

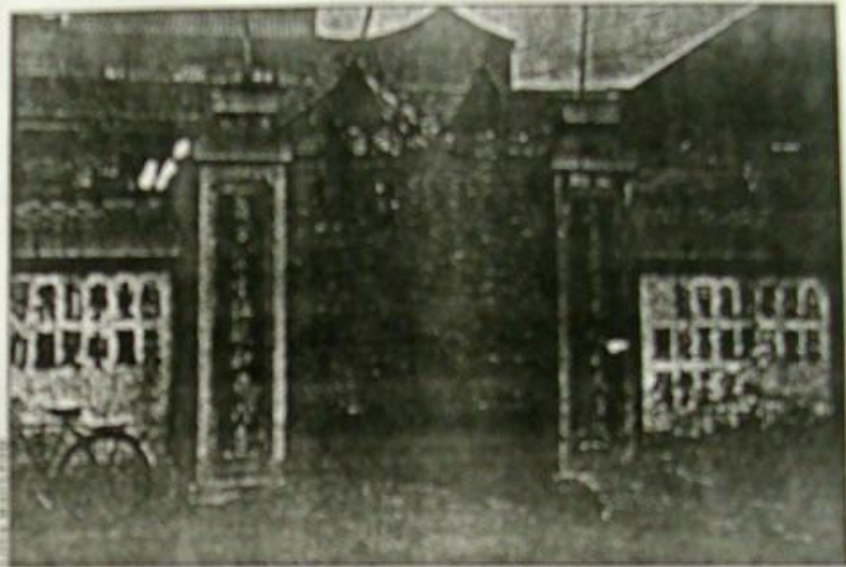
Cultural Evolution: Changing a Maoist Mecca

The rise, fall and rebirth of a onetime model commune

BY LIJIA MACLEOD

WHEN THE STORM hit in 1963, Dazhai was a tiny, struggling village hidden in the harsh plateaus of northern Shanxi province. Floods washed away homes, livestock and terraces of grain. But the 500 peasants of Dazhai vowed to rebuild. Inspired by their village leader, Chen Yonggui, and the works of Chairman Mao, they began filling gullies, breaking boulders and retterracing the rocky crags. Before long, they were producing more grain than ever. Mao quickly declared the village a national model of hard work and self-reliance. In 1966 the Great Helmsman hoisted high Dazhai's red flag to help spark revolutionary fervor. "In agriculture, learn from Dazhai," he exhorted peasants around the country.

They did. From the Mongolian steppes to the high plateaus of Tibet, communes faithfully copied Dazhai's agricultural example, disregarding variations in climate or geography. They filled rivers, cleared forests and built terraces on flat, fertile plains. Not only did other Chinese come to learn from Dazhai—literally the "great stockade"—leaders from Albania,



Read the rhetoric on the wall: Dazhai village was a sham

East Germany and Africa also came. By 1980 more than 7 million people had visited Dazhai, including "Premier Zhou Enlai (three times), Deng Xiaoping (twice), Pol Pot from Cambodia and Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands," says the manager of the massive, now empty Dazhai Hotel. They helped make it the most famous village in China.

But like so many communes, Dazhai was a sham. The village repaid government subsidies with falsified statistics showing ever-increasing grain production. Of the record 120 million kilograms of grain reported in

1973, nearly half was fictitious. At one point, food was so scarce that the hordes of visiting Red Guards required helicopters to drop grain. With Mao's death in 1976 and the rise of pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping, the Dazhai mystique was shattered. "Nowadays, to many people the whole thing about Dazhai looks like a joke," says Wang Shan, a political writer in Beijing who first visited the commune with his father 30 years ago and then again on a Red Guard pilgrimage trip. "But for me, when I was young, Dazhai was a revolutionary mecca."

Today that Maoist mecca

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Today that Maoist mecca has changed considerably. On a plot of terraced land in the shadow of Dazhai's Tiger Head mountain, peasant farmer Jia still spreads home-made fertilizer—a mixture of mud and human waste. But "the land is contracted to the individual now," says Jia. "What I grow here is mine." He also earns money transporting people by tractor; his two sons work in the coal mines. Indeed, less than 4 percent of the village's income now comes from farming; the rest is earned through mining, a transportation company and a garment factory that produces Dazhai-brand shirts. Per capita income in 1995 was a relatively impressive \$220. As central-government funds have dried up, other benefactors have emerged, including Daqiuzhuang, the new "capitalist village" model of Deng's China.

To be sure, the communist rhetoric, though faded, is still visible on Dazhai's cave walls. And though Chen Yonggui was disgraced by Beijing, villagers are currently putting the finishing touches on a new memorial to the illiterate communist leader who wore a peasant towel on politburo. Nobody personifies the changing times more than Guo Fenglian. A former "iron maiden" model worker, today she is the village leader and head of the Dazhai Economic Development Co. Her greatest hope? That Dazhai's place in history will promote investment and tourism. Nothing could be further from Mao's model commune than that.