

Chinese authors charged with libel for exposing rural crisis

John Chan

22 September 2004

Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, authors of the best-selling *An Investigation of China's Peasantry* dealing with the problems of small farmers, were hauled before the Chinese courts last month to face charges of libel.

The plaintiff, Zhang Xide, is one of the officials whose corrupt practices were described in detail. But he is undoubtedly acting with the backing of broader layers of the Chinese bureaucracy who are nervous about the issues raised in the work and by its unexpected popularity.

The hearing officially started on August 24. The court immediately sent a letter to the publisher, People's Literature, to suspend any further release of the book. Legal proceedings finished on August 28 but the verdict is not expected to be announced for another month.

According to Radio Free Asia, hundreds of local farmers gathered outside the court to show their support for the authors. Only about 20 of them were allowed to enter the courthouse, which was packed with 100 or so government officials. The Central Propaganda Department ordered the state media not to report the case and no foreign journalists were allowed to attend the hearing. A few Chinese journalists attended as individuals, not representatives of news agencies.

Chen and Wu spent three years doing research in the largely rural Anhui Province. The book, which is written in an accessible narrative style, graphically describes the hardships confronting farmers, including falling prices, the lack of basic services, heavy taxation and police repression. It also details the parasitic activities of individual officials who live a relatively privileged existence based on extortion, bribery and other forms of corruption.

Initially, the book was hailed in official circles as a serious work—one of the few in recent years that aired the grievances of impoverished peasants. According to a defence statement in court, the art department director of *People's Daily*, Guo Yunde, for example, said that he had seriously read the book “word by word”. The party secretary of the literature institute of Chinese Academic of Social Sciences, Bao Mingde, praised the book as a comprehensive “white paper” on problems in rural China.

The response changed rapidly, however, when the book was released and immediately achieved unprecedented popularity. The monthly magazine *Dangdai* began to serialise the work in its December issue, which sold out in one week. The book itself sold 100,000 copies in the first month of release.

Disturbed by a wave of public discussion on peasant issues, the

Central Propaganda Department imposed an informal ban on further publication and any discussion of the book in the state-owned media. But millions of copies were printed illegally to meet the popular demand for the work which, as one commentator put it, was “written in the blood and tears of farmers”. An estimated eight million copies have been sold.

Local officials struck back. Zhang Xide, who filed the case against the authors in Fuyang City Intermediate People's Court, is a former county Communist Party secretary. He was exposed in the book as a tyrannical official oppressing farmers with heavy financial taxes, the forced implementation of the “one child policy” and police brutality.

An entire section of the book is devoted to Zhang. He was in charge of Linqiang, which was officially classified by Beijing as an “impoverished county”. Yet he was able to buy a luxury Benz 500—a car that even provincial governors and party bosses in wealthier coastal areas do not dare to have. When he left his post in 1996, 3,000 angry farmers stormed his former residence.

Zhang was not punished for his crimes and is now a vice-chairman of the Fuyang City Political Consultative Conference—a powerful government advisory body. Zhang launched the court case against the journalists shortly after the book was published at the end of 2003 but took six months to produce any evidence to support his claims.

Zhang insists that the book's references to him are “a serious distortion of truth”. He is demanding the withdrawal of the book, a public apology from the authors and compensation of 200,000 yuan (about \$US24,000) from the defendants.

Defence lawyer Wu Ge called on the court to reject the statements of three policemen and other government officials supporting Zhang on the basis that the local government itself was the “source of corruption”. Wu told reporters that the authors did not expect to receive a fair trial because of “executive inference in the juridical process”.

Zhang's son is a judge in the same court. Before the trial began, the court rejected an application by the defence to have the case moved to another city. Zhang shamelessly boasted to reporters that the author Chen was going to lose, telling them: “I think he himself best understands why.”

In a statement on September 2, the executive director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, Ann Copper, condemned the trial. “Although the Chinese government has encouraged citizens and journalists to expose government

corruption, investigative writers like Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao remain at the mercy of the same corrupt system they worked to expose. These politicised libel charges are clearly intended to exact retribution for criticism of public officials, and the case should be dropped immediately,” she declared.

Zhang is just one of a number of officials in Anhui province whose abuses were highlighted in the book. Despite these graphic exposures, the scope of its criticism is very limited.

The authors wrote in the introduction: “Now many people have never left big cities, and think that all of China is like Beijing and Shanghai. Some foreigners came and looked and also decided that this is what China looks like. In fact, it isn’t. We want to tell you that we have seen the unimaginable poverty, unimaginable crimes, unimaginable suffering, unimaginable helplessness, unimaginable resistance, unimaginable silence, unimaginable emotion and unimaginable tragedy....”

The report, however, never focuses on Beijing’s policies and the responsibility of the central leadership for the devastation in Anhui province and other rural areas. Rather the blame is placed on local officials who, the authors claim, are defying Beijing’s policies to “reduce the farmers’ burden”. Local officials are portrayed as corrupt and tyrannical but the central leadership is described as paying serious attention to the problems.

At the end of the book, the authors declare that “rural reform” has reached the stage that there is “no way to retreat and we are standing in a minefield”. But they then add that with a “new party leadership under Hu Jintao, we and 900 million peasant friends have no reason not to be confident that another glorious sunrise in China’s history is waiting.”

Such generous praise for the Hu Jintao leadership is absurd. The social nightmare that confronts millions of Chinese peasants is not simply the product of corrupt local officials. The entire Chinese government from bottom to top is responsible for the heavy taxes, lack of services and poverty in rural areas. The imposition of market relations in the countryside has led to sharp social polarisation; enriching a few but leaving many farmers facing acute financial difficulty.

Despite the cautious nature of the book, Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao still find themselves in court. The attempt to suppress the work reflects deep fears in all layers of the Stalinist bureaucracy that any debate over the rural crisis will trigger social unrest. The Beijing leadership is acutely sensitive to these issues because the regime came to power through a peasant-based army, which has been the backbone of state power for decades.

Mao’s nationalist and non-proletarian orientation, summed up in the Stalinist conception of “socialism in one country”, proved a disaster in all fields, including the so-called agrarian problem. The book makes several references to the fact that the roots of today’s rural problems can be traced back to era of Mao. The initial benefits of “land reform” after the 1949 revolution were short-lived, as the leadership sought to industrialise at the expense of the peasantry, resulting in famine and millions of deaths.

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping responded to the country’s deepening economic crisis by opening up China to market relations and foreign capital. The limited protections for farmers under Mao were dismantled under Deng’s de-collectivisation of

agriculture. The initial increase in the income of farmers in early 1980s was soon turned to the opposite for most by the operation of market forces.

In addition, the replacement of Peoples Communes with township-village administrations—a huge bureaucratic apparatus—became a heavy financial burden for the peasantry. The decentralisation of the financial system in 1990s, which transferred the responsibility for raising taxes and providing services from the national to the local level, left farmers at the mercy of endless “fund raising” and fee collections by local officials.

The deepening rural crisis drove tens of millions of farmers into urban areas in search of work. This seemingly inexhaustible supply of cheap labour was the basis for a huge influx of foreign capital in the 1990s and the rapid emergence of China as the so-called workshop of the world. But these economic processes have profoundly altered class relations, confronting the increasingly isolated bureaucracy in Beijing with insoluble dilemmas.

Chinese leaders routinely make cosmetic statements about the “burning urgency” of resolving rural problems, but little has been done. Earlier this year, Premier Wen Jiabao implemented a policy of limited farming subsidies to try to overcome the continuing decline of grain output. But any improvement, however slight, in the conditions facing farmers slows the tide of impoverished labourers into the cities and threatens to undermine the basis of economic growth.

The international financial press has already begun to comment on the shortage of cheap migrant labour in some coastal areas. The Pearl River Delta alone—one of the world’s largest manufacturing centres for toys and garments—is reportedly short of two million workers. Farm subsidies are thus regarded as a threat to China’s main economic “advantage” in attracting foreign capital—its huge reservoirs of cheap labour.

Economically the Chinese leadership has no choice but to continue policies that are forcing millions of rural poor into the cities. Politically, however, its actions are creating a social time bomb: not only is the regime fuelling mass resentment and hostility among its traditional base of support in the countryside, but it also confronts a working class that has grown massively in the last two decades.

In 1927, one of Mao Zedong’s first writings was “Report on an investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan”—a much celebrated but very limited work that was used to justify tearing the Chinese Communist Party away from its working class base and building “peasant soviets”. It is a measure of Beijing’s profound crisis today that no public discussion or debate can be allowed on a book that is in no way critical of the central leadership but simply describes the immense problems confronting the rural poor in China.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact