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## China's peasants

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# China's peasants

## The anthropology of a revolution

*by*

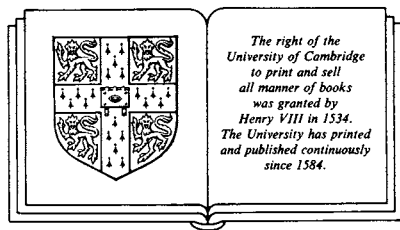
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*To Elizabeth and Noah*

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## Preface

This book is the first comprehensive anthropological study of a rural Chinese community to be carried out by foreign anthropologists in the People's Republic of China since the Revolution of 1949. It is a diachronic investigation of rural Cantonese village life, with the pre-revolutionary period as its starting point. The major theme of the book is the analysis of revolutionary efforts to bring about social reform and economic development. Since 1949, such efforts have taken many forms, and have created diverse consequences. We examine the initial processes of reform, the Maoist period, and the post-Maoism of the present day. The pre-revolutionary period is reconstructed from personal accounts by the villagers, from historical documents made available locally, and from comparative material gathered over two decades of studying Cantonese peasants. The portrayal of the Maoist period is based on personal accounts by the villagers and on our fieldwork in Maoist rural China in 1979–80. The account of the transition from Maoist to post-Maoist society is based on return field trips in 1981, 1983, 1984, and 1985.

We have attempted to understand the local significance of one of the largest and most important events in contemporary world history by using the methodological and theoretical repertoire of the discipline of anthropology. Our fieldwork took place in Chashan district, located in Dongguan county, about half way between Hong Kong and Guangzhou. In 1979, Chashan was called a commune, and included the town of Chashan, with a population of 4,000, and 15 production brigades in the surrounding countryside. The population of the district was approximately 35,000. Our research site was Zengbu brigade, a cluster of three natural villages and two hamlets, with a population of approximately 5,000.

Zengbu was divided into 17 production teams. These teams made a living partly by working the land, and partly by rural industrial enterprises. The brigade owned approximately 5,000 *mu* (about 350 hectares) of agricultural land, including fishponds.

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Preface



1. Lane of Lu's Home village, 1979

We had requested a field site with the general characteristics of Zengbu, in order to have the possibility of making a fruitful comparison with the villages of Ping Shan, in Hong Kong's New Territories, previously studied by Jack M. Potter (1968). Zengbu and Ping Shan share custom, culture, and regionalism, broadly speaking, so it is possible to use the comparison to clarify the changes the Revolution has produced.

The authors and their two children, aged seven and two, were provided with living accommodation in four small rooms in the brigade headquarters building. This building was customarily used as living-accommodation by brigade cadres and other visitors, as well as ourselves. The brigade headquarters was a center of Zengbu social life: brigade-level governmental transactions were carried out there; meetings were held and decisions were reached. The building is located where the three villages meet. The brigade headquarters is not isolated from village social life, in which we participated freely. There were no official restrictions placed upon our research.

Fieldwork in the People's Republic of China presented certain special problems. The Chinese had hesitated to admit anthropologists. For 30 years they had excluded all outsiders, and they were clearly sensitive to the process of being observed. China was a country where social reality was explained in terms of a shared public morality expressed in ideological form; the understanding and interpretation of such explanations makes demands on the

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anthropologist's capacity for insight. However, anthropological understanding is based on the development of empathy with what is initially perceived as alien, rather than on taking an ethnocentric or adversarial position. The task is to understand the people of Zengbu in their own terms, insofar as possible, and then to make those terms intelligible to outsiders.

Change has by no means ceased in Zengbu; rather the reverse. Our period of field research encompasses both the final year of Maoist practice in the countryside and the dramatic redefinition of rural economic life under the present policies. We have also been able to observe the relationship between ideology and social reality in the context of an extraordinarily wide range of ideological formulations. The length of time we have known Zengbu, and the range of policies we have seen put into effect, provided perspective and context.

Three chapters of this book are based upon previously published work by Sulamith Heins Potter. "The Cultural Construction of Emotion in Rural Chinese Social Life" won Honorable Mention for the Stirling Award in 1986, and has appeared in the journal *Ethos*. Versions of "Chinese Birth Planning: A Cultural Account" have appeared as Working Paper on Women No. 103, Office of Women in International Development, Michigan State University, East Lansing (1985), and in Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Child Survival* (1987). "The Position of Peasants in Modern China's Social Order" was originally presented to Columbia University's Modern China Seminar on April 9, 1981. It later appeared in *Modern China* (October 1983, pp. 465-499); a shortened version was published in Dernberger *et al.*, (eds.), *The Chinese: Adapting the Past, Building the Future* (1986).

We wish to thank the villagers and cadres of Zengbu, the cadres of Chashan district, Dongguan county, and Guangdong province, and the Chinese Academy of Social Science, for their help and kindness. We wish to thank Professors Elizabeth Colson, Norma Diamond, and Eugene Cooper for reading our manuscript and making constructive comments. Adrienne Morgan drew the maps and illustrations.

Our research has been funded by the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, the Center for Chinese Studies of the University of California at Berkeley, and a Wang Institute Fellowship in Chinese Studies.

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## Notes on the text

### *Table for conversion of Chinese units of measurement*

#### LENGTH

1 *li* = 0.5 kilometer1 *chi* = 0.333 meter

#### AREA

1 *mu* = 0.077 hectare1 *li* = 0.01 *mu* = 0.1 *fen*

#### WEIGHT

1 *dan* = 50 kilograms1 *jin* = 0.5 kilogram

### *Official Exchange Rates, U.S. dollars and Chinese yuan*

1979–80 1 U.S. dollar = 1.5 *yuan*1981 1 U.S. dollar = 1.7 *yuan*1983 1 U.S. dollar = 2.8 *yuan*1985 1 U.S. dollar = 2.7 *yuan*

### *Romanization*

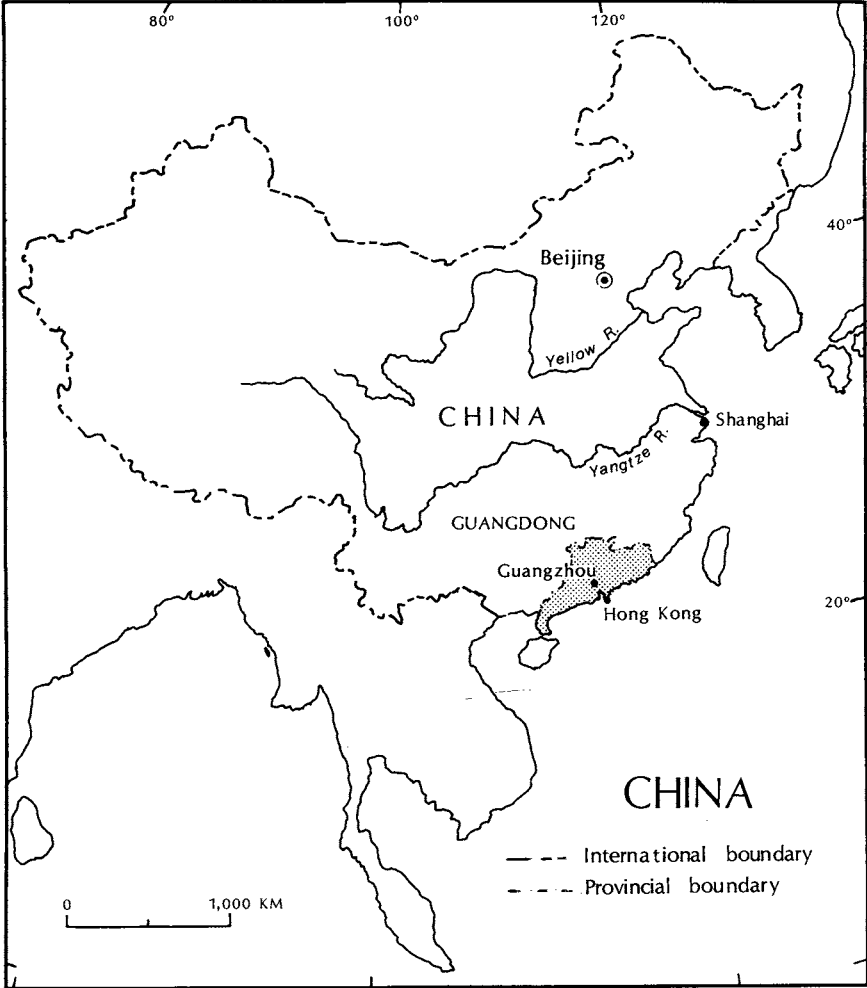
Most Chinese names are written in Mandarin, romanized according to the pinyin style. Cantonese names and words are romanized in the United States Department of State Foreign Service Institute's modification of the Huang-Kok Yale romanization.

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Map 1 China