

Analysis, Comment, Letters

# Focus

## On grievance street



He is not a vagrant – just a man pursuing his last chance of justice. *Calum MacLeod* and *Lijia MacLeod* report in the second of a two-part series on China's rural crisis

CHINA'S LEADERS DO NOT have far to go should they desire to hear the people's grievances. All the misery and poverty of modern China is lined up along a small street in south Beijing.

At its northern end lies an obscure government office – the State Council's and Visits Bureau. There is no sign from the main road, and the telephone number is not listed, but word of mouth works well enough among the disadvantaged and dispossessed.

Amid makeshift camps of cardboard and rattan mats, at least two hundred Chinese stake their daily claims and hold out for the duration.

It could be a long wait. They have come from every corner of this vast land to “shangfang”, two Chinese characters that conceal a multitude of sins. ‘To complain to the higher authorities about an injustice and request fair settlement’ is the dictionary translation. It sounds so straightforward, but a few conversations soon disabuse one of any impression that the system actually works.

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would tell them the bad news. The local governments do their best to cover it up and such reports are nowhere to be seen in the public media.

If mainland internet surfers circumnavigate government blocks, they can access alarming accounts of incidents on Web sites such as the United States based “chinesesecret”, which has reported several cases of unrest. In September, a report by the same Web site

### On grievance street: on China's rural crisis

All the misery and brutality of modern China is lined up along a small street in southern Peking. At its northern end lies an obscure government office. There is no sign from the main road, and the telephone number is not listed, but word of mouth works well enough among the disadvantaged and dispossessed. Amid makeshift camps of cardboard and rattan mats, at least two hundred Chinese stake their daily claims and hold out for the duration.

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Bent almost double under a fertiliser sack that functions as suitcase and sleeping bag, a 67 year old peasant from Inner Mongolia says he has been coming here for twenty years. He does not straighten up when he lays down his sack. "The head of the commune did it!" he complains, pointing to his back and recalling the beating he suffered in 1966, the first year of the vicious Cultural Revolution.

His attacker was promoted still higher, and later passed away without a thought of compensation, while the peasant still makes his annual trek to Peking, driven by a misplaced conviction that somehow, some day, justice will prevail.

Desperation forced veteran Shu Shandong on the road to the capital. Shu returned a medalled hero from China's 1979 border war with Vietnam, but minus his left leg. Although his disability meant no family would ever entrust their daughter to him, the state lent him a livelihood working at a rural co-operative. Three years ago, Shu was laid off, and has received nothing ever since. Limping on a false leg, last month he begged his way to Peking from southern Hunan province. "I fought for this country, I bled for this country," Shu says. "How can they treat me like this?"

The government office at the end of the street is the place of last resort for thousands of people like Shu whose efforts to seek redress have failed at the local level. China's citizens hold little faith in its courts of law, where the judiciary is appointed and dominated by the Communist Party. But they maintain a naïve hope, nurtured by literary tradition, that if only a righteous, high-ranking official could read their heart-rending petition, he would have the power to set things right.

In modern times, that saviour is less a knight in shining armour, than a Mao-suited party cadre, yet even that hope is increasingly remote. "Every day the central government says 'we will resolve the farmers' burden'," cries Zhao Sunan from Sichuan province, far to the southwest. "But the local officials are acting worse than the Nationalists' 'white terror' in the 1930s. City people cannot imagine how corrupt they are!"

And how effective at protecting each other. Zhao cannot return to her home village, after she frightened local authorities by pursuing the largest civil action ever attempted against government officials in China. In June 1997, together with almost 2,200 families from Sichuan's Hebian township, Zhao sued the township and county government for imposing excessive tax. The poll tax, irrespective of age and contravening state-set levels, was almost half the villagers' pounds 80 annual income. Moreover, tax collection was brutal – if they failed to pay, peasants were detained illegally in government offices, and beaten until relatives borrowed enough to buy their freedom.

Since 1997, Hebian officials have successfully pressured the families to withdraw the suit, cancelled the lawyers' licences and forced 'ringleaders' like Zhao on the run. While Zhao's two children are cared for by their grandparents in the village, the former nursery schoolteacher and her husband find piecemeal work in the provincial capital Chengdu to fund her struggle for justice. "I am fighting for the right to eat, and I will keep on fighting," she vows on her fourth trip to Peking to protest the villagers' plight. "We've done nothing wrong. The truth is on our side."

That kind of conviction represents Peking's worst nightmare. The Communist revolution fifty years ago was supposed to end the oppression of the peasantry, who still comprise 70% of China's 1.3 billion population. But as farming incomes stall, the environment deteriorates, and more people leave the land for the cities, local officials are responding with the oldest squeeze in the book – increased taxes. And the peasants are not going to take it any more.

Last month saw the most dramatic example yet, when up to 20,000 farmers in the backward province of Jiangxi gathered in violent protests against excess taxes. Rebellions by desperate peasants have signalled the demise of many a Chinese dynasty. As the crisis grows in China's countryside, Peking had better start listening to people like Zhao Sunan. For now, it still prefers to lock them up.

Zhao's two partners in crime are equally unlikely fugitives. Sixty-seven year old Wu Tianxiang was a model worker and local legislator before his outrage at the treatment of Hebian peasants turned corrupt officials against this lifelong party member. In August Wu heard a local propaganda broadcast calling for his arrest and fled for his life down the back roads to Chengdu. A poor and illiterate farmer, Liu Decai has felt the blunt instruments of official displeasure on many occasions.

The trio are taking great risks just coming to Peking. Their age and rustic dress mark them as prime targets for police cracking down on Falun Gong believers heading for arrest and martyrdom at Tiananmen Square. Near the government

office, plainclothes police mingle with the desperate petitioners, and try to halt exchanges with anyone suspicious (and they don't come more suspicious than foreign journalists).

As for their appeal, the government insists that responsibility lies lower down the pyramid of power. Zhao, Wu and Liu left Peking yesterday, their money exhausted and their hopes deflated. Zhao promises to keep fighting but she cannot forget the mocking tones of her hometown cadres. "Go and see President Jiang in Peking," they laughed. "If you find him or [Premier] Zhu Rongji, they'll still send you right back to us!"

EXTRA NOTES:- A Uighur Muslim from China's northwest described his detention for a week by police who then ordered him to leave Beijing. These people can disappear with no one knowing. "I won't eat their food" he vowed, and claims to have survived on water alone. But instead of returning to Xinjiang, he came back to pursue his fight for money owed - he says he has not been paid for three years by his state-owned work unit. Nodding in sympathy, another Uighur reports his lack of success in winning compensation for a car accident in Urumqi that injured him and crippled his wife. She lies weeping on a cardboard mat at the side of the road where they have camped out for the past six weeks. Their young daughter plays in the rubbish.

"There are 56 nationalities in China but only one counts. They don't even regard us minorities as people! The officials in Xinjiang are all Beijing's men. It would be better if Taiwan took over!" He has had no luck with his petition. "They say they don't understand us, but it is only an excuse." His accent may be heavy but his story is easily understood.

Passions run high when hope drains away. Where else would you hear so often sentiments like "What sort of country and society is this! If China fought with another country, no one would help the central government." A woman from Tianjin tried to sue her corrupt boss, but her efforts cost her her job. Zhao Yuanxin from Sichuan weeps as she tells of her son, murdered in a coal mine. The killer was well connected and got away. "Wasn't he a good boy?" she says over and over, clutching a well-worn photo. A 65 year old woman, also from Sichuan, tells of her village leader who damaged her spine when he beat her in 1997. He was never punished and has made life hell for her and her son's family ever since she began her battle to make him pay. She has been in Beijing for two months, but still awaits her first face-to-face interview with a government official.

The soldier Shu Shandong complained to his village leaders – with no success. "They were eating banquets, while I had no grain of rice to eat." He moved up the pyramid of power to the county and city authorities. "No use!" This is his first time in Beijing, where he first tried the Ministry of Civil Affairs, who replied "We are not responsible. You were already assigned a job." At the State Council office, he reports he won sympathy but the same advice – 'go back home', and refusal to write a note asking the railway authorities to give him a free ticket. For now Shu will hang on in Beijing, begging to get by.

One man carried his bed on his back; all are eager to open their motley bags and reveal the tattered hopes within – plastic bags concealing fragile documents they believe will prove their case. Letters, press clippings, administrative orders, even bearing the red letter-heads and seals of government ministries, all purporting to show how illegal were actions inflicted upon them.

unwarp,

These days, you are hard pressed to find an honest official – paid little, and the temptations of the socialist market economy, where entrepreneurial dreams have been unleashed but the government had not fully relinquished its hold on the economy – many approvals and chops are necessary, and those levels of bureaucracy can handsomely supplement an official stipend.

Since the early 1980s, the office has rehabilitated thousands of innocents persecuted for years as 'counter-revolutionaries', 'rightists' and public enemies, Then Zhao Sunan,

**[learn how how inadequate the legal process remains in China, the over-arching authority of local officials.] – Zhao Sunan – even if it ignores the hisatoprical debts, rehab has been ongoingnfor two decades, but the government cannot ignore the peasants in this ruralk nation , 70% etc. must take notice;**  
history, and the present-day challenges to one-party rule. ;

where else would you hear – if the central government fights, ... we minorities don't count as people, it would be better if Taiwan took over!"

**Coming to the government bureau ,They must beware they are not mistaken for Falun Gong; middle-aged, out of towners;** like the Gongers, they too protesting for their freedom, not be fleeced by rapacious government officials, not to be locked in illegal prison cells, and beaten until their families pay up.

Story from heartbreak hotel ; Stuff of dreams  
Agree to the very real risk of talking to the foreign press  
Describe the hotel -

fond, rather  
the naïve hope that somewhere an upright official will set things right.  
The righteous official – a long-running theme in Chinese literature and folklore and politics; the Communists tried to capitalise, exhorting the masses to follow the good example of model workers, soldiers and peasants - Lei Feng;

Yet all the state wants to do is pass the responsibility back down the chain

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Why did the peasants revolt  
Over taxation -

**It takes a lot of courage to sever your ties with your ; for all the dot.com fever and busy cranes of urban China, this remains a peasant nation;**

Through verbal and physical intimidation, officials prevented the biggest ever civil case brought against government officials; three on the run

The mass line 'From the masses to the masses'; policy was always dictated by urbanites

The government follows some high-profile cases like Cheng Kejie – but most people don't know who he is; more meaningful to do sb locally; but no means to challenge the dissatisfaction; one social commentator- **if there are not enough means or channels for this satisfaction, there could be more trouble, larger-scale uprisings"** ENDS End – Peking has better take notice – use ShenYue comment; - some observers are trying to help –Southern Weekend

If there is trouble, no news in mainland news; China way to cover it up; but we should reveal problem; the lesson to learn – supervision ; - by media and ordinary people; no democratic supervision,

Li Minde. Former head of Guangxi Daily and editor in chief, published an article criticising Guangxi's corruption; figure-making official (good figures making officials; officials make up good figure, and good figures make officials) he was sacked for this in May;

muslim bit at end?  
[, labour ]  
declining farming incomes,  
bags, petitions  
START