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Chen Village is a highly readable account of life in an unnamed, “ordinary” Chinese village between the 1960s and the early 1980s. It chronicles the rapid political and material changes that take place in the village, and the effects of a succession of political campaigns on its residents. The book has since been updated twice, to keep pace with the similarly drastic changes of the late 1980s, 90s, and into the 21st century. The original volume paints, through narrative, a picture of the idealized aims of political reforms such as the Four Cleanups, and the actual short and long-term consequences of those reforms. Likewise, it shows how the arrival of the Cultural Revolution in Chen Village originally took the form of political competition among youths of different class distinctions, in an attempt to secure one of very few positions of power within the village. The authors intend to show that the cleanups, class struggles, extorted confessions from local cadres, the Socialist Education campaign, and other reforms were deleterious to the population of Chen Village, despite what appears to be real idealism among the residents and a desire to keep local power in check. By the 1980s, the effect of years of campaigns appeared to be institutionalized corruption and mass exodus from the community.

The authors are quite clear about their methods. When the book was first published, access to the countryside, and to interviews with peasants, was very limited. By chance, the authors had found a large group of emigrants from one village living in Hong Kong. Roughly half had been born in the village, and the other half had been living there as “sent-down students” from Canton, attempting to prove “revolutionary zeal” in the countryside (8). Realizing the inherent problems of having only emigrant interviewees, the authors sought to find overlap in their storytelling and were able to uncover personal animosities between former residents that helped form a more complex picture of the political rivalries in the village. Near the end of their research, the authors also had an opportunity to visit the village and interview subjects there—but due to the politically sensitive nature of the work, all names were altered and locations kept opaque. The authors also admit to finding two competing historical narratives of the village. Residents from birth and non-cadres perceived the village as historically prosperous. Party members preferred to portray the “wretchedness” (17) and poverty of the village to serve revolutionary purposes. Often, the authors find overstatement in either direction useful to their observations about political maneuvering and power structures within the town.
The book is structured chronologically, and each chapter discusses one reform in detail. There is little emphasis on the wording of the directives, or the intent from above. Instead, the narrative focuses on the very specific local interpretations of the reforms, and the local and individual effects of their implementation. This approach comes across not as a weakness, but a particular strength. By showing one concrete example with results that cannot be replicated by other towns, the authors show the human and individual cost of the reforms, allowing individual idealism and enthusiasm to show alongside personal pettiness and incompetence. For instance, much of the town’s political life revolves around a few notable personalities, Qingfa and Longyong. In the chapter about the Small Four Cleanups, the authors show how Qingfa, who had risen to a position of power, unfairly used a criticism of Longyong to show his dedication to the cleanups, and in the process created a political enemy. Later, when thirteen cadres came to the village to implement the Big Four Cleanups, Longyong and other villagers exacted revenge on Qingfa. This political rivalry continues throughout the book, with periods of power and disgrace for both men. The authors also show the ways in which the rivalries among the students became competitions over Maoist righteousness, escalating into unhealthy behaviors and dividing them along their assigned class lines.

Several other themes stand out in Chen Village. One of them is the role of youth in this series of political movements. The authors demonstrate the party's ability to “channel [their] collective brashness” into attacks against others—particularly local cadres (58). Age, in this case, complicated relationships and decreased people’s desire to “struggle” against one another. Young people also proved critical to the education of villagers about Mao's “three constantly read articles” (75) and to the creation of time schedules and village-wide broadcasts (85-86). Finally, it is the sent-down students of Chen Village who bring the Cultural Revolution to the village, and escalate it. The authors also document some change in the reasoning of the students as they age. One example is Ao's change of heart about family background (227), which may have been prompted by decreased political prospects in the village, but may also indicate her matured thinking about the results of class discrimination.

Another strong theme of the book is its juxtaposition of real ideological hopes, and realities that failed to live up to them. Well-intentioned reforms of the Great Leap Forward degenerated into “bureaucratic blundering and organizational chaos” (24). At least some of the sent-down students from Canton were honestly committed to tempering themselves, or rectifying their class backgrounds. As the students discovered, there were limited opportunities for advancement in the village, and they could expect little local peasant support. Also evident is a disconnect between the
way the party tried to keep its cadres in check, and the results of those efforts. Some team leaders were disconsolate after their extorted confessions of the Big Four Reforms (as seen on pg. 70) and tried to leave their posts. Others returned to dishonest behavior, learned to manipulate the political system, or both. Economic changes in the late 1970s and early 80s reintroduced capitalist ideas such as private ownership and consumerism, and lessened privileges for lower-level team cadres. Upper-level cadres like Qingfa were able to take advantage of the community and so retain his privilege without fear of rebuke. The original book ends on a note of uncertainty about the future of the community, and the government’s ability to institute policies that bring out the better, rather than the worse aspects of human nature.

*Chen Village* has many useful applications, and it is of little surprise that the book has been revised and reissued twice. Even though the specific outcomes of reforms in one village cannot necessarily be applied universally, the book filled two important purposes. The first was to give Westerners one of the first complex depictions of late 20th-century life in China, when such narratives were scarce or nonexistent. The second was to show consequences of Mao’s political directives from a non-governmental source. Later, it would provide nuanced insight into the realities of economic and political changes after Mao.