

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR  
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
WORKING PAPERS



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

WORKING PAPER No. 122

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SOCIALISM QUA  
CIVILISATION  
ENCOUNTERS  
THE CONFUCIAN  
TRADITION:  
MORALITY, POWER  
AND SOCIAL  
STRUCTURE IN  
BRIDGE VILLAGE,  
HUNAN PROVINCE,  
CHINA

Halle/Saale 2010  
ISSN 1615-4568

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# **Socialism qua Civilisation Encounters the Confucian Tradition: morality, power and social structure in Bridge village, Hunan Province, China<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In China, socialism was built against the background of neo-Confucian traditions in rural society. These traditions were at the core of a social structure that Fei Xiaotong has described as the ‘differential mode of association’ (*chaxu geju*). Here I describe the historical change of this social structure in its vertical and horizontal aspects. Vertically, this social structure has been changed completely under socialism, when the main criteria for social stratification became political indicators. Horizontally, however, the same social structure retained its core principles: a relational ethics regulating social action according to discrete circles around the self and corresponding social roles. This was one of the important conditions for the reform in rural China in 1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the workshop “Socialism as Civilisation”, 23 March 2010, at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. The author wishes to thank Chris Hann, Stephan Feuchtwang and Michael Rowlands for the discussion and their suggestions, Astrid Bochow and Oliver Tappe for their review, and Hans Steinmüller for his help with the translation into English.

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## Introduction

*“The roar of cannons of the October Revolution gave us Marxism-Leninism”*

*Mao Zedong*

As in this quote, Mao Zedong frequently acknowledged that he took the Russian Revolution and socialism in the Soviet Union as a model for China. Before Mao, various other political reformers had tried to resolve the social problems in China and the challenge from Western countries. But those who relied on Confucianism failed to resolve these social problems. In Mao Zedong’s opinion, China could be saved only by Marxism-Leninism. Thus the quote above might have two implications: first, for Confucian China, socialism was a new civilisation that came from outside. Second, the aim of importing socialism was to reform society, in other words, to resolve the social problems which Confucianism had not resolved.

In this paper, I analyse the encounter of socialism as a civilisational practice with neo-Confucian traditions in rural China.<sup>3</sup> I describe concrete social and moral changes in rural society during and after Maoism based on my fieldwork in the southeastern Hunan province. Although Confucianism had been in decline since the late Qing, when urban society and intellectuals started experimenting with a wide variety of modern and revolutionary ideas, Confucianism was well alive in the countryside until the Maoist revolution. Here I deal not with Confucian philosophy as intellectual history, but rather with Confucianism in everyday life in rural China and its transformation under socialism.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Chaxu Geju: the performance of the Confucian tradition in rural China***

#### *The Basic Characteristics of the Confucian Tradition*

In the Confucian tradition, a relational morality based on social roles called *lunchang* was the core principle of moral and ethical behaviour. Confucius said that there are five basic relationships in the world: king and official, father and son, husband and wife, brothers, and friends; and all of these were to be guided by the principles of *lunchang* (*Zhongyong*). Mencius similarly declared that ‘father and son should love each other; ruler and official should be loyal to each other; husband

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<sup>3</sup> “Civilisational process” or “civilisational practice” refers to the development, change or decline of one civilisation. Civilisational analysis, as Johann P. Arnason (2006) pointed out, is a kind of research approach that analyses the patterns and transformations of one civilisation in a (historical or spatial) comparative perspective.

<sup>4</sup> The data in this paper is based on 10 months of fieldwork in Bridge village, from July to August, 2005, January and June to October, 2006, and January to February 2008. Bridge village is located south of Jinling town in Yongxing County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province in southern China. It includes seven little hamlets and its population was nearly 2,300. Among them, Xia Bridge hamlet was the ancestral place of several villages around Bridge village inhabited by Lin families.

and wife should be different from each other; old and young should be in an orderly relationship with each other, and friends should be sincere to each other' (Mencius).

According to the *lunchang* principle, the love between father and son was the ideal family relationship everyone was striving for, which by extension should be the basis of peace and harmony in one's country and of 'everything under heaven' (*tianxia*). As a result, 'filial piety' (*xiao*) has always been considered a panacea for maintaining normal social relations and order. Confucius said, for instance, that the person who has filial piety would rarely offend an elder and he (she) would never rebel against the king (*Lunyu*). *Lunchang* principles tended to give priority to ensuring the relationship between father and son when the five basic relationships contradicted each other. As Confucius said, it was right for a father to disguise his son's crimes, and a son his father's (*Lunyu*).<sup>5</sup> Although popular Confucianism surely changed very much during the 20th century, it has been argued that filial piety has remained the core element throughout, and thus a core principle of ordinary ethics in China as well (Wang Hui 2004: 108, 286, 748).

In a similar way, husband and wife should be 'different from each other', that is, in a relationship of love and hierarchical difference. As Qian Mu, the representative philosopher of neo-Confucianism in contemporary China, put it:

"In the relationship between husband and wife love is continuously emphasised, and hence it is important that there be formality and order as well. In the relationship between father and son, formality and order are continuously emphasised, and hence it is important that there also be love. [...] If husband and wife are not different from each other, there will be never a harmonious relationship." (Qian Mu 2004: 210)<sup>6</sup>

The relation between old and young is primarily the relationship between brothers. According to the *lunchang* principle, this relationship should be 'well-ordered' (*youxu*), but here as well, there should be a strong emotional attachment, and the older should help the younger (cf. Qian 2004: 214). The relation between father and son was the key relation within the family, and the relation between the ruler and the official was the key relation outside of the family.

#### Chaxu Geju and its Experiential Representation

How were these central principles of Confucian morality lived in social reality? Fei Xiaotong's<sup>7</sup> famous answer was that they form a 'differential mode of association':

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<sup>5</sup> The only exception here would be if the respective crime involved rebellion against the ruler.

<sup>6</sup> This and all other citations of Chinese works in the text are translated by the author of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Fei Xiaotong was a renowned Chinese anthropologist who wrote several famous books, such as *Peasant Life in China* (1936); *Earthbound China* (together with Chang, 1945); and *From the Soil* (1992).

“The Confucian tradition continuously emphasises the ethics of human relations (*renlun*). What is this ethic (*lun*)? To me, insofar as it is used to describe Chinese social relationships, the term itself signifies the ripple-like effect created from circles of relationships that spread out from the self, an effect that produces a pattern of concentric circles.” (Fei 1999: 335–336)

“In these self-centred networks of social relationships, the most important feature is certainly to ‘subdue the self and follow the rites’ (*ke ji fu li*). [...] The process by which the social spheres extend outward takes various paths, but the basic path is through kinship, which includes relations between parents and children and among siblings born of the same parents. The ethical values that correspond to this sphere are filial piety and fraternal duty. As the saying goes, ‘are not filial piety and fraternal submission the foundation of moral life?’ An additional road leading from the self outwards is through friends. The ethical values that correspond to friendship are loyalty (*zhong*) and sincerity (*xin*).” (Fei 1999: 341)

In his book *From the Soil*, Fei described the Chinese society as formed around the ‘differential relations’ of unitary selves. Like the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake, each circle in spreading out from the centre becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant (Fei 1999: 334). Social roles and moral behaviour correspond to relational position and distance. Following Fei’s outline, this ‘differential mode of association’ (*chaxu geju*) has been used frequently to describe and analyse Chinese social structure.

The principles of *chaxu geju* can be well illustrated with empirical cases. Fei himself offered clear examples in his analysis of the Chinese patrilineage, the difference between man and woman, and he also used this framework in his discussion of Chinese law and politics.<sup>8</sup> In Fei’s analysis, the Chinese social reality was permeated by the relational ethics of *lunchang*, and therefore society was not governed by power, but by ritual (*li*) and the appropriate adjustment of behaviour. Ordinary people learned about morals and ritual (*lunchang* and *li*) in their education, which thus became part of their lives. If people failed to learn them, or committed mistakes, then the elders of the patrilineage would remedy their behaviour (Fei 1999: 356, 371). Several other studies in 1930 and the 1940s confirmed Fei’s analysis of this time. Francis L.K. Hsu (2001: 76), for instance, studied rural society in Dali (Yunnan) and argued that villagers lived under their ancestors’ shadow, which gave meaning to their life.<sup>9</sup> Hsu pointed out that the bond uniting father and son provided the most important bond within a larger family, connecting numerous ancestors of previous generations with countless children and grandchildren of future generations; hence this bond was at the core of Chinese social structure (Hsu 2001: 205). Even though Hsu acknowledged

<sup>8</sup> See for instance the chapters ‘A Society without Litigation’, ‘An Inactive Government’ and ‘Ruling by Elders’ (Fei 1999: 344–372).

<sup>9</sup> Hsu’s famous book was based on fieldwork in Dali, amongst a population that was later classified as the ‘Bai’ minority. The lasting cultural influence of Han Chinese culture notwithstanding, the empirical basis for Hsu’s generalisation about all of ‘traditional’ Chinese social structure remains questionable (cf. Leach 1982: 124–126). I quote Hsu here in reference to his representation of ‘traditional’ China as a life ‘under the ancestors’ shadow’, and do not deal with the problems of his ethnographic material.

that in reality this ideal was barely realised in rural society, he emphasised the social impact of the ideal of a large extended family (Hsu 2001: 94–96).<sup>10</sup> In this ideal, because of the patrilineal kinship organisation, family life was based on the relationship between father and son and – to a lesser extent – on the relationship between husband and wife. Similarly, the philosopher and reformer Liang Shuming (2006 [1990]: 81ff.) pointed out that lineage organisation provided the background for Chinese interpersonal relations, which were guided by a relational ethics (*lunli*). He further contrasted this society, which was ‘centred on ethics’ (*lunli benwei*), with Western society, which was ‘centred on individuals’ (*geren benwei*). The social dynamics of collective ownership, family division, and the management of wealth could be only understood against the background of relational ethics in such a society (ibid.: 83).

Fei was educated in the new education system, but was influenced by Confucianism through his family education and his teacher, Pan Guangdan, who was renowned in the field of Chinese traditional cultural studies. Actually, Fei saw himself as gentry.<sup>11</sup> Hsu, Lin and Yang were also educated like Fei. In addition, Liang was a representative of neo-Confucianism in contemporary China (Chen Yinque, Qian Mu and he always were seen as important scholars for Chinese traditional cultural studies), and he was even considered the last Confucian (Alitto 1993). Thus, their analysis of the elements of Confucianism in rural China is credible. Based on Ling, Yang and Fei’s summary of Confucian society, we can distinguish several features of society under the influence of the Confucian tradition. Vertically, there was a diversity of criteria determining social stratification, including wealth, power, status in the local community, educational level, seniority in the family etc. Horizontally, the relationship between self and others evolved according to a pattern of concentric circles around the self, and the standard for choosing who should be put in the inner circle and who in the outer was *lunchang* morality.<sup>12</sup>

What connected the vertical and horizontal dimension of society was the analogy of the father – son relationship with any kind of authority: Whereas hierarchy and power differentials were acknowledged, it was believed that authority should act benevolently and mercifully in accordance with *lunchang* morality – just as a father towards his son.

### *The Confucian Tradition in Bridge Village*

In Bridge village, various elements of the Confucian tradition could be seen clearly before 1949. During the first half of the 20th century, the state attempted to extend its reach into local society,

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<sup>10</sup> Hsu’s acknowledgement of the relatively small family sizes in rural China was directed explicitly against others who emphasised the importance of the extended family, such as Daniel Kulp in his study of ‘Chinese familialism’ (Kulp 2006 [1925], see for instance p. 121).

<sup>11</sup> Fei said in his autobiography that he was one of the last representatives of the gentry in China (Fei 2005: 1–7). His niece, Fei Wan, edited and published this autobiography after Fei’s death.

<sup>12</sup> This paper focuses on these two points and analyse the changes of rural society under socialism but not the changes of the five basic relationships which Confucianism focused on.

but managed to do so only on a very superficial level. Although the ‘*baojia* system’ of household registration and local administration had been introduced, the actual authority over village-level public management remained with the lineage elites. Lineage elders played the most important role in the public affairs of local society, and they mediated conflicts between and within families.

One could say that at the time, the villagers did not yet have a concept of the modern state. They did not understand military service as a civil duty, for instance, but instead tried to escape forced conscriptions. In fact, many villagers paid for someone else to do military service for them, which was called “buying soldiers” and “selling soldiers”. From the villager’s perspective “buying soldiers” and “selling soldiers” were basic livelihood strategies to reduce risk.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the villagers’ family life and the relations extending outwards from the family were all organised according to relational ethics and the principles of *lunchang*.

Neither the bridegroom nor the bride had the right to determine their marriage partner. Marriages were arranged by the parents and the bride could not see the bridegroom before the wedding. After the wedding, the villagers always emphasised that the couple just had to ‘to pass their days’ (*guo rizi*) and that they had to continue the ‘incense flame’, that is, they had to produce male offspring to continue the family line. Brothers were supposed to help each other out without regard for boundaries of their respective property, even if their houses were already divided and each had his own household. There is a story about one man in Bridge village, for instance, who sold nearly all of his property to buy out his brother who was held hostage. This man was highly praised for his action and said to be a model of moral behaviour. This again is a good example for the ways in which relational ethics took priority over economic interest (Liang 2006 [1990]: 83–84).

Thirdly, the principles of *lunchang* provided the main standard for dispute resolution and the disciplining of aberrant behaviour. These principles were upheld and enforced by the lineage, which had the decisive communal authority to defend the moral system. Generally most cases in which the lineage elders took action had something to do with the hierarchical order between old and young: when sons were not pious towards their parents or when parents did not behave according to their role as parents, etc. Theft, tawdry behaviour, and acting against the ideals of filial piety were considered crimes of the first degree, that is, crimes against the principles of *lunchang*. In such cases the lineage elders would organise public beatings (*da pigu*) or in some cases public parading and humiliation and banishment from the village (*xie zhushu*).

During the first half of the 20th century external powers intervened in Bridge village several times: militias organised by the county government entered the village and burnt houses to take revenge against local communist mobilisers, and there was frequent plundering by bandits and marauding soldiers. But during all this time, the social order described above remained relatively stable, just as Lin Yaohua (1989: 206) described it in his book *The Golden Wing* in the scene where

<sup>13</sup> Such actions are similar to ‘the art of not being governed’ which James Scott (2009) has analysed.

an old man calmly says to his grandson: “Do not forget to put the seeds into the soil!” while enemy aircrafts were flying over their heads.

### **Re-identification and the Politicisation of Social Stratification**

In 1949, after the victory of the Communist revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic, rural China entered a period of unprecedented social change, a genuine transformation of all spheres of life. The campaign ‘to reduce land rent and to oppose local tyrants’ (*jianzu fanba*) was held in Bridge village just like in many other regions of central China in the winter of 1950.

The work team in charge of the campaign arrived in Bridge village and was lodged in the houses of poor villagers. The fact that they lived in poor villagers’ houses is vividly remembered: These were ‘good officials’ (*hao guan*), who shared their residence with ordinary peasants instead of insisting on the privileges of officialdom. The work team required the landlords of Bridge village to reduce the land rent they charged their tenants radically. Among about one dozen households classified as ‘landlords’, there was one case of a man who voluntarily abandoned all the rents he had been due to receive from his tenants. This man, Lin Jinxuan, was commended by the work team for this behaviour. In fact, this man had a high reputation in the local community before and after the revolution and was considered a man of high morals. Lin Sihong, a long-term employee of Lin Jinxuan described him as follows:

“During shortage seasons, he [Lin Jinxuan] would lend the poor some rice and invite the borrower to have dinner. He would supply dining and offer wages to his workers even when it was raining [i.e. when they had to remain idle]. He and his family never had dinner before the employees had also ended their work, and then they would eat together with their workers. In all this, he was very different to Lin Jinpin.”<sup>14</sup>

Lin Jinpin was Lin Jinxuan’s paternal cousin. He also had to participate in the campaign, and the work team explained the policies of the campaign several times to him and tried to persuade him to hand over what they then called ‘filthy wealth’ (*fucai*). However, he not only refused, but accused the work team of robbing his property and shouted: “If Wang I dies, there is still Wang II. If you kill me, all my wealth will still go to my children.” This man, who had a bad temper and a bad reputation before the revolution, was the only one to be executed during this (and all following) campaigns in Bridge village. Someone like him, who had been the representative of a ‘strong family’ (*qiang men*) before, became a ‘local tyrant’ in the new moral discourse.

Another campaign which would change many villagers’ fate began after the Chinese New Year of 1951: land reform. From now on, the villagers had to recognize that the new moral principles

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication.

advocated by the new state were fundamentally different from their earlier moral discourses and practices. Whereas the ‘reduce the rent’ campaign had just opposed certain actions (basically charging too much rent and mistreating tenants and workers), land reform brought an entirely new conception of right and wrong. The work teams explained to the villagers that the reasons for their poverty and suffering were feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism and imperialism, which they called “the three big mountains on the heads of Chinese peasants”. These institutions of exploitation had to be destroyed before the villagers (and all Chinese peasants) could enjoy a better life. For the villagers, there were too many ‘isms’ here and at the beginning they did not understand many of these words. They had experienced the Japanese army burning and looting the village, they remembered how the old government had forced villagers into conscription and levied huge amounts of grain and money, and they also knew well about Lin Jinpin’s bad behavior, and were ready to denounce it. When the work team said that they would distribute all of Lin Jinpin’s land among the villagers, people were quite happy. But they could not understand why Lin Jinxuan was now also a man with moral problems, especially those who had been in relations of employment or exchange with him. The old worker Lin Sihong, who had been employed by Lin Jinxuan, remembered this still 50 years later as follows:

“The grain tax for the empire and the rent for the landlords were always considered fair and just. In that time, before 1949, we could only hope for the government to levy a bit less and the landlords to demand less rent, but we could have never thought about not paying at all. Something like distributing the land equally amongst all, that was completely unthinkable.”<sup>15</sup>

‘Landlord’ was then no longer just an economic concept, referring to someone who owned land and rented it out to tenants; it also became a political and a moral concept. Similarly, other words such as ‘rich peasant’, ‘middle peasants’, ‘poor peasant’ and ‘labourer’ began to spread in the village and became powerful political and moral symbols.

Aside from Lin Jinxuan, another man in the village was also difficult to categorise into the new political and moral frameworks: Lin Peiwu didn’t do agricultural work, he was not rich but also not poor, as a lineage elder he had been active in public affairs in the village, and during the Japanese occupation he had also been the head of a village association. So into which economic class should he be classified? Because the local work team could not resolve the problem, Lin Peiwu’s files were sent to Yongxing county, and from there forwarded to Hunan province. Hunan province identified him as a ‘manager of associations’. This conclusion, however, confused not only Lin Peiwu himself but also the work team, and people were not quite sure whether this was a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ class. In fact, those who had at some point of their life participated in the management of

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<sup>15</sup> Personal communication.

associations were surely not one single ‘class’, and their economic background (in terms of their situation within relations of production) was certainly quite varied. Others with similar positions as Lin Peiwu were not attributed this class status. At the time, the problem of someone’s class status could not be just ignored. It had a practical meaning in life. ‘Landlord’ and ‘rich peasant’ (especially the ‘landlord’) were ‘bad’ classes, and people who were classified as such tended to be criticised in a variety of political ceremonial activities as representatives of the classes who had caused all the suffering of poor villagers. What would happen now to Lin Peiwu?

Compared to ‘landlords’ and ‘rich peasants’, Lin Peiwu’s situation was much better. The villagers interpreted his class identity ‘manager of associations’ as neither of these bad classes nor as the agent of enemies. After the land reform, there was a campaign to ‘remember the suffering [in the old society] and to long for the sweetness [of the new society]’ (*yi ku si tian*). The main question of this campaign was to discuss ‘who was feeding whom’ (*shui yanghuo shui*). Landlords like Lin Jinxuan were criticised but Lin Peiwu was not treated the same way, because the villagers still considered him as a man of high moral reputation. The moral principles of before were still stronger than those the work team had brought in, at least in this case where Lin Peiwu’s class identity was unclear.

Lin Peiwu, however, felt some chagrin about another villager named Lin Fengyuan. Lin Fengyuan was once the director of the *baojia* (the administrative unit of the nationalist government), and was still considered a government official. He wrote a ‘letter of confession’ (*huigoushu*) and a ‘letter of guarantee’ (*baozhengshu*) after the establishment of the new government – a practice some old peasants called ‘letters of capitulation’ (*touxiangshu*). One year later, he became a teacher of the Bridge village primary school because the new government needed so many teachers. Lin Peiwu, who also had a relatively high education, was not given this opportunity, because his political identity was problematic (more so than that of a small village official under the nationalist government such as Lin Fengyuan). Even though many villagers suggested that Lin Peiwu would be a good teacher, this was not accepted by the government. In this case, the moral principles which the work team had brought in were stronger than the traditional ones of the villagers.

The complete ‘turnover’ (*fanshen*) of social identities (cf. Hinton 1966) that began with the land reform brought with it very much political and moral struggle and competition for power between the villagers. But in Bridge village, at least, this did not happen the way Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden (2002 : 374) describe it, that instead of giving power to poor villagers, the revolution gave power to local bullies and lazy people and reinforced some bad habits within Chinese culture and society. In Bridge village, revolutionary discourse really put people on the lower ends of society into higher positions. Moreover, the indicator of social stratification was no longer wealth, prestige, education or morality, but the standards of political discourse.

What were the social continuities and discontinuities? Firstly, the villagers accepted the new politicised social stratification; however, they did not really accept the moral principles of class. So they were more willing to interpret Lin Peiwu's identity as non-hostile and were softer to Lin Jinxuan, who had a high moral standing according to principles of *lunchang*, and they were confused about how people like them should fit into the new moral frameworks of class. In broad terms, this might be considered the inertia of their 'political culture' or 'habitus', but I think the most obvious reason is that moral frameworks of ordinary people in Bridge village were still those relational ethics of *lunchang*, and could not be easily changed into class principles. Additionally, the basic principle according to which people behaved in relationships with others was still that of a 'differential mode of association' (*chaxu geju*). In other words, the horizontal rural social structure did not change while the vertical one changed radically.

### **Rural Social Power and Morality in Revolutionary Competition**

Revolutionary discourse was emphasised the most during the Cultural Revolution which began in 1966. However, even during the Cultural Revolution, those who tried to use only standards of class to settle human relationships were very often excluded by other villagers in daily life.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, almost all of the villagers, including those who now called themselves 'rebel faction' (*zaofan pai*), did not know the meaning of 'capitalist roaders' (*zouzi pai*). After some young villagers learned that there was a 'peasant rebel association' (*nongmin zaofan lianhehui*) in a neighbouring village, they announced that they also belonged to this 'rebel association', and recruited new members in Bridge village. The head of these rebels was a young man called Lin Menggu. He had been discriminated against before, because his family was small, he had no brother, and his head was full of scabs (*favus*). He often felt insulted when people called him 'scab head' (*laizi*), but actually scabs were very common in Bridge village at the time. When the news arrived that Chairman Mao had said it was 'rightful to rebel' (*zaofan you li*), Lin Menggu had seen his opportunity: he could rebel now! After he announced that he belonged to the 'rebel association', the director of his production team did not dare to call him a 'scab head' any longer. Sometimes, the old director slipped and used the old nickname, but then Lin Menggu showed himself magnanimous and spared him. When others asked him to 'class struggle' this old man, Lin Menggu said that "he is an old man and he has corrected himself, that's enough." Soon after, Lin Menggu found out that their rebel faction had been directed against the wrong enemy. News arrived in the village that the 'capitalist roaders' were actually inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Who belonged then to the 'capitalist roaders' in the party in Bridge village? Lin Menggu came to oppose the 'regime faction' (*dangquan pai*) which consisted mainly of the former and the current party secretary of the village, Zhang Xiaobai and Jin Jixiang. According to Lin

Menggu their crimes had been the following: During the ‘great leap forward’, Zhang Xiaobai insisted on cutting many trees to make steel and iron. Jin Jinxiang was getting 3,000 work points as a salary each year, and that was too much. In a meeting held later by representatives of the poor peasants, Zhang Xiaobai explained that cutting trees was the decision from higher government; he was no longer the secretary of CCP in Bridge village, and so he did not belong to the ‘regime faction’. Jin Jixiang also gave an explanation and said that his salary was regulated by the government. One of participants in the meeting shouted, “You have such a bad temper and you tell us off just as if we were your sons! But none of us is your son!” Jin Jixiang promised to correct his attitude, and the ‘rebel faction’ concluded their criticism of the ‘capitalist roaders’ in the village.

In 1966, members of another revolutionary organisation arrived in Bridge village to compete with the “Peasant Rebel Association” for members. Named “Storms and Thunders along the Xiang River” (*Xiangjiang Fenglei*), this organisation consisted mainly of urban intellectuals and employees of state factories and mines. In Bridge village, two “peasant intellectuals” became members: the two local barefoot doctors. But this new revolutionary organisation met with only mistrust in Bridge Village. When the doctors attempted to attract new members and held a meeting in Bridge village, Lin Menggu came with several members of the “Peasant Rebel Association” and demanded an end their activities. After some quarrelling, the meeting escalated into a brawl, and the intellectuals of the Xiang River faction were beaten up by the local peasants. In the end the two barefoot doctors did not even help the members of their own faction. After this, no one ever participated in the Xiang River faction in Bridge village.

At the same time, the factional struggle between the Xiang River Faction and the revolutionary peasant association in the “Red East” mining district was fierce. For most of the time, the “Peasant Rebel Association” was dominant, because it had more members. In the autumn of 1967, the Xiang River Faction took the upper hand, because they acquired some guns. When the members of the “Peasant Rebel Association” in Bridge village heard about the triumphs of the Xiang River Faction in the district, they decided to come to the peasant association’s aid. 40 members of the local peasant rebel association lead by Lin Menggu and Lin Dingxin, went to Red East district. When the members of the Xiang River opened fire, Lin Menggu ran away, and with this act of cowardice he lost his authority in the peasant association. Lin Dingxing, however, showed himself very brave, rushed the ‘enemies’ and captured their guns. Actually, they discovered that the ‘enemies’ had only been shooting at the sky. A week later, the military organisation of Yongxing county arrived in Bridge village to confiscate the captured guns.

After these initial struggles, there were no more violent confrontations between the ‘rebel faction’ (*zaofan pai*) and the ‘regime faction’ (*dangquan pai*) in Bridge village. What remained was the everyday presence of revolutionary slogans and verbal struggles. Jin Jixiang, for instance, showed himself to be more revolutionary than the “rebel association” at various instances. In 1974, the new

meeting hall of the village was inaugurated, and people wanted to write “Great Ceremonial Hall” (*Da Li Tang*) on the framework of the door. Jin Jixiang, however, protested: “Have we not always criticised Confucius and his slogan ‘to subdue the self and follow the rites’ (*ke ji fu li*)? How dare you to write the character *li* [i.e. Confucian rites] on the wall?” He ordered the builders to modify the words into ‘Great Meeting Place’ (*Da Hui Chang*) instead – and these three characters can be still seen today on the meeting hall of Bridge village. In the same year, Jin Jixiang reproached the primary school teacher of the village, because the teacher had taught ‘superstition’ to the students. In fact, the teacher had used the phrase “After the thunder god has shouted, the celery no longer smells good”. This was an old saying in the village, which meant that after the season of the spring thunder, one should not eat celery anymore, because they did not taste well then. Jin Jixiang criticised the phrase ‘thunder god’ (*lei gong*), and he recommended just ‘thunder’ (*da lei*) as the correct use.

Yet at the same time, this man Jin Jixiang apparently cared more about his own power than about revolutionary discourse. During the ten years when he was party secretary in Bridge village, he gave no other villagers the chance to enter the communist party, not least of all to prevent himself getting replaced by younger and better educated people. So during these ten years, there was not a single new party member in the village. He rejected Lin Zhitian’s application to become a party member, for instance, with the following reasons:

“[Lin] Zhitian always needs others to accompany him at night; alone he just walks on the main roads, and avoids smaller paths, when he visits patients at night. This shows how afraid he is of ghosts, and that he is not a real materialist yet. Chairman Mao has stressed to ‘destroy the four olds’, and being afraid of ghosts was one of the ‘four olds’!”<sup>16</sup>

Compared to the radical struggles during the Cultural Revolution described by many scholars (e.g. Zhang Letian 2005), the Cultural Revolution in Bridge village was much more peaceful. Other observers have reported similarly soft factional struggle and relatively little violence (e.g. Gao 1999). Why was the same policy practiced at the grassroots level in different areas with such different outcomes? Maybe part of the reason was the different attitudes and incentives of local officials. Different social structures and the particularities of local conflicts might have also played a role. While I will not discuss the first reason here, the second one is clearly visible in the comparison of Bridge village and Red East district. In terms of social structure, lineage authority remained crucially important in Bridge village, even though revolutionary discourse and policies changed the power system of the village. But the *lunchang* system of morality did not essentially change and still provided behavioural guidelines for the villagers. This ‘baseline’ of local relational ethics did not disappear, even though people used a very different political discourse about ‘right’

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication.

and ‘wrong’ during the revolutionary campaigns. Those who broke this ethical ‘baseline’ were condemned by village discourse and sometimes even punished. Compared to Bridge villagers, the mine workers of Red East district came from many different regions, and there was no stable *lunchang* morality amongst them. So in Red East district people had no way to absorb the shock wave of revolutionary discourse and the struggle was more radical than in the village.

Continuities notwithstanding, the revolutionary struggles transformed the everyday competition for power into a dramatic theatre (which takes on not a little ‘black humour’ from today’s perspective). The highly ritualised revolutionary discourse stood in stark contrast with the simple everyday life in the countryside (Zhang 2005: 5), and this disjuncture threw some people into deep depression. This was also one of the main reasons for the end of the Cultural Revolution.

### **Changes of Social Structure and its Impact in Mao’s Era**

The civilisational practices of socialism in rural China cannot be separated from the discursive changes which took place. The core of revolutionary discourse was class analysis, and it required people to differentiate who was close or far from oneself by class standards. It was fundamentally different from the ‘differential mode of association’ (*chaxu geju*) which required people to differentiate who was close or far from oneself according to the principles of *lunchang* firstly, of kin secondly, and of geography thirdly. This distinction is simple in theory, but much more complex when the two moralities encountered each other in practice.

Did socialism as a civilisation change the (neo-Confucian) social structure in rural China? Here one can emphasise either change or continuity. Those focusing on discontinuities will emphasise that the new national power absorbed and transformed traditional society completely. Helen Siu, for instance, argued as follows:

“The land reform destroyed the economic foundation of the lineage organizations; collectivization turned rural communities into component cells within the state sector. The communization movement incorporated the rural cadres into a tight bureaucratic network [...]. These leaders acting more as state agents than as political brokers [...] established the power of the party-state in the daily lives of the villagers.” (Siu 1989: 292)

Many scholars have emphasised the discontinuities of the revolutionary era. Zhang Letian (2005: preface) describes how revolutionary representation had obstructed and even replaced the “real life” of society, and he argues that rural society was turned into a “theatre society”; Wu Yi (2002: 92) argues that the totalised revolutionary state power got rid of community power completely, which made the nation-state into the one single “collective community” (ibid. 120); Wu Miao (2007) also describes revolutionary governance as an “absolute break” (*juelie*) with tradition.

Others would emphasise continuity and point out that the traditional social and cultural structure was not changed completely by the new state power. Huang Shumin (2002: preface) argued that revolution campaigns were not really carried out much in the rural areas after 1949; Sulamith and Jack Potter (1990: 269) also hold that the so-called change was just a scratch on the surface of social life, and Han Min (2007: 259–264) is of a similar opinion. Richard Madsen (1984: chapters 6–7), Zhu Xiaoyang (2003: chapter 3) and others insist that while people in rural society made use of revolutionary discourse, the latter did not really essentially transform the social integrity and morality of rural society.

Surely there was a combination of continuities and discontinuities, and maybe the most important question is to ask *how* things changed (or did not change).

The experience in Bridge village shows that during socialism the vertical social structure was transformed, and political standards became the dominant standards for social stratification in rural society. The horizontal structure however, by which I mean the concentric circles around the self forming the basis of any relationship and the principles of *lunchang* regulating moral behaviour within these relations, did not change in essence. For the villagers of Bridge village, class did not become the core moral principle according to which they acted in relationship with others. While there really was a complete overturn (*fanshen*) of social life, of identities, of worldviews, the horizontal social structure remained the same.

The politicisation of social stratification also lies also at the core of those problems which led to the end of collectivism. Officials, who were only judged on public performance in a bureaucratic structure and their ‘public morality’ (*gongde*), no longer felt any inhibitions in their private actions, that is, their ‘private morality’ was often problematic. On the other hand, for common villagers the opportunities for social mobility didn’t increase during political campaigns. When the standards of political discourse had become the only criterion for social stratification, people also became increasingly dissatisfied with revolutionary discourse. In China, we find a continuity of the horizontal social structure in the way I have described here, and in this way, through the social connections of kin and family, people were still able to organise productive activities and maintain social lives.

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