

Chapter 2

No. 9 Courtyard and Rural China

A few days ago, I passed by the main gate of No. 9 Courtyard by chance. I could not help stopping and looking at it: the thick and dignified gate with the marble doorplate reading “Mansion of Prince Li of the Qing Dynasty” is just as before. Beside the gate, soldiers stood on guard with guns. Nobody knows exactly how many recruit–veteran successions occurred at the posts, but it still seemed to be familiar to me. More than 20 years have passed, but the appearance here, compared to the first time I entered the gate, has been exactly the same. However, I know that the deep and mysterious courtyard has totally changed as far as the persons working inside are concerned. In those years, this place had been a “meeting place of wind and clouds” for Chinese rural reforms. Every move within the courtyard had been closely associated with Chinese rural reforms, but now it has disappeared from the sight of rural researchers.

Sitting in the car and seeing the once familiar courtyard fade out of sight, I had a unspeakable feeling of sadness. It reminded me a line of poetry from the Song Dynasty: “Many events of revitalization and failure in the six dynasties have all become the gossips of ordinary people.” It seems that No. 9 Courtyard now can be talked about like gossip. I once had the feeling of gossiping when talking about the experience with my previous colleagues, but the only difference was they are not ordinary people.

In the early 1980s, I entered the courtyard for the first time. It was midsummer at that time and it was quite difficult to find the place. There was only the name of the work unit appearing on my graduation job dispatch card and there was no specific address. The day before going to work, I suddenly realized that I had no idea where exactly the work unit was located. After numerous inquiries, I was advised that it should be located in Zhongnanhai because it was an institution of the Secretariat of the Central Committee. Therefore, carrying my bag I directly went to Zhongnanhai

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on the morning of the day. At the west main gate, the guard soldier asked me to wait a moment. After a few minutes, he came back telling me that the work unit was not here but it was not far and that I could go west through Lingjing Lane and would find it at Huangchenggen South Road. Fifteen minutes later, I arrived at the main gate of this courtyard. The guard soldier here checked over my work identity card, called inside, and then let me in. Since then, for more than a decade I worked in this courtyard.

This is a grand, old, and simple courtyard and once was the mansion of Prince Li of the Qing Dynasty. It was said that this place was also a prince's mansion in the Ming Dynasty. The peasant insurrectionary army leader Li Zicheng did not reside in the Forbidden City when he originally entered Beijing with his troops but stayed in this courtyard for three days. There were six or seven smaller courts of different sizes inside the Prince's mansion, all of which were quadrangles. As for its present division of usage, the courtyard was basically divided into two parts, south and north. The south part was used for offices of two institutions, one of which was the Rural Policy Research Office of the Secretariat of the Central Committee; the north part was mainly for residences. Three large courts accommodated three national leaders, including the former highest party and state leader who had just retired. The other two courts were smaller and were called No. 1 court and No. 2 court, using offices of the directors of the Rural Policy Research Office. Ordinary staff all worked in a three-story building, which was called the "small gray building." After starting work, I was assigned to the secretariat, which was at the middle part of level two of the small gray building. Later, when acting as secretary, I worked in No. 1 and No. 2 court, respectively.

At that time, the household responsibility system (*dabaogan*) was spreading to the whole country and rural reform was being vigorously carried out. Soon after commencing my work, I was involved in a series of meetings, business trips, reports, and other activities and personally realized that this place was actually the headquarters of the general staff of Chinese rural reform. Policy making of course lay in the highest level in Zhongnanhai. Nonetheless, work concerning the design and promotion of rural reform including collecting information, reflecting on problems, raising policy proposals, and drafting documents were all carried out in this deep and serene courtyard. At that time, apart from this unit, there was no other special institute in the party center and the State Council for rural policy research. The work of the secretariat was mainly about information transmittal, meeting arrangements, and minute taking, and taking phone calls as well, and was extremely busy. We often received phone calls from offices of top leaders and saw various instructions and comments sent from the high-level leaders. Endless meetings were held in the meeting room of No. 2 court, and ministers relevant to rural work and leaders of some provinces and cities often came here to give reports and discuss issues. A few old typewriters in the printing room clattered away all day long and all kinds of materials were printed and bound, which made the two young lady typists cry every two or three days due to the heavy work. In the summer of the year, the main issue with which it was busy here in the courtyard was to prepare a document concerning rural reform. In the early spring of this year, the center had

just issued the No. 1 document on rural reform, which was the first of the later famous “five No. 1 documents for rural reform.” The document that was being prepared later became the No. 1 document of the year 1983, which today is called the second No. 1 document.

According to my limited personal observations and participation, I noticed that the formation of each No. 1 document consisted of a series of investigating activities and a number of meetings of different scales. Investigations and research activities were mainly organized and planned in No. 9 Courtyard. Except for the Politburo meetings discussing the finalization of the documents, those previous meetings were all organized by the No. 9 Courtyard and many of those meetings were held in different meeting rooms there. At a later stage of the document formation, a conference of provincial and ministerial leaders was to be convened for focused discussion. It was initially called the “Whole Country Agricultural Conference for Party Secretaries” (*quanguo nongye shuji huiyi*), was later called the “Nationwide Rural Work Conference” (*quanguo nongcun gongzuo huiyi*), and then the “Rural Work Conference of the Central Committee” (*zhongyang nongcun gongzuo huiyi*). The conference discussing the second No. 1 document was held in the guesthouse of the Beijing Military District and Tianjin City, respectively; the conference for the third No. 1 document was held in the Air Force guesthouse located at Yabao Road; and the conferences for the fourth and fifth No. 1 documents were held at the Jingxi Hotel. Meetings at that time lasted for a long time, usually over 10 days and even more than a half month, and a meeting would also be off on weekends. Group discussion took a large amount of time in a meeting. In every session, all the secretariat staff would go and provide services except those who were left on duty in the office. As meeting service workers, our duties included making phone calls, circulating notices, taking notes, and so on, which were detailed and tiring and often ran into working overtime. It was unavoidable for us to feel tired and unhappy and to express the feeling in words. I remember that a senior comrade once criticized me: “Young man, it is concrete to serve the people.” Nonetheless, I still had a pleasant feeling as I benefited from listening in the meeting. In addition, because the hotel provided accommodation and meals, it was also quite convenient for a bachelor like me to stay there.

In my memory, the conference for discussing the second No. 1 document was really lively. It was held first in Beijing and then in Tianjin and took nearly 20 days. The discussion was quite ardent, but because the “ice of policy” had been basically broken and the policy controversies were not as fierce as when discussing the household responsibility system, the atmosphere was not stressful and oppressive. The problems discussed in the conference were all derived from the rural reality of the early stage of the reform and needed to be solved urgently. After the land was contracted to individual households, which became the basic production units, questions whether large agricultural machines such as tractors should be allowed to be purchased by individuals, whether peasants should be allowed to engage in long-distance dealings in their spare time, and whether labor employment should be allowed in policy, still needed to be answered. From today’s viewpoint, these issues are not problems at all, but they were questions of principle at that time. Under the

structural conditions at that time, local governments were barely able to make decisions without the higher-ups' approval or policy loosening. For instance, regarding the problem of individual persons' purchase of tractors, if the center had not made a unitary policy to allow it, rural households would have no way to buy one even they wanted to because the state factories could not sell tractors to individuals. Meetings held in No. 9 Courtyard and investigators dispatched by No. 9 Courtyard mainly took these issues as their topics. Some controversial policy issues usually had to wait for opinions from a few top central leaders, some of whom would give oral instructions and some of whom would make written comments. As for peasants doing long-distance trade, for example, they were called speculative "two-way merchants" in some materials, but the then General Secretary's written instruction read: "No, they should be called Erlang God" (the god for solving the difficulty of rural logistics). The opinions and written instructions by the highest level were important references for the formation of policy documents. After this document was issued, the center subsequently issued three successive No. 1 documents. The outstanding contributions of these documents were that they responded to new real problems that emerged, and effectively broke through the old system restricting the peasants and established a basic rural framework of the market economy.

The influences of No. 9 Courtyard upon Chinese rural society were not just limited to policy research. At that time, No. 9 Courtyard had integrated the rural and agricultural research institutions of the whole country and had effectively organized the higher education and research units so as to provide services for applied research. In those years, many scholars from both Beijing and elsewhere also visited No. 9 Courtyard constantly. The rural research institute in No. 9 Courtyard also had another sign, which was originally called "Research Center for Chinese Rural Development" and was changed to "Research Center for Rural Development of the State Council" two years later. In the name of this center, a significant amount of special funds was used to support research projects undertaken by social organizations, which aimed to serve policy research through making use of various academic strengths. Apart from that, the center was also engaged in exchanges and cooperation with many international figures. During that period, some Western scholars visited China through this center and, accordingly, leaders of No. 9 Courtyard were also able to listen to opinions of foreign scholars. Through arrangements made by No. 9 Courtyard, some of the Western scholars were even able to meet and discuss with the State Council leaders. No. 9 Courtyard actually had the most influential status in the Chinese rural research area.

In the last year of the 1980s, 1989, the rural research institution of No. 9 Courtyard was abolished. According to my personal observation and understanding, the influence of No. 9 Courtyard had started to decline before the abolition of the institution and the turning point occurred approximately when the fifth No. 1 document was issued. There were three indications. First, the sharp reduction in grain production in the mid-1980s caused some doubts from the high level to the public, and severe criticism toward it even appeared. Second, since then, research on rural reform was also stuck and No. 9 Courtyard seemed to lose its

direction. When people talked about the next stage of reform when dining in the cafeteria or on the regular bus, it was clearly felt that the reform focus was not evident and the policy spirit was quite vague. After the fifth No. 1 document, a rural work document was still issued in 1987 and it was the No. 5 document of the year. At that time, grain yield was still hovering and the improvement of peasant income was still slow. The influence of No. 9 Courtyard was far less than before. After the institution was abolished a year later, again in the summer, the staff of nearly 200 persons was assigned to five relevant places one after another and the people here sadly parted. During the most of the 1990s, some personnel allocated to another unit still worked here, and some of my colleagues and me still stayed in this courtyard. However, as far as rural research was concerned, No. 9 Courtyard had lost its glory. In the autumn 1998, the new work unit was moved to a new address as a whole, and we finally bid farewell to this courtyard. Today, I just went by its gate simply as a passerby.

No. 9 Courtyard had experienced the two dynasties of Ming and Qing with a history of over 100 years, and its recent 20 years probably have been of little significance. But to an individual person it is not a short period, and especially to a young person moving toward middle age it is enough to brew a strong historical sense, which can drive every person to think much more deeply and further. I above all think of the historical logic embodied in its glory and decline.

As many people know, there had been an important think tank in No. 9 Courtyard, which was glorious for the five successful No. 1 documents. Nowadays, there are still many think tanks and there are even many more documents of various types. However, we do not know which strength could create similar glory once again. When I turn my focus from No. 9 Courtyard to wider rural China and examine 20 years of rural reform and development, it seems that the “document era” has come to an end. At the local level, many leaders’ speeches simply imitate the higher-ups and village party branch (VPB) secretaries’ talks are just like the tone of the editorials of the *People’s Daily*, but after the talks, nothing has changed; many policy documents are simply copied from the higher-ups and transmitted down level by level without taking any substantial actions; the regulations and requirements are stressed by one document after another, but year after year problems remain and even deteriorate. As far as documents are concerned, current documents are high in strategies, deep in ideas, clear in direction, and much more in-depth compared to the past, but the problem lies in their invalidity. Documents played a role in the past largely due to the power of a totalitarian system, which guaranteed the lower levels to follow the higher-ups’ directions. Today, the system is no longer unitary. Outside the political system, all kinds of civil strengths have appeared and developed vigorously with different actors struggling for their rights and aims; within the political system, there are different interest claims and expression strategies for different levels and sectors. Although nobody publicly looks down upon the authority of the system, each has its own interests and strives to achieve its goals. Such a new change of the system, according to the observation of an American political scientist, is referred to as “fragmented authoritarianism.” The reform becomes “wrangling” among various

social strengths and also becomes wrangling among different systematic forces. It is similar to a chess game. In the past, there was basically only one type of force in command, but now although this force still exists in form, such force that previously commanded everything has become only one of many parties under many circumstances. As a result, orders are still being issued but the operational logic has changed to game playing. Some local governments or governmental departments have no intention of implementing the documents when issuing them and are even against the spirit of those documents. When I conducted investigations at the local level, a township party secretary once told me directly: "Nowadays, spirits of the higher-ups have no longer been significant to us unless it is a spirit of directly giving money. Without increasing the township income, no matter what spirits from the higher-ups, it is nothing but a waste of energy for me." The process of reform has demonstrated that the real impetus of creating glory is the peasants because questions are raised by them and development is promoted by them and what the high level has done is just conform to it. In my view, under current circumstances, how to make the peasants become a strong force in the game of reform and how to promote policy implementation and improve rural governance through enhancing the rights of the peasants have been the key of solving the so-called "three rural issues."

No. 9 Courtyard gradually faded away from my sight but the stories concerning this courtyard still lingered in my mind. I remembered another line of Song poetry: "The previous affairs of the six dynasties has gone with running water, but the fog and wild grass outside can still be seen in green color." I cannot exactly comprehend Wang An-shi's meaning in this line, but placed against the background of Chinese rural reform, special comprehension may be granted: no matter how glorious it was, the rise and fall of the high level have just been like falling flowers and running water, but the social and civil developments and renovations have been everlasting. In the countryside covered by fog and wild grass, the "greenness" of life that drives social development has always been embodied by those silent and hardworking ordinary people.



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