



## Cao Jinqing, China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society

New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2005, 254 p.

**Claude Aubert**

Translator: Philip Liddell

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/1039>  
ISSN: 1996-4617

**Publisher**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 July 2006  
ISSN: 2070-3449

**Electronic reference**

Claude Aubert, « Cao Jinqing, China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society », *China Perspectives* [Online], 66 | July- August 2006, Online since 09 August 2012, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/1039>

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 This book is a partial translation of a Chinese best-seller published in September 2000<sup>1</sup>. It was one of the first in a series of books on rural China. They were very successful, and rightly so (one of the last being the famous *Report on the Chinese Peasants* by Chen Guili and Chun Tao<sup>2</sup>).
- 2 Unlike that report, and more journalistic in tone, the study by Cao Jinqing, who is a sociologist and university professor in Shanghai, takes the form of a simple travel journal. He notes day by day, even hour by hour, his encounters and the comments made to him. His observations have not been filtered; everything he heard is faithfully set down; the study breathes a priceless authenticity.
- 3 The part selected for translation is Cao's account of his second stay in Henan, from September to November 1996. Taking advantage of friends and colleagues at the Kaifeng Party School, he carried out an unofficial survey that took him to Kaifeng, and on to the deprived regions of that province traversed by the Yellow River, Zhumadian, Xinyang and Luoyang. His observations reflect the situation in that relatively poor countryside of the provinces in the Chinese interior, mostly deprived of rural enterprises.
- 4 Even so, in this survey, we hardly hear at all from the peasants. When a roadside interview leads to complaints that make his accompanying officials uneasy, the writer backs off. So what is offered to readers is not so much an immersion in village life as a

trip into the no less interesting world of the local bureaucracy, that of the districts (*xian*) and especially the townships where his contacts and sources were based.

- 5 The picture we are given of the countryside, as seen from the road, or deduced from the figures carefully noted down by the writer, is doubtless truthful and even accurate. The topography of the regions that he visited, the appearance of the villages, the farming activities (the sowing of winter wheat at that time of year) are scrupulously reported. And the diagnosis reached by our sociologist is set down alongside the familiar conclusions of his rural economist colleagues. In these over-populated villages (1/15 of a hectare, on average, is cultivated per head of population), the crops bring in just enough to pay for the seeds, feed the family and pay the taxes. Most of the available household cash is provided, in these circumstances, not by farming but by postal orders, sent home from migrant workers. And the writer has adopted a typological approach, in comparing the richness of villages and their inhabitants, based on the housing: adobe houses for the poorest, brick houses with tiled roofs for the average family, two-storey houses for the occasional *nouveau riche*. Cao takes particular care in noting building costs, in relation to peasant incomes: only households with non-farming incomes can afford a modern house: it represents the investment of an entire peasant lifetime.
- 6 The book is teeming with observations and anecdotes that will satisfy the ethnologist or the historian. Its main interest, however, lies elsewhere. Much of the text is made up of interviews that the writer conducted with a multitude of officials, ranging from Party secretaries at the village level to first secretaries at the *xian* level, by way of all levels of the administration and most of its offices. From this point of view the book is repetitive, each day offering new speakers usually speaking on the same subjects. But it is this very repetition that constitutes the charm of the exercise, each of these speakers adding their opinions, disclosing new aspects to problems that become gradually more familiar—and yet more complicated.
- 7 At the heart of the subjects treated and the problems raised lies the essential question of good governance in the Chinese countryside. This governance is in a sorry state, if we may judge by the situations of conflict that set the peasantry and local government at odds with each other. Behind all the grievances and the disputes, and posing the worst headaches for the officials is, of course, the peasants' tax burden. The figures provided by the writer support other surveys highlighting the extent of the problem<sup>3</sup>. Housing and service charges are from three to four times higher than the officially permitted ceiling. And they can reach more than 20% of the peasants' net income, sometimes draining away all their cash.
- 8 The local officials concerned, mainly those in the townships, generally acknowledge the facts, but attempt to justify themselves: most of the charges are their responsibility (teachers' pay and so on) whereas the profits from more lucrative activities are appropriated by the higher ranks in the bureaucracy. Cao takes his enquiry further, however: he tries to identify, by means of interwoven testimony, the logic that underlies the workings of the administration; and in so doing he questions the entire system of power in the countryside. It is an authoritarian system, one in which instructions handed down from higher authority take precedence over realities on the ground. The resulting aberrations are sometimes disastrous—forced cultivation of cotton, compulsory plantations of apple-trees—and they drive the peasants into destitution. It is an irresponsible system, one that the township officials either collude

in or are powerless to alter, their own careers depending on the achievement of fixed targets. In short, as the writer says, it is a system in which power belongs to those in power, and not to the people.

- 9 Above all else, it is a system that opens the way to endemic corruption. The burdens born by the peasants are matched by the unwieldy size of the local bureaucracies: in country areas deprived of other resources, a career in local government is the only way of acquiring some affluence. And climbing the ladder is stiffly competitive. The small perks claimed by the officials (and not necessarily the most corrupt among them) weigh heavily on the peasants' budgets: free meals for village officials, cars and accommodation for the higher ranks in township administration. Heavy expenditure on hospitality is the price paid for how the bureaucracy works. Inspection visits are endless in a system where rules and standards are ignored and must ceaselessly be supervised: to advance one's career, one must provide fitting entertainment for the inspectors. It is hardly surprising that karaoke evenings or dances should be regular events in local government hotels. At the same time, the peasants are brutally fleeced, by a diverse range of fines (for exceeding birth quotas, for instance), which swells the coffers of some offices.
- 10 The writer provides for us an unvarnished picture of this world. A latter-day *Candide* in the land of the bureaucrats, he often queries his own findings, asking disingenuous questions about the reasons for, and possible solutions to, various problems. And his account is punctuated with reflections, even with the lectures that he is frequently asked to give, on the nature of power in China, or on the loss of ethical standards. The reader too is left to follow his own enquiries, at the end of some particularly painful stories.
- 11 Professor Cao does have his prejudices, however, which he shares with many city intellectuals. In his view, Chinese peasants are still backward, imprisoned within clan and family networks, accustomed to social relationships that are incompatible with the modern exigencies of the market. Villagers seek private solutions to problems arising from legal matters or caused by collective organisations: such solutions are based on plying personal acquaintances with gifts (or bribes). Thus, from this perspective, the peasants are as much the accomplices as the victims of the extortions that predatory bureaucrats subject them to. Which reflects rather leniently on the responsibilities of the monolithic Communist Party, which specifically stifles the least whim of any autonomous organisation within the peasantry that might prove capable of defending its interests. On this subject, the introduction contributed to the book by the anthropologist Rachel Murphy (noted for a remarkable study on the effect of migration on villages in Jiangxi<sup>4</sup>) sets things straight. She shows, supported by studies of village life, that the traditional forms of sociability are not necessarily any obstacle to modernity, and that they are often the basis for a spirit and a capacity for enterprise that are well understood in the Chinese world.
- 12 Almost ten years have passed since Professor Cao carried out his research. Has the situation in the countryside changed, has the behaviour of local administrations altered much during this decade? One might doubt that they have, on reading the evidence that has accumulated over that period. Yet, the Chinese government seems to have grappled with the "countryside problem" by introducing extensive reforms in recent years. Within local government, these are aimed at cutting back drastically on staffing numbers, or even at merging the administration of the smaller townships. Reform of

rural taxation consisted at first of combining the various taxes and expenses into one single countryside tax. It had the explicit aim of abolishing this tax outright by 2006. Local government is to be compensated financially by direct grants from central and provincial government. Having read Cao's book, one can only be sceptical, given the extraordinary challenge that these reforms must pose to the system. Is there not a risk that they will force bankrupt administrations into adopting illegal practices, simply in order to survive? That is precisely what a township Party secretary disclosed, in his interview with the writer. He said he was unable to apply the directives imposed by central government, such as limiting the charges on peasants to 5% of their incomes. And he admitted having been forced to break the law, "to arrest people, to confiscate their cattle, demolish their homes and a thousand other illegal things" simply to meet the township's expenditure. For us to know more, we must hope that further studies will reveal the outcome of this fascinating story, the relationship between peasants and bureaucracy, as outlined in the present book.

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## NOTES

1. Cao Jinqing, *Huanghe bian de Zhongguo, yi ge xuezhe dui xiangcun shehui de guancha yu sikao*, Shanghai, Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000, 772 p.
2. Chen Guili, Chun Tao, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha*, Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004, 460 p.
3. Cf. The work by Li Changping in Hubei, in *Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua*, Beijing, Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2002, 366 p.
4. Rachel Murphy, *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 286 p.