

Heteronomous rationality and rural protests: Peasants' perceived egalitarianism in post-taxation China

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Abstract

This study focuses on Chinese peasants' behavioural logic after the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006. The everyday words and deeds of the residents of an ordinary village in Gansu Province were observed and interpreted. Their behavioural logic can be conceptualized as 'heteronomous rationality', according to which one's behavioural choice is based on whether one is treated equally and fairly in comparison with others. When deviations from this standard are observed, rural peasants are motivated to protest. This study further examines when and how this Chinese-style peasant egalitarianism was shaped.

Keywords

rural protest, peasant egalitarianism, village community, abolition of agricultural taxes, family economic strategy

This study examines Chinese peasants' behavioural logic in the 21st century, especially after abolition of the agricultural taxes in 2006. The everyday words and deeds of the inhabitants of an ordinary village in Gansu Province were observed and interpreted. Their behavioural logic can be conceptualized as 'heteronomous rationality', according to which one's behavioural choice is based on whether one is treated equally and fairly in comparison with others. When deviations from this standard are observed, a villager may resort to complaining, making a fuss, protesting, refusing to cooperate, petitioning, or even rioting.

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People experiencing peasant issues are usually thought to be living in the margins of highly developed coastal cities, where they are discriminated by the household registration system, suffer from poverty, and are employed as manual labourers and migrant workers. Such migration issues force them to leave their children in the village. To bring attention to their plight, some resort to petitions or violent riots against local governments. Village governance occupies a significant part of China's domestic politics. Chinese urban scholars often summarize domestic rural issues as the 'three rural issues'.¹ According to dominant agrarian narratives, the economic disparity between urban and rural areas² is a major problem in China; thus, narrowing this gap is the only way to solve rural problems. In this context, Chinese peasant protesters or 'rebels' have attracted much scholarly attention, and some scholars have characterized peasants' behaviour as 'rightful resistance'.³

Observing these major trends, one may easily presume that the rural peasants left behind by the rapid urban development in cities are resentful, and hence, protest against the widening gap between urban and rural areas. However, before hastily concluding that the recent peasant protests stem from the three agrarian problems, we must stop to understand their inherent logic, worldview, sense of equality, way of family life, the marketization of the Chinese economy, and evolving agrarian policies.

Granted, some studies employing detailed field surveys have observed that peasant behavioural logic exhibited in situations, such as the recent petition movements, differ from what James Scott calls 'everyday forms of resistance'⁴ and more closely resemble that of the logic employed in profit-seeking schemes. Thus, peasants' 'stubbornness' show specific tactical preferences. For example, based on quantitative analysis, Jing Chen⁵ found that higher household income is the only significant factor that increases a villager's probability to participate in collective petitions. Unlike James Scott's argument, contemporary Chinese peasants do not rebel about subsistence issues but about political inefficacy resulting from their economic standing. Tian Xianhong,⁶ via a field survey at Bridge Town in Hubei, claimed that villagers' petitions from the mid- to the late 1990s were mainly for the protection of their rights. However, after the tax reform in the early 2000s, profit-seeking petitions became more prominent.

When considering the peasant's rationale behind protests, a salient aspect is their sense of equality. A convincing and powerful argument is made by Lu Huilin⁷ who focused on the origin of peasant egalitarianism. According to Lu, before the Chinese Revolution in 1949, four prominent features were common among Chinese peasants' world view: (1) a well-defined idea of individual property; (2) a view of self-responsibility that does not rely too much on the moral economy; (3) a relative, not absolute, egalitarianism in the event of hunger only to escape from eventual death; and (4) an idea of 'fate and fortune' to accept inequalities under the status quo. Thus, egalitarianism was not prevalent among small farmers who owned a portion of land. Rather, the ethos was more prominent among the poorest, or peripheral residents, for example among fishermen. This modest egalitarianism that values private property and individual responsibility was affected in the process of land reform and agricultural collectivization in the 1950s, but was transformed by 'mobilizational collectivism' into a more conscious and well-developed egalitarianism which was shaped by socialist ideology. While Soviet collectivization circa 1930 began with the arrival of the communist ideology from outside the

rural villages, collectivization in China materialized from the egalitarian ethos already existing within the peasantry. Lu argued that the egalitarian mindset formed during the collectivization period can explain the behaviour of Chinese rural villagers after the reform era, including the competition among villagers for house construction.

Hence, despite the notable studies on peasant protest, there remains room for further insight into the topic. First, an in-depth interpretation of people's actions and proper conceptualization of peasant behavioural logic is necessary. Second, in the debates concerning peasant behaviour, the voice of external observers (governments, media, or researchers) often overwhelms that of the insiders, and we rarely hear the peasants' direct accounts. To overcome this limitation in material, this study focuses on peasants' actual words and deeds, and it attempts to interpret them from an insider's viewpoint. To this end, qualitative data obtained from the fieldwork are utilized.

Material and methods: Interpretation of peasant behaviours

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative approach by: (1) returning to the daily-life situation of rural villagers to recapture peasant behaviour via direct observation of a relevant site; and (2) interpreting the meaning of peasant actions according to their historical, cultural, and sociological contexts.

The research site, Xihe, is in the southern part of Gansu Province and it is a typical agricultural county in north-western China. The county has also been a key target of national poverty alleviation projects. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake caused considerable damage throughout the county and reconstruction funds were distributed to victims. Xihe is situated in a relatively steep mountainous area, and the annual rainfall can be as low as 510 mm.⁸ Maicun⁹ is in the central part of the county, about 20 km from the county seat. The topography of the village is mountainous and complex, and the altitudinal difference between residential areas is significant. There are 408 households in the village, which is higher than the regional average of 205 households, and the total population of Maicun is approximately 2000. The cultivated land comprises approximately 2000 *mu* (15 *mu* = 1 hectare), which is roughly 1 *mu* per person. Although this figure is slightly higher than that in the southern provinces of China, it is considerably lower than the average in the northern rural areas and in the county, indicating that population saturation in Maicun is high. Consequently, the proportion of people who work as migrant workers in cities is also relatively high. According to a sample survey conducted,¹⁰ 40.1 per cent of the labour force aged between 20 and 60 years worked outside the county, with most of them working in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. This ratio is approximately twice the average of Gansu Province (19.8 per cent) and is close to that of some southern provinces. Agriculture remains largely self-sufficient, centred on wheat, maize, and potatoes, with low profitability apart from the cultivation of *pinellia ternate*, whose tuber is used in traditional Chinese medicine.

This study primarily employed a qualitative and anthropological methodology. The discussion section presents a series of whole episodes that occurred in an organic manner. Once settled in a peasant's house in Maicun, the researcher roamed around the village with an assistant who was fluent in the local dialect and chatted freely with the villagers, whether by the roadside or on a farmer's *ondol* (floor heater). Except for

several semi-organized interviews, primary data were collected through casual interaction with the villagers and direct observation. In a relaxed and informal conversation, the villagers reiterated a common theme: 'The current policy is good, but it is not properly implemented.' In other words, 'I have not gotten what I should get.' Given that responsibility in this regard was most commonly considered to rest with the village cadres, this situation generated various types of speculation and rumours. The village cadres also seemed to be concerned about the public's opinion of them. Thus, on the fifth visit in 2016, our request to stay in the village for fieldwork was refused and our investigation could not continue. However, in retrospect, this action of the village secretary most likely reflected the challenging governance situation in Maicun.

Background: Marketization and pro-agrarian policies

This section provides the historical background of the Chinese peasantry from the collective era of the last century to the present time.

Family economic strategies

After the people's communes were disbanded, production management and risk assessment returned to being the responsibility of individual small-scale households. At first glance, they seemed to have reverted to the pre-liberation stage. However, this period differed from the pre-collectivization period prior to the 1950s in the following three respects.

First, the organization of the labour force under the people's commune system promoted the construction of agricultural fields and irrigation facilities, enabling improved agricultural productivity.¹¹ Activities such as constructing terraced fields, tree planting, and school construction proceeded under the slogan of self-reliance. Therefore, risks in terms of threats to the survival of rural residents were considerably reduced compared to the earlier times.

Second, notably, restrictions on rural–urban migration throughout the Mao era had created a rural–urban divide or 'dual structure'.¹² This dual structure had a notable psychological effect on rural villagers. Due to their greater detachment from cities and an attitude of self-reliance encouraged by the government, villagers became more interested in issues concerning disparity and fair treatment *inside* the rural sector, that is, among villagers themselves, neighbours, or neighbouring villages, rather than urban–rural disparities in general, as might otherwise have been assumed. Everyday words and deeds of Maicun villagers, as shown in the discussion section, portray this consciousness.

Third, when the people's communes were disbanded in the early 1980s, agricultural land was distributed to each household in a remarkably egalitarian manner, with administrative villages as units. This nationwide measure ensured that only usage rights were redistributed to local villagers, leaving ownership to collectives, such as administrative villages (former production brigades) and small groups (former production teams).¹³

In Maicun, land distribution was conducted in circa 1982 with the original production teams as units. According to the introductory statement of Lin Yuwen, the former village chief, the first, second, and third production teams comprising the central hamlet of

Maicun were provided approximately one group of agricultural lands. Each group included farmlands in varying conditions: prime, second-class, and third-class land. Prime land is generally flat, with a good supply of water, suitable for maize cultivation. Second-class land is hilly and suitable for wheat cultivation. Wheat and maize cannot be cultivated on third-class land. Hence, there is no choice but to cultivate plants such as oats, buckwheat, cowpeas, and soybeans. If the prime, second-class, and third-class lands were divided among all the households, the distribution pattern would be disproportionately scattered. Thus, households that received second-class lands did not receive prime and third-class lands.¹⁴

A major difference between rural China, including Maicun, and other developing countries is that China underwent a post-socialist de-collectivization process, involving the implementation of an egalitarian distribution of farmland usage rights. Thus, in the early 1980s, the hierarchy among villagers that had developed in the pre-liberation era was reset within rural communities. Moreover, as collective ownership was maintained, peasants could not sell farmland without permission. Thus, the farm size of each household was retained at a similarly average-sized scale. This equal distribution of core agricultural land within rural communities is an important feature that distinguishes China's peasant economy from other developing countries.

The Chinese peasant economy in inland villages comprises two layers: farmland management and off-farm management or employment associated with it. The latter may include a side business (such as carpentry); off-farm employment (such as migrants working in cities); or other jobs (such as teachers and public employees). Based on the conducted sample survey¹⁵ in Maicun, out of 62 households, 45 (73 per cent) made a living by holding multiple jobs,¹⁶ that is, combining agricultural land management with off-farm management or employment. Among them, the combination of farmland management and migrant work in cities was the most common, accounting for 33 households. As for the others, 10 households were engaged only in farmland management, five households only in migrant labour, and one household in a side business (one household comprised an older adult living alone and was not engaged in earning a livelihood). Holding multiple jobs may be more common than the above figure indicates, because the households solely engaged in farmland management often have children who work as migrant workers but who were counted as a separate household. Likewise, those households who solely depended on migrant work also owned portions of land cultivated by their parents or relatives.

In terms of non-agricultural employment accompanying farmland management, the egalitarian distribution of farmland facilitated the smooth switch by peasant families to non-farm employment as migrant workers. Stable land usage rights at home provided a stable foundation for peasants, especially of the younger generation, to travel between cities and villages. If farmland management was secured and the minimum food necessary for personal consumption was guaranteed, peasant families could actively seek employment opportunities elsewhere for cash income. Why did rural migrant workers emerge from all areas and spread throughout China in the 2000s? One cannot explain this phenomenon without appreciating the history of agricultural collectivization in the mid-1950s and the egalitarian land redistribution in the early 1980s. Contrastingly, in Japan during its high-growth period, migrant workers tended to originate primarily

from specific regions, such as Tohoku, Hokuriku, and Kyushu.¹⁷ Furthermore, in many developing countries, including India and Latin America, rural agricultural land ownership is uneven and unstable, and landless agricultural workers move to urban areas, living in places often characterized as slums,¹⁸ neither of which has been the case in China.¹⁹

In the peasant economy, different goals are involved in farmland management and in migrant labour, because the former involves securing basic food needs whereas the latter involves maximizing cash income necessary for a desirable future in terms of consumer expectations around owning a house, acquiring a wide range of material goods, and educating children. In adopting the latter approach, cost–benefit calculations as Popkin²⁰ calls it tend to predominate. The two goals can be mutually pursued, with the former providing insurance for subsistence while being flexibly combined with the latter.²¹ Off-farm employment tends to be unstable, whereas farmland management is likely to be stable. Since Chinese peasants have small portions of farmland in their home villages that can be used in emergencies, they can temporarily suspend their employment in cities to return home, as revealed during the 2008 global financial crisis. Thus, rural China currently functions as a ‘reservoir’ and ‘stabilizer’ within Chinese society.²²

Households comprising older adults only, persons with physical disabilities, or older adults whose children have effectively abandoned them have only farmland as a source of livelihood. When such households begin to lose their source of labour, subsistence becomes a primary issue. However, as shown in the case of Maicun’s fifth company, such households can apply to join the government’s ‘five-guarantee’ scheme (五保供养制度) discussed later on in the article). Further, the Chinese government has made progress with poverty alleviation projects and officially eradicated rural poverty in 2020.²³ Given these supportive circumstances, fewer issues concerning subsistence are likely to arise.

Even so, the number of people who can withdraw from small farming is also limited, especially in inland China, where economic opportunities are scarce. Opportunities generally arise for (1) business owners who have advanced from migrant work to self-employment; (2) people who have acquired higher educational qualifications and are able to obtain regular work in cities; and (3) state officials who have obtained posts in higher government entities. For example, the Maicun branch secretary, Lin Shuangyong, a mine owner, exemplifies the case of self-employment, while Lin Hu, an official of the County Finance Bureau who secured external funds for the road construction in Maicun (see Case 9), exemplifies the third category.

In summary, most villagers in typical inland villages (such as Maicun) are generally not concerned about maintaining their livelihoods but have not become successful enough to escape village life. Overall, village society has maintained a relatively flat structure.

Government’s pro-agrarian policies

The central government’s agrarian policies are another major factor that affects local villagers’ world view. Since the latter half of 1990s, the central government has initiated a series of policies, including the tax-for-fee reform, village elections, and institutionalization and routinization of petitions. Some researchers believe that these seemingly independent agrarian policies are in fact co-related such that, by appearing to side with the

villagers against the predatory agents of the local governments, the central government has managed to shift the blame for bad governance to the local officials, bolstering its own image and credibility, and, ultimately, maintaining its authoritarian regime.²⁴

Especially after the post-taxation era, pro-agrarian policies involved the provision of various government subsidies for agricultural and rural support. Resource extraction from rural to urban areas was reversed, and various government pro-agricultural policy funds began to circulate from the state to the peasantry. This distribution of government funds to rural areas was unprecedented in rural China, and its novelty was likely to have been striking to those villagers who benefitted from it.

Government funds flowing into rural areas could be nationally or regionally targeted, and some may be of a temporary nature, such as post-disaster rehabilitation assistance. The various types of funding available in Maicun are:

1. Assistance to 'five-guarantee households': These households comprise those aged above 60 years and without children. They are guaranteed clothing, food, housing, medical care, and burial.²⁵
2. Birth control incentives: Since 2010, Xihe County, the research site of this study, has certified 1160 couples who had undergone ligation after having two girls consecutively. The county has given an incentive of RMB 3000 to RMB 4000 per household. Under this scheme, the girls in the households concerned will be given 10 points in university entrance examinations. Those couples above the age of 60 years, who have undergone ligation, will be given RMB 600 monthly per person.
3. Direct grain subsidy or comprehensive agricultural material subsidy: A subsidy to encourage farmers to grow food crops, such as wheat, corn, and potatoes. In 2009, farmers received RMB 4.22 per *mu* as direct food subsidies and RMB 37.67 per *mu* as a comprehensive agricultural material subsidy, amounting to RMB 41.89 per *mu* in total.
4. Minimum Living Standard Scheme: After this national policy was initiated in Xihe County, the number of people covered by the minimum life guarantee and the amount of subsidy have continued to increase (31,802 in 2008 were given a monthly amount of RMB 30 per person; in 2011, the scheme covered 67,087 people, with each receiving RMB 72).²⁶
5. Subsidy for 'returning-farmland-to-forest' projects:²⁷ This policy was implemented in 1999 and Maicun was allocated a quota of 373 *mu*. Farmland productivity near the mountains is low and households are willing to consider returning those marginal lands to forest in return for a subsidy. As of 2010, of the 408 households in Maicun, half (204) have been granted the subsidy, at a standard amount of RMB 125 per *mu*.
6. Post-disaster rehabilitation assistance: The Sichuan earthquake of 12 May 2008 (locally known as the '512 earthquake') occurred almost simultaneously with the beginning of the post-taxation period. Thus, from the villagers' perspective, the reconstruction assistance may well have been perceived as a type of general government funding. The reconstruction funds comprised: (a) post-disaster reconstruction subsidy; (b) post-disaster repair subsidy; and (c) living expenses.

The beneficiaries of the first three government resources listed are relatively clear and indisputable in terms of allocation, while the beneficiaries of the Minimum Living Standard Scheme, subsidy for returning farmland to forest, and post-disaster rehabilitation scheme are selected by village cadres. Thus, as shown in the discussion section,

the extent to which these types of funding are received and how they are allocated can greatly affect the villagers' collective behaviour.

Results: Heteronomous rationality

In the logic that this study terms heteronomous rationality, people choose their actions by comparing their situation with that of others. Their main attitudes toward private and public life can be summarized as primarily involving two perspectives: claims of interests expressed as 'get as much as you can' and the logic of non-cooperation expressed as 'if others do not concede, I will not concede either'. First, claims of interests or whether to concede in public issues are not decided internally or autonomously, nor are they based on the maximization of profits as asserted by Popkin.²⁸ People argue that they should receive or relinquish the same amount as that received or relinquished by 'others'. In this sense, the criteria are rational, but not autonomous. Second, as a result of heteronomous reasons for claiming interests and for conceding, the actual conditions of each individual or household are often disregarded, and 'equality of outcome' for all members is pursued. Third, based on these criteria, individuals judge whether they are treated equally and fairly, compared to others. When judged not to be fairly or equally treated, they resort to complaining in daily conversations, protests, non-cooperation, and in some cases petitions to local governments. Dissatisfaction is often directed at village cadres who directly undertake the distribution of profits and burdens. Fourth, others who are the basis of such comparison are close neighbours such as fellow villagers in the same village or neighbouring villages, about whom first-hand oral information can be transferred, and who are not distant strangers such as urban residents.

Discussion: How was it shaped?

This section focuses on the villagers' words and deeds observed during fieldwork. On this basis, words and deeds are interpreted and contextualized along with the village's unique historical path and sociological features. Case 1 represents the most popular discourses in Maicun.

Case 1: Side dishes for a drinking party

On 3 May 2015, after roofing a new house, seven or eight male villagers drank wine over simple food. Sitting cross-legged on an ondol, they began with the usual theme that village cadres were not implementing government policies. In an hour or two, all the complaints about village life came to the fore like metaphorical side dishes, with nine points raised in total. Regarding the government project for constructing water storage wells, the men claimed that 15 bags of cement should have been distributed free of charge, but in fact RMB 50 per well were collected in their village. Regarding the recipients of the minimum life guarantee, reshuffling occurred every year in other villages, and villagers enjoyed the benefits accordingly. However, in their village, the men claimed that the recipients are relatively fixed, involving households connected to the secretary. They claimed that the third living expenses payment after the 512 earthquake had not yet been paid; that the footpaths in the wheat fields were too narrow and that the

harvested wheat had to be carried manually; that the route selection for the small road paved recently (described later) was probably in favour of households with official connections; and that although there was water supply in Liudaigou (a peripheral hamlet in the Maicun administrative village), there was no water supply in the central hamlet of Maicun, which was unfair. Concerning education, it was claimed that elementary school teachers had no sense of responsibility; that some teachers had bought taxis and were preoccupied with their side jobs; that there were no physical education and music teachers at the school; and that there was no kindergarten. Finally, it was claimed that some villagers had not received compensation for the returning-farmland-to-forest project.

The topics arose not as a result of questioning the villagers but organically, in the course of conversation. The fact that these themes emerged naturally in just an hour or two shows that the villagers were extremely interested in these topics that covered a wide range of public issues in Maicun. Notably, they were complaints about village public affairs. Many of the complaints concerned the direct economic interests of individual village households, especially in terms of the distribution of government funds, such as the minimum life guarantee quota and underdeveloped public goods, such as schools, roads, and water supply. In many cases, dissatisfaction stemmed from perceptions of disparity among the villagers or between their village and other villages, due to unfair resource distribution. Finally, alleged improper resource allocation by village cadres, such as the village secretary (e.g. through connections), was perceived as discriminatory.

How can this scene be interpreted? First, the fact that relatively young villagers come together after collaborative work indicates that mutual acquaintances and exchange relationships have not been lost. This is partly explained by the Chinese-style ‘family economic strategy’, in which only young family members circulate between the home village and big cities. Moreover, although migrant workers are more prevalent in Maicun compared to other villages in Gansu and the Northwest, a comparatively large number of villagers, mainly women and middle-aged people, have remained in the village. Even those working in Hangzhou spend a relatively long time in the village, mainly during the summer wheat harvesting season. Numbers have not fallen to the same extent as in the southern provinces. Migrant work and village life are in a delicate equilibrium, with community life centred on farmland management and with acquaintance relationships and the collective memory of the community relatively well preserved.

Second, and related to the first point, all these topics discussed are directly related to the villagers’ daily lives. This is not distant information obtained from newspapers or media, but first-hand information that villagers circulate orally in their daily interactions. Even now that smartphones have become quite popular, villagers still depend on and trust face-to-face contact to obtain trustworthy information.

Third, the feeling of ‘unfairness’, frequently mentioned in the villagers’ discussions, underpins their various dissatisfactions and interests. The allegation of unfairness is based on the premise that ‘it should be equal’. One perceives a strong egalitarian consciousness from these remarks. As indicated by the fact that all the villagers are concerned about daily life within the village or of neighbouring villages, the scope of ‘equality’ is narrow. In other words, there is an awareness that ‘we, villagers and peasants, should be equal’. Interestingly, based on the author’s experience, the villagers have never talked

about disparity with urbanites. This is also clear from the historical and sociological contexts presented earlier in the background section of this article. In terms of conventional sociological theory, villagers' choice of a reference group is still largely limited within localities to which they belong. One can safely say that they are not feeling 'relatively deprived', with reference to urban dwellers. The concept 'relative deprivation',²⁹ typically refers to a positive attitude engendered when a person feels empathy with another group, such as urbanites, which is not the case with Chinese peasants. Thus, relative deprivation does not describe the reasoning of peasants, their behaviour, and way of thinking. Instead, heteronomous rationality is a better description of the reality experienced by the Chinese peasantry.

Claims of interests

Among the various government resources mentioned by the villagers, the minimum life guarantee was the focus of the villagers' grievances.

Case 2: Interest in the minimum life guarantee

Lin Kaihui, our landlord during our fieldwork, had a very bad impression of He Youming, the head of Maicun's fifth company, apparently because, despite having a son, He was given a minimum life guarantee. When Lin learned that the researcher had visited He's house for an interview, he became infuriated and began to curse He and swear about the injustice.

Obviously, the villagers have become sensitive to disparities in treatment between neighbours inside and outside the community. As highlighted in Case 1, there were multiple comments on how resource distribution was 'unfair', which formed part of the village public opinion.³⁰ Such comments can only be generated where there are clearly recognizable objects of comparison. Everyone was eager to know which household had been allotted the minimum life guarantee ratio. Once known, such information spread quickly, generating jealousy, envy, and a sense of unfairness because it provided an opportunity for fellow villagers to compare each other's situation.

Case 3: The battle over flour

The flour distributed by the government during the 2011 Chinese New Year was originally intended for five-guarantee households, senior party members, and poor households. However, the villagers of Maicun were dissatisfied with this, and physically fought over the flour distribution. Consequently, 140 bags of flour were evenly divided among the seven companies. Approximately 20 bags per group were further evenly distributed to each household within each group. The information that the villagers provided was very confusing and uncertain, but some believed that 'a friend of the village secretary took away the flour'.

A strong sense of fairness was evident. While the Maicun villagers can now afford to eat wheat meals every day and failing to obtain a small amount of flour does not affect

their lives, it is still important to them that flour distribution takes place in a clear and fair manner. Even though the distribution was originally aimed at five-guarantee households, senior party members, and poor households, other non-beneficiaries among the villagers demanded their share. Therefore, it is safe to say that the individual economic situation of households does not matter. Since their reference group is the general rural community, if some households receive flour, other villagers also expect to receive the same, which means that peasants seek 'equality of outcome'. Comparisons with others can occur among fellow villagers, and with the other hamlets in the same village, as shown in Case 1. Likewise, neighbouring villages can be objects of comparison, as the following case shows.

Case 4: Dissatisfaction with the transfer of subsidies to other villages

According to the villagers, there was a policy that the government would provide subsidies of RMB 4000 to RMB 5000 per *mu* for farmers growing *pinellia ternata*. However, the secretary of Maicun handed over the relevant subsidy to the neighbouring Huangjiang Village. The secretary stressed that *pinellia ternata* cultivation requires a considerable amount of labour to weed the land and a relatively high technology level. Farmlands must be properly managed to maintain an appropriate moisture level. As the plant is highly toxic, the planting location must be changed every two to three years, and the land must be returned to its original state after four to five years. Given these constraints, new farmers would most likely lose their investment if they plant *pinellia ternata*. Nonetheless, villagers were dissatisfied with the secretary's transfer of the subsidy to another village.

Why were there so many expressions of dissatisfaction among the villagers of Maicun, who were likely to have become much wealthier now than they were during the commune period? Undoubtedly, the unprecedented flow of resources due to the government's pro-agrarian policies affected the villagers' expectations. They were initially sceptical about receiving such resources. According to the former village chief,³¹ when the government called for applicants for housing reconstruction funds after the 512 earthquake, there were three categories of villagers: (1) those (especially older people) who thought that they would not receive government money under any condition; (2) those who could not believe that the government would truly provide subsidies or were convinced that they would be pressed to repay the money in the future; and (3) those who thought that they would simply accept what the government gave, but that they would repay when asked. Those who expressed the first and second types of responses did not apply for reconstruction funds, whereas those who applied received the government funds and benefited. Consequently, the others became jealous and began to complain that the government had provided subsidies without expecting repayment. Such dissatisfaction was often directed at village cadres.

Case 5: Protest against village cadres and petition to the town police

Lin Kaihui's younger brother Wenhui and others protested outside the house of the former village chief, Lin Yuwen, more than a dozen times over the distribution of

house reconstruction funds. On one New Year's Day, accompanied by a few people, the younger Lin sibling banged a gong and a drum and held high a white poster similar to the 'big-character poster' (a wall newspaper with inscriptions comprising criticisms, slogans, or requests) notably used during the Cultural Revolution, with texts criticizing the village chief. Because it is considered an ill omen to quarrel or fight on New Year's Day, the village chief's family made every effort to keep them away from their gate. Li Wenhui repeatedly petitioned the town police to sue the village chief. On another occasion, the chief was beaten by the villagers. He resigned in 2013.

Notably, given the influx of various government funds, including post-disaster reconstruction, post-disaster living expenses, minimum life guarantees, subsidies in relation to returning farmland to forest, direct grain subsidy, birth control, and subsidies for wells, flour, and special agricultural products, those villagers who were initially sceptical gradually became more sensitive to profits and losses. They began to apply the principle that 'you should get what you can; you should get as much as you can, even if it is a small amount'. Regarding 'how much you can get', since there are no objective standards, comparisons with other villagers or between villages have become crucial. This situation calls to mind a saying in the *Analects of Confucius*, namely, 'Do not worry about scarcity, but rather about uneven distribution' (不患寡而患不均).

Peasants are not born egalitarian, as Lu Huilin suggested.³² In China before the founding of the People's Republic, where, under the landlord system, the gap between the rich and the poor was clear. No one would have imagined that villagers of the same village should be equal. In addition, in rural areas in some countries that have not experienced thorough land reforms and socialist policies, such as rural India, economic disparities and social inequalities within villages have basically remained intact. Thus, there is no consciousness among villagers that they should be equal. Rather, the Indian government, on the premise of the stark inequality among castes, ethnic groups, and genders, is taking affirmative actions in favour of underprivileged social groups.³³

In China, it is recognized that the greatest disparity among Chinese citizens is between urban citizens and rural peasants. The government's official discourse, intellectuals, and the media are preoccupied with the economic gap between urban and rural areas. Disparities within rural areas themselves are left to internal coordination and are rarely discussed in the public discourse. Nevertheless, according to our field data the idea that 'it should be equal among the peasants themselves' better represents villagers' real feelings. The idea, undoubtedly, was formed when peasants experienced revolution, socialism, collective labour, and egalitarian distribution under the people's commune. This history is reflected, for instance, in villagers' deep curiosity in the minimum life guarantee, a new resource that has flowed into the village, and the battle for wheat. Equality of outcome is more important to villagers rather than equal opportunity in the allocation of resources to those in need. Field data showed that for farmers, the immediate, discernible disparities with close neighbours are the real 'problem'.

Non-conceding attitudes

The cost of governance decreases in proportion to the degree to which villagers 'concede' their private interests or agree to 'bear' the expenses in public matters. Conversely, the higher the degree of refusal to concede interests or to bear expenses, the higher the cost of uniting villagers toward a goal. As with claims of interests, there are no absolute criteria in terms of whether or not to concede interests or to bear expenses. The relevant criteria hinge on the behaviour of others, as often stated by certain villagers: 'if others do not concede, I will not concede either'. It is evident from the following cases that those who do not concede become more influential.

Case 6: Selfish use of the wheat floor

In north-western rural China, to which Maicun belongs, there is a public place called the 'wheat floor', where harvested wheat is temporarily piled up for threshing. He Youming, the head of the fifth company, has become frustrated by other villagers' selfish behaviour. Many wheat harvesters brought their wheat or other materials early and occupied the wheat floor. Consequently, his wheat was always threshed last. He observed resignedly, 'Today's people have stopped obeying rules. The Communist Party is nice, the policy is also good, but the people have become rude.'

First, from He's comments, we discern that he is comparing the recent behaviour of ordinary villagers with that of the past. He was born in 1943 and clearly remembers the behaviour of people during the people's commune era. It serves as a reference axis for comparison, demonstrating that people's behaviour has now changed in a way that it is easy for them to push others away. Second, he believes that the cause of the change was that the central government's policies were so good that the farmers had become selfish. Third, unlike other ordinary villagers, persons in public positions still have a somewhat 'concessionary' attitude. If all the villagers take a non-conceding attitude in all aspects, village public life will not be sustainable. We cannot overlook the role of village cadres and company heads in maintaining village life. Still, most villagers remain 'non-conceding' in their public life, an attitude which has to do with recent changes in the central government, which He Youming is also aware of.

Case 7: 'Status of the weak as a weapon'

Twenty-nine-year-old Lin Dehui served in the People's Liberation Army for five years in Qinghai. Owing to the hardships he endured during this period, he sustained serious health problems and was unable to work. Since his 70-year-old mother also has health issues with her heart and brain, their household has been pushed into poverty. He receives RMB 200 per month as a wounded retired soldier, two minimum life guarantee ratios (RMB 1400 per year), and RMB 3000 as post-earthquake house repair subsidy. In his claims for better treatment, he has even made a petition trip to Beijing.³⁴ He has a non-compliant attitude in matters concerning public life. According to the former village chief, around 2011, Lin Dehui insisted on claiming his interests on three occasions. On the first occasion, after the village

committee had constructed a nursing home for older adults near his home and dug a well approximately seven meters deep in the courtyard, Lin brought in a drawing of a triangle, claiming that the well would have a negative impact on his neighbouring farmland if it exceeded a depth of four meters. Second, after a neighbour had placed rocks behind Lin's house, Lin insisted that the thudding sound as the rocks were dumped on the ground was disturbing. On the third occasion, he claimed that the wheat floor behind his house was encroaching by 0.5 *mu* onto his farmland and he appealed directly to the town authorities to resolve this issue. However, a further issue arose after some of his pigs had dug up the wheat floor, leaving tree roots exposed.³⁵

His actions remind us of the 'status of the weak as a weapon'.³⁶ Status can be weaponized as the central government addresses the needs of the weak by providing a variety of subsidies or compensations. As in Case 6, this case may imply that the better treatment by the central government has encouraged ordinary villagers to insist on their private interests more bravely than before.

The attitude of not conceding in matters concerning public life is the other side of the claim of interests. This begs the question: how does this attitude affect village public construction? The following example concerning road construction in Maicun provides insight.

Like many villages in inland China, the paving of roads around the village is also a public concern among villagers in Maicun. In 2010, road construction concerned four stretches of the road around the village (Figure 1): (1) the village entry road from the adjacent Huangjiang Village to the entrance of Maicun (1.5 km); (2) the loop-shaped road in the central hamlet (1.6 km); (3) the small paths cutting across the central hamlet (1.5 km); and (4) the road connecting the central hamlet and the surrounding peripheral hamlets (4.5 km).

When we visited Maicun in 2010 and 2011, we observed that the road stretching from the county seat was paved only to the centre of Heba Town; the rest was a dirt road from the town to the village. One day, after it had rained, our minibus was stuck in the mud and the passengers had to push the minibus out of the mud. Rural road conditions were similar throughout the county at the time.

The maintenance of small paths across the central hamlet was also an urgent matter, especially in relation to transporting water. Among the residents living in high-altitude areas of Maicun, those without a water storage well had to walk down to the central public well (see Figure 1) to fetch water. However, after a rainfall, the slopes would become muddy and slippery, making it a challenge to fetch water and forcing villagers to use rainwater. Wheat transportation was another issue, as highlighted in Case 8.

Case 8: Cooperative and non-cooperative games in farm road expansion negotiations

Wheat harvested in the fields would be transported to the wheat floor and threshed. However, because there were only narrow foot paths from the field to the wheat

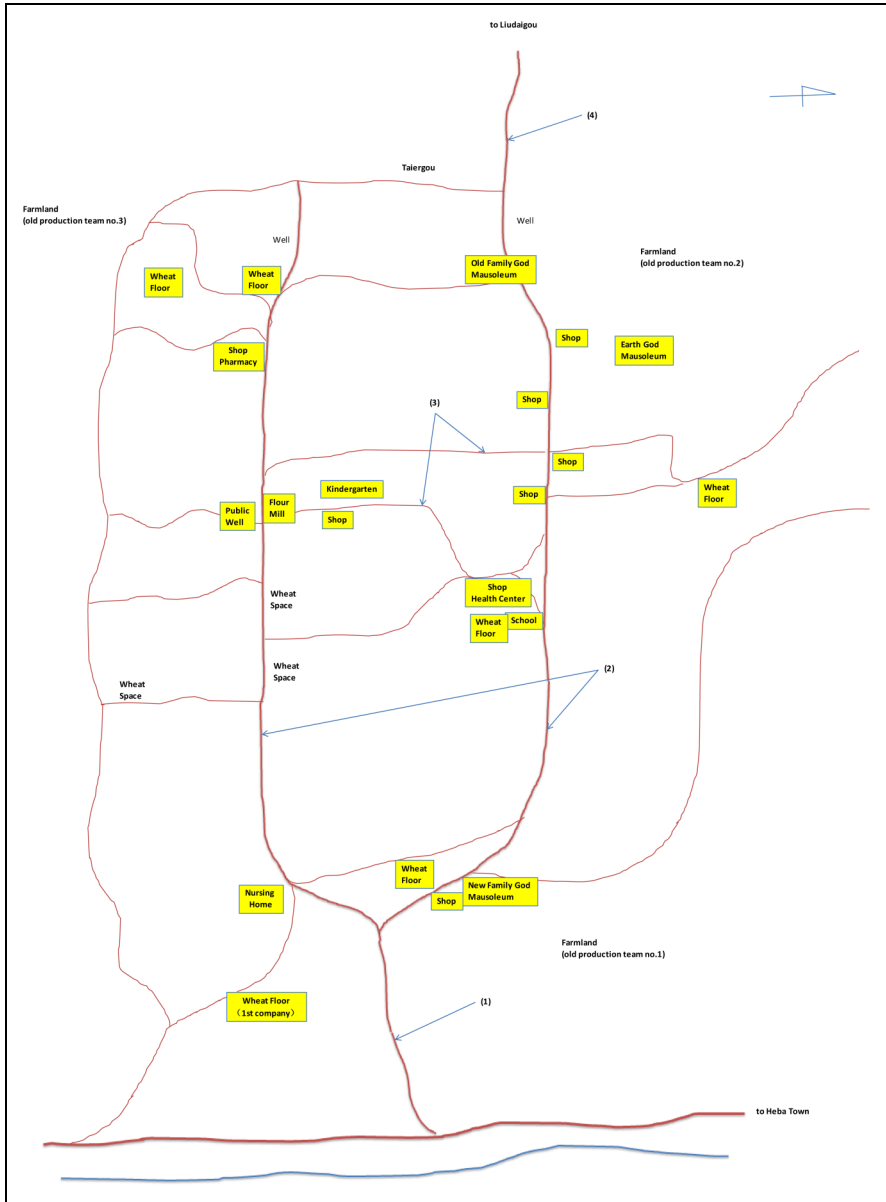


Figure 1. Map of Maicun central hamlet.

floor, it was challenging for small agricultural trucks to carry a huge amount of wheat, with at least three trips required. At RMB 30 per trip, the total cost would be RMB 90. To save money, villagers had to carry the wheat themselves. To remedy this situation,

30 to 40 households in the vicinity began discussions to expand the farm roads. However, a household living beside the road objected to the plan, noting that the proposed expansion could affect the feng shui of their graveyard, thereby preventing the plan from progressing.

In this episode, one non-compliant household hindered the whole public construction. It is quite common in the Chinese context that feng shui becomes an issue when a public goal partially conflicts with private interests. We should note here that there were 30 to 40 households who were not self-centred and tried to cooperate. This indicates that seemingly selfish Maicun villagers can unite for public purposes. Therefore, what counts is the specific situations in which people are non-compliant with public projects.

Since most villagers use the loop-shaped road, expectations for its development were particularly high. Nevertheless, certain villagers were obstructive and hindered progress, as shown in Case 9.

Case 9: Varying reactions to cadre-led road construction

In August 2010, Maicun cadres struggled with how to deal with necessary house evictions for the construction of the loop road. According to County Transportation Bureau regulations, the newly paved road had to have a width of 4.5 m, but the loop road at that time was clearly narrower. Some of the villagers' houses would have to be demolished. The eviction compensation amount for households at the town level was RMB 1500 per room, so it was expected that the compensation would be less in rural areas, but there was no clear regulation. One villager deliberately built a toilet beside the road, obviously to obtain compensation. The villager insisted on a RMB 4000 compensation if evicted, which frustrated the village leaders. The village secretary estimated that the construction cost of the toilet had been approximately RMB 500. The secretary and the village chief tried to persuade him many times, but the villager remained resistant. The second son of the household involved worked in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, and the secretary sought his opinion. The son stated, 'I agree if other households agree (to evacuate).' On the third visit to Maicun in 2011, we found that an application for construction funds for the loop-shaped road had been accepted, and that the government would pay RMB 80,000. In addition to the government subsidy, the village planned to raise RMB 30,000 from the villagers. Given that there were approximately 2000 villagers, the amount required was approximately RMB 15 per person. Nevertheless, the villagers were generally reluctant to cooperate. Many villagers did not pay; consequently, only RMB 1400 was collected, which was subsequently returned because it was an insufficient and useless amount.

As noted, many types of government resources are filtered and determined by village cadres before redistribution, such as minimum life guarantee funds and compensation for returning farmland to forest. It is apparent that the distribution of these resources in Maicun inevitably lead to dissension following the selection of beneficiaries by village cadres, with villagers' dissatisfaction not directed at the government for not providing sufficient resources, but rather at the village cadres involved in the allocation. No matter how carefully managed, village cadres' allocation of government resources is always regarded as unfair by some villagers who do not benefit (Case 5). Village

cadres and village committees are a target of popular criticism and they have lost some of their capacity to unify the community. The Chinese central government has continued to enjoy a high degree of trust among rural villagers. The closer the government is to the grass-roots level, the lower its prestige.³⁷ Thus, a double standard can be seen to operate among the villagers, expressed as ‘if the government does it, [I will not complain], but if the village does it, I will not cooperate’. Thus, the governance cost is extremely high, especially for projects led by village cadres that require significant villager participation.

Paradoxically, the non-conceding attitude of the Maicun villagers in Cases 6 to 9 also show that they remain interested in village public matters, which is why they expect the village committee or leaders to distribute government resources fairly. Nevertheless, because there is no universally fair measure, the more access there is to government resources, the more the village cadres are likely to fail in providing fair distribution, thus infuriating the villagers (Cases 5 and 9). The fact that many villagers are not active in public work projects led by village cadres indicate that they are not prepared to cooperate due to the perceived lack of fairness in the distribution of government funds (in their view, the current policy is good but improperly implemented).

Conclusion

Why do today’s peasants protest? This study examined peasants’ profit-seeking and non-conceding behavioural logic in Maicun in Gansu Province, north-western China, in the post-taxation era. Peasant behaviour in such general inland areas can be described in terms of claims of interests (‘I will get as much as I can’) and the logic of non-cooperation (‘If others do not concede, I will not concede either’). The logic of these two claims involves the use of heteronomous rationality in which people act by comparing themselves with their close neighbours. Assessing the ‘profit one should receive’ or the ‘burden one should bear’ cannot involve applying an absolute standard; relative comparison with fellow villagers or other villages is required. Deviations from this relative standard are considered unfair if people benefit less or end up paying more. Subsequent dissatisfaction may be expressed in everyday discussions at meals or may lead to personal petitions. These actions may indirectly affect the behavioural choices of the village leaders. Thus, the words and deeds of non-conceding peasants have undoubtedly become part of ‘everyday politics’.³⁸ This study does not make a sweeping generalization that all petitions and protests are triggered by peasants’ heteronomous rationality: nonetheless, it is undoubtedly one of the significant factors that dominates peasant behaviour. Moreover, this rationality has largely been omitted in preceding discussions about peasant politics.


What has shaped such behavioural logic? In the background section, this study focused on the unique path that rural China has charted relative to its rural counterparts in other developing countries. Broadly, historical development in China combined four mutually interconnected factors:

1. Due to the urban–rural divide sustained in the 1960s and 1970s, the status of ‘rural’ became fixed, with awareness of rural disparity with urban citizens becoming less clear and sensitivity to equality within rural collectives becoming more acute.

2. In the early 1980s, following the dismantling of people's communes, hierarchies within rural communities were reset due to the egalitarian farmland allocation process, forming a flat village social structure.
3. Based on this flat social structure, in the 2000s, migrant workers left for the big coastal cities. However, owing to family economic strategies in which only younger generations circulated between home village and cities, acquaintance levels in rural communities remained largely unchanged, enabling face-to-face oral communication to transmit various information about village life.
4. After 2006, strong central government support for farmers and rural areas was implemented under a pro-agricultural policy, resulting in various government resources flowing into rural areas. These new economic opportunities instigated peasants' egalitarian mindset that had been shaped during the collective era.

There remain some limitations regarding the above interpretations. Regional deviations would affect the third and fourth factors. In the case of suburban or urbanized rural areas where most farmland was lost, the equilibrium between farm management and migrant work no longer exists. Moreover, in more wealthy rural areas such as coastal regions, there is no need to contend for government resources that are by no means abundant. Under the pro-agrarian policy, in southern inland rural areas, including Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Sichuan, and Guizhou, the excessive labour drain has caused a hollowing out of village populations and a decline in the level of mutual acquaintance and social interactions. This is likely to affect heteronomous characteristics in peasant egalitarianism.

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Notes

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8. Editorial Committee of Xihe County Gazetteer 西和县志编纂委员会 (ed.) 西和县志1996–2013 (Xihe County Gazetteer 1996–2013), Lanzhou: 甘肃文化出版社 (Gansu culture press), 2014, 133.
9. The author conducted five field surveys in Xihe County and Maicun (July 2009, August 2010, August 2011, May 2015, and July–August 2016), approximately seven weeks in total. This study employs data from the fieldwork, including interviews and participatory observations. Maicun (Wheat village) is a pseudonym to protect the privacy of the local informants. Moreover, wheat has a special symbolic significance for local farmers, as shown by an episode in this study.
10. Out of eight ‘companies’ (社) in the village, this study targeted the fifth company (62 households, 304 people) for sampling. Interviews were conducted with heads of households regarding demographic details such as each household’s family membership, age, sex, education, and present and past work experiences. A company in the Xihe County area corresponds to a small group of villagers.
11. Marc Blecher and Vivienne Shue, *Tethered Deer: Government and Economy in a Chinese County*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 174–6; Huaiyin Li, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform: A Micro History, 1948–2008*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, chapter 10.
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14. See Ellen Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, chapter 2; Blecher and Shue, *Tethered Deer*, 191–4; and Li, *Village China Under Socialism and Reform*, 269–71, for similar cases.
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25. Institutionally, it also includes people with disabilities who have no dependents and those under the age of 16. Regarding boys and girls, education, instead of burial, is covered.

- During the era of the people's commune, the collective was responsible for the five guarantees. It is now subsidized directly by the government.
26. Editorial Committee of Xihe County Gazetteer, 西和县志1996–2013, 705–6.
 27. This is a policy measure to return low-productivity agricultural lands, mainly in mountainous areas, to a forested state to protect the ecological environment (see Shiraishi, 農業・農村から見る現代中国事情, 223–8).
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