

RULE BY TERROR

BY CHEN GUIDI AND WU CHUNTAO

Following is a translated excerpt from the book *Chinese Peasantry: A Survey*, which sold around 200,000 copies before Chinese authorities banned it soon after its publication earlier this year. First published in a literary magazine, *Chinese Peasantry* vividly describes the poverty and corruption that plague China's rural majority. The authors, a married couple, are themselves the children of peasants, and they spent three years living in the countryside to research the book.

Shortly after the book was published, the Chinese government reissued "Central Document Number 1," an official policy formulated in 1982 to promote the improvement of farm incomes. Meanwhile, Zhang Xide, an Anhui Province official whose activities are described in the book, has launched a libel lawsuit against the authors. Zhang filed his lawsuit at Fuyang Intermediate People's Court, where his son is a judge.

The following excerpt describes another incident in Anhui Province that illustrates why peasants' initiatives to protect their rights are not only difficult, but sometimes deadly.

It all happened within five minutes

With the current emphasis on commerce and materialism, most Chinese people like the number eight because of its similar pronunciation to the word meaning "prosper."

For that reason, February 18, 1998 would have seemed an especially propitious date. But in fact, that day was to live on in

infamy in the memories of the residents of Xiaozhang Zhuang in Tangnan Xiang, Guzhen County, Anhui Province.

Xiaozhang Zhuang was situated on a flood plane at the mouth of a river, and constant flooding in recent years had made the villagers' survival increasingly difficult. Exacerbating the villagers' misery was the egregious taxation imposed by village officials. But not all of the villagers of Xiaozhang Zhuang were willing to submit themselves to the officials' lawless bullying. Several stalwart men, Zhang Jiaquan, Zhang Jiabao, Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guimao, submitted a request to the Tangnan Xiang Party Secretariat for the accounts of Xiaozhang Zhuang to be audited. Last spring, another villager, Zhang Jiachang, delivered a report of corruption to the Guzhen County Procuratorate.

This constant stream of petitions and reports was particularly infuriating to Zhang Guiquan. Although he was only the "vice-head" of Xiaozhang Zhuang, Zhang Guiquan was feared by all, who knew him to be capable of any evil deed. He himself was well aware that he was the source of most of the villagers' anger, but he had enough support within the village that he could safely ignore his detractors. One day he invited two members of the village's security squad to his home, then on some false pretext had someone tell Zhang Hongchuan, the instigator of the complaints against him, to come to his home with the accounts. Zhang Hongchuan, suspecting nothing, obligingly hurried over with the air of one who believes that virtue is rewarded. No sooner had he entered the door than Zhang Guiquan began hurling abuse at him, and ordered his two sons and the security officers to beat Zhang Hongchuan into a bloody pulp. If Zhang Hongchuan's nephew, Zhang Guiying, had not heard of the matter and rushed over to save him, who knows what would have been left of him?

But rather than discouraging the villagers from further action, Zhang Guiquan's violent threats had the opposite effect, inspiring the village's Party members, retired officials and 80-odd households to an unprecedented unity. They went twice to the Tangnan Xiang township government and five times to the home of the village Party secretary, forcefully demanding a full investigation against Zhang Guiquan and a thorough audit of the village's finances.

The villagers' repeated requests and appeals finally attracted the attention of the Tangnan Xiang township Party secretariat.

The Guzhen County government was carrying out a thorough examination of the finances of all its subsidiary villages at the time, and the Tangnan Xiang Party secretary, Zuo Peiyu, told the petitioning villagers of Xiaozhang Zhuang, "As it happens, our county has an audit drive in progress, and we've already done some research and decided that the secretary of the Tangnan Xiang disciplinary inspection committee, Wang Jiawen, will bring three accountants from his finance department to audit your village first."

The villagers of Xiaozhang Zhuang rejoiced at the news.

On February 6, 1998, Wang Jiawen arrived in Xiaozhang Zhuang with three accountants and the township official responsible for Xiaozhang Zhuang, Xue Zhaocheng.

On February 9, under the direction of Wang Jiawen, the village's 87 households conducted a lively and democratic discussion through which they selected a group of representatives to form an auditing committee. Those elected included Zhang Jiabao, Zhang Guiyu, Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guimao, who had already gained the complete confidence of the villagers. As everyone was familiar with Zhang Guiquan's proclivities, they anticipated that the audit would not progress smoothly. Apart from laying down a strict system and discipline for the audit, the 12 committee members between themselves agreed that if Zhang Guiquan showed up at anyone's home to raise a fuss, all of the other committee members would immediately rush to the scene and prevent any misfortune from occurring.

Zhang Guiquan did everything in his power to impede the audit.

Right from the start, Zhang Guiquan did everything in his power to impede the audit. He started out by trying to divert attention with a false rumor that someone wanted to kill his sons. Then on several occasions during village meetings he declared, "Those 12 representatives want to tally my accounts and make trouble for me, but they won't find it so easy! They have no way to get rid of me, and if they can't get rid of me, I will make their life miserable—if I don't kill them, I'll grind them to pieces!" A couple of days later Zhang Guiquan's daughter-in-law, Zhang Xiufang, spread the word that her father-in-law was planning to kill someone.

But the leaders and officials of Xiaozhang Zhuang and Tangnan Xiang didn't take Zhang Guiquan's threats seriously. The audit committee representatives likewise thought this was just Zhang Guiquan's attempts to intimidate them and paid no attention.

No one could have guessed that on the ninth day of the audit, early on the morning of February 18, Zhang Guiquan would actually wield his butcher's knife.

On that day, rain showers pelted the rooftops of Xiaozhang Zhuang in a steady and hypnotic patter.

Although it was already daylight, most of the village's residents remained snuggled in their homes. Fifty-eight-year old Wei Surong was one of the few who rose from her bed as early as usual and bustled to the kitchen. She knew that her hus-

band, Zhang Guiyu, like the other eleven village representatives, would have to go off to examine the village accounts, regardless of the weather. Rather than cause delay to this momentous occasion, Wei Surong made sure that breakfast was prepared first thing in the morning.

Much to their surprise, just as Zhang Guiyu and his son, Zhang Xiaosong, had sat down to the table at ten past seven, Zhang Guiquan appeared at the door with two of his sons, Zhang Yuliang and Zhang Dongyi. They were joined soon afterward by the village accountant, Zhang Jiahui, and his son, Zhang Jie.

Zhang Jie, whose father, as the village accountant, was implicated in the investigation of the accounts, started out by imitating Zhang Guiyu sarcastically asking, "How are the accounts? How about a share for me?"

Zhang Guiyu was a sensible person, and picking up on Zhang Jie's insinuation, he rose from the table and coolly replied, "The others told me to look at the accounts. How could I not go?"

Zhang Guiquan immediately snapped back, "Let's not waste any more words," and then shouted to his two sons, "Beat him up!"

Because everything happened so quickly, Zhang Guiyu was too surprised to respond to Zhang Guiquan's shout.

At that moment, Zhang Dongyi grabbed a wooden pole resting next to the door of Zhang Guiyu's home, and at the same time Zhang Yuliang grabbed a sickle.

Zhang Dongyi danced over to Zhang Guiyu, brandishing the pole, and the village accountant, Zhang Jiahui, not only declined to stop him, but grabbed Zhang Guiyu around the waist and held him tight. Zhang Guiyu managed through frantic exertion to free himself, and seeing himself under imminent attack, picked up a brick from the floor. Wei Surong saw the village official's sons preparing to beat her husband to death, and quickly grabbed a vegetable knife from on top of the stove.

The two sides eyed each other wildly, ready to leap at each other at a moment's notice.

The racket alerted neighbors on all sides. Zhang Dongyi and Zhang Yuliang saw many villagers hurrying to the scene, and as they didn't dare to make their attack in front of so many witnesses, they retreated outside the house.

Zhang Guiquan was clearly still not satisfied, and ran to the back of Zhang Guiyu's house shouting, "Xiao Qiao (Zhang Guiyu's nickname), you son of a bitch, if you have the guts, come out with me!"

Zhang Guiyu was an easy-going, honest man. When he saw the village official acting like a madman, he displayed no fear, but followed him behind the house and challenged him: "Tangnan Xiang officials want to audit your books, and the people here chose me as their representative. What have I done wrong? Zhang Guiquan, you should watch your language. Even if I want to audit your books, what can you do to me?"

During the argument, Zhang Guiquan had motioned for his son, Zhang Dongyi, to go home and fetch reinforcements. Not long afterward, Zhang Guiquan's eldest son, Zhang Jiazhi, and another son, Zhang Chaowei, arrived at the scene with con-

cealed weapons. Zhang Chaowei ran over and struck Zhang Guiyu, and Zhang Yuliang took the opportunity to snatch the pole from Zhang Guiyu's hands. When Zhang Chaowei saw that Zhang Guiyu continued to fight back, even though empty-handed, he took a sharp knife out of his boot, and another knife out of his waistband, and began slashing savagely at Zhang Guiyu's head and chest.

Zhang Guiyu was caught off guard, and without uttering a sound fell heavily to the ground.

When village representatives Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guimao heard what had happened, they rushed to the scene. Upon seeing Zhang Guiyu lying prone in a pool of blood, Zhang Hongchuan angrily demanded of Zhang Guiquan, "How could you be so vicious? Why haven't you sent him to the hospital?"

By then, Zhang Guiquan had completely lost all rationality. When he saw Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guimao hurry over, he gave them an evil smile and said, "Damn, you came just in time! We've been waiting for you!" Then he charged at Zhang Jiazhi yelling, "I'll teach you for trying to get rid of me! I'll kill every one of the 12 who are auditing me!"

Zhang Yuliang, who was standing closest to Zhang Hongchuan, immediately leapt forward and delivered frenzied slashes to Zhang Hongchuan's chest, abdomen and thigh. Without having even enough time to react, Zhang Hongchuan fell to the ground and breathed his last.

While Zhang Yuliang was attacking Zhang Hongchuan, Zhang Guiquan picked up an umbrella and grabbed Zhang Guimao from behind, yelling at him, "Damn you, weren't you planning to take action against me? Here's what you get for your audit!" Although Zhang Guimao was tightly gripped, he was a tall, big man, and he exchanged blows with Zhang Guiquan. Recognizing that he was no match for Zhang Guimao, Zhang Guiquan called out, "Dongyi, hurry, he's getting away!"

Zhang Dongyi raised the vegetable knife in his hand and danced over to Zhang Guimao, stabbing at his head, and managed to knock him to the ground. Then Zhang Jiazhi rushed over with murder in his eyes, and determined to ensure that Zhang Guimao would not escape, stood over him and stabbed him in the back three times with a butcher's knife. Subsequently the coroner reported the vicious damage inflicted by the killer, noting that Zhang Guimao suffered five wounds to his head, with some penetrating the skull bone, and that his left lung was also punctured.

Meanwhile, Zhang Guiyu, lying on the ground near death, uttered a groan of pain. When the rage-maddened Zhang Jiazhi discovered that Zhang Guiyu was not yet dead, he rushed over and stabbed him five more times in the chest.

In an instant, three village representatives had been felled behind Zhang Guiyu's house. The blood mixed with the rain to coat the earth red, and the air was heavy with the rank odor of slaughter.

Zhang Guiyu's elder brother, Zhang Guiyue, heard of the attack on his brother, and filled with grief and outrage, he grabbed a small wooden pole used for feeding hay to cattle. Because his eyesight was poor, he was practically in front of Zhang Jiazhi before he saw his brother lying on the ground. "Is

that Qiaozhi?" he cried, but almost before he finished the sentence, Zhang Jiazhi had plunged his butcher's knife into Guiyue's chest.

Zhang Guiyu's 16-year old son, Zhang Xiaosong, had managed in the confusion to reach his father's side, and tried to lift him up to carry him to the hospital. Zhang Chaowei, unwilling to allow Zhang Xiaosong to save his father, took up his bloodied knife and slashed at Xiaosong's head. An onlooker's cry of warning alerted Zhang Xiaosong in time for him to turn his head. Zhang Chaowei's knife struck him in the shoulder instead, and Zhang Xiaosong fled with his life.

In a matter of only five minutes, the blood of four dead and one wounded mingled in the rain and wind in Xiaozhang Zhuang.

When Zhang Guiquan's fourth son, Zhang Simao, took up a knife and arrived panting at the scene, the village loudspeaker sounded with the voice of village Party Secretary Zhang Dianfeng urging the village representatives to continue their audit. . . .

The village tyrant phenomenon

According to modern economic theory, the power of a social organization is related less to its size than to its level of organization. Organizations connected with political authorities are that much stronger. China's peasants are numerous, but they are too widely dispersed, and they lack the organizational resources to withstand oppression. On the other hand, village officials arise from a highly cohesive organization; they are the state authorities' legal representatives in the villages. If even a small percentage of these representatives ignore the national interest and use official organizational resources to their own ends, the results can be horrifying.

Even though Zhang Guiquan received no more than a primary school education, he was still able to attain a powerful official position as vice-chairman of the village council. Combined with the enormous power of his clan (including seven sons), Zhang Guiquan was able to assume complete control over Xiaozhang Zhuang and effectively become a "village tyrant."

In 1997, clearly knowing that the county government had handed down a lower grain quota than in 1996, Zhang insisted that each person add 50 catties. He developed any number of other means to accumulate personal wealth. One of these was his "five taxes, one fee" system for increasing revenues: any household raising a pig had to pay an extra 45 yuan in tax; a household that built a new house had to pay an additional tax of 150 yuan to 500 yuan, depending on his immutable pronouncement; all owners of old houses in the village had to pay 50 yuan; households growing peanuts paid a tax of ten yuan per mu of cropland; any household that bought a plow added 50 yuan. Zhang Guiyue bought a work vehicle, and even before he had a chance to use it he had to hand over 45 yuan; anyone who demonstrated a lack of family planning skills was assigned a fine entirely at the caprice of Zhang Guiquan, who typically pocketed the proceeds without any official record.

On the one hand, Zhang fabricated a multitude of pretexts to reap personal benefit from the public purse; on the other hand the "deposits" that he and his family should have made to

the public coffers according to official regulations were completely ignored.

The “Zhang Guiquan phenomenon” is something that should make our hearts tremble

Zhang Guiquan used the power at his disposal to appropriate land and fish ponds, public property and funds beyond the endurance of the villagers. How could such a tyrant become head of the village committee? Again, it must be remembered that he was merely the committee’s vice-chairman—what were the committee chairman and the village chairman doing all this time? Were they sharing in his corruption or simply turning a blind eye? Our inquiries were never able to determine the truth of this matter.

Ultimately, Zhang Guiquan’s history is bound to strike us city-dwellers as inexplicable. But in fact, the ills that plagued Xiaozhang Zhuang were not limited to its chaotic financial management; the problems that were revealed in its basic organizational structure were even more shocking. On May 20, 1992, Zhang Guiquan, who was at that time chairman of Xiaozhang Zhuang’s village committee, was convicted on charges of corruption and sexual assault and sentenced by the Guzhen County People’s Court to one year in prison, suspended for two years. During this period, Xiaozhang Zhuang incorporated the neighboring Zhang Qiao Village into its jurisdiction, and even though Zhang Guiquan was still serving his suspended sentence, he was made vice-chairman of the village committee of Zhang Qiao Village. Village residents said that Zhang Guiquan was never elected to this post; he was simply appointed against the wishes of the villagers by the township Party secretariat and certain local Party cadres.

To have two levels of the Party structure endorse him for an official position even in the midst of his suspended prison sentence hardly encouraged Zhang Guiquan to reform his evil ways, but rather made him even more fearlessly rapacious.

Strictly speaking, the kind of behavior exhibited by Zhang Guiquan is typical of the local bully phenomenon that used to plague villages in feudal times. At the same time, it is also different from this behavior in a number of fundamental ways. In the feudal period, the village bully was only able to lord over a small turf, and he usually had very limited liquid assets at his disposal, not to mention not enjoying the legitimacy gained through the support of local public authorities. In Zhang Guiquan’s case, he was not only able to seize control of land and liquid assets, but also enjoyed the legitimacy afforded by public office; for that reason, an official such as him was much more dangerous to society than any local bully of feudal times.

Although the murders committed by Zhang Guiquan and his sons might be called an “individual case,” the “Zhang Guiquan phenomenon” is something that should make our hearts tremble. In the course of our inquiries, we discovered that the phenomenon of “rule by terror” in the villages has already reached shocking proportions. Zhang Guiquan is merely a living example of a particular product of modern China’s grass-

roots village power structure.

It’s all too easy to reach these conclusions and reflections after the fact. The quandary is how to prevent more such tragedies from occurring in the future.

Postscript: The authors go on to relate that Zhang Guiquan, Zhang Jiazhi, Zhang Chaowei and Zhang Yuliang were arrested for the deaths of Zhang Guiyue, Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guiyu (Zhang Guiquan’s other son, Zhang Dongyi, escaped). With Zhang Guiquan and his family in custody, the village audit proceeded apace, and many irregularities were found, implicating not only Zhang Guiquan, but also the village Party secretary, village council chairman and village accountant. Zhang Guiquan and his sons eventually went to trial, and Zhang Jiazhi was sentenced to death for killing Zhang Guiyue. Zhang Chaowei and Zhang Yuliang were sentenced to life in prison for killing Zhang Hongchuan and Zhang Guiyu. The villagers felt the sentences were not harsh enough, and were particularly incensed at implications in the court records that the killers had been acting in self defense. Family members of the victims applied for a review of sentence by a higher court. In the meantime, the magazine *Democracy and Rule of Law* published an exposé that brought the events at Xiaozhang Zhuang to national attention. After the story broke, local officials made efforts to assist the victims’ families. And on September 8, 1998, the Anhui Supreme People’s Provincial Court, in its review of the case, ruled that Zhang Guiquan and his sons had not been acting in self defense when they caused the deaths of the three victims.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

The entire Chinese text of *Chinese Peasantry: A Survey* is posted on the Web site of the Chinese Democracy and Justice Party: <http://www.cdjp.org/gb/article.php/336>