

Subaltern Studies and the Peasant World The Case of China

Subaltern studies have changed the landscape in South Asian studies. Researchers in this school have focused attention on the social relations of rural society--relations of domination and control, relations of un-freedom, relations of power and authority between landlord and tenant, master and bondsman. They have brought us to see the ways in which South Asian studies emerged within the conceptual categories of British colonial administration--the "orientalist" bias of much nineteenth-century scholarship on South Asia. And they have brought into relief some of the neglected aspects of the social history of the sub-continent that bear most centrally on these themes--rural rebellion and unrest and the patterns of silent resistance through which the subaltern seeks to preserve his position.

The work that has emerged from this school is very specific to South Asia--its ethnic histories, its patterns of landholding and labor, its pre-colonial and colonial history. And yet South Asia's history is also one of a complex agrarian civilization which embodies social phenomena with strong resonances to other parts of the world. Other areas of the world have likewise developed vigorous traditions of "agrarian histories"--historical research oriented toward the experience and circumstances of the powerless, research that questions traditional categories of politics and empire, research that casts strong light on peasant resistance and rebellion. The question arises, then, whether there is the possibility of a fruitful exchange between the subaltern approach to South Asian studies and current research in other agrarian societies.

Particularly salient is the comparison with China. China is the world's most populous peasant society, with complex and distinctive patterns of agrarian relations. Like India, China's encounter with the West was a tumultuous and profound one. And like India, China's political history cannot be separated from its history of periodic peasant rebellions. Finally, China studies have undergone a reorientation of method and emphasis in the past two decades that is every bit as profound as that leading to the subaltern literature, and that points in some similar directions. This essay will offer an extended overview of the state of agrarian histories in the China field and consider some of the ways in which these recent traditions have dealt with some similar issues. It will emerge that there has been a certain degree of convergent evolution between the two fields, but that the two approaches remain rather distinct. In particular, the field of Chinese agrarian history is probably more eclectic and more methodologically diverse than the subaltern literature. The influence of Marxism is much less pronounced, and the influence of social science hypotheses drawn from a variety of disciplines greater (for example, neoclassical economics, rational choice theory, theory of organizations, collective action theory, and central place theory). Finally, it will

emerge that the emphasis that colonialism and imperialism receive in the subaltern field finds less salience in the China field.

A “China-centered” approach

The field of China studies has undergone a rapid evolution since World War II. The most significant developments are these. First, there developed in the 1960s and 1970s what Paul Cohen refers to as a “China-centered” approach to the study of the history of China (Cohen 1984). The central notion here is the idea that historians of China need to analyze China’s history making use of concepts and hypotheses specific to its own experience. Cohen puts the point this way: “The main identifying feature of the new approach is that it begins with Chinese problems set in a Chinese context. . . . [These] are *Chinese* problems, in the double sense that they are experienced in China by Chinese and that the measure of their historical importance is a Chinese, rather than a Western, measure” (Cohen 1984, p. 154). Rather than asking whether China experienced “sprouts of capitalism” in the Ming Dynasty, we need to consider the distinctive features of China’s economic development. Rather than considering whether China was a “feudal” society, we need to identify and conceptualize the specific features of political and economic relations that linked elites and the common people.¹

The point here is not that China’s history is unique and *sui generis*, but rather that one should not presume that the categories of politics, social structure, and historical process that emerged as central in the unfolding of early modern Europe will find natural application in the historical experience of China.² The concept of feudalism is not a trans-historical category which should be expected to have application in every process of historical development.

Second, there has emerged a substantial emphasis on material culture in the China field: social and economic circumstances, the technology of agriculture, marketing hierarchies, and the circumstances of life of ordinary Chinese people. Features of local material culture find prominent expression: population processes, local politics, agricultural technique, land tenure arrangements, patron-client relations, banditry, and environmental change. And since historical China is an

¹ Lillian Li makes a similar point in her analysis of China’s silk industry. “To regard the putting-out system as a ‘sprout of capitalism’ is to apply alien categories of explanation to Chinese institutions that actually served a different purpose” (Li 1981, p. 61).

² Susanne Rudolph makes much this same point in application to India’s political history in her presidential address to the Association for Asian Studies (Rudolph 1987).

agrarian society, this means that agrarian histories have been particularly important in the China field.

Third, China studies have moved in the direction of local or regional studies rather than national histories. Issues arising out of consideration of the village rather than the capital have come to the fore: the village, the marketing hierarchy, and the region have come to define the focus of inquiry. Scholars are suspicious of generalizations about China as a whole; rather, local and regional variations are the focus of research. It is recognized that lineage is more significant in the south of China than the north; that rice cultivation imposes a series of social imperatives in the south that are absent in the north; that regions linked by water transport show an economic and social integration often lacking in administratively defined units (provinces); that millenarian Buddhism is a powerful factor in the political culture of Shandong but not in Sichuan; and the like.

Finally, the influence of the social sciences in the China field has been of great importance. Much (though of course not all) of the most productive historical research on China in the past two decades has made substantial use of the tools of social science to construct explanations of Chinese historical processes. Techniques drawn from historical demography, economic geography, and the study of organizational behavior have substantially increased our understanding of China's history.³

These are some rather general features of the current state of the China field. Let us turn now to a number of themes to be found within this literature which have the greatest resonance with the subaltern approach to agrarian histories. A central focus will be the politics of peasant unrest and the circumstances of land, labor, and exploitation from which these expressions emerge.

Labor and land tenure

Agrarian studies in general, and subaltern studies in particular, commonly look at rural society through the lens of the "social relations of production" that define rural property arrangements--that is, the relations defined by law and power through which land and labor are employed. The social relations of production determine the forms of access through which rural people gain access to land and other means of production, and the form of surplus extraction that is embodied in a

³ See my *Understanding Peasant China* for a review of many of the social science debates current in the China field (Little 1989). For a review of recent work on historical demography in the China field see Lavelly, Lee, and Feng 1990. An engaging exchange over the non-academic forces that may have shaped the development of China studies in the past four decades may be found in Marks 1985 and Cohen 1985.

local economy. Studies from this perspective have provided much insight into the structure and dynamics of Chinese rural society.

Implicit in the notion that the social relations of production are central to the dynamics of rural society, is the view that these relations commonly constitute a system of exploitation and domination in which a minority class controls the economic activity and product of the majority. These features of rural life are thought to be central in several ways. First, they are defining features of the lived experience of rural folk. The forms of petty humiliation and subservience imposed on the tenant, the bonded laborer, the serf, make up an important dimension of the lives of rural peoples.⁴ Second, the fact of “surplus extraction”—the processes through which the economic surplus of agrarian society is extracted from producers through rents, taxation, interest, and profits—sets the stage for the material poverty of rural producers. Third, a long and important tradition of historical research makes a convincing case that the specific relations of surplus extraction—essentially the property relations—impose a distinctive pattern of development on each society.⁵ Finally, the consequences of the reality of exploitation and domination for popular politics are great. Food riots, peasant uprisings, tax riots, and attacks on landlords are the stuff of peasant politics.⁶ The musculature of the system of exploitation and domination creates cleavages in rural society along which peasant mobilization and action can occur.

A particularly important example of this approach is represented in the work of Philip Huang. *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (1985) is a study of the material institutions that constituted the agrarian economy of North China: land tenure institutions, agricultural practices and techniques, labor arrangements, and the extension of the institutions of the market through the rural economy. Huang argues that the longterm patterns of agrarian change in North China can best be understood through detailed investigation of these material institutions. A central theme in Huang’s treatment is the relationship between family farming and managerial farming. Contrary to the expectations of many economic historians, Huang finds that managerial farming did not tend to drive out

⁴ James Scott has greatly illuminated the experiential side of peasant life and history in a series of important works. Though his work focuses on Southeast Asia, Scott has influenced peasant scholars throughout Asian studies. For a review of the moral economy debate, see Keyes 1983 and Little 1989, chapter 2.

⁵ Consider, for example, the Brenner debate, and Robert Brenner’s analysis of the differences in development between Britain and France (Aston and Philpin, eds. 1985). E. L. Jones offers an account of Asian economic development that pays attention to the effects of property relations on development (Jones 1987).

⁶ Charles Tilly’s long career of study of these aspects of peasant politics bear mention in this context.

family farming: “In North China . . . the process of change did not lead to the end of the small peasant economy, with capitalizing managerial farms developing into modern capitalist farms” (Huang 1985, p. 17). His explanation of this result derives from an analysis of the economic circumstances, incentives, and constraints of peasant farmers and managerial farmers; these circumstances created an environment in which self-exploiting peasant farmers could successfully compete with managerial farms. Huang adopts the language of “involution” to describe the situation of family farms in the peasant economy: families expend labor power to the point of almost zero marginal return, because the marginal cost of family labor is zero. Given these circumstances, he argues (parallel to arguments advanced by Kang Chao as well) that landlordism was in fact more profitable than managerial farming (Chao 1986, p. 177). These arguments have important consequences for the agrarian history of China: in particular, they help explain the persistence of the peasant economy over many centuries.

A central issue underlying rural politics is the process of surplus extraction that is embodied in the rural economy. Relations between elites and rural producers are largely defined by the distribution of rents, taxes, and debt through which part of the economic product flows from producer to landlord, creditor, and the state. An important contributor to this issue in the China field is Victor Lippit, who has made a sustained effort to evaluate the flow of surplus through the Chinese rural economy. Lippit offers an estimate of the proportion of the rural product that took the form of surplus--rents, profits, and interest. "Income from agricultural land remained the principal source of unearned income in the countryside. In the agricultural sector of the 1930s, land rent constituted 10.7 percent of national income, farm business profits or the surplus produced by annually hired labor above its own consumption 3.4 percent, and rural interest payments 2.8 percent" (Lippit 1987, p. 40). Lippit maintains that an important element of China's economic stagnation in the Qing period derives from the unproductive uses to which economic surpluses were put. "The uses of the surplus included primarily luxury consumption (including conspicuous consumption), the purchase of land, ceremonial expenditures, the military expenditures necessary to defend the empire against the foreigners and against the Chinese, and expenditures on classical education" (Lippit 1987, pp. 90-91).⁷

Peasant rebellion

Particularly prominent in Chinese history is the occurrence of largescale peasant rebellions. If we consider the nineteenth century alone, North China

⁷ See also Carl Riskin's "Surplus and Stagnation in Modern China" (Riskin 1975) for further discussion of this point.

experienced a series of rebellions including the Eight Trigrams rebellion, the Nian rebellion, the White Lotus rebellion, and the Boxer uprising; South China experienced the devastating Taiping rebellion; and social unrest in the countryside became the central point of mobilization for the Communist Revolution in the twentieth century. China's political and social history was thus punctuated by episodes of largescale peasant mobilization, forming peasant armies that tested the military capacity of the Imperial state. Historians have posed a series of fundamental questions about these periods of unrest: What motivated participants? What organizational resources facilitated mobilization? What ideologies or religious doctrines provided such fertile ground for peasant activism? How did the state respond? What role did ecological or environmental disaster play in the pattern of rebellion?

On the approach outlined in the previous section, a promising hypothesis about rural unrest derives from consideration of the circumstances of class and exploitation found in rural society. Rural property relations define an objective set of class relations among landlords, tenants, laborers, and the state. The property relations establish a surplus-extraction relation between the elite and the producers, permitting the elite to exploit the producers through rent, interest, corvée labor, taxation, or tribute; they thus constitute a coercive system of exploitation. Members of the exploited segment of rural society have an implicit capacity to perceive the exploitative nature of their situation and are thus readily mobilized in peasant organizations; the reality of exploitation constitutes a prominent salience around which leaders and organizations can muster support.

The class-conflict theory thus identifies classes as the politically salient groups in society. It holds that such classes come to identify themselves as such, and that members of classes engage in collective action in defense of their material interests. On this account, revolution and rebellion are the natural culminations to the historical development of a class society: class society involves the exploitation of the many by the few, and eventually the many will acquire both the will and the means to overthrow the economic relations that govern them. Thus this approach advances a fairly simple explanatory claim: the social tensions created by an exploitative economic system, and the conflicts engendered between landlord and peasant give rise to underclass collective action (food riots, social banditry, rebellion). There is a straightforward connection between the objective conflicts of interest embodied in the property system, and the political behavior of the various participants. Rebellions and popular collective action are rational strategies of collective self-defense on the part of subordinate classes.⁸ In his important study of

⁸ Asian agrarian protest has been analyzed in similar terms by Chesneau (1973), Vlastos (1986), Marks (1984), Selden (1971), and Paige (1975).

revolutionary mobilization in Shensi Province Mark Selden puts the perspective in these terms: "Any effort to link peasant discontent with rural revolution requires a comprehensive analysis of the quality of life in the area, an understanding of the specific content of landlord and warlord domination, and the nature of the foreign economic and political impact" (Selden 1971, p. 35).

In application to agrarian China, this account finds expression along the following lines. The primary rural producers are rent-paying peasants engaged in farming and rural handicrafts. Peasant production gives rise to a small but real surplus; this surplus is extracted from the peasant in the form of rent, merchant profits (on handicraft products), interest, and taxation. Peasants are thus exploited by landlords, merchants, tax farmers, and moneylenders. And the presence of exploitative relations of power and property acts as a powerful salience in the generation of peasant politics. Jean Chesneaux applies this framework to the Taiping rebellion: "The Taiping movement was fundamentally an agrarian one, a revolt of the peasants against their 'natural' enemies within Chinese society, against landlords, gentry and officials" (Chesneaux 1973, p. 25). Chen Yung-fa emphasizes the centrality of class factors in his analysis of the rural mobilization of the Chinese Communist Party. "A whole range rural tensions enabled the CCP to pursue its economic programs, each of which of promised some degree of redistribution, and to transform sporadic spontaneous collective actions by peasants into systematic, large-scale class struggle. Without the rural tensions the Party could have done little to motivate peasants politically, and without the Party the rural tensions might well have remained largely latent and nonantagonistic" (Chen 1986, p. 161).

The class-conflict model is a plausible basis for understanding Chinese peasant politics for several reasons. First, property arrangements and relations of exploitation in agrarian China are relatively transparent; the class structure of traditional rural China was easily discerned by the participants. Moreover, these property relations work effectively to extract a significant surplus from small farmers into the hands of landlords, officials, moneylenders, and the like. And second, the success of the class-inspired Communist Revolution of the twentieth century makes it plausible to suppose that class conflict politics were latent in traditional China as well. However, unexpected difficulties confront the class-conflict model of peasant politics in application to China.

First, it is an important truth that much observed collective action in traditional China does *not* occur along clean class cleavages; instead, much collective action involves alliances between local elites and lower classes. This is true, for example, in the context of intervillage conflicts of interest: e.g., water and land rights. Prasenjit Duara describes some of the forms of organization through which North China villages and market towns mobilized cross-class support for the purpose of defending water rights (Duara 1988). Second, Chinese village self-defense and militia organizations typically had a cross-class character with elite

leadership (Kuhn 1980). Third, local society was capable of providing collective goods--e.g. village water resources (flood control and irrigation); and, once again, these forms of collective action typically proceeded under elite leadership. Peter Perdue's treatment of the organization of waterworks in Hunan illustrates this point (Perdue 1987). These examples suggest, then, that class factors were often eclipsed by economic interests shared across village society as a whole.⁹ In each of these cases we find that collective action occurs under the leadership of village elites--landlords, village headmen, local literati. But this poses a problem for the class-conflict thesis; if much traditional collective action occurs through vertical organizations and with elite leadership, then what resources are available to create horizontal organizations and leadership?

Consider next the problem of identifying the description under which to characterize a group's material interests. Particularly important is the fact that there are spatial characteristics that affect a group's interests. The class-conflict model does not incorporate any regional specification; it treats a class as an undifferentiated whole over the full society. But it is plain that there are politically significant differences of interests within classes over space. For example, peasants of late-Qing Henan had an interest in famine relief that peasants of the Yangzi did not share (because food supplies were more stable in the latter region), whereas the latter group has a crucial interest in water works not shared by the former; these variations derive from differences in the farming systems and ecologies of the two regions. Regional differentiation thus imposes interests on segments of a class that may be politically significant.¹⁰

Material group interests may thus be viewed from a range of perspectives from the local to the global. For example, tenant farmers in a given village or marketing community share certain interests in common (e.g. water rights, access to firewood, etc.), which give them a material basis for engaging in collective action together. But class interests may be defined on a more comprehensive geographical scale as well; thus, for example, tenant farmers throughout all of north China share

⁹ "Peasant collective action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had led to a considerable amount of rural social violence in Haifeng, but these disruptions could hardly be described as class conflict. Most of the conflict for which we have documentation occurred between lineages or the Red and Black Flags, vertically aligned social groupings, or between state and society, as in the food riots" (Marks 1984:96).

¹⁰ G. William Skinner's analysis of the importance of geographical differentiation on a variety of economic, political, and cultural processes is an important contribution to our understanding of late imperial China, and highly pertinent in the current context (Skinner 1964-65; 1977).

certain material interests--economic and political--with each other. (A concrete example of shared interests is imperial tax policy--should taxes be remitted in times of crop crisis, should taxes be assessed to land or to farmer, etc.) Once we recognize the range of levels at which group interests may be defined, however, it becomes clear that there may be fundamental conflicts of interest within groups defined at the higher levels. Thus a strategy of demanding tax relief for farmers in Henan may impose greater tax burdens on farmers in Sichuan. There is thus a material basis for mobilization of local politics on the basis of local interests in direct opposition to global class interests. This point makes it plausible to suppose that local material interests might mask global class interests--local elites and peasants may join together in violent action against neighboring villages in conflict over water rights, disputed land rights, etc. In this connection Lucien Bianco argues that peasant political interests in pre-revolutionary China were invariably localistic in nature, often cutting across class. In his study of spontaneous peasant uprisings in Republican China he writes, "The spontaneous peasant movements analyzed above show three main characteristics. The first is the weakness of class consciousness among the peasantry, a weakness illustrated by the comparative rarity and traditional nature of the social movements directed against the wealthy. . . . The second main characteristic of spontaneous peasant movements is their parochialism. In default of class consciousness, there was a sense of belonging to a local community, which overrode distinctions of class. . . . The need to limit themselves to survival strategies, which dictated these attitudes, also explains the third characteristic of peasant agitation, namely its almost invariably defensive nature" (Bianco 1986, pp. 301-302).

These considerations present the class-conflict theory with a critical problem: what social mechanisms would permit a geographically dispersed class to arrive at a group identity based on its shared material interests in opposition to other, regionally-based interests that may be shared with locals from other classes? What would lead the landless peasants of the North China plain to identify their fortunes and goals with those of Shanxi, rather than with local elites? Why should we expect textile workers in Shanghai to identify their interests with metal-workers in Sichuan? The apparent answer to this question unavoidably involves reference to supra-local organizations. But it would appear dubious that there is an endogenous tendency for dispersed groups to come to identify their interests as classes rather than as groups of other sorts.

We may draw several tentative conclusions on the salience of class in Chinese peasant politics. Most importantly, an adequate theory of peasant politics must provide an account of the local processes through which group identity is formed and through which members of groups come to identify themselves as political actors. Agents act deliberately, on the basis of their own understandings of their interests, allegiances, rights, and the like; consequently, in order to explain the political behavior of a group it is necessary to give some account of the processes

through which this particular group identity and set of collective goals have been formed. It is essential to analyze the processes of political identity-formation through which a group is transformed into a political agent with shared goals, beliefs, values, commitments, and plans. And these processes are typically *local* if spontaneous, and dependent on competent organizations and leadership if supra-local. For spontaneous group identity, it would seem, emerges from contiguity and shared perceptions of the social world; it requires a common history of struggles, demands, successes, and failures. If a geographically and socially dispersed group is to acquire such a self-conscious identity, it is difficult to see how this could occur without the deliberate efforts of a competent regional or national organization. It is necessary to formulate a diagnosis of the social world and a political program that will permit dispersed members of such a group to come to regard themselves as part of a meaningful political agent; and this vision must be communicated to members of the group through competent local cadres. All of this requires organization, however; and without such, it is unlikely in the extreme that class consciousness on a national scale would emerge spontaneously.

Second, it emerges from this discussion that class is at best a latent factor in political behavior on any but the local level. It is *possible* to mobilize members of classes around their class interests, and to cultivate a class identity among members of classes. Class membership constitutes a *possible* basis for mobilization because it does in fact identify a set of interests that are shared by members of the group; and these interests are, as Marxism postulates, particularly fundamental. But there is no reason to expect that either group identity or political action will emerge spontaneously around class position. The prominence of purely local interests and issues threatens to swamp the emergence of more global concerns and identity. Thus latent class interests can only be converted into effective political motivations for a dispersed group through skillful organization and mobilization on a regional or national level.

Turn now to efforts to explain Chinese peasant politics that do not place primary emphasis on class relations. Some China historians have attempted to understand Chinese peasant politics along the lines of a theory of individual rationality. The rational-choice approach has been applied fruitfully to problems of popular politics in Asia by a number of scholars (for example, Samuel Popkin's *The Rational Peasant* (1979)). On this approach, the goal is to explain peasant rebellion and political behavior on the assumption that peasants make deliberative decisions about participation. The guiding thread of these theories is that rebellion is a form of deliberate collective action that originates in the local interests of the individuals who participate and is facilitated by the local political resources (organizational forms, militias, kinship organizations, etc.) available to potential rebels. Individuals are assumed to have a clear idea of their interests and opportunities, and engage in collective action as a deliberate strategy of furthering their individual interests. The primary emphasis in this approach is on uncovering

the local processes through which these general factors come to fruition. A distinctive feature of these theories is the observation that largescale rebellions are often only unintended, unforeseen consequences of essentially local processes. The local political process is rational-intentional, whereas the global process is unintentional.

Elizabeth Perry's *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China 1845-1945* (Perry 1980) is an important recent example of this sort of approach.¹¹ Perry analyzes the Nian Rebellion (1851-63) and the Red Spear uprisings (1911-49), both in the Huai-pei region on the North China plain. The Nian Rebellion represented the gradual transformation of local bandit gangs into loosely-coordinated regional forces capable of defeating regular Qing armies. By 1856 small Nian groups had been brought together into a loose confederation of five "banners" under the nominal leadership of a bandit, Chang Lo-hsing; in fact, however, leadership and power within the Nian remained at the community level rather than the regional level. Nian groups were generally adept at cavalry warfare, and practiced mobile strategies that were difficult for the more static Qing military forces to counter. The Nian groups retained close connections with their local communities, which often took the form of walled villages and towns; these villages provided both an economic base and a defensible retreat for Nian groups. At its peak the Nian may have had as many as 100,000 men under arms, and held sway over large parts of Huai-pei. Regular Qing forces were supplemented and finally replaced by Manchu and Mongol cavalry, and after years of inconclusive fighting the Nian armies were destroyed in 1868.¹²

Perry's account of rebellion in Huai-pei gives central place to the ecological circumstances that surrounded peasant life in North China. She notes that the ecology of the North China plain was extremely harsh, with regular flooding, drought, and famine. The region had only a low level of commercialization, given low agricultural productivity.¹³ As a result peasant lives were both poor and insecure, and there was precariously little surplus available to tide over periods of

¹¹ Theda Skocpol implicitly describes such an approach when she writes of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions, "Peasants participated in these Revolutions without being converted to radical visions of a desired new national society, and without becoming a nationally organized class-for-themselves. Instead they struggled for concrete goals--typically involving access to more land, or freedom from claims on their surpluses. Such goals were entirely understandable in terms of the existing local economic and political circumstances in which peasants found themselves" (Skocpol 1979:114).

¹² This account is derived from Feuerwerker's description of the Nian rebellion in *Rebellion in the Nineteenth-Century*, pp. 38-42.

¹³ See Arrigo (1986) for a study of land tenure in North China.

disaster.¹⁴ Perry puts the point this way: "In sum, interactions between people and nature rendered Huai-pei a highly precarious ecosystem. During the century under consideration (1845-1945), nature wielded the upper hand" (16). Perry thus puts the problem of survival at the center of peasant behavior in this region and time; and she explains the extensive rebellions that occurred during the period as the results of several different types of survival strategies by peasant actors. She argues that peasant actors sought out a variety of means of survival, some individual and some collective, through which to ensure their continuing welfare and security. She distinguishes broadly between predatory strategies and protective strategies. Predatory strategies include smuggling, robbery, and banditry, while examples of protective strategies include crop-watching societies, local militia, fortification, and tax resistance (58-95). She holds that each strategy gave rise to distinctive forms of collective action. Further, the forms of collective action inspired by each strategy influenced the subsequent development of the forms of collective action inspired by the other. The Nian rebellion grew out of the formation of more and more powerful bandit gangs (predatory strategy), while the Red Spears period reflected the autonomous power of local militias directed by local notables (protective strategy).

Another example of a rational choice approach to peasant politics is James Tong's study of collective violence in the Ming Dynasty (Tong 1988; Tong 1991). Banditry and rebellion were common events in imperial China, and they tended to occur in clusters of events across time and space. What caused this temporal and spatial distribution of banditry? James Tong puts together a set of 630 cases of collective violence over the period 1368-1644, distributed over eleven of fifteen Ming provinces (Tong 1988). He then attempts to evaluate three alternative causal hypotheses:

- Collective violence results from rapid social change;
- collective violence results from worsening class conflict;
- collective violence results from situations of survival stress on rational decision-makers.

He argues that the third hypothesis is correct. He codes each incident in terms of the current "likelihood of surviving hardship" and "likelihood of survival as an outlaw" (122-124). And he argues that when coded for these variables the data vindicate the rational-choice hypothesis; the most rebellions occur when the probability of surviving hardship is lowest and survival as an outlaw is high; while

¹⁴ This is one of the regions of China where Tawney's celebrated remark applies most vividly: when the peasant is standing up to his neck in water, even a ripple will drown him.

the fewest when hardship is least and survival as an outlaw least likely. Tong offers statistical evidence, then, to support the idea that rebellion results from the rational choices of large numbers of potential participants.

Much of the discussion to this point has adopted a fairly narrow vision of the explanation of collective behavior in terms of the material interests of participants and their calculations about the effects of various possible collective actions. However, a variety of authors cast doubt on the adequacy of an explanation of underclass collective action based on narrow calculation of costs and benefits. In her treatment of the White Lotus rebellions of nineteenth-century North China, Susan Naquin (1976, 1981) shows the relevance of cultural and religious beliefs in the occurrence of political behavior, so that it is not possible to analyze peasant behavior solely in terms of material interests. Likewise, in his important study of the depression rebellions in Vietnam and Burma James Scott (1976) shows that political behavior is mediated by a culturally specific moral system defining just and unjust social arrangements--once again implying that a narrow analysis of material interests will not suffice to explain political behavior. In the context of popular politics, the point may be put in these terms: most political action involves a normative component that cannot be reduced to narrow self-interest or to the class structure within which it functions. So it is necessary to extend the conception of political motivation to include such factors as solidarity, class consciousness, or communal values. This is an empirical point; it represents the assertion that the causes of individual political behavior are more varied than the class-conflict paradigm asserts, and that it is necessary to give some account of the moral values and worldview through which agents deliberate. This does not lead to the conclusion that political behavior is not rational; rather, it insists only that rational, deliberative political choice always occurs within the context of a normative worldview that affects the outcome.

The grasp of the state

State-society relations play an important role in many subaltern studies: to what extent, and through what mechanisms, is the state in a pre-modern society able to effect its will on its population? This question is particularly salient in the case of China because of the somewhat paradoxical role that the Imperial state plays in Chinese history. The Imperial system is often portrayed as weak and ineffectual; at the same time, it is the embodiment of a refined and sophisticated administrative apparatus. To what extent was the Chinese state able to carry out its essential functions--the extraction of taxes, the preservation of order, the suppression of social unrest, the maintenance of large-scale water projects, and the administration of central grain policies? These issues impact on agrarian histories in diverse ways: mobilization of peasant unrest is affected by the extractive behavior of the state, on the one hand, and the effectiveness of the state's coercive apparatus, on the other.

Philip Kuhn emphasizes the limitations of the grasp of the imperial state in his analysis of the local and regional responses to the Taiping Rebellion. “Local militarization posed acute problems for the imperial state; for if irregular military force could not be regularized and brought under control, if the widespread militarization of local communities could not be brought into a predictable relationship to the state, then the security of the state itself might soon be shaken” (Kuhn 1980, p. 9). There was a logic to the process of the state’s diminishing capacity to effect its will in response to rebellion. “The Ch’ing military establishment lent momentum to the downward spiral of dynastic decline: the worse the troops, the longer it took them to quell an uprising; the longer it took them, the greater the cost; the more impoverished the government, the lower the quality of imperial administration and the greater the frequency of revolt” (126). On Kuhn’s interpretation, the local militarization that occurred in response to the Taiping Rebellion had a permanent effect on the balance of power between center and periphery in Chinese politics.

In his study of state-society relations in North China, Prasenjit Duara emphasizes the “state-making” processes that were underway in the late Qing (Duara 1988). Duara’s analysis focuses on the end of the Qing dynasty and the turn of the twentieth century in North China; Duara attempts to comprehend the variety of institutions, elites, and influences through which political power was wielded at the village level. The state was earnest in its efforts to penetrate rural society to the village level, and Duara examines the efforts made to extend the administrative structures of the state into the system of lineage and local power relations which had traditionally dominated village society.¹⁵

Intermediate between studies of the Imperial state and local agrarian histories is the effort to discern the “patterns of dominance” exercised by Chinese local elites (Esherick and Rankin, eds. 1990). Studies by Schoppa, Rankin, Kuhn, and Rowe provide instances of in-depth efforts to identify the historical identities of Chinese elites, rural and urban, and some of the mechanisms through which these elites endeavored to influence local society.

Spatial organization of culture and economy

China studies have been more influenced than many area studies by the insight that there is a critical spatial dimension to processes of social, political, and economic change. In his groundbreaking work on marketing hierarchies and the regionalization of traditional China, G. William Skinner has demonstrated the key role that transport systems, central place hierarchies, and physiography play in

¹⁵ Vivienne Shue offers an extensive analysis of these issues in *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Shue 1988).

China's history. Skinner's work has been remarkably prolific and influential in the China field; among his contributions, two are especially important. First, Skinner undercut the village-oriented perspective of much existing research on peasant China by putting forward an analysis of the central place hierarchy that exists among cities, market towns, villages, and hamlets in traditional China (Skinner 1964-65). These hierarchies are knit together by transport systems and the circulation of products, traders, craftsmen, martial arts instructors, necromancers, and other itinerant folk. This is an important contribution because it suggests stimulating hypotheses about the mechanisms of popular culture, the transmission of ideas, the movements of peoples, the diffusion of new technologies, and other fundamental aspects of social change. The second signal contribution contained in Skinner's work is his regionalization of China into nine "macroregions," each of which is analyzed in terms of a core-periphery structure (Skinner 1977a). This construct incorporates the structure of marketing hierarchies into the analysis and adds the notion that the economic processes implicit in urbanization impose a structure on rural society as well. Urban cores create a demand for resources (firewood, food, raw materials) that extend economic influence into peripheral areas.

These ideas have a number of important implications for agrarian studies more generally. First, the spatial organization of settlements--villages, towns, and cities, and the transport and marketing networks that connect them--has important consequences for diverse aspects of rural life. Whereas many historians have viewed rural life in China as centered around the village, Skinner asserts that the social horizon of the peasant was substantially broader, encompassing the standard market town, and that the horizon of the local elite extended to the intermediate and higher market town (Skinner 1964-65, p. 32). Ideas, political movements, and knowledge are diffused through marketing system channels. Itinerant merchants, artisans, letter writers, necromancers, fortune-tellers, or martial-arts instructors travel the circuits defined by the marketing hierarchies; and through these travelers results movement of ideas, products, rumors, skills, and innovations. Philip Kuhn emphasizes the importance of these ideas in his study of the Taiping Rebellion: "The great merit of William Skinner's study of Chinese markets is that it relates such complex matters as social stratification and informal rural organization to the ambits of movement described by people in their everyday lives. The fact that an ordinary peasant was physically present in his standard market town more than a thousand times in the course of his life, . . . means that his circle of personal acquaintance was . . . coterminous with the market area" (Kuhn 1980, p. 83).

These ideas have been applied to diverse topics in China's social history: the diffusion of millenarian ideas (Naquin), the spread of rebellion in the Canton Delta (Hsieh), the dispersion of literacy across space, and the constraints on Imperial military policy (Perdue). In a work that extends the spatial approach, Prasenjit Duara emphasizes the importance of irrigation associations in shaping the

social geography of rural China (Duara 1988). The core-periphery analysis has been found fruitful as well in analysis of banditry, rebellion, and smuggling. The grasp of the state tends to be weakest in peripheral areas with difficult terrain (mountains, deserts, marshes), sparse settlement, and poor transport networks; and consequently anti-state activities find natural refuge in such areas. (Perry, Schoppa, and Kuhn document various aspects of this phenomenon.)

Environment and resource regimes

We have already seen several examples of recent works that give central focus to environmental and ecological issues in China's history. Environmental issues come in a number of forms in Chinese history, including especially water management, land reclamation, and deforestation. As G. William Skinner points out, there is a strongly spatial orientation to each of these sets of issues: water systems constitute one of the lineaments determining patterns of settlement; land reclamation and deforestation follow population density (and therefore tend to correspond to a core-periphery structure, with a transfer of fertility from periphery to core).

An important recent treatment of the human impact on the Chinese environment is Peter Perdue's study, *Exhausting the Earth* (Perdue 1987). Perdue's study focuses on Hunan, 1500-1850, and places primary emphasis on the processes of agricultural change, land reclamation, and water control through which the landscape of Hunan was dramatically altered throughout this period. The struggle between the state and local interests over such issues as taxation, land reclamation, dike building, and land property rights is highlighted.

What is most original about the book is the author's success in identifying the consequences for ecology and land and water management of the political and economic processes involved in Hunan's substantial growth during this period. Perdue documents the slow process through which land reclamation efforts and dike-building nibbled away at Dongting Lake (now China's second largest lake). The state played an important role in stimulating this process in the Ming dynasty; in the Qing, Perdue indicates that the private interests of local elites and landowners were the driving force for continuing encroachment on wetland and lake margins.

Colonialism and imperialism

An issue that has not surfaced above is the impact of colonialism and imperialism on China's history. China's contact with the West was indeed significant--particularly in the nineteenth century, with the Opium War, the contact with modern military technology, Christian missionaries, and the increase of commercialization and trade between Europe, North America, and East Asia. Joseph Esherick places these events at the center of his interpretation of the Boxer Rebellion, which he understands as originating in popular resentment of foreign

missionaries. “If the Chinese state was incapable of resisting the ceaseless demands of the Christians and their foreign supporters, sooner or later the ‘heathen’ would form an organization of their own to fight back. And they did. They called it the Da-dao hui: the Big Sword Society” (Esherick 1987, p. 95). This is to emphasize the impact that Western presence exerted on popular politics. In a different vein, students of China’s economic development in the nineteenth century have noted both the stimulus and the distortions created in the Chinese economy by demand for silk, tea, bricks, and other Chinese exports (Li 1981; Dietrich 1972). Impact with the West, then, is one important element of China’s modern history (particularly since the nineteenth century). But there is an important proviso as well that emerges from contemporary China scholarship: this impact never had the profound or even decisive consequences for China’s history that British presence had in the South Asian experience. China was never colonized; it was never governed by a European power; and it maintained its own institutions of administration, trade, education, and warfare until the early twentieth century. China’s historical development proceeded largely according to its own internal factors and processes; it did not march to the beat of imperialism or colonialism. And so the prominence which these themes receive in the subaltern approach to South Asia finds little resonance in the field of the agrarian history of China. The notion of a “China-centered” history with which we began is applicable in this arena as well.¹⁶

Assessment

Is there a common approach in the studies mentioned here? Have we identified a “subaltern” school of study in these works? Clearly we have not. There is a common focus in all these works on the politics and local dynamics of agrarian change; but upon this commonality rests a broad diversity of approach. Some--Kuhn and Bianco--focus much of their attention on the forms of local organization through which local grievance leads to largescale disturbance. Others--Esherick, Naquin, Wagner--focus on the motivations, beliefs, and ideologies of the participants. Yet others--Perry and Tong--apply the idea that rebels are rational agents, propelled to their actions by a set of interests and beliefs. Some give primacy to the relations of class as an explanation of rebellion (Marks, Selden); others make use of the general framework of the “moral economy of the peasant” (Thaxton, Polachek) to account for the bases of solidarity and collective action.

One can say, then, that there is a broad spectrum of approaches, methodologies, and assumptions that underlie current research on China agrarian histories; more, one can say that virtually all of these approaches complement each other and give rise to a better historical understanding than any single-dimensional

¹⁶ See Cohen 1984, pp. 97-147, for extensive discussion of these issues.

approach would do. When one takes the sensitivity to organizational structures that one finds in Kuhn's work, adds to that the attentiveness to the nuances of ideology and religion that we find in Esherick and Naquin, and considers as well the material circumstances and prudential motivations engendered in Chinese rural people by the system of land and labor and the vagaries of the environment offered by Huang or Perdue, one has the basis for a rich explanation of a variety of processes of peasant politics and life.

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