II

We leave for the village when my neighbors are taking their mid-day nap. Many people in Zhanjiang rest during the hottest hours of the day.

In the early afternoon the neighborhood lanes are empty. The buildings seem to float in the afternoon heat. It's the only time of day when no one is awake to watch me.

We pedal up the hill outside the college and take the road to Ma Jong. I feel liberated when the city is behind us and I am once again on the open road. After a forty-minute ride, we turn off the highway and start down a narrow dirt path that runs from village to village.

I know I should wear a hat when I ride to the village at this time of day, but I don't. My skin is too light for the fierce south China sun. The heat drains my energy as I pedal down the bumpy village road. With the exception of a two-month period when the climate turns cold and damp, the weather here is almost always warm, the sunlight blinding.

I travel to the village at least once a week with Liu, who understands both the Cantonese and Lei Zhou dialects spoken by the people of Long Wan. Liu allows me to ask any question I want in my interviews. He isn't afraid of the authorities or what people think of him for asking sensitive questions.

I once asked him how he felt about Mao Zedong, and he told me his mother was attacked for political reasons and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. So how could I like Mao Zedong? he says.

Still Not Good Enough

It's an oppressively hot summer afternoon, the time of day when the villagers seek a cool shady place to rest. Liang Ru Qiang rests under a tree in the courtyard of his home, fanning himself as he smokes from a long water pipe.

His small grandson chases a pig across the courtyard and tries to hit it with a slingshot. His wifeless brother Liang Ni Fen sits silently beside him while his wife and daughter-in-law do housework nearby.

Liang Ru Qiang is in his 70s and has spent his entire life in Long Wan. Two of his sons work as farmers in Long Wan and a third, the youngest, is a hairdresser in Zhanjiang.

Liang has given his share of land to a son to cultivate in exchange for food and money. He says Long Wan's farmers are doing much better than they were before the recent reforms, earning between 800 and 1,000 yuan a year compared with just 200 yuan a year a decade and a half ago.

Some farmers are getting richer than others, but the difference between rich and poor is still not great, he says. The rich ones can build a taller house.

But despite the improvements, Liang remains dissatisfied. I don't have a happy life because I don't have enough money to build a better house or help my youngest son get married, he says. If I don't have enough money how can I find my son a wife? How can I be happy?

Liang says even if his son finds a girl he'd like to marry, he may not have enough money to satisfy her parents. He says most parents now want their daughters to marry into well-off families. He says a family needs at least 3,000 yuan to prepare a wedding feast and provide gifts for the couple and the girl's parents.

He says his son left the village to seek a better life in Zhanjiang, where he learned to cut hair and started his own business. But it's hard for villagers to earn money in the city. There are too many people cutting hair now, too many

villagers with dreams of starting a new life and a business in the city.

Before the revolution, the big landlords wielded all the power in Long Wan, he says. The biggest landlords lived outside the village but some lived in Long Wan.

After liberation the government confiscated the landlords' land and redistributed it amongst the villagers. Everyone in the village received a share of their property. The landlords' personal possessions ¾ houses, furniture, and other belongings - were also seized and distributed to the villagers.

Liang says the authorities took a large house that belonged to one of the landlords and allowed six families to move into it. Some of the landlords and their children fled to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Zhanjiang; others stayed in Long Wan and continued to farm.

Liang Ru Jia smoothes the ground with a hoe as the younger members of his family harvest and thresh the rice crop.

Liang has lived his entire life in the village and - at 78 - is old enough to remember when the villagers still lived in thatched-roof cottages. In those days Long Wan was much smaller than it is now, he says.

Most of the villagers think of the pre-liberation years as a time of despair - a time of hunger and sickness - but Liang Ru Ja says life was good for his family during the years before the Communist revolution.

He says his family was a landlord and owned over 20 mu of land. When he was growing up his family always had enough to eat.

Under the Guomindang government some villagers owned land and others had nothing; some had enough to eat, others starved, he says.

In the early days of the civil war, many Long Wan villagers sympathized with the Communists and fought against the Guomindang. He points to the hill rising above the lowland fields and recalls a battle between Guomindang and Communist fighters that took place there.

It's true that the Communists took his family's land, he says, but he feels no bitterness toward them now. Other families, he says, lost even more land than his did.

Liang Ge, a 52-year-old farmer with bright intelligent eyes, came of age during the early years of the People's Republic of China.

Over the years, he says, he watched the introduction of one social movement after another. During one period, the villagers were ordered to eat their meals in a communal dining hall. No one wanted to do this but they had no choice but to go along with the cadres.

Liang says all of the movements failed to help the farmers improve their livelihoods. The government's policies didn't inspire the villagers to work hard or provide them with enough food to eat. They forced us to do things, but no one wanted to do them, he says.

In the early 1960s, Liang had the chance to attend primary and middle school despite being in his 20s. He says the government wanted more Chinese to complete their education.

He attended school in Zhanjiang for a time but a food shortage forced him to leave. He says he was one of the best students in the class, but the older students were the first to be dismissed.

Only in recent years has the living standard of the villagers improved significantly, says Liang. Today, he has more than enough rice for his family and a sideline business raising livestock to earn more cash.

But many villagers are still dissatisfied, he says. Rice production and profits have increased over the last decade, but the farmers still feel squeezed by government taxes and the high cost of education. Progress for the farmers continues to be slow.

Liang says he spends 160 yuan a term to send his youngest son to middle school. He has one of the highest incomes in the village, but he still finds it hard to pay for his son's schooling.

He fears that conditions won't improve much in the days ahead. Progress will be little and slow. Taxes will continue to grow, and the villagers will feel even more squeezed than they are today.

It's not a good situation but there's not much the villagers can do about it. It's not a question of liking or not liking it, he says. The farmers have no choice but to put up with it.

Young people search for ways to escape to the city but that option presents numerous obstacles, he says.

Liang knows he will never be able to leave the village to seek a new life elsewhere. He is too old to do what the young people are doing, he says. Instead, he will work to improve his livestock business and live as well as he can in Long Wan. This is his life and he has no choice but to accept it.