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# Visit to a Rural Commune

## Felix Greene

Felix Greene is an experienced Anglo-American journalist who has visited China several times. This article is a chapter in Awakened China, his account of five months of travel in China in the summer and fall of 1960.

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## 17. *Visit to a Rural Commune*

### *Chengchow, Honan Province*

TODAY I went to a rural commune near this city, which lies in the Yellow River valley.

Honan Province has always been one of the poorest areas of China. Last night, when they asked me what kind of commune I wanted to see, I said, "Your worst." They didn't seem to resent this. The commune I saw today was, they said, the poorest within driving distance, and after seeing it I can believe it. So much for the story that visitors see only the show places.

We left at eight. They had a Russian car for me today, small but brand-new, and we drove out of Chengchow over a reasonably good dirt road. (They drive with more zip here and without that maddening habit of rushing ahead and then coasting, which the Peking drivers are convinced saves gas.) After half an hour we branched off and for another thirty minutes we bounced along a cart track. It was already hot. The sky was pale blue; there were no clouds.

Groups of peasants in wide straw hats were in the fields at work with hoes and rakes. Some were resting. The land here reminds me of parts of northern Spain, arid and barren, and the crops of wheat and millet looked sparse. The whole area has been badly hit by drought.

My interpreter told me this was the first time he had been in this part of China. It seems that there was no In-tourist interpreter in Chengchow and he had been sent from Wuhan to meet me. A foot infection held me up in Peking, and he's been hanging around for ten days waiting for me. He told me all this while we were lurching and

bumping over the cart track, I wildly clutching my precious Zeiss cameras and praying for the Bolex in the trunk.

Behind us we left a cloud of dust.

We came finally to a small village, with a faded banner strung across the street, and the car turned into a courtyard enclosed by low white-washed buildings. More flags and pictures and slogans painted across the walls. Mr. Chiao, the director of the commune, was waiting to greet us, and he invited us in for the usual preliminary talk over a cup of tea. The room he took us into was long and narrow, with a table and benches running the full length. This was the meeting room of the commune management committee. From the wall at one end Mao Tse-tung smiled benignly down at us; at the other were portraits of Liu Shao-chi, Chou En-lai, Chu Teh—the four heroes of the revolution. With Mr. Chiao were two others who accompanied us all day, but they left the talking to Mr. Chiao. Occasionally one or the other would bring out a notebook and record some question and answer. I never did learn quite what their function was; but I have become accustomed by now to these silent observers at my interviews.

As we sipped our tea Mr. Chiao gave me the background picture. The basic problems of this commune were poor land and difficult climate. There was constant alternation between flood and drought. Five rivers, all flowing finally into the Yellow River, cross the commune land. Before liberation no one bothered to tend the dikes or clean out the canals, which were constantly silting up. Only a small rise brought the rivers to flood stage. Eight inches of rainfall in a season meant certain inundation.

Crop yields had almost always been poor. A high grain harvest for the region would be 60 catties per *mu*, or *mou*. (Approximately 6.9 bushels per acre. More prosperous communes I visited were harvesting as much as 1,000 catties per *mu*—more than a hundred bushels per acre. By way of comparison, according to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1960*, American output in 1959 was 21.3 bushels of wheat per acre.) Some years there had been no crop at all. In 1942, for instance—a year which

the peasants still look back on with horror—during an autumn, winter, summer, and succeeding autumn no grain grew. More than two thousand families left the area to go and beg. Three hundred and twenty-seven people died of starvation in this immediate vicinity. Two hundred children were sold by families unable to feed them. People were eating the dry roots of grass and the bark of trees.

Most of the land was tenant farmed. The Communists arrived in October 1948, and plans for land reform were started almost immediately. This area went through the same general stages as most other sections of China—mutual-aid teams, early co-operative period, advanced co-operatives, and now, the people's commune. Even the advanced co-ops, Mr. Chiao felt, had been incapable of meeting basic agricultural needs. In the matter of water conservation, for example, those higher up the river might take too much, leaving those farther down with not enough. Or in floodtime some ill-considered action upstream could increase the flood level lower down. Also, the co-ops were too small to mechanize effectively. Tractors were scarce, and as they were under the control of central tractor stations, the co-ops had to apply in advance for them. In rush seasons tractors would arrive too early or too late.

When news of the Sputnik Commune spread across the country, peasants here at once began debating whether to form one of "these new communes." Everyone seemed in favor, representatives were sent to the county government to apply. The county approved and the commune was formally organized on August 17th, 1958.

The first thing they did was to tackle water conservation. Armed with picks and shovels, and carrying baskets, thousands of men and women, working after the autumn harvest and before spring sowing, had constructed five new reservoirs with storage capacity for 506 million gallons, as well as a network of drainage and irrigation canals. As much as twelve inches of rainfall now would not cause flooding, Mr. Chiao thought; and despite the serious drought conditions for the past two years, some crops have been saved.

"What is your current crop yield?" I asked.

"Poor. The drought now is just as bad as 1942. The last two hundred days of last year there was no real rain at all, just a few sprinkles, and this year [1960] not a single drop. The water level is really low. The irrigation ditches helped our crop last autumn, but this year we have had to replant some of our fields four times and each planting has dried up. We are carrying water by hand and we have laid temporary piping. The crop will be far below normal, much less than we had hoped for. But we shall have something. No one will starve. There will be no 1942."

I watched Mr. Chiao as he recited these facts. He was, I judged, about thirty-five. He had muscular arms and calloused hands. In shirt sleeves, elbows on the table, he looked straight across at me out of a tanned, weather-beaten face. Here was no city commissar. This man was from the land and part of the land. I could well understand why he had been elected to direct the commune.

"Come," he said. "I'd like to show you what we're doing."

We stepped out, shielding our eyes, into the blaze of mid-morning sunlight. Our driver had pulled the car into the shade of a nearby tree and was fast asleep. We woke him, piled in, and headed for the tractor station. Tractors, clearly, were one of Mr. Chiao's favorite topics. He told me the commune now owned thirty-five, in addition to four combine harvesters and fifty-one power machines, including some large pumps. At the tractor station we saw a repair shop equipped with several lathes, and mechanics at work on some dismantled machines. The tractors were lined up outside. I counted thirty-eight, plus five combines. Mr. Chiao apologized. He said he had given me last year's figures; recently they had bought three more tractors and another combine.

One of the tractors here was of Chinese manufacture, from the nearby works at Loyang. The rest were Czech or Bulgarian. When I asked about performance, Mr. Chiao said the Loyang and Czech were the best. The Chinese tractors have more power and can draw two combines, while the others draw one.

Into the car again, and as we drove Mr. Chiao contin-

ued to bombard me with information about the many activities of his commune. They manufacture paper and chemical fertilizer; bottle wine and vinegar; raise fish which they sell to nearby markets; they have several assembly shops associated with large state factories. They also have a brickworks and are under contract to supply two million bricks this year to the city of Chengchow. The commune owns 6,000 pigs. (There is a national "pig drive" this year, I learned, aimed at doubling China's pig population.) As to livestock, Mr. Chiao told me, the commune has 160 horses, 4,000 chickens and 1,500 ducks. When I said this seemed a surprisingly low figure (one chicken to every ten people) the director explained that *privately*-owned animals and poultry were not included in the figures he had given.

I asked if the members were allowed to keep their own chickens and ducks and to cultivate vegetable patches.

"They are not only allowed," he replied, "but encouraged. We have another drive on right now. [I had lost count of the drives.] We call it the 'Use-the-ten-edges campaign.' Use every little strip of land around you. The edge of the road, the edge of the river, the edge of the orchard. . . ."

At this point the car came to a halt in front of a new brick building—the ball-bearing plant—and we climbed out. Actually this was an assembly shop rather than a factory, the parts themselves being sent out from Chengchow. We saw some two hundred girls in blue overalls, seated at benches, and assembling various types of bearings to the accompaniment of music from a loudspeaker. I stopped by one bench where a girl—the prettiest of the lot—was bending over her work. She was so absorbed that she did not notice me till she heard the click of the camera. Then she looked up and broke into a delightful half-shy grin.

I asked her name.

"Shu Shao-yen," she said. (Shao-yen, the interpreter told me, means "swallow.")

"How old are you, Shu Shao-yen?"

"Eighteen."

"Can you read and write?"

"Yes—but I am still going to spare-time school to learn more characters."

"Do you like your work?"

"I like it. And that we can help, too."

"Help? How do you mean?"

"It helps our country," she said, "to build socialism."

The ball-bearing shop seemed quite up-to-date and efficient, which was not the case with the other industries we visited that day. Nevertheless, the one that fascinated me most was not the ball-bearing plant but a paper mill, because of its Robinson-Crusoe, do-it-yourself quality. Here was a series of homemade wooden machines booming and thumping away like the big wheel and little wheel in the spiritual, which ran by faith and the grace of God. But they *were* running, and while straw and leaves were pushed into a primitive pulping machine (powered by a donkey) at one end of the shed, but from the other end between two rollers made of logs jerked a ribbon of wet paper, the coarsest I had ever laid eyes on. However, intended for packaging, it was quite adequate.

No problem of modern mechanics, I thought, would long resist the ingenuity that turned his collection of barrel staves and tree trunks into a paper mill.

On the way back to commune headquarters I asked Mr. Chiao how much members were earning. He gave the figures for the commune's single complete year, 1959. The average cash wage was 6.80 yuan a month. Food, education, medical care, housing are free. The food distribution he estimated as 53 per cent of the total payment.

"Are you building new housing?" I asked.

Mr. Chiao said they were, but not very fast. During 1959 they had added eight hundred new rooms, a total of 140,000 square feet. (This would represent approximately 120 two-bedroom-size American housing tract homes, and there are 8,000 families in the commune, most of them still living in small huts and cottages.)

"There are so many things that have to come first," Mr. Chiao said.

It was good to pause for a while in the committee room, good to get out of the glare. We were parched, de-

hydrated, and soaked with sweat. As we sat down again at the long table a girl brought in tea, and cold wet towels with which we mopped our faces. For a few minutes we silently sipped our tea. I dusted the camera lenses and put another hundred feet of film into the Bolex. Then, back to work.

"Tell me about education," I said.

"To start with the little ones," Mr. Chiao replied, "we run 120 nurseries and 89 kindergartens." I interrupted to ask if all small children went to these. "Oh no," he said, "we couldn't take care of them if they did. Only about 40 per cent of the children go—the rest stay at home with the grandparents. Then, in this commune we have 44 primary schools, 16 of which are run by the state."

"Why doesn't the state run them all?" I asked. "Isn't it the national policy to give primary schooling to every child?"

"Yes, but it would be impossible at this stage for the central government to set up schools in all our scattered villages. Besides, we like to run our own affairs. It makes good sense, too. We have the houses and we now have young people with enough training to be teachers, or we can get them from the colleges in the city.

"We provide spare-time education for adults too. Not only for the illiterate but for anyone who feels he hasn't had enough schooling. The majority of our members had no education at all when they were children. Now they can get it later in life. It doesn't matter what age they are, they can start as low as the first grade if they want to and go through the schooling that they missed."

"How many are still illiterate? And what is your definition of 'literacy'?"

"There are a good many people who are just too old to learn to read and write. We don't press them. Spare-time education is only useful for those who really want it—and we have thousands of our adults enrolled in classes. But about 20 per cent will never become literate. By literate we mean knowing how to read and write about twelve hundred characters—that's enough to be able to read a newspaper. In cities the test is usually higher—two thousand characters or more. But here in the country . . ."

He wiped his face again on the towel. "In the country we have to take things as they are. And it's quite an event when one of our people passes the literacy test. We have a little celebration for them. Do you know what they nearly all want to do first? Write to Chairman Mao to tell him they have learned to write! He must get thousands of letters like that every day.

"You must understand, the communes have three purposes. They are to develop agriculture, to build local industry, and to advance education and culture. We want eventually to give people in the country the same opportunities as city people. One day the communes will have colleges and technical schools, their own theatres and schools of music, drama schools. . . ." His voice trailed off and he leaned back, looking through half-closed eyes at the ceiling.

This seemed like a good time to ask a question, one I asked in every commune I visited. "Have you ever," I asked Mr. Chiao, "found it necessary, perhaps for a short period, to house husbands and wives in separate buildings?" Mr. Chiao asked the interpreter to repeat the question and the interpreter turned back to me. I repeated it.

The interpreter began to laugh and the director and the other members joined in. Mr. Chiao, still laughing, said something and the interpreter said, "Mr. Chiao wants to know if that's what they do in England." The widely publicized Party Resolution of December 1958 had ridiculed Mr. Dulles's speech in Seattle in which he had informed the world that Chinese families were being broken up. Cartoons of Dulles and Eisenhower were often painted on commune and factory wall boards. In all communes my question about family separation provoked mirth, except in one where the director said with a certain contempt, "You have been reading Mr. Dulles!"

"What do you do," I asked, "About a boy and girl who fall in love and have a child before they are married? Or before legal marriage age?"

The interpreter's translation of this question was followed by a rather lengthy silence. It was obviously an unusual question. The others at the table became busy readjusting their notebooks and examining the points of their

ballpoint pens. The girl who was picking up the wet towels paused to listen.

"There is no problem now about marriage," said Mr. Chiao. "Formerly, many could not afford to marry. But that is no hindrance now. Formerly also, the low level of education made some fall into wrong habits. That does not happen any more."

"But human nature is human nature," I insisted. "You just can't expect me to believe that babies are never born to unwed parents."

Mr. Chiao shook his head.

I pressed the point as far as I felt I could go. It would hardly do to dispute the director's accuracy; I could not go out, after all, and count the babies as I had counted the tractors in the tractor yard. And who knows?—he may have been right. I told him that officials in Peking and elsewhere, people at the university and in the health office, discussed these problems as a matter of reality. . . .

Mr. Chiao, however, stood his ground. "You may not believe me," he said, "but we really have none of these problems now."

I nodded and changed the subject.

China is today an intensely, almost compulsively "moral" society. Of the many communes I visited, all except one denied any knowledge of any children born out of wedlock. In the one exception, two cases were cited, both involving parents who were under the legal marriage age (twenty for boys and eighteen for girls). Both cases were resolved in the same way: by court orders permitting early marriage, "in the interest of the child."

I had by this time formed a high opinion of Mr. Chiao. Despite his official position, he was neither servile nor overbearing in his manner. I noted that he spoke to those who were "under" him in the same tone that he used to me, or to my interpreter. Besides that, I liked him for his obvious enjoyment of his job. He must be working like mad most of the time to keep up with this three-ring circus, and loving every moment of it.

I asked him to tell me about himself.

He shrugged the question aside, but as I persisted, he finally told me he had been born in a nearby village, not

in what was now this commune, but in a neighboring county. His father was a lower-middle peasant. The family owned a plot of land, too small to live off, and worked for a landlord and rented an extra field from him too. They never got out of debt. After liberation the family received eight *mu* of land, still inadequate for a living; but with mutual aid they began for the first time to move ahead.

"When did you learn to read and write?" I asked.

"At the spare-time school, six years ago."

In these few and rather unwillingly spoken words, it seemed to me, lay a large part of the secret of the Chinese Revolution: the release of buried creative potential.

Ten years earlier Mr. Chiao was grubbing out his life on half an acre. Today he is dreaming of power stations, technical colleges, schools of music. And not only Mr. Chiao, but the girls in the ball-bearing factory, the youngsters who had dreamed up the fantastic "paper mill", the nurses in the kindergarten, the men installing a new (commune-made) electric irrigation pump. Just in this one morning's visit I had seen hundreds who were using talents that would previously have remained immobilized. I remembered a slogan I had seen some days before painted in bold, red characters across a commune building: *Don't be frightened of the experts—compete with them!* They appear to be learning that technique has nothing mysterious about it; they are not waiting for the state to tell them how. . . .

Mr. Chiao brought me back. "There's time to show you the hospital before lunch," he said. "I'd like you to see the hospital."

### *Three Buns for Lunch*

I was glad the hospital was only a short walk from headquarters. It was a simple structure of whitewashed brick, less than a year old, with clean earth floors and a little tiling. On each side of a central corridor were small single rooms—thirty in all—with a nurse's office at the middle. There were ten patients at the time, and two neatly dressed nurses were on duty.

A doctor arrived while I was there and I had a brief talk with him. He told me there were twelve doctors attached to this commune, and they spend most of their time on rounds in the villages. Six doctors are trained in Western, and six in traditional Chinese medicine. Only two of the Western doctors are fully qualified.

In addition to this small hospital, which he regarded as inadequate, they have set up sixteen "hygiene stations" serving groups of villages (there are ninety villages altogether). These are clinics which can handle simple first-aid and immunization. They try to see that every infant gets B.C.G. at ten days and is later vaccinated against smallpox, diphtheria, and epidemic encephalitis (Japanese B)."

The commune medical staff is still too small, 120 in all, including doctors, nurses, and technicians. They conduct continual educational programs on health matters among the peasants by means of posters, films, and lectures. This, and the immunization program, are paying dividends. There have been no cases of smallpox since the commune started, no cholera, no venereal disease, which used to be one of the worst problems here. They have been burning off the banks of the rivers and have virtually eliminated schistosomiasis, a disease caused by the ova of a blood fluke to which a small water snail plays host. The ova develop into minute, free-swimming cercariae which can penetrate the skin of a human being who wades in the water or even wets his hand while filling a pail. Elimination of the snail is the most direct way to break the cycle. Symptoms of the disease are severe, and include enormous extension of the spleen and progressive enfeeblement of the victim. This remains one of the most serious medical problems of China. There are still an estimated ten million cases.

In this commune bacillary dysentery is the most stubborn problem. Midwives are now trained, and the days when umbilical cords were cut with unsterilized scissors and bleeding stopped by dirt are past. Infant mortality has dropped, though the hospital was unable to give me the figures as the records were kept in the hygiene stations.

I asked whether the hospital was sufficiently equipped to perform an appendectomy. One of the doctors said they are treating most cases of appendicitis by traditional methods, not by surgery. (They told me the same story in Peking, and claimed a number of cures. See the chapter on medicine for a further discussion of this question.) But on being pressed the doctor admitted that all advanced cases were operated on. Most surgical cases from this commune would be taken to one of the modern, fully equipped hospitals I had seen in Chengchow.

After the hospital Mr. Chiao, on behalf of the commune, extended to me an invitation to lunch.

I would stay, I said, provided I could eat in one of the canteens exactly as the commune members were eating. They agreed to this. But on our return to headquarters the meal was already spread out on the table in the meeting chamber. I argued and begged. So did Mr. Chiao. This would be so much more convenient, we could talk more easily, and particularly now the table was set. . . .

But I insisted.

The canteen, one of 119 in the commune, was a pleasant, airy room, fifty or sixty feet long. Straw matting hung under the slope of the tile roof and at one end there was a portrait of Mao.

By this time it was well past two o'clock and most of the members had already eaten. But a few were still drifting in from the fields. The only table at which there were chopsticks was obviously ours: the five of us and the driver of the car sat down. Three or four dishes of vegetables and a platter piled high with steamed dough buns were brought in. There were no bowls or plates; nothing to drink; we pitched in out of the common platters. When I looked to see what was being served at the other tables, I understood their reluctance to bring me to the canteen. The workers were eating nothing but the dough buns (*man tow*). I tried one. These buns were about the size of a woman's fist, of dark wheat flour. Inside were about two teaspoonsful of chopped cabbage. This was the entire meal. Each worker had three; the children one.

I have seen poverty in many countries—in Mexico, in South America, in India—and I have always found it

difficult to understand how a human body could go on day after day with so little nourishment. Here, then, was the bare truth. The people of this commune were desperately poor. I could hardly bear to watch these men coming in tired after working in the fields since daybreak; stopping at the kitchen to pick up their three buns; sitting down quietly to eat them. And the children, munching without a word!

Chalked on a blackboard I noted what looked like a menu for the week. I asked for a translation. Tonight, noodles. Anything else? No, just noodles. Tomorrow for breakfast, these same *man tow* but without the vegetable filling. Lunch, the same, but with something else inside. Tomorrow night, soup; and so it went on.

"How often do you eat meat?" I asked.

Chiao hedged. "Not very often."

"How often?"

"On festival days we have meat, and sometimes fish. On three festival days we eat meat, and on three days fish. But this will improve as time goes on. . . ."

"You mean three days in the whole year?"

"Yes, in the year."

"And that's all the meat or fish you eat?"

"For the present, yes."

What of those six thousand pigs I had heard about, I wondered. Or the fish-breeding pools from which they sent fish to the Chengchow market. There was a contradiction here I could not understand.

"May I see your fish-breeding ponds?" I asked.

And into the car we piled again to go bouncing over some very rough roads for twenty minutes or half an hour. The fish project, Mr. Chiao explained, was the second task to which the new commune had turned its energies after water-conservation problems had been taken care of. Fish-breeding, it seemed, was completely new in this area. They had reclaimed some otherwise useless swampland, and in the first complete year of operation (1959) bred 29 million fish, of which they sold 313,000 pounds on the Chengchow market.

I was impressed by the figures.

I was even more impressed by the fisheries themselves.

These were, I think, one of the most remarkable features of the entire commune. Over many acres of low-lying ground between two rivers, shallow ponds had been made with well-banked divisions. Each division had its own generation of fish. Each was neatly labeled as to date and type. Mostly silver carp. Young men, wading thigh deep in the ponds, swung their nets over their heads, letting them balloon out in a wide circle before falling into the water. A universal method this, always fascinating to watch. Slowly the nets would be gathered in and every throw would collect thirty or forty slithering, fighting silver fish, all of uniform size, probably four or five pounds each.

After I had photographed these young fish catchers, some of them walked back with me to the car. The sun was horribly hot. I suggested we sit for a while under a tree. One of the young men went off and brought back an armful of small melons—I don't know what kind they were, but they were juicy and ripe and we sat under the tree eating them, spitting out the seeds.

Then I raised the question which had been troubling me.

"You eat fish in your communal dining rooms only three times a year. To judge by your menu you are not eating very well. You are not getting enough protein. Sooner or later your health will suffer. Why don't you eat the fish you raise in your own communes?"

There was a general outburst of talk, everyone saying something at once. Finally I sorted out what they were trying to tell me. This question of eating the fish from their own fisheries had been a matter of considerable controversy in the commune. They had had several meetings, mass discussions, special sessions of the management committee.

"But what are the objections?" I asked. "Why *not* eat the fish?"

"Money," they said. "We need to earn more money."

"Money for what?"

"Listen," one young man told me, "we only have one rather poor hospital. We should have a properly equipped one—and the instruments and the buildings and

the X-ray equipment and all that costs money. Point one. Point two; look at some of our primary schools—housed in old sheds. A disgrace. Point three: we need libraries. We've seen them in other communes. We haven't got any. Oh yes, we have so-called reading rooms, but they are mostly for kids. We need a place where we can stock books and read, and have rooms in the different villages and the books can go from one village to another. Point four: we want some decent movie equipment. You should see the old projector we have—well, we have two, but only one works. It goes the rounds of the villages, but that means we only see a show once every week or so. We need at least ten good projectors. All this costs money. Point five: the old people's homes. Go and see them. We have two that are all right—the others, well, they are nothing to be proud of."

The young fellow paused long enough to spit out some seeds and continued, "What we have to understand is that we are a very poor commune. Other communes can do all these things because their land and conditions are better. So some of us think, 'let's put off eating more fish until we get ahead and have done these things which need doing.' Of course, others think that food is more important. But they don't understand that we are building a socialist country [he spoke scornfully], they are not politically aware and mature."

"But what about health—isn't that important, too?"

"Look at us," they said, laughing, "do we look weak?" and they flexed their arms and showed their muscles. "And the women and children who need more food get it."

Perhaps here, sitting under the tree with these young men, I have hit on one element that, above all else, was enabling China to move forward so rapidly—the sense of self-restraint, the awareness that sacrifices now were necessary to lay the foundation of future prosperity. The almost unbelievable fact is that they are doing it, and to a great extent, voluntarily. Of course, the peasant cadres, the dedicated, professional, hard core of Communist youth, are giving the lead. I'm sure they do a lot of the talking at these public meetings and discussion

circles and their powers of persuasion are great. But the people are let in—they can say what they feel, just as these young men under the tree were saying what they felt. The fish are sold to the city, but not “by decree,” which would leave a sullen and resentful peasantry who would do their best to sabotage the plan as soon as the leaders’ backs were turned. The sacrifices, the self-restraint are not being imposed by young men with machine guns, but by young men who talk—and there’s a world of difference.

All this went through my mind as we drove back to the central village. But *had* there been an improvement? I wondered. How far was I being strung a line about the bad old days? How much worse than this could it really have been? I made the suggestion that I would be interested in talking to some of the commune members in their own homes. Mr. Chiao agreed; and even offered no objection to my seeing them on my own—on my own, that is, with the interpreter. As we climbed out of the car in front of headquarters, he waved us down the street and called, “See who you can find at home,” and disappeared inside.

### *Personal Histories*

Half a block farther along I pointed to a door at random, in a row of newish houses. The interpreter knocked and the door was opened by a woman with two children at her side who at once asked us in. Her name was Mrs. Chang. The house consisted of two rooms and a small kitchen. Along one side of the living room was a wide brick ledge (*kang*) upon which the entire family would sleep at night.

The room was not much larger, I think, than ten feet by twelve. The floor was tamped earth. There were four children in all, the two who had come to the door and a four month-old baby in the lap of a five-year-old who was squatting on the floor. The baby had a dark area on its head, like a burn or some fungus. Mrs. Chang was pert and eager. She wore a blue shirt-blouse with bright-green plastic buttons, and the usual work trousers. I asked

her later how old she was and she said thirty-two, but she looked older than that. She was self-possessed, not at all put out by having two strangers burst in on her, and one a foreigner. Her face was serious, but pleasantly so, and she showed occasional flashes of humor. Her hands were delicate and clean. (I have often noticed how well the Chinese, even the very poorest, keep their hands.)

As we talked her story came out little by little, hesitatingly at first then more readily; and sometimes, as memories stirred her feelings, the story came with great fluency. I took it down precisely as she gave it to me:

"I was born in this very village. My father was already fairly old when I was born, and my mother was blind, from an illness that she had had some years earlier. I was the eldest child of three—a brother and a sister. We had no land and my father worked for a landowner. The hut we lived in was very tumbledown, grass on the roof and so on. As my mother was blind, we depended entirely on my father's work, but as he was already fairly old, however hard he worked he could never get enough to support my mother and three children.

"I was the biggest, so when I was eight my mother and I would go out regularly every day to beg. I was still fairly small when we began this, so we were limited—we could just go about five *li* a day. Nineteen forty-two was especially bad for us. It was a drought year, my father was ill. We had nothing we could sell and couldn't send my father to be cared for. He was very thin from lack of food and his illness, but he kept on trying to go out. On the second of July in that year he went out, but he fell in the street and died there—it was really half due to his illness and half due to not having eaten anything for so long.

"His death was a disaster for us. My mother couldn't work, I was thirteen, my brother was eleven and my little sister was five. It was really a bad year. Later it rained a great deal and one day there was a tremendous storm—it was still summertime, I remember—and the roof of our house fell in. We got out our bedding and took it to the temple. That winter, too, was cold. My mother and I would go out begging every day and sometimes our

young brother would come too. One day, I remember, he fell into a deep hole full of snow. It was cold and we didn't have any clothes for that kind of weather. Nothing happened to my brother, we fished him out.

"The next really bad year was 1944—another snowstorm. My sister was very ill and we had just nothing at all to feed her on. By this time we had moved from the temple to a kind of shack where we lived. It was just when my sister was so ill that the big snowstorm began—it lasted for three days and my mother and I couldn't get out at all. Only seven, sister was terribly ill and terribly undernourished. She died, during those three days of storm.

"After the death of my sister there were only three of us left to feed, which made it a little easier, but even so we never seemed to have enough. My brother and I used to go to the fields and pick up grains of rice or wheat which had dropped after harvesting, grain by grain. We would sometimes go to the market and pick up the little bits that were dropped on the ground. This sounds as if we were in an extra bad position, but we were not. This was the normal way of living for many people around us those years. There were some actually much worse off than we were.

"This area was liberated in 1948. The Japanese never actually occupied this area—they were north of the Yellow River—and the fighting between the Kuomintang and the P.L.A. [People's Liberation Army] took place about twelve miles from here, so we didn't see any actual fighting. The first time I saw the P.L.A. men come here I was very frightened. The P.L.A. sent some officials to us to explain things and tell us not to be frightened, but most of us were; we didn't believe them. They tried to organize us into an agricultural district and asked our family to join, but we were not sure what they were really after and we didn't join. We were only convinced when we were actually given some land under the land reforms and when we really got rid of the landlords. That convinced us.

"At land-reform time my brother and I were old enough to till the land. The family got nine *mu* of land. The landlord pretended to be willing to distribute his land but in his heart he wasn't satisfied. So we held big

speaking-bitterness meetings to tell the landlord what we thought of him and to calculate how much he had exploited the peasants on his land. We held several meetings to speak our bitterness to him. Sometimes at the big meetings there was only one landlord, sometimes several. We finally convinced this landlord that he had done terrible things to the peasants and he was ready to hand over his land. He was given his share of land—he is now somewhere in this commune but not in this section of it.

“I never went to school as a child, but in 1950 I went to a spare-time school and now I know enough characters to write letters and to read the newspaper. I’m working in the fields most of the time now, but also do work with pregnant women, especially to see when they should stop working. I got married in 1949 and have four children—these two go to kindergarten, the girl of two goes to nursery, and this baby as well, when I am busy and can’t look after him.”

From Mrs. Chang’s we crossed the street to another house which turned out to belong to a cheerful-looking chap with bad teeth by the name of Yang Chin-li. His hair was cut very short and there were many crinkles around his eyes as if he laughed a great deal. His ears were slightly pointed and the skin drawn up, which gave him a bit of a puckish look. During our conversation he seemed to be always on the verge of bursting out laughing, as if all this business of recounting events out of the past was a great joke, another example of how odd foreigners could be.

Here is Mr. Yang’s story as he told it:

“My father was a poor peasant and worked for a landlord. I went to school when I was seven, but only stayed one year as my parents hadn’t enough money to pay for me. There were six of us—my parents and four children. I have one sister older than I am and the rest are younger. My father rented eight *mu* of land—but rented land is always the worst, for the landlord kept the best land for himself, and usually for about eight months of the year we never had enough to live on. We kept on trying different crops and filled every corner,

but we never made enough to pay the landlord and our debts to him kept growing. We did have a donkey and during the idle season when we didn't need him we rented him out to others and made a little that way.

"Our debt to the landlord was not money—it was in crops. The actual rent was paid for in wheat and sorghum. But that wasn't all. Before harvest time when we had no food my father would borrow from the landlord—but for every bushel of grain we borrowed we would have to pay back double after the harvest. We sometimes could pay off a little of the debt by working—one day's work was the equivalent of a quarter of a bushel of grain. We never got out of debt.

"We were always in trouble until I was sixteen years old. At that time we planted nearly thirty *mu* of land—the landlord lent us the additional land. But this land was paid for by an arrangement whereby we gave 80 per cent of the crop to the landlord and kept 20 per cent ourselves. We had to work very hard. Our living—our food—was better at this time but our debts never got smaller. We never did get out of this trouble until liberation, when under the land reform we got eighteen *mu* of land. It was fairly good land, too, and we could get a living off it, but we had some economic difficulties too, due to the climate—some harvests were good, others were bad. The government subsidized us when we had serious difficulties.

"At the bitterness meetings we all calculated how much the landowners had exploited us, charging us too much rent and too much interest, and we showed how the landlord owed *us* debts rather than that we owed *him* debts. He had complete control over my family for years. The landlord ran away after one of these big meetings, but I believe he came back later.

"I can read and write now. I started in the spare-time school in 1953, and by 1956 had learned to read. It was difficult, but I always wanted to finish school and this was too good a chance to miss.

"When land reform changed to mutual aid and then the co-op period, it meant that we had to give up this land that had been given us. It was difficult for many

peasants to see the advantages of this and some wouldn't. I could already see that we would never really get ahead just working our own land, so I was ready to join the co-op, but a lot of the others weren't. What we did then was to give them time. The co-ops were voluntary, so those of us who wanted to joined up, those who didn't stayed out. But little by little they saw that we were doing better than they were and most of them joined up when they saw it worked.

"I think all the changes have worked out pretty well. This commune idea is working. It's ten thousand times better now than when I was a child! Look, I have five children—a girl in secondary school, a boy and a girl in primary school, a girl in kindergarten, and another girl in the nursery—and *with no money worry!* My mother is living with us—she's very old—but she's taken care of, too. Five children being taken care of—and my parents couldn't keep just one child at school!"

Out once more into the heat. The sun was lower now and its sting had gone, but the gray earth had absorbed the heat all day and was now reflecting it like a furnace. A few peasants were beginning to straggle back from the fields in twos and threes, men and women, and the dust whirled up in little puffs from under their feet. They looked tired and walked tired, saying very little. A few dropped into the general store to make some purchases. One man was walking alone and I greeted him as he went by. He stopped immediately, and with a show of courtesy took off his wide straw hat. His face was withered and his clothes were patched, and he, like the child I had seen earlier, had a blue mottled stain over one side of his face. I asked him his name and what work he had been doing. "Hoing," he said. (He told me his name but I made no record of it.)

"What were you doing before liberation?" I asked him. He glanced at me with a wry grin: "Me? Oh, I was a landlord," "How much land did you own?" Waving his hat vaguely around, he said, "All this. . . ." I asked him to tell me about it, and he did, but before he began we walked across to the shady side of the street and sat,

leaning our backs against the mud walls of a house. He didn't speak as fluently as the others I had questioned. Perhaps there were too many painful memories involved. Perhaps the presence of my interpreter restrained him. But this is the story as it came out little by little.

When the Communist army came through in 1948 he tried to escape, but the village was surrounded and there was no way out. His land was not immediately confiscated, though he realized that there was no chance of his keeping it if the Communists won the civil war. There was no formal trial, but the villagers organized "speaking-bitterness" meetings in which he was put on a platform and all those who had rented land from him could come and speak their mind.

"These meetings," he said, "were very difficult. Sometimes I was alone and the people would be shouting at me all the things they thought I had done wrong; sometimes they would have several of us at these meetings and the crowd would then be larger. Anyone who had any grievance against us could come to these meetings and speak their mind. The people were sometimes very angry. I didn't understand any of it at first; I didn't know they had any special grievance against me. They then added up all the money they thought I owed them, so they said that the land I owned was really theirs now, for they had worked it for years for too little. I was, they said, a rich landlord, because I didn't have to do work myself; but I don't think I was nearly as rich as they thought I was and I had plenty of economic troubles too.

"When the village committee was established to settle how my land was to be divided up, there was some argument among the peasants themselves, but they got it settled. All my land was taken from me."

"All?" I asked.

"All except a small piece which they said was my share. It was very poor land, the poorest, but I was allowed to build a small house on it and that is where I and my family lived. The first few years were very hard. No one would speak to us and we could hardly earn enough from the land to keep going. When mutual aid came in they did help me a little, but never as comrades;

we were always shunned. I had to attend political-instruction meetings twice a week.

"When the co-ops came I thought I'd better join in and I asked that my piece of land should be included. They did this, and it helped me; but we were not real members of the co-op. We couldn't go to the public meetings, we couldn't vote, but they began to talk to us more freely in the fields."

"Are you now a member of the commune?"

"Yes. When the commune came in they had some meetings to decide which of the former landlords should be allowed in. As I had co-operated in the fields and because they felt I was beginning to understand what they were trying to do, they allowed me to join. Some of the others are not yet full members, they cannot vote or go to meetings. But I am a full member."

"They speak to you now?"

"Oh, yes. They accept me. I do my share of work."

"Looking back on all this," I asked, "do you think things were handled well or badly?"

"I was very bitter at first, because I couldn't understand what I had done wrong. But I think I understand it now. Yes, I suppose it was a necessary thing. Some of us have suffered, but things before were very bad for most people. There are some things to be grateful for. My grandchildren go to school. They learn to read and write. I was a landlord but I never learned how to read and write."

"Were any landlords in this area killed by the people, or by the courts?"

"Not here. Some ran away and disappeared and we don't know where they are. None of us who stayed were killed. There are many former landlords in the commune. Yes," he said, looking at my interpreter, "socialism is a fine thing."

And with that he cleared his throat and let loose a wad of spit.