LONG WAN

Stories from a Chinese Village

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Long Wan (Dragon Bay) 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 regularly visited Long Wan to interview and photograph its residents. I returned there in 2000 and 2005.

The stories that follow are a record of what I found there and the changes that are slowly transforming villages across China.

1990 to 1991

I

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

I am traveling with Liu, a math teacher at Lei Zhou College, and his friend Liang, also a math teacher at the college. We are traveling by bicycle to Liang's home village, a 45-minute ride from the city.

We share the highway with platform bicycles piled high with leafy green vegetables and ancient dump trucks that stir up the dust as they rumble past us.

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

When I arrived in Zhanjiang a few months ago to work as an English teacher at Lei Zhou College, I asked Liu if he knew of a village where I could photograph and interview people.

He said his friend Liang grew up in Long Wan village just outside of Zhanjiang and could perhaps take me there to meet his family.

He asked me why I wanted to interview people I didn't know, and I said I wanted to know how other people live, I wanted to hear their stories.

It doesn't matter if they are ordinary or extraordinary, I said, if I know them or don't know them.

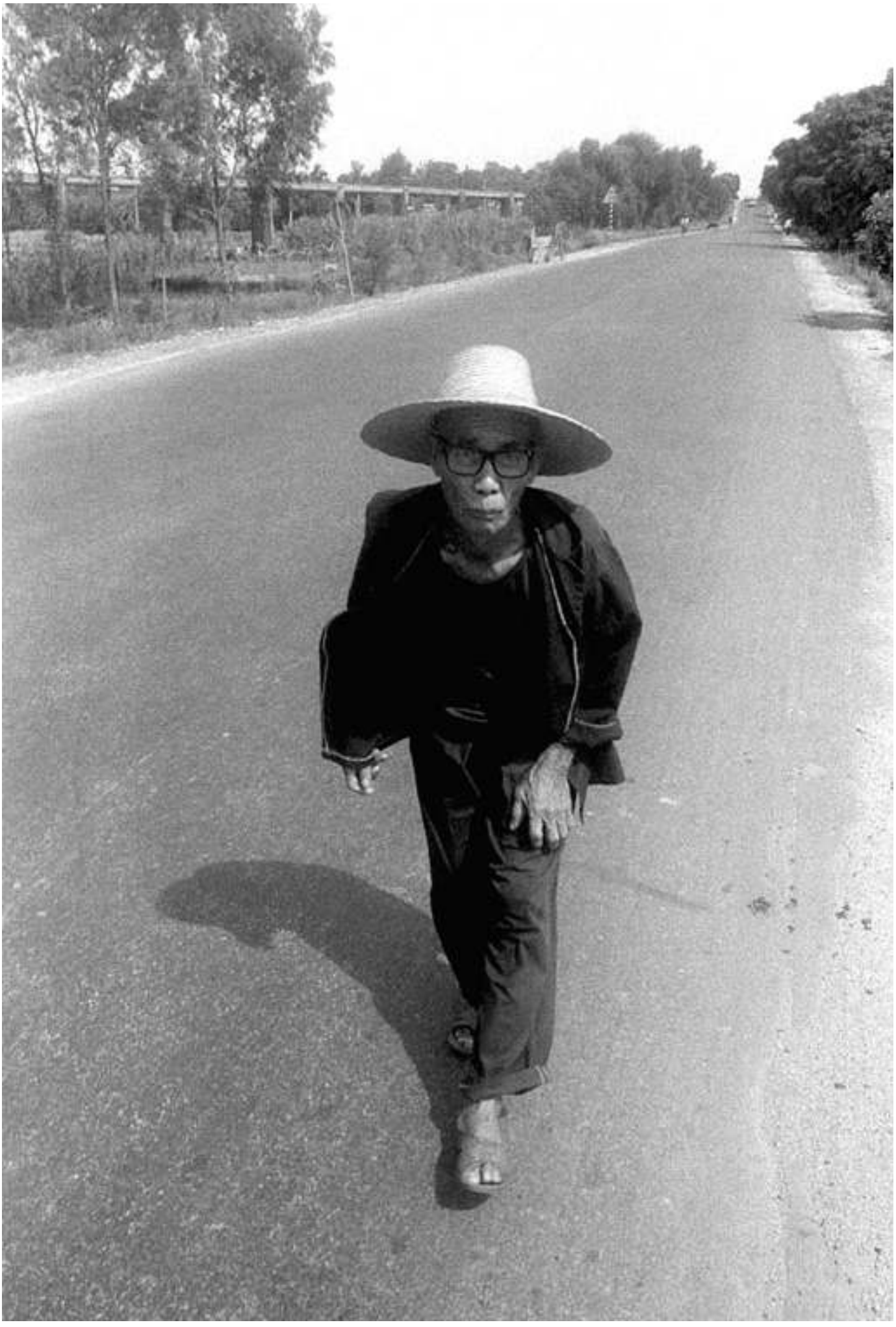
It's a tense time in China - just a few months after soldiers shot scores of democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

At the college, the department leaders carefully monitor my movements and conversations.

Several teachers tell me the students are not allowed to speak with me about politics. Rumors circulate that I may be a spy for the overseas democracy movement.

Why else would I walk around with a camera…why else would I have arrived in China so soon after the Beijing demonstrations?

Most foreigners have left China, but Robert has just arrived, they say. How do you explain that?



The Road to Long Wan

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.

An old man walks behind a bullock-drawn cart filled with cut cane, a pouch hanging from his shoulder, his gold teeth glinting in the sun as he turns to smile at a passing stranger.

In nearby fields, farmers dressed in patched up 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 faces, dries and etches deep grooves into their skin.

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

Long Wan'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 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 are at 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 live under the same roof.

I sit at a round wooden table in the Liang family home. Vegetable, chicken, pork, and fish dishes rest on the table.

Each person seated receives a bowl of rice but the rest of the dinner is eaten from communal plates at the center of the table.

The Liang family treats me like a special guest, putting out their best dishes in my honor.

I am always treated this way when I visit Chinese homes. I am a foreigner, a very special guest.

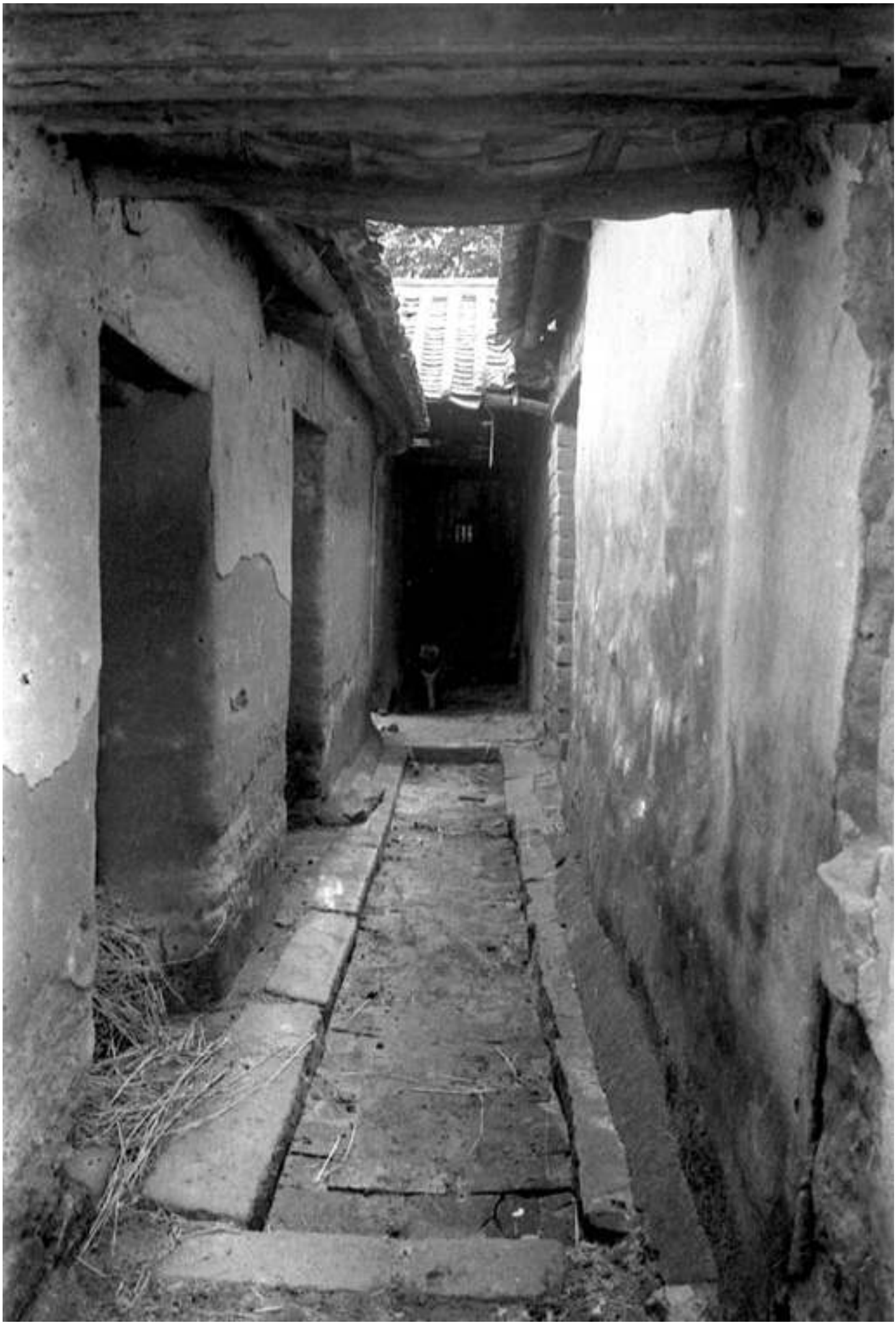
Liang Ta Gann - a retired schoolteacher ¾ is excited to have his two sons here for a visit.

One son is a middle-school teacher in a nearby town, the other a math teacher at Lei Zhou College.

The villagers believe Long Wan (Dragon Bay) is at least 300 years old, but no one knows for sure, the elder Liang says.

The only knowledge people have of the past is what they have heard from their parents and grandparents.

In the days before the 1949 communist "liberation," only about 300 people lived in Long Wan, but today (in 1990) about 900 people live here, he says.



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 remarried and moved to her new husband’s village, leaving him behind in Long Wan to live with an older brother.

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

He says his mother returned to Long Wan because she didn’t want him to live alone and also because she didn’t have enough food in her new husband's village.

But she soon discovered that conditions in Long Wan 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 Long Wan there had always been a disparity between those who had much and those who had little - and his family had very little.

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, but others were very bad and did nothing to help them.

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 favor.

Liang says the war years brought changes to Long Wan. Japanese soldiers used to arrive 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 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.

But the two young people found they got along quite well, he says, laughing when 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 that 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 even then received more land than others, Liang says.

But those jubilant days didn't last long. 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 was carried out in ordinary villages like Long Wan.

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 it, 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 allowance as hardworking villagers.

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. The commune system was scrapped and each family was allotted its own land to cultivate.

He says Long Wan 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.

He 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, 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 Nu Li, who is in his 70s now, says he tried hard to bring up his children well.

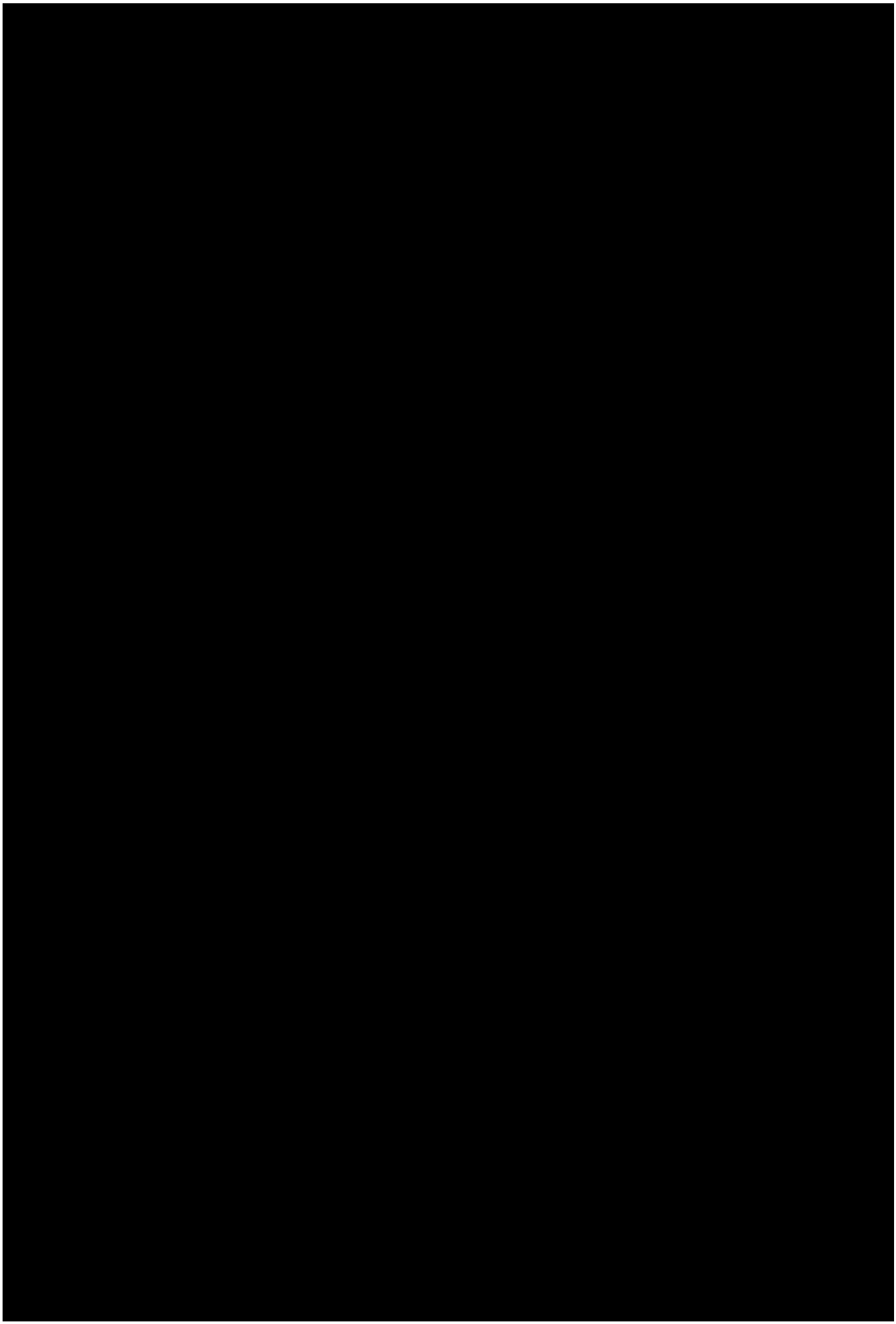
He taught them the difference between right and wrong…he taught them not to steal or fight or argue with others, he says.

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.

Instead, he says, he passed down to them his knowledge of planting and harvesting.

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.



II

We leave for the village when my neighbors are taking their mid-day rest. It's the only time of day when no one is awake to watch me leave.

The neighborhood lanes are empty then. The buildings float in the afternoon heat. We leave during the hottest hours of the day.

We pedal up the hill outside the college and follow the road to Mah Jong. After riding for a half hour we turn off the highway and follow a winding dirt path through the countryside.

I travel to Long Wan with Liu, who understands the Cantonese and Lei Zhou dialects spoken by the villagers.

Liu isn't afraid of the authorities or what people think of him for accompanying me to the village. He isn't afraid to ask sensitive questions.

I once asked him how he felt about Mao Zedong and he said his mother was severely criticized and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. How could I like Mao Zedong? he said.

Changing Fortunes

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 yard and tries to hit it with a slingshot.

His unmarried 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 the village and a third, the youngest, is a hairdresser in Zhanjiang.

Liang has given his share of village land to one of his sons 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? he says.

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 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, he says. 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, he says, the big landlords wielded all the power in Long Wan.

The biggest landlords lived outside the village but some of the wealthiest property owners lived in Long Wan.

After liberation the government confiscated the landlords' property and redistributed it amongst the villagers. Everyone in the village received a share of the confiscated land.

The landlords' personal possessions - 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.

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

Liang has lived his entire life in Long Wan 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 for Liang Ru Jia, it was a prosperous time .

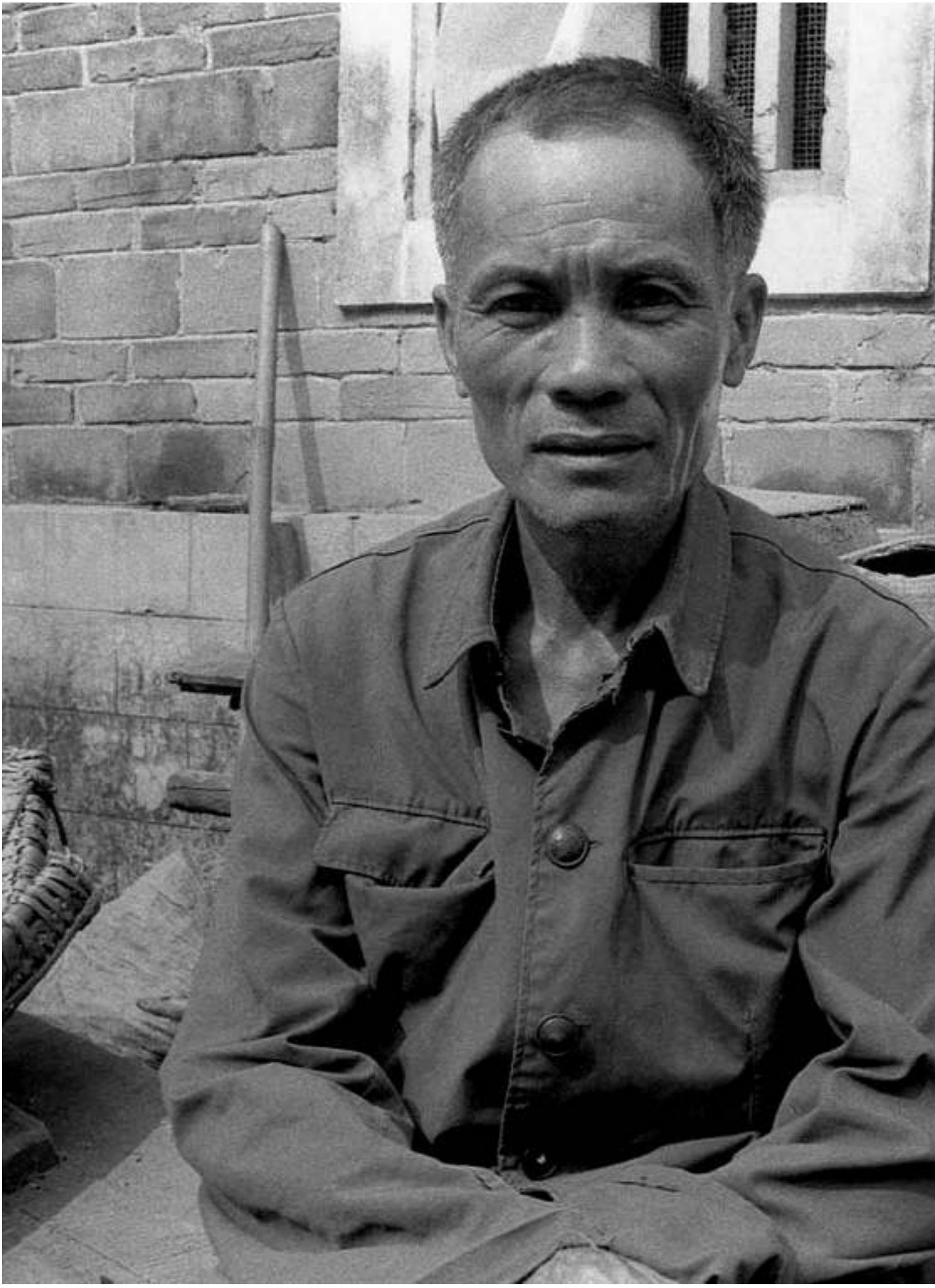
Back then his family owned over 20 mu of land and always had enough to eat.

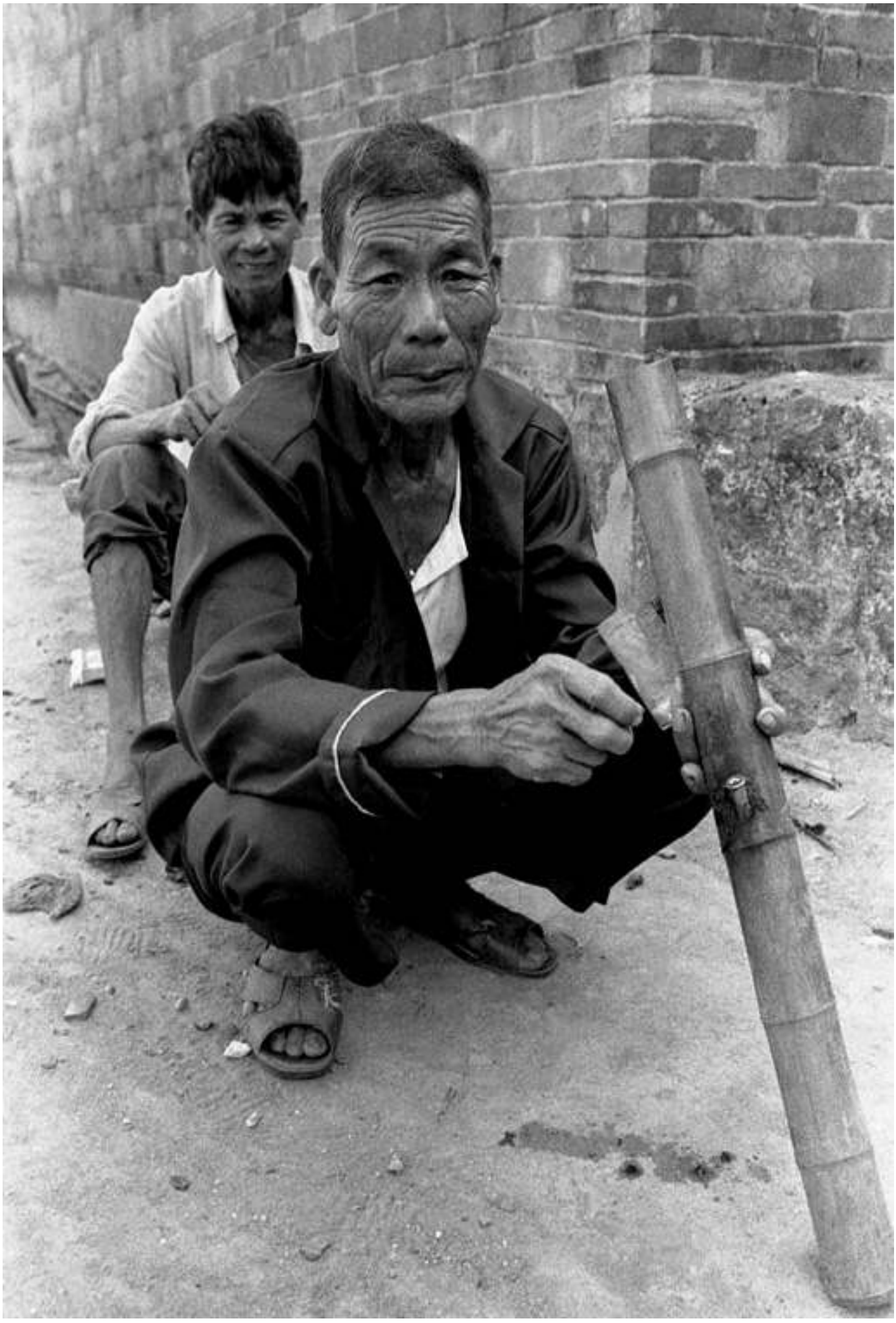
Under the Guomindang government some villagers owned land and others had nothing, says, some had enough to eat, others starved.

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 landlord families, he says, lost even more land than his.





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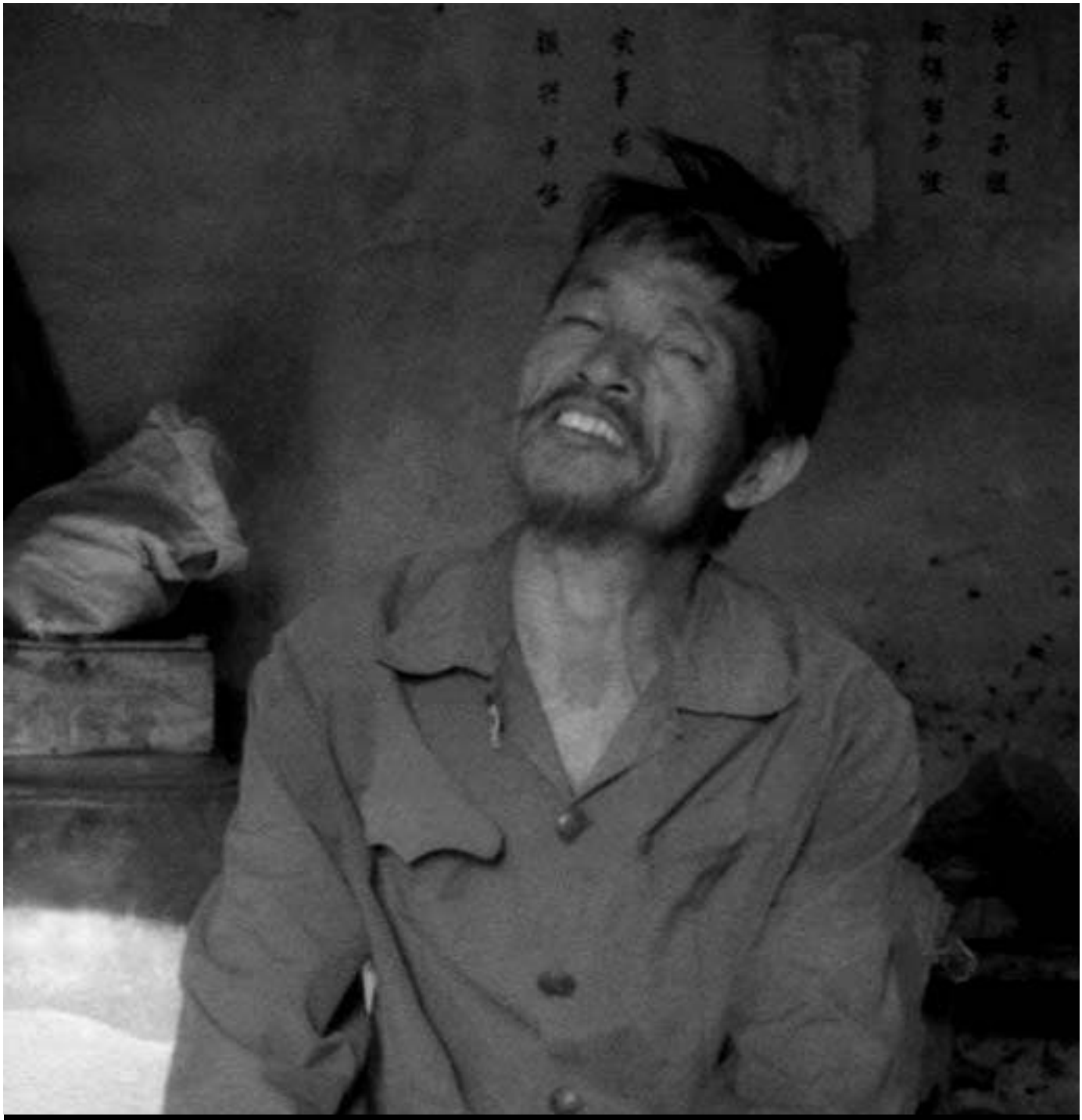

Still Not Good Enough

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 has witnessed the introduction of one social movement after another.

During one period, the villagers were ordered to eat their meals in a communal dining hall, he says. No one wanted to do this but they had no choice but to go along with the cadres.

Liang says the various government-sponsored movements failed to help the farmers improve their lives.

The policies didn't inspire the villagers to work hard or provide them with enough food to eat, he says, they forced us to do things, but no one wanted to do them.

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

He attended school in the nearby city of Zhanjiang until 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.

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

Still, he adds, many villagers remain dissatisfied. 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, he says. Taxes will continue to grow, and the villagers will feel even more squeezed than before.

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 accepts that he will never be able to leave the village to seek a new life elsewhere. He says he is too old to do what today’s young people are doing.

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.

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Liang Ge’s wife guides her bulls along the narrow road that bisects the lowland fields. The light is clear and sharp today, the sky a cloudless deep blue.

The bulls move in formation toward the hills rising above the lowland fields, casting long shadows across the dusty road. When a bull strays from the path, she strikes him with a long stick.

Don't you dare, she shouts when a bull starts to feed on a bush, I'll kill you…you're so hungry you're going to die.

She leads the bulls to a sugarcane field above the lowland rice paddies and ties them to a

small tree. She picks up a sickle and starts to strip the leaves off freshly cut cane. She picks up the leaves and offers them to the bulls to feed on.

She says she has never had enough money to make a better life for herself and her family.

She says her bad luck started when she came to Long Wan at the age of 19 to marry her husband. At that time, her mother-in-law was sick and the family didn't have enough food.

In recent years village life has been improving and her family no longer goes hungry, but making a decent living is still difficult, she says.

She and her husband earn extra money raising and selling livestock, but the family's income still isn't high enough to cover their growing expenses.

For example, she hasn't enough money to find wives for her three sons, she says. Finding a wife for each of them will require at least several thousand yuan.

The 45-year-old mother of five has other expenses as well. Her husband was recently hospitalized with a stomach ailment and the family didn't have the several thousand yuan they needed to pay for his treatment. Unlike many city dwellers, the villagers must pay for their own health care.

We had to borrow money from the village and now must pay it back with interest, she says.

It's not good to always be poor, she says. When you're poor you can't talk about being happy. To be rich is good.

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Lu Qiu crosses the lowland fields carrying the hoe she'll use to weed her peanut field.

Rice seedlings glow bright green in the nearby paddies. The lowland fields stretch to the horizon on either side of a dirt road that bisects the fields.

Soon the villagers will transplant the rice seedlings to the muddy land nearby to begin their final stage of growth.

For days the spring weather has been damp and overcast, but today the sky is a clear blue.

Lu Qiu says she is accustomed to laboring in the fields, but that doesn't make the work any easier. Farm work is hard and everyone in the village knows it.

If it were possible she would prefer a more comfortable job in the city, but she has no choice but to work as a farmer.

If I wasn't a farmer I don't think I could find another job, she says.

Liu Qiu says she generally wakes up at five or six in the morning, though the time she rises depends on what needs to be done in the fields that day.

In early April, when the rice seedlings need to be transplanted, she gets up early and works till late in the day.

As soon as she wakes she prepares breakfast for her husband and three primary-school children. After that she feeds the pigs and chickens.

Once her chores around the house are finished she picks up her hoe and goes out to the fields to work with her husband.

The family grows rice, sugarcane, peanuts, and watermelons, she says.

What is a good life? She considers the question carefully before answering.

A good life means living in a beautiful house and eating meat or fish - maybe chicken or shrimp - with every meal.

The house she lives in now is old and unattractive, and her family seldom eats meat or fish with their meals, she says.

No, she adds, her life in Long Wan isn't much like the one she imagines, though it's not that bad either. Many village women believe that living in Long Wan is better than living in other villages because there's always enough rice to eat.

Long Wan has more land than many other villages and can produce more food, she says. In Long Wan people have rice left over to sell for cash in the market.

In fact, some of the villagers are getting rich and building new houses, she says. Some are growing more sugarcane and raising livestock; others are earning extra money working outside the village.

Life isn't as bad as it used to be, she says. Before the reforms there wasn't enough rice, but now no one goes hungry.

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Chen Feng is perched on a wooden stool in her village house. The late-day light filters through the windows.

Although she is more than 40 years old and has four children, she still has dreams of finding a better life in the city.

When I was young I wanted to marry a city man, she says, I wanted to escape from the countryside, but it was impossible.

I married my husband because he was the village doctor, she says. I thought he would give me a good life, but he couldn't take me out of here.

It's true that life in the village now is better than it used to be, but it's still not good enough, she says.

In the old days her father died of sickness and hunger, but at least now there is enough food to eat.

If it were possible she would leave the village right now and find a better life in the city.

If she could go to Zhanjiang she could maybe buy a house or a building. If she could go to the city she would not be so poor.

I'm always gloomy, she moans, I am never happy.

Chen Feng says that many village women feel as she does about living in the countryside. They dream of another life outside the village but doubt it will be possible.

The women work as hard as the men, she says. They labor under the rain and sun, just like the men.

The farmer's life is especially hard for her because she suffers from a chronic bone disease and can only work for short periods in the fields.

But it's impossible to stop working now, she says. Her family has too many expenses.

Her children's middle school tuition is especially burdensome, costing as much as 160 yuan a year. Paying for their children's schooling has become a burden for many village parents.

Chen Feng says it would be easier to accept the high cost of education if she believed the children could one day use what they've learned in school to find jobs in the city.

But she doubts that most of them can do this. Most will end up working in the village as farmers.

They won't have the chance to make use of their costly education. Because of this many farmers see no value in educating their children, she says.

The young people want to move to the city because they think life in the countryside is too difficult and won't offer them a bright future, she says.

Her eldest daughter recently migrated to the coastal city of Shenzhen where she found work in a toy factory.

Both Chen Feng and her husband agreed that it was a good idea for their daughter to leave the village for Shenzhen, a fast-growing city and special economic zone near Hong Kong.

But her daughter recently became ill and returned to Long Wan, in part because she missed her family.

She thinks Shenzhen is too far away from home, Chen Feng says.

Chen Feng's husband listens disapprovingly as his wife complains about her life in the village. A tall, stern-looking man, her husband is the village's traditional Chinese doctor.

In recent years his reputation has suffered because many villagers no longer have faith in his ability to cure people.

He sits on a stool smoking a water pipe, eyeing his wife suspiciously as she speaks.

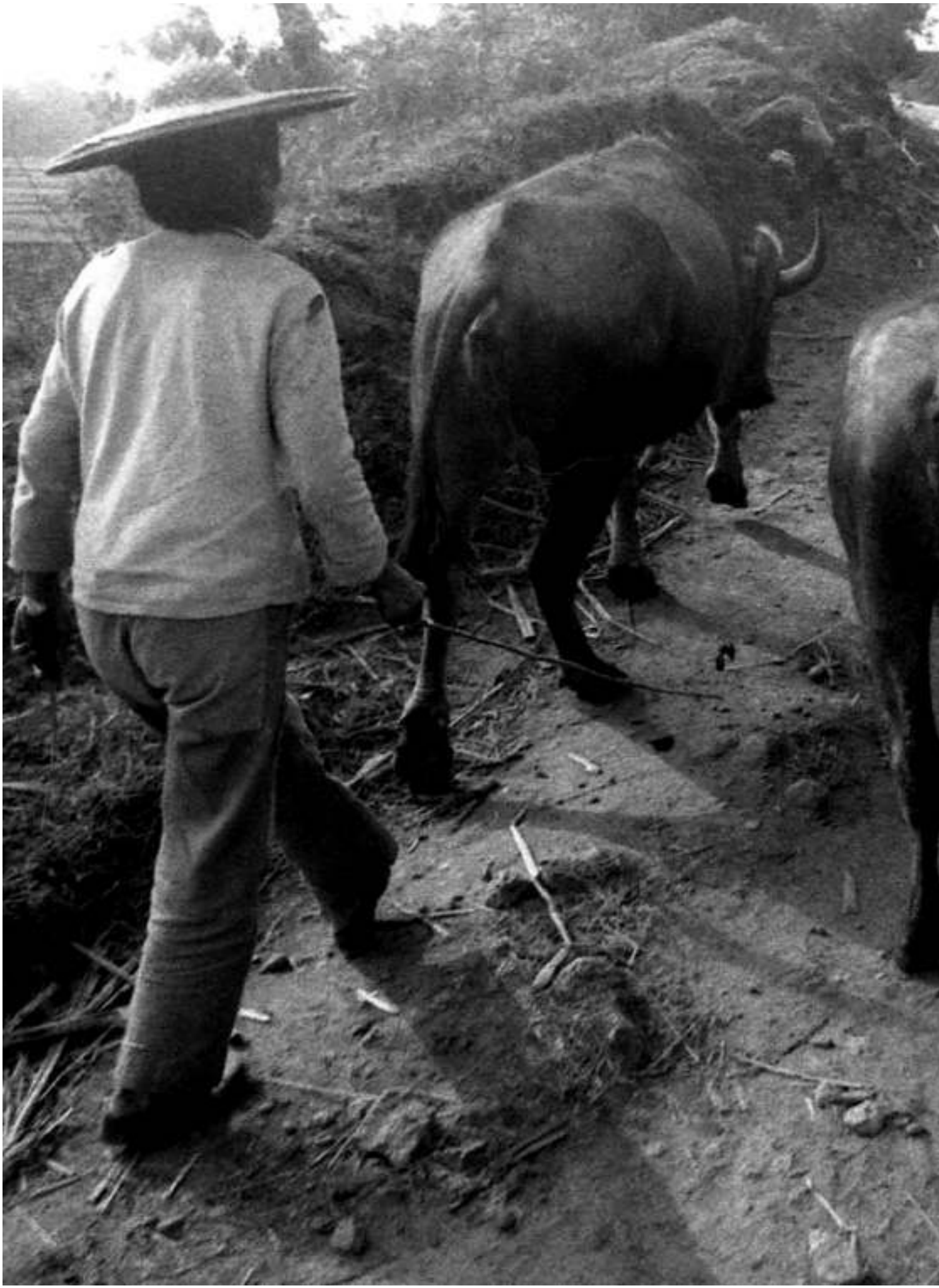
All this talk is useless, he blurts out, it won't make it any easier to leave the village.

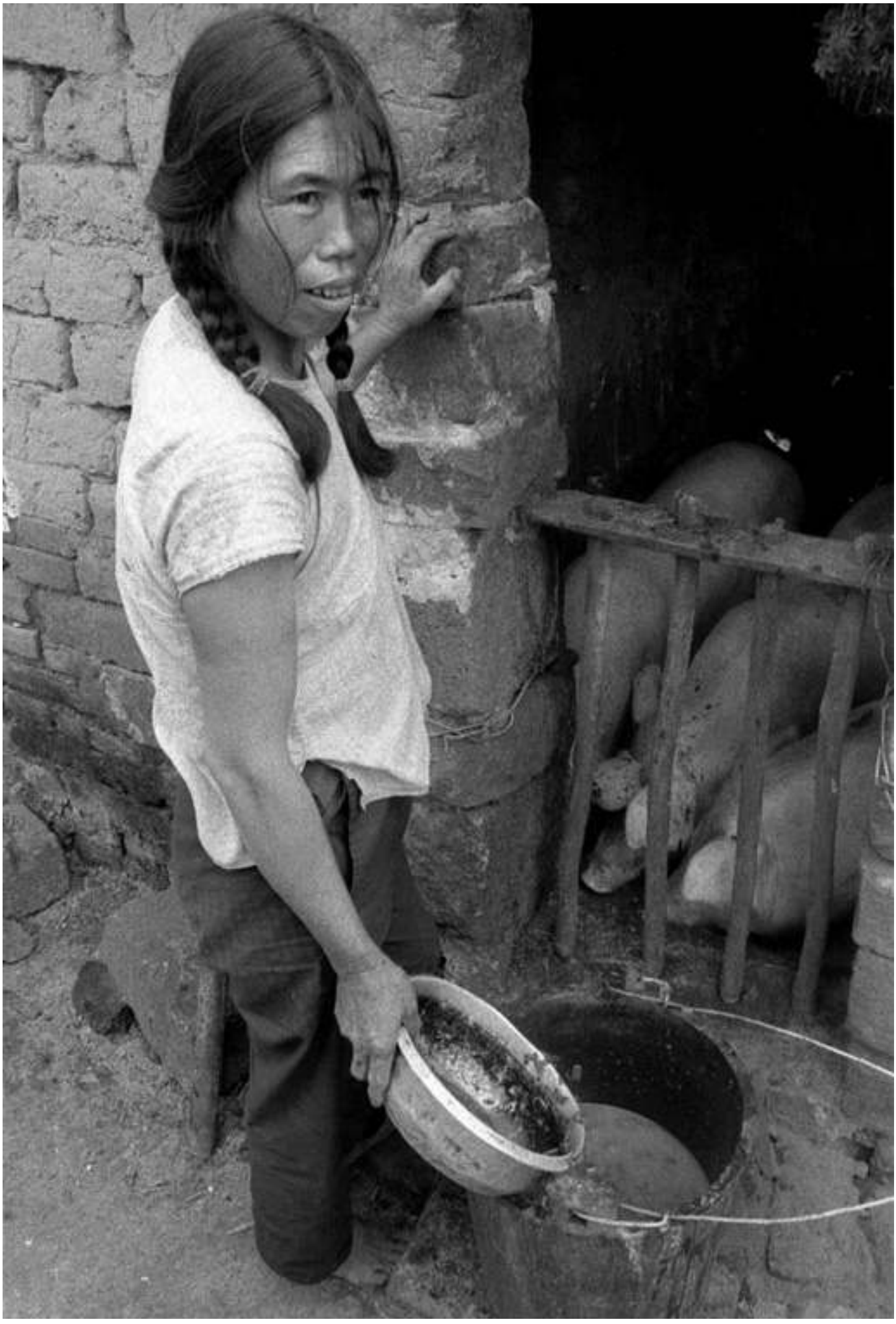
But his words are unable to silence her. She continues to talk despite his warning, albeit less volubly than before.

We seldom talk to each other, she says, we are always too busy working.

Chen Feng says that she and her husband are equals…they do the same work and make decisions together.

She asks him jokingly who makes the important decisions, but he continues to sulk…refuses to answer her question.





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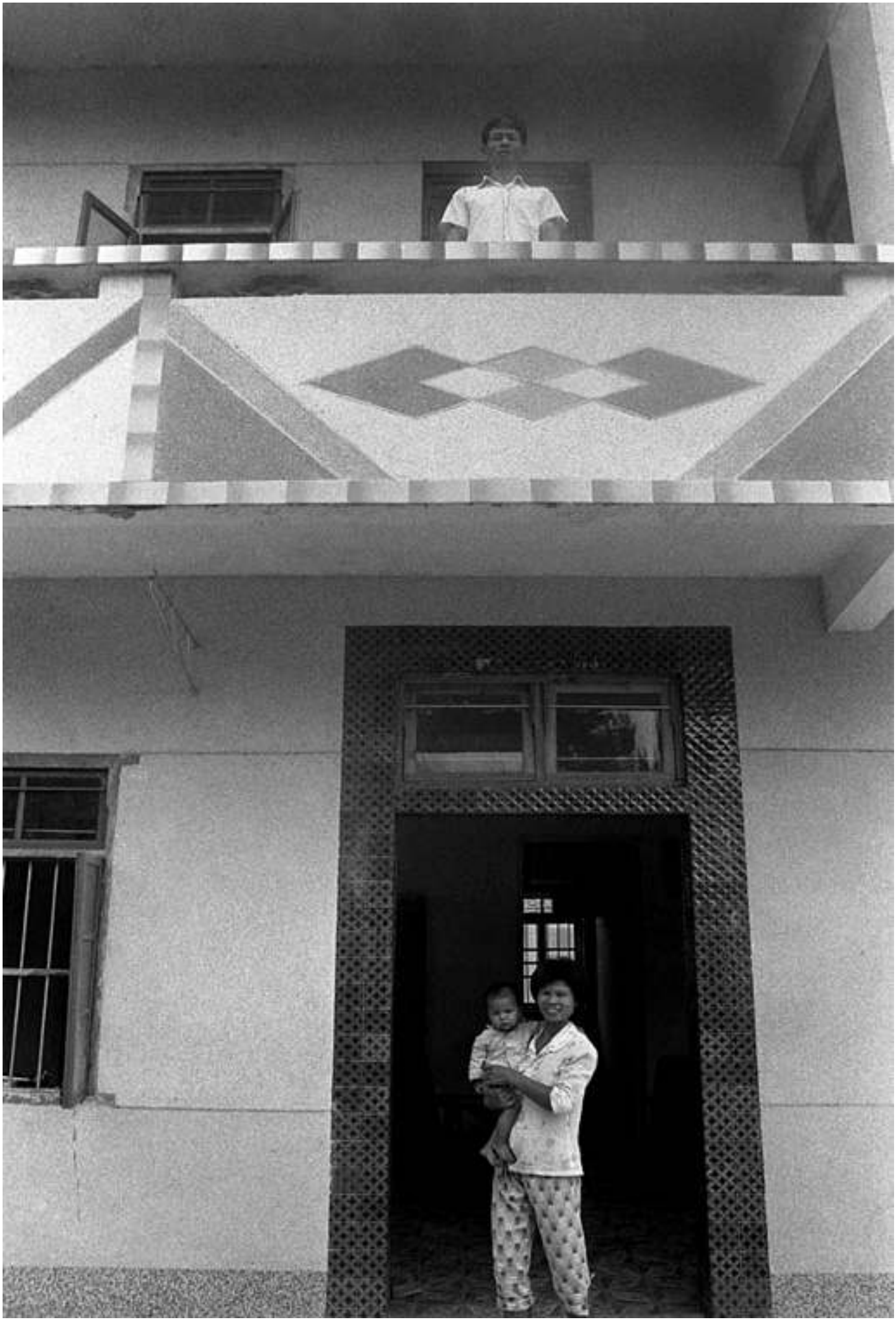

Making It Big in Long Wan

Liang Jie Li guides his bullock cart down a narrow village lane and stops in front of his new three-story house ¾ one of the largest in Long Wan.

Liang and his family moved into the house a few days ago ¾ before construction had been completed.

He moved in early, he says, because an astrologer said it was an auspicious time to start living there.

Liang is the richest resident of Long Wan but like other villagers dresses in work clothes and a straw hat.

He says he will spend about 70,000 yuan to build his house, compared with the 10,000 yuan most villagers spend to build theirs.

Not only is his house larger than other homes in the village - rising proudly above the surrounding structures - it is also more attractive, with brightly-colored tiles covering the living room floor and geometric designs on the exterior.

A successful businessman and farmer, Liang could afford to build a more lavish house than his neighbors.

Several years ago he purchased a stone-crushing machine and has been using it to produce gravel for construction companies.

In recent years, the countryside has been abuzz with talk of "doing business," but Liang is one of the few villagers who has managed to do this.

The key to his success and what sets him apart from other villagers is his willingness to take a chance on the future, says his 21-year-old son.

Liang Jie Li says he received only five years of schooling, all of it as an adult. He began primary school at the age of 18 at a time when the new communist government was eager to provide more people with education.

He finished primary school in three years and attended middle school for another two years. He wanted to continue his studies but the government forced him to stop, saying he was too old to be a student.

Over the years he has been a factory worker, a teacher, a village accountant, and a power-station worker.

The villagers always considered him cleverer than other villagers and often asked him for help in writing letters.

Liang says his success in business wouldn't have been possible if it hadn't been for the economic reforms that allowed farmers to cultivate their own land.

The new policy generated excitement and optimism in the countryside because the farmers realized that hard work and perseverance could lead to greater profits and a higher standard of living.

Although the land still belonged to the government and the farmers still had to pay a rice tax, Mao Zedong's dream of a classless, communist society was scrapped in favor of letting people fend for themselves and get rich if they could.

China's new rural policy was liberating for most of the farmers, but Liang soon concluded that farming alone would not lead to riches in the long run.

The villagers would need to find other ways to generate income if they hoped to increase their long-term profits, he thought.

When he heard that the local military was selling a stone-cutting machine, he and several friends decided to buy it for 4,000 yuan. Liang says the army had tried to earn money with the

machine but failed to make a profit because they didn't know how to manage the business.

Liang thought he could do better. The villagers' plan was to extract stone from a site in the village and crush it to make gravel for use in construction.

Since the village stone isn't owned by anyone, Liang concluded that he could extract it from the hills above the village free of charge.

It was a large and risky investment for villagers, Liang says. If their enterprise failed they would lose all the money they had struggled so long to save.

In the beginning it was difficult to find customers, says Liang. He had to look for them outside the village.

But after a year and a half of hard work, his perseverance began to pay off. Builders in the area learned about their business and started to seek them out.

The business began to flourish and Liang was able to hire workers to perform the day-to-day labor, leaving him more time to focus on managing the enterprise.

Liang's company now employs about 20 people, including northerners from less prosperous provinces who have migrated to Guangdong to find work and are willing to work for less money than the local people.

One of Liang's workers says he is paid only five yuan a day ¾ which is significantly less than what most local workers would accept.

Liang's success has also paid off for his son, who now has a small business transporting construction materials.

Liang bought his son a tractor-like vehicle with a trailer for about 3,000 yuan, and the son now uses it to haul stone and sugarcane, earning about 30 yuan for each load he carries.

Liang says he isn't optimistic about the future of farming in Long Wan. In the days ahead, he says, there won't be much progress for villagers who limit themselves to cultivating the land.

While the income of farmers rose rapidly over the last 10 years, he expects additional increases will be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain.

Most of the fields have already been cultivated, so it will be hard for farmers to increase their income by cultivating more land, he says.

If the farmers want to raise further their standard of living, they will have to explore other kinds of work, such as starting small sideline businesses like his to supplement their farm income, he says.

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Liang Chao Li is taller and more sturdily built than most of the other men in the village. When he smiles he shows a perfect set of white teeth.

He sits along the side of the road above a stream that meanders through the rice paddies. Like many young villagers, Liang Chao Li has dreams of getting rich.

He says he and several friends have been extracting sand from the village streambed and selling it to local construction companies.

People in the village have seen the success of Liang Jie Li's gravel business and are eager to duplicate it, he says.

Liang Chao Li says he and his friends have already started to earn money, though not enough to pay for the machine they purchased to extract the sand.

He says some people in the village oppose what they're doing, arguing that removing sand from the streambed will damage the bridge that spans the stream.

But Liang offers another explanation for their opposition: They're just jealous, he says, they're afraid we'll get rich.

Liang Chao Li says he attended school for eight years before dropping out. He says he and his friends had little interest in school because they didn't think it would be useful to them in the future.

But he doesn't think this way now: if he could relive those days today he would take his learning more seriously, he says.

In the past, many villagers believed they wouldn't have a chance to use their education as adults. Most thought they would have no choice but to spend their lives working as farmers in Long Wan.

Liang says he often had difficulty getting along with his teachers. There was one teacher whom he especially disliked.

This teacher, he says, once ordered him to write a self-criticism after he failed to show up for a work detail. Liang refused to write the criticism and soon began to hate the teacher.

Eventually he stopped attending school altogether.

He says he was disruptive in school and often got into fights with other boys. Once, he says, he tossed a firecracker into a classroom, upsetting both the students and the teacher.

He says his parents told him to be kind to others and avoid trouble, but he ignored their advice.

They hit him when he refused to behave, but their punishments had little impact on his behavior, he says.

Liang Chao Li eventually found a job as a laborer with a local company that built houses. But his experience there ended badly when he got into a serious fight with another worker and was fired.

After losing that job he worked for a company that provided sand for construction projects. His job was to assist the truck driver who hauled the sand.

He also lived for a time in the city of Zhanjiang. There were many new sensations to experience in the city, he says, many new things to see and buy there.

He says he passed much of his time watching movies and wandering through shops.

The world outside can open your eyes, he says. I liked to watch the crowds…I liked to look at the different kinds of people.

But he says he was always drawn back to the village even though he knew there was no future for him there.

The outside world is better, he says, but if you' re away from the village for a long time you start to miss it.

Liang knows it will be hard for him to improve his situation in Long Wan. There are too few opportunities for change here, he says. Life remains the same day after day, but it will be hard to leave now.

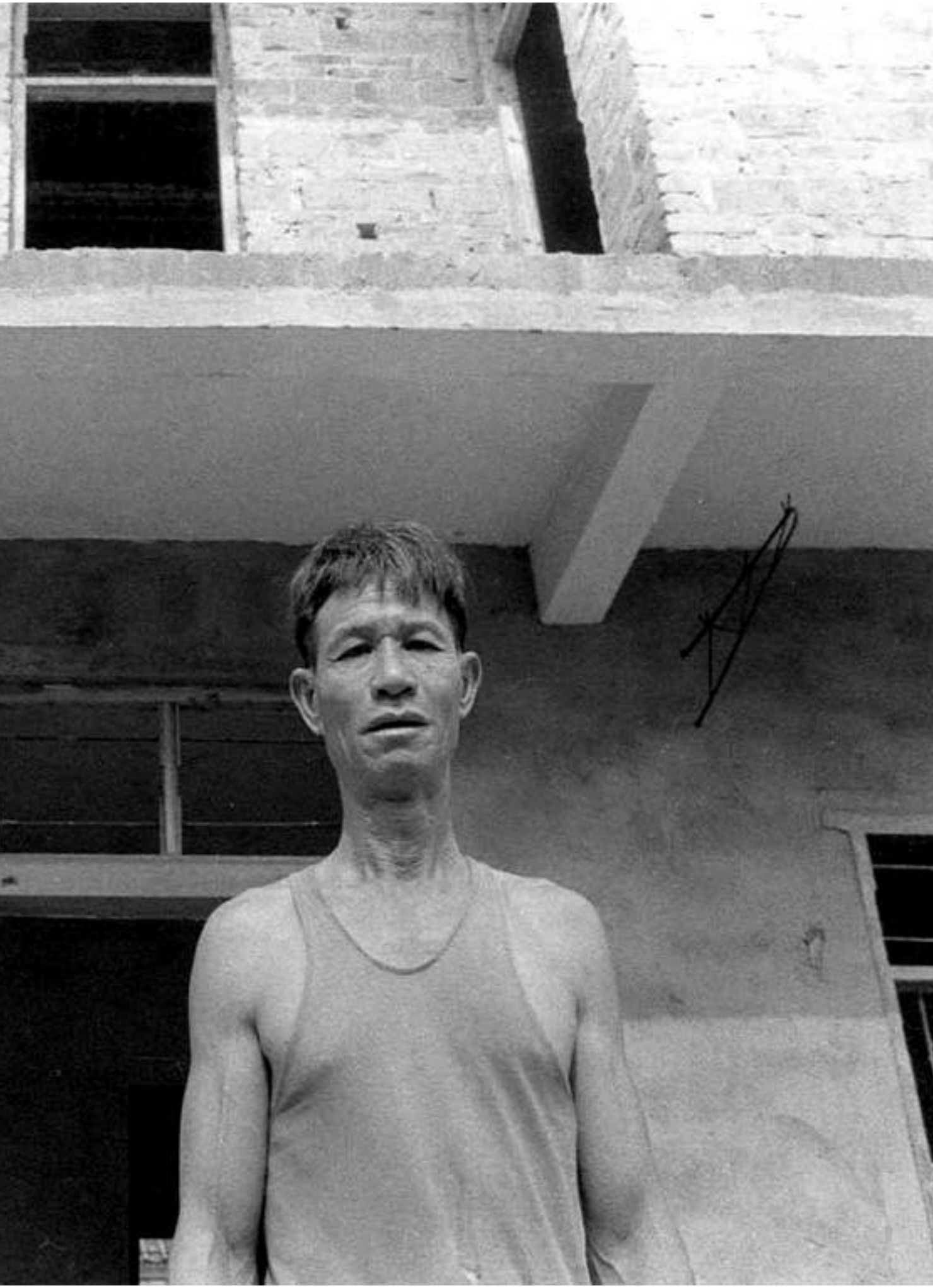
Liang says he leads a simple life in Long Wan these days, working in the fields and helping his family out at home. Occasionally he does temporary construction work outside the village to earn extra money.

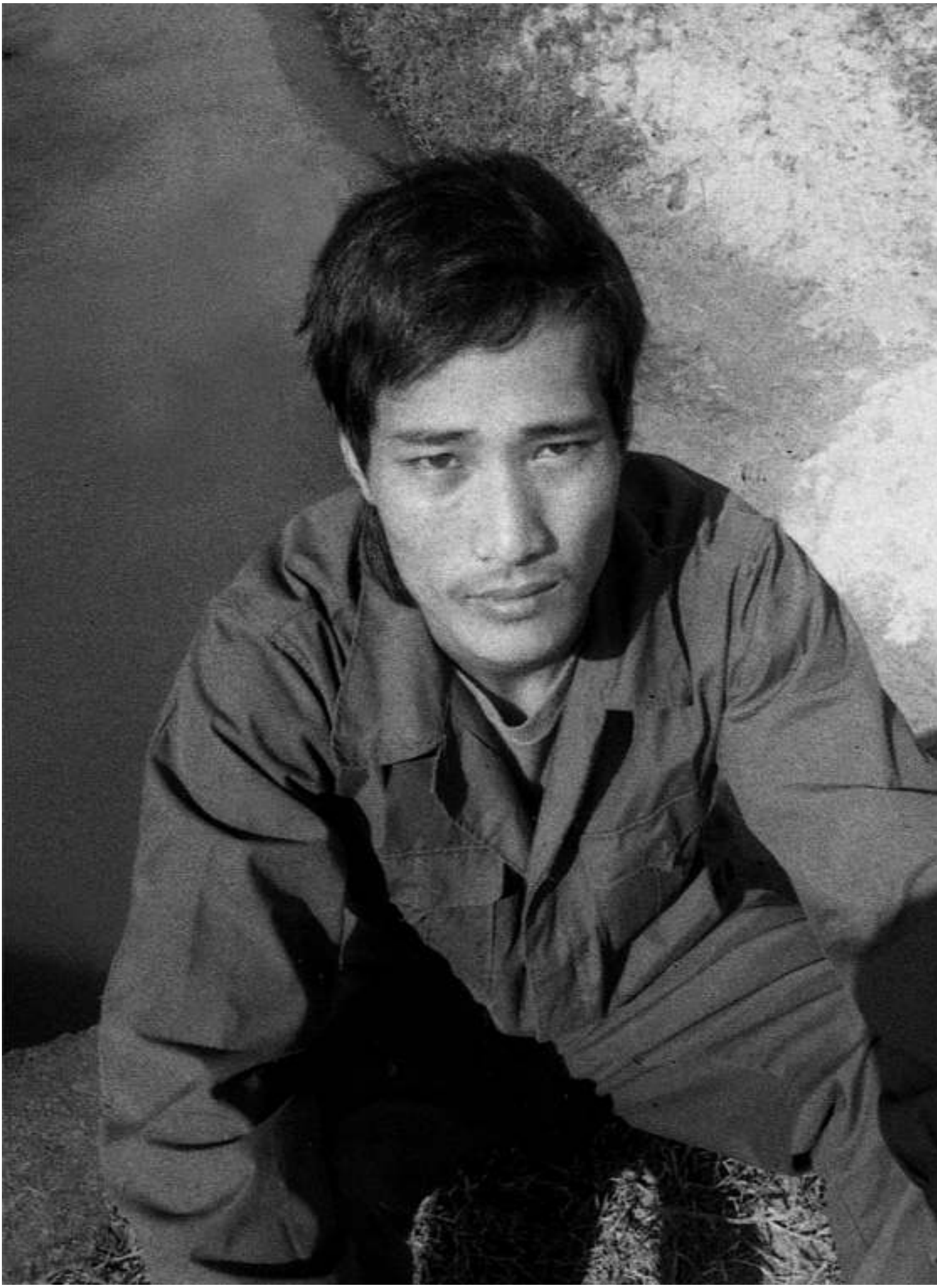
In the evening he and his friends get together to drink tea, watch television and devise strategies to catch up to the villagers who are becoming rich, he says.

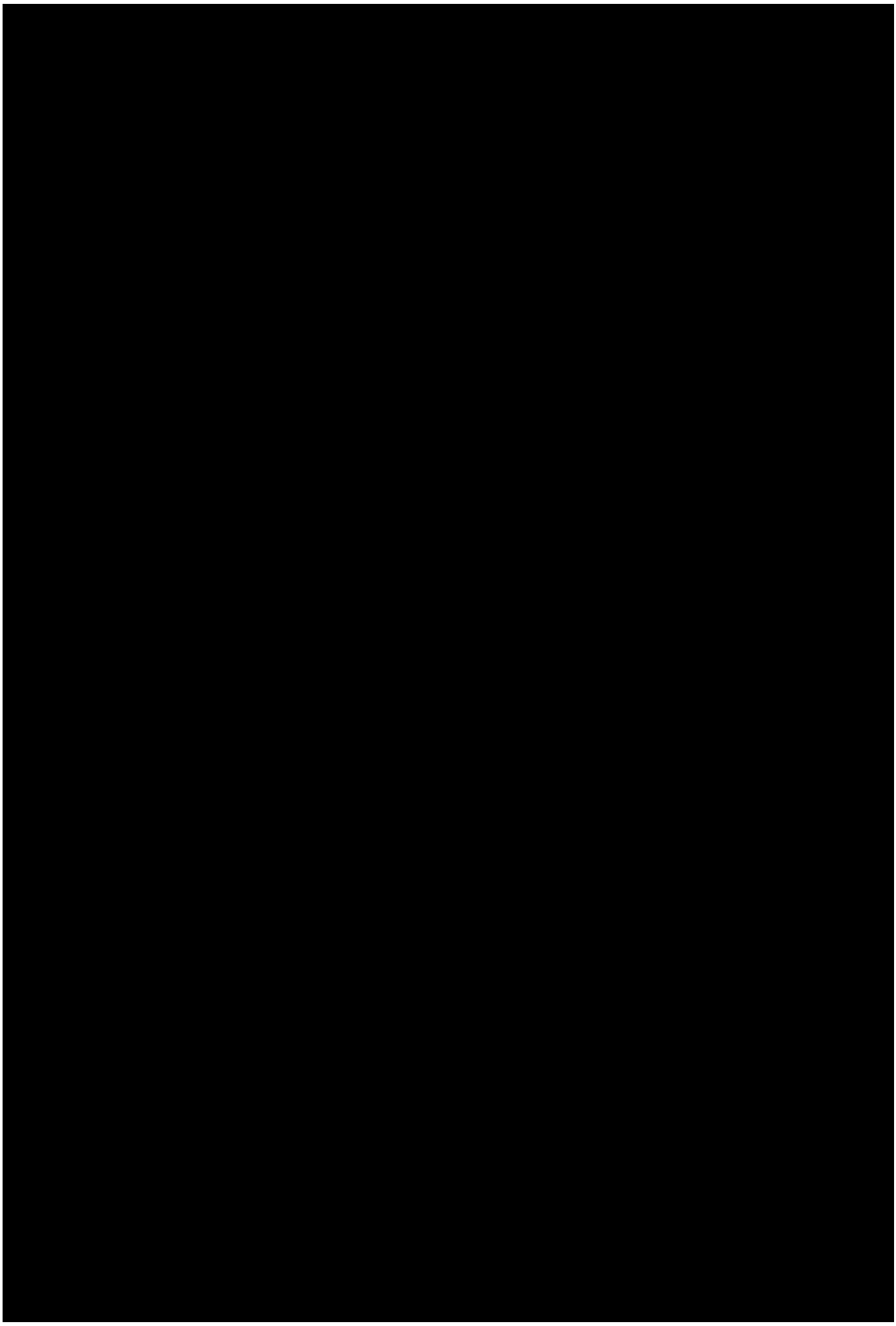
Earning more money and finding a wife are his main concerns now. He has tried several times to find a wife but has so far failed to find a match.

A matchmaker introduced him to two different girls, but neither of them would accept him.

My life wasn't what they were looking for, he says, matter of factly.







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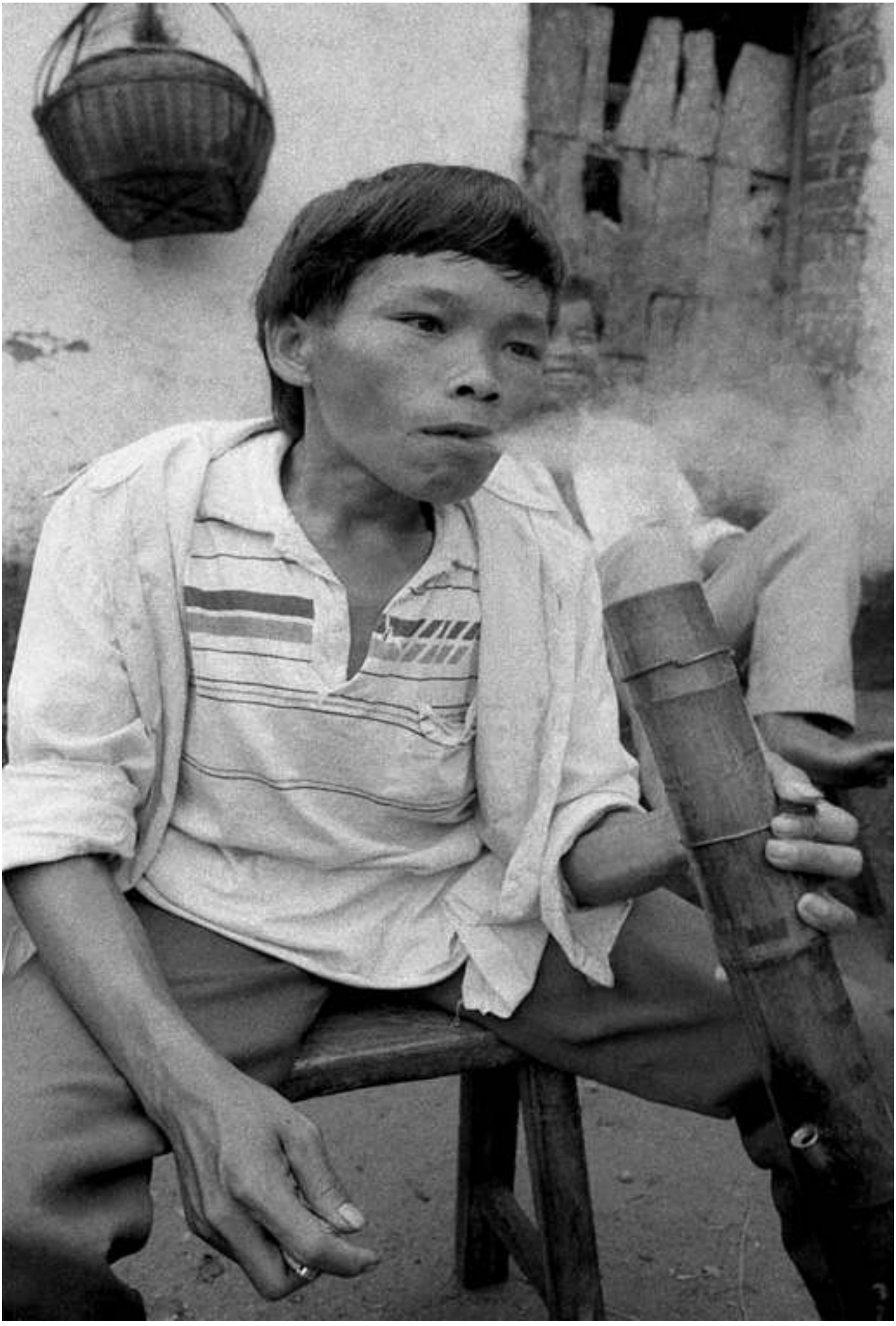


Life Is Elsewhere

They sit in courtyards on crowded village lanes. Many are in their 20s. Most are farmers who dream of better days somewhere else.

They talk about doing business and finding work in the city. Their talk is the background music of the village now.

They catch glimpses of the modern life they aspire to in the TV programs they see from Hong Kong and the United States.

When they go to Zhanjiang, they see the many new gadgets and appliances that are increasingly becoming a staple of city life.

There's a fire sweeping across the countryside and almost everyone is getting swept up in it…almost everyone is being transformed by it.

A young girl says the one thing she really wants in her life now is a television. If she had her own television, she says, she could stay at home rather than go to a neighbor's house to watch her favorite programs.

Her family, she says, hasn't enough money to buy one because they need whatever extra money they have just to keep life going.

You need about 3,000 yuan to buy a television, she says, but it's hard to save so much money here.

She doesn't know exactly what the good life is but she knows that having a new TV is part of it.

A young woman washes her clothes by hand in the courtyard of her village home. She's 21 years old and works as a farmer.

Of course, if she had the chance, she would like to live and work in the city, she says.

But it's not easy to move from the countryside to the city because she is officially registered as a resident of the village and so must live and work here.

It's hard to find work and a place to live in the city, she says, it's hard to change your hukou (official place of residence) from village to city.

Here in the countryside you work long hours for little money, so of course it would be better to move to the city, she says, the money is better and the work more comfortable there.

If she had more money, she would buy better clothes, she says. In her imagination she sees herself living in the city dressed in beautiful new clothes.

A young man talks in the courtyard of his home, pausing now and then to draw on a long bamboo water pipe.

His idea of the good life isn't so complicated, he says. It means having enough food to eat and nice clothes to wear.

He agrees with his friends that life in the city would offer them a better life than what they have in the countryside.

He says he sometimes earns a little extra money taking temporary construction jobs building new houses, but he sees little chance of leaving the village for good and making a new life outside Long Wan.

The people in the village know that city life is better, he says, but most of them don't think they will ever be able to move there.

It's not a question of liking or not liking the village, he says. We were born here and have no choice but to live and work here.

A young farmer talks about family life in Long Wan. Every family has their problems, he

says. Family life isn't always perfect.

Sometimes there are quarrels between husband and wife, child and parents, he says, sometimes brothers argue over how the family property will be divided when a parent dies.

Family life in the village isn't perfect, he says. There are lots of arguments that people outside the family never see.

A 13-year-old boy pauses a moment in a village lane to talk. He's a student at the Commune Middle School in nearby Mao Village but spends much of his time when he's not in school helping out his family with the farm work.

One of his jobs is to take the family's water buffalo out to graze and make sure the animal doesn't run away.

He says he spends his free time playing ping-pong, cards, and Chinese chess with his friends.

Someday he would like to leave Long Wan, he says. He doesn't want to spend his whole life working hard as a farmer for so little money.

A 21-year-old girl stands in the kitchen of her mother's village house. She grew up in Long Wan but lives in Shuixi County now with her sister and brother-in-law - a rich businessman who recently bought a new house there.

She says she felt ill in recent days and decided to come home and stay with her mother, who raised her alone after her father died when she was very young.

Dressed in stylish new clothes, she seems out of place standing in her family's dirt-floor kitchen. Most villagers wear dark clothes that have been mended and re-mended but she is dressed in a bright white shirt and pants.

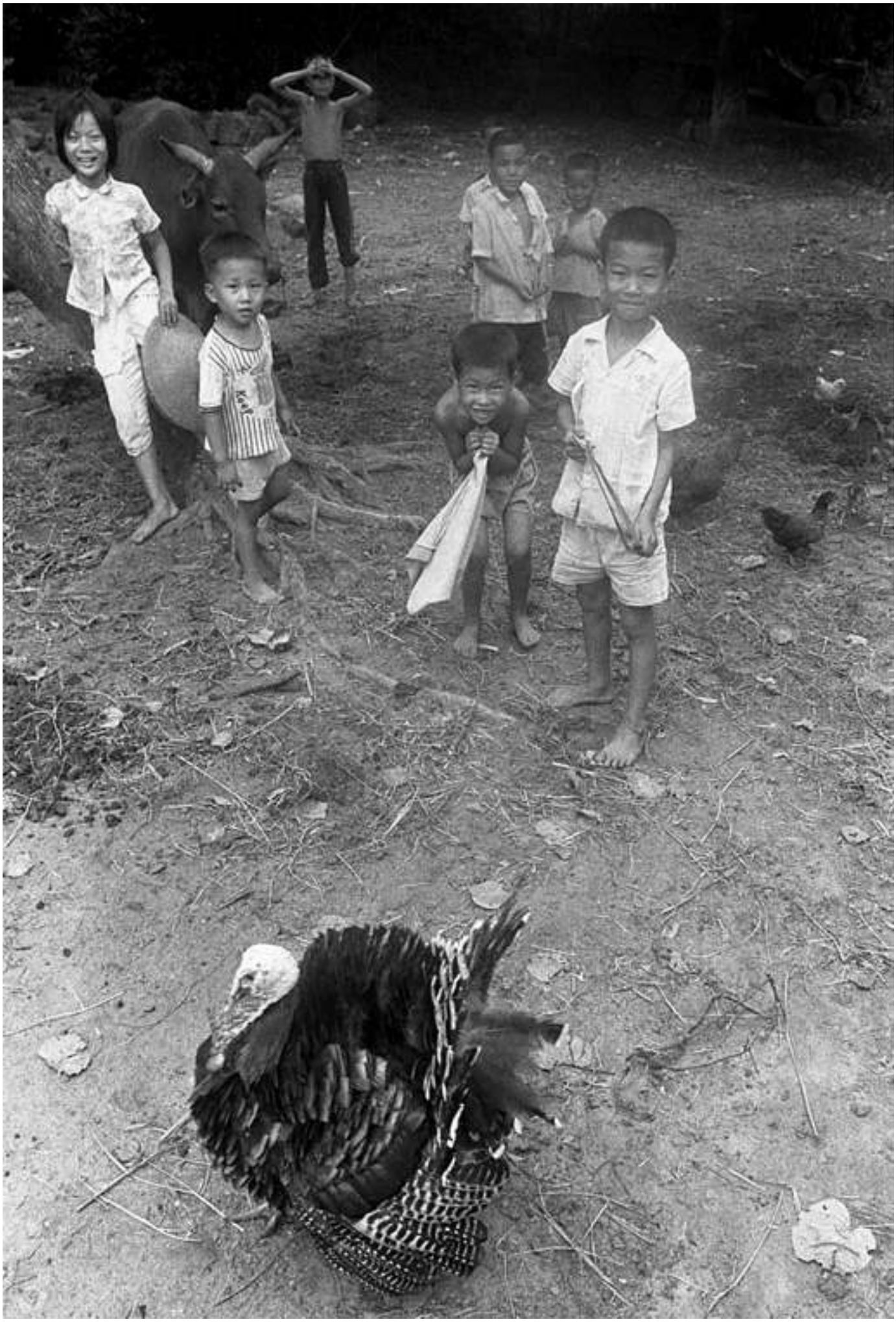
She says she recently opened a small clothing shop in Shuixi County with help from her brother, who gave her 8,000 yuan to buy the clothes. As soon as she got the money, she and her girlfriend traveled to Guangzhou to buy stock for the new shop.

She says she earns several thousand yuan a year running her business now, which is much more than most farmers make cultivating the land.

She says she enjoys having her own business but wishes she had more education. She regrets not taking school more seriously when she was younger because she sees now how useful it would be to her.

She attended middle school but like most villagers dropped out before completing senior middle school. In those days she thought education would be of little use to her in the future. Back then she didn't know then what she knows now.

She says many of the young people in the village would like to do what she is doing. Many villagers are working in the city now, driving trucks, cutting hair, sewing clothing, doing whatever jobs they can to make a living and escape the farmer's life that awaits them back in Long Wan.

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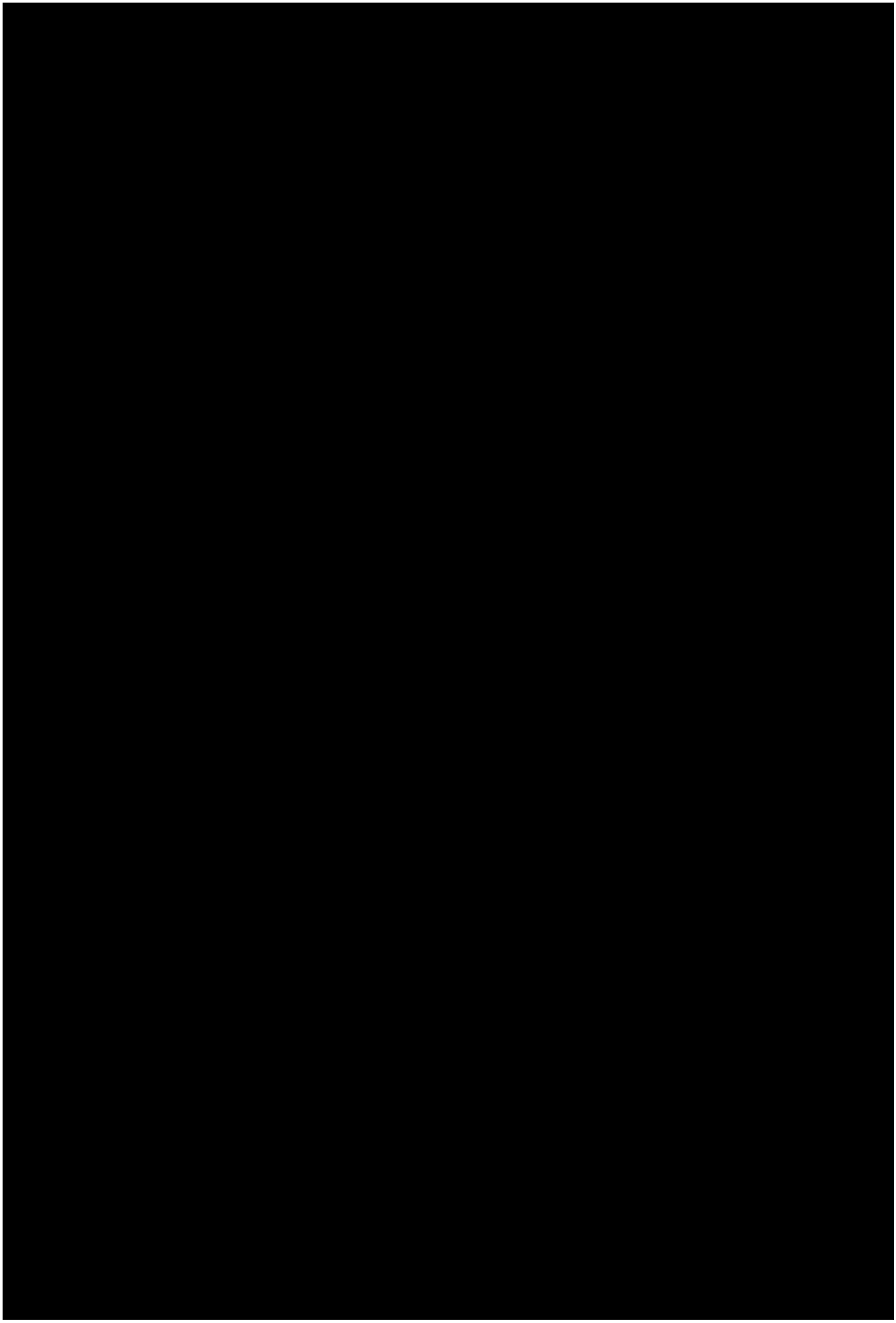

VI

Spring Summer Fall Winter

The arrival of spring in early February often coincides with the start of the Chinese Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival - China's most important holiday.

The festival lasts 15 days and is celebrated with a family feast, visits to the homes of family and friends, and the lighting of firecrackers.

Each year is dedicated to one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, with 1990 being the year of the horse.

In early spring the temperature fluctuates between 20 and 30 degrees centigrade. Cold air occasionally sweeps down from the north, but the days overall become warmer.

In early spring the farmers start to prepare their fields for planting. In March they plant the first rice crop, and in early April the newly sprung rice seedlings are transplanted to new fields to provide more room for them to grow.

In early April the farmers plant sugarcane by burying small pieces of cut cane in long orderly rows.

Crops such as sweet potatoes, peanuts, and green vegetables are also planted.

Summer begins during the first week of May. With each passing day the mid-day sun grows warmer and fiercer.

The farmers wear wide-brimmed straw hats to protect their skin from the sun. The villagers say too much sun is unhealthy and will darken their skin. Many Chinese believe that light skin is more attractive than dark skin.

In July, the villagers start to harvest the year's first rice crop. The work is hard and the hours long. The sun beats down relentlessly but the work must get done.

On the hottest days, storm clouds gather in late afternoon. The sky darkens and thunder and lightning sweep across the land. A drenching rain falls for a few minutes and then the sky clears and the wet fields and lanes glisten in the returning sun.

It's these dramatic thunderstorms that give the region its name: Lei Zhou (Thunder State) Peninsula.

In summer, the nights can be unbearably hot but a cool breeze often sweeps in from the South China Sea to make sleeping more comfortable.

After the rice has been cut, threshed, dried, and packed in sacks, the year's second rice crop is planted.

The villagers keep a wary eye on the weather, especially for any sign of typhoons brewing in the sea off the Philippines. If a typhoon is strong and the rain too heavy, the rice crop can be damaged, especially if it's close to harvest time.

Autumn arrives in late September or October. The days grow cooler but the weather is still warm and sunny. In autumn the weather is close to perfect, with temperatures neither too warm nor too cold.

Although some species of trees shed their leaves in autumn, most vegetation is perennial.

In October, the villagers harvest the year’s second rice crop.

In autumn, the villagers also celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival or Moon Festival. The date of the festival is different each year and is determined by the lunar calendar.

On the night of the Moon Festival, families gather at home for a dinner and go outside to gaze at the full moon.

Winter begins in mid-November. The cold air sweeps down from the north and the days turn chilly.

Although the wind sometimes blows cold and steady, the winter temperature is mild compared with northern regions. The cold weather lasts for a week or two at a time.

The coldest days - when temperatures reach as low as 10 degrees centigrade - are damp and rainy, making it hard to stay warm and dry, even inside the house.

The villagers feel no need to light fires to keep warm on cold winter days, explaining that the damp unpleasant weather doesn't last long enough to warrant lighting a fire.

In winter the sugarcane harvest begins. Entire families ride out to the cane fields in ox-drawn carts to cut and collect the cane.

The villagers cut the cane plants with small machetes and pile it into their carts. After the cane has been harvested, it is carried to a factory in Shuixi County.

In winter the farmers burn their fields to prepare for the next spring planting.