Dragon Bay

Stories from a Chinese Village

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Dragon Bay (Long Wan) is a village in Guangdong Province, China, a 40-minute ride by bicycle from Zhanjiang, a port city on the South China Sea. In the early 1990s, I visited Dragon Bay to interview and photograph residents. I returned there in 2000 and 2005. The stories that follow are a record of my time in Dragon Bay and the changes that continue to transform villages across rural China.

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I RIDE DOWN a dusty two-lane highway a few miles outside of Zhanjiang, a port city on the South China Sea.

I ride with Liu and his friend Liang, math teachers at Lei Zhou College in Zhanjiang.

We are traveling by bike to Liang's home village, a 45-minute ride from the city. We share the highway with farmers riding platform bicycles piled high with leafy green vegetables grown in nearby villages.

Ancient dump trucks rumble past us, spewing trails of exhaust and dust.

The fields stretch to the horizon on either side of us; the land is flat, the sky overcast.

Not long after arriving in Zhanjiang to work as a teacher at Lei Zhou College, I asked Liu if he would take me to the countryside to see how people lived there.

He said his friend Liang grew up in Dragon Bay village just outside of Zhanjiang and would be willing to take me there to meet his family.

It's a tense time in China, a few months after soldiers shot down scores of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The department leaders at the college carefully monitor my movements and conversations with students.

Several teachers tell me the students have been told not to speak with me about politics; rumors circulate that I may be a spy for the overseas China democracy movement.

Why else would Robert walk around with a camera like that, they say, why else would he come to China so soon after the demonstrations?

Most foreigners have left China, they say, but Robert has just arrived here.

1990-2005

The Road to Dragon Bay The fields swallow up everything. The village houses are hard to see at first, obscured by dense fields of ripening sugarcane.

A dirt lane weaves from village to village, cutting through lush fields of rice and cane.

Along the narrow rutted lane, a farmer passes on a bicycle, his daughter balanced precariously on the crossbar, his son resting on the passenger seat behind him.

The children gaze out impassively as they travel along the bumpy road, undisturbed by the steady jolting and swerving of their father's bicycle.

In nearby fields, farmers dressed in patched clothing harvest sugarcane with small machetes.

A woman leans low to the ground to harvest the cane, slicing each plant cleanly in one swift motion.

Now and then she pauses to eat a piece of cut cane, lifting it up to her mouth and biting off a chunk, sucking out the sweet juice and spitting out the pulp.

The villagers wear straw hats to shade their faces from the fierce Guangdong sun, which darkens their skin and dries and etches deep grooves into their faces.

The road passes deeper into the countryside. The cane fields are dense and impenetrable, crowding out the sky, hissing when the warm, subtropical wind blows through them. The crops grow easily here, luxuriantly.

In the distance, Dragon Bay's brick and stucco houses rise from the spreading field and sky.

A dirt path leads into the village, past a dilapidated village school without doors or glass windows.

Children play in the yard in front of the school, waiting for afternoon classes to begin.

Farther along the path, a group of farmers gathers at the village store, a dark, cave-like structure that is cool on sweltering summer days. Inside, men sit on battered wooden benches in front of a small black and white TV, talking quietly, drawing by turns on a long bamboo water pipe.

The men have time to rest and socialize today because the harvest is drawing to a close and the hard work will soon be over for another season.

Inside the store, children linger in front of the communal TV or make small purchases of candy from the ancient candy jars resting on the counter.

In a room nearby, a group of young men smoke a water pipe and play mah jong.

The village is a web of lanes and houses enclosed by farmland. The lanes are muddy and rutted. Leaky water pipes sometimes transform the paths into quagmires of mud and animal feces.

Here and there new houses are under construction, testifying to the new prosperity of some villagers.

Chickens, pigs, and turkeys wander down the lanes and through the courtyards; water buffalo stand like statues in the shade, tethered to walls and tree trunks.

Farmers and bands of children pass along the paths, walking or riding in bullock-drawn carts.

A group of children trail behind me as I move from house to house, trying to catch a glimpse of my eyes, laughing and calling out to me:

Guailao, guailao, ghost man, ghost man!
Look at the guailao; look at his ghost eyes; look at his cat eyes.

The mournful sound of a Lei Zhou opera playing on a crackly tape recorder drifts from a village house.

The steady beat of synthesized dance music imported from Hong Kong plays faintly in the distance.

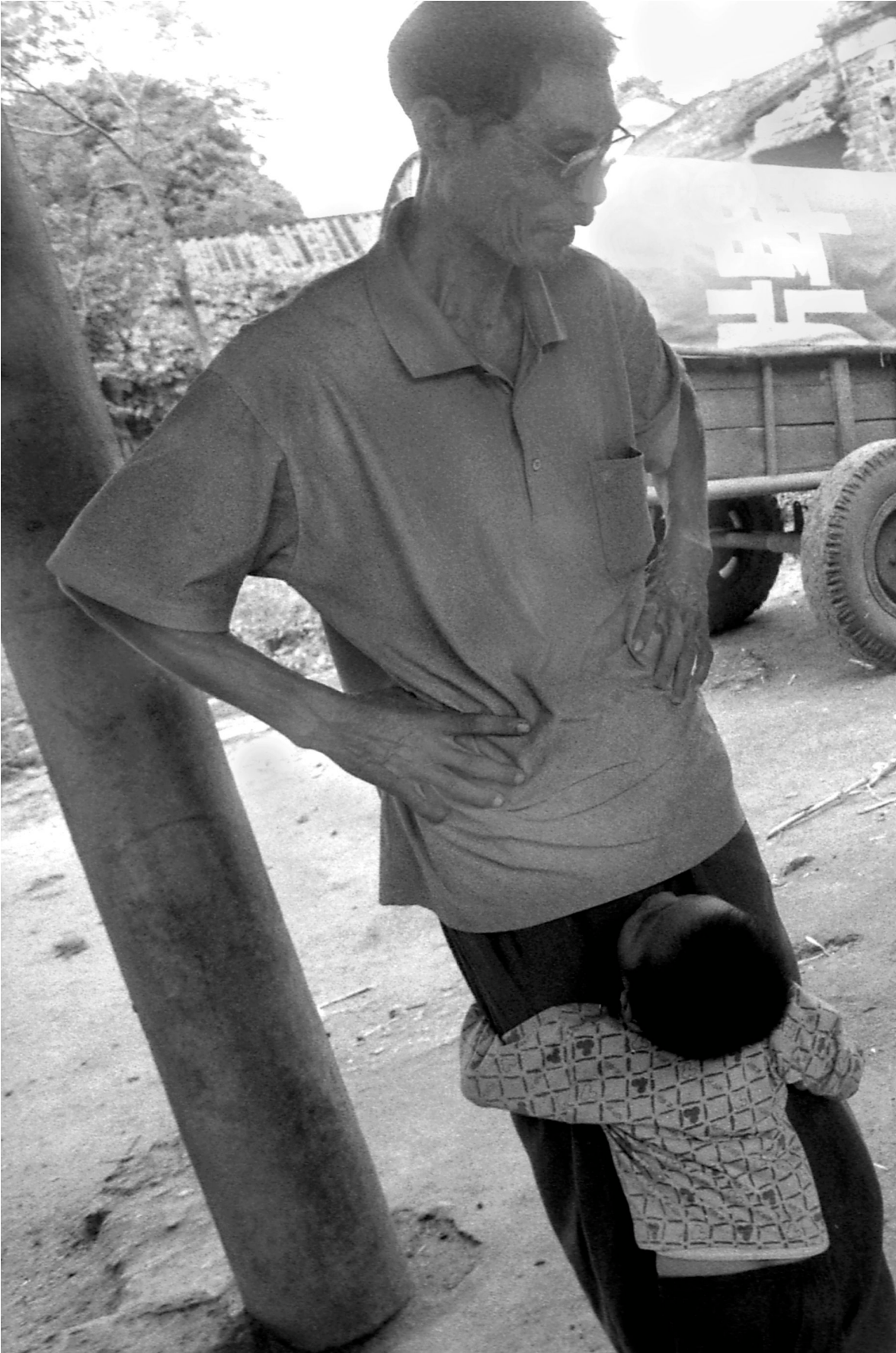
Trees bend and hiss in a steady wind blowing in from the sea; the village light is sharp and bright, glowing in the leaves, casting deep shadows across the paths and courtyards.

The village grows more silent as the day deepens, the only sound the murmuring of old people and children in the courtyards.

The elders spend much of their day caring for grandchildren while their parents work in the fields.

Every village home has a courtyard where families gather to wash clothes, scrub vegetables, and talk with neighbors.

In most families, parents, children, and grandchildren all live under the same roof and share the same hard work in the fields.



A Farmer's Life Liang Nu Li hoes a pepper field in the village's lowland fields. Seven decades working in the wind and sun have etched deep lines into his face, though his smile remains bright and youthful.

Liang says his father died when he was five years old. His mother eventually remarried and moved to her new husband's village, leaving him behind in Dragon Bay to live with an older brother.

When he was 16 years old, tragedy struck again when his older brother died and he was suddenly living alone in the village.

He says his mother returned to Dragon Bay then because she didn't want him to live alone and also didn't have enough food to eat in her new husband's village.

But she soon discovered that conditions in Dragon Bay weren't much better than what she had left behind, Liang says. Many villagers hadn't enough land to cultivate and couldn't raise enough food to feed their families.

In Dragon Bay there had always been a disparity between those who had much and those who had little — and his family had very little, he says.

To survive during the lean years, Liang scavenged the countryside for wood and leaves, trading what he found to wealthier farmers for rice.

One of his jobs, he says, was to look after the water buffalo for the rich landlords.

Liang says some of the landlords were kind to the poor and would help them in times of need; others did nothing to help them, he says.

But even the good ones were not very good, he says, the wealthy villagers would lend the poor money but charge them interest for the service, he says.

Liang says the war years brought changes to Dragon Bay. Japanese soldiers arrived in the village without warning from their camp in Zhanjiang. They came looking for chickens, pigs, vegetables — anything they could find to eat, he says.

When word spread through the village that the Japanese had arrived, the young people fled to the hills above the village to hide until the intruders departed. Only the elderly, who were too old to run, stayed behind to face the Japanese, he says.

Soon Guomindang soldiers also arrived in the village, searching for food and fresh recruits to help them fight the communists. The young people ran from the Guomindang soldiers as fast as they fled from the Japanese.

The villagers weren't fond of the Guomindang government and had no desire to fight its battles for them, Liang says.

At around this time his mother brought home the young girl who would one day become his wife. She was in her early teens and at first lived in the house to help out with housework.

They lived like this for five years until his mother told him that he and the girl should get married.

He says that neither he nor the girl had much to say about the arrangement. They had to get along with each other whether they liked it or not, he says.

But the two young people found they got along quite well, he says, laughing as he recalls this early time in his life when his wife was still alive. They had five sons and two daughters, he says.

When the communists won the civil war, many farmers thought their hour had finally arrived.

Land was confiscated from the rich landlords and redistributed to landless farmers like Liang. Each farmer received an allotment of land to cultivate, though privileged villagers received more land than others, Liang says.

But those jubilant days were shortlived, he says. About seven years after the communists took power, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party introduced the People's Commune, which required China's farmers to work the land in common.

Mao's goal was to make China a powerful socialist nation, a communist utopia, and his great experiment would be carried out in ordinary villages like Dragon Bay. To gain the support of the people, the party played on the villagers' longing for a more prosperous life.

Liang recalls the earliest days of the commune system as a time when the villagers shared the land, the work, and the harvest. It was an idealistic, joyful time when people thought the communist system was fair and equitable compared with what they had before, he says.

But soon the villagers began to see the flaws of the new system. Some of the farmers were lazy and didn't do their fair share of the work. They went to the fields to work but didn't work very hard, Liang says.

Despite their laziness, they received the same rice allotment as hardworking villagers, he says.

In the end, all the cheery talk failed to give the villagers the better life they had

hoped for. People continued to go hungry, especially during the Great Leap Forward movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, he says.

Liang says his life changed for the better when Deng Xiaoping rose to power and introduced economic reforms throughout China following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. The commune system was eventually scrapped and each family was allotted its own land to cultivate.

He says Dragon Bay farmers, including his oldest son, became more prosperous after the reforms.

Yet the farmers remain wary of the future, Liang says. Village life in 1990 may be better than it was a decade ago but it's still not very good compared with city life.

Two or three times a year he visits Zhanjiang and sees how people are living there. City people are free, he says, they don't have to work long hours under the rain and sun.

Liang says he's worried about his youngest son, who is 23 years old and unmarried. His son wants to leave the village and find work in the city, he says, but he can't find a job or a place to live there.

He has no choice but to stay here, Liang says, he has to like the village even if he doesn't want to be here.

Liang, who is in his 70s now, says he tried hard to bring up his children well. He taught them the difference between right and wrong…he taught them not to steal or fight or argue with others, he says.

He says he was too poor to go to school and doesn't know how to read and write.

I couldn't teach them about books, he says, if I knew words, I would have taught them words, he says.

Instead, he says, he passed on to them his knowledge of planting and harvesting rice and sugarcane.

He says he doesn't know what will happen to him when he dies…he doesn't know if there is another life after this one.

I half believe, half disbelieve, he says.