THE PEASANT CRISIS: ONLY FREEDOM WILL BRING PROSPERITY

BY XIAO SHU

Xiao Shu is the penname of Chen Min, chief editor of *China Reform* magazine, who was detained briefly in December 2004. The authorities closed down the rural edition of *China Reform* in January.

The terms "power" and "rights," although both pronounced *qiangli* in Chinese, are applied very differently. The term "power" is usually used in respect of government; the main responsibility of a government is to maintain effective order in society, and implementing effective order requires the use of genuine power. This genuine power is invested by the citizenry, and without this power the government has no strength. The term "rights" is normally applied to citizens; the main responsibility of citizens is to create their own welfare, and ensuring their welfare requires complete personal freedom and economic freedom. Just as fish can only swim freely in an ocean, and birds can only fly in the sky, complete personal and economic freedom are required in order to fully express a person's talents, excavate a person's potential, maximize the creation of welfare and allow society's bounty to flow freely. When this freedom is lacking, when minds are fettered and hands and feet are bound, citizens have no means of ensuring their own welfare, and have no way to support themselves. So for the ordinary citizen, power and welfare are inseparable.

It is clear that for the ordinary citizen, rights are not a luxury; no one can live without certain basic necessities of life, such as clothing, food, housing and transportation, all of which fall within the ambit of "welfare." A degree of personal gain is a necessity of survival, and for that reason is natural and legitimate. That is why we have old expressions such as "Profit gets people out of bed in the morning," and "The whole world is pursuing profit." So-called "welfare" is the precondition for "power," and also for genuine personal freedom and economic freedom. Generally speaking, places that enjoy a high level of economic development and a plentiful flow of social wealth usually also enjoy relatively comprehensive civil freedom, while places with poor economic development and short on social wealth also tend to be lacking in civil freedoms.

For this reason the three rural problems[1] are not difficult to understand. The No. 1 Central Authority Document for 2004[2] on increasing peasant income came as gospel to China's 800 million peasants, promising boundless beneficence. But the means by which peasants are to increase their income remain a matter of further inquiry. To concentrate resources on supporting the food production capabilities of farming regions, to continue to promote the fine-tuning of farming infrastructure, to develop secondary and tertiary industries in villages and improve conditions for peasants who seek work in the urban areas, all of these measures, if successfully implemented, will of course be extremely beneficial for increasing peasant income. But all of these measures depend on the right conditions. What are these conditions? I think the most important one is the ability of peasants to exercise their potential. If peasants are not allowed to exercise their potential, the government will only be imposing these measures unilaterally from the outside, and more desirable measures will be difficult to implement and of questionable effectiveness.

So what is the best way to mobilize peasants' potential? Increasing income improves welfare, and any normal person will do his utmost to ensure his own welfare. For the 800 million peasants who have all along endured the poorest living standards, the desire to shed poverty and enjoy prosperity, the desire to improve their welfare, is even stronger than in the average person. And the knowledge of how to make a silk purse from a sow's ear can be found in abundance among China's 800 million peasants. So the root of the problem is not that peasants do not want to prosper, or are not able to prosper, but rather that these 800 million peasants have been in an extremely disadvantaged position; without genuine personal freedom or genuine economic freedom, these 800 million peasants have not been able to prosper when they wished to, or when they were able to.

For this reason, it is clear that in order to mobilize peasants' potential, the most effective approach is to restore the personal and economic freedom that belongs to these 800 million peasants by right, and allow them to prosper, not through depending on the charity of others, but through the exertion of their own knowledge, intelligence and strength. In other words, power and welfare are directly related; without power there is no welfare. For that reason, we cannot address the present living conditions of China's 800 million peasants from the outside, but rather should look for solutions in the personal rights

Harvest in Xinjiang. Photo: Sinopix

of the peasants themselves. Improving welfare requires first increasing power; without increasing power, there will be no increase in welfare.

Using this logic, the means by which the central government's No. 1 Document can be implemented become very clear. At present the most important thing is not technical adjustments to the agricultural industry, but rather improvements to the management of urban and rural areas. Whatever aspects of the urban and rural management system currently fetter the brains of peasants or bind their limbs, and keep them from freely fulfilling their potential to create welfare for themselves, that's where the knife should first be wielded.

For example, the system of village and township government is undoubtedly chiefly responsible for the inability of peasants to increase their income if they stay in the countryside. So how should the village and township system be reformed from here on out? There are a number of different ways to address this issue. For another example, the system used to manage rural migrant workers undoubtedly contributes to the inability of peasants to increase their income when they go to the cities for work. The present system does not allow migrant workers to organize themselves to deal with management, and does not provide them with the necessary conditions to negotiate with management on a relatively even playing field, with the result that they're forced to surrender to management's extortionate conditions. As with the village and township system, reform of the peasant labor management system can also be addressed in a number of ways. Other such examples are too numerous to mention.

What it comes down to is that the key means of effectively implementing the central government's No. 1 Document is to liberate the peasants and restore their civil rights. If peasants' civil rights are restored, the government will need to take very little additional effort, because the peasants themselves will be able to generate their own welfare, and improving the living standard of peasants will no longer seem such a daunting task. But if the peasants are not liberated, and continue to depend on the government for means to increase their income and for various benefits, the government can exhaust itself with all sorts of measures, and the improvement of peasants' living standards will still remain an impossible goal. Let me just pose this question—when in history have the people of any country been able to live off of their government in the long term?

Translated by Stacy Mosher

The Chinese version of this article was originally posted on the Web site of New Century Net: http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/da.asp?ID=57123&ad=4/21/2004.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

1. "*San nong*," or "three rural," refers to the three aspects of issues confronting China's peasants today: agriculture, peasants and the development of rural communities.
2. A summary of this document, and related articles, was posted in February 2004 on the Chinese government's official news Web site, China Internet Information Center: http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Feb/86743.htm.