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The Violent Dawn of Reform

When Mao died in September 1976, China's rural people were still suffering from the impact of his party's great famine. In much of the countryside per capita total daily consumption was below the poverty line, and material deprivation was shocking. In some villages of the Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area, where I interviewed in the following decade, dollar-poverty measures actually rivaled those of poverty-stricken Malawi, Niger, and Sierra Leone. Mao-era disasters, especially the Great Leap famine, had set rural China's economy back to the level of development that obtained in 1928. As Elizabeth Gooch has demonstrated, even with the post-1978 economic improvement, the imprint of the great famine's intensity seriously hindered the recovery of social well-being.[1] With Mao gone, Beijing-centered reformers started to move rural China out of this predicament, or so it seemed.

Convened during late December 1978 in Beijing, the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) solidified the triumph of Deng Xiaoping and his reform agenda, which called for market-driven economic growth and political stability aimed at setting China on a pragmatic course of modern national development. When it came to restructuring the rural economy, this new course would be free of damaging party-state interventions in the habitual survival routines of the rural poor – or so it seemed.[2] Assuming this was the case, Harry Harding proclaimed that the Central government was engineering a "Second Revolution" under Deng.[3] And indeed, the post-Mao center's policy-making process raised the hopes of rural dwellers: the reformers apparently intended to enable farm people to abandon

[1] Gooch, "Estimating the Long Term Impact of the Great Famine," 1–21.
[2] Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 434–435. [3] Harding, *China's Second Revolution*.

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monocropping of grain for a diversified pattern of agriculture, to sell their crops to the state at higher prices, to garner off-farm income through petty trade in reinvigorated local markets, and to break away from the bondage of the collective by pursuing jobs in rural township-based factories and in urban-centered construction work.[4]

Da Fo's farmers by and large welcomed this liberation from the Maoist collective. After all, as I demonstrated in *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, in the two decades following Mao's Great Leap famine, many of them had waged day-by-day, year-by-year struggles to escape state control of their attempts to scratch out a living. Even as Deng Xiaoping proclaimed his reform agenda, they were still cultivating small, private strips of sweet potato land into which they invested most of their energy and organic fertilizer; stuffing their skinny bodies with grain that the state would otherwise procure from them at a low price; and conducting petty trade in small markets off the radar of the Liangmen People's Commune leaders – and not one of these endeavors was authorized by the Maoist collective.[5] For most Chinese villagers, the dramatic policy shift of the 1978 Third Plenum did promise a better world. But people in Da Fo had already envisioned this world through decades of resistance. By embracing the general thrust of the Deng-conceived policies, farmers in Da Fo hoped to improve productivity and sustain the inch-by-inch ascent they had engineered in the last years of the collective. As matters unfolded, however, the state violence that accompanied reform made this climb problematic.

In the early years of China's opening to the world, when *Time* magazine was proclaiming Deng Xiaoping "Man of the Year" and John Denver's popular song "Shanghai Breezes" connected Americans with the image of a warm, gentle, and exotic China, a handful of American scholars were permitted to commence field work in the Chinese countryside. One of the privileged few, I was granted rare access to villages in the remote Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area in the mid-1980s, and this access eventually led me to Da Fo. Little did I realize the extent to which my access was arranged in ways that walled me off from a wave of police state violence that was rolling over the countryside. Only later, after twenty trips to the rural interior, did I begin to detect a bone-deep enmity among Da Fo's farmers, a hatred that stemmed in part from unjust treatment at the hands of an emerging Deng Xiaoping–led police state at the violent dawn of reform.

[4] For this intended and happy outcome, see the excellent studies by Harding, *China's Second Revolution*, 101–107; Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China*, 137, 144–145, 146–147; Zweig, *Freeing China's Farmers*, 70–73, 139, 189–193; and Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Revolution, Resistance, and Reform*, 242–243. A great strength of Friedman et al. is that they show reform was difficult and that local power holders in the thrall of Maoist ideology were recalcitrant and slow to move.

[5] Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*, chapter 8.

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THE RESUMPTION OF WAR COMMUNISM

In 1983, Deng Xiaoping officially conceived and then pushed for a centralized national anticrime movement known as *yanda*, the Strike Hard Campaign. Ostensibly designed to halt the rise of lawless gang activity engendered by the Cultural Revolution – a phenomenon the Third Plenary Session did not address – the Strike Hard Campaign stemmed in reality from the desire of Beijing's post-Mao leadership to address a crisis in public security resulting from decollectivization and to prevent the rural poor from entering cities en masse in search of food security.

The first five years of decollectivization (1978–1983) had dismantled Mao-era militia controls on rural villages, thereby weakening the Communist Party's ability to colonize and directly rule the countryside. With the disintegration of the commune, local Public Security forces that had previously been subordinate to commune and county-level governments increasingly lost control of rural communities and suffered a power deflation, due in part to the decay and apprehensiveness of local party branches and in part to a shortage of professionally trained police.[6] A rise in economic crime in the countryside was accompanied by the mushrooming of large groups of criminals in cities, including Beijing, Tianjian, and Qingdao. Urban Public Security forces were pressed to effectively patrol and suppress this "criminal uprising," which threatened the privileged networks, neighborhoods, and kin of the key leaders of the CCP. Many of the so-called criminal bands were composed of poor drifting ruralites who wanted a better life in urban China. Some had been released from prison labor reform sites; others were just rootless unemployed villagers. Upper-level Communist Party leaders' great fear of these desperate floaters, who roamed cities in search of jobs and food security, combined with the center's fear that they would accost global diplomats, business folk, and tourists to drive the nationwide *yanda* campaign.[7]

The Cultural Revolution had indeed unleashed waves of hooliganism, vigilantism, and criminality across China. In the early years of reform, public order proved a major headache for the Chinese police. In 1980, there were 750,000 cases of police-logged crime. The figure shot up to 890,000 in 1981, dropped to 740,000 in 1982, and then spiked again in the first quarter of 1983. The crime rate went up dramatically in the peak summer tourist season, magnifying the need to establish order for city residents and global travelers. Determined to arrest the spread of urban crime, in the summer of 1983 Deng Xiaoping convened a series of meetings with Liu Fuzhi, Peng Zhen, and Zhang Jieqing. According to Liu Fuzhi's memoir, Deng criticized a published Public Security report as not being radical enough, urging Public Security forces to arrest and strictly punish criminals and to improve public education about the CCP's anticrime policies. He insisted on organizing multiple three-year-long "battles"

[6] Cf. Xu, *Mutual Empowerment*, 13, 43–44, 46–47.

[7] Liu, "Yanda Jiu Shi Zhuanzheng," 1–3.

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that would exterminate criminality in large cities. "We should arduously arrest, penalize, and reform criminals, including assassins, robbers, gangsters, and human traffickers," Deng declared. He went on to insist: "We should not leave criminals fearless. This is a people's dictatorship, and here we protect the safety of the majority. This is humanitarianism." The first *yanda* campaign, targeting 70,000 criminals – with its primary focus on hooligans, kidnappers, rapists, and murderers in key state-developed cities – exploded in August–December 1983.[8]

Deng Xiaoping's battle plan for the Strike Hard Campaign had its roots in his historical engagement with internal public security in the People's Republic of China (PRC). During the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, Deng had served as the secretary of the party's antiespionage bureau in the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan area. When the CCP won the civil war and the PRC was established, Mao Zedong called on Deng to host a series of meetings on public security, and Deng subsequently influenced PRC guidelines on internal public security, crime, and law. He played a key role in carrying out the ruthless antirightist campaigns against those who spoke up against the Great Leap Forward. He also endorsed Mao's 1959 decision to promote Xie Fuzhi to head of Public Security, knowing full well that Xie had served as Yunnan CCP provincial secretary when thousands of villagers lost their lives to the famine and that Xie was to take charge of suppressing the social unrest stemming from the intensifying famine.[9] With his triumph in the Eleventh Plenum, Deng Xiaoping instinctively seized leadership of public security work. According to Liu Fuzhi, Deng's decision to launch the 1983 Strike Hard Campaign resonated with the practical wisdom of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, for Deng reasoned that historical experience had taught the CCP that "an iron hand is essential in implementing the people's democratic dictatorship."[10] Not surprisingly, therefore, the template for the Strike Hard Campaign was remarkably similar to that of the tempestuous war communism campaigns utilized by Mao and Deng in the 1950s: it was a party-orchestrated outburst of the sort of political militancy that had driven rural people to ruin in the Great Leap Forward and its famine.[11]

Yanda shared at least two important features with the monstrous campaigns of the Mao era. Throughout 1983, city dwellers were detained on the basis of unproven, sometimes false accusations supported by party-state propaganda. In a number of cases, *yanda* was employed to target people who posed cultural threats. A movie star named Chi Zhiqiang was one victim. *China Youth Daily*

[8] Ibid. and Tanner, *Strike Hard!*, 87–94.
[9] This information comes from two sources: Guo, *China's Security State*, 16, 205–206, and Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine*, 7–8.
[10] Liu, "Yanda Jiu Shi Zhuanzheng," 1–3.
[11] See Bernstein, "Mao Zedong and the Famine"; Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*; and Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, Part 2, "Politicization of Hunger."

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accused Chi of being a criminal "black sheep" for dancing, watching movies, and engaging in one-night stands with relatives of high party cadres, and Nanjing Pubic Security forces sentenced Chi to four years in prison just as his career was taking off. Deng Lijun, whose love songs had begun to spread among young people through private cassette reproduction, was defined as a "spiritual polluter." During the Strike Hard Campaign, Sichuan Public Security pressed the courts to sentence Zhou Shifeng, a staff member of a Chengdu guest house and a fan of Deng Lijun's songs, to seven years in prison for illegally producing "obscene" music tapes. If the early 1980s saw an expansion of the private sphere in urban China, *yanda* placed limits on that expansion.[12]

Strike Hard also replicated Mao-era repression. In city after city, top CCP leaders and Public Security personnel stoked public indignation toward accused criminals, often issuing calls for quick, violent revenge against the accused. In the last quarter of 1983, tens of thousands of "criminals" were detained, arrested, and rapidly executed. In this period, the Ministry of Public Security revved up the same chilling theatrical performances of the Maoist past: people were sentenced and shamed in mass public meetings, and alleged wrongdoers were paraded through the streets with derogatory signs around their necks while scores of police cars, sirens screaming, were dispatched to seize "criminals" reported by "the masses." Presenting *yanda* as a military campaign, the CCP's Propaganda Department did everything in its power to persuade urban dwellers that such repressive violence was necessary and effective.

Whether the first Strike Hard Campaign enabled the CCP to swiftly regain the trust and loyalty of its urban constituency is unclear, but it seems that this campaign did relegitimate the Communist Party. Although urban people realized that many wrongful prosecutions had taken place and that Deng's violent policy trumped the rule of law, the majority reportedly supported the campaign. According to one report, "A lot of people paid visits to the Public Security Bureaus to thank them for their work."[13] Apparently, they felt safer because the crackdown had reestablished clear boundaries that could not be crossed without penalty.

At the same time that Deng and his reform team were carrying out Strike Hard, moreover, they were also dismantling some of the terrifying mechanisms of Maoist rule, including the public criticism session. This process allowed people in state-favored cities and towns to recover space in which they were increasingly free to reactivate the arts of family and neighborhood discourse, as well as family-based entrepreneurship and small trade. To be sure, Deng was reconfiguring a single-party-led police state, but the reformers could promise there would be more privacy and personal freedom, and they were able to

[12] See Li Jun, "1983 'Yanda' de Beilun" and "Cong Zhong Cong Kuai: 1983 Nian 'Yanda' De Beilun."
[13] Ibid.

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justify the Strike Hard Campaign as a measure for restoring political and social order so that economic development could progress unhindered by crime.[14] Still other subtle changes offered reassurance that the party-state operated differently in the era of reform. In the first Strike Hard Campaign, a few privileged, high-ranking Communist Party officials were targeted and summarily punished, cuing urbanites that the Central government would not tolerate the crimes of party-based "princelings." Additionally, some of the harshest sentences against wrongly accused celebrities were reduced, signaling the urban public that expressions of disbelief over false accusations would be heard.

The lawless politics of the Mao years had created a great fear of chaos and crime among urban dwellers, and the center was able to take advantage of this fear to override popular distrust of the emergent police state and elicit sympathy for Public Security forces portrayed as working overtime and sacrificing to protect urbanites from imagined enemies of prosperity and progress.[15] Apparently, therefore, the "right-wing populism" of the Deng-led reformers that is underscored in the writings of Jonathan Unger and Edward Friedman had a lineage going all the way back to the first Strike Hard Campaign, which appealed to educated, career-aspiring urbanites who were predisposed to support an antidemocratic police state in return for the center's retreat from constant direct interventions in daily personal life.[16]

If those with urban residence permits (*hukou*) and connections to the CCP-structured apartheid order were the principal beneficiaries of the Strike Hard Campaign, the impact of *yanda* on people in distant rural villages was more problematic. In late 1983, Public Security forces spread the Strike Hard Campaign to the Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area. Here, the campaign was designed to maintain the discriminatory city-based polity of the Communist Party as well as address crime, and so it was even more punitive. Scores of Da Fo's farmers experienced *yanda* as forceful exclusion from the promise of reform, and some still equate *yanda* with suffering and loss. We do not have any studies of *yanda* in rural China. What follows is a small step toward understanding how it was implemented, who gained and lost from it, and its political consequences in the Henan village of Da Fo.

RURAL SURPLUS LABOR AND PETTY CRIME

Da Fo's farmers hold deeply layered historical memories of the "Second Revolution" wrought by the Deng reform. These memories undercut the dominant representation of reform – one that villagers would argue was based on a distant Central government transcript that paid scant attention to local

[14] I am indebted to Harold M. Tanner for this insight. Personal correspondence, May 20, 2009.
[15] Tanner, personal correspondence, May 30, 2009.
[16] Cf. Unger, "China's Conservative Middle Class," 27–31, and Friedman, "Post-Deng China's Right Wing Populist Authoritarian Foreign Policy," 21–24.

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knowledge of the politics delivering Deng's economic policy, and one whose adherents evaluated reform policy by using an abbreviated time scale that obscured the party-state violence infusing the early years of reform.[17] The initial impact of reform on the existing condition of rural surplus labor – which in the Da Fo area meant young farmers without the means to effectively practice household agriculture, engage the market, or pursue city-based jobs – has not been fully appreciated.

The Great Leap famine and the twenty years of dearth that followed had ruined Da Fo's small farmers, and the small, infertile strips of land provided in the 1982 land redistribution severely tested their efforts to immediately boost the protein component of their food supply. In the early phase of reform, therefore, the first generation of reform-era farmers, whose fathers had barely survived Mao's assault on agriculture, faced two serious challenges. Lacking sufficient food, they were often undernourished and weak and thus unable to find the physical strength required to clear the fields for planting, to dig and maintain individual wells, and to harvest crops in a timely fashion. They were also bereft of capital and hence rarely had the ready cash to obtain seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides for their fields. The Deng "reform" did not automatically resolve these problems.[18] The official image of reform as an overnight miracle in which tillers could snap their fingers and suddenly bolster grain crop yields, increase per capita income, and fully recover earned household entitlements was not consistent with everyday reality for Da Fo's poorest farmers.

The transition to household-based agriculture was a period of vulnerability. Precisely because the Central government reenacted the pre-1949 practice of investing mainly in agricultural zones with superior crop lands and with comparatively developed transport links to the cities, where its high-grade cadres resided, the poor interior villages with infertile lands and primitive links to faraway Beijing, Tianjin, and coastal magnets of global commerce were neglected. The late-Qing/early-Republican-era pattern of disinvestment in marginal agricultural regions reappeared.[19] Da Fo's farmers suffered from this state neglect. Even when the Central government began to import phosphate-based fertilizer from the United States and Japan, Beijing and its Henan provincial clients maintained a monopoly on chemical fertilizer, selling it through state agents at artificial, dictated prices beyond the reach of Da Fo's ordinary farmers.[20]

The challenge of transitioning to household-based farming was even more daunting in Da Fo because many of the village's poor eighteen- to

[17] I am indebted to Pierson for helping me grasp this point. Cf. *Politics in Time*, 45.
[18] To his credit, Harding found that villagers were not investing capital in farming in the early reform period, though he did not locate the dearth of capital in the enduring impact of Great Leap deprivation. Cf. *China's Second Revolution*, 105.
[19] On this pattern, see Pomeranz, *Making of a Hinterland*.
[20] On the state monopoly of chemical fertilizer, see Friedman, "Deng versus the Peasantry," 39.

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twenty-five-year-old farmers hailed from families whose labor force had been decimated in the Great Leap famine. At the dawn of reform, they were farming alone. They had to use primitive tools to plow, plant, and harvest their fields individually, and they often worked those fields with their bare hands (instead of using farm tools). For some, the longer, harder work days of the Great Leap years were coming back.

Da Fo's half-starved farmers had managed to escape Mao's great famine in part by planting sweet potatoes in small household plots in 1961–1962, and they survived over the ensuing decades by relying on this durable, high-yield, fallback tuber crop. Bao Chaoxiang describes how Da Fo's farmers came to rely on sweet potatoes: "During the collective time, we did not have chemical fertilizer. We had to plant more sweet potatoes. Other crops, like wheat and corn, demanded more fertilizer, but sweet potatoes could produce high yields without fertilizer. As a result, we had a lot of sweet potatoes at home, and we had to eat them all the time."[21] The cost to farmers' health was tremendous.[22] Long-term reliance on this starchy tuber caused serious gastrointestinal disorders, including bleeding ulcers, so that sweet potatoes were associated with the woefully poor food regime of Maoist disorder. After Deng came to power, Bao and his peers were desperate to abandon sweet potato production, not just because it was unhealthy but also because they needed a high-protein diet to perform labor-intensive family-based farming, ply local markets, and occasionally search for jobs in distant towns and cities. They could not do this, however, because they were cash poor and could not afford chemical fertilizer, the price of which, again, was dictated by the state.[23]

They faced, moreover, the perennial scourge of tillers: the tax burden. To be sure, early-Deng tax claims provided relief from collective-era procurement, but in Da Fo the per-household grain tax spiraled upward, reaching 20 percent of total income in the first decade of reform. Da Fo's farmers could have coped with these difficulties if the Deng-led reformers had funded vocational training programs supportive of family-based farming as an enterprise, but the center failed them, leaving them with no way of developing the skills they needed to produce specialized products for the market or to acquire the knowledge necessary to engage in legal, quickly profitable sideline production.

Finally, we must include a much neglected factor in this counternarrative of the politics of the early years of the Deng-led reform. In places such as Da Fo, farmers remained powerless to effect reform on their terms or to openly challenge local CCP leaders who either opposed or reworked reform to enrich mainly themselves, their families, and their cronies. For the center, power still grew out the barrel of a gun, and the center's local cadres hustled to make certain that guns did not fall into the hands of farmers when decollectivization

[21] Bao Chaoxiang, interview.
[22] Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*, chapter 9.
[23] Bao Chaoxiang, interview.

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triggered the disbandment of the militias. In Da Fo, the years 1978–1983 witnessed an upsurge in the attempts of farmers to acquire primitive hunting rifles. Fearing its rural cadre base would be hunted, the center responded by issuing an order for local party activists to seize all such weapons, which is precisely what they did. Though it is unlikely that rural people would have used such weapons to directly challenge the center, the important point is that they were left without the resources to enforce the promise of reform against local power holders who twisted reform to serve their own ends.

Whereas the early 1980s saw *People's Daily* churning out columns on the dangers of an emergent class of self-serving, ostentatious, rich peasants, this was hardly an issue in Da Fo village. The more salient problem was that few of its poorest inhabitants, whose households had yet to recover from loss in the Great Leap famine years, were able to achieve a stable livelihood through family-based farming. To be sure, with reform, life was getting better. For nine months a year, there was more food, but farmers still lacked the capital and the chemical fertilizer needed to improve food quality and provide for their households across an entire year. Many recall that they remained handcuffed by the inherited poverty of the collective era, and they remember the challenge of making up the cost of government disinvestment, improving soil fertility, and keeping up with tax claims as overwhelming. Coupled with local party corruption, the center's policy of rushing the transition to household-based agriculture left Da Fo's poorest tillers in the lurch. Many, therefore, had to engage in high-risk behavior in order to survive.

Desperate young males frequently turned to petty theft in order to compete in the political economy of the reform era. The Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area was convulsed by a wave of economic crime in the early 1980s. By 1983–1985, Da Fo's poor farmers had joined this rat race, pilfering both private and public goods in order to make ends meet. Many of the petty thieves were the young adult orphans of Mao's war communism, protected from police investigators by kin who had themselves suffered from the debilitating consequences of Mao-era malfunctions. They most often targeted the state-monopolized good that was absolutely essential for any chance of success in farming the fields: chemical-based fertilizer. This black gold was not only a requirement for boosting productivity in Da Fo's nitrogen-deficient fields, it was associated in the popular imagination with party-state domination and was inextricably connected to popular memories of the debilitating food regime of Mao's Great Leap famine and its long-term damage to the body.

Bao Nianxi, who was thirty-two years old and a father of three when Da Fo's collective broke up, recalls how he became a petty criminal and target of the *yanda* campaign:

> After the land was divided to my household, I was in a dilemma. I did not have any chemical fertilizer. Chemical fertilizer was very hard to find at the time. … Since we did not have any chemical fertilizer in Da Fo, a few young people in Da Fo discussed what to

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do. Someone suggested that we should try to steal some chemical fertilizer bags from the passing government trucks. We thought this was a good idea. Therefore, a few of us went to the roadside to take the bags from the trucks. We dug some holes in the highway, which slowed down the passing trucks. As the trucks slowed, we mounted them and threw down bags of the chemical fertilizer. The drivers . . . did not dare stop us, because there were quite a few people doing this. They were afraid we would beat them up.[24]

Scores of Da Fo's young farmers secretly boarded government trucks passing along Dongle county's poor roads in the midnight hours and threw huge bags of fertilizer onto the ground. Villagers escalated this struggle to rectify the exclusive party-state domination of chemical fertilizer with abandon until local Public Security forces began replacing the fertilizer truck drivers with nonuniformed agents and then, increasingly, engineering surprise arrests of the culprits. The official crackdown on such petty crime became entwined with the politics of the Strike Hard Campaign. Thus, in late 1983, the Deng-led center initiated a police onslaught against a rising tide of rural petty crime that its own flawed developmental policies had exacerbated and to some extent produced. As Scot Tanner has noted, the *yanda* campaign was characterized by "frenetic overtime police activity."[25] In the vicinity of Da Fo, this activity was characterized by injustice in the identification and selection of "criminals" for arrest, the classification of crimes, the treatment of prisoners, and the severity of sentencing. To some extent, therefore, this campaign replicated the Great Leap model of policing, for between 1958 and 1961 the tensions between rural people and the CCP were, according to Xiezhi Guo, the result of the public security's harsh treatment of villagers who had turned to small crime out of desperation as well as the pain of acute hunger.[26]

THE INJUSTICE OF *YANDA* IN DA FO

In the name of *yanda*, Public Security forces throughout the Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area subjected poor farmers to everything from arbitrary arrest, frame-ups, and false accusations of group crime to kangaroo trials with laughable procedural protections to cruel sentences and punishments, including, according to Scot Tanner, "the use of execution on a tremendous numerical scale."[27] Public Security relied on local party leaders and their minions to implement the Strike Hard Campaign at the village level.[28] This practice, coupled with the poor training of the police, gave rise to discretionary arrests involving arbitrary decisions by village party leaders implicated in the unjust punishments of the Mao era. Describing the theft of electrical wire – the sort of petty crime common in the early years of reform – Tang Wensheng offers one

[24] Bao Nianxi, interview. [25] Tanner, "Campaign-Style Policing," 171.
[26] Guo, *China's Security State*, 205–206. [27] Tanner, "Campaign-Style Policing," 171.
[28] Cf. ibid., 177.

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