

Preface

Looking at the “Politics of Peasants” from the “No. 9 Courtyard”

In examining long-term rural policies, either before or after the reform, we can find that all these policies have been expected to promote peasants' interests and claim to take enhancing peasants' happiness as their goal. From this perspective, it is unfair to say that those policy designers did not take peasants seriously or that they intentionally imposed sufferings upon the peasants. Nonetheless, the history and current reality of rural development have demonstrated that the same policy starting point can lead to very different policy designs. Even today, quite a few institutional arrangements with good intentions have ended up with opposite results and have even engendered bad policies that do harm to people. It is quite difficult to uncover the reason for such a problem. To explore this question is the fundamental reason for my writing *The Politics of Peasants*.

In recent years, I have attempted to do some analysis and exploration, focusing on the relationship between peasants and policies within the process of reform. My analytical approach has been to explore both the historical evolution and the reflection of reality, to examine both the high-level policy process and the social phenomena at the grassroots level, and to refer to the studies of both Western and Chinese scholars. However, thus far the answer has not been clear and the exploration is to be continued. My basic view is this: the reason for such serious deviation between political intentions and institutional arrangements, as well as between policy goals and their results, seems to be that the peasantry, despite being the biggest social stratum, has failed to obtain a proper position in the power structure of politics. Under many circumstances, peasants, who should have been the recipients of political services, turned out to be the tool of political activities. As a result, the happiness of peasants themselves becomes of no importance. The peasantry becomes an object that is arbitrarily manipulated by high-level policy makers and even the tool of a high-level power game. This is obviously a kind of misadministration of political power. The peasants' falling into such a difficult

situation can also be attributed to this reason: as a political force, the peasantry itself has not effectively engaged with the political process of the country.

The Politics of Peasants consists of five parts, with a total of 30 articles. Some of the articles focus on demonstrating the phenomena of high-level politics, both narrating high-level politicians' behaviors and revealing the process of policy making; some articles put the emphasis on describing and analyzing the reform process of local governments or on understanding ordinary and trivial rural public affairs; and the rest of the articles reflect what I have learned from reading and researching grassroots democracy and rural governance, as well as the methods and tactics of peasant studies. The articles mainly originate from my observation and refinement of personal life and work experience. On the whole, these articles have different characteristics in terms of theme, form, and narrative style, and the style of writing attempts to be bright and vivid.

The first part of the book focuses on observation of the high-level policy process. This collection of articles originates from my work experience during the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, the geographic hallmark of rural policy research in China was considered to be the "No. 9 Courtyard." In terms of the struggle of different policy ideas before the reform, and the formation of a few crucial policies in particular at the breakthrough stage of the reform, the No. 9 Courtyard was a place full of stories. This collection of articles attempts to explore certain internal logic of the high-level policy process from a given perspective. Combining some figures and events, I discuss in these articles what politics is and the relationship that exists between peasants and politics. This part of the book consists of five articles. The first two, directly titled "No. 9 Courtyard," portray high-level political figures and describe the political life in the No. 9 Courtyard. These two articles aim to demonstrate the changeable situation of the reform process from a particular perspective and to reveal a certain mechanism of the reform process. The remaining three articles narrate two important figures at the breakthrough stage of rural reform. The two figures are Wan Li and Wang Yuhao, who were both closely associated with the No. 9 Courtyard. This part accounts for about one third of the entire book and perhaps constitutes the most important part of the book.

The second part of the book is about my personal experience of local government reform. I had worked in local government for two years and participated directly in the actual process of local government reform as a county and city government leader. This part consists of six articles. They discuss the history, emphasis, and driving forces, as well as aims of local government reform by combining specific cases that I personally experienced in the workplace. Observing and understanding government operation at a given level is much more difficult than observing and understanding rural households or the life of particular villages. The process requires not only a researcher's accumulation of knowledge and experience but also communication skill and a good understanding of the Chinese political system. In my personal opinion, to do research on government should not only focus on laws and regulations. It is also vital to approach the "truth" of governmental operation through participant observation.

The third part of the book is my reading notes on grassroots democracy. In summer 2006, I received a special task, which was to act as a teaching expert for the collective study of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee. The theme of the collective study was grassroots democratic politics. In order to make preparations for the study's lecture, I spent nearly five months concentrating on surveying, reading, and analyzing grassroots democracy. In the classic theories of democracy, grassroots democracy is not considered an important part because democracy as a national system is fundamentally a high-level democracy. However, comparatively speaking, in modern China the thriving of grassroots democracy in practice has become an important characteristic of Chinese political development. The understanding of answers to many questions about grassroots democracy cannot be isolated from the specific grassroots circumstances in China. In the process of preparing for the lecture, I wrote down the insights I obtained, which constitute the main contents of this part of the book. This part has a total of eight articles, which address questions concerning the development of Chinese grassroots democracy, including local party-state organizations, nongovernmental organizations, construction of democracy and rule of law, and democracy and social stability, as well as international factors in the democratization process.

The fourth part of the book is about understanding village governance practice. When working in local government, I was repeatedly warned not to enter villages lightly. Someone told me that entering villages as county leader, I might find it very difficult to extricate myself once I got involved in dealing with specific affairs. Just like the saying, "It is easy to get into villages but difficult to get out," such action was very likely to cause trouble instead of producing achievement. Nonetheless, I went into some villages selectively and got involved in some work arrangements and conflict mediation. These included my direct organization of some village infrastructure construction, building and maintaining public order, as well as conflict mediation between villagers and village cadres. Some of my work experiences of entering villages were interesting and they stimulated my thinking. I therefore wrote them down, which forms this part's collection of six articles.

The fifth part of the book, consisting of six articles, is about my comprehension of the course of peasant study. In researching rural policies and peasants, a historical perspective is crucial. A historical review can make people conscious and sensible of the situation. As far as my own personal experiences are concerned, the phenomenon of peasants' appealing to higher-level governments for help and the changing process of peasant migration can offer much inspiration and many lessons. The theoretical and methodological evolution of Western academic development, especially that which relates to the research progress of conflicts in rural China, also provides us enlightenment on research approaches. It would be more helpful for us to discuss the peasants' position and effects regarding national political life or policy process if we cultivate peasant study in China by taking a broad international perspective of related academia and reveal the micro-rural development against the macro background of Chinese political development.

In order to express relevant thoughts systematically, I wrote the introduction of this book. To a certain degree, the introduction is about my systematic thinking about Chinese peasants and Chinese politics. In other words, it deals with the confusion that I faced when encountering crucial questions, such as what are the political attributes of peasants in contemporary China; what role do peasants play in politics; how will peasants' political capacity be exerted; what is the relationship between the political system and peasants, and so on and so forth. The introduction does not offer a clear theoretical viewpoint. It only serves to foster discussion on the basis of limited theoretical perspectives and practical observations; or rather it presents my own confusion.

The relationship between peasants and politics is a problem of both the low and high levels, and is both a practical issue and an academic one. These problems manifested themselves both in the lowest rung of rural life and in the political power center. In short, as far as the basic questions in discussion are concerned, *The Politics of Peasants* can be considered a companion to my previous research monograph, *Township Governance and Institutionalization in China*, although the two have different research methods and writing styles. Also, the two monographs have different research perspectives with *Township Governance* mainly taking a government perspective whereas *The Politics of Peasants* takes the perspective of peasants. The basic concern of the two books, however, is the same.

In the course of future political development in China, what role peasants will play, or in other words, what the political prospect of peasants and the trend of Chinese political development will be, remain open-ended questions. Although the development of society may not be necessarily unpredictable, the historical development process has fundamentally sneered relentlessly at those who claimed to have discovered the law of history. Nobody can really understand or even grasp the laws and logics of historical evolution. It's also impossible for someone to design, regulate, or control the goal and route of social development. Nonetheless, this does not mean that we should give up researching and exploring. To explore and solve the mysteries of historical process for future applications is exactly where the significance and value of research lie. Researching the mutual relationship between Chinese peasants and Chinese politics belongs to precisely such a grand historical project, a process of research that is not only bewildering but also fascinating.

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