



They Do What They Want

The villagers have little say in the matters that have the greatest impact on their lives. Important decisions about village life are made by the central government in Beijing. The chain of leadership begins with officials in Beijing and ends with the local cadres.

In China there are provincial, city, and county leaders; below that there are Zhen (town), Xiang (area), and village leaders.

The village leaders are at the bottom rung of the leadership hierarchy and have little power. Their job is to inform the villagers of the policies handed down by the Xiang, the leadership level a tier above them.

A Xiang is made up of a number of villages. Before the 1980s, the Xiang was the government of the People's Commune. Each commune was made up of a number of villages.

Village leaders support the Xiang leaders by ensuring that residents pay their taxes. They also settle whatever local disputes arise, including arguments over land and water.

The Xiang has the greatest influence on the day-to-day life of the farmers. City people have a danwei, or work unit that controls many aspects of their lives, but the villagers have the Xiang.

Long Wan's Xiang is at Mao village, which borders Long Wan. People go to the Xiang office at Mao village to address legal and other issues. They go to the Xiang to pay their rice tax. Villagers who want to marry go to the Xiang's marriage office to make their requests.

There's also a store in the Xiang where the villagers buy fertilizer and insecticide.

If a villager wants to work in the city, the Xiang officials must certify that the person hasn't violated the country's birth-control policy.

The villagers must also go to the Xiang office to register births. The Xiang keeps records of how many children each family has and who must be sterilized for having too many.

No Real Elections

A villager complains that the farmers have little control over what goes on in the countryside. In Long Wan, there are no real elections, he says. The villagers must choose from a list of candidates drawn up by the cadres when voting for village and Xiang leaders. They call them elections but they aren't real elections, he says.

It's the Xiang cadres who have the real power and make the important decisions. The village leaders elected by the farmers have little power because the Xiang leaders tell them what to do, he says.

Occasionally the village leaders go to the Xiang to work with the officials there, but mostly they work as farmers like everyone else.

The only difference between the village leaders and other farmers is that the leaders receive a wage and special benefits, such as the opportunity to buy fertilizer from the government at a discount, he says.

Village and Xiang leaders tend to be members of the Communist Party,

though nonmembers can also become leaders. One Long Wan leader is not a party member.

The villagers have little say about the decisions the cadres make about their lives. They do what they want, he says of the leaders, and they don't care what the people say about them.

The Village Leader

Liang Zhen Hai has been chosen village leader three times since 1980. Elected from a list of candidates selected by the Communist Party, he serves as a go-between in conflicts that arise within the village and between Long Wan residents and Xiang (area-government) officials.

He says he is often called on to settle disputes over water rights and land boundaries.

Liang says he has watched the village go through many changes in the course of his lifetime. In the days before liberation, his family worked for a landlord but maintained their own small plot of land for growing vegetables. Liang says he began working in the fields when he was 12 years old.

Despite the recent reforms, some villagers see few opportunities to create a better life for themselves in Long Wan.

He says his own children have left the village to find new opportunities in the city. His son lives and works in Zhanjiang and his daughter lives in the coastal city of Shenzhen.

Many villagers have left Long Wan to seek their fortunes in Shenzhen. There's a gold-rush fever spreading across China, driving many people to migrate to growing cities like Shenzhen where work is plentiful.

Just Another Piece of News

A young villager sits in the living room of his family's house on a quiet summer afternoon.

When the Chinese government used force to remove student demonstrators from Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, it was big news in the village. Everyone in Long Wan was talking about it, says the young villager.

But the Tiananmen event was just another piece of news to the farmers in Long Wan, he says. They thought the students were foolish to stick their necks out like that because they were sure to fail.

Most of the villagers don't have strong political feelings about the incident or about the Communist Party, says the villager, who was a college student in Zhanjiang at the time of the protests. Most simply accept life as it is and try their best to improve their situation.

They obey the leaders because they think it's impossible to stop the government from doing what it wants. They don't really care which party or group leads them as long as their policies provide them with a better life. Even if a government is unacceptable to them the farmers believe there's little they can do to change it.

The student says that even though he took part in the student demonstrations in Zhanjiang in 1989 he still wants to join the Communist Party. A person

can advance more quickly in society by joining the party, he says. The party has power and the people must obey it.

Although the young man is willing to talk about political issues in the privacy of his village house, he is careful not to say too much about it when people are listening; he is wary of revealing too much about his political thinking to a foreigner.

The political tension that grew out of the Beijing demonstrations is still in the air a year after the event. The villagers are still nervous about openly discussing politics, especially with a foreigner.

Joining the Party

A family sits in a crowded village house on a warm summer afternoon. A small boy, no more than nine or 10 years old, sits on a couch puffing on a cigarette.

In China, men often say you can't be a man if you don't know how to smoke.

A grandmother with a child on her back stands among the children, smiling and laughing; the children's mother sits on the couch cutting paper with a pair of scissors as the father speaks.

Many people in the village want to join the Communist Party, including him, he says. It's good to be a party member. Party members are always the first to know when something important happens in the village.

But the party is selective about who can join, he says. There are about 20 party members in the village now. Other than attending meetings, party members live like other village farmers.

The father speaks openly for a few minutes but, like most villagers, is wary of talking too much about politics with a foreigner. Eventually he becomes silent, unwilling to answer any more questions.

No Democracy

A villager sits with his small son on the living room floor of his house and complains about the local leaders.

He says the leaders have little respect for him and he has little respect for them. He says the system for electing leaders isn't genuinely democratic because the villagers have little control over who gets nominated.

The Xiang cadres in Mao village make all of the big decisions for the villagers. The villagers choose their local leaders from a list of nominees selected by the cadres, but they can't nominate their own candidates.

When it's time for an election, the farmers travel a short distance down the road to Mao village to vote.

The leaders are just out for themselves, he says. I know they will never help me.

He says he once sought redress from country officials after being struck by a truck while riding his bicycle in Shuixi County. The officials urged him to drop the matter, but he refused. Only after he offered them a bribe did they agree to help him.

He says he eventually decided not to pursue the matter because he realized that most of the redress money would end up in the pocket of an official as a bribe.

The leaders are no good, he says. They wait until the rice is harvested before scheduling a birth-control raid. They're afraid they won't have enough rice if they make a raid before it has been harvested.

When a villager is fined for violating the country's birth control policy, he and others in Long Wan believe the local cadres receive a share of the fine.

The cadres, he says contemptuously, only want to make money at the expense of the people. He says the Xiang cadres in Mao village are collecting more taxes than is allowed by the central government in Beijing.

The Communist Party is worse than the Kuomintang, he says sarcastically. Many people hate them. They always think up new ways to get more out of the farmers.

The Xiang leaders do what they want, he says. They sit in their office and do nothing while the farmers do all the work.

If you regularly go to a leader's house to talk with him, he will be more willing to help you, he says. If you don't talk with the leaders or if you talk badly about them, they will ignore you.

The leaders are like emperors, he says. They hate me because I always talk bad about them.











