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China's peasants

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China's peasants

The anthropology of a revolution

by

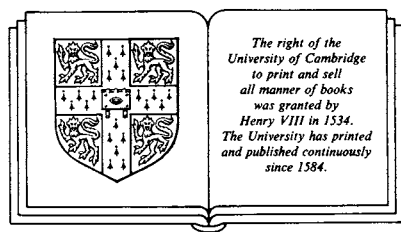
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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Notes on the text</i>	xiv
1 The old “feudal” order: Zengbu before Liberation	1
2 Establishing the new order	36
3 The ordeal of collectivization	59
4 The Cultural Revolution	83
5 Maoist society: the production team	94
6 Maoist society: the brigade	129
7 Maoist society: the commune	143
8 Impatient aspirations: transition to the post-Mao period	158
9 The cultural construction of emotion in rural Chinese social life	180
10 Marriage, household, and family form	196
11 Chinese birth planning: a cultural account	225
12 Lineage and collective: structure and praxis	251
13 Party organization	270
14 The party ethic: a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm	283
15 A caste-like system of social stratification: the position of peasants in modern China’s social order	296
16 The Chinese peasants and the world capitalist system	313
17 The crystallization of post-Mao society: Zengbu in 1985	327
<i>References</i>	340
<i>Index</i>	348

Illustrations

Photographs

1	Lane of Lu's Home village, 1979	page xii
2	A branch ancestral hall	53
3	A production team warehouse and rice-drying ground, Lu's Home village, 1979	95
4	Zengbu brigade headquarters, 1979	130
5	Brigade office, 1979, with one of Zengbu's most experienced cadres	130
6	Chashan State Grain and Oil Purchasing Organization	145
7	Modern, post-Maoist altar	224
8	Lao Ye and the brigade birth control team, 1985	234
9	Rebuilt Sandhill ancestral tomb, 1985	258
10	Zengbu lineage dragon boats, 1985, showing the levee built along the river	259
11	Chashan Commune Communist Party headquarters, 1979	271
12	Secretary Lu, of Lu's Home village, head of the Zengbu Brigade Communist Party Branch	275
13	Brigade cadres in headquarters' courtyard, 1983	276
14	Brigade party cadres listen to eulogy at the funeral of their fallen comrade, 1979	284
15	Hong Kong–Zengbu brigade factory, 1985	316
16	Young Zengbu women make British dolls for export, 1985	319

Figures

1	Internal segmentation of Pondside's Liu lineage	13
2	Internal segmentation of Sandhill's Liu lineage	14
3	Internal segmentation of Lu's Home's Lu lineage	15
4	Chashan commune, rice production, 1962–82	81

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052135787X - China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution - Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

Illustrations	ix
5 Zengbu brigade, rice production, 1962–80	81
6 Male workpoints, by age, Zengbu brigade, 1978	122
7 Female workpoints, by age, Zengbu brigade, 1978	122
8 Sources of Chashan commune's income, 1962–80	161
9 Chashan commune's income and collective distribution, 1962–80	162
10 Average per capita distribution, Chashan commune, 1962–80	163
11 Average per capita distribution, Zengbu brigade, 1962–80	163
12 Per capita rice production, Chashan commune, 1962–82	164
13 Per capita rice production, Zengbu brigade, 1962–80	164
14 Population, Chashan commune, 1949–81	165
15 Phases in the family and household cycle	221
16 Chashan commune's birth, death, and increase rates, 1962–81	239

Maps

1 China	xv
2 Guangdong province	2
3 Dongguan county	3
4 Chashan commune (district)	4–5
5 Sketch map of Zengbu brigade (<i>xiang</i>)	6–7

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052135787X - China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution - Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

Tables

1	Percentage of Zengbu families in each class status	<i>page</i> 47
2	Pondside Number 4 team work assignments	106
3	Land per capita, Zengbu teams, 1979	108
4	Zengbu production teams, statistics, 1979	109
5	Zengbu production teams' gross income, by category, 1979	115
6	Workpoint values of Zengbu labor grades	120
7	Labor grades of Zengbu men and women	121
8	Rice rationing guide, Sandhill village, 1978	124
9	A household account	126
10	Zengbu brigade enterprises and industries, 1979	139
11	Chashan commune enterprises and industries, 1979	151
12	Methods of birth control used in Zengbu, 1979	235
13	Differentiation of household incomes in Zengbu, 1985	338

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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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

xii

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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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

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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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

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

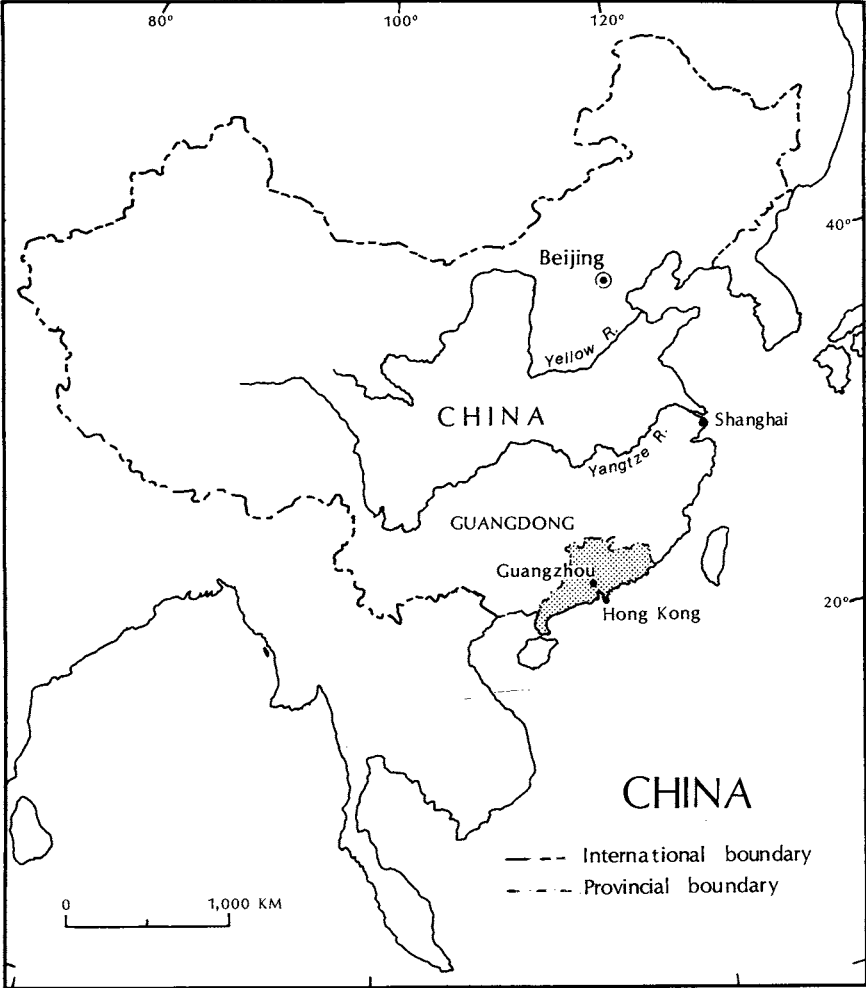
Most Chinese names are written in Mandarin, romanized according to the pinyin style. Cantonese names and words are romanized in the United States Department of State Foreign Service Institute's modification of the Huang-Kok Yale romanization.

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Map 1 China