The World Turned Downside Up: Three Orders of Meaning in the Peasants' Traditional Political World

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Three Orders of Meaning in the Peasants' Traditional Political World

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Almost all Western social scientists tend to conceptualize traditional Asian peasant societies as paternalist political orders which developed from the imbalanced personalized land and lineage relationships of feudal society (Pye, 1962; Lande, 1965; Phillips, 1965; Scott, 1972a). At the bottom, these societies have been termed patron-client political orders. They are, according to Lande (1973: 105), generally characterized by a dyadic interpersonal relationship which is a "broad but imprecise spectrum of mutual obligations consistent with the belief that the patron should display an almost parental concern for and responsiveness to the needs of his client, and that the latter should display almost filial loyalty to the patron." In their analyses of rural social relations, the advocates of patron-client theory usually place class relationships within a patron-client framework and then

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emphasize vertical relationships over horizontal patterns of peasant-elite interaction (Solomon, 1971; Scott, 1972a; Scott and Kerkvliet, 1973; Townsend, 1974).

In applying this theory to the study of peasant uprisings, patron-client analysts point to the powerless political positions and the dependency orientations of peasant masses as the most salient factors contributing to the false starts and failures of contemporary peasant revolutions. The major intellectual premises in the theory of clientelism and dependency, as loosely developed in the studies of peasant rebellions, carry a carefully conceived message about the role of peasants in revolutionary politics.

From the vantage point of dependency theory, the peasants are seldom the makers of revolutionary political movements in the contemporary world. Peasants rarely rebel, and when they do rebel they rarely succeed in seizing political power. As subordinates in patron-client political orders, peasants supposedly subscribe fully to the dominant paternalist ideas which validate superior-subordinate relationships in the countryside. The peasants rebel primarily because their local patrons, who turn away from the needs of the old village world as they take up the values of commerce and civilization, default on their traditional services to their clientele in the villages—the peasant masses. As clients who are afraid of this patron abandonment, peasants generally do not seek to overthrow landlords and local governments. Instead, the rural people revolt to reestablish the idealized traditional paternalist relationships which once offered them protection and security. Given their subordinate vision of the world, the peasants are by and large powerless dependents. They are not capable of changing their own world through revolution.

The task of making rural revolution falls to politically sophisticated professional revolutionaries, usually the intellectual vanguard of a modern political party. Where these elites are able to arouse and organize the peasants to participate in a victorious rural political movement, the peasants nonetheless remain subservient and subordinate in politics, for the revolution in the old

village world is simply another patron-client rebellion. The revolutionaries who cry "power to the people" don the clothes of traditional benefactors and reestablish the bonds of paternalism, dependency, and hierarchy in their relations with peasant masses. For the peasants, therefore, the meaning of revolution is neither freedom nor liberation, but the dictatorship of a new patron-client order which will at least allow them to meet the subsistence conditions of their existence.

Although not set forth fully in any one study on China, the premises in dependency theory provide the pillars for the theory of the Chinese revolution as a patron-client rebellion under the command of a statist Communist Party. According to this theory, rural China before the revolution was a society with a "politically reticent peasantry" (Solomon, 1971: 523), and without a tradition of antipaternalist peasant revolts (Solomon, 1971: 514; Kataoka, 1974: 301). As a psychocultural type conceived in relations of hierarchy, the peasants were not the stuff of which a revolution could be made or that could make a revolution (Kataoka, 1974: 295-301). Peasant protests before the revolution supposedly were not collective political acts aimed at stopping a politics which was reducing rural people to wretchedness and substituting a politics which would fundamentally transform the mode of governing rural society. The peasants, confused by the loss of paternal authority relations, were protesting simply to defend their spatially separated and culturally specific home villages and, as such, were ready to heed the commands of any protective authoritarian political force (Kataoka, 1974: 295-301).

Since peasant protests were restorationist rather than revolutionary, there supposedly was no preexisting social support for a rural class revolution in China. Mao and the intellectual vanguard of the Communist Party thus created peasant support by destroying the old agrarian elite and seizing state power. Mao and the party, *not the peasant masses,* made the Chinese revolution by penetrating thousands of separate cellular village units and organizing them into a vertically tiered national resistance movement (Solomon, 1971: 515; Kataoka, 1974: 301-302). Under the Communist Party, the peasants still remain subordinates in

politics because the party substituted its own authoritarian rule for the dictatorship of past patriarchs (Townsend, 1974: 32-33). In this theory, Mao Ze-dong becomes the godfather of a benevolent communist dictatorship with only one value system. As the godfather of a prepolitical peasant movement and the apostle of Marxism, Mao's revolutionary mission is to control and organize peasants "in a society where traditions have not yet prepared people for a critical participatory role in the affairs of state" (Solomon, 1971: 517; compare Pfeffer, 1972: 620-623). For the peasants, then, the revolution is neither a realization of traditional folk justice nor the fulfillment of millennial dreams to rule their own lives. The Communist Party did not win by enhancing what is revered by the rural folks. Instead, the revolutionary triumph was largely dependent upon the total destruction of the old village world (Kataoka, 1974: 295). Since the peasant proclivity for dependence lingers on in post-1949 China, Mao's revolution is a continuing war which transforms peasant clients into proletarian gladiators who consciously reject the political culture of subordination, dependency, and inferiority only after they comprehend the ideas of class and communism.

What are the origins of dependency theory in the field of modern Chinese studies? Dependency theory grows largely out of the interpretations of elites rather than the experience of masses. The main reasons for the circulation of these interpretations lie in the elite traditions of social science on China and peasant societies. On the one hand, the early interpretations of peasant activities to which the so-called China watchers were exposed were usually cast in elite terms—terms which made political sense to the gentry and officials with whom Westerners dealt. These Great Tradition interpretations of peasant strivings, which were reinforced by the patron-client bonds between Western intellectuals and Chinese elites in the period of colonialism, became the unquestionable knowledge in centers for Chinese studies after the Mao Ze-dong revolution. On the other hand, social science is an elite language, and intellectual history, the main social science strategy for research on revolution in rural societies, argued that the values and ideas of the triumphant power holders directly

reflected the demands and ideas put forth by peasants in their struggles. Having mastered the principles of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, Western intellectuals wrote about peasants and revolution in terms of their reassuring elite categories and concepts. If intellectual historians did not intentionally reinforce dependency theory, neither did they challenge its fundamental premises. In both of these traditions peasants were cast as the victims of revolutionary defeats and the followers of revolutionary victories, and the very idea of the peasant masses making revolution became heresy.

Although the theory of clientelism and dependency provides some useful starting points for comprehending political change in peasant societies (Powell, 1970: 412-418; Scott, 1972a: 95-99), this paradigm of dependency and patronage is inadequate for explaining the nature of peasant involvement in victorious rural revolutions. To comprehend the possibility of a successful peasant revolution, one must take seriously the notion that the people who make the revolutionary movement go are the peasants who support the insurgent army. The makers of the first and foremost rural revolution in the contemporary world were, I suggest, the peasants themselves. The revolutionary political movement which Mao Ze-dong led to power in China was a peasant revolution.

We lack a microtheory of the old political order which more or less turns the paradigm of patron-client politics downside up and talks about the countersociety of the peasant masses and the ways the peasants themselves made revolutionary change in Chinese society. I do not propose to discard the useful elements in dependency theory. But rather than stress only the multiple patronage services which elites provided peasants when the traditional dynastic order was working at its best, I intend to focus on the ways peasants sustained their own livelihood and made their own culture. Rather than emphasize mainly the paternal arrangements which preserved the rural peace and perpetuated the ruling political order, I treat the paternalist practices of traditional Chinese elites as an antipopulist means of oppressing the peasantry. And rather than explain peasant

practices in elite terms, I investigate the counterpractices whereby the rural folks sought to emancipate themselves from elite oppression and put their own pristine values in command of politics. As an investigation into the social and psychological sources of peasant politics and revolutionary change in rural China, this essay attempts to establish the starting points for a theory of the revolutionary world the masses made by going backward into the peasants' traditional political world.

I. THE PEASANTS AS THE MAKERS OF CHINA'S LITTLE TRADITION: PEASANT SELF-RELIANCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

According to the patron-client versions of peasant-elite relations, the traditional Chinese elite provided peasants the conditions of their subsistence in exchange for peasant labor. Although rural class relations were rooted in a system of human bondage and sharp social inequalities, Chinese peasants supposedly obtained an array of subsistence benefits from their mutual obligations and reciprocal exchanges with agrarian elites. These elite provisions included the basic means to subsistence, social crisis insurance, protection and security, extravillage goods and services, and patron-sponsored collective benefits in the village (Scott, 1972a, 1972b). In a suggestive application of dependency theory, one student went so far as to claim, "Chinese peasants considered these relations as legitimate as long as local elites guaranteed their daily subsistence needs" (Thaxton, 1974: 279-288). What this top-down paternalist version of traditional Chinese society misses, in an important sense, is that the peasants carried on many self-reliant subsistence endeavors independent of and even in spite of the agrarian elite. In reality, of course, Chinese peasants were part of a larger society in which they were at the mercy of landlords and local governments. In their continuing desire to avoid dependence on these potential political predators, however, the peasants were, ideally, striving to carve out their own autonomous subsistence niche.

A. THE PEASANT FAMILY AS THE SUBSISTENCE MAKER

In traditional Chinese society, the peasant family with its extended kinship relations scratched out its own family subsistence (Fei Hsiao-Tung, 1946: 1-17; Fried, 1963: 3, 17-21; Myrdal, 1963; Thaxton, 1975b). Every peasant knew that each peasant household, rather than the local landlord elite, assumed responsibility for providing its own subsistence and security. The fiercely self-reliant tilling and trading activities of each small solitary peasant family was the basic way the peasants made ends meet.

In traditional China the peasants supplemented these family subsistence endeavors with joint family mutual aid arrangements for realizing the right of each family to obtain a subsistence (Needham, 1963: 133; Crook and Crook, 1959: 161-165; Li Zhunlan, 1946). These mutual aid arrangements among peasant families, being mostly customary horizontal exchanges such as plough sharing and substitute tilling, were the most important secondary means of practicing subsistence principles in material pursuits for peasant families. That peasants always preferred to rely on these small neighborhood and field companion mutual aid groups, rather than turn to landlord or gentry patriarchs for assistance, suggests they considered their own horizontal exchanges a more reliable and less threatening means to subsistence than patron arrangements in normal harvest years. This peasant tendency to shun the inequitable terms of imbalanced exchanges with agrarian elites in favor of the equitable terms of their own family-centered mutual aid arrangements was common practice among almost all Chinese peasants. An unwritten subsistence proverb in Chinese peasant folklore was, "whenever possible practice self-reliance and avoid entangling dependency relationships with landlords because these may jeopardize subsistence." For the overwhelming majority of peasants, the only acceptable elites were those who did not employ their political power to prevent a family from fulfilling its subsistence needs.

B. THE PEASANT FAMILY AS A SOCIAL CRISIS INSURANCE AGENCY

For peasants who supposedly could count on landlord patrons as a "generalized relief agency of first resort" (Scott, 1972b) in periods of economic distress and social suffering, Chinese peasants were extremely cautious about soliciting relief from landlords in periods of crisis. Undoubtedly some tillers, especially tenants, did turn to landlords for crop rent reductions in the aftermath of poor harvests and for low interest grain loans to tide them through the spring famine. These were ancient practices in tenant-landlord relations throughout most of China. Nonetheless, the conditional terms of elite-centered emergency relief services in China often entailed potentially devastating social costs to the peasant family. When Chinese peasant families were not threatened by successive crop failures and continuing famine, they generally relied on the resources of their own households and their joint family mutual aid groups, such as homemade herbal prescriptions and interest-free short-term grain loans, to fight off malnutrition and starvation. For the peasants, these small group strategies of subsistence relief were ways of avoiding the heavy-handed conditions of elite-sponsored aid (Taihang renchia, 1964).

Except where labor power was very short, the traditional Chinese landlord elite made social crisis provisions available to the peasants mainly on terms favorable to themselves with little regard for the threatening consequences for the peasantry—consequences which could jeopardize peasant security even during abundant crop years. Landlord crop rent reductions in poor harvests was customary practice in many of the rich grain growing villages of Shandong and the lush rice producing villages of Guandong (Bo-hai qu dangwei, 1944: 1-104; Holoch, 1973). Yet landlords by and large made these reductions only at the urging of tenants, and those same landlords made up the difference (and then some) in their losses in abundant crop years. A landlord who carried his tenant through the year following a poor harvest was likely to call the debt in tenant work time and tenant production yields during the following harvest season. In the eyes

of tenants, landlords made a grain loan, for example, because it signaled the continuity of a period of dependent tenure in which the landlord could extract a larger share of the crop, and perhaps additional work duties and social favors not part of the customary relationship—these were terms to avoid, for they led to *mastership*.

In China the village people knew that landlords actually seized the opportunity presented by subsistence crisis situations, such as famine or epidemics, to strip the poor of their means to subsistence. It was in hard times that the landowning elite attempted unilaterally to dictate exchanges which were detrimental to peasant family welfare. Under these conditions, the landlord provision of relief was not always seen as a service which expressed a deepening relationship between landlord patrons and tenant clients (compare Scott, 1972a: 99; Powell, 1970: 412; Emerson, 1975: 8). The peasants bitterly resented the long-term social drawbacks from the immediate subsistence payoffs in their exchanges with landlords under crisis conditions.

A sequence from Feng De-ying's novel, *The Bitter Herb* (1959: 1-150), an account of peasant troubles in Shandong, illustrates this very illusory injustice in landlord relief to peasants in hard times. When spring famine stalked the peasants of Wang Kun village, a peasant community near the Kun Lun mountains in eastern Shandong, the powerful patriarch of the Wang clan took advantage of the desperate situation of the peasants, including the respected peasant elders who practiced many Confucian paternalist beliefs themselves, to deprive several villagers of their rights to family and home. The clan patriarch, Wang Wei-i, made a spring hunger loan to his indebted aged tenant clansman, Si Ta-ye (Ssu Ta Yeh), only on the condition that Si Ta-ye grant him the sole right to arrange a marriage for the tenant's daughter. The young woman opposed the betrothal. The aged tenant and his daughter entered into this exchange only because it was the only way to keep from starving. Although Si Ta-ye expressed his gratitude for benevolence from his patron as he accepted the grain loan, the old tenant and his daughter came to terms with patriarch Wang against their will. When the grand patron

later compelled the woman to marry the mentally disadvantaged son of another clan member, Si Ta-ye and his daughter bitterly resented this social favor.

By no stretch of this tenant's imagination was this landlord grain loan taken as benevolent social crisis insurance from a patron. Instead, the old tenant and his daughter interpreted the loan as the landlord's means of depriving their household of the daughter's customary labor contribution, the daughter's traditional marriage rights, and the customary provisions for parental care which were part of normal nonretardee marriage couple arrangements among peasants. For a small peasant family, the same grain loan which brought momentary relief from hunger might, as in this instance, also break the affectionate bonds of parent-child relations and double the burden of daily work life duties for the parents. It was precisely because of the unwritten conditional terms embedded in relief arrangements such as this one that Chinese peasants traditionally saw landlord patriarchs as specific predatory relief agencies of the very last resort.

C. PEASANT SELF-PROTECTION AND SELF-DEFENSE

Chinese peasants traditionally took the initiative in establishing protective relations with landlord patrons only when their livelihood was in peril. The old popular idiom, *lin shi bao fo jiao,* meaning to "embrace the Buddha's leg only in time of need" or to "look to a benefactor only when one is in difficulty," was one of several peasant metaphorical warnings against establishing entangling dependency obligations with powerful landowning patriarchs (Chiang Ker-chiu, n.d.). When subsistence harvests and prosperous markets prevailed, peasants usually avoided soliciting those protective patron services which engendered a personal sacrifice on their part, such as picking fruit in the landlord's orchard without pay or fighting in the landlord's clan war. These reciprocal obligations to landlord patriarchs cut into the peasants' cropping schedule and posed a serious physical threat to the peasants' physical well-being.

Chinese peasants attempted to protect themselves by forging their own self-protection and self-defense arrangements. Within

the villages, the peasants participated in both joint self-help and small-scale collective resistance activities against landlords and local governments—the very political figures who are portrayed as paternalist protectors in patron-client pictures of traditional society. The peasants pooled their household funds for court suits against landlords who transgressed their private property rights and protected each other from government tax collectors and bailiffs (Zhao Shu-li, 1953, 1955; Taihang renchia, 1964). When landlords provoked nonsubsistence grievances, such as defending a client who had raped a peasant woman or conscripting the skilled son in a labor-short peasant household, the rural folks sought to settle these conflicts through family and clan arbitration committees and through village-regulated wrestling matches and *gongfu* fights. When landlords tried to cheat the peasants on major subsistence matters, such as refusing to reduce the crop rent or grant a grain loan when the harvest was poor, peasants called rent strikes and threatened to eat the crops in the fields.

In traditional China there were times when the peasants joined together in small-scale collective resistance. When the crops failed in a village already suffering from high crop rents and government grain tax squeeze, hungry bands of three, four, and five peasants left their home villages and roamed the countryside as small groups of petty thieves. By and large they pilfered only the crops of the large landowners, taking only enough of the crop to meet the immediate subsistence needs of their own families. In famine situations, many of these peasant bands joined armies made up of hundreds and then thousands of uprooted village people. These "baresticks," as the Chinese villagers called the uprooted peasants, took the grain, tools, and clothing of rich landowners to redistribute among the walking skeletons in their own poor armies. The leaders of these insurgent forces redistributed a subsistence share of the grain they got from landlord and local government granaries to the hungry peasants in the villages and temple market spots of their changing encampments. The Confucian landlords said these rebels were bandits. The desperate peasants in the villages and temple fairs, however, saw the rebel leaders of these swollen ex-peasant bands as saviors

who would set things right with the landlords and governments who were plundering them of their rights to harvest and home.

D. PEASANT BROKERAGE AND BARGAINING ARRANGEMENTS

Rather than depend primarily on the Confucian lords of the land to help obtain goods and services from outside their native communities, as many advocates of dependency theory assume (Scott, 1972a, 1972b), Chinese peasants customarily relied on their families, friends, and field companions for brokerage services. Poor peasant families arranged for a second or third son to take up an apprenticeship under an owner-cultivator family who practiced a profitable side-occupation, such as carpentry or leathercraft work, during the slack season and, in return, sent their sons to do field-work for the middle peasant family during the busy agricultural seasons. Owner-cultivators and rich peasants, rather than relying solely on introductions or financial aid from benevolent landlord guarantors, took the suggestions and advice of their family mutual aid groups and field companions in hiring part-time field hands to assist them in planting, weeding, and earth-banking during the spring planting or with crop cutting during the autumn harvest. When peasants made their trips to the market fairs twenty to sixty miles from their native villages, they usually arranged their own string of services for the round-trip marketing. The wife prepared a steamed bread loaf for the husband to munch on the road and the husband arranged his own temporary shelter from rain storms or road bridge detours along the way. Before going to the market fair, the peasant family carefully counted every copper coin they could spare from their meager budgetary savings for the subsistence commodity purchases they had to make in the marketplace.

In the marketplace, the peasants negotiated with tinkers for saws and files and with carters for oxen and mules. In addition to these self-reliant extravillage tilling and trading arrangements, the peasants contracted their own cultural brokers. They enlisted

local matchmakers of their own choosing—perhaps in exchange for a few bolts of cloth or an invitation to the wedding feast—to arrange the marriage of a child, and they enlisted small groups of family friends for funeral processions. In all of these ways, Chinese peasant families practiced self-reliance in securing gains for their households and small groups in their relationships with people in the extravillage world.

E. VILLAGE SELF-RELIANCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY: COLLECTIVE MEANS OF PEASANT SURVIVAL IN TRADITIONAL CHINA

For most Chinese tillers village life was a continuing collective experiment in self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Given the paucity of evidence, it is difficult to determine whether these collective endeavors were class based or community based, in which case they most likely held a vision of local interest per se that was not necessarily the same as peasant class interests. Nonetheless, Chinese peasants probably did engage in activities for serving mainly their own horizontal interests.

What exactly were some of the collective practices of peasant survival in traditional Chinese society? In almost any given village peasants learned how to scratch out a subsistence through family and friendship experiences which were in tune with subsistence-oriented collective enterprises. When to plant a particular crop, how deep to till the soil, and how many times to hoe a specific crop—peasants picked up practical advice on these questions through their joint hoeing and weeding activities in the rice fields, through their discussions with field companions in dinner field meetings, and through their talks with mutual aid group leaders from various villages in the temple market fairs (Li Zhunlan, 1946: 1-46).

Chinese peasants also came together to save themselves from common enemies such as disease and natural disasters. When sickness struck the members of a village family, the family relatives and friends solicited door-to-door donations from both their prosperous and poor neighbors in the village (Liu Chang,

1962), either to purchase an herbal prescription in the nearby marketplace or to arrange for medical care by a traveling country doctor. The peasants preferred this course of community action rather than entreating the local landlord household for the service of the physician in its employ. Admittedly, the peasants did expect local rulers to make available much of the useful book knowledge which the dynasty carefully put forth for promoting abundance in agriculture. For example, the traditional almanac, with its astronomical and meterological advice on planting and ploughing routines, was made available by the agrarian political elite. The dispensing of this knowledge by local governments may have been bound up with rituals meaningful to the peasants, but in the vicinity of many temple pilgrimage centers there usually were some semiliterate peasants who interpreted and applied the information from the almanacs by a number of cues and tips about agricultural ecology acquired from their fathers and grandfathers over time. In many villages, such as those dotting the Henan counties at the foot of the Taihang mountains, peasant weather observers accumulated meterological information about climatic conditions and relied on local folk proverbs about weather forecasting to adapt to changing natural conditions ("Peasant Weather Observer," 1975: 26-28). It was the time-tested practical experiences of these peasant weather forecasters, not the book knowledge of landlord and gentry patriarchs, that informed rural people to carry out emergency crop cuttings before sudden flooding or to wait until the rainstorms passed to prepare to fire limestone.

In China the peasants expressed a collective commitment to guarantee the sovereignty and survival of their villages in periods of war. When warring troops threatened to pillage, the peasants converted their mutual aid groups into small-scale crop watch teams and self-defense squads. The rural people resisted war mobilization measures which threatened to disrupt their short-run subsistence tilling and trading routines, causing production and marketing losses. The peasants opposed military conscription by underreporting the number of children in their households, by flight, and by anti-induction protests, such as mass

petitioning and demonstrations which easily exploded into violent riots. They also resisted mandatory noncompensatory war service duties. If peasant carters were not compensated by military commanders for using their prized oxen in transporting grain provisions, then they hid or sold their carts and animals. Similarly, if peasant porters were not provided adequate subsistence services (grain, boiled water, rest facilities) in villages along the routes to the front-line battlefields, then they deserted or staged transport stoppage protests along the roads to war. When the armies of warrior patrons were unable to ameliorate the pressures for participation in dangerous war-related activities, peasants sidestepped and stood up against these outside threats to village sovereignty and security (compare Elvin, 1973: 19, 27-28, 33, 38).

Chinese peasants also counted heavily on each other for garnering resources and services which would meet the collective needs of their own communities. When a young married couple could not afford to build a house, the friends and neighbors, who also were members of their mutual aid groups, led small groups of villagers into the pine forests to cut timber, along the dry river beds to gather stones, and to the ponds to dig the loess earth for constructing the family shelter (Liu Chang, 1962; Chen, 1973: 5-6). In the hilly villages of Zhejiang, hundreds of peasants reportedly traveled together annually to gather bird droppings for fertilizer from countless bird nests in giant caves (Chen, 1972: 78). The pesants also pooled their funds to arrange for carpenters and masons to repair the public temples or to bring a well-builder to construct a surface water well in their village (compare Myrdal, 1963: 95-108). These collective efforts to obtain goods and services independent of landlord-patron sponsorship were, of course, endeavors to enhance and ensure the self-sufficiency and sovereignty of the peasant community.

A Qualification About Autonomy, Stratification, and Dependence

Of course Chinese peasants were not actually independent or self-reliant in a strict sense. Peasants were dependent on their

equals rather than unequals, so that no permanent imbalance and stratification was involved. At the same time, although the quest for subsistence autonomy may have been a very real concern, we cannot speak of an ideal universe of free-standing, autonomous peasant families without hierarchy or some measure of dependence. What are we to make of the religious subordination and followerships—dependencies in which peasants evidently freely participated? Did peasants participate in these relationships because of false consciousness? It seems unlikely that Chinese peasants saw all distinctions in rank and dependencies as illegitimate. The captain of an egalitarian mutual aid group or the religious leader of an egalitarian monastic order were examples of what was often, in Chinese peasant minds, nonexploitative dependency. Among Chinese peasants, then, there were efforts to establish nonexploitative dependency relationships that set the moral standards against which dependence relations could be judged. Stratification *within* China's Little Tradition did not necessarily imply exploitation, and where it did foster egalitarian relationships the peasants may very well have emphasized these bonds in order to enhance their power to avoid permanent dependencies with their overlords.

The continuing attempt by peasants to avoid permanent dependencies was also contingent on their capacity to acquire the land, property, and skills which allowed them to produce and procure an alternative means of sustenance (compare Alavi, 1974: 418-420). In China, the small peasant freeholders, peasants who traditionally cultivated their own land, were free from direct dependence on landlord patriarchs for acquiring their means of livelihood. Access to land, plus some very cohesive lineage ties among these owner-cultivators, enabled the middle peasants to avoid and confront landlords who attempted to dominate village affairs. Even more important, where these owner-cultivators constituted a significant percentage of the whole peasantry, as was increasingly the case in several regions of northern China from Ming times, the landless peasants and tenants who otherwise had no choice but to submit to the dependence imposed by landlords were able to align with landowning tillers to achieve

greater leverage in their negotiations with landlords. Stratification within the Little Tradition, then, was also important for the possible power alignments peasants could arrange among themselves vis-à-vis landlords and gentry. It may be that poor peasants and tenants idealized, respected, and envisioned becoming owner-cultivators partly because these conservative landowning peasants afforded a greater autonomy in political action for even the more marginal, powerless peasants of any given village.

II. THE LITTLE TRADITION AS A SUBORDINATE CULTURE: LANDLORD POWER AND ELITE CONCEPTIONS OF PEASANT DEPENDENCY

Whereas Chinese peasants preferred to exchange goods and services primarily among themselves, they nonetheless participated in a wide range of reciprocal relationships with overlords. Partly through their landholdings and lineage ties and partly through their clan posts and literatus positions, the local elites were able to render many ordinary peasants dependent on them for many goods and services which were beyond the strength and scope of peasant groups.

The prototype of unequal and imbalanced elite-peasant relationships in traditional rural China was the landlord-tenant bond (Thaxton, 1975b: 323-331; Hsiao, 1960: 384-385; Rawski, 1973). Tenants traditionally paid a portion of the crop in rent to landlords who could permit or prevent the fulfillment of subsistence. The tenants sought a cluster of subsistence provisions in return for their labor and crop payments. These provisions included the right to secure employment, as evidenced in five-year leases, and a customary subsistence share of the harvest, as indicated by half of the crop under customary 50/50 sharecropping agreements. Tenants petitioned their landlords to reduce the crop rent by 25% of the usual rent in the aftermath of poor harvests and to cancel the rent in the face of successive crop failures. Tenants also solicited peck-for-peck loans to carry them through the spring hunger. They requested landlords to

provide head towels to protect them from sunstroke; to hire extra field hands to help weed and earth-bank during the spring planting; and to make bonus payments for special work performances, such as cash tips for delivery a calf or ewe.

The landlords at the apex of local power usually were in a position to arrange a variety of services to the villages within their domains. The wealthy landowners often supplied materials and hired people to dredge the canals and to construct the irrigation dykes and lake reservoirs which contained water for the village fields. These same figures, in their unofficial role as village grain tax assessors, appealed to the *di pao* in the employ of local tax administrations for grain tax reductions and rebates when the crops were poor. These local overlords punished crop thieves, paid peasants to build moats to defend the villages against bandits, and enlisted peasants in corps to guard the village granaries from pillaging warrior bands. Traditionally, landlords also arranged an array of brokerage services to the villages, such as paying a rock chiseler to repair the village temple (Liu Chang, 1962), hiring a geomancer to advise on the location of the village office, or sponsoring old operas and plays which the peasants attended for entertainment (Zhong Da, 1974: 1-7).

For the landlords of old China, patronage was the primary political means for containing class antagonisms in social and psychological relations which did not dangerously question their right to rule the peasantry. The efforts of overlords to shape peasant images of their multiple subsistence services as "patronage by benefactors" were, in an important sense, the efforts of the agrarian political elite to validate itself in the eyes of the peasants. At the same time, the elites introduced their paternal political philosophy in their material exchanges with peasants in an attempt to cultivate social conformity and contain political deviance. Seen in the context of unbalanced subsistence exchanges, the political meaning of several Confucian concepts for legitimating landlord rule provides some starting points for understanding elite conceptions of peasants as dependents.

The Chinese landlords who performed these multiple subsistence services in the villages saw and styled themselves as the

patrons of the poor. It was from the doctrines of Confucius that these masters of the land derived the language and logic to propagate a paternalist image of their political authority. They drew from the Confucian idea of the "Mandate of Heaven" to claim the divine right to rule the peasantry. What validated their political authority ethically, in their own eyes, was their belief in the superiority of the benevolence, virtue, and propriety which imbued their relationships with peasant dependents (Bian Shi-zhong, 1974). In the eyes of the elites, these Confucian concepts of political legitimacy were what confirmed landlords as superiors and cast peasants in the role of subordinates and dependents. True, the Confucian ethic also taught obligations and noblesse oblige which oppressed peasants could come to see not as privileges but as rights. Nonetheless, in landlord eyes, these rights were rights only because they were bestowed upon the peasants by the patrons of the Great Tradition.

In presenting subsistence provisions to the peasants, Chinese landlords sought to wrap peasant minds in the bonds of their own patron-client thinking. In paying melons to the tenants who tilled the fields, for example, landlords claimed they were bestowing gifts from a benefactor. When the landlords made grain loans during the spring hunger they often behaved as if they were doling out grants to grateful dependents. In mobilizing an army to beat back bandit assaults aimed at their own property, landlords declared they were the protectors of the poor. And the landlords who arranged brokerage services for their tenants, such as hiring a carter to take the crops to market, said they were performing favors from a superior.

The landowning patriarchs presented their collective services in a similar style. They claimed they were the benefactors of the whole village when they established public relief granaries for the hungry or served as legal guarantors for a village delegation to the local courts. The old ruling groups also sponsored Confucian operas to spread their paternalist code of behavior among the peasantry. For example, the village opera "Clapping the Hands Three Times" was an old Confucian play which exalted a young woman in a rich family who rebelled against her father, a prime minister she accused of detesting the poor and loving the rich, to

marry a beggar for whom she had feelings of benevolent affection. By sponsoring plays such as this one, Chinese landlords were able to present themes of class conciliation through marriage and to tell the poor they might gain benefits from patrons (male or female) by prostrating themselves before rich influential families (Zhong Da, 1974: 1-7).

The Confucian claim to virtuous rule also carried connotations of landlord paternalism and peasant dependency. According to Confucius "anyone who rules with virtue is like the North Polar Star, which is located in the center with all other stars turning around it" (Bian Shi-zhong, 1974). This astrological analogy equated the landlord patron with the North Polar Star, a celestial symbol of reliability and good fortune in Chinese astrology, and relegated the peasants to a position where they were to pay homage to the patron or the lead star for guidance and favor.

Chinese overlords usually insisted that the peasants conduct themselves as subordinates in the presence of superiors. The paternal kindness with which the landlord served the needs of the peasants in his employ supposedly fostered a life-long social obligation for peasants in their role as landlord dependents (Solomon, 1971: 1-36). The peasants were to repay these debts of paternal nurture by bearing all grievances without criticizing the benefactor. The landlords saw those who complained of hunger, by rent strikes or field work stoppages, as insubordinate and ungrateful dependents who were courting abandonment and even abuse by the patron. In landlord minds, peasant propriety involved, at its root, peasant passiveness in the face of oppression.

III. PEASANT AUTONOMY AND LANDLORD POWER: THREE ORDERS OF MEANING IN THE PEASANTS' TRADITIONAL POLITICAL WORLD

According to the categories of dependency theory, the peasants became the dependents of the landlord patrons as they confronted the power of these potentially brutal but ordinarily benevolent patriarchs and comprehended their own institutional powerlessness. In this view, landlords were able successfully to

socialize the peasants to accept the political philosophy they introduced in their material exchanges with the rural poor. As grateful and loyal clients of benevolent landlords, therefore, Chinese peasants supposedly did not create any culture which was not connected with the codes and cues of the landlord patrons of China's Great Tradition. What was subjectively just in the Great Tradition was subjectively just in the Little Tradition, because the ethics of peasant culture were only a drop-down of the ethics of elite culture. The main social ethic of the Great Tradition was a conception of social justice rooted in the idea of inequality and subordination. In traditional Chinese society, the ethic of sharing resources was cast structurally in terms of vertical cones and symbolically in terms of social deference. The peasants, so the argument goes, subscribed to this elite ethic because the inegalitarian moral order, being cemented socially by vertical trust and reciprocity, allowed the rural folks to subsist.

The claim that China's Little Tradition or lower class culture was a faithful mirror of elite homilies is the central theme in Solomon's *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture* (1971) and Stover's *The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization* (1974). Solomon and Stover both depict peasants as subordinate and submissive pawns in a vertically tiered Chinese political order with only one value system. This interpretation of traditional rural Chinese politics overlooks the ways peasants were creating their own participation in the world of extreme power imbalances. The exponents of dependency theory have seldom made inquiries into the ways the peasants created their own autonomous group experiences independent of the morals and values of landlord patriarchs. If we can tap the currents of peasant beliefs and behavior in opposition to the paternal ideas and practices of the landowning elites, however, then we may see the failure of the old ruling groups in cultivating complete social conformity and the success of the peasants in making their own world at the margins of the Confucian political order (Moore, 1966: 455-456).

For the peasants, there were three normative orders of meaning in the traditional political world. One order of meaning was the *superior landlord value system,* a moral framework in which

peasants endorsed the existing inequality by deference in the presence of the power elite. Another normative order was the *subordinate peasant value system,* the moral milieu in which the rural poor accepted social inequality and subordinate status in exchange for subsistence, without fully endorsing or rejecting the values of the Great Tradition. The third order of meaning was the *egalitarian peasant counterculture.* This peasant counterculture was the moral framework in which the peasants espoused and practiced beliefs which were fundamentally in opposition to the ideas of the paternalist elite.

Were these three orders of meaning actually independent? Surely the superior landlord and the subordinate peasant value systems were based on hierarchical relationships between lords and peasants. The peasant counterculture was based principally on peer, horizontal relations among the rural folks. It is not unlikely that the countersociety of the peasants, however, included at least some hierarchical relationships rooted in egalitarian notions of social justice. So, in reality, there was considerable interdependence in superior and subordinate value systems, and even the moral world of the peasants may have been hued by some egalitarian visions of hierarchy held by the common people.

What determined whether the peasants interpreted their experiences in any one order of meaning and acted in accordance with the language and logic of any particular normative order was, I suggest, the peasants' understanding of political power and political change. As long as the patriarchs of the Great Tradition were politically dominant on the local scene, the peasants generally operated within the superior landlord value system and, to a lesser extent, their own accommodating subordinate value system. The village dwellers invoked the subordinate peasant value system when, under conditions of social suffering and political instability, the landlord patrons began to violate their own inegalitarian moral terms of exchange. What prompted peasants to openly advocate their own countervalues was not simply a local rebellion, but a revolt under the guidance of an insurgent army which could clearly shift local political

power from the hands of landlords and gentry into the hands of peasants and their respected rebel leaders. If we peer carefully into peasant participation in each of these orders of meaning, including the superior landlord value system, we may detect the sinews of a distinctively peasant world in the making.

A. THE SUPERIOR LANDLORD VALUE SYSTEM: PEASANT DEFERENCE AND DEVIANCE IN THE PATRON-CLIENT WORLD

In China the peasants were active in creating their own world at the margins of ongoing power arrangements. Although the peasants most likely saw themselves as subordinates within the dominant landlord value system, their inconsistent behavior in their separate relationships with landlord superiors and peasant counterparts suggests that they did not necessarily accept the elite values of deference and inferiority as morally binding in all social situations. The same peasants who expressed deference and quiescence in the presence of landlord patrons often refuted the landlord's claim to moral superiority in the seclusion of their own small groups. The rural poor resorted to this inconsistent role behavior largely to secure their means to subsistence in the presence of powerful landowners and to minimize conflict with prominent overlords (compare Mead, 1934).

The ability of the peasants to adapt their performance to the expectations of landlord benefactors and to revert to autonomous efficacious activities in opposition to those same patron expectations was evidenced symbolically in their rudimentary expressions of class consciousness. To some extent, the customary beliefs and behavior of the peasants within the patron-made world suggests the rural folks consciously participated in material exchanges without fully accepting the paternalist version of landlord rule. We can detect peasant deviancy from the values of the traditional ruling groups along at least four specific subjective dimensions of peasant class consciousness.

One is *peasant class appreciation* for the services rendered by landlord superiors. The peasants accepted patron services, such

as postponing a crop rent, providing a grain loan, or paying for doctor care, with gratitude in their face-to-face relations with landlords. When we turn away from the elite language of the Great Tradition, however, it becomes more difficult to judge whether tenants, for example, appreciated the landlord postponement of the crop rent or provision of a grain loan in a poor harvest year as kindness from a patron rather than a morally fitting act by a "rich grain bags" who could count on grain stored in his clan cellar when famine threatened the village. Should we assume a priori that field hands appreciated the landlord provision of the customary dumpling and wine dinner *(gai shan fan)* during the autumn harvest festivities as a favor from a benefactor rather than a justly deserved payment from a rich land master who feared the loss of the services of talented field hands? Is it not likely that the same field workers who expressed their appreciation for landlord watermelons sent to quench their thirst in the summer fields also understood the melons were presented to make them work harder in the scorching summer sun? Certainly, the peasants who tilled landlord fields did not appreciate the risks of exhaustion from overwork which went with accepting the melons. Perhaps, then, tenants accepted the melons as symbols of their justly deserved rest breaks—as a symbolic guarantee against overwork, as well as a favor from a patron.

Another dimension of underclass deviancy from the dominant Confucian value system, as reflected in the inconsistent role behavior of the village people, was peasant *class allegiance.* The primary loyalties of Chinese peasants were to their families and little groups of friends and neighbors. Nonetheless, the peasants living directly under local landowning power figures understood that the same patron-client bond from which they derived protection and security also demanded deference and loyalty toward traditional Confucian patriarchs. In the presence of landlords, peasants consciously wore this subjective mask of subordination and allegiance because it was part of the ritual of assuring themselves a livelihood. Whenever peasants were among family and friends in their homes, the village snack stalls, the fields, and the temple fairs, however, they often scorned and

ridiculed the landlords. In China this Janus-faced behavior of the peasantry was the only way for the rural poor to cope successfully with the political restraints to openly and fully expressing their true class allegiance in normal times.

It is important to ask whether the peasants who had to wear masks and play a role in power situations much of the time could actually avoid having it spill over and affect their values. One might conceive a number of specific situations and issues which could temporarily convert pesants to the elite values they otherwise accepted as somewhat alien. The same peasants who resented the village landlord for driving hard bargains with his tenants, one might guess, sided with that landlord in banishing a poor tenant widow who attempted to remarry or in beating a peasant who eloped with the daughter of a tenant in the landlord's clan and aligned with that landlord in closing off the village to outsiders desperately searching for grain during famine situations. I suspect these local allegiances did not always reinforce peasant class allegiances, and that peasants could not always avoid having elite values spill over and affect their own cultural affairs. It was, after all, landlord patriarchs who preached Confucian homilies against peasant rights to arrange marriages within their own class without approval from landlord superiors. It seems unlikely that peasant acceptance of these upper-crust values would have strengthened peasant allegiances to families, neighbors, and friends, and more likely that landlords were able to play on local allegiances to mobilize at least a vocal minority against those villagers who felt there was nothing wrong with such practices.

As exponents of dependency theory point out, Chinese peasants displayed a sense of *class affection* toward their landlord patrons. The peasants presented eggs, fruit, and candy to landlords in return for the use of an oxen or a small cash loan. Nonetheless, in the sanctuary of their own small groups the peasants did not romanticize their relationships with landlords. The same peasants who expressed affection for their landlords also divulged deep feelings of antagonism toward their overlords.

For the peasants, there was continuing antagonism and conflict with landlords. Each village had its heritage of fights and floggings. In virtually every village peasants knew the consequences of turning away from the "North Polar Star" or revolting against their patrons. A repertory of landlord warning symbols (leather items made from human skin, the rope-scarred branch of a hanging tree, and the execution scenes in the antirebel Confucian operas) etched the potential danger of rebelling deeply in the minds of peasant youth. In addition, the old-timers told tales of the wails of hundreds of peasant rebels who were put to death by landlords who took blood vengeance in crushing the rebellion. And there were always toughs in the employ of the landlord standing by to administer physical punishment to the peasant clients who dared defile their patrons.

Nonetheless, from the cradle to the grave, the peasants were learning about the feats of the renowned rebel warriors in their struggles against local landlords. The rural folks passed on their memories of these populist uprisings from generation to generation in the family. And, when a revolt permitted, the old-timers praised past rebels and heaped humiliation on notorious landlords and their ancestors in the village back streets and the lanes of the temple fairgrounds. The dynastic pressures on landlords to keep peasants loyal and obedient and the landlord pressures on peasants to appreciate them as benefactors, coupled with the absence of virtually any enabling political rights, effectively curtailed the peasants from expressing their antagonism against landlord patrons in stable subsistence situations. When the dynasty let go on forest conservation and flood control, contributing to fires and flooding, and when landlords and local governments tried to collect regular crop rents and grain taxes under such threatening conditions, the peasants vented the hostility toward overlords they normally expressed only in the confidence of their families and friends.

Although Confucius, like many exponents of dependency theory, argued "all under Heaven will submit to the benevolent rule" (Yang Rong-guo, 1974: 15) and advocated "the order of the ranks between the high and the low is the principle of Heaven and

should not be undermined" (Zhe Zhun, 1974: 53), neither Confucius nor his landlord followers were able to completely negate peasant *class awareness.* Undeniably, the rural poor did kneel down before their benefactors, giving recognition of the order of the ranks between high and low. Could it be that peasants consciously chose to behave meekly in order to minimize conflict with patriarchs who otherwise could penalize and punish their families and friends? The same peasants who were aware of their individual subordination to patriarchs realized that the beliefs and behavior of the upper layer people tended to subjugate the interests of the poor. In China the peasants made jokes and wise tales about landlords and professed local profanities to express resentment and ridicule of patriarchs. They scrawled explicitly insubordinate frescoes and graffiti on the temple walls and put forward defiant struggle slogans in their uprisings against the rich. Many of these jokes, profanities, temple fresco inscriptions, and slogans symbolized a sense of class awareness among the peasants. Consider, for example, the peasant awareness of strip-like subjugation entailed in working under a miserly landlord as depicted in an old wise tale about an agricultural laborer in Southern Hebei:

> When working for a landlord, Chang Lao-shih had only spoiled soup and scraps to eat and never anything decent. One day, on the landlord's birthday, he sent Chang Lao-shih out to buy a big fresh fish in the market. When he had done this Chang Lao-shih cut it into three big pieces. The meaty middle piece he cooked up and greatly enjoyed. The remainder, the head and the tail, he wrapped up and took to the master.
>
> The master took one look and asked in astonishment: "What's the meaning of this? There's only the head and the tail. Where's the middle?"
>
> "What's the use of the middle?" said Chang Lao-shih. "I cut it off and threw it away."
>
> "What! You threw it away?"
>
> "What else should I do with it? It's nearly two years that I've been working for you and I've never eaten the middle part of a fish, so I thought it was only the head and the tail that could be eaten." [Curwen, 1974: 99]

Peasant wise tales as this one, popular cliches as "the big fish eats the little fish," and protest slogans as "even up the rich and the poor" (Zhe Zhun, 1974: 52), expressed a rudimentary realization of the social penalties of underclass life and the social benefits of leveling the wealth differences in the traditional political order.

B. THE SUBORDINATE PEASANT VALUE SYSTEM: PEASANT MODIFICATIONS OF PATERNALISM— THE NEGOTIATED VERSION OF PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS IN TRADITIONAL CHINA

Although Chinese peasants did not subscribe completely to the paternalistic versions of social exchange enshrined in the institutions of the ruling Confucian groups, they were, from time to time, willing to accept landlord visions of the social order. If Chinese peasants did not fully endorse the Confucian version of a harmonious ordering of society, neither did they always dissent to remake society in their own moral image. Instead, peasants often aligned themselves with the landowners' somewhat abstract and idealized paternalist version of underclass life. The rural poor adapted their own modified version of the superior landlord value system to enhance their own chances for subsistence.

For the peasants, the compromise with the normative ordering symbols of Confucian overlords was not simply an unquestioning exchange of deference for paternalism. When Chinese peasants gave their qualified endorsement of the values of Confucian patriarchs, they were not only casting doubt on the morality of a hierarchical distributive system, they were also acting to modify the inequities in their relationships with upper layer people. It seems doubtful that peasants were using, instrumentally, a negotiated version of their patron-client relations quite cynically for what they could get, while recognizing the whole context as one of class exploitation. Of course, the peasants could not manipulate patron-client relationships with landlords as if they had a completely free hand, but they did see themselves exercising limited choices to secure their own subsistence and security in specific situations where the power of landlords and local governments made open defiance virtually impossible. A brief

instance of peasant dealings with landlords may illustrate this negotiated version of patron-client relationships in traditional China.

The Benevolent Landlord in Traditional China

Chinese peasants adapted the Confucian view of "the benevolent landlord" to realize their own subsistence standards of justice in agrarian class relations. When tenants entreated landlords as benefactors, for example, they also were endorsing their own common conception of the reciprocal responsibilities of landlords to them. For the tenants, those responsibilities required the landlord to provide for their subsistence preoccupations—the sharing of crop production costs, carting services at harvest time, and reducing the rent in poor harvest yields.

Tenants called the landlords who failed to uphold their reciprocal obligations "bad landlords" *(huai dizhu).* The tenants who denounced the bad behavior of their individual landlord patrons were able to arouse opposition to the bad landlord from within both the peasant community and the landowning groups. A talented and respected tenant who betongued a bad landlord in his native village and the local market fair was able to make a persuasive warning for other tenants not to work for such a shyster. At the same time, a tenant who berated a notorious landlord, one who made forceful rent collections by brutal beatings, was able to arouse landlords who saw themselves upholding benevolent social roles to bring in line the dishonorable landlord. In the eyes of self-perceived benevolent landlords, the bad landlord was bad precisely because he was setting a bad example by provoking peasants to protest against their superiors. Thus, a bad landlord who stubbornly defended his dishonorable deeds was courting boycott by peasant field hands and possible banishment by benevolent landowners. When tenants demanded benevolent landlord behavior from the "bad seeds," therefore, they were, in an important sense, adapting the deferential beliefs of the dominant agrarian class to negotiate their own version of adequate subsistence provisions, rather than subscribing completely to a meaning system which confirmed their inferiority.

Thus, the peasants' accommodation with the inegalitarian moral order of landlord superiors was not, as Emerson (1975: 1-2, 15-16) claims for Javanese villagers, simply a matter of forced acculturation on elite terms. Nor is it so obvious that the peasant strategy of challenging their landlords to uphold their paternalist obligations and appealing to their landlords to intervene in their defense against the excesses of bad masters simply reinforced the peasants' dependency on the benefactor and, in turn, reinforced the patron's self-image and his image among the villagers as a protector. This line of reasoning in dependency theory, which has been elaborated brilliantly by Genovese (1974: 21-25) for master-slave relations in the old American South and by Scott (1975: 521-523) for landlord-tenant relations in the Philippines, does not fully comprehend social reality in terms of Chinese peasant experiences. For Chinese peasants, these accommodations with the paternalist ideas of the landowning patriarchs signified their own power to mobilize protection for themselves. As such, the peasants' negotiated defense of paternalism confirmed a sense of self-esteem and created a sense of political efficacy among the rural poor.

C. THE EGALITARIAN PEASANT COUNTERCULTURE: THE MORAL VALUES OF THE OLD VILLAGE WORLD

Existing side-by-side with the superior landlord and the subordinate peasant orders of meaning was a peasant counterculture rooted in the moral values of China's old village world. Chinese peasants held values which were fundamentally in opposition to those of the landlord patriarchs. Many of these radical ideas of the rural folks suggest the peasants saw the paternalist bonds between them and landlord patrons as fundamentally parasitic in nature. If the peasants kept these radical ideas to themselves when rebellion was out of the question, they put them forth fervently when revolt became a political possibility as well as a social necessity. In traditional China, the peasants who otherwise challenged landlords over subsistence rights by protest acts acceptable in either superior landlord or subordinate peasant meaning systems took the arrival of a

powerful insurgent rebel army as a political cue to free themselves from landlord oppression and overturn the inegalitarian moral universe of landlord superiors. These moments of millennial ecstasy in old China, when "the rebel commanders and troops from Heaven" enabled the rural folks to put forth their own radical notions of social justice, were the political moments in which Chinese peasants turned the world downside up, that is, rightside up, and made politics serve their own pristine values.

The main social claims in these peasant struggles were subsistence claims. When Chinese peasants made these claims, however, they were also attempting to remake society in their own moral image. That image reflected at least five central values in the counterculture of the old village world: (1) an egalitarian version of the subsistence ethic, (2) an egalitarian community-oriented participatory culture, (3) dignity, equity, and sharing in group work life, (4) an egalitarian redistribution of resources, and (5) a sense of their own collective strength and superiority. All of these counterideas which the rebel peasant groups put forth in their protests carried the seeds of a fundamentally different society. That society was a world without interclass paternalism, subordination, and dependency. It was a society in which the peasants substituted their own egalitarian version of social justice for the inegalitarian moral order of the Great Tradition.

The main social value in the old village world of the peasantry was the right to subsistence. The political dynamic in traditional Chinese peasant society was the peasants' struggle to secure the subsistence conditions for their existence. For the peasants, the right to subsistence was a moral right to be respected and revered by all, and the quest for a tolerable livelihood was a quest for social justice. Consisting generally of two or three generations of blood relatives, Chinese peasants participated in an integrated household pursuit of subsistence. Each peasant family geared its individual and mutual aid group tilling and trading activities to the basic subsistence welfare of its own household.

The most important value of each peasant family and each joint family mutual aid group was an *egalitarian version of the subsistence ethic.* The rural folks believed that everyone should

have a means to subsistence and that the right to subsistence should be earned through production rather than privilege. It followed, in peasant eyes, that no one should be able to use his or her superior station and status to deny those who produced the staff of life the means to subsistence and security. The outcry of the village rebels who waged fist-fights and raised pitchforks against landlords who were reaping the fruits of abundant harvests while denying their tenants and field hands a subsistence share of the crop echo this notion of subsistence rights in China's Little Tradition. The peasant rebels proclaimed, "those who work should eat, but those who do not work should not eat." For the peasants, a morally just world was one in which the "pot bellies," as they called their rich landlord enemies, could not depend on the poor for subsistence and, in turn, deny the poor their own right to subsistence, while simultaneously pretending the peasants actually were dependent upon their patronage for a livelihood.

The uprisings of the peasants also involved a quest to enhance the *egalitarian community-oriented participatory culture of the poor.* The peasants reaffirmed their rights to the few acres of common lands, forests, ponds, and public temple hall facilities around their villages. These common holdings, although not abundantly available to all villages, were an integral part of the cultural sovereignty of China's old village world. The common lands set aside by the village or the clan served the aged landless villagers and served as playing areas for the children who helped the older people glean the fields. The common forests, customarily preserved and protected by the peasants themselves, held berries and nuts, and the ponds offered fish and frogs for lean times. The public temple halls provided temporary shelter for marginal peasants whose families were beset by some subsistence dilemma.

What made these village institutions communal was the equal right of all peasants to participate in them. This egalitarian participation, wherein each peasant had the right to speak before the community, ran counter to the idea of dyadic one-to-one confidential authority relationships mandated by the local patriarchs. As the political power of the insurgent force reached its zenith in a locality, the peasants seized the time to speak for

themselves before Heaven. They came together in dinner field meetings, pine forest and cedar grove assemblies, and public temple hall meetings to discuss their grievances and deliberate their demands. The peasants who took the lead in these discussions against landlord injustice spoke bitterly about the ideas of social subordination in Confucianism. They wanted to "abolish the distinctions between high and low" and create a classless society. What they were seeking was a New Heaven and a New Earth in which "all peasants under heaven would be one family."

In China the peasants emphasized *dignity, equity, and sharing in their group work life* (compare Osgood, 1963: 258-260). In their morning trips to the rice fields and their noon rest breaks near the village temples, the peasants bestowed informal honors upon the outstanding tillers in their mutual aid groups. The young, the strong, and the healthy members of these groups worked so the old, the weak, and the sick could live a tolerable life. The hoeing and planting teams usually considered the situations of both prosperous and poor peasant families, hoeing the dry gravel-layered lands of poor families before the rich wet sandy soil of more prosperous households. When the members of mutual aid groups took leave from their field work for the marriage, birth, and death ceremonies of their families or friends, the group still provided them the customary share of the crop. In much of China the peasants traditionally based their group work life on sharing their continuing innovations in agricultural production. They made the novelty available to all. The peasant family spread its novel tilling practices to its joint family mutual aid group in the home village and the mutual aid group leaders, in turn, passed on their technical inventions and tilling improvements to peasants in the nearby villages and market fairs.

At the same time, the peasants rejected the Confucian literati who sought to separate mental and manual labor and capture the innovations and specialties of the village dwellers to serve only their own private and professional interests. A poem from *The Book of Odes,* the folk songs of the common people, suggests the peasants resented the privileged persons who bestowed honors on themselves without making manual or mental contributions to enhance agricultural production:

The pelicans beside the waters' edge collect food,
but do not wet their wings.
The best-dressed people often give the least service,
are the most worthless. [Alley, 1954: 5]

As the insurgent armies spread the insurgency from one village to the next, the peasants called for an *egalitarian redistribution of resources.* What the peasants were fighting for was a fundamental redivision of all their goods and services in the hands of landlords and local governments. Under the shield of the insurgent army, the peasant rebels declared that "all the land shall be divided equally between the poor and the rich," they refused to pay crop rents to landlords, they abolished grain taxes to local governments, and they sought equal competitive access to the markets dominated by the local patriarchs. These demands, which the peasants expressed so fervently, were not pleas for landlords and local governments to reinstitute the paternalist redistributive practices which validated an inegalitarian version of social justice. Instead, the rural people were attempting to substitute their own egalitarian leveling practices for the marginal redistributive allowances of the old agrarian political cliques.

Perhaps some of these redistributive demands were related to peasant attempts to enhance the ongoing customary leveling activities in their communities. The redistributive nature of extravillage marketing activities, for example, engendered a collective commitment to a self-reliant community among Chinese peasants. Already mid-way through the Qing dynasty, Chinese peasants were participating in agrarian commercial production and marketing activities in their native localities. Rich peasants, owner-cultivators, and even tenants exchanged their agricultural products in the marketplaces at fairly competitive prices to maintain their livelihood. Although these exchanges were often less than equitable, the profits these fiercely competitive petty-bourgeois cultivators gained from exchanging their crops and crafts constituted the commercial cornerstone for peasant family solvency and for self-reliant peasant communities. Through their profitable capital accumulations in agriculture, peasant families were able to continuously resecure their sub-

sistence caloric supply and replenish their rent and investment funds from one season to the next.

In contrast to what Wolf (1966a) has found for Latin America, the profits of solitary peasant families in China indirectly brought benefits and better times to the village community. In China the outstanding agricultural producers in any one village usually demonstrated that their market prosperity was in accord with the pristine virtues of the subsistence-oriented peasant community. These prosperous peasants, often rich peasants and occasionally owner-cultivators, could afford to employ the village marginal and the landless as field hands, shepherds, and tenants, could risk low interest loans for seeds and implements to family friends and field companions, and could contribute to the village community chest for carnivals and temple fair celebrations. At the same time, the marketing successes of peasant families often brought subsistence gains to the joint family mutual aid groups, usually made up of two to five peasant households, in which they were members. When a labor-short peasant family was able to purchase a buffalo because of its prosperous market adventures, for example, they could, in turn, patricipate in joint family ploughshare arrangements with animal-short peasant families who had a surplus work force of three or four sons and daughters, sending the buffalo to the animal-short household for the spring planting in exchange for additional human labor power during the autumn harvest.

To the extent that these outstanding peasant cultivators, in their dual role as dominant producers and direct sellers, were able to successfully carve out commercial exchanges among themselves in the marketplaces, they were able to create the economic sinews of self-reliant communities inside the domains of the powerful landlord and gentry patriarchs who ruled rural China. The traditional redistributive marketing activities of the peasants tempered the competition between villagers and strengthened the cooperation among the peasants, thereby approving the competitive exchange of crops and crafts in the marketplace as an appropriate family household solution to the subsistence needs of the peasant community (compare Ortiz, 1971: 328). Insofar as the market hierarchies of landlords and

local governments stifled such a solution, the peasants most likely approved of rebel attempts to remove the political restraints on agrarian commerce. As long as the rebel army allowed the rural folks to enter the marketplace after meeting the subsistence needs of their families and to withdraw from the market when family production failures required minimizing market risks, Chinese peasants voted for the insurgent forces by participating fully in competitive free trade markets.

Some of the protest actions of Chinese peasants suggest they were attempting to enact a *vision of their own collective strength and superiority*. The peasants accentuated this value within each village and among the many villages. The rural folks supported the idea of subordinates defying superiors. The peasants who stood up to landlords, for example, refused to remove their straw hats, bow their heads, and kneel down when in the presence of their self-perceived superiors—these were long-standing symbolic gestures of popular protest against deference in Chinese villages. The peasant community also supported the idea of the poor expressing their own feelings of superiority. The peasants humiliated notorious landlords by tying them up, pasting excrement on them, and parading them around the villages in green cuckold hats—the hats symbolized the landlords had lost power and control over their subordinates, both their wives and their peasants. The village honored the peasant leaders of the land redistributions and the tax readjustments by asking them to take up residence in the grand houses of landlords and to assume village duties formerly dominated by landlord clients. The slogans the peasants brushed on their protest banners and inscribed on their temples read, "the poor are upper layer people" and "the poor are their own benefactors." By these radically dissident actions, the peasants demonstrated they were reluctant to accept the fatalism couched in the Confucian Mandate of Heaven and indicated they were ready to sweep away the inequities inherent in the hierarchical political order of traditional China.

What made these peasant visions so dangerous, from the viewpoint of the paternalist agrarian elite, was their relevance to the peasants' highly conventional cultural activities to achieve

subsistence and prosperity in agriculture. In traditional China, the peasants carried on many of these activities in the county temple market fairs. In these old religious fairs, which were set around the lunar calendar with its customary cues for planting and ploughing, Chinese peasants created the sinews of horizontal community above the villages. In the fairs the peasants sold their subsidiary crops, such as eggs, melons, honey, jujubes, and yams, and purchased commodities under the government bureaus, such as salt, tobacco, and liquor. The villagers attended the fairs to obtain herbal medicines, such as taro, and to trade ideas about disaster relief, such as the most thrifty crop-watering methods during droughts. It was in the fairs that the rural folks rubbed shoulders with experienced tillers and weather observers from distant villages, seeking advice on how to cultivate certain crops and when to plant and harvest. The peasants made these fair-time festivities enjoyable by playing their flutes and guitars, performing their lion dances, and interpreting puppet shows, plays, and operas.

Although the peasants undeniably participated in fair activities permeated with various themes in Confucian thought, such as listening to Confucian operas performed by landlord-sponsored drama troupes, the rural folks also accentuated the religious ceremonies of their own innovating subsistence traditions in these fairs (Day, 1969: Thaxton, 1975b). Central to these practices was the religious expression of self-reliance and security in family agricultural pursuits. Upon going to the fairs the peasants paid respect to the Kitchen God, the moral guarantor of the subsistence rights of each family; upon arriving at the fair they presented their prayers and candy and fruit offerings before the animated paper versions of the God of Agriculture, the protector of subsistence benefits from family agriculture; and upon departing the fairs, they burned joss paper money before the Goddess of Mercy, the provider of relief and mercy from drought and flooding.

As the centers of community efforts for subsistence and security above the villages, the temple fairs of old China were, in a significant sense, the horizontal political assembly grounds for the peasants. They not only took place in the county seats, they

were also the organizational points of collective peasant protest. When the peasants waged demonstrations to petition the magistrate for lower salt shop prices, grain tax relief, or lower landlord crop rents in the wake of flood disasters, they almost always took these protests into the temple market fairs and then summoned the magistrate to present their demands. Since the fairs occurred with the turn of the seasons, these temple fair protests usually were routinized to the turn of those seasons. Accordingly, the protests seldom came as a surprise to the county officials, who were ready to responsibly negotiate the tiger world of politics between peasants, landlords, and their own administrations.

These negotiations were extremely important, from the vantage point of local power, because there were precedents for the temple fair protests turning into violent riots and spreading like wildfire through entire counties. And even more important, the temple fairs, with their intervillage grapevines for spreading radical ideas among the peasants, traditionally became the assembly points for the peasant rebels who were ready to rally their villages to welcome the oncoming insurgent army. It was the great fear of these potential peasant riots and rebellions, and their potential alignment with an outside insurgent force that could shift power into the hands of the local rebels, that made the magistrates listen to the demands of the peasants. And it is not unlikely that the peasants understood the potential political payoffs of their collective protest activities in the temple fairs.

A Qualifying Note on the Revolutionary Potential of the Little Traditions

Despite the tenacious counterthrust of peasant values, it may be wrong to assume that this radical peasant counterculture was fully in place and dominant subjectively, and that peasants were just waiting for an opportunity to openly express and elaborate their ideas. The status of this counterculture and the capacity of its peasant carriers to create an authenticating social knowledge, in addition to reflecting it after the insurgent army arrived, are also critical. The relative standing of competing meaning systems,

the capacity for the peasant counterculture to blossom forth largely by its own efforts, would seem to depend partly on the pattern of interclass stratification (small holders, tenants, landless, plantation workers, seasonal migrants, *lumpen* elements versus the kind of landlords), on province and region, and on the high dynastic politics of a given historical epoch. In China there was great variation in the Little Tradition—much more, probably, than the Great Tradition—since peasant countercultures were only integrated over market town and/or religious temple pilgrimage areas. The elite culture, coloring as it did much of the symbolic means of production, probably did more seeping down than the peasant culture did seeping up. It seems unlikely that there was a great popular union of peasant countercultures—although research may someday show there were some very important class elements common to all of the Little Traditions in China. In such a situation, the problem of purging old ideas, of peasant backsliding toward elite values and myths, was a real one. It occurred even during rebellions. If these peasant countercultures did not take an institutionalized form powerful enough to replace the Great Tradition until the emergence of the Mao Ze-dong Communist Party in the twentieth century, there were, nonetheless, serious attempts by insurgent armies flying the banners of regionally based Little Traditions to turn the world downside up and establish themselves as powerful contenders to the Great Tradition.

The Late Ming Dynasty Revolt of Li Zi-cheng: The Emergence of Peasant Countervalues in a Traditional Rural Uprising

One of these rebel attempts to turn the world downside up was the late Ming dynasty rebellion of Li Zi-cheng. The struggle waged by the bands of uprooted people in the insurgent armies of Li Zi-cheng provided the political impetus for peasants in the Yellow River Basin to openly reject the paternalist views of Confucian landlords and momentarily replace the ideas of the old ruling groups with their own moral version of social justice. In the uprisings against the landlord descendants of Cheng Hao and

Cheng Yi, two pro-Confucian spokesmen of the tottering Northern Song dynasty, the peasants reportedly attacked landlords who saw themselves as superiors and denounced their elitist codes of thinking and behavior.

The peasants joined the insurgent army to stop landlords from denying those who worked the land a subsistence share of the harvest, putting an end to unjust crop rents and labor duties without pay. The peasants drove those lords who would not work from the villages so that "they could not find a peaceful place to live and almost starved to death" (Zheng Zhou, 1974).

The peasants came together in great assemblies to openly denounce the Confucian idea that "riches and honors come from Heaven." Through folk songs and propaganda teams they spread the idea that the sufferings of the poor were due to the "maladministration of taxes by the Royal court" and the "man-eating land grabbing of landlords." It was said that Li Zi-cheng encouraged these egalitarian assemblies to "turn the government of landlords into a government of peasants" (Zheng Zhou, 1974).

The rebels also struck out against the practices which denied dignity and justice in work life. The insurgents burned the Confucian ancestral temples and the Cheng colleges. The temples symbolized the Confucian ideas of venerating lords as sages and sacrificing peasants as ignorant persons, while the schools admitted only the well-to-do, even though the poor paid tributes and taxes to support such institutions. The rebels, then, were demonstrating their contempt for ideas which subordinated tillers to "those who did not know the difference between the five grains," and for institutions which hardly were geared to providing them a practical education that would enhance their work life (Zheng Zhou, 1974).

The insurgent army reportedly equalized landholdings and abolished grain taxes, and the peasant rebels called themselves the Leveling Kings, insisting they were leveling the distinctions between lord and serf, rich and poor (Elvin, 1973: 245-246). The tenants who distributed the grain of their overlords challenged the very right of landlords to call them serfs, insisting that "from now on it is going to be the other way around!" (Elvin, 1973: 24).

Indeed, it appears that as the rebel army executed the lords and officials responsible for starving the villagers, the peasants began to enact a vision of their own collective strength and superiority. They not only took back the lands seized from their families by landlords, they also took over the property of lords and officials and required them to obey the regulations of the rebel village governments. In the moments of rebel triumph, the peasants compelled lords to kneel down before them and condemned the Confucian credo that "distinctions established by the hierarchical system must not be overstepped" (Zheng Zhou, 1974).

The emergence of countervalues in traditional peasant revolts such as that led by Li Zi-cheng raises an important theoretical point usually overlooked in patron-client explanations of peasant rebellions. In China, the uprisings of the peasants possibly represented a surge to seize political power and *upend the relationships of force in agrarian class relations.* At bottom, the demands of the peasants represented a reaction aimed at protecting existing subsistence rights, but symbolically, in peasant consciousness, these revolts were an effort by rural people to remake society in the image of their own culture. It also seems unlikely that these peasant revolts were, as several proponents of dependency theory suggest about contemporary peasant revolts (Scott and Kerkvliet, 1973: Scheiner, 1975), a collective defense of paternalism and patronage. The insurgent army removed the relationships of political repression in the villages and roused the peasants to dissent radically from an elite-imposed tradition of passivity and subordination. The insurgent army provided the political catalyst and cue for the peasants' tenacious defense of subsistence rights to proceed hand-in-hand with their angry dissent against paternalism. Against this theoretical background, would not the victorious rural political movement spearheaded by Mao Ze-dong seem explicable partly in terms of the fermentation of radical ideas among the peasants and the revolutionary enhancement of the traditional countervalues of the old village world?

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