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# Protest Leadership and Repertoire: A Comparative Analysis of Peasant Protest in Hunan in the 1990s

ZHANG Wu

**Abstract:** Based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork, this paper compares two cases of peasant protest against heavy taxes and fees in a northern Hunan county in the 1990s. It argues that peasant protest did not arise spontaneously. Rather, it erupted when leaders emerged who used central policy documents on lowering peasant taxes and fees to mobilise peasants. Protest leaders were articulate and public-spirited peasants who had received political training from the local party-state. Furthermore, the number of leaders, their education level, and their relationship with the local party-state explain why the repertoire and the scope of the two protests varied. Protests led by less educated veteran Communist Party cadres tended to be milder and smaller than those led by better-educated peasants more distant from the local party-state. This paper helps us to understand the process of peasant mobilisation in contemporary China and explains why peasant protest varies across cases.

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**Keywords:** China, peasant burdens, protest leadership, repertoire, state power

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## Introduction

During the 1990s, the local government in China, that is the county-, township/ town-, and village-level administration, collected heavy taxes and fees from peasants. These burdens led to widespread peasant protests, particularly in the grain-producing provinces of central China, such as Hunan, Hubei, Henan, Anhui, and Jiangxi provinces. Studying these peasant burdens helps us to understand how China's market reform has changed the relationship between peasants and the state, and deepens our understanding of rural China where half the Chinese population still lived in 2010. Furthermore, peasant anti-tax protests in the 1990s occurred in many places, but varied significantly in their repertoire, scope, and outcome. By analysing the commonalities and dissimilarities among different cases, we can answer important questions about social protest in contemporary China, such as why it occurs, what accounts for the differences among individual cases, and how far it can spread.

Many scholars have written about peasants and peasant protest in contemporary China. Pan Wei (2003) argues that peasant protest occurred in places where the collective economy had collapsed. Chen An (2007: 147, 170) argues that the authority of the party-state weakened significantly in the countryside when village cadres lost control over public assets in the 1990s. Villager cadres became either corrupt or irrelevant. Power was no longer exercised by village cadres, but by people with their own businesses. Bernstein and Lü (2003) have thoroughly studied the question of peasant burdens. They argue in Chapter 5 that a general decline in the state's police power in rural China during the reform era and the division between the central and the local government provided peasants with the opportunity to protest. Many peasants protested against heavy tax burdens because they believed that the central government supported them through issuing policy documents on lowering peasant burdens. Peasant protests in the 1990s were widespread, but small. Most protests were restricted to one village, though some spread to an entire township or town. Peasants made no coalitions with other groups, such as laid-off workers. Some peasant protests were led by leaders, many of whom were well-educated village elites (Bernstein and Lü 2003: 148).

O'Brien and Li (2006) argue that peasants carried out "rightful resistance", using divisions within the Chinese state to protest and resorting to tactics that straddled the boundaries of what was legal, such as petitioning, and what was disruptive, such as protesting. Peasants' collec-

tive action was “rightful” because peasants backed their protests and petitions with references to policies and laws. Yu Jianrong (2003, 2007) argues that peasants in Hengyang county, Hunan province, demanded not only less taxation, but also political rights, such as the right to form peasant associations. Then, in 2003, representatives from 13 townships in the county signed a single letter of complaint addressed to the provincial government, a type of cross-township coordination not found among peasant activists elsewhere in China. Overall, researchers agree that peasant protests in the 1990s were local, apolitical, and loosely organised at most.

With one exception, however, no detailed case studies on peasant protest against heavy taxation have been published so far. The exception is the Renshou protest analysed by both Pan Wei (2003) and Bernstein and Lü (2003). The Renshou protest, one of the earliest cases of peasant anti-tax protest, occurred in 1993 in Sichuan province. In the works of Bernstein and Lü, O’Brien and Li, and Yu Jianrong, we can find only very brief sketches of other cases. Yu Jianrong (2001, 2003, 2007), for example, has published a series of works on peasant protest in Hengyang, a county in Hunan, but none of the works analyses in detail a single case of peasant protest, detailing its emergence, growth, and finally its end. A detailed comparative case study based on first-hand materials helps us to understand how peasants carried out their protest, how they mobilised, and why they failed or succeeded. It also enables us to explain why peasants in different places carried out different protests. While researchers have noticed that peasant protests differed in their repertoire, scope, and outcome, we know little about what caused these differences, as researchers have not pursued comparative analysis. This paper thus introduces a new research question and takes an important step toward explaining why peasant protests vary across cases.

This paper compares two cases of peasant protest against heavy taxation in Hunan and explains both the commonalities and differences between them. It argues that the peasant protests erupted after the emergence of peasant leaders, who believed that their protest activities were authorised by the central government. Moreover, the different protest leaders led different types of protests. The number of leaders, their education level, and their relationship with the local party-state shaped the repertoire and the scope of the protest. The peasant leaders were those peasants who decided to take the initiative to help fellow villagers to lower peasant burdens. Their names and brief biographies are known.

The peasant followers, by contrast were amorphous and nameless. The peasant leaders popularised policy documents, petitioned higher authorities, and mobilised peasants (see also Li and O'Brien 2008). In the area of social movement, “repertoire” is taken to mean the form of protest action or the ways in which the protestors make their claims (see Tilly 1995: 41; Tarrow 2011: 39–56). For example, protestors can sign petitions, post banners, distribute leaflets, block traffic, conduct rallies, demonstrations or vigils, or in extreme cases even burn down government buildings. The scope of a protest means the area that the protest spreads to, ranging from one village to several townships.

This study aims not merely to add two more cases to the list, but to seek patterns of peasant protests against heavy taxation through a paired comparison and to see if we can introduce some fresh thinking into the field of social protest in contemporary China. While by now we do know something about protest leadership in contemporary China (Chen 2008; Li and O'Brien 2008), we have not made many causal arguments or formed hypotheses about the role of leadership in the protest. By arguing that different protest leadership leads to different repertoires and scope in peasant protest, this paper hopes to bring a new research question into the field.

## Fieldwork and Case Selection

The two protest cases studied in this paper occurred in Changtang and Cangyuan, two towns located in Yuanxiang, a hilly county in northern Hunan. They provide an excellent opportunity for a paired comparison, as both protests took place within the same county, over the same period of time (1996–1999), and ended with massive riots on exactly the same day, which forced the county government to deal with two crises simultaneously. Thus, the two protests best depicted a picture of an embattled local government besieged by angry peasants, signifying the profound crisis that rural China faced in the 1990s. Also, the two protests varied greatly, even though the burden levels were similar. The Changtang protest was large and well-known, whereas the Cangyuan protest was small and little-known. A comparison of these two cases enables the author to control many structural factors, such as the burden level, the nature of the local state, the cultural mores, and the degree of economic development in the region, and to look for non-structural factors that explain the differences between the two cases.

All materials on the two cases and on the fiscal and political background of peasant protest (unless noted otherwise) come from ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author in Hunan province from 2001 to 2005. Hunan is a typical agrarian province in central China with a long history of peasant protest. It lies in the central rural belt where the question of heavy taxation was particularly acute (Bernstein and Lü 2003). In the 1990s, Hunan peasants staged numerous protests and riots against heavy tax burdens. A detailed study of the causes and consequences of heavy peasant burdens in this province will help us to comprehend the important issue of peasant protest encountered by China in the 1990s.

To fully understand the question of peasant burdens, the author immersed herself in Hunan for more than two years (2001–2003) and followed up with two more trips (2004 and 2005). Field sites covered northern, central, and southern Hunan. To find out why peasant burdens increased in the 1990s, the author interviewed hundreds of cadres at all levels of the local government (village, township, county, prefecture, and provincial level). Then open-ended, detailed, and intensive interviews were conducted with protest leaders, their family members, and ordinary peasants. To protect her sources, the author uses pseudonyms for people and places throughout the paper.

## The Fiscal and Political Background of Peasant Protest

During the 1990s, the local government (counties, townships/ towns, and villages) in China was heavily dependent on rural taxes and fees for its public finances. Rural taxes and fees increased severalfold in the 1990s, becoming so heavy that it was no longer profitable for peasants to work the land (Li 2002; Chen and Tao 2003). For example, in 1988, the burden level in Hunan was a little more than 20 CNY per person or per *mu* (亩, equivalent to 614.4 m<sup>2</sup>) in a hilly area. Ten years later, in 1998, the level had reached more than 130 CNY per person or close to 170 CNY per *mu*, thus the peasant burden level per *mu* was over eight times its 1988 level. Heavy taxation in the 1990s made farmland a burden, rather than an asset. Peasants could not collect rent even when they rented the land to others to farm. Typically, they still had to purchase goods, such as fertilisers and pesticides, even if they found another person to till the land and this person agreed to pay all the taxes and fees

levied on the land. The large tracts of abandoned farmland and widespread peasant riots and protests against heavy taxation during this period clearly showed that rural taxation was too heavy.

The causes of heavy rural taxation were many (Bernstein and Lü 2003: 48–115). Bureaucratic expansion at the local level and a fiscal system that centralised revenue were two major reasons. The number of cadres employed by the township government increased at least ten times in the 1990s. Before 1984, when the People's Communes were abolished and replaced by townships, a typical commune employed a dozen cadres. By the 1990s, this number had increased to more than 100, not counting temporary workers and staff members hired by the township/ town who did not receive their salary from the budget appropriation from the county. According to Bernstein and Lü (2003: 100), by 2000, an average township/ town hired 300 cadres, while a larger town might hire as many as 800 to 1,000 cadres.

Ever since the 1980s, each layer of the Chinese government has been responsible for its own revenue and expenditure. This was figuratively called “eating from separate stoves”. Thus the central government, the province, the prefecture, and the county are independent fiscal entities, each having its separate sources of income and each responsible for its own expenditure. Only the county government and its townships and villages had to rely on rural taxes and fees, and to collect them. In the 1990s, rural taxes and fees formed a major component of a county's public finances and provided the most important source of revenue for a township/ town and was the only source of income for many villages in rural China. Counties relied on rural taxes and fees to pay cadres' and teachers' salaries. Townships/ towns were dependent on rural taxes and fees for almost everything they did, ranging from paying salaries to their cadres to providing rural public services, such as irrigating and draining land, building levees, and maintaining rural roads and schools. Village collectives were not a part of the state bureaucracy and village cadres were not state employees and received no salaries. They were compensated through fees collected from peasants. Village cadres performed important public duties, such as enforcing law and order, providing rural public services, and implementing national policies. Thus, villages formed an important component of the local government. Since only counties, townships, and villages collected rural taxes and fees, peasant protests targeted townships, villages and occasionally the county government, but never the prefectural government.

The tax sharing system (TSS, or 分税制, *fenshuizhì*) that China adopted in 1994 contributed to heavy peasant tax burdens. The TSS increased the state's capacity to levy taxes and centralised revenue by creating two separate taxation agencies (the State Administration of Taxation (国税局, *guoshuiju*) and local taxation bureaus (地税局, *dishuiju*)) and by clearly assigning different types of taxes to either the central or the local government. The TSS, however, created a serious mismatch between the fiscal capacity and the fiscal responsibilities of the local government in China (Wong 2009). After the introduction of the TSS, the local government's share of national fiscal capacity was 45 per cent, while its responsibility was 70 per cent (Liu et al. 2009). The difference was largely made up through taxes and fees collected from peasants. The TSS also created a severe downward fiscal pressure within the bureaucracy, as each higher level of government centralised revenue and left expenditure responsibilities to the next lower level of the government. Townships sit at the very bottom of the bureaucracy. They received little budget appropriation from the county, yet they had to hand over large amounts of money to meet county quotas for taxes and fees. Thus, townships in turn squeezed the peasants.

The taxes and fees were collected by township and village cadres from individual peasant households. In the 1990s, there were numerous types of rural taxes and fees. In some areas, peasants had to turn in more than 30 types of rural taxes and fees. These taxes and fees could be split into three categories, including those levied by the county, by the township, and by the village. The township/ town turned in a substantial portion of the grain and money collected from peasants to the county treasury. For instance, the agricultural tax, the special agricultural product taxes, the education surcharge, and the pig slaughtering tax all went into the county coffers. The rest formed a major source of revenue for the township. Villages not only needed to help the township/ town to collect taxes and fees, but they also needed to collect grain and money for their own use. Each county assigned a quota for rural taxes and fees to each township/ town, which in turn assigned a quota to each village. Township and village cadres were obliged to fulfil the quota, otherwise the township cadres would lose their jobs and village cadres would lose their face. Thus rural taxes and fees were known as burdens to peasants, but as tasks to cadres.

Politically, the power of the party-state in the countryside weakened in the 1980s, when the state decided to return public assets and econom-



ic production from village collectives to peasant households in the disbanding of the communes. Peasant households gained control over the land. Other assets, such as township and village-owned enterprises (TVEs), collapsed in the 1990s. In addition, peasants gained the freedom of movement and millions of young and middle-aged peasants migrated to the cities in search of employment. Many village collectives became mired in debt and controlled no assets whatsoever, becoming known as shell villages (空壳村, *kongkecun*) or paralysed villages (瘫痪村, *tanhuancun*). Peasants no longer received any public goods and services from their collectives. Rather, in most places, the maintenance of village public assets, such as roads and the village school, had to be financed through fees collected from peasants. Essentially, the peasants were only loosely connected with the state in the 1990s and the state increasingly was reduced to nothing but a greedy grain collector.

In the 1990s, the most important task of the village cadres was to collect grain from the peasants. A village in Hunan usually employed five to seven cadres. A village was divided into different teams, each with a team head, who was paid dozens of CNY (几十块, *jishi kuai*) a year for his or her labour. The township/ town assigned a cadre to each village who was known as the “stationed” or *zhu cun* (驻村) cadre to help collect taxes and fees, and to maintain law and order. Village cadres answered to township cadres and had to fulfil tax quotas. In the villages in northern and central Hunan, the author did not see evidence of other organisations, such as clan associations, temples, or churches, which might compete with the state for political authority, although the peasants did attend temple affairs and churches, and some villages consisted mostly of peasants with the same surname.

The most salient feature of local power in the 1990s, other than a general weakening of the state, was that the local government found itself squeezed between a rock and a hard place, lodged awkwardly between the demanding authorities at the top and the disgruntled peasants at the bottom; commanded by the former and loathed by the latter. The lower down the bureaucratic hierarchy one went, the more intense the pressure from above and the resistance from below became. While local governments might be corrupt, bloated and disregarding of the well-being of the peasants, they were in a vulnerable position. When the higher authorities, particularly the central and provincial governments, demanded that the local government lower the financial burden on peasant, the fiscal pressure faced by county- and township-level governments was

immense. Without a mandate to collect sufficient taxes and fees from the peasants, counties and townships could not function. Meanwhile, the peasants were still highly resentful of the local government that had levied extremely heavy burdens on them. The general decline of state power in the countryside and the tension between the political vulnerability of the local government and the dire financial realities it faced created an optimal situation for the peasants to protest, as we will see from the case studies.

## The Changtang Protest (1996–1999)

Changtang is a typical medium-sized town in the hilly county of Yuanxiang in northern Hunan with more than 50,000 peasants. The town took its current shape when three smaller townships were consolidated into Changtang town in 1995. The town did not have a single profitable TVE, but had a few million CNY of debt. Its peasants needed to pay about 80 to 100 CNY of taxes and fees per *mu*, which was average for a hilly area.

Despite their grievances about the heavy tax burdens and the rampant corruption surrounding the consolidation of the townships in 1995, the peasants in Changtang dutifully turned in all their taxes and fees until 1996, when one peasant from Xujiaba village by the surname of Liu and aged in his early- to mid-40s somehow acquired a copy of the central policy documents on lowering peasant burdens. According to the documents, peasants had the right to resist unreasonable burdens and to audit village accounts. Liu decided to start popularising these documents among his fellow villagers and a burden-reduction protest thus began.

As his father was a retired village Party secretary, Liu had access to the village accounts and knew how much money in taxes and fees each peasant family turned in. This enabled him to gather evidence on the extra amounts charged by the local government. Liu started to oppose all unreasonable taxes and fees, and the high tuition fees and education surcharge levied on rural students. He also demanded that peasants be allowed to audit the village accounts and that the local government should fight corruption. He organised burden-reduction meetings in peasant homes and among team heads, and had soon mobilised all the peasants within Xujiaba village, which remained the centre of the protest.

To mobilise support, Liu enlisted the help of a fellow villager, a classmate and a good friend called Guo Weiguo, who was about the

same age. Unlike Liu, Guo had a high school diploma, the highest level of education that a peasant in China could achieve before (s)he stopped being classed as a peasant in the 1990s. Though common today, it was rare to find a peasant with a high school diploma then. Anyone with that level of education belonged to the “rural intellectual elite”. The other peasants respected them and considered them “cultured” (有文化, *you wenhua*) and “learned” (读过书, *duguo shu*).

After successfully mobilising the peasants in Xujiaba Village, Liu abruptly quit the protest. He faced severe pressure from the prefectural, the county, and the town administration, which had sent dozens of cadres to visit his house five or six times, in an effort to persuade him to stop leading the protest. Liu refused at first. However, after the town authorities tried to arrest him, he suddenly decided to switch sides. After Liu quit, however, Guo took over leading the protest. He refused to be co-opted by the local government, even though it had promised him the reward of whatever job he wanted and any kind of favour, in return for giving up leadership of the protest. Guo mobilised the peasants and sustained the protest until it was suppressed on 8 January 1999.

In addition to the protest in Xujiaba Village begun by Liu, another protest was taking place simultaneously, led by Lin Zhiqiang, an old peasant in his 60s. Lin started his own burden-reduction effort in his village within the same town, but more than 40 *li* (里, equivalent to 500 m) away from Liu’s village. The two burden-reduction protests were not coordinated until Liu abandoned the protest and Guo became the most prominent leader.

Altogether, about ten peasants emerged as leaders during the protest. All were men (see also O’Brien and Li 1995: 768). With one exception, all leaders were either middle-aged peasants in their 40s or old peasants in their 50s or 60s. Though he did not start the protest, Guo became the most prominent leader, since he had a high school diploma. His education gave him a good command of language, which enabled him to write petition letters and pamphlets and to interpret central documents and policies for peasants. According to Guo’s sister, “Without him (Guo), they could not have carried out the protest. They needed his cooperation, because only he could write this kind of thing”.

To understand who these peasant protest leaders were, other than their age, gender, and education, and why they decided to lead the protest, let us now look briefly at the biographical background of four peasant leaders in Changtang.

Guo Weiguo, the most prominent leader of the protest, was an inspiring public speaker, a good writer, and a charismatic leader. He commanded respect among the peasants. He was a Communist Party member, a team head, and had served in the military in his 20s. Guo was public-spirited and a man of principles. While in the military, Guo spoke out against the theft of military equipment organised by a leader in his unit. As a team head, he built the only small irrigation project in the entire town in 1998 when he had cement bricks built along the walls of a huge pond owned by the team. Guo quit a well-paid job in a nearby city to lead the protest, though nobody in his family wanted him to get involved. Guo's wife and sister described him:

He is willing to sacrifice anything for the masses. The production team wanted him to be the head of the team. He was willing to give others whatever he had. He is a good man (Anonymous 1).

He wants to set an example through his own actions (以身作则, *yishen zuozhe*). He is willing to sacrifice the interests of his family in order to work for the common good (舍小家, 为大家, *she xiaojia, wei dajia*). He is sympathetic toward those who are poor. He neglects (冒管, *mao guan*) his wife, his household, and his parents. He has no concept of the small family. He has a unique character (Anonymous 2).

Guo's education was crucial in his transition to the most effective and prominent protest leader. Guo could write inspiring pamphlets and petition letters, whereas the other leaders could not. Liu recruited him precisely because Guo was a good writer and a good public speaker. Guo's wife explained Guo's ability to lead the protest:

He knows how to write a few characters (会写几个字, *hui xie jige zi*). He has a high school diploma and he is more educated than the others. He is a cultured person (文化人, *wenbuaren*). The others did not know how to write this kind of stuff [...] They needed his cooperation. Otherwise they could not carry out the protest (Anonymous 1).

Lin Zhiqiang, one of the two peasants who started the protest, was an old peasant in his 60s. He was also a team head. He grew a long beard, vowing that he would never have it cut until peasant burdens were lowered. As a consequence, every peasant in the town recognised him as the "Bearded Old Man". Of all the leaders, Lin most resembled a "professional rebel". His children had all grown up and he devoted all his time, energy, and quite a lot of own personal savings to disseminating central policy documents on lowering peasant burdens. He bought a tape re-

corder and a loud speaker, and recorded himself reading these documents. Whenever and wherever a rural market was held, he played recordings of the readings of these policies to the peasant crowds attending the rural market. After mobilising other peasants in this way, Lin organised burden-reduction meetings. He also specialised in travelling to different villages and linking with other leaders. Whenever a peasant decided to become a leader, Lin would visit him and invite him to petition higher levels of the government together.

Zhang Xiuyuan was another important peasant leader in his 50s. Just like Guo Weiguo, he was a Communist Party member and a team head. He had also served in the military. While he was the team head, Zhang installed several electric pumps to irrigate his team's land. Zhang was a loyal Communist Party member who deeply believed in the party-state. He was elected as an "outstanding Party member" and was a Party representative of the town for many years. He described himself as someone who cared about others, a motivated person, and "a man belonging to the era of Mao Zedong and having grown up in the era of Mao Zedong" (Anonymous 4).

Zhang liked to watch the television and read newspapers. When he saw that the taxes and fees collected by the town government exceeded the levels broadcast in the mass media, he joined Guo, Lin, and the others to petition the authorities within the county, the province, and Beijing.

Liao Minjun, a man in his 60s, was the only leader whose family was a part of the village power establishment. While he was leading the protest, his son was the village Party secretary tasked primarily with collecting taxes and fees from the peasants. In the 1950s, Liao had become one of the first armed policemen in China. Unlike the other leaders, Liao did not become completely demoralised after the protest was suppressed in 1999. He continued to resist the heavy tax burdens after returning from a labour camp. At the time of the interview, Liao was serving his second or even third term in a labour camp.

From these biographical sketches, we can see that the leaders in the Changtang protest were public-spirited. They were a self-selected group who had all worked for the party-state at some point. Most leaders were Communist Party members. Three out of the four leaders had served in the military or the armed police, one of the few institutions which historically had provided peasants with social mobility and interaction with the outside world (Shanin 1966). Three out of the four leaders had also

worked as team heads. The leaders were also better-educated than most peasants and could speak in public and write petitions.

Once the protest leaders emerged, the peasants quickly followed them. In the words of one peasant, “the leaders wanted to lower peasant burdens and I supported them. As long as you lead the protest, I would agree and follow” (Anonymous 5). Leadership was crucial in the emergence of the protest because the leaders shielded the peasants from state repression and made it rational for peasants to protest. The peasants enthusiastically supported their leaders because they could save dozens of CNY for each *mu* of land they tilled, if the township government implemented central policies. Leaders also made it safe for peasants to protest, because when the sword of the state fell, it would only fall on the heads of the leaders, not the mass followers. The crucial role played by leaders in the emergence of the protest can be seen from the following explanations provided by the peasants:

Talking about peasant movements (农民运动, *nongmin yundong*), how did our movement start? It started from Qianzhu village. Four people there did not want to turn in unreasonable taxes and fees. This then snowballed into a big event (越搞越大, *yuegao yueda*) [...] Because we were close to the village, the movement spread to our village. Who started the movement in our village? It was Liu Aimin. However, after he got an interest-free loan, he stopped doing it [protesting]. He switched sides and oppressed the others [peasant leaders].

In this area, if only someone would lead the protest again, we peasants would be even less afraid [of the local government] and the scale of the protest would even be much larger. If only there were leaders, who the hell would be scared of [the government]? However, who dares to be a leader [again]? Whoever leads a protest would be arrested (Anonymous 7).

It could also be said, however, that the support of the peasants turned a few leaders' efforts into a protest. According to protest leader Zhang, “Without support from the peasants, there would not have been this protest”. Peasants withheld grain from the village and town officials, donated money to the leaders, participated in the meetings that the leaders organised, and protected their leaders when the local government tried to arrest them. They refused to turn in unreasonable taxes and fees; they demanded that tuition fees be lowered, that the education surcharge levied on students be abolished, that the pig slaughtering tax and the special agricultural product tax not be assessed, on either individuals or

on land, and that all other taxes and fees forbidden by policy documents not be collected. They also demanded the right to examine the village account books and to fight against corruption. Peasants explained their demands:

Because the peasants did not agree [to turn in heavy taxes and fees], they [village and town cadres] could not collect enough grain. Peasants only agreed to pay the state taxes, including the taxed grain and the procurement grain. They refused to turn in anything else if the village accounts were not examined (Anonymous 7).

Since the early 1990s, the Chinese central government had been issuing a series of policies regarding lowering peasant burdens. These documents, relayed to the peasants through the leaders, emboldened the peasants in Changtang to protest. In the words of the peasants, “had there been no documents, the peasants would not have dared to rebel”.

These documents provided the peasants not only an opening of the political opportunity structure, but also the moral justification for their protest (see also Bernstein and Lü 2003). Since political power is centralised in China, the local government was obliged to implement central policies. More importantly, the peasants in Changtang believed that they had the right to protest because it was authorised by the central government. Believing that they were helping the central government to implement policies, the peasants were united and fearless.

Peasants were united at that time, since they had not learned to be afraid. They thought that it did not break any law to popularise central documents. The newspapers and television talked about lowering peasant burdens all the time and peasants did have TVs. How could they know that they had broken the law? It did not occur to them that popularising central documents broke the law. Who could have known it? Whatever the Party centre advocated and whatever the TVs popularised, they [the peasants] repeated it [the argument]. They refused to turn in [exorbitant taxes or fees] to the counties (Anonymous 7).

The ten peasants emerged gradually as leaders on their own. They were dispersed in different villages throughout the town. They lived far apart from one another, some as far apart as 40 *li*, a considerable distance in rural China, a distance that was about four times as large as the natural world of a peasant. At first, the leaders in the different villages did not coordinate their burden-reduction effort. Only after the protest became well-known did they start holding meetings together, thus integrating the burden-reduction activities in the different villages into one full-blown

protest. Of the leaders, Lin, who was one of the two original leaders who had started the protest, and Zhang Xiaowei, the only young leader, specialised in linking up with leaders and activists in other villages. Whenever a new leader emerged, Lin and Zhang would pay him a visit and invite him to petition the higher authorities together. All the leaders coalesced around Guo, the best-educated and most prominent leader. His village remained the centre of the protest. The leaders held meetings to discuss the strategies of the protest and Guo's opinion carried a lot of weight at these meetings.

The leaders called themselves “volunteer propagandists” and focused their mobilisation effort on popularising the central documents about reducing farmers' tax burden among other peasants. This task was accomplished in five ways.

- First, they wrote slogans and made banners on red pieces of paper and posted them on the doors and walls of peasant households, in village public spaces, and even on motor vehicles travelling along the major highways linking the town with three major cities.
- Second, peasant meetings were organised, big and small, in which the leaders read out the documents and explained to peasants their right to resist burdens. The crucial role that policy documents played in mobilising peasants was best exemplified by what Zhang Xiuyuan, the loyal Communist Party member, did in these meetings. With his thick pair of glasses, soft voice, and mild character, Zhang looked less like a rebel than a village grandfather. In burden-reduction meetings, Zhang never said anything contrary to the Party's policies. Instead, he would put on his pair of glasses, hold the documents, and read them out loud word by word.
- Third, the leaders used mass communication tools and popularized documents in rural markets where one could find the largest number of peasants at any given moment. They also drove vehicles from village to village and broadcast these documents by loudspeaker.
- Fourth, copies were made of the documents and handed out among peasants.
- Finally, the news of the protest and the idea that peasants had the right to resist heavy tax burdens were spread among peasants through word-of-mouth, a powerful mobilising tool in the countryside where people lived close to one another and formed dense social networks.



The peasant leaders also tirelessly petitioned the county, the provincial and finally the central government in Beijing. Through the petitions, the leaders quickly compiled a thick pile of policy documents, which helped to mobilise more peasants. The petitions to the highest authority, the central government and the Central Committee of the Communist Party, served as a catalyst and helped to push the protest to its peak. In 1998, Zhu Rongji became China's prime minister. In March 1998, encouraged by Premier Zhu's declared determination to fight corruption and lower peasant burdens, Guo Weiguo, Zhang Xiuyuan, and Liao Minjun petitioned Beijing. After they returned, the peasant leaders organised a burden-reduction meeting in the town government compound in the summer of 1998. Between 7,000 and 8,000 peasants from the entire town attended the meeting.

The Changtang protest was large-scale, civil, and energetic. Most of the 50,000 peasants in the entire town were mobilised. Even when the protest peaked in summer 1998, when more than 7,000 peasants attended a mass meeting amongst a sea of banners and slogans, it was an orderly gathering. Peasants damaged no property. The protest was suppressed on 8 January 1999, when the peasant leaders planned to hold another mass meeting. To prevent the meeting from taking place, the provincial government sent in about 3,000 soldiers and policemen to guard the town government compound, blocked roads to the town, and surrounded Guo's village. Excited by the arrival of military troops and the general commotion, over 40,000 peasants from several neighbouring towns showed up in Changtang town. When some peasants tried to push through the policemen to enter the compound, violence erupted and chaos quickly spread among the more than 40,000 peasants. Tear gas was fired. A man's leg was blown off and a woman's face was badly damaged. Half a year later, in June 1999, Guo and most other leaders were arrested and sentenced to a few years in prison or in a labour camp.

During the peasants' protests, cadres rarely came to the village to collect grain. The town abolished the education surcharge levied on students for two semesters from 1998 to 1999. It also lowered the taxes and fees for peasants in Xujiaba village. After the protest was suppressed, however, the county government sent work teams to the countryside and demanded that each peasant household pay the education surcharge abolished during the protest and all the taxes and fees in arrears. After the leaders were arrested, the protest collapsed and the peasants paid most of their taxes and fees.

## The Cangyuan Protest (1996–1999)

Cangyuan is another typical hilly town in Hunan. Located in the same county as Changtang, the two towns were very similar. Cangyuan also consists of three smaller townships, which were consolidated into Cangyuan town in 1995. The town government also had debts amounting to a few million CNY and no profitable TVEs. The peasant burden level was a little more than 100 CNY per *mu* in the 1990s, which was similar to the level in Changtang.

At about the time when Guo and the other leaders were heading the peasant protests in Changtang, three peasants from Cangyuan also started advocating the relief of peasant burdens. In 1996, three peasants from Shuangdu village read in the local newspaper about a provincial policy that forbade the local government from taxing peasants excessively. They were determined to help implement the policy and started disseminating the documents among villagers.

All three leaders in the Cangyuan protest were old men in their 60s. All were veteran Communist Party members. Two of them, Duan Xiaofeng and Yu Disheng, were retired village Party secretaries. When Yu retired as the village Party secretary, Duan was appointed as his successor. He then retired from the position in the 1980s. The peasants attributed Duan and Yu's leadership role in the protest to their Communist Party membership and their status as veteran cadres:

Only people who are more enlightened (觉悟高, *jue wu gao*) and who understand policies would do this. Actually, for them personally, these fees were not a big deal. Even if you had to pay more than 100 CNY extra yourself, it was only 100 CNY. They upheld justice, since they were all retired village Party secretaries. Otherwise they would not have come out to do it at all (Anonymous 13).

After all, it was Communist Party members who were advocating lowering the peasant burdens (Anonymous 13).

Once they had decided to lead the burden-reduction effort, the three leaders visited one another a lot. They also tried to recruit a retired town cadre in the village and visited his house twice. The cadre refused, explaining that he was a retired state cadre and that he was not aware that the Party had such a policy. He also warned them that they must base their claims on policy documents and on newspapers.

After reading the newspaper article, the three peasants began to advocate lowering the peasant tax burden among their fellow villagers.

They wrote slogans and banners on red pieces of paper, posted them in the village headquarters, and informed fellow villagers about their right to resist unreasonable burdens. The leaders were actually very cautious in their claims. Duan's wife explained:

He [Duan] did thought work (思想工作, *sixiang gongzuo*) with other peasants. He told them that the burdens were too heavy. More importantly, he said that some burdens were unreasonable. He did not tell commune members not to turn in unreasonable taxes or fees. Rather, he told them to turn in unreasonable taxes and fees more slowly (慢些交, *man xie jiao*). Reasonable burdens should still be turned in (Anonymous 8).

The protest was restricted to Shuangdu village. No village-to-village mobilisation occurred and no mass meetings on burden reduction were organised. The leaders did not record central policies and broadcast them in rural markets. They did not post banners on motorised vehicles travelling to the county seat and nearby cities. Neither did they drive vehicles from village to village to popularise policy documents. They made no attempt to recruit leaders from outside the village and established no village-to-village coordination mechanism. No leaders emerged in other villages.

The leaders also followed meticulously the rules and regulations on public security while popularising documents among peasants, just as the retired cadre had recommended. Their activities were peaceful and lawful, and they engaged in no disruptive collective actions, as can be seen from the following comment:

In our village, there was no demonstration, no mass gathering, no blocking of traffic, or beating of cadres. They [the leaders] did a good job in following the laws. The People's Representatives of the County made four rules. Those who organised demonstrations and mass gatherings, blocked traffic or attacked others would be sentenced to more than three years and fewer than seven years in prison (Anonymous 12).

The three leaders also petitioned the county and the provincial government. A cadre in the provincial government answered their questions. Returning to the village, the leaders started popularising the response among the villagers. In addition, Duan brought with him some newspaper articles from the provincial capital Changsha that criticised the numerous education fees that a county in Hunan collected from students.

In 1998, the protest escalated. Yu Disheng, one of the three leaders, acquired a document on the tuition fee level for primary students from the Education Bureau of Jiangu city, which administered Yuangxiang county. The level was significantly lower than the amount charged by the county. From a classmate, a retired cadre working for a government agency in Jiangu city, Yu also acquired a book which compiled policies on lowering peasant burdens issued by the provincial government. Yu told peasants that they should resist unreasonable education fees and heavy agricultural taxes and fees. He wrote slogans and banners on red pieces of paper and posted them everywhere in the village. Later Yu also acquired a booklet containing the 23 rules on lowering peasant burdens issued by the central government. He copied the entire booklet on red pieces of paper and posted them in the village. On seeing these rules and the banners and posters, peasants in Shuangdu village and two to three neighbouring villages refused to pay the education surcharge and the taxes and fees disallowed by these policies. Unable to collect grain from peasants, the town could not pay its teachers' salaries for a few months. So the teachers organised a strike, marched to the town seat, and demanded their wages.

Worried that the protest would paralyse the town's public finances, the town mayor arrived at the village school. He told the peasants that Yu had concocted all the documents himself. He said that the central government had not issued the 23 rules on taxes and fees, and that the document on tuition had also been made up by Yu. He stipulated that the peasants should pay the tuition and fees decreed by the town government, rather than by any other layer of the government. Still the peasants in Shuangdu refused to pay the unreasonable fees. Unable to placate the peasants, the town decided to sit down and negotiate with them. The town promised to give the village 19,000 CNY on condition that the leaders stop their activities, but the leaders refused.

To stop the protests led by the former village Party secretaries, various county and town government cadres visited the leaders several times. They tried to make the leaders understand the financial plight of the town, telling them that their activities were illegal and that they should turn in their taxes and fees. The leaders, however, insisted that the town should lower the burdens somewhat. Neither side was prepared to give in so a deadlock was reached over the issue.

Having failed to persuade the protest leaders, even after repeated visits, the town cadres decided to subdue Duan and Yu by collecting the

taxes and fees that they had so far refused to pay in arrears. Yu's son paid for him. Duan, however, insisted that the village pay him the wages that it owed him before he would pay his taxes and fees to the town. If his left hand received his wages from the village, Duan said, his right hand would immediately give the money to the town cadres. He would not even put the money into his pocket. The cadres insisted that Duan should not confuse what the village owed him with what he owed to the town. Duan had no right to deduct the wages the village owed him from his tax obligation toward the town government. Instead, he should take out money from the earnings of the small store that he had opened in the village and pay the local government. Duan refused.

After several futile trips to Duan's home, the town officials decided to collect the taxes and fees from Duan by force. On 6 January, at dawn, 27 people from the town got into two vehicles and drove to Duan's village. The moment they reached the village, they ran to Duan's tiny shop. Some pushed Duan and held him still, while the others searched the shop. They took away more than ten cartons of cigarettes and possibly a few hundred CNY from Duan. The village accountant wrote Duan a receipt. After raiding Duan's shop, they got back into their vehicles and drove swiftly toward the town seat.

Shortly after the raid, a group of peasants found Duan semi-conscious and foaming at the mouth. Little breath was left in him because Duan had drunk pesticide. Peasants put him in a vehicle and rushed him to the largest hospital in the county seat, where he was taken to the emergency room for resuscitation. Duan was officially declared dead the following day on 7 January.

Like a flood, hundreds of peasants instantly gathered in Duan's village. They started chasing the cars of the town cadres, who abandoned the vehicles and escaped through the rice paddy. The news of Duan's death spread among the peasants like wildfire. Rumours, collective rage, and Duan's status as a burden-reduction leader spread through the dense rural networks and helped to swell the crowd of peasants from a few hundred to more than 40,000 in a matter of hours. The crowd gathered in the village, the town seat, and the hospital at the county seat. It consisted of tens of thousands of people from four or five nearby townships/ towns, which covered about one eighth of the entire county. The crowd gathered in the early morning of 6 January when the news of the raid and Duan's death first emerged. Then on 8 January, when Duan's body was transported from the hospital at the county seat back to the

village, the crowd ransacked the town government and burned it down. The crowd was finally dispersed on 9 January when Duan's body was put to rest and buried.

During the four-day riot (6–9 January), Duan's body became the bone of contention between the crowd of peasants and the local government. The local government wanted to cremate Duan's body, which Duan's relatives and the peasants categorically refused. The local government then wanted to bury Duan's body as quickly as possible, but the peasants refused to bury Duan. Some even wanted to borrow the deceased's body from the family and have it presented at a burden-reduction meeting. In the end, the retired town cadre in the village who had refused to join the peasant leaders brokered an agreement between Duan's family and the county government. He also played an important role in arranging the burial of Duan's body, pacifying the peasants, and dispelling the crowd.

After the peasants quietened down, the county government started a propaganda campaign to smear Duan's reputation in newspapers and on the radio. The officials accused Duan of resisting taxes and fees, and committing suicide by drinking poison. The county government also mobilised a work team of a few hundred county cadres to visit Cangyuan town to collect grain from the peasants. More than 100 county cadres were posted in the two or three villages heavily affected by the burden-reduction activities. The peasants were ordered to hand in the taxes and fees that they had refused to pay during the protest. The county government arrested more than ten peasants who had participated in ransacking the town government.

Duan's son and one relative travelled to Beijing to petition the Letters and Visits Office of the State Council and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. They were told to return home for the sake of stability and unity, and for the good of the whole country. An investigation team consisting of cadres from the central government, the province, and the prefecture interviewed peasants in the town and the village. The county's Party secretary and the entire leadership of Cangyuan town were removed.

Though the red colour had faded, the old slogans demanding the lowering of peasant burdens could still be seen at the village headquarters when the author visited in October 2002. However, after Duan's death and the sentencing of more than ten peasants, nobody dared to talk about lowering the peasant burden any more. The peasant burden re-

mained heavy in Cangyuan. The only positive result of the protest and the riot was that the peasants in Cangyuan town could deduct whatever the village owed them from the taxes and fees levied on them by the town- and village-level authorities.

## Conclusion

From this paired comparison, we can draw some conclusions about state power and protest leadership in contemporary rural China. First, the weak position of the local government in the Chinese political system and the divisions between the central and the local government empowered peasants to protest. Both the Changtang and Cangyuan protests started when some peasants acquired policy documents, particularly central policy documents on lowering peasant burdens. These documents helped to legitimise the peasants' claims against the local government and shaped the demands of the peasant protests. Other scholars have made similar arguments. For example, Bernstein and Lü argue that

the most important resource that emboldened villagers to engage in strategic, rational collective action was the belief that the central authorities themselves opposed excessive burdens and therefore sided with them against their own agents (Bernstein and Lü 2003: 139).

O'Brien and Li (2006) call peasant protest "rightful resistance", a type of protest that utilises the division between the central and the local government and forces the local government to comply with official policies, documents, and laws. Perry (2007: 19–21, 2008) argues that Chinese protestors historically and currently demonstrate a rule consciousness, rather than a rights consciousness. People protest in China, not because the state has violated their citizenship rights, but because the state has allowed them to do so. Thus, protestors take cues from the state, use the language of the state to frame their demands, and demand economic rights rather than civil and political rights. The peasants in the two cases certainly followed the rules of the state and demanded the economic rights given to them by the state.

Second, the protest leaders played a crucial role in both protests. The protest leadership not only made the protests happen, but they also shaped the repertoire and the scope of the protests. Contrary to Piven and Cloward (1979), neither protest arose spontaneously. Only with the emergence of leaders who made the protests both safe and rational for ordinary peasants did we see the beginning of the protests. Furthermore,

different leaders led different types of protest. The number of leaders, their age, their education level, and their relationship with the local party-state shaped the repertoire and the scope of the protests. The Changtang protest spread to an entire town, while the Cangyuan protest was restricted to one village. Until the very last day when both protests turned into massive and violent riots, the Changtang protest remained civil, energetic and assertive, while the Cangyuan protest was lawful, peaceful, and mild. The leaders in Changtang petitioned Beijing, mobilised peasants across different villages, and built village-to-village coordination mechanisms, while the leaders in Cangyuan did not petition Beijing and did not mobilise peasants outside the village.

Since the peasants in both towns faced similar burden levels, similar local governments, similar cultural mores, and similar economic backwardness, the causes of the difference in the repertoire and the scope of the two protests are likely to lie in the number of leaders and their characteristics. The leaders in Changtang were more numerous, younger, and better-educated. The Changtang protest was started by two leaders located in two different villages, who vigorously opposed all unreasonable taxes and fees, and mobilised a large number of peasant followers by means of broadcasting policy documents through loudspeakers in rural market and on vehicles driven from village to village. The momentum of the mobilisation created by the two initiators and subsequently by Guo, the most prominent leader, helped to attract a greater number of followers and swelled the number of leaders to ten.

In addition, the leaders in Changtang were also better-educated. An educated leader can interpret policies, write petition letters and pamphlets, make public speeches and argue more forcefully. Thus an educated leader is likely to be more influential. Guo became the most prominent leader of the Changtang protest because he had a high school diploma. The three leaders in Cangyuan, by contrast, were older and less well educated. All were in their 60s and none had a high school diploma. Furthermore, all were veteran Communist Party members, and two had served as the village Party secretaries. It is likely that, since the Cangyuan leaders had worked as village Party secretaries for many years, the Party continued to exercise a strong discipline over them, which explains the particularly lawful and restricted form that their protests took. The comparison between the two cases suggests that veteran Communist Party cadres with little education were likely to lead milder and smaller protests.



Given the importance of protest leadership, we need to ask who these peasant leaders are and what common characteristics they share. Bernstein and Lü (2003: 148–150) argue that protest leaders are better-educated village elites, such as rural teachers and those who had joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The leaders had information and organisational skills, and enjoyed support among the villagers. Li and O'Brien (2008) argue that some leaders are public figures before they lead the protest, including "former village cadres, retired government officials, clan leaders, school teachers and religious figures" (Li and O'Brien 2008: 10). Some are ordinary peasants, who are usually "male, better-educated, and have strong personalities, and have undergone transformative experiences such as serving in the army" (Li and O'Brien 2008: 13). Yu (2001: 565) argues that peasant leaders are usually male, aged between 30 to 45 years old, have received a middle-school education, joined the PLA or worked as migrant workers, and come from relatively well-to-do families. A few were Communist Party members or retired cadres. Most knew Party policies on lowering peasant burdens.

The leaders studied in this paper had a similar profile. All were male. Some leaders were former soldiers, some were retired village Party secretaries, some worked for the township government, and many were Communist Party members. But there are also new findings. First, team heads played an important role in these protests. For example, in the Changtang protest, Guo, the most prominent leader, Lin, one of the two leaders who started the protest, and Zhang, the loyal Communist Party member who petitioned Beijing, were all team heads. Team heads were among the first group that the leaders mobilised. For example, when Liu in Xujiaba village decided to lead the protest, he first organised a meeting of team heads. In another case of peasant protest in central Hunan studied by the author, most leaders were team heads (Zhang 2009). Bernstein and Lü (2003: 154) argue tentatively that team heads are more likely to side with the peasants. This author's research provides evidence that team heads form the backbone of peasant leadership.

Second, older peasants played an active role in the two peasant protests studied in this paper, while the young rarely did so. While it may seem strange to see peasants in their 60s or even 70s leading a protest, this is not surprising, as most young and many middle-aged men have migrated to the cities. Third, all the leaders had received some form of political training from the local party-state in one way or another before leading the protest. While not every leader had worked as a village Party

secretary, as the leaders in Cangyuan had, all the leaders were politically active and had access to Party policies. Finally, this study introduces the concept of the most prominent peasant leader. In a protest with numerous leaders, one leader was more influential than the others. The role of the most prominent leader is played by the best-educated and the most charismatic person, such as Guo in the Changtang protest.

In order to respond to the deep rural crisis, the central government started implementing the tax-for-fees (费改税, *fei gai shui*) reform in 2001, after experimenting with various pilot projects to lower peasant burdens. The reform initially lowered and then abolished peasant burdens and also provided peasants with direct subsidies, which required large transfers of funds to the local government from the central and the provincial governments (Bernstein and Lü 2003; Yep 2004; Kennedy 2007; Lin and Wong 2012). In 2006, the agricultural tax was abolished nationwide, ending an ancient tax in China that had lasted for more than 2,600 years. While many actors played a role in this historical decision, the pressure for policy change came first and foremost from the ground. As demonstrated in this paper, peasant anti-tax protests often led to massive and violent riots. Even a small and initially mild protest restricted to one village could easily lead to a massive and violent riot that could destabilise a large area. Considering that the stories recounted in this paper were played out many times in other parts of Hunan and in other provinces during the 1990s, we can understand the magnitude of rural chaos and instability in the 1990s. This forced the central government to adopt new policies to stabilise rural China. Protest leaders and their peasant followers made history with their courage and sometimes with their lives.

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