

## The Death of a Landlord: Moral Predicament in Rural China, 1968–1969

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To the villagers of Yangjiagou, in northeastern Shaanxi Province, April is the best month of the year. After a long and harsh winter, the weather becomes warmer and the land revives. It is a time to prepare for the beginning of a new year. It is a time for the peasants to plant their hopes in the soil. Yet for Ma Zhongtai, April 1969 was the end, not the beginning. On the evening of April 28, after being tortured in a struggle session, Zhongtai was dumped at the foot of a hill. The next morning he was found dead in the spring wind.

Ma Zhongtai was a member of the eminent Ma landlord family that dominated the social hierarchy of Yangjiagou in Mizhi County from the 1700s to the 1940s. In early 1969, during the Cleansing of the Class Ranks (*qingli jieji duiwu*) campaign, Ma Zhongtai and his wife, He Hongfan, were sent back to the village from their work unit in Lintong, a city near the provincial capital in Xi'an and three hundred miles from Yangjiagou, the village they had left twenty years earlier. In early April, soldiers stationed in Yangjiagou found some old account books and sheaths of swords and pistol holsters in Zhongtai's old house. Immediately, Zhongtai and Hongfan became the targets of cruel struggle meetings. Allegedly representatives of the "evil landlords" who were dreaming of returning to exploit others, Zhongtai and Hongfan were beaten. Ten days after the old account books were found, Zhongtai died. Three days later, Hongfan committed suicide in their home. Incredibly, Zhongtai and Hongfan were the only two members of the large Ma landlord family who died as victims of popular violence after land reform in the 1940s. The deaths of Zhongtai and Hongfan traumatized

the village and have become a symbol of the fortunes and mishaps of the Ma landlords.

On May 18, 1998, twenty-nine years after Ma Zhongtai's death, I visited Yangjiagou, where Zhongtai and his wife were buried. In my preparation for the first trip, I had gotten used to hearing about the tragedy of Zhongtai from previous interview tapes. On the fifth day of my trip, I visited the couple's gravesite. Their tomb was simple but dignified, standing alone on the top of a hill east of the village. The previous day, I had visited the Ma family cemetery, which stands at the top of another hill. Although the family cemetery was dilapidated, I could still appreciate, from the broken tablets and the well-laid-out tombs, the family's past glory. Moreover, on the way I also saw several splendid new family graves, which belonged to the new elites who rose after land reform.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Zhongtai and Hongfan rested in solitude. They were not buried with Zhongtai's forefathers; and there was no other tomb around their burial place.

On our way to the tomb, my colleagues and I were lost until we ran into an old woman, Liu Zhangshi, who later introduced herself as the daughter of Zhongtai's wet nurse. I noted that she called Zhongtai "milking elder brother" (*nai gege*). Having led us to Zhongtai and Hongfan's tomb, Liu Zhangshi began to talk about the death of her "elder brother." She was still upset about how her good will had unintentionally facilitated Hongfan's suicide. After Zhongtai died, Liu Zhangshi asked her own brother to help out Hongfan by filling her water vat. Yet Hongfan later unexpectedly drowned herself in that water. Listening to Liu Zhangshi's confession at the tomb, I became aware that Zhongtai's tragedy was still painful for the villagers. That was why many people mentioned Zhongtai's death in interviews, though few talked about it in detail. It also explained the silence around Zhongtai's graveyard. It dawned on me at that moment that Zhongtai's death could serve as a window on the moral suffering of peasants in socialist China.

According to the communist blueprint for a new and modern country, moral transformation was central to the reconstruction of Chinese society.<sup>2</sup> Before the Communist Party controlled the village, peasant views of their world were mainly based on local norms, which came from the experiences of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> Such customary morality sustained order in the village by emphasizing harmonious relationships among people. Most important, the relationships among villagers were based on everyday life interactions, not

simply on the ownership of the means of production as the Communist Party suggested. Therefore, although they paid a substantial rent to their landlords each year, many ordinary peasants regarded a landlord as a rich villager, a family member, a friend, or a partner in agricultural production.<sup>4</sup> Compared to customary morality, communist morality is derived not from daily life but from abstract theoretical doctrine. Unlike customary morality, which held that “one’s moral obligations to another depended on the precise nature of one’s relationship to the other,” communist morality emphasizes that “one’s moral obligations toward another are defined by general norms equally applicable to all persons of a particular category”—specifically, a class category.<sup>5</sup> After the communists entered the village, they began to use class discourse to reshape relationships among villagers. Class labels that did not necessarily coincide with villager experiences were used to stratify people. For example, a landlord who had helped villagers in a time of famine was now held accountable for the misery the peasants suffered. Instead of emphasizing harmony, struggles with “enemies” were advocated in communist morality to create a new moral order.

To establish a new order, the party attacked customary morality. The communists launched a series of campaigns to facilitate moral transformation.<sup>6</sup> It seems that people’s behavior was inevitably shaped to some extent by the new communist morality advanced in waves of campaigns. However, the customary morality rooted in people’s everyday experiences was not easy to eradicate. Therefore, due to the tension between the customary moral ideals of the peasantry and the dictates of the official ideology, Chinese peasants constantly found themselves caught in moral predicaments, and were at a loss about how to conduct themselves.<sup>7</sup>

By tracing the life course of a single landlord, Ma Zhongtai, this chapter tries to demonstrate the changes Zhongtai, his family, and Yangjiagou villagers experienced during this moral transformation. The goal of the chapter is to shed light on the characteristics of the communist morality and the moral predicaments Chinese peasants faced. How did the communists initiate moral transformation? What caused changes in Yangjiagou and pushed Zhongtai to his death? In what moral predicaments were peasants caught in the Cultural Revolution? How did the villagers deal with these predicaments?

Yangjiagou was not a typical village. Before the communist revolution,

the Ma landlord family owned about 14,000 *shang* (7,000 acres) of land. Their prosperity made Yangjiagou a special place. To what extent can the case of Yangjiagou be used to illustrate a broader pattern in peasant life? Researchers doing case studies normally find that in rural China “there was, and is, no typical village.”<sup>8</sup> Every village is different with regard to income, economic and cultural activities, lineage relations, and ties to the state. It is impossible to imagine that changes in Yangjiagou were exactly the same as changes in other villages. However, as some researchers indicate, throughout rural China, “the social forces in conflict, the basic problems, the goals and the final outcome of the Revolution were the same.”<sup>9</sup> If the research “works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures,” it can go beyond the specific micro case, and help explore the macro structures.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the experiences of residents of Yangjiagou can reasonably offer glimpses into the fates of other peasants. Studying Zhongtai’s death and its meaning for Yangjiagou villagers will contribute to an understanding of the moral predicaments of Chinese peasants in general.

All data about the Cultural Revolution in this chapter originate from oral history interviews with Yangjiagou villagers conducted during six periods of fieldwork between 1997 and 2001 by the Beijing University Research Center for Oral History of Social Life.<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to observe what happened at the time of Zhongtai’s death. Moreover, it is not easy to find detailed records regarding Zhongtai, who was not an influential figure at all. No written materials concerning his death have been found in the county or prefectural archives. Illiterate villagers were important witnesses to Zhongtai’s death, but they could not write down what they saw and experienced. Therefore, the oral history testimonies from Yangjiagou villagers are the only available sources to study this tragedy.

The Cultural Revolution was one among many long-term efforts of the party to enforce communist morality. Against this background, Zhongtai’s death can help us explore the social changes initiated by moral transformation as well as the inner world of Chinese peasants involved in such transformation. This chapter begins with a delineation of the history of Zhongtai’s family and the initial efforts at moral transformation during land reform. It then proceeds to focus on the village in the Cultural Revolution, Zhongtai’s tragedy, and the moral predicament Yangjiagou villagers experienced. Finally, based on the representation of Zhongtai’s death at present,

the chapter discusses moral issues that arose in the post-Cultural Revolution period.

### *The Advent of Communist Morality*

The eldest son in his family, Zhongtai was born in 1908. At that time, Zhongtai's lineage had lived in Yangjiagou for about two hundred years. Yangjiagou is a village in the loess hills of northeastern Shaanxi Province. It is about seven hundred miles from Beijing, and fifteen miles from the county seat, Mizhi. Many Yangjiagou villagers believe, "As Ma landlords brought great fame to Yangjiagou, people outside may not recognize Mizhi, but they know Yangjiagou."

#### A VILLAGE OF THE MA LANDLORDS

In the early eighteenth century, Ma Zhongtai's eighth generation ancestor moved to Yangjiagou.<sup>12</sup> Although Ma is a typical surname among northwestern Muslims, Zhongtai's family was not Islamic. By transporting merchandise from Shaanxi to north China for the famous traders of Shanxi, Zhongtai's ancestors were able to earn the money to purchase land from the residents of Yangjiagou. The old residents in the village either moved out or became tenants of the Ma family. Thus, Zhongtai's lineage became the masters of Yangjiagou.

One hundred years later, the great-great-grandfather of Zhongtai became a famous member of the local gentry in Mizhi County. At that time, Zhongtai's ancestors owned lands not only in Yangjiagou and surrounding villages, but also outside the county. Moreover, Zhongtai's forefathers studied for and passed the imperial examinations, and some were selected to be officials.

In 1908, the year of Zhongtai's birth, the Ma lineage functioned as the lords of Yangjiagou and benefactors of all the villagers. In a 1942 survey of Yangjiagou, Zhang Wentian, a senior leader of the Communist Party, found that among the 220 ordinary village households, all but four were tenants, sharecroppers, or servants of the Ma landlords.<sup>13</sup> The prosperity of the Ma landlords attracted peasant households from other villages to move into Yangjiagou to look for jobs. Ma landlords provided the peasants not only with tools and cattle, but also houses. Yangjiagou was a community that tied the Ma landlords to all other peasants. In particular, as the Mas

gradually came to own more and more land outside the village, Yangjiagou villagers assisted them in managing their business with people in other villages, including the collection of land rents. Moreover, most villagers' wives worked as servants or wet nurses for the Ma landlords. Close personal ties thus grew between landlords and peasants.<sup>14</sup>

Under these circumstances, the Ma landlords seldom hesitated to be cordial with and supportive of villagers. In 1867, facing threats from Muslim rebels, the cousins of Zhongtai's grandfather built a fortress to protect all residents in Yangjiagou. During famines, the Ma landlord family usually set up a relief station, serving free food to the villagers of Yangjiagou and surrounding villages.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the Ma landlords bestowed small favors on their neighbors such as lending them grain or helping them find wives.

As a result of cooperation in production and noteworthy charitable deeds, the Ma landlord family established decent relationships with their tenants and servants. Villagers' images of the Ma landlords were drawn from life experience. The Ma landlords were partners in production, neighbors, relatives, and friends whom they could ask for help in life's everyday crises.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between the Ma landlords and other residents of Yangjiagou reveals a pattern of customary social ethics in action, which placed a sacred value on loyalty generated by kinship, friendship, and charity.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Yangjiagou was not free from resentments and conflicts. However, public conflicts were exceptions rather than the rule. The village appeared to be a lively and relatively harmonious community, which is fundamentally different from the Communist Party's image of village life under landlord rule.

#### A PREVIEW OF THE NEW MORALITY

Due to the tumult of the late Qing, Ma Zhongtai's father, born in 1883, only studied in the family school. After the 1930s, he sold some land to his cousins and sent his children to prestigious schools in China's major cities. His eldest son, Zhongtai, was sent to Beijing University, where he majored in biology.<sup>18</sup> In this he was typical of many Ma offspring. Under the new educational system that started during the New Policy period of the late Qing, young Ma students, both male and female, got a chance to study in such new-style institutions as normal schools. Many went to college in Beijing, Tianjin, Xi'an, and even abroad. The new generation of Mas was exposed to many new ideas, including Marxism. Some became the earliest Communist

Party members in the county.<sup>19</sup> "The underground party organization was first established in schools," said Liu Chengyun, who joined the party in 1942 and worked as a leader in the township (*xiang*). "There were children of the Ma landlords in these schools. They were the earliest members of the party."<sup>20</sup> However, these revolutionary forerunners devoted themselves to the revolutionary cause outside Yangjiagou, while other people initiated the revolution that challenged the authority of the Ma landlord family in Yangjiagou itself.<sup>21</sup>

Zhongtai did not join his revolutionary cousins. Instead of becoming a Communist or working for the Nationalist Party, in 1935–36 Zhongtai chose to abandon his studies to return to Yangjiagou.<sup>22</sup> At that time, Yangjiagou was already affected by the tide of revolution. In 1934, communist guerrillas appeared in the surrounding areas. The Ma family had to call in a company of Nationalist soldiers for protection. It became increasingly difficult for the Ma landlords to collect rents, not to mention retain their power. Zhongtai was thus destined to witness dramatic changes in his village.

Just one hundred and fifty miles south of Yangjiagou, Mao Zedong and his comrades established the headquarters of their famous base in Yan'an in the mid-1930s. Following the outbreak of the war against Japan in July 1937, Yan'an began to attract patriotic youth from all over China. A new moral order, not only for the Ma landlords, but for all Yangjiagou villagers, was emerging in the communist base.<sup>23</sup> In the view of the communists, harmony between landlords and peasants was a mere illusion. Instead, the new communist morality paid great attention to conflict and dissent, which was attributed to the inequality in ownership of the means of production, especially land. The party aimed to wipe out the inequality between landlords and peasants. A new code of ethics was promoted. According to the communists, the Ma landlords were morally "evil." Their monopolization of land meant that they were the exploiters, not the benefactors, of Yangjiagou's villagers.

Because of the war against Japan, the Ma fall from power, although drawing closer and closer, was postponed. In July 1937, the communists joined a united front with the Nationalist Party. Mizhi County was subsequently included within the garrison area of the communist forces. A people's political regime (*renmin zhengquan*) led by the communists was gradually established in Mizhi County in 1941.<sup>24</sup> The Ma fortress in Yangjiagou was soon penetrated by the new communist regime.

At that time, the Ma family largely retained its privileges. In order to solidify the wartime multiclass united front, the party treated the Ma landlords as a potentially cooperative partner.<sup>25</sup> The Mas soon found positions throughout the different levels of the people's government. One was even elected head of Yangjiagou district. Zhongtai also got a job in the new local government.<sup>26</sup> However, the communist rent and interest reduction (*jian-zu jianxi*) policies, accompanied by heavy taxes (*aiguo gongliang*), severely weakened the economic power of the Ma landlords. As a report from the township of Yangjiagou states, "These years, several Ma landlords sold their land . . . [and] several mortgaged their land out."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, to the party, cooperation with the "evil" landlords was just a temporary tactic. In less than a year after the end of the war against Japan, the Communist Party changed its policy toward the landlords. In particular, the May Fourth Directive (*wusi zhishi*) of 1946 initiated land reform. The directive focused on both land redistribution and an attempt to establish a new social order based on communist morality.

#### AFTER LAND REFORM

According to the party's conception of rural life, the village was dominated by landlords and rich peasants who exploited and oppressed the rest of the villagers. The evil landlord was the root of peasant misery. Only after poor peasants struggled with their landlords, under the direction of the party, could a new social order be established. During land reform, the antagonism between peasants and "evil" landlords was highlighted. The party tried to overturn the old social order by mobilizing peasants to struggle against landlords.<sup>28</sup> In Yangjiagou, during land reform, the Ma landlords became the targets of struggle meetings. Although the head of his family, Zhongtai's father did not attract public attention. In contrast to his eminent cousins, who owned over 500 acres, Zhongtai's father held only 50 acres of land under his own name. Further, the personality of Zhongtai's father was very mild.<sup>29</sup> All these factors helped Zhongtai and his family escape struggle sessions during land reform. However, the more successful cousins of Zhongtai's father were not as fortunate.

An uncle of Zhongtai, Ma Xingmin, was an eminent figure in both Yangjiagou and in the whole base area. After studying architecture in Shanghai and Japan, Xingmin went back to the village and worked as a leader of the Ma family. During the famine of 1929, he hired Yangjiagou villagers to

construct a splendid cave house. In the view of Liu Chenggao, a former Ma tenant, Xingmin's project was designed to provide the villagers with food during that famine. "That guy," he said, "was a benevolent landlord" (*ende dizhu*). Xingmin's fame made him the first target in land reform. In the struggle meeting, the benevolent Ma Xingmin was condemned as immoral. The work team members taught the villagers a song, in which Xingmin was criticized for being "rapacious as a wolf and savage as a cur" (*lang xin gou fei*).

However, the Yangjiagou villagers did not really accept this criticism. In our interviews, almost every person who talked about this struggle meeting praised Xingmin as a good person. Conversely, many villagers regarded those who criticized Xingmin as ingrates. In 1934–35, when Nationalist troops were stationed in Yangjiagou, they detained many people from the surrounding areas and accused them of being communist sympathizers. "Xingmin always went to ask the Nationalist army head to set these people free after beating them instead of killing them." The villagers preserve vivid memories of Xingmin's benevolence to this day. However, in the struggle meeting, one of the persons saved by Xingmin came forward to beat his savior. A villager described the scene in an interview: "This old guy [Xingmin] said, 'I do not feel injustice if others beat me; but now that you beat me, I feel bitterness.'" In my interviews, most of the villagers who recalled this scene deplored this injustice toward Xingmin.

The struggle meeting was a public confrontation between communist morality and customary village ethics. According to customary village ethics, it is unjust for a former beneficiary to beat his benefactor. However, this perfidious behavior was not only legitimate but advocated in communist morality. Regardless of how well landlords had treated the villagers, villagers should now transcend personal relationships to condemn landlords as representatives of the "evil" landlord class. Moreover, speaking out against an acquaintance in a public struggle meeting indicated to the authorities and to one's peers that the critic placed the new ethics over and above old loyalties to his associates.<sup>30</sup>

The party rewarded people who expressed loyalty to the new morality with opportunities for advancement. But Yangjiagou villagers used the label "black skins" (*heipi*) to refer to the brazen persons rewarded by the party for beating a landlord. Nevertheless, the party had already labeled the Ma landlords as "enemies" of the other villagers. After several villagers were criticized

as Ma henchmen or backward elements for expressing their disapproval of the accusations against the Mases, no one dared to dissent publicly from communist morality.

When the Ma landlords and the party's supporters were respectively labeled "enemies of the masses" and "revolutionary masses," the villagers caught between these poles were in a torturous situation: according to village tradition and their life experience, the villagers could not accept struggles against their patrons; however, if they still supported the Ma landlords, they would be regarded as accomplices of the "enemies."<sup>31</sup> The discrepancy between customary morality and communist morality definitely threw Yangjiagou villagers into a predicament. Most of the time, the only possible choice for these tortured villagers was to do nothing.

Compared with landlords in other villages, the Ma landlords did not suffer a great deal. In the first phase of land reform (1946–47), during which Ma Xingmin was struggled against, corrupt local cadres who confiscated the property of the Ma landlords for their own use soon became targets. The Ma landlords, meanwhile, were almost forgotten. By the second phase of land reform (1947–48), Mao Zedong was residing in Yangjiagou, hiding from the Nationalist armies then advancing into northern Shaanxi. Thus, the struggle session during the second phase lasted only a single day in February 1948 before it was stopped by Mao. The good fortune of the Ma landlords was also the luck of the Yangjiagou villagers. The Ma landlords escaped physical torment, and the villagers were saved from psychological suffering.

After land reform, the Ma landlords who escaped persecution soon left Yangjiagou. Their superior educational background and revolutionary relatives helped them to find good jobs in the cities. After his father died in 1948, Zhongtai moved with his family to Yan'an. By 1949, only two or three Ma landlords remained in Yangjiagou. Everyone recognized that Yangjiagou was no longer a Ma family stronghold. Nobody, not even Zhongtai, foresaw that Yangjiagou would become a place of suffering for the Ma landlords in the distant future.

#### THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN TWO MORALITIES

Twenty years after Zhongtai's family moved out of Yangjiagou, Zhongtai and his wife were sent back to his old home. In the two decades he spent outside Yangjiagou, he had worked successively as head of the Yan'an Sugar Refinery and as an office clerk for the Heavy Industry Department

of Shaanxi. Later on, Zhongtai was demoted to be a research fellow at a research institute of the Ministry of Chemical Industry in Lintong, a satellite town of Xi'an. In fact, the ups and downs of Zhongtai's career were directly due to his family relations.

The landlord class label that Zhongtai inherited from his family made him vulnerable to the various campaigns launched after 1949. However, in the new state, one's relationships with one's relatives and close friends (*shehui guanxi*) were also considered a measure of one's political inclinations, a measure almost as important as class origin.<sup>32</sup> Thus, since several of Zhongtai's family members were high cadres of the party, he was sheltered from attack.

Marriage was an important method that the Ma landlord family used to expand and strengthen its social networks. Before the rise of the communists, Ma landlords married their daughters to other local gentry families and took wives from these families. For example, Zhongtai's mother was from a famous intellectual family in the county seat. After the Communist Party rose to power in the 1940s, personal connections with the new regime were established through marriages. Numerous Ma family daughters, including Zhongtai's youngest sister, Shuliang, married party cadres.<sup>33</sup> Shuliang's husband, Ma Mingfang, was a high-ranking communist who had joined the party in 1925. After the new state was established, Mingfang was the PRC's first governor and first party secretary of Shaanxi Province, a major player in the Northwest Bureau, and later, a minister in the central government.<sup>34</sup> Such an influential brother-in-law greatly benefited Zhongtai.

Moreover, Zhongtai's eldest daughter, Ma Li, was also a high official in the party. Before 1949, Li worked for the Department of Civil Affairs in the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region. After 1949, she worked in the General Office of the State Council.<sup>35</sup> Li's husband, Zhong Ling, was both a famous artist and an important state official. Zhong Ling went to Yan'an in 1938 at the age of seventeen and studied at the Lu Xun Art Academy. It is said that during the Anti-Japanese War most of the slogans in Yan'an city were written by him. Zhong Ling was also one of the designers of the state emblem and a major organizer of the founding ceremony of the People's Republic on October 1, 1949. Furthermore, Zhong Ling was responsible for writing the two slogans hung on Tiananmen after 1949.<sup>36</sup>

Zhongtai's powerful relatives built a safe shelter for him in the various political campaigns that followed 1949. During these campaigns, he was

never considered a class enemy and was in a safe position even during the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign. Zhongtai's special connection with party officials was common in the Ma landlord family as a whole. Every Ma landlord could list several remote or close relatives who were eminent revolutionaries. In the seventeen years from 1949 to the start of the Cultural Revolution, only one Ma landlord was attacked during the Anti-rightist campaign and two were victimized during the 1962 Return to the Village movement. Personal relationships were an important aspect of customary morality, one that sustained the social order. Although the communist regime targeted the old social system for destruction, personal relationships were still important in the PRC.

Since the Mases became city residents after the new state was established and only periodically visited Yangjiagou, they were regarded as remote relatives of the villagers. Though few Ma landlords lived in Yangjiagou after 1949, many still regarded Yangjiagou as their home. In 1963, for example, the eldest cousin of Zhongtai's generation, Zhonglin, was buried in Yangjiagou after his death in Xi'an.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in the 1950s, almost every spring at the Qingming Festival, some Ma landlords returned to sweep the graves of their ancestors.

At the same time, despite the absence of the Ma landlords from village life, Yangjiagou was continuously labeled a "landlords' nest" (*dizhu wo*). In the views of county leaders and the peasants in surrounding areas, Yangjiagou villagers still maintained close relations with the absent Ma landlords. They even believed that it was Yangjiagou villagers who had helped the Ma landlords escape punishment during land reform.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1963 Socialist Education movement, the county selected Yangjiagou as a model site for intensive study and struggle, due to its fame as a "landlords' nest." A work team led by a county vice-magistrate stayed in Yangjiagou for three months. The work team was disappointed to find that the villagers were still reluctant to criticize the Ma landlords.<sup>39</sup> Ma Hanshu, one of Zhongtai's nephews, who had returned to Yangjiagou from a bank in the city during the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign and then worked as a temporary accountant in Yangjiagou for about a year, became the scapegoat in the team's search for corruption in the village. The village leaders were also criticized for "sitting in the midst of landlords" (*zuo zai dizhu huaili*). The Socialist Education movement was an attempt by the communist state to push class discourse in villages once again, and it was a prelude to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>40</sup>

### Chaos and Persistence

During the Great Leap Forward, a broadcast system was installed in every household in Yangjiagou. Several years later, on June 1, 1966, Yangjiagou villagers heard the broadcast of the *People's Daily* editorial "Sweep Away All Monsters." Through their reading of other editorials and documents, the villagers became familiar with the thrust of the discourse found in the editorial. "Class struggle has not ceased in China," it stated, thus it was time to "demolish all the old ideology and culture and all the old customs and habits [the 'four olds'], which, fostered by the exploiting classes, have poisoned the minds of people for thousands of years," and to "create and foster among the masses an entirely new ideology and culture and entirely new customs and habits."<sup>41</sup> The antagonism between the old and the new was the central topic of this editorial. As the masses were still deeply influenced by the old cultural system, a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was necessary to enlighten the backward elements with communist morality. From this editorial, we see that one aim of the Cultural Revolution was to demolish the old customary morality and foster the new communist morality.

It was impossible for ordinary peasants in Yangjiagou to foresee what was going to happen in this new revolution. Were great changes going to take place, or was it just the usual propaganda? No one knew at the time. Yet it was not long before the villagers witnessed a great upheaval. Three months later, in September 1966, the Destroy the Four Olds (*po sijiu*) campaign carried out by young students brought the first stage of the Cultural Revolution to the village.

The middle schools were the starting place of the Cultural Revolution in Mizhi County.<sup>42</sup> In June 1966, red guard organizations were established in these middle schools. Students were extremely enthusiastic about the call of the Cultural Revolution, and by September 1966 the students of Mizhi County were fervently participating in the Destroy the Four Olds campaign.

The red guards did not overlook Yangjiagou, the famous nest of landlords. The prosperous Ma landlord family had left behind numerous relics of their illustrious past. During land reform, few of these relics had been destroyed.<sup>43</sup> The glorious gates of the Ma fortress, their ancestral halls, and the two stone tablets remained important parts of Yangjiagou until September 1966.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the well-decorated homes of the Ma landlords, in which more than one-third of the villagers lived at that time, suggested to

outsiders the village's splendid past. While Yangjiagou villagers enjoyed the structures left by the Ma landlords, militant revolutionary youths did not appreciate these remnants of the old society.

"The two well-built memorial arches (*pailou*), the Buddhist temple, the temple of the Goddess of Fertility, and one ancestral hall of the landlords were all smashed by the red guards," said Li Huaishan, whose uncle, a famous mason, had directed the construction of one arch standing at the entrance to the Ma landlord fortress. This memorial arch was built in honor of a Ma landlord's widow. Many villagers, like Huaishan, sang high praise for this *pailou*: "It was the best one in the whole Shaanbei area." In an effort to sweep away this symbol of the old culture, "the red guards tried to smash the *pailou*, but they failed. Neither could they pull it down." Zhongyi, one of the two landlords who returned in 1962, recounted the sad destruction of this *pailou*: "Then they drilled several holes at the bottom, buried some dynamite, and blew up the memorial arch." The explosion shocked the villagers, and they reacted docilely in the face of the radical youth from the county seat.<sup>45</sup> A villager, Guo Chengde, explained: "They went to my house, and searched for the 'four olds.' An incense burner and several traditional New Year pictures were found. They shattered these. I was there, but what could I do? I just sat there and ate."

However, the red guards did not sweep away all the "four olds" in Yangjiagou. The whole Ma fortress was preserved, partly due to Mao's stay there during land reform. Along with the compound in which Mao lived, placards inscribed with landlords' calligraphy were preserved. In the center of the village a pavilion and a temple were destroyed, but the two stone tablets recording the good deeds of Ma landlords, though not connected in any way with Mao, were also preserved. In village memory, the preservation of these two tablets was extremely dramatic. "The red guards wanted to smash the tablets," Ma Zhihui, a village youth at that time, said, "but we villagers did not permit it." Rather than risk a public confrontation with red guards who used dynamite to destroy the "four olds," the villagers hid the two tablets. The night before the red guards came, someone plastered mud over the tablets. Later, as Zhihui recalled, "Bricks were used to seal these tablets, and they were turned into a propaganda board. An image of Chairman Mao wearing a military uniform was later painted on that wall."<sup>46</sup> To the villagers, these two tablets were relics of former community life. "The tablets represented help given to us in time of distress (*jiu ming*)," said Li Huaishan,

whose sentiment was quietly shared by many Yangjiagou villagers. Although the demolition of the cultural monuments of the Ma landlords was accompanied by startling violence, the villagers still appreciated the relics of the village past more than the new communist morality.

During the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, Zhongtai's cousin Zhongyi, as a representative of the evil landlords, was paraded through the street with a tall white hat and a humiliating placard placed around his neck. Meanwhile, Zhongtai remained at the research institute near Xi'an. He probably could not have imagined that in Yangjiagou the red guards had already destroyed his grandfather's tomb. But Zhongtai also led a difficult life at that time. His family origins received increased scrutiny, and his revolutionary relatives themselves became targets of the Cultural Revolution. Ma Mingfang, Zhongtai's high-ranking brother-in-law, was publicly criticized for his skepticism of the policies of the Cultural Revolution, and later he became a major target in the attack on the Northeast Bureau, where he worked as the second in command.<sup>47</sup> Instead of gaining shelter from his relatives, Zhongtai was now implicated in the cases of these "counterrevolutionaries." Zhongtai's stay in the city was about to be cut short.

#### THE RETURN OF THE MA LANDLORDS

The passionately revolutionary students went back to their schools soon after they ran out of "four olds" to destroy, and Yangjiagou was left in a mess. The memorial arch and temples were demolished. The village leaders who rose during land reform were asked to stand aside (*kaobian zhan*). Soon the factional conflicts that engulfed the red guards also spread to Yangjiagou.

The young villagers, most of whom returned to Yangjiagou after finishing middle school, organized themselves into two factions: the Red Rebel Army (*Hongse zaofan jun*) and the Red Rebel Corps (*Hongse zaofan tuan*). At the county seat, the two factions not only engaged in armed battles, but also sent special attack teams (*wudou dui*) to besiege the nearby county seat of Jiaxian. By contrast, the red guard factions in Yangjiagou were far more moderate. There were continuous public debates, but only one violent struggle. This occurred during the "power seizure" (*duoquan*) period of February 1967. At that time, the commune government was located in Mao's former Yangjiagou residence.<sup>48</sup> Both the Red Rebel Army and the Red Rebel Corps wanted to control the commune government. Their battle lasted one night. Although no one died, the brutal fight led many youths to reconsider

their actions. Ma Rutong, a central figure in the Red Rebel Army, dropped out after experiencing such a terrible night. "No matter what happens," said Rutong, "I will not join again."

On March 8, 1968, the central government issued a special directive for spring planting in rural areas. Agricultural production was emphasized. It urged "all the poor and lower-middle peasants and the proletarian revolutionaries and revolutionary cadres to immediately mobilize to break a new spring cultivation record."<sup>49</sup> In Yangjiagou the old leaders with experience in agriculture were recruited to work with the young revolutionaries and more and more of the younger generation went back to the fields with their fathers. The peasants were very realistic. They knew well that revolution alone could not produce food.

After 1967 Mao began to advocate the establishment of revolutionary committees at all levels to quell the violence in the cities.<sup>50</sup> The revolutionary committee in Mizhi County was established in February 1968, but violent fighting did not cease until June. To strengthen the rule of the new revolutionary committees, the central government released another directive that initiated a new political campaign, the Cleansing of the Class Ranks (*qingli jieji duiwu*). After the Twelfth Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress in October 1968, the cleansing campaign became the major task of the Cultural Revolution. A proclamation of the Twelfth Plenum stated: "We must carry out the Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign well in factories, rural communes, organizations, schools, all enterprises and streets, to dig out the handful of counterrevolutionaries hidden among the masses."<sup>51</sup> The campaign soon spread nationwide.

According to official directives, the campaign had multiple targets. First, the cleansing campaign targeted the leaders of red guard factions considered responsible for the disorder of the past two years. Ma Rutong, who withdrew from the red guards after the "power seizure" episode, witnessed the violent beating of his successor during the cleansing campaign. "He was beaten to the ground, and then someone poured cold water on him. Fortunately, I escaped from this." Rutong's decision to withdraw from the red guards had saved him.

However, others were destined to become targets of the cleansing campaign. This campaign followed the basic aim of the Cultural Revolution—to demolish the old culture and foster a new communist morality. Those with bad class backgrounds were easily identified as potential counterrevo-

lutionaries who should be struck from the ranks of the people. This time the members of the Ma landlord family who worked and lived in cities were inevitably labeled “enemies of the people” because of the wealth of their forefathers. “There had been no class distinctions for a long time. But after that point more landlords were brought forward.” As a member of the Ma landlord family, Zhongyi was very dissatisfied with this change, which in his view was completely arbitrary. After the cleansing campaign directives were issued to grassroots units in winter 1968, more and more Ma landlords became targets. Soon some were sent from their work units back to Yangjiagou, where they were subjected to continuous political attacks.

As early as May 1968, when the Liaoning provincial revolutionary committee was established, Zhongtai’s brother-in-law, Ma Mingfang, who was once the leader of the provincial government and the Northeast Bureau, was labeled a prominent counterrevolutionary.<sup>52</sup> His relationship to Mingfang made Zhongtai more vulnerable in the cleansing campaign. In January 1969, Zhongtai and his wife, He Hongfan, were sent back to the county seat of Mizhi by Zhongtai’s research institute. Several days later, the couple was brought to Yangjiagou, their home village where they had lost their family property twenty years before.

In many ways, Zhongtai was not a likely candidate for struggle. Before land reform, Zhongtai’s family was not among the richest households of the Ma lineage. Moreover, throughout his adult life Zhongtai had rarely stayed in Yangjiagou for long periods of time. After his fourteenth birthday, he lived mostly outside of the village, studying or working. Between 1939 and 1948 he worked in the nearby township and later the Mizhi county seat but seems to have frequently returned to Yangjiagou, where his wife and children lived. Even during that time, his father was still the head of the family. Thus, it was not easy to identify Zhongtai’s supposedly “bad” deeds. At this point, Zhongtai could only be criticized as a member of the Ma landlord family, a representative of the “evil” landlord class. Zhongtai’s other vulnerability was his relationship with his brother-in-law. As Liu Xuezhang, a teacher in the Yangjiagou elementary school during the campaign, commented, “Zhongtai himself did not do anything bad.” Therefore, the struggle session marking the couple’s return was routine. “The landlord who was the target stood at the center, while other landlords stood to the side,” said Liu Xuezhang. That evening, Zhongtai stood at the center of the struggle session. He was asked to confess to his crimes, and was warned to

work honestly under the supervision of the poor and lower-middle peasants of Yangjiagou.

Zhongtai met several of his relatives after returning to the village. They had also been sent back from their work units. Zhongbi, Zhongtai’s cousin, had worked in the provincial Department of Agriculture. Ma Qian, Zhongtai’s distant nephew, was a political commissar in the army. Ma Kai, a distant grandnephew, was a factory worker in a nearby town. Chang Jiexuan, a remote niece-in-law of Zhongtai, was a well-known figure in the surrounding areas. She was two years older than Zhongtai and had retired from the county government.<sup>53</sup> In addition, three Ma landlords had returned to Yangjiagou before the Cultural Revolution. Hanshu, a nephew of Zhongtai, came back as a “rightist” in the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign. Two of Zhongtai’s cousins, Zhongyi and Shiqi, returned during the 1962 Return to the Village movement. At that time, in January 1969, there were a total of nearly ten households of the Ma landlord family in Yangjiagou. Zhongtai and his wife joined them in a humiliating parade around the village. A villager, Ma Zhenyin, recalled the scene: “There were eight or nine people altogether,” he said, “One person hit a drum; one held small cymbals. All of them wore tall paper hats and recited confessions.”

However, it seems that even at that time the Ma landlords were still respected by Yangjiagou villagers. Stories were told about Zhongtai’s renowned niece Chang Jiexuan. Ma Rutong remembered that as a revolutionary rebel in 1967, he had publicly debated Chang. “I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight,” Rutong said. “This old woman was in her sixties. Her hair was cut into a yin-yang pattern.” The debate between Rutong and Chang, the “evil” landlord wife, lasted a whole day in Yangjiagou. Even today, Rutong continues to praise Chang. He stated, “She had high prestige in this village. Her head was very clear.” After this public debate, Chang was confined in the village and labored under surveillance. In the view of the Yangjiagou villagers, the Ma landlords were not mere representatives of the “evil” landlord class. They were concrete persons in past and present village life. Even putting the past benevolence of the Ma landlords aside, struggling against the Ma landlords or any other people did not conform to the villagers’ conception of a proper life.

#### THE ARMY’S ARRIVAL

After land reform, Zhongtai’s family retained some land and two rooms

of their old house on the east hill. When he moved out in 1948, Zhongtai sold the land and permitted a former tenant to live in the two rooms. However, when Zhongtai and his wife returned to Yangjiagou, it was impossible for them to move back to their old home. An army unit was stationed in Yangjiagou just two weeks after Zhongtai's return. Zhongyi was Zhongtai's close cousin and his house was very close to Zhongtai's. Before the army came, Zhongyi had already been asked to move out of his own house. "All the houses on the east hill were requisitioned by the army," he said. "We moved into the old mud-house down the hill."

According to the county gazetteer, "From winter 1968 to April 1970, PLA unit 8321 was stationed in Yangjiagou to prepare for war" (*bei zhan*).<sup>54</sup> Here, "Yangjiagou" refers to the entire Yangjiagou commune. The soldiers lived in several of the commune's villages. One battalion, unit 4785, lived in Yangjiagou. "They came in the first month and left in the tenth month, staying almost one year," Zhongyi remembered. "They were an engineering unit. They came here to excavate some caves in the back hill." The construction in Yangjiagou was ordered by the central government as preparation for a possible war with the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup>

The coming of the engineer corps changed Yangjiagou. Before, there had been no road connecting Yangjiagou and the county seat. To facilitate its construction project, the army built a road connecting Yangjiagou to the outside world. Because of the size of the army's trucks, Yangjiagou's rear gate, which had been preserved during the Destroy the Four Olds campaign, was pulled down. However, the impact of the troops was more profound than these physical changes. During their stay in Yangjiagou, these engineers were deeply involved in the politics of the local Cultural Revolution. In particular, they led the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign in Yangjiagou.

After the chaos of 1966 and 1967, Mao decided to rely on the army to suppress disorder, restore order and authority, and then continue the Cultural Revolution. In a January 1967 directive, the central government made it clear that "the PLA must firmly take the side of the proletarian revolutionaries," and "the demands of all true revolutionaries for support and assistance from the army should be satisfied."<sup>56</sup> From that point on, the army played a significant role in the Cultural Revolution nationwide. Guided by the dual principle of "grasping revolution and promoting production," the engineer corps would not fail to make revolution in Yangjiagou, even while busily working on construction.

In Ma Zhenyin's memory, the soldiers were very cordial. They fed chickens for Zhenyin and repaired his worn shoes. "They came to chat with me almost every day," Zhenyin recalled. On the other hand, it is likely that without the engineer corps, revolution would have been placed on the back burner in Yangjiagou. The army sent some soldiers to work in the fields with the villagers, and there was also a special group of soldiers in charge of assisting the village leaders in carrying out the Cultural Revolution. Guo Chengde, who graduated from the village elementary school, admired the experts in the army. "They drew pictures of Chairman Mao all over the village, in our rooms and on the doors," he reminisced. "Their calligraphy was also great. They left so many slogans."<sup>57</sup>

The soldiers also gave villagers up-to-date information on the larger purpose of the Cultural Revolution. Guo Chengde still remembers these exciting times: "Every time some new central directive was released, they sent us a copy, with much beating of drums and gongs." In contrast to the red guards, the army was made up of complete strangers, whom the villagers viewed as connected to the prosperous outside world. Sometimes, however, the villagers found that they were put in painful situations by these outsiders. In spring 1969, for example, the engineer corps set in motion a series of events that would lead to the death of Zhongtai.

#### THE DEATH OF ZHONGTAI

After being sent back in January, Zhongtai and his wife, He Hongfan, worked in the collective under surveillance. According to Zhongyi, Zhongtai's close cousin and fellow sufferer, physical labor was not punishment, but a test for people with "bad" class origins: "It is not easy to distinguish black from white. You cannot decide arbitrarily. It is necessary to work under surveillance; people can judge you by your work." Under such circumstance, it is likely that Zhongtai and his landlord relatives had to work hard to demonstrate that they were not "enemies of the people." Farm work was not easy for Zhongtai. He was already sixty-three, and he had never before done any physical labor. The work was not heavy during the winter, but when the spring planting drew near, Zhongtai became busier. Work in the fields exhausted old Zhongtai and Hongfan, but it was still bearable. The routine evening meetings were not very troublesome either. They were seldom beaten, though severe reprimands were unavoidable. Bowing and honest confessions were the correct public gestures. However, this routine life was

broken on April 19, 1969, when new “evidence” of Zhongtai’s “crimes” was found.

Ma Zhongyi witnessed Zhongtai’s whole ordeal: “Some soldiers were living in Zhongtai’s old house. They wanted to build a toilet in the storage area. In the process, they dug up some old account books and several sheaths of swords or pistol holsters.” Burning the account books of landlords was a special ritual during land reform. In Yangjiagou, after the burning a memorial tablet honoring *fanshen* (overturning the old class hierarchy) was also erected. According to the revolutionaries, an old account book that recorded the land and other properties belonging to a landlord was the symbol of exploitation by the landlord class. Thus, keeping a copy of an account book was regarded as a sign of waiting for “a change of the sky,” and then restoring the old system of exploitation. But during land reform, Zhongtai was already working outside the village. “It must have been Zhongtai’s father who buried this stuff,” Zhongyi deduced. It is not easy to imagine what Zhongtai’s father was thinking when he buried the account books. At that time, he was already in his sixties and had lost all his belongings in one night. “The sheaths must have been left by Hu Zongnan’s troop,” Zhongyi told us. In autumn 1947, Nationalist troops under Hu Zongnan had passed through Yangjiagou after they were defeated by the communist army in Shajidian, about eighty miles from Yangjiagou. Zhongyi believed that Zhongtai’s father did not own a sword. “Probably he wanted to use the sheaths of swords to make a kitchen knife,” Zhongyi guessed.

No one knows whether Zhongtai knew about the existence of the account books and sheaths left by his parents. But now he was responsible for these “evil” items. As soon as the account books were found, the soldiers informed the commune government and village leaders. What an excellent negative example for the cleansing campaign! The landlord class never gave up its ambition to restore the “evil” exploitative institution. They were definitely “the enemies of the people.” More importantly, in Zhongtai’s case, the evil landlord had infiltrated into the revolutionary camp long ago. He was connected to a national target, Ma Mingfang, Zhongtai’s brother-in-law who had been jailed as a traitor. The activists were pleased about finding such a villain. Continuous struggle meetings awaited Zhongtai in the following days.

It was the busy season for spring cultivation, so struggle meetings were held in the evening. The theater stage located at the center of the village

was used to conduct the struggle meetings. Now Zhongtai and his wife were placed at center stage. Several villagers described the struggle meetings against Zhongtai. As Ma Rutong remembered, in the routine struggles the landlords were only asked to bow, while the struggle of Zhongtai was different: “Zhongtai and his wife stood with hands bound in back.” In contrast to the routine struggle sessions, this “evil landlord” was violently beaten. Ma Zhenyin said he had some problems with his eyes, but he was still shocked by the bloody scene. “Someone wrenched Zhongtai’s neck, and another used an iron rod to hit him. It was very horrible even to glimpse.” Nor was Zhongtai’s wife, He Hongfan, able to avoid the brutal treatment. Liu Xuezhang remembered that Hongfan’s hair caused her great pain. “The hair of Zhongtai’s wife was pulled out. These people were really atrocious.” But, who precisely were these atrocious people?

“These struggles were in fact directed by the army,” Ma Rutong said. According to directives issued to the army in the Cultural Revolution, the soldiers definitely should have supported the masses in their struggles against all kinds of counterrevolutionaries. In Zhongtai’s case, it was the soldiers who found evidence of his “crime.” Naturally, the army was fervent about taking part in and even directing the struggle against Zhongtai. But in Ma Zhenyin’s view, the soldiers themselves were very moderate. “I remember an army company commander saying, ‘Comrades, we are here to figure out his problem. Do not hurt him. We should focus on his crime.’” Ma Zhenyin’s memory reflected a general impression of the army in Yangjiagou: they were reasonable.

However, He Zhifu was more precise about the role of the army: “In public, they did not beat Zhongtai, but they supported the local toughs.” According to the party’s mass line, the soldiers could not run the struggles all by themselves. In fact, the soldiers’ task was not to struggle against Zhongtai, but to mobilize the villagers for the struggle. So all villagers were asked to show up during the struggles against Zhongtai. After some villagers joined in the struggle against Zhongtai, the army showed support for these revolutionary masses. Even though violence was used in the struggle, it was inappropriate according to its own regulations for the army to condemn or stop the revolutionary local toughs.

All memories of the local toughs converged on several young men, all of whom were former red guards or revolutionary rebels who worked as low-level leaders in the village. “At that time, the young red guards were really

brutal," said Liu Xuezhang, identifying one person by name. "Zhang Ming. He was very fervent in such rebellious activities (*zaofan*)."<sup>58</sup> Zhongyi also named another rebel. "It was Yang Jizhan who made Zhongtai suffer."

Both Zhang Ming and Yang Jizhan had returned to Yangjiagou after studying in the county middle school, and both were rebels at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Liu Xuezhang testified that neither of these local toughs personally resented Zhongtai: "Their fathers were not tenants of Zhongtai's family. Based on their ages, when Zhongtai moved out, they must have been kids or infants." Unlike their fathers, whose entire world was their village with its familiar customary moral code, educated youths like Zhang and Yang not only lacked interactions with the Ma landlords, but had also been exposed to communist doctrine since primary school. After years and years of communist education, these youth who were born and grew up under the red flag were very familiar with the class discourse that condemned the Ma landlords as enemies of the village, and more importantly, of the party. At that time, Zhongtai, in the view of the radical youths, was not an old man of blood and flesh, but a representative of the "evil" landlord class, as they learned in school.

The recollection of Ma Rutong, who was a peer of Zhang and Yang but withdrew from the red guards after the "power seizure" of 1967, is helpful to understand these radical youth: "We youths always wanted to show that we were revolutionary and were the eligible successors of the revolution." Moreover, in their school life, the youths, like Zhang Ming and Yang Jizhan, knew well that only when people expressed their loyalty to the party could they get rewards, such as a promotion, from the party.<sup>59</sup> It is not easy to know the precise motivations of Zhang, Yang, and other youths who joined in beating Zhongtai. But it is reasonable to deduce that the possibility of such rewards provided the youths with the incentive to struggle mercilessly against this "enemy of the people." Furthermore, from the rise of the new village elite after land reform, these new rebels knew very well that the struggle against Zhongtai was also a chance to demonstrate their power, and even establish their authority in the village. When Liu Xuezhang tried to guess the motives of Zhang and Yang, he presumed that these young men were very pragmatic: "I am not sure, but probably they were party members, or they wanted to be party members."

In contrast to the young activists, most villagers acted as silent witnesses. Although the villagers had lived under the communist regime for twenty

years, it appeared that they still could not heartily accept the antagonism between "the people" and "the enemies of the people" as spelled out in communist morality, and they could not bring themselves to be enthusiastic about the merciless struggle against such "enemies." Furthermore, as Zhongyi pointed out, the peasants were at the bottom level of Chinese society; thus, there were few things that the state could take away: "Could they steal my hoe from me?" In rural areas, on the periphery of the state, the regime was not able to buy widespread compliance from the peasants by giving rewards.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it was possible for Yangjiagou villagers to stay away from the struggles against Zhongtai. According to Ren Xiulan, an old woman, most villagers just "did not join these struggles."

The predicament that Yangjiagou villagers faced in the case of Zhongtai was similar to their experiences in land reform. Zhongtai had been labeled an "enemy of the people." Only those who supported the struggle against Zhongtai could be counted as "revolutionary masses." Any sympathy toward Zhongtai would be regarded as support for the "enemies of the people" and as "counterrevolutionary" behavior. Thus, to escape their predicament, the villagers' only possible choice was once again to do nothing. They just stood by in the struggle meetings, and did not give a hand to either the local toughs or Zhongtai. As Ma Rutong confessed, most of villagers believed "the less trouble the better," and that this was the only way they could protect themselves.

Although all the villagers were asked to show up, some, especially women, showed their lack of enthusiasm by staying home. Liu Zhangshi did not go to the struggle meeting at all. "My children went, but I did not. One reason is that I know I am a relative of Zhongtai." Liu Zhangshi's mother was the wet nurse of Zhongtai. According to the communists, Liu Zhangshi's mother was exploited by Zhongtai's family. Zhongtai was definitely Liu Zhangshi's enemy. But it seemed that Liu Zhangshi did not think that way. In the villagers' view, a person was related to his or her wet nurse's family. As Liu Zhangshi stated, she was a relative of Zhongtai, just like Zhongyi, who was Zhongtai's close blood cousin.

In fact, during the brutal struggles, it is Liu Zhangshi who took care of the poor couple, as if Zhongtai were her blood brother. In Yangjiagou, water was very scarce. People had to carry water from the well in the gulch to their houses on the hill. Carrying water was not an easy job for Zhongtai. Liu Zhangshi covertly gave a hand to Zhongtai and his wife. "Every ten or

more days, my brother or my husband carried some water for them during the night," said Liu Zhangshi.

After the discovery of the old account books and sword sheaths, struggle meetings were held every evening. "Zhongtai was beaten every day. It lasted about ten days, and in the end Zhongtai was beaten to death," Zhongyi told us. On April 28, 1969, Zhongtai's wife, He Hongfan, was sick, and she was therefore exempted from the struggle meetings. Zhongtai was beaten that night. At the end of that struggle meeting, Zhongtai was not able to stand up due to injuries sustained during the ten days. He was dumped at the foot of the east hill. Although his house was very close, Zhongtai could not walk home by himself. That evening, many Yangjiagou villagers heard Zhongtai's moans, but no one gave him a hand. The next morning, April 29, 1969, Zhongtai was found dead.

A well-known local tough in Yangjiagou is believed to have beaten Zhongtai after Zhongtai was left at the foot of the east hill. Ma Rutong testified, "Liu Chengfa was in charge of raising animals at that time. The animal shelter was very close to the place where Zhongtai lay. Zhongtai's groans annoyed Liu Chengfa. So he went to beat Zhongtai again." During land reform, Liu Chengfa was already an infamous local tough. In a struggle meeting during land reform, Liu brutally beat one of Zhongtai's cousins, Zhongyue, and forced Zhongyue's daughter to marry him. After the 1952 marriage law, Zhongtai's niece divorced this brutal local tough, who later rose to a leading position in the village militia. On that fateful night, it is possible that Liu Chengfa wanted to settle old scores with the Ma landlords.

Zhongtai was buried by his cousin Zhongyi. "I was working in the fields. The village leader sent someone to ask me to bury Zhongtai," Zhongyi said. "They said it would be counted as work points. I bought a coffin on credit from a villager, and buried him." However, the tragedy of Zhongtai had not yet ended. His wife, Hongfan, committed suicide three days later. Hongfan was so sick that it was not easy for her to kill herself. "After Zhongtai died, I clandestinely sent some food to his wife. I found there was no water left," said Liu Zhangshi. "I asked my brother to carry some water. Three days later, he filled the whole water vat. The old woman drowned herself in that water vat." Liu Zhangshi was extremely upset about Hongfan's death. On May 1, 1969, Hongfan wrote several sentences just before her death: "I am asked to turn in a rifle. Where is it? Long live the Communist Party! Long live Chairman Mao!"

#### THE AFTERMATH OF ZHONGTAI'S DEATH

After 1978, the Ma landlords who had been sent back to Yangjiagou during the Cultural Revolution gradually got their jobs back and returned to their homes in the cities. Only Ma Zhongtai and He Hongfan were left behind. In April 1984, Zhongtai's four children returned to Yangjiagou to rebury Zhongtai and Hongfan. A traditional Chinese poem written by Zhong Ling, Zhongtai's son-in-law, was engraved on the back of a gravestone. Zhong Ling, whose handwriting is hanging on Tiananmen, left his script in Yangjiagou.

In spring 1998, twenty-nine years after Zhongtai and Hongfan's death, Liu Zhangshi said at their graveyard: "We wanted to help the old woman, so my brother carried water for her. Why did she use it to kill herself?" Zhongtai's death never faded from village memory. For Liu Zhangshi and others, Zhongtai's death is not merely a story, but a personal moral torture.

After the 1980s the benevolence of the Ma landlords was once again publicly discussed. In 1995 the two stone tablets hidden in a wall saw daylight again. Various Ma offspring have returned to visit their forefathers' village. Researchers, including our group, attracted by the tale of the Ma family, have reminded villagers of the success of the Ma landlord family in Yangjiagou.<sup>61</sup> The existence of the Ma landlord family is again part of Yangjiagou's identity.<sup>62</sup>

It appears that, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, communist morality has collapsed. More specifically, communist morality focusing on class discourse has been discarded. Yangjiagou villagers are no longer asked to condemn the evil landlord class. However, life in Yangjiagou has not been restored to the relatively harmonious balance of the Mas' heyday. Yangjiagou as a community has been destroyed by the struggles of the communist period. The new village elites are not able to shape the villagers into a community. The administrative leaders are powerful, but in the view of the villagers, they are of dubious character. The former cadres have successfully restored some folk religious practices, but few of these former cadres have been broadly accepted by the villagers. Even worse, the village elites themselves are divided by the conflicts that pitted them against one another during the campaigns of the communist period.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, Yangjiagou today is somewhat anomie. No one has been criticized publicly or punished for the miseries suffered in Yangjiagou during the communist period.<sup>64</sup> The villagers generally do not want to talk about their

former miseries. Instead, they prefer to emphasize that, in contrast to other villages, Yangjiagou enjoys unlimited blessings from the gods. Zhongtai's death is merely mentioned as an exception, and no one really wants to talk about the details. Only those who have moved out or are already dead are identified as the ones responsible. Nobody currently living in the village did anything wrong during that miserable period. Each misery, even death itself, is reduced to an absurd joke involving some unknown outside power.

Nevertheless, when speaking with the villagers about Zhongtai's death, we could feel their pain. They spoke in a low voice, as if revealing a secret, and they occasionally stopped. It seems that they wanted to say something, but hesitated to speak out. Discussion of Zhongtai's death has in fact become taboo in the village. It is true that the institutional base of communist morality has broken down. Yet without a full reflection on the communist period, it will not be easy to reestablish moral order in the village.

### *Conclusion: Moral Predicament in Communist China*

Before the communists arrived, Yangjiagou was a cooperative community. Peasants worked for the Ma landlords and, in exchange, the Ma landlords provided the villagers with aid when they needed it. In the face of outside threats, landlords and peasants often worked together to safeguard their community. Moreover, in the everyday world of the village, landlords and tenants were perceived to be neighbors, relatives, and even friends. Close personal ties linked all villagers. Of course Yangjiagou was never free of conflict. The Ma family monopolized village land, and there were always marginalized villagers, such as those who could not rent land from the Ma landlords. Yet such conflicts were the exception rather than the rule. Harmonious human relationships were the norm in Yangjiagou.

Chinese communist activists regarded such village harmony with disdain. They emphasized the conflicts in village life. In their view, in sharp contrast to the ideal of equality in communist society, traditional society was riddled with exploitation, repression, and inequality. According to Marxist doctrine, the ruling class—in the case of Yangjiagou, the Ma landlord family—reproduced its domination not only through exploitative relations of production, but also through hegemonic ideology, such as the “four olds,” thus providing an illusory picture of harmony in society. In order to replace the old

society with a new one, the revolutionaries had to destroy the old ideology. Customary morality, which helped to sustain social order in village life, was part of their target. First, the communists developed a set of class labels to classify people. Then they emphasized the antagonisms among villagers, which reflected the sharp distinction between “the people” and “the enemies of the people” in communist ideology. The landlords were held responsible for all hardship experienced by the villagers. More important, dismissing the concept of harmony in the old morality, the communists believed that it was only through struggle that a good society could be forged.

After land reform, the communists endeavored to establish a new morality through various political campaigns. In their blueprint for a new China, moral transformation was an important component. They wished to make people “more virtuous in their motivations, commitments, and relationships.”<sup>65</sup> The new morality was in conflict with the life experience of villagers, but it soon became the standard for proper behavior. However, the communist regime was not totally successful in replacing the old morality with the desired communist morality. In the case of Yangjiagou, the Ma landlords were an integral part of village identity, even after the Mases moved out. Thus, villagers found that the conflicts between the two contending moralities led to painful moral predicaments.

Zhongtai's death provides a chance to scrutinize the peasants' experience with the two moralities, especially in the Cultural Revolution period, when the new morality was promoted by violent means. In this case, it was the army stationed in Yangjiagou, rather than the revolutionary masses as the party hoped, that was the most critical force in Zhongtai's death. The young generation in Yangjiagou tended to become activists. Some youths, like Zhang Ming and Yang Jizhang, were opportunistic. By demonstrating their loyalty to the party, these youths wanted to win rewards or promotions from the state. For most Yangjiagou villagers, because they lived on the periphery of the communist state, the state's control was relatively weak. Thus, it was possible for villagers to choose nonaction in the struggles against Zhongtai. Nonaction was, in fact, a form of resistance peasants could use to resolve their moral predicament. The old morality was endangered, but nobody served as an all-out apologist for the new morality.

The party tried to destroy the old moral system in the rural areas. The old morality was incessantly denounced. However, in Yangjiagou as in many other villages, the new morality was never fully accepted by the peasants,

since it alienated people from village life. Thus, the new, “more virtuous” morality never brought order to village life. It only forced villagers to face all kinds of moral predicaments.

Ironically, instead of fostering a more righteous society, the moral transformation initiated by the communists did not work as they expected. The new system “generates acrimonious political competition, avoidance of activists, retreat into the private world of friends and family, and disaffection from the regime.” People are left to be “more rather than less alienated from one another and from the state.”<sup>66</sup> Like the Yangjiagou villagers, many other Chinese felt that the efforts to carry out the new morality in the communist period led to the extreme anomie of the post–Cultural Revolution period. The communists’ attempt to achieve moral supremacy instead led Chinese peasants to face moral predicaments and moral corruption in their villages. Even today, Chinese peasants, like other Chinese, have difficulty constructing a moral order that can bring together their communities, from village to nation.

## SIX

## Staging Xiaojinzhuang: The City in the Countryside, 1974–1976

*Jeremy Brown*

As I stepped out of a minivan and greeted Wang Zuoshan, the sixty-nine-year-old former village party secretary of Xiaojinzhuang, my taxi driver suddenly realized that he recognized the old man. Driver Li had last seen Wang in 1976, when Li was an elementary school student in the Baodi county seat, a town about forty-five miles north of Tianjin and fifty-three miles southeast of Beijing.<sup>1</sup> Li was part of a crowd of ten thousand watching transfixed as Wang, kneeling on an elevated stage in the town’s main square, bowed his head and accepted the slaps and insults of his accusers.<sup>2</sup> This was a time of political upheaval in China. Mao Zedong had died, and his wife and the rest of the “Gang of Four” were arrested as the curtain fell on the Cultural Revolution. But in late 1976, Wang Zuoshan was the target of a classic Cultural Revolution ritual, the mass criticism and struggle meeting.

Wang Zuoshan had the misfortune of being the leader of Xiaojinzhuang, a village of 101 households on the Jian’gan River. His village, about a thirty-minute drive east of the Baodi county seat, became a national model for arts and culture after Jiang Qing visited in June 1974 and called it her “spot.” Wang and other villagers emerged as the poetry-writing and opera-singing stars of a political drama sponsored by Jiang and staged by her allies in the Tianjin municipal leadership. Xiaojinzhuang’s fortune was tied to Jiang Qing and other “radicals” who sought power by affirming the anti-capitalist, collectivist Cultural Revolution policies of constant class struggle and strict artistic standards. The model village became a weapon in the radicals’ 1974–76 political battle against “moderate” targets of the Cultural Revolu-