate of more than 11 percent have exacerbated and intertwined with the above economic abuses.

In the mid-1980s when the protests first began, many took the form of acts of 'revenge' (*baohu*) or violence directed at local cadres, the newly wealthy

in villages (often also cadres), and tax collectors [Li and O'Brien, 1996: 29]. A survey of 12 townships and towns in Suining County, Jiangsu Province, revealed, for example, that in 1987 and the first five months of 1988 local residents committed 381 acts of 'revenge' against village and township cadres [Bernstein, 1994: 63]. Similarly, surveys of ten villages in Hubei found 164 instances of 'antagonistic conflict' between peasants and village elites, an increase of 37 per cent over the previous year. These instances included the beating of cadres and their families, the destruction of property by arson, the poisoning of horses, hogs, and poultry, and the cutting-down of privately-owned trees [Bernstein, 1994]. In 94 villages in Hebei, 151 village cadres or 53 percent of the total, were beaten or injured in the period from 1987 to early 1990 [Bernstein, 1994: 64]. In Anhua County, Hunan, according to a 1989 report, 200 or 17 percent of all township and district cadres were beaten over a three-year period [Bernstein, 1994: 64]. A report published in the People's Daily in 1988 also indicated that more than 5,000 cases of 'violent' tax resistance involving injuries and the death of tax collectors had occurred over a two-year period [Bernstein, 1994: 65]. In not a few cases, such as that of the local party secretary in Hebei who had his property torched for five years running, acts of revenge prompted 'terrified cadres' to hand in their resignations [Bernstein, 1994: 63–4]. All available data suggest that through most of the 1990s tactical use of 'revenge' against corrupt, 'bourgeois' cadres increased in scope and intensity.²¹

Like the acts of 'revenge,' which were often carried out by individuals, many of the collective protests and risings have been directed at local cadres and the newly wealthy. Some also targeted higher levels of administration, such as the 1987 rising in Shandong in which 40,000 peasants wrecked the Party and government compound of Cangshan county [Bernstein, 1994: 66].

A sampling of direct actions in 1993 suggests the scope and range of these collective protests. In one larger-scaled rising, an estimated 15,000 angry peasants in Renshou County in western Sichuan rose in response to the increasingly arbitrary and high fees imposed by local cadres. During this rising, which lasted for six months, they blockaded traffic, held police officers hostage, set police cars ablaze, attacked officials, rampaged through government offices and marched *en masse* through town streets, nearby mountains and fields and on local highways carrying pitchforks, rods, and banners [Bernstein, 1994: 70–77; Goodspeed, 1993: F2; Sampson and Mirsky, 1993].

In the southern province of Guangdong, several thousand peasants blocked a major highway with trucks to protest the expropriation of their fields for a highway improvement project. In Shanxi Province, they confronted local authorities over high taxes. Furious over a sudden cash shortage in the banking system that made it impossible to cash postal money orders sent home by relatives working in the cities, peasants also attacked post offices in at least

11 provinces. Others closed the Henan Railway Line with bulldozers and huge piles of dirt in a tax protest. In Anhui they drove tractors into the city of Hefei and paralyzed traffic outside the offices of the provincial government for hours in a yet another tax protest [*Goodspeed*, 1993: F2].

In another Anhui protest an 'Autonomous Peasant Committee' seized members of a work team from the county party committee and demanded a 50 percent tax reduction, the dismissal of a township head and party committee, and the dissolution of the township militia organization. Three hundred members of the committee attacked the county government building. Also in Anhui, more than 2,000 peasants from seven villages organized against both the issuing of IOUs and government payment for crops in material rather than cash. At their meetings they 'openly' displayed banners that contained such slogans as 'All power to the peasants!' and 'Down with the new landlords of the 1990s!' [*Bernstein*, 1994: 14–20; 63–77; *Koe*, 1993: 1].

In the mid-1980s, when the wave of rural protest first appeared, party and government officials minimized their public response. In fact, it seems that Beijing may have actually welcomed the peasants' initiatives against errant local cadres. As Jonathan Unger has suggested, once decollectivization was complete 'the central government no longer saw as much need to placate the rural cadres... whose independent back-scratching networks impeded [its] authority' [*Unger*, 2002: 215].

It is within this context that the government's promulgation in 1987 of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, which established village elections [*Oi and Rozelle*, 2000: 522], can perhaps best be understood. Ostensibly, village elections provided a new arena for resisting local corruption and abuses of power. But by most accounts, only a limited implementation of elections occurred in the first few years. Many cadres directly opposed them or moved very slowly to implement the law. Others circumvented a genuine electoral process through a variety of procedures. Because of these circumventions, initially many peasants showed little interest in them as well [*Elklit*, 1997; *Li and O'Brien*, 1999; *Oi and Rozelle*, 2000; *Shi*, 1999]. The key point here, however, is that given the post-socialist regime's urban orientation and the fact that by the latter 1980s many peasants were at once cognizant and resentful of its bias,²² the state's introduction of village elections was both a timely and shrewd maneuver. The move enabled Beijing to promote itself as an ally and protector of peasant interests and, thereby, both potentially minimize opposition to its own policies and suggest that the real problem lay with local officialdom [*Unger*, 2002: 215, 218; *Bernstein*, 1994: 20, 26].

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Beijing authorities deepened this tactical thrust. Exposés of corruption and tax abuse became regular features in the national news media and party organs. Articles produced by the official news agency *Xinhua* warned ominously, for example, that the practice of

levying arbitrary taxes could affect 'the stability of the countryside and even the whole society'; others revealed that the IOU problem was so widespread it had become a 'chronic disease' with the power 'to rock the very foundations of agriculture' [*Goodspeed*, 1993: F2; *Liao Jinying*, 1993; *Poole*, 1993: 10].

Beijing also issued new regulations. In late 1992 in a significant move, it prohibited local governments from levying taxes and fees at rates greater than 5 percent of the average net income in a village. Such limits had been set before, but had not been enforced. This time, the central leadership sent a special 'Urgent Circular' to all party officials instructing them to comply immediately so as to 'ease the burden' on peasants [*Bernstein*, 1994: 71; *Goodspeed*, 1993: F2]. In 1993 it went even further, when it wrote provisions into a new Law on Agriculture that gave peasants the legal right to 'refuse' to pay excessive or unauthorized fees and taxes [*Bernstein*, 1999: 214].

The above measures notwithstanding, in his 1997 report to the fifteenth national congress of the Communist Party Jiang Zemin frankly admitted that 'corruption and other undesirable phenomena' were 'still spreading and growing' [*Jiang Zemin*, 1997: 5; see also 'Decision on Alleviating', 1997: 1–2; *He Kaiyin and Gu Xianxin*, 1996]. As with other directives and laws, the government's tacit support of the peasants seems to have been mostly ignored by local gangster capitalists whom Beijing found increasingly difficult to supervise or control.

On the other hand, the significance of the government's stance in the late 1980s and early 1990s cannot be understated. Although it failed to thwart gangster capitalism at the local level, it appears to have had an almost opposite effect on the protest movement. It is perhaps not too much to argue that in further legitimating and giving peasants the legal basis for struggle against tax abuse the regulations of 1992–93 fuelled the rapid upsurge of protest activity in 1993, when the total number of recorded protests and risings climbed to 8,700 [*Pei Mixin*, 2002: 109]. The government's apparent support in the media and elsewhere added to the proactive climate. Indeed, precisely in this period what has been termed as 'policy-based resistance,' or the peasants' practice of defending their 'legitimate rights and interests' by citing laws, government policies, and other official communications to challenge over-taxation and the excessive use of force, to demand the dismissal of corrupt cadres and greater accountability, or to protest against rigged elections and call for the repeal of 'local policies' [*Li and O'Brien*, 1996: 29] emerged as a common form of contention.

The 1993 collective protests in Renshou County, Sichuan mentioned above, which were among the largest in the rural movement thus far, are a case in point. The protests originally started when, soon after its promulgation, local peasants invoked the 5 percent limit to resist paying fees for a

highway construction project the county was trying to impose. Miscellaneous fees in the county were already close to 100 *yuan* per person, or about 20–30 percent of *per capita* net income; the new levies added another 30–50 *yuan*. In the first phase of the six month-long protest, 700–800 peasants drove arresting officers out of the village, burned a police vehicle, and then marched to the county town to demand justice. The trigger for the second phase, which as noted eventually involved more than 15,000 participants, was apparently an article published in China Consumer News (*Zhongguo xiaofeizhebao*) charging that Renshou officials were defying the 'Urgent Circular' by imposing new levies and attempting to conceal central directives from the local population. Peasant leaders made more than 1,000 copies of the article, which they posted on walls and roads and sold to villagers. Reportedly emboldened by the 'support' of the central newspaper, the growing numbers of participants moved on the county party committee (more than 40 cadres were beaten), attacked the county government offices, and destroyed numerous vehicles (in which only officials usually rode) [Bernstein, 1994: 70–75].

Given the size and dimensions of the extended protest, the central authorities may have precipitated much more than they bargained for. According to Thomas Bernstein, Zhongnanhai was shocked by the developments. A hotline from Beijing to Renshou was established and daily written reports required. Contingency plans were also laid in the event that the protest resulted in the toppling of the county leadership. In that event, the 'riot' was to be redefined as a rebellion and crushed 'at all costs' by a PLA (People's Liberation Army) unit that was mobilized and ready to move. As it turned out, armed paramilitary police were able to quell the conflict, the PLA was not called in, and only minimal reprisals against and arrests of protestors occurred [Bernstein, 1994: 77, 80; Goodspeed, 1993: F2; Sampson and Mirsky, 1993].

In retrospect, the Renshou story marks 1993 as a pivotal moment in the development of the rural protest movement. Policy-based resistance became much more common within the repertoire of contentious activity – a development that exacerbated the already deteriorating relations between corrupt local cadres and peasants. Contradictions between local officialdom and higher levels of the state also intensified, as evidenced by the fact that Renshou cadres felt they had been 'betrayed' by the central authorities. At same time, despite the state's growing concern about the rural problem and its tactical shift, the violent conflicts in Renshou and elsewhere stood as an indictment of the central authorities' failure to adequately deal with the situation [Bernstein, 1994: 75, 82].

Consequently, in the 1990s local rural society grew further out of control. In some places resistance assumed a more radically militant form, resulting in 'paralyzed' and 'run-away' villages where local cadres were killed and the rural administration either ceased or turned wholly away from state extraction

and policy implementation [Bernstein, 1994: 79; Chu, 1999b: A1; Lam, 1998: 17; Li and O'Brien, 1996: 36; Rennie, 1999: 14; Smith, 2000: 1; Tillou, 1999: 19A]. A revival of clans, secret societies, unregistered mass organizations, and what state security forces called 'feudalistic peasant empires' paralleled these developments [Goodspeed, 1993: F2; He Qinglian, 2002; Perry, 1985; Yang Bo, 1992]. In some districts peasant leaders succeeded in gaining the allegiance of villages over an entire local area [Koe, 1993:6].²³ In others, rural protest was accompanied by a strong resurgence of folk religion with many incidents involving shamans, links to ancestral temples, or 'jade emperors descended to earth' [Perry, 1994: 81]. The 'Heavenly Soldiers Fraternal Army,' which recruited thousands of followers from some 120 villages, is a case in point. The leader declared himself a reincarnation of the Jade Emperor. He practiced shamanistic rituals of spirit possession and exorcism, and along with his disciples pledged to fight for a new 'divine regime free from social classes, authorities, grades and ranks' [Perry, 1999: 321].

Compared to the mid-1880s, when contentious actions first became widespread, in the later 1990s the rural movement showed signs of greater organizational and political development and of the coordination of protests in different areas, the latter perhaps even extending to the trans-provincial level. In the case of the former, new collectivities appeared under such names as 'peasant unity committees' and 'autonomous peasant governments.' Protest slogans also evinced a decidedly political thrust, as for example in 'Long live the peasant Communist Party,' 'Establish peasants' political power,' and 'Divide the wealth of the new rural despots' [Bernstein, 2000: 103-4; Li Zijing, 1997; Thornton, 2004: 93, 98]. Data for the simultaneous outbreak of larger-scaled risings in different localities suggest their coordination ['Twelve Thousand Sue', 1999].²⁴ From mid-May to mid-June 1997, for example, violent collective actions in which protestors attacked government buildings, burned vehicles, confiscated fertilizer and cement – and in at least two instances seized ammunition and guns – took place in the four central provinces of Anhui, Henan, Hubei, and Jiangxi. The participants in these large-scale risings numbered 70,000, 200,000, 120,000, and 100,000 respectively. In each province the actions included participants from a number of counties, but involved a cluster of no more than three prefectures [Li Zijing, 1997: 19-21].

By the late 1990s there was also evidence of greater militarization and an openly insurgent politics, including the formation of dissident organizations and paramilitary forces. In some localities protesters established 'peasants' revolutionary committees,' 'peasant rebellion command committees,' or armed self-defense units to replace the party and government [Perry, 1999: 315; Thornton, 2004: 93, 98]. The obscure and secretive 'Anti-Corruption Army of the People, Workers and Peasants' is also a case in point. In late

1998 Yang Jiahua, a 52-year-old peasant, organized the 'Southwestern Yangzi Column' of the Anti-Corruption Army in western Sichuan. This peasant-based force apparently viewed itself as a new communist organization and patterned its structure on China's ruling party, from a politburo down to a propaganda department. The Column surfaced publicly in early June 1999, when it led a series of rallies in three counties and 13 townships in the Chongqing region where, according to news reports, it appeared to have wide appeal. At these rallies several hundred Column members distributed leaflets condemning the Chinese Communist Party as no longer authentic, totally corrupt, and unfit to rule [*Holland*, 1999a: 10].

Alongside the formation of radical insurgent organizations, suicide and martyrdom appeared as both forms of protest and symbolic testimonies to the deteriorating economic situation of many rural dwellers. In 1998, for example, in a large protest in southern Hunan 10,000 peasants rose after one of their compatriots reportedly poisoned himself in protest because he could not afford to pay exorbitant 'illegal' taxes ['Chinese Police', 2000: 1].

Paralleling the above developments, in the late 1990s rural protests snowballed with some locales being hit by weekly, if not more frequent, actions. According to internal government statistics, the number of demonstrations, protests, and risings in 1998 alone rose to 60,000; in 1999 the figure was even higher, reaching 100,000 ['Dissidents Warn', 1999; 'Five Thousand PRC Farmers', 1999; 'One Thousand Protest', 1999; 'Police Clash With 1,000', 2001: 1–2]. Hong Kong-based information centers reported that the actual figures could have been even higher, as many protests were not reported to the central government.

In the face of the widening agrarian unrest and its own growing lack of credibility in the countryside, the party-state stepped-up efforts to both defuse the rural movement and reign in local gangster capitalists. First in 1998, under the rubric of expanding 'democratic decision making' in the rural areas, it revised the 1987 regulations on village committee elections. The revised regulations took direct aim at some of the practices commonly used by local power-holders to circumvent elections. They explicitly state, for example, that no individual or organization is allowed to 'appoint, designate, remove, or replace' members of a village committee, and they expressly authorize voters to combat dishonest elections ('threats, bribes, forged ballots and other improper methods') ['Efforts to Promote', 1999; *O'Brien*, 2001: 417–18; 'Report on Villagers', 1999]. The promulgation of the revised regulations seemed to indicate that the Beijing leadership wished to give peasants greater autonomy and to increase their ability to deal with local abuses of power. But it is also clear that it had no intention of relinquishing control. Thus at the same time that state leaders issued the new regulations, they strengthened the role of local party committees to whom village officials are

answerable [Chu, 1999a; 'Excising the Cancer', 1998; Ngo, 1999: 465; 'Report on Villagers', 1999; 'Rural Autonomy', 1998; Zhao, 1998: 10; 'Zhejiang Farmers Sack', 1999].²⁵

Over the next several years the party-state admitted publicly that the mounting social discontent in the countryside was threatening its rule. Ostensibly in response, it put forward a new 'strategic line' on rural and urban development. Downplaying the ideology of peasant backwardness that had underpinned urban-centered development for two decades – in the State Council, the National People's Congress, plenums of the Communist Party, the media, and elsewhere – officials and pundits announced that 'protecting' peasants' interests and rights had now become a top priority ['Dissident Speaks', 1999: 1; 'Ex-Policeman Jailed', 1999: 1; 'Wen Jiabao Chairs', 2003: 1].

The most significant policy flowing from this so-called strategic turn has been a new system for collecting agricultural taxes. Known as 'tax-for-fee' (*fei gai shui*) reform', the Chinese state initiated the new system on a trial basis in a number of localities in Anhui Province. It became a province-wide pilot project in Anhui in the year 2000, and was expanded to 20 provinces in 2002, with pilot projects scheduled for the remaining 11 provinces by the end of 2003. The government argued that the measures would reduce so-called 'peasants' burdens' by both standardizing agricultural taxes at a maximum rate of 8.4 percent of output²⁶ and prohibiting special product taxes, unwarranted fee collection, fund-raising, and quotas for fees and labour service ['Deepening Rural Reform', 2003: 1; Qi, 2003: 1; 'State Council 'Views'', 2003: 1; 'Wen Jiabao Leading', 2003: 1].

If they had been put into effect, the new measures could have reduced rural taxes by one-third to one-half ['PRC Implements', 2003: 1; 'Rural Tax Reform', 2003: 1]. But given the fact that the central government had to rely on those who in the past had committed some of the worst tax abuses, from the outset local cadre and official resistance hindered implementation. Even in areas where the pilot tax reforms were carried out, officials used other pretexts to levy new charges. In Liaoning, for example, the pilot project reportedly reduced the tax burden on peasants by roughly 40 percent. But in a number of localities officials moved quickly to make up the tax loss by initiating new vehicle and vessel taxes, or by forcing villagers to purchase seeds and saplings at higher prices ['China's Economic Development', 2003: 3].

In some cases maneuvers of this sort became the means for local gangster officials to continue to line their own pockets. On the other hand, the widespread levying of additional charges also highlights a problematic aspect of the new tax system: the loss of revenues for local governments. Beijing promised to make up part of this deficit by funneling funds from the center; it also promoted cost reduction through the downsizing of bloated local administrations and the elimination of some administrative villages altogether

['China's Economic Development', 2003: 1–2].²⁷ The Shanghai municipality spearheaded the latter approach in 2002 when it introduced the new tax measures and simultaneously reduced the number of administrative villages from 12,693 to only 2,001 ['Shanghai Implements', 2003: 1–2]. Still, functionaries in many areas complain that they 'cannot guarantee expenses if [they] only collect the agricultural tax from the peasants according to the [new] state policy'; thus, as one county official from Hebei puts it, 'in order to ensure expenditures [we] cannot but collect [extra] funds' ['China's Economic Development', 2003: 4].

As a result of such obstacles, at a State Council forum on the tax measures held in late 2003 Vice-Premier Hui Liangyu candidly admitted that 'the pilot reform project [had] been generally carried out on a delayed basis' ['Vice Premier', 2003: 1]. The combination of cadre resistance and mounting protest apparently prompted the new leadership of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, who both pledged to improve social and economic conditions in the countryside, to assume a more radical stance. Under their direction the Central Committee's Document No.1 of 2004 outlined plans for increasing peasants' incomes through rural-sector programmes totalling 30 billion *yuan* (US\$3.6 billion), bringing Beijing's total funding for rural areas to a record US\$18.3 billion [*Prosterman and Schwarzwald*, 2004]. Then in early 2005 Chen Xiwen, the government's top rural policy official, announced that by the end of the year the base agricultural tax would be eliminated in 24 of China's 31 provinces (and phased out in the rest of the country over the next several years). He stated further that the government was also accelerating plans to reduce other taxes on non-grain crops [*Kahn*, 2005: A3].

In light of the persistent opposition from local officialdom, whether the central state's latest initiatives will be successful seems at best doubtful. In the meantime, as corruption has worsened, and collusion between cadres-officials and private business has become more systematic, rural collective action has continued to expand, with many risings drawing on larger numbers of participants.²⁸ Most recently, the expropriation of peasants' land, which according to Hong Kong sources has already left tens of millions of peasants impoverished, has deepened as a means of private capital accumulation by corrupt local officials and their Chinese or foreign capitalist allies. In turn, it has also become a central focus of the protest movement ['Chinese Farmers Clash', 2002; 'One Thousand Rural Chinese', 2003; *Yardley*, 2004: 1].²⁹ In August 2003 Vice Agriculture Minister Liu Jian called expropriation the most glaring current infringement on peasant rights and interests. He acknowledged that coercive expropriation and the occupation of peasants' contracted land at low prices were worsening trends in many areas, along with such practices as the retention and withholding of peasants' compensation and resettlement funds and the lack of job placement for those who lost their land

[Yao, 2004: 1]. Issues of this type sparked huge demonstrations in Sichuan in 2004, in the largest of which 100,000 protestors reportedly clashed with 10,000 police [Saiget, 2004: 1].

Since the late 1990s increases in the number and scale of risings have also produced what may be termed the darker underside of the central government's new strategic line: namely, greater suppression and control. In early 1999 President Jiang Zemin announced that, in addition to peasants' interests and rights, he was making 'order in the countryside' one of Beijing's top priorities ['Public Security Organs', 1999]. Producing an escalating web of violence that reached to religious groups such as the Falonggong, urban democracy advocates, and protesting workers, this 'priority' actually meant greater state repression and crackdown, including the more frequent use of armed police, troops, and tear gas, more arrests, and heavier prison sentences for protest leaders ['Five Thousand PRC Farmers', 1999: 1; Holland, 1999a: 10; 'More Than 60,000', 2001: 1; Tillou, 1999: 19A]. His more 'caring' image notwithstanding, Jiang Zemin's successor Hu Jintao has taken an even harder line. Arrests and intimidation have steadily increased, and new sophisticated suppression techniques have been adopted, such as 'snatch squads' to apprehend protest leaders [Armitage, 2004: 12; Manthorpe, 2004: A7].

The arrests have included leaders of dissident organizations such as the Southwestern Yangzi Column of the Anti-corruption Army mentioned above, who were charged with subverting the state [Holland, 1999a: 10]. Revealing the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leadership's extreme sensitivity about the issue of rural protest, they have also even extended to citizens who release information to the media about the rural situation.³⁰ In 2004, in an attempt to keep news of public unrest from spreading, the authorities imposed a media blackout on the largest and many of the smaller risings, protests, and work strikes. Yet the internet, mobile phones, and short messaging are making it impossible to keep the situation under wraps.

Moreover, as Hong Kong-based human rights organizations note, as long as efforts of the Chinese state to crack down on instability fail to address the root causes of social issues, they will in all likelihood only delay larger social unrest. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of the 20-year rural movement, 'larger social unrest' has been steadily building. According to a Foreign Broadcast Information Report, in 2004 the number of 'civil disturbances' involving land disputes and 'antigovernment' protests totaled 292,729, or almost three times the number for 1998 ['Highlights: PRC Civil Disturbances', 2004].

ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

As should be clear from the above, in China the development of gangster capitalism has generated intense agrarian conflict of an almost classic variety.

Assuming the contours of a social movement, the class character of this conflict confronts and contradicts much of the theorization about classless 'new' social movements as *the* form of struggle in the contemporary globally capitalist world. On the other hand, it will not do to view this movement simply as an oppositional reaction to the agents and processes that have been economically disadvantaging peasants and attempting to dispossess them of an effective political voice. The data strongly suggest that radical alternative visions and narratives rooted in non-capitalist understandings of the world have also been structuring and fuelling its development. In the remainder of this article I will consider briefly three of these underlying narratives: historical/nationalist, socialist, and a critique of urban-centered development plus a new assertion of 'peasantness'.

The Historical/Nationalist Narrative

To a considerable degree, the protests of the present are rooted in and extend the history of peasant politics in China. At the most obvious level, from tactics such as *baohu* (revenge) and endemic tax resistance to the appearance of secret societies and massively popular heterodox religions such as the Falungong, the peasant politics of the last two decades have been revitalizing an older repertoire of protest and intertwining with sociocultural phenomena commonly associated with rural social movements of the past.

Clearly, as well, peasants today not only retain a long historical memory of their struggles, but also often *explicitly* situate their current opposition within that very long history. In 1993, to cite one example, when top officials made a series of secret speeches to delegates of the National People's Congress, Wan Li, one of China's original revolutionary leaders, reportedly said: 'When conducting investigations and studies in the countryside a party member asked a peasant what they needed. The peasant replied: "We need nothing but Chen Sheng and Wu Guang"' [Goodspeed, 1993: F2]. The peasant's reference was to two of the leaders in the peasant uprising that toppled the Qin state in the 3rd century B.C.!

The simultaneous outbreak of local struggles throughout China and, in the last analysis, their articulation as a unified discourse further compels us, I suggest, to situate the current movement within the history of what I have referred to elsewhere as an alternative peasant nation [Walker, 1999]. I will not reiterate that entire argument here, but I will note that my conceptualization of it stems from a glaring paradox in the study of Chinese peasant politics: namely, the gap separating, on the one hand, standard scholarly assessments of peasant politics as only localized and parochial and, on the other, the compelling contradictory evidence of political cultures and unified peasant narratives that at key moments in Chinese history – though largely expressed in local struggles – developed *simultaneously* on a trans-regional and even national scale.

This alternative history appears to have first assumed definitive form in the late Ming (1368–1644) in the context of a radical social movement and the formation of a distinct subaltern culture of national proportion [Walker, 1999]. Informed by a vision of community based on the premise of equality, its narratives underpinned the widespread local struggles through which peasants broke the back of the servile labour system, and then further eroded patriarchal landlord power by altering the contours of the property system. It surfaced again in full force during the militant agrarian movement of the first two decades of the twentieth century *before* communists appeared on the rural scene. In that movement, at once extending and reformulating the older developmental line, peasants elaborated a mass critique of modernity and combined the ideals of a radical social programme with opposition to what they viewed as a fraudulent and illegitimate Republican state. Although not articulated as such, their protests raised the issues of the meaning of the nation and the form it was going to take, while questions of social and economic justice, community, cultural autonomy, and legitimacy emerged at the center of that debate. I suggest that what we are witnessing now is yet another – perhaps pivotal – chapter in the history and reconstitution of this oblique peasant nation and the egalitarian imaginings which inform it.³¹

The Socialist Narrative

Flanking the older historical line, there are of course distinctly new elements in recent peasant politics that must be considered, including the degree to which three decades of socialist experience may have left, as Elizabeth Perry puts it ‘a visible imprint on the mentality of today’s peasantry’ [Perry, 1994: 81]. Contemplating this socialist legacy enables us to understand how, largely under the rubric of anti-corruption, older peasant concerns are being reinvented in new narratives about community, distributive rights, and revolutionary socialism.

This legacy is often clearly discernible in ‘policy-based resistance.’ To be sure, such resistance has long formed part of the repertoire of peasant protest. In the late Qing, for instance, through the tactic of ‘reporting a poor harvest’ in their dealings with the state, peasants appropriated the grounds on which landlords had always argued for tax relief to achieve rent reductions [Walker, 1999: 167–8, 184]. During the early phases of the revolution, as Mao Zedong [1971] noted, peasants tactically raised the issue of ‘accountability’ to at once expose corruption and the misuse of public funds, and to knock down ‘local tyrants and evil gentry’ from their positions.

As noted, accountability and policy-based resistance have reappeared in the present as a means of countering the abuses of gangster capitalists by making state functionaries confront official policies and rhetoric. This type of resistance requires a sophisticated, up-to-date understanding of current

government policies [Li and O'Brien, 1996]. Hence the importance of publications such as *Peasants' Friend*, an official pamphlet containing a collection of central government documents on rural taxes. In the year 2000, for example, in one of the largest collective actions to date, 20,000 peasants in the Yuandu area of southern Jiangxi rose in violent protest when local officials prohibited distribution of copies of the pamphlet ['Chinese Police', 2000: 1–2].³² But precisely because the contemporary Chinese state continues to retain a modicum of socialist rhetoric, policy-based resistance can likewise function as a platform for raising issues of socialism. As such, it is as much a tactic for keeping revolutionary socialist ideals alive and forcing the state *at all levels* to confront those ideals as it is for exposing corruption, resisting taxes, or protesting other changes associated with the post-socialist path.

Thus in the early 1990s, when the state moved towards the full marketization of grain, protestors used the rationale that China was still a socialist society to demand 'market protection' (*shichang baohu*). They called on authorities to intervene in the market when the price of grain and cotton fell below the costs of inputs [Bernstein, 1994: 15]. A similar rationale was used when they called for the allocation of TVE jobs on an equitable household basis, claiming that this was a matter of (socialist) 'right.' They claimed that such equitable allocation was preferable to the new (post-socialist) policy of bilateral negotiation, 'in which resources such as personal relations and the ability to bribe or bring investments into the enterprise might play a role' [Bernstein, 1994: 53].

Often protestors have simply used common political slogans of the Maoist/socialist years (1949–76). In using such 'outdated' and 'discredited' slogans in lieu of the market-oriented rhetoric now favored by the regime, they at once foreground their opposition and speak to a different morality. Thus, for example, they charge objectionable local officials or cadres with 'suppressing the masses' or 'harboring an evildoer'; with failing to be 'clean, fair, and willing to "serve the people"'; with being 'morally lacking' or 'inauthentic' party members; or with having 'undemocratic work-styles' [Li and O'Brien, 1996: 31, 44–7]. Some even employ the now completely (regime-) discredited 'Four Greats' of the Cultural Revolution (speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, writing big-character posters) or the party's principle of 'mass line democracy,' which dates back to the revolutionary era and is primarily associated with Mao Zedong [1971: 46].

The use of these narrative tactics has coincided with a developing popular counter-remembrance of the Maoist period as a time when there were greater social guarantees, and when peasants wielded more power and there was wider democracy in the sense of cadres being accountable to the people. In this sense, in the rural protests the ideas of socialism, democracy, and peasant

power are closely intertwined.³³ Furthermore, precisely because the highest levels of authority cannot be openly criticized without severe punishment, these narrative tactics enable peasants to express generalized discontent with post-socialist policies, especially the demise of collective agriculture and the forced implementation of the household responsibility system. In the eyes of many peasants this system has imposed a new relationship of dependency on the state, or as one man put it, a situation in which there are 'very few rights in exchange for a great many duties' [Beller-Hahn, 1997: 92].

A continuing socialist vision, and the fact that it resonates with renewed concern in the countryside about issues of community and social justice, is also connected to the resurgent popularity of Mao Zedong and his widespread popular adoption as a talisman. Accordingly, participants in protests and risings have sometimes punctuated their anti-corruption speeches and slogans with shouts of 'Long Live Mao' [Bernstein, 1994: 66].³⁴

Along with older peasant ideas of community and equality the socialist imprint is suggested as well in the slogans of the protest movement, particularly over the last few years. 'Return land and property to the peasants,' 'Divide the wealth of the new local despots in the countryside,' and 'End the exploitation and oppression of the peasant class' illustrate the point [Li Zijiang, 1997; Thornton, 2004: 98]. Contemporary popular epithets that often reveal an immense public indignation at social unfairness also bear the socialist imprint. As one goes:

For forty-some years, ever more perspiration,
And we just circle back to before Liberation;
And speaking again of that big revolution,
Who, after all, was it for? [Liu and Link, 1998: 25]

The Critique of Urban-Centered Development and New Assertions of 'Peasantness'

A third prominent narrative in the recent struggles concerns the rural – urban divide. It has produced new political and cultural assertions of what might be best termed 'peasantness.' Through these assertions peasants explicitly reject the post-socialist state's privileging of city over countryside, the exploitation of rural areas for urban-oriented development, and the anti-peasant contours of capitalist modernization.

This narrative line first surfaced after 1985, when increases in urban incomes began to rush ahead of those in rural areas. Reports from the countryside indicated that tensions were rising steadily, prompted by the peasants' realization that China's booming economy was 'sending salaries surging in the cities but only raising prices, taxes, and fees in the countryside.' In short,

they had begun to understand that they were being 'left behind in the rush to get rich' [*Goodspeed*, 1993: F2; *Poole*, 1993: 10].

Rural advocates replicated and extended the critique that was developing among peasants of the post-socialist state and its anti-peasant, urban-centered policies. Deputies to the National People's Congress, which in the 1980s assumed some quasi-representational qualities [*O'Brien*, 1990], formed one source of advocacy. A sizeable number of the delegates were from rural areas, and by the time of the 1988 congress meetings they defended 'in exceptionally loud voices' agricultural and peasant interests, raising such issues as the decline of central government investment in agriculture, the IOUs, and so forth. Newspapers such as the Peasants' Daily (*Nongming Ribao*) also contributed to the discourse. As an official organ, the daily generally reinforced the 'backward peasant' ideology and image of peasants as people who someone else needed to develop. But precisely because it provided a platform for peasant grievances, it also advanced the peasant critique (as, for example, in such editorials as 'Agriculture Must Be Put Into a Protected Position' and 'Make a Strategic Decision Against Urban Bias') [*Bernstein*, 1994: 33–4].

Temporary contract workers and 'floating' rural migrants, many of whom move back and forth between countryside and city, have deepened this discourse. In the cities they are relegated in racist fashion to shanty-town ghettos, and are frequently both discriminated against by more affluent urban residents and blamed for the social ills created by the market [*Chan*, 1998]. They thus have feelings of unfairness and anger over the blatant inequalities they are forced to confront, feelings which, in turn, they have directed against the permanent populations of the cities [*Solinger*, 1999: 283]. As one rural migrant summarizes:

In the city, some people basically don't consider us to be people. They treat us as a thing... We all appeal: the whole society shouldn't discriminate against peasant workers! Don't look down on country people! [*Solinger*, 1999: 283]

And as a journalist comments:

The peasants and semi-peasants who enter the city feel comparatively deprived by the tightly locked city walls. Peasants coming in want to enjoy this fat meat with city people... But... after entering the city, they feel 'The more you city people look down on me, the more I oppose you'. [*Solinger*, 1999: 283]

The peasants' critique of urban centered development and bias has surfaced in various arenas of the protest movement. Its greatest prominence

has been in collective actions involving the intersecting issues of corruption, neglect of public works, and state policy toward flood control. Along with its more explicitly economic features, the systemic corruption associated with gangster capitalism has resulted in widespread mismanagement and neglect of waterworks systems, including shoddy workmanship in the repair of dikes and other components of waterworks. Accordingly, in the perspective of many rural dwellers the collapse of dikes and flood protection stands as a barometer of official corruption. They argue that corruption not only underlay but to a significant degree also caused the massive flooding that occurred in China during the 1990s, especially in 1998 and 1999 [Lam, 1999: 17; 'Rights Group Says', 2000: 1–2].

Rural protestors have also been highly critical of the Chinese state's response to the problem of flooding – a response that has generally reflected its position that in times of trouble the cities must prevail. That critique reached its crescendo in 1998, when in response to massive flooding of the Yangzi state authorities blew up dikes and sacrificed the countryside in order to protect the cities. At least 4,000 rural residents perished, and the cost of the damage reached US\$25 billion ['Chang Jiang Dikes Burst.', 1999; 'Disasters Hit', 1999; 'Dissident Lin Xinshu', 1998; Goh, 1998: 20; Lam, 1998: 17; 'Official Says Flood-swollen', 1999]. In reaction, peasants in the affected areas of Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Hunan Provinces engaged in at least 130 incidents of violent uprising involving the sacking of state warehouses, the burning of vehicles and buildings, and attacks on and occupations of government offices [Liu and Link, 1998: 25]. Those risings represented a precise peasant analysis and rejection of the post-socialist state's deprivileging of rural China.

The reaction of peasants to state policies during the SARS epidemic of early 2003 is another case in point. Rural inhabitants of villages in Hebei, Zhejiang, and Henan adopted 'self-protection' measures when authorities attempted to establish quarantine camps for urban SARS victims in their locality. Many villages set up inspection posts at entrances to the village so as to prevent outsiders from entering, and when authorities attempted to do so violent confrontations often ensued. In the peasants' perception the camps were simply another illustration of the post-socialist regime's anti-peasant stance and of the common understanding among them that 'whenever a problem breaks out in the cities, the price is always passed onto the peasants in all sorts of ways' [Zheng Yongnian, 2003].

Adding another dimension to this narrative line, peasants have likewise opposed the regime's privileging of the urban through new expressions of cultural contestation. One of the clearest insights into this form of contention comes from the anthropologist Andrew Kipnis [1995]. His field work in rural Shandong reveals how peasants turned the ideology of 'peasant

backwardness' on its head by arguing, in essence, that they were the repository and inheritors of both the nation and its traditions. Through ritual, etiquette, and preferences in style and taste, they subversively asserted their 'peasantness' against urban-oriented modernity and those in the villages who supported it. Taking cultural warfare to a new level, they even prohibited the 'inauthentic' from assuming positions of ritual leadership within the village community.

Thus, by linking the class conflicts of post-socialism and gangster capitalism in a unitary cultural idiom, they claimed for themselves a position of autonomous authority and worth. As such, by bringing their own history and interests to the engagement with global capitalism in localized form, they have not only subverted and explicitly rejected the modernist teleology characterizing peasants as inferior and belonging to a different time, but have given notice that the terms are and will be 'town *and* country.' Protesters in different parts of the country who have advanced slogans such as 'Long live the unity of the peasant class' [Thornton, 2004] and 'Down with the urban bureaucratic exploiting class' [Li Zijing, 1997] send a similar message. The following verse from *The Peasant Cries*, a taped collection of poems that the government banned in 1996 because of its frank expressions of peasant grievances, reiterates these notions of 'peasantness':

We are the most numerous of the whole population,
We are the peasants, the masters of mother earth,
We are the guarantors of everyone's food and wealth,
We are the hard workers of earth. [Beller-Hahn, 1997: 93]

CONCLUSION

Over the last quarter of a century as neoliberal structural adjustment has gained sway in many parts of the world, radical popular politics and social movements have often been captured, contained, defused, or destroyed.³⁵ Most recently, however, the intensifying contradictions of imperialist globalization and state-related violence have begun to generate a resurgence of radical politics, particularly in rural areas.³⁶

Forming part of this global resurgence, the peasant protests and politics outlined above provide insight into the way in which in China a predatory gangster capitalism, local cultures and histories, and the legacies of socialism are generating new expressions of class and national consciousness. The degree to which the more 'caring' leadership of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao may be able to defuse the rural movement remains to be seen. But at least for the moment, radical alternative visions and resistance are very much alive and well in China.

NOTES

- 1 I borrow the term 'gangster capitalism' from Nancy Holstrum and Richard Smith [2000] who first used it in their comparative analysis of post-socialist China and Russia.
- 2 From 1981 to 1991 annual average growth stood at 10 percent and from 1991 until 1995 at 12 percent, after which it dropped to about 7 percent [*Liu and Link*, 1998: 17]. Paralleling this growth, average personal incomes tripled in the 1980s and then doubled again in the first half of the 1990s [*ibid.*]
- 3 This policy, known as the 'Household Responsibility System,' was first introduced in 1978 on a voluntary basis, but when many communes opted to maintain their collective structure instead of privatizing, the government, in 1980, made disbandment compulsory. Under this pressure, by 1983 only about 2 percent of rural production remained truly collective [*Hart-Landsberg and Burkett*, 2004: 34].
- 4 Several factors contributed to this contraction and reversal: first, the immediate gains stemming from the return to labor-intensive family farming could not be sustained; second, the state lowered procurement prices for quota commodities while input prices rose; and third, many TVEs, the profits from which were supposed to help subsidize agriculture, fell victim to de facto private ownership, extortion, over-taxation, embezzlement, and other forms of corruption engaged in by local officials; in the case of joint ventures, control by foreign capital also became commonplace [*Greenfield and Leong*, 1997: 107–8; *Hart-Landsberg and Burkett*, 2004: 34; 40].
- 5 By 2000, according to government statistics, fully 230 million of China's 900 million rural dwellers were attempting to survive on annual incomes of 950 yuan or less; that figure represents less than one-third of the international poverty standard of a per capita annual income of 3,000 yuan [*Li Congguo*, 2003: 2].
- 6 The 'ideology of peasant backwardness' has thus underpinned the claims of new capitalist elites, modernist intellectuals, and post-socialist state functionaries to an inherently superior, privileged position in national economic, political, and cultural life [*Cohen*, 1993: 155; *Zheng*, 1999]. As such, it resembles closely the nationalist discourses of elites in early twentieth-century China (on the early anti-peasant discourse, see, for example, Walker [1999] and Cohen [1993]). Along with state spokespersons and agencies, popular urban and intellectual writings have helped to frame and disseminate the contemporary discourse. Some of these writings contend that China's stagnation in the feudal stage of history was due precisely to 'peasant backwardness.' Others suggest that the poorer rural areas of China are still underdeveloped because the 'feudal consciousness' of the peasants prevents proper market mechanisms from working [*Cohen*, 1993: 166; *Kipnis*, 1995: 119]. Thus according to one popular television series of the 1990s:

In the vast backward rural areas, there are common problems in the peasant make-up such as a weak spirit of enterprise, a very low ability to accept risk, a deep psychology of dependency and a strong sense of passive acceptance of fate. No wonder that some scholars sigh with regret: faced with the [psychological] make-up of people such as this... even if a great economist like Keynes were to come back to life, what could he do about it? It's not the lack of resources, nor the level of GNP, nor the speed [of development], but rather this deficiency in the human make-up that is the essence of... 'backwardness.' And the decline of the make-up of the general population is caused precisely by the rapid increases in its numbers. This truly is an agricultural civilization caught in a vicious cycle. Do we still have any reason to praise or to be infatuated with it [*Bodman and Wan*, 1991: 169–70]?

- 7 In this article I have focused on internal developments, but clearly global capitalism has both provided the framework for and to a significant degree shaped those developments. This process has involved not only the fusion of local and foreign capital interests; the state itself has been transformed by its drive to attract foreign capital. The relationship between the TVEs and foreign capital is one illustration. Proponents of market socialism usually assume that the interests of foreign capital cannot determine the conditions of production and distribution in enterprises such as TVEs. In point of fact, however, as Gerard Greenfield and

- Apo Leong [1997: 108] outline, most joint ventures between TVEs and foreign capital have boards of directors on which the foreign partner is dominant, or they are based on agreements that grant strategic control to foreign capital. Local political authorities, including the local party secretary, also often derive a direct income from joint ventures, thereby guaranteeing a partnership of interest between the local state and foreign capital [Greenfield and Leong, 1997: 108]. Aside from the direct linkages of joint ventures and subcontracting, local governments have also restructured to facilitate the influx and expansion of foreign capital. From the late 1980s on, this restructuring frequently involved the confiscation or buying up at low prices of farmland and its conversion into industrial use – a process that, as our examination will highlight, at once contributed to the rise of a rural protest movement and deepening of rural poverty [Hart-Landsberg and Burkett, 2004: 39]. Thus for the Beijing authorities, as Arif Dirlik [1994: 59] suggests, 'the recognition of the local in marketing strategy does not mean any serious acknowledgement of the autonomy of the local but is intended only to incorporate localities into the imperatives of the global'.
- 8 He Qinglian's book *Zhongguo de xianjing* was first published in Hong Kong in 1996 and reissued in Beijing in 1998 under the title *Zhongguo xiandai hua de xianjing*. It has been translated under the title *China's Descent into a Quagmire* in four separate issues of *The Chinese Economy* (see He Qinglian [2000; 2001a; 2001b; and 2002]). Liu Binyan and Perry Link [1998] have also authored an excellent review of the book, the title of which they translate as *China's Pitfall*. They speculate that Chinese leaders permitted its publication because of their need – in the face of growing popular unrest – to disassociate themselves from corruption and related trends.
 - 9 He Qinglian provides a number of illustrations of how the embezzlement of state property occurred, including, for example, local cadres giving away as gifts to government officials so-called power shares (*quanli gu*), in return for their willingness to authorize the formation of a shareholding company in order to make cheap land and materials available [He Qinglian, 2000: 45].
 - 10 He Qinglian argues that personal fortunes were easily made with only minimal capital investment, a process popularly referred to as 'going from nothing to something' (*yi wu bo you*). As she states: 'The process was simple: find some government officials with the appropriate power and decision-making authority, acquire the 'red-lined map' by making the necessary bribes, and then approach officials from the finance sector and make additional bribes so as to secure the loans to finalize the deal. In no time flat, these people became fabulously wealthy, simply by relying on relatively small-time tricks and tactics' [He Qinglian, 2000: 81–2]. In the case of acquiring a tract of rural land for gain (i.e., the 'red-lined map'), typically all personnel in the administrative hierarchy were bribed – from the village cadres and land managers to the appropriate authorities at the district, township, county, and municipal levels, and in construction bureaus [He Qinglian, 2000: 64].
 - 11 At the close of 2004 Merrill Lynch estimated that there were 236,000 millionaires (in terms of U. S. dollars) in China – more than in Russia and India combined [Barboza, 205: 1].
 - 12 The rate of exchange is 1 Yuan = 0.12 US\$ (or US\$1 = 8.05 Yuan).
 - 13 Deng's public pronouncements, as Liu Binyan and Perry Link so aptly note, 'led virtually every official, government office, . . . and organization in China to "jump into the sea" and try to make money . . . the most lucrative means [of which] were usually exploitative or illicit' [Liu and Link, 1998: 18; see also Chu, 1999a: A1].
 - 14 He Qinglian cites a variety of means through which this transfer of ownership was effected (see, especially, He Qinglian [2001a: 33–43]). In many cases fallacious mergers and/or fake bankruptcies were executed so as to free the newly established firms from the accumulated debts of the older ones. In this organizational shell game, as she explains, 'all outstanding debts and obligations were retained by the original state-owned enterprise, while the new "reorganized" firm inherited the productive assets, technical know-how, and skilled labor, avoiding both debt payments and the start-up costs of forming a completely new enterprise' [He Qinglian, 2001a: 10].
 - 15 Because Chinese banks announce only part of their bad debt publicly it is difficult to determine the actual figure for non-performing debts. In 2003 the rating service Standard &

- Poor estimated that 50 percent of all loans outstanding from China's banks are non-performing, roughly equivalent to US\$500 billion. The service also estimated that based on the pace of reforms, it could take the banks more than two decades to reduce their bad-debt levels to about 5 percent – a figure that would still be above the preferred 3 percent or lower ['Banks Sink Deeper', 2003: 24].
- 16 It is really only in the context of this financial quagmire that China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 – and with it the possibility of financial bailout from advanced capitalist partners – can be fully comprehended. In 2003, for example, the state-run China Construction Bank finalized an agreement with the U.S. investment bank Morgan Stanley to set up an asset-management joint venture to handle 4.3 billion *renminbi* (US\$519.3 million) of the Chinese bank's nonperforming loans (this agreement extended the range of asset-management companies that had been established in 1998–99 to dispose of 1.4 trillion *renminbi* in non-performing loans) ['China Briefing: Bad Loans', 2003: 26; *Shih*, 2004: 939–42]. Adding to the Construction Banks problems, in 2003, as well, China's National Audit Office uncovered a 1 billion *renminbi* (US\$120 million) fraud case in the mortgage-lending business of the bank ['Banks Sink Deeper', 2003: 24].
 - 17 In 1978 the traditional statistical measure of the gap between rich and poor, known as the Gini coefficient, was 0.16 for China – the lowest in the world. As early as 1994 it had already moved to 0.445 for China's urban areas and townships, which placed these areas well above the international average of 0.3 to 0.4 [*He Qinglian*, 2001b: 43]. The 1994 figures reflected the growing divide between urban and rural areas. Statistics released in January 2005 show that China now also has one of the biggest urban-rural divides in the world, with urban incomes averaging 3.2 times those in the countryside [*Kahn*, 2005: 3].
 - 18 The urban/industrial actions include a reported 135,000 labour disputes in 1994; 25,000 strikes involving 450,000 workers in 1995; and by 2004, 224,715 'civil disturbances.' Some have involved large numbers of participants, such as the demonstration by 40,000 miners and their families in 1996 and the massive protest of tens of thousands of former oil industry employees in Heilongjiang Province in 2002 [*Albright and Kunstel*, 1999: A11; *Greenfield and Leong*, 1997: 97; 115; 'Highlights: PRC Civil Disturbances', 2004.12.23; *Weston*, 2004: 67].
 - 19 Given this situation, not infrequently hundreds or even thousands of petitioners from various parts of the country have converged outside the offices of state authorities in Beijing. By late 2004, viewing the problem as having become acute, the central government established a new committee to deflect petitions back to lower administrative levels and, thereby, steer petitioners away from Beijing [*Cai*, 2004.12.3].
 - 20 In a pattern that is strongly reminiscent of the early Republican state, fees and taxes have been imposed for just about everything: buying pigs, selling pigs, building new roads, removing old roads, on the land, on the right to water the land, etc. In many instances, no reasons have been given, just lump-sum amounts listed as a 'farming tax' or some other vague designation [*Chu*, 1999b: A1].
 - 21 On the other hand, there is also ample evidence of cadre participation in a large number of incidents and risings, that is, of 'non-corrupted' cadres whose outlook and worldview still resonate or coincide with that of the protestors. See, for example, Bernstein [1994: 63–4], Thornton [2004], and Zweig [1986: 3].
 - 22 See below for further discussion.
 - 23 In 1993 Qiao Shi, chair of the National People's Congress, cited, for example, the growing influence of one 'peasant emperor' in Hubei who had gained the allegiance of peasants from four surrounding villages (presumably those comprising the local township) ['Rural unrest', 1993: 6].
 - 24 Thomas Bernstein makes a similar point. He suggests as well that the coordination and outbreak of simultaneous protests stretches the government's ability to handle or control them [*Bernstein*, 2000: 108].
 - 25 Following a slow start, in the 1990s both peasant interest in and the quality of village elections appears to have increased (for discussion, see O'Brien [2001: 418–19], Shi [1999: 394, 402], and Unger [2002: 218–22]). At the same time, complaints from villagers to higher authorities about abridgements of their electoral rights increased [*Shi*, 1999: 403–4].

- Especially after the revision of the Organic Law, the election process also appears to have surfaced more frequently as a protest issue. To cite one example, in January 1999 some 1,000 people from Leibei village in northern Shaanxi Province demonstrated to protest that local elections were dominated by party officials ['One Thousand Protest', 1999].
- 26 The actual tax is calculated at 7 percent of household yields but village governments are allowed to levy an additional 1.4 percent to help fund village services, bringing the total tax to 8.4 percent. Planners calculated that since many rural households now also have nonfarm income, the average tax burden would be at or below 5 percent of total household income, thus keeping the new tax in line with the previous 5 percent limit. But for families who derive all of their income from farming – typically the poorest in a village – the tax is discriminatory [Unger, 2002: 216–17].
 - 27 One associated consequence of the rise of gangster capitalism and the possibilities for enrichment that bureaucratic position affords has been a rapid increase in the size of local administrations. In Qipan township, a former commune in Hebei Province, to cite a typical example, the number of officials tripled from 1990 to 2000, reaching a total of 340 [Smith, 2000: 16].
 - 28 A case in point was the sacking in September, 2002 of the municipal building in Yizhou, Guangxi by 5–6,000 sugarcane peasants. They were protesting the local authorities' policies and the sugar factories' failure to pay the arrears owed to them. According to local and external sources, contradictions had been building for some time between peasants who grew sugarcane and the sugar production department, mainly because the sugar production factories failed to pay the peasants on time or purchased sugarcane from them at very low prices. In 2002, for example, the Boqing Food Shareholding Company, a joint-venture sugar extraction factory set up by the largest state-owned enterprise in Yizhou and a British company, only paid the growers 180 *yuan* per ton, which was far lower than the 200–400 *yuan* originally promised them. The Yizhou city government also introduced a new policy stipulating that growers could only sell their sugarcane to the city's sugar factories and forbidding them from selling to factories outside the city. Violators were required to pay fines or have their sugarcane saplings confiscated. Clearly benefiting local factories, such as Boqing, the policy set the stage for the peasants' assault on the city government building. It also typifies gangster capitalist activity in the sense that the president of the Boqing company was also the mayor of Yizhou ['Guangxi's Yizhou City', 2002: 1].
 - 29 Experts estimate that at least 70 million peasants have lost their land in the last decade, and they expect that number to rise to above 100 million [Yardley, 2004]. For a more detailed discussion of the expropriation of peasants' land, see Walker [2005].
 - 30 Hunan labor activist Zhang Shanguang, to cite but one example, was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for subversion after giving an interview to a foreign radio station about the plight of China's peasants ['Dissident Speaks', 1999: 1; 'Ex-Policeman Jailed', 1999: 1].
 - 31 Western scholars who have analyzed recent peasant politics have mostly ignored this history. Contributing to the 'farmer' construct – an ideologically-charged terminological transformation of contemporary peasants into market-oriented 'farmers' that now predominates in China scholarship – they not only disregard the continuities with the past, but turn the current peasant struggles into something entirely new: an emergent, unprecedented form of civil society or nascent citizenship. Modernization-oriented analyses of this sort thus reinforce the view of peasants (or 'farmers') as people who belong to another time and are just beginning to 'enter the modern world'.
 - 32 The rising was also stirred by poor harvests in the area and building resentment among local residents at the hard line tactics officials used to collect taxes, including demolishing the homes of those who refused to pay taxes and fees that were above the official government rate. Protestors ransacked the Yuandu government building and later beat officials and smashed up their homes before being quelled by 2,000 riot police. One peasant was killed and over 100 were injured ['Chinese Police Maintain', 2000: 1–2; see also Smith, 2000].
 - 33 This peasant-based interpretation of democracy (*minzhu*) clearly corresponds more closely to the vision advanced in the 1978–79 worker-based democracy movement than to that of 'elitist' students in 1989 – many of whom, as ample evidence now shows, excluded peasants from their vision and were horrified at the prospect of a political democracy in which China's

rural millions might have the right to vote [*Guang*, 1996: 439–40; *Perry*, 1994: 79–80]. Against such elitist ideas, the worker-based conception of ‘socialist democracy’ combined notions of economic egalitarianism, popular control over the allocation of resources and management of the production process, and popular management of state affairs through the election of representatives and supervision of leaders at various levels [*Guang*, 1996: 430–31, 438–9]. As one worker put it, ‘We not only need political *minzhu*, but economic *minzhu* and *minzhu* in the production process’ [*Guang*, 1996: 438].

- 34 Similarly, in their protests workers have both raised the issue of revolutionary and socialist ideals and pointed to Mao as a pivotal symbol of those ideals. In the retrenched workers’ demonstrations of 2002 in Heilongjiang Province, for example, protesters marched through the streets carrying posters of Mao and distributed a leaflet entitled ‘Retrenched workers cherish the memory of Mao Zedong.’ ‘By wielding language, slogans, and iconography from what were to them the far brighter days of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s,’ as Timothy Weston [2004: 67; 69] notes of the workers’ protests, ‘these victims of China’s market-oriented reforms challenged the Communist Party on emotionally resonant historical grounds’.
- 35 See, for example, the study by Edelman [1999] which documents the de-radicalization of the peasant movement in Costa Rica and its transformation ‘from protest to petition.’
- 36 See, for example, the review by Petras and Veltmeyer [2001: 103–10] of agrarian movements in Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, and Mexico, and the volume about Chiapas edited by Washbrook [2005].

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