

TAISHI VILLAGE: A SIGN OF THE TIMES

BY HU PING

Events in Taishi Village point to a crisis that will be inevitable if the Chinese government does not address growing public demand for economic and social justice.

What happened in Taishi Village

The residents of Taishi Village in Panyu District, Guangdong Province discovered that the village committee accounts were not in order. Because they suspected the village committee director of corruption involving the sale of land, and because large swaths of farmland had been requisitioned, land had been left uncultivated and the local economy was in a slump, they signed a petition to recall the village-committee director, in accordance with the “Village Committee Organization Law.” The initial response of the Panyu District civil affairs bureau was to ignore the petition and arrest several village representatives. It then formally rejected their petition.

Approximately 100 Taishi villagers traveled to the Panyu District government seat and held a silent sit-in and hunger strike in front of government office to express their discontent. The civil affairs bureau received their petition, but then sent nearly 1,000 riot police officers to Taishi Village. The riot police used water cannons to attack some 50 village women who were keeping guard in the village budget office, then entered the budget office and made off with the account books.

The civil affairs bureau then put forward a slate of candidates for a village committee election and demanded that the Taishi Villagers elect them, but the villagers rejected all of those candidates and elected their own. The local government responded by stepping up its repressive action, arresting several villagers and Guo Feixiong, a human rights lawyer who had come from Beijing to assist them. Professor Ai Xiaoming of Guangzhou’s Sun Yat-sen University, two lawyers and a journalist were assaulted by unidentified thugs when they came to the village. These same thugs also attempted to orchestrate a car accident to make it look as if Ai Xiaoming had been killed. Lü Banglie, a delegate to the People’s Congress from Hubei Province, was beaten unconscious while trying to help the Taishi Villagers defend their rights. The government officials stepped up the pressure, forcing the newly elected representa-

tives to resign and the villagers to withdraw their petition to have the village head recalled. The villagers thus lost the first battle in their struggle to assert their rights.

What does the Taishi Village incident reveal?

The Taishi Village incident was no trivial matter. It highlights several key points:

- 1) *Ordinary Chinese citizens are perfectly capable of practicing democracy.* A large number of Taishi villagers took part in the effort to defend their rights. Their nonviolent resistance and ingenuity were exemplary. By their actions, the villagers demonstrated their belief in democracy and awareness of the rule of law. They are fully competent to practice democracy. Those who think that the common people of China are too uneducated for democratic participation are completely wrong.
- 2) *China’s democratic showcase is a sham.* The Taishi villagers’ struggle to defend their rights was defeated by brutal interference and violent repression orchestrated by local government leaders. This demonstrates that in a highly centralized system, whenever villagers exercise self-government in a way that runs counter to the will and interests of higher government authorities, genuine self-government will not be allowed to exist. For several years, the Chinese Communist government has presented village elections and village self-government as a showcase of democracy and as evidence of China’s implementation of gradual democratic reform. The Taishi incident amply exposes the bogus nature of this showcase.

- 3) *The Taishi Village incident manifests the Chinese Communist authorities’ growing reliance on the criminal underworld.* During the Taishi Village incident, the dirty work was done by a group of unidentified thugs. These were not ordinary bandits, hooligans or members of the criminal underworld; they were thugs hired by the local government. Ai Xiaoming is a well-known and highly respected professor at Sun Yat-sen University. When she posted an account on the Internet of how she had been roughed up by thugs, she found that very few of her colleagues, friends or students dared express protest or support for her on the Web site. The media were also silent.

Clearly, everyone knew that these were not ordinary thugs; otherwise people would not have been afraid to express their indignation. Chinese society is not in a state of anarchy, nor is it split up into feudal separatist fiefdoms. Yet the government

simply ignored the violent assault on Chinese citizens. This proves that the thugs had government backing. Although in this case the violence was instigated by low-level district government officials, they acted secure in the knowledge of strong backing higher up. They knew that if higher authorities or even the central government got word of what had happened, tacit consent would be the only response.

We know that since the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, the Communist authorities have repeatedly ordered the military and police to violently suppress ordinary citizens in flagrant violation of the law. But it is sometimes difficult for them to deploy the regular repressive apparatus without justifiable cause. Although the majority of the people are so fearful of the regime's despotic power that they dare not protest publicly, a minority do have the courage to make a stand. Chinese dissidents have gained much experience in this cat-and-mouse game between the powerless and the powerful. Most of the time, they can accurately anticipate the response that certain actions will elicit from the authorities and what consequences they will have to face. This allows them to protect themselves as far as possible while taking a resolute stand, and to take acceptable risks in putting up limited but effective resistance.

The Taishi Village incident was different. In this case, the government acted behind the scenes to order the violent assaults against ordinary citizens. Now, it matters not one whit how secure your social position is, how resourceful you are in taking a stand, how just and principled your demands are, and how unassailable your legal position. It matters not one whit that the government has no evidence against you. What matters is that if the government considers you an eyesore, it can simply resort to the methods of the criminal underworld to threaten your life. The original rules of the game have been broken. What we now have is naked terror. If we let the Chinese Communist regime have its way, the cause of human rights in China is in for very dire times ahead.

4) *Taishi Village is a microcosm of China today.* The Taishi Village incident began as a simple petition to recall a village-committee director. How could it have escalated into such a serious incident?

Panyu District government officials put it in plain language at the outset. They said, "The township and district leaders say that we can't approve their petition to recall their village head, because if we did, we'd have hundreds of villages following their example and demanding that village accounts be audited. There's no telling how many leading cadres would be implicated."

During the Taishi Village incident, the local government acted as if it were crazy and the central government played deaf and dumb. They clearly understood what was at stake. They know that the Taishi Village incident was neither isolated nor exceptional. For several years, different levels of the government have requisitioned land, ostensibly for development, without the consent and approval of villagers or the original land owners. To make quick and massive profits, officials and businessmen have colluded in underhand deals that seriously damage villagers' interests. The authorities know that if they approved the Taishi villagers' petition to recall the village com-

mittee director, they would in all likelihood encourage other villages to look into past illegal land deals. The consequences would be unthinkable.

That's the situation in the countryside. But matters are not much different in the cities; if anything, they are even worse. The so-called reform of state-owned enterprises is nothing but the wanton plunder by officials of all levels of public property that rightfully belongs to the Chinese people. China's economic reforms ceased to be genuine many years ago. The privatization process is simply the wholesale pillaging of China by men of power and influence who are protected by the iron hand of an autocratic state.

It is common knowledge that the current distribution of wealth is utterly lacking in legitimacy. To maintain this illegal wealth-distribution setup, the government cannot but use violent repression against those who stand up for their rights. When citizens strictly abide by legal procedures to defend their rights, and their actions are legally unassailable, the government simply resorts to the methods of the criminal underworld. It uses naked violence, "killing one to warn a hundred," to impose its criminal rule on society. As the Chinese folk saying goes, "Pull one hair and the whole body moves." We also say, "When a spot is seen, the whole leopard may be inferred." Taishi Village is truly a microcosm of China.

Two interpretations of the Taishi Village incident

1) If the Taishi Village incident had happened in a remote district, it might have been an exceptional occurrence and the result of the foolish actions of a local despot with an exaggerated opinion of his own worth. But Taishi Village is located in Guangzhou Province, which suggests this is anything but an isolated case. Moreover, the Chinese government generally tries to save face in front of foreigners, especially Western journalists. But during the Taishi Village incident, even a British journalist working for *The Guardian* and a French reporter for Radio France Internationale were intimidated and beaten up. Which begs the question: How did the central government respond when Chinese and foreign media exposed the outrages committed by the local government?

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Some people say that the Taishi Village incident is a reflection of the growing power of local government and the decline of the central government's authority. According to this view, the central government is no longer able to deal with the problem. At best, this is only half the story. It's true enough that Hu Jintao and other top leaders would prefer local officials not to be insatiably rapacious and not to levy exorbitant taxes. But if the central government wants to obtain the support of local officials, it must provide them plenty of opportunities to engage in corruption. Now that the Chinese Communist

regime has lost its moral legitimacy and ideological cohesion, all it can rely on are corrupt officials who shield one another. The central government therefore has to turn a blind eye to the criminal actions of local officials.

On the other hand, the claim that local governments are growing more powerful, and that the central government is losing its ability to exercise control over local government, depends on the circumstances. After all, many local governments were not keen on suppressing the Falun Gong movement, but as the saying goes, "it is difficult to disobey imperial orders," and the central government issued strict orders that any official who refused to clamp down on Falun Gong practitioners would be summarily dismissed. With official corruption it's the other way around. Because corruption serves the interests of local government officials as well as of the Communist bureaucratic system as a whole, the central government does not dare clamp down on it or acknowledge how widespread it is.

Clearly, sweeping statements that the central government is losing power do not hold water. The real issue is not the relative power of the central and local governments but rather the fact that the Communist Party is increasingly becoming a special interest group whose interests are at odds with those of ordinary people. Consequently, whenever the government feels threatened by dissident or civil rights activism, the entire ruling hierarchy displays a high degree of unity in suppressing it. Moreover, every level of government, including the central government, is very weak when it comes to curbing corruption within its ranks.

2) Some people wonder why it is that Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, while professing their concern for disadvantaged groups upon taking the reins of government, and having since adopted some policies aimed at improving the conditions of these groups, have shown complete indifference and unreponsiveness in the aftermath of the Taishi Village incident.

There is a good answer to this question. As noted above, the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao government may really want to curb corruption a little and improve the situation of disadvantaged groups, but they cannot permit ordinary citizens to engage in open, collective action to defend their own interests. The government can partially meet the public's material demands, but what it fears most is that the Chinese people will gain the capability for independent, collective action. The top leadership is willing to let officials at the lower levels behave like tyrants because they actually want citizens who stand up for their rights to suffer for their temerity. Thus, even if the day comes when the government feels compelled to grant the public some small favors and punishes a few officials guilty of criminal acts, citizens who stood up for their rights will have already paid a heavy price, and the majority of people will think twice before following their example. Most people will be cowed

into enduring untold injustices. The Communist Party will therefore be able to maintain its much touted "stability and unity" for quite some time to come.

The Communist authorities know full well that the current wealth-distribution setup is unjust in the extreme and utterly lacking in legitimacy. Many ordinary people are no longer willing to submit to this injustice. China's wide gap between the rich and the poor has been created neither by history nor by the market, but mainly by those in power. The poor are poor mainly because their property has been appropriated by the powerful and influential, and the rich are rich mainly because they use their power to steal wealth created by others.

Once citizens are able to fight for their rights on the basis of law and reason, and once they are capable of engaging in collective action, they will no longer be satisfied with a slight increase in unemployment benefits or welfare payments. They will demand the return of the property stolen from them, and they will probably also demand a proper accounting of how the privatization drive has benefited an elite minority. This reckoning will certainly threaten the regime itself. It explains why the government has consistently used heavy-handed coercion against citizens who demand their rights, and always feels compelled to "nip turmoil in the bud."

Conclusion

More and more people are waking up from the pipe-dream of economic determinism. They no longer believe that China's economic reform will inevitably lead to political reform and privatization to democratization. But that is not the only problem. Even more serious is that fact that since Tiananmen, China's ruling elites have used economic reform to rob the majority of the population. In China we need to speak of plunder not in the past perfect but in the present progressive tense. It is not in the least bit surprising that the deeper the men in power push economic reform, the less they dare or want to implement political reform. They are all too aware that once democracy is introduced in China, they will probably not only lose their monopoly on political power, but also the ill-gotten gains that took years for them to amass. They know that they will not be able to prevent the people from bringing them to account in courts of law for their economic crimes. That is why they may well grow even more savage in the defense of their criminal one-party dictatorship.

In China, economic reform is not only failing to provide an impetus for political reform, but is actually hindering it. The privatization drive is not only failing to bring about democratization, but is pushing the dictatorship ever further into hooliganism and crime. That is the crucial message of the Taishi Village incident.

Translated by Paul Frank