Donglan Huang

Revolution, War, and Villages: A Case Study on Villages of Licheng County, Shanxi Province during the War of Resistance Against Japan

Abstract This paper focuses on several villages of Licheng county in the southeastern part of Shanxi province, probing into how the war and the revolution affected village society in North China. The primary concern of most existing studies on the Chinese Revolution has been to examine how the Communist Party of China (CPC) mobilized peasants in a certain area, boosted their revolutionary consciousness, and ultimately led them to win the revolution, and to carry out this inquiry in the context of the orthodox history of the CPC, from top-down perspective. The paper focuses on the microscopic world of a village, and examine, from the bottom-up perspective and in the context of the history of the village itself, what the war and the revolution meant to the village, several factors that have remained rather inconspicuous begin to surface. The case studies of several villages in Licheng county shows that the revolution unfolded as an extension of various conflicts or rivalries that had existed for years within each village, or between different villages. One group of well-to-do people who had once monopolized public authority within a village fell from power, while a group of poorer peasants who had been dominated by the richer group joined the CPC and emerged as new power holders in the village. The motives that drove peasants to join the CPC were often far more complex and diverse than conventional theory would have us believe.

Keywords Chinese revolution, the Communist Party of China (CPC), villages of Licheng county, Shanxi province, the War of Resistance Against Japan

William Hinton’s 1966 book Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village is perhaps the best known of the many books published since the
end of World War II on how Chinese villages were affected during the twentieth century by war and revolution. Hinton entered Zhangzhuang张庄 village, or what he called “Long Bow village” in the book, in Lucheng潞城 county, Shanxi province, in 1948, in the capacity of an observer of a land reform work team of the Communist Party of China (CPC). On the basis of his firsthand observations of land reform at work and the materials he collected in the village, Hinton vividly portrays the revolution that was unfolding in Long Bow village, which constituted part of the great anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution of China.1

Most of the books on the Chinese Revolution published in the United States after the war, including Hinton’s, tried to answer the question “why did the revolution led by the CPC succeed?” which was the obverse of the question that puzzled the American public, “why did the United States lose China?” These books concluded, in summary, that the CPC managed to garner the support of the peasants by implementing its land reform policy, which involved confiscating tracts of land from landlords and rich peasants and redistributing them to poor peasants, which prompted the peasants to willingly take part in the CPC-led War of Resistance against Japan, thereby paving the way for the CPC’s triumph in its revolution.2 This view is supported by an enormous number of books published in post-revolutionary China on the history of the CPC. After the end of the Mao Zedong era, Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden carried out several dozen field surveys in Wugong village in south Hebei province, beginning in 1978, to look at changes in the relationship between the state and society as observed in the history of this village from the pre-revolutionary days until the end of the 1970s. In a book they coauthored in 1991, summarizing the findings of their surveys, the three American researchers basically support the above-mentioned conclusion reached by postwar American studies on the relationship between the CPC and the peasantry at the time of the War of Resistance against Japan.3

Unlike American scholarship on Chinese agrarian villages, which is inspired by interest in the Chinese Revolution, postwar Japanese studies on Chinese agrarian villages, with the exception of those undertaken at the time when Marxian historiography was influential, can be regarded as an extension of the

---