

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Rural Development and Local Governance in China

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Lau: In the last three days, we attended the Oxfam International Conference on Globalization and Development in China, and exchanged our views on rural development. Huang Ping critiques the whole notion of developmentalism. He thinks in rural communities, not only natural resources have been damaged, interpersonal relationships especially in terms of trust, sense of security and traditional life-style have also been disrupted. Science, technology and foreign capital investment have changed the original diversity and especially indigenous knowledge and wisdom. He asks the basic question: "development for what?"

Wen Tiejun critiques the monopoly of resources and wealth by different sectors in China. He says we cannot simply impose western

theories on Chinese reality. In China now there is a process of "internal colonization", for lack of a better term, with exploitation of rural resources. He proposes that at the village level, there should be general election, self-government and cooperative economy, so that the village cooperative committee would be the basic unit of financial management and ownership of local resources.

Chen Xin questions the logic of capitalism, which is pursuit of super profits. He feels we should distance ourselves from the impact of market under globalization.

Bai Nansheng gives us a specific case in Yunnan, of how the government promoted the planting of grass and trees, but the project was quite a disaster. Though in the name of environment protection, the project caused a lot of environmental destruction. He calls for caution on implementing programs by administrative means.

On the basis of such discussions, we can now go further into these issues.

Wen: The exchange in the last three days enables us Chinese scholars to learn a lot from presentations by NGOs. However, I would like to make one comment: some people emphasize the question of participation and human rights without a concept of fieldwork. For example, Green Peace is very popular in developed countries, but this kind of environmental movement is not popular in China, not so much because of political control, but because people are not at the same level of concern for issues of post-modernization. A large number of people still live in the rural area, and issues like genetically modified food, which have become critical issues in western countries, are not of much concern to peasants in China because land is scarce and peasants want to find ways to increase output. Similarly, poor urban consumers need cheap food rather than care if the food is organic.

So there is a conflict between the need of poor people and opposition to GM food. If you take the poor's need into consideration, how can you stand against GM food? Last October I was in Shaanxi province, in a town famous for biotechnology. The University of Northwest Agricultural Technology has a BT center and produced a sheep "Youngyoung" using the same technology as the British Dolly cloning. I was in the town to give a speech on the local people's demand on hi-tech. I said maybe there is not such strong demand for hi-tech from the rural people. The technology system is strictly controlled by the administration. Scattered farmers do not have the scale of economy and capacity to absorb hi-tech. But they may need some applied

technique for their small farmland in increasing output. So our problem in agriculture is not similar to countries like Japan or Europe. I think thorough discussion is needed to compare data from different countries and different periods.

The reason why I strongly criticize some micro finance projects practiced among a lot of NGOs with high cost and high interest, but instead talk about alternative currency, is because that is a very important factor for social capital and social economy in the rural area.

Lau: Could we also go into the question of alternatives, such as election of village chiefs, and the question of self-governance at the village level?

Chen: Village self-governance depends on the condition of the villages. Self-governance will be better than intervention by officials from outside if peasants can decide their own resources, land, property, community relations and the development of the village. A good example is Xinrenzhuang Village in Hebei Province. But if the village chief is supported by hooligans or triads, the nature of village self-governance is changed, since there is no monitoring from higher authorities. Authority from above sometimes can be a restraining factor in preventing control by the local mafia. I am not saying village self-governance is not the way out, but its effect varies in different situations.

Wen: In some cases in Guangdong and Guizhou provinces, there is a strong relationship between local governance and local property rights. Last year I was in Guangdong Province to carry out fieldwork in several villages. I found out that if the village has carried out reform in giving property right to the villagers, especially the land right, or even property right of the village's factories, the villagers, as shareholders, are very careful on election of village representatives. However, often, the central government, in order to get access to the village, turns the rural organizations and village committees, which are supposed to assist village agricultural production, into tax collectors for the central government. Then gradually these rural organizations lose their function in helping agricultural production, and only perform the function of collecting tax. If the staff of these organizations are elected by the shareholders of the village, then those who can defend the interest of the villagers will be chosen. Different structures of property

right distribution would bring different authority and different measures of local governance.

Chen: I agree with you, but what you said is only one of many possible situations. In some cases, the villages have their own committees, but the question is who will supervise this committee's power when the committee only represents minority interest in the village. I think in this case, the central government should supervise the village committee.

Wen: If the village distributes property to every household equally, the villagers will be serious about exercising their right. But if the government carries out a privatization program on property right distribution, and much of the village land falls under the control of a few entrepreneurs, then the villagers will not care about public affairs which is under the control of the entrepreneurs. I think the resources of authority are affected by the structure of property right, therefore we should distribute property right equally.

Chen: Yes, that is quite reasonable. But when we talk about the committee at the village level, in trying to equalize power by distributing property right equally in terms of shares, we have to face the reality that power distribution is not equal in a village. At the village level, the distribution of right and interest is very differentiated. So-called equal distribution may not easily reach women and children who are supposed to share the property right. In this case, one solution is to invite government intervention at the beginning.

Manipon: On the question of village governance, relationship between the village and higher levels of authority, it is very hard to talk based only on principle, to say whether it should be more centralized or decentralized. We need to talk of which area we are referring to in a certain experience. I want to use Kerala as a starting point to ask the question further. Two things struck me of how they describe several processes in Kerala. One is how they look into the direction of devolution of power from above to below. What has been devolved? The other direction is what could be done at the village level, and the pre-conditions of social reform before that can actually happen. I don't know if Chen Xin was also referring to certain pre-conditions in the village?

Huang: There is a danger of simply arguing on abstract principles, like should we have an equal starting point, or should it be bottom up. Some people may even come up with a neo-liberal approach to development, that is, let it go. Let the government do nothing. Let the people live under the rule of the jungle and compete with each other. That is definitely neither Wen's nor my point. When we talk about such issues or argue for self-governance, it is not just a question of theory or principle, but rather a question of where to start. We have to recognize we don't start from zero. The interest groups already exist. There is already unequal distribution of wealth and power. Look at the land reform in the early 50s and the rural reform in the early 80s, the reason why they were quite popular is because they offered equal opportunity for everyone in accessing resources. Of course we should go further, and consider not only equality at the start, but also equality of the process. For instance, we may have a quite equal program on re-distribution of land, but what happens after three months or three years? Sometime it turns out the land is monopolized by a few persons. We have to look at the starting-point, the process as well as the end-results.

Even if we have mechanisms in monitoring, evaluating and controlling these kinds of unequal distribution, we still have to face the problem of the weak. It is more a question about the whole process, rather than simply saying decentralization, privatization, letting go. Today, when NGOs talk about alternatives, they all talk about participation and bottom-up approach. I think that is too simplistic and idealistic. That's why we always emphasize how complicated things are.

Lau: Can Chen Xin give an example of the need for intervention from senior levels?

Chen: I will talk of what I saw in a village election. There was conflict in the village, no agreement could be reached, and in the end some people resorted to violence. The government had to come to help with mediation and form a new committee, and suppressed some people in the process of mediation. Later the village committee became somewhat like a shadow of the government. This is one case with the government helping to resolve internal conflicts and then influencing the village committee.

In another case, an entrepreneur who had started his enterprise for a few years said, "Vote for me and I will do this and that for the

village, I have money." The entrepreneur made a lot of promises, and told people that "my uncle is the county chief, if I am elected I will do this and that". Sometimes they even bully the villagers. The official told the villagers, "If you vote for him, I will give funds to your village so that you can build a new road. If you don't, you get nothing." So there is outsider influence. What I just mentioned are some worse cases. The more ideal cases that Wen mentioned do exist, for example in Shangdong Province.

Huang: The question is: who can guarantee that the initial distribution of property right is just? Even if we have villagers' self-rule, the self governing team may be hijacked by the village chief or the officials.

Chen: There already exists a structure of conflicting interests, but some re-distribution of land still retains a revolutionary nature.

Wen: Jeannie asked the question of comparing Kerala with China. In Kerala, the Kerala People's Science Movement has started a very long-term social movement. Let me talk a little bit on what I think China can learn from Kerala. There should be some small capital, or resources, such as a piece of farmland, to be given to the local people by the government. In China, people do want property right, but in actuality the property right is controlled by the village elite in the name of the Party, the village committee, etc. So the question is how you can enable the villagers, in the name of shareholders, to have a share in the property right that used to be monopolized by the village elite. How can we make the elite share this right with the villagers? I emphasize that equalized property right is an important base to people's right.

During the 1990s, there were new conflicts because of the appearance of industrial zones or development zones. Especially in the Pearl Delta region, which is near Hong Kong, the village elite wanted to increase the village collective land for industrialization and to attract investors. But all the land had already been taken by the common villagers during the rural reform of the early 1980s. So the village elite had to re-collect the land in the name of the village collective. But the villagers said: "you have already occupied the interest of the village industries, and now you want to rob my land? No way!" So there were so many conflicts in Guangdong province. According to the statistics, 46-49% of local conflicts were caused by the land problem. The central government had to settle this situation, and started to intervene by trying to find solutions. This gave a chance for

the common villagers to bargain with the village elite. Otherwise the village elite will never agree to sharing power with the common villagers. Since we were working in one of these experimental zones as instructors, we were able to propose a solution of equalized distribution of industrial property right combined with ownership of land, where farmland can be converted into industrial land. Every share-holder can benefit from the village industry.

Huang: This case suggests that sometimes there should be intervention from either people like Wen or the higher authorities to ensure there is equal distribution. My feeling is if we simply let it go, it would turn into disaster. In reality, it is impossible to have equal starting point, because resources are already unequally distributed. I also understand why today people are calling for private ownership of land and even urging for modification of the Constitution; it is because twenty years after the last re-distribution of resources in the early 1980s, distribution of resources has again become unequal, and a minority has put most of the village resources into their own pocket. For instance the conversion of township and village enterprises into private shareholders system has privatized a lot of common property. Some may feel there is no problem in principle, but in reality the situation is complicated. One speaker in the conference did not realize there are such privatized systems in rural China, and argued for common property and village cooperatives. In terms of alternatives, I don't think alternative should simply mean bottom-up because we have been suffering from top-down. We should rather find something in between, to work with different agencies and groups to see if there is any solution.

Chen: The Xinrenzhuang Village that I mentioned has a very good local governance committee. They also have a better economic situation based on a larger proportion of collective economy compared with other villages. But such cases are rare in the rural area. In some villages with collective enterprises, because the ownership of property is not clear, the management is chaotic and inefficient. In some cases, it begins with collective economy but turns into monopoly by individuals.

Felizco: There is much stress on resources in terms of physical resources, property, but that is just one of the factors that exist in the community. There are so many variables and hierarchy of power that impact on

whether a governance is democratic or not. For example, social and cultural hierarchy. I think it is important to make those linkages because democratizing access to resources does not prevent the possibility of power captured by a local elite. Who is powerless is not simply on physical resources but also on other terms.

Huang: Yes, definitely so. Even when we had quite equalized re-distribution of land in the 50s and early 80s, we did not have that kind of consideration or institutional arrangement of opportunities or rights. It would be impossible to imagine how women could participate in all these kinds of social life and economic life, the so-called liberation of Chinese women. I think we still cannot surpass the early 50s, when at least there were big changes, despite all the failures. The first was land reform and the second was women's status as the first marriage law was passed. And that is exactly what you said, we need to consider both physical and non-physical resources. Today we already talk a lot about equal opportunity, equal access, but in terms of institutional arrangement, there is still a serious lack of implementation, even from NGOs. Both NGOs and industry developers can be a big help on this. How NGOs think not only for themselves but for the people is important. Usually NGOs don't realize this: they bring new ideas to the community, but without sustainable effort.

Bai: In the eighties and nineties, I did some historical research on the countryside, and I have been looking for chances to continue this research. My research shows that in China, in the past, rural villages were basically self-governed. In modern historical writings, there is a trendy saying that the rural is "a tray of dispersed sand", without organization, difficult for organization. But I have many examples of self-governed organizations actually existing in the countryside in economy, social security, disaster relief, financing, and other aspects. If we are to seriously study this, we can categorize them by their functions, and see what functions they had taken in the past, and how they came to take up such functions.

Of course, today, the village is required to take up very different functions compared with the past. Now we ask the village to take up a lot of work, almost like controlling all aspects of society, from land to birth control, education, housing, and even burial of the dead. That is one major difference. The other is, historically, the village had strong Confucian thinking. Even though the government did not go directly into the village to work on people's mind, Confucian thinking

maintained basic control. In a village, there were literate people who studied in order to get into the officialdom, so they acquired Confucian thinking, and the village thus had a rather homogeneous ideology.

Lau: When was it?

Bai: The records can be traced back to Ming and Qing periods, but the situation did not change much until liberation. Before liberation in 1949, the Nationalist Party government set up district offices under the county in only a few provinces, but there was not any township or village level governing bodies. When I was conducting interviews in some villages in North China, I came upon a very interesting story: the villagers in one village were discontented about their leaders. Why? Well, from today's point of view, we will say that the village leaders then were too honest and clean. The discontent was: each leader collected the villagers' money as fund for village affairs, post the budget balance on a wall, but the villagers were not satisfied because the accounts for the whole year was a neat balance, not one cent more, not one cent less. The villagers thus thought that was not possible, it must be a scam. The villagers complained to the district office and the village leader was removed from office.

At that time, "cadres" in the village, for performing certain tasks throughout the year, would collect money from the villagers. The tasks could be giving provisions to an army unit that came by, for example. Every expenditure item must be shown in the balance report posted on the wall. This village had a neat balance.

Huang: Luo Hongguang did a research in North Shaanxi Province. There was a temple where people came from different villages, and shared the social space as well as symbolic space. The argument of his research is basically that among the villagers, power and authority did not necessarily all the time remain held by the same group of people. The authority for community integration, community identification and community development must be an authority with identification by the villagers. For instance, the village chief may have certain political power, but he may not really be the authority in the village. It may be the elderly people who have the authority. Luo's research shows that there are a lot of "exchanges" taking place among villagers. The exchange may not necessarily be of equivalence in price or value, but rather, the equivalence is in terms of meaning. For such physical or non-physical exchange of meaning, people cultivate a kind of authority

structure. That is something we should consider when we try to reconstruct the community.

Chen mentioned Confucian culture in the village; the village Luo Hongguang studied was of Daoist culture. Actually, it does not matter which culture it is, because the people in the village has dialogue with Zhang Fei the legendary general in folk stories, or with Confucius, or with Mao Zedong. The activities held in the temple are not just religious or ritual; they are also practical. When the village authority and the political power structure go into conflict, a lot of resources and time in the village are wasted.

Lau: I would like to ask Bai, how do you link your research of the historical past to possible alternatives for the present?

Bai: Before 1949, the self-governing bodies took up different functions, so the situation was relatively stable, and even if there were problems with one self-governing mechanism, other mechanisms were there, so there was no total collapse. The integrated system built up since 1949 is highly unified and monolithic, and includes ideology and rigorous social control. However, when problems arise in this monolithic leadership system, the system becomes the least stable. That means all the self-governing mechanisms playing various integrative functions that the village originally had have been done away with.

Now our institute is working on a new research project. It is to study what are the things that the peasant families cannot resolve by themselves, and who takes up these social functions. There are lots of differences among villages, and we try to see whether the institutions that take up these functions are centralized or diversified. For instance, about elections, I would like to know how village committees in various places hold elections; they must be very different, for example between a poor village where the village government knows nothing but collecting tax, and a well-to-do village where the village government provides lots of social benefits; in some places, people don't have to pay for medical fee, and the livelihood of the elderly is taken care of. Through analyzing these I hope I can see, among the functions that the village government has taken up, what are the needs of the villagers, what are the tasks imposed by the higher authorities, and what are the different conditions of the villages taking up these social functions. I think we have to compare that, to see what is the real situation, so that we can make more meaningful recommendations.

Why am I interested in this research? Firstly, this idea came up from studies on the rural village in the collective phase. At that time, we believed that the managing cost in the collective phase was too high, while the surplus of agricultural production, after deducting the necessary production cost, was very little. Could such a small surplus sustain such a huge monitoring, control system? I therefore went to look at control and management in the past. In the past, productivity was lower, surplus should be less, so at that time, for example, economic cooperation or disaster relief, which could not be taken up by one single family, had to be accomplished with very low costs. There are many stories but we do not have the time to go into them.

The second reason is, according to class analysis, those who controlled the village and had authority all seemed to be rich men. Why? Was it because of class consciousness or other factors? From some interviews, I find out that it is because of actual need. The rich men provided something, some services unavailable from others. Take one example. The troops arrived in the village, and demanded that the village gave them a certain amount of provisions in two days. These were not part of the usual tax collecting activities. To collect these, only the rich men could do. In the north, rich men were called 'big hay households, because they had more crops and more hay. In the process of collecting provisions, if one person could not pay, another person would have to stand in, otherwise the troops would set fire to the whole village. The local gentry might allow the poor to pay back after the autumn harvest, or might ask for high interest.

We paid special attention to those who were originally the authority of the community, helping to integrate the community. In those days, the local gentry would not have taken direct wages or remunerations. So, when did the wage-receiving functionaries come to be professionalized? From our studies, this basically started after collectivization in the 50s, after the implementation of labour credits. Such professionalized people came to be a bit too many.

Huang: My view is slightly different. In analyzing the structure or the problems of the village, I think analysis of the functions cannot solve one problem. Specifically, why did I mention the structure of authority? A friend of mine studies the ancient history and post Warring States period, through Qin to Han dynasties. Qin was a time when the rule of law was more dominant, but why was it that they went back to Confucianism after the Han period? Because that would keep the management cost low.

Using class analysis in economic terms to apply to a village would of course be too simplistic. But I think there is a structural problem here, which is not so much between the rich and the poor, but the question of moral authority. When the self-governance of the village is largely based on authority within the village, little intervention is required and the management cost is low.

Bai: I think the most meaningful thing about studying rural integration is, if you look at the problem only from the economic perspective, the problem is difficult to be resolved. The economy of the rural village is basically a problem of income. In actuality, the criteria a peasant uses to judge a person are, besides the person's income, his character, then his clan – which big kinship group he belongs to. These different dimensions do not necessarily overlap with each other. The less they overlap, the more the community's diversity and stability; the more they overlap, the more rigid and oppressive the structure may be.

Huang: The authority structure is often like this: the one with the highest authority is not the wealthiest one. (Bai: Right.) For instance, the physician in the village, the elderly. It is because the structure of a village is usually centred around a clan, the family is given higher value. The higher the position in the kinship hierarchy, the higher the authority. Often the structure of authority has nothing to do with income. On the other hand, the elite and the upper class will sit down to decide village affairs. They represent different clans, blood lineages and interest groups, and sometimes not the people with the highest authority can make the decision alone; at least the physician, the head of the big family, the old farmer with the best farming technique, etc., had to participate, (Bai: The most ferocious people also.) All sorts of authority are included, despite their difference in nature. (Bai: The butchers are the most ferocious people.) In the past we asked: why was it that political authority reached only the county level, and below county level it was self-governance? In this analysis, we can see self-governance includes a very important power structure, but it is not a power structure of administration, because once it becomes an administrative power structure, the villagers have to support the village chief's livelihood, the central government cannot afford that, the substantial cost will be very high. So the good thing about Luo's study is, I think, when there is a power structure, what is its relation with the original authority structure? If they are in conflict, the cost will be higher, most of the resources will be consumed in confrontation.

I know of a village, when in the fifties, the captain of the production brigade was not appointed by the government, but was the head of the clan. He had authority because he was an old farmer, and knew farm work, when to sow seeds, etc. In another village, two brothers were the seniors in the clan, the elder brother was the production brigade head while the younger brother was the landlord. They were supposed to be politically on different sides. But actually, when the elder brother went out for meetings, the younger brother would take charge of the affairs of the village. Thus, in the village, there was a very complicated mix of relationship and most important is the one who has authority in the village, the one who has the capacity to mediate, so that conflict, argument and fight could be avoided or compromised. It is not simply top-down administrative control from the government. The top-down process also involves local authority. In addition, even if we say power should be devolved to the village level, it will not induce a sudden political vacuum and only the local mafia will be dominant. There are still many existing relationships.

Thirdly, the usual talk about "decentralization" has much to do with the administrative system. I would like to stress that we should consider not only how authority functions, but also how it constructs rural community life, how it relates to traditional authority and moral structures. Today, many NGOs try to work closely with the community by simply repeating the World Bank's approach of money, technology, top-down or governmental approach, enforcing the administrative means or power, rather than looking into the kind of authority that can be shared or established by the villagers, so that the village may find out its own way to self-governance.

Chen: The style of management in the village that Huang Ping mentioned can still be found today, and can be an important background reference. Today's rural village has changed a lot compared with the past. Before 1949, villages were basically isolated from the outside world, with internal diversity, and a relatively simple and primitive economic structure. The relation between a village and the state was, during the war time, that the village provided supplies for the army, paid tax, gave provisions, and depended on the state in carrying out disaster relief work; there were no other relations. Self-governance was under the influence of Confucianism, and existed under the interlocking relations of functions and structure. Apart from the functions Bai pointed out, there were functions for marriage, defence against bandits, and other simple functions. After 1949, there was a major change, the

state industrialized and modernized the townships and villages, and economic targets became the dominant language. The natural village is no longer natural, and it is still called that way because of the geographical meaning. It has been closely tied with the political agenda of the state. Through the Party and the people's commune, the rural villages were organized into the state agenda. After the reform policy, the people's commune do not exist anymore but the townships and villages are still drawn into the development target of the state: family planning, roads, electricity to every village....

Now, the relation between the village and the state is not that the village can self-govern itself. The state sets requirements for the village, and seeks to uniformly construct the township and the village. Especially in the 70s, the economic structure at the village level was highly complex. There are more than 20 occupations at the village level. Some are based on actual need, some bring individuals away from his land but not his home village. These occupations have complicated the political and economic relations in the village. In addition is the state's demand for all villages to aim towards the same goal, so rural villages cannot remain natural villages.

For the time being, it is not easy for NGOs to start from village self-governance, to discuss from the outside what pattern of self-construction the villages can choose. Not only because it may arouse suspicion from the government, it is also difficult to mobilize people to participate in it. The experience I got in projects is, whether it is a township or a village, one should choose a place where the village committee is more just so that the villagers can be convinced. If the village head is a local tyrant, the relations in the village are tense, the conflict of interests serious, and it is not easy to come to consensus on anything, then a project should not be launched there.

Huang: I agree. The most important thing is that the village now is part of the state building process, be it to modernize or industrialize. One problem is, when things go wrong in the village, there is only one solution: to resolve the problem within the administrative system, such as giving more funds, more manpower, or add a special official post. The village reconstruction and community reconstruction I think of does not go this direction. It doesn't mean one more bridge or one more woman representative in the village committee. It is to find a genuine authority that everyone recognizes in the village. This person with authority may be a village committee member, a teacher, a physician, an old man, or an educated person. Without this authority,

more money, technology, bridges or electricity lines mean nothing.

The rural village in China is seriously declining, not just financially in terms of indebtedness, or decrease of agricultural income, or marginalization of the village because young people run away. Of course these are problems, but most important of all, if a village loses its authority, and there is no reconstruction, no rediscovery, then it is not the community we talk about, it is just a place in the geographical sense, with a group of people living there, on guard against each other, trying to stab the back of each other. The agenda of the state or of the NGOs are all from the outside, like what Wen said, imposed by the west, or imposed by the state. It may not be useful for a village to go after production of profit.

I find the definition of poverty problematic, not only because it imposes on the village a marginal position once and for all, thus diminishing its self confidence, but it also mixes up a good village with a bad one. For instance, even if the average income per capita is 500 yuan, some village may be in a barren mountain with unruly rivers, bandits, local scoundrels, diseases, and some village may have very good relations, blue sky, clean water, trust among villagers. Yet, if one looks only in terms of per capita income, the two villages are of the same level.

I have previously talked about a remote mountain area where the villages are not indebted, and there was no suicide for some years. Rather than pushing for an increased income, it is more preferable to seek identification with the community, consolidation of authority, trust and security. The income may remain 300 yuan a year, but the relations between man and nature is excellent, there is sense of identity with the community and the authority. They do not need a lot of administrative control. A village like that is a village with high quality of life, which even urban people will envy. I think it is the most important thing in the reconstruction of the rural community.

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