CHEN VILLAGE: THE RECENT HISTORY OF A PEASANT COMMUNITY IN MAO'S CHINA
by Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger
(University of California Press; 293 pp.; $19.95)

David Rosen

Throughout the 1960s and '70s peasant villages in much of China were caught up in the nation-wide revolutionary political movements that culminated in the Cultural Revolution. These movements—the Four Clean-Ups Campaign, the Antisuperstition Campaign, the Destroy the Four Olds Campaign, and many others—were part of a state-orchestrated revolutionary process that spread from urban to rural areas. Villages throughout China became the locus of intense conflicts that pitted peasant leaders, Communist party cadre, and revolutionary youth against one another. Chen Village, the subject of this marvelously descriptive book, was one of those affected by such changes.

The primary economic goal of the Chinese Revolution was the transformation of peasant life from the traditional class-based system of agricultural production into one based upon collective agriculture. This required that political leadership at all levels of Chinese society be drawn into the processes of social change. Yet intimately tied to this broad goal of economic change was another goal: revolutionary purification to weed out all vestiges of class from political and economic decision-making. As this book makes clear, the end product was largely out of the power and authority vested in him by the state. An intelligent man, he manipulated either to support or to sabotage the fact that Quingfa was an impoverished peasant originally helped him obtain power in the village. But when he became unpopular, he was targeted by the Four Clean-Ups Campaign, which used his kinship ties to a former landlord family to discredit his class origins and identity. In fact, Quingfa’s is only one story of how the ideology of class was manipulated to compromise almost all forms of political leadership. As a result, it became impossible to predict whether today’s leaders and policies would become tomorrow’s counterrevolutionaries and heresies. Quingfa’s ultimate success depended not only upon changes in the Chinese state after the death of Mao but, equally profoundly, upon his deep ties to the peasant community.

Longyong’s leadership, in contrast, grew largely out of the power and authority vested in him by the state. An intelligent man, he quickly learned to balance the interests of Chen Village against the demands of the state. He exhibited a puritanical revolutionary style, which failed to gain him the level of support he required to survive politically. Although Longyong was the architect of the modernization of Chen Village and remained popular as long as his policies were successful, his leadership faded with the collapse of his grandiose plans for village development. Longyong’s story, like that of Quingfa, illustrates the importance of ties to the peasantry for successful village leadership. Leaders like Longyong, who tied their fate to the state administrative system, were failures in the long run.

A second and equally important focus of this book is the story of the “send down youth”—the young people, often of bourgeois backgrounds, who dedicated themselves to the revolution by moving into the countryside to work with the peasantry. These young people found themselves in a profoundly difficult position. They were from outside the village and could not carve out new lives among a peasantry who regarded them at best as likeable long-term guests. In addition, their class origins made them suspect in the eyes of their revolutionary sponsors. One youth, for example, rose to a position of leadership among the youth because his stepfather had been a war hero. But his standing was ultimately undermined when it was revealed that he was from a deceased biological father, whom he had never known, was a former Kuomintang official. Essentially rootless in the village and discredited by revolutionary ideology, many of these often talented, skilled, and dedicated young people fled to Hong Kong. They were cast adrift by a peasant society that could not absorb them and by a revolutionary administration that ultimately eschewed them.

Outstanding as this book is, it falls short at two points. First, although the data for this study were derived from interviews in Hong Kong with individuals who left Chen Village, there is no more than a glancing reference to the problem of bias. Second, although contemporary events in the village are wonderfully portrayed, without some idea of the history of agricultural development in China and of peasant-state relations we do not have a larger context in which to view them.

CITIES AND THE WEALTH OF NATIONS
by Jane Jacobs
(Random House; 257 pp.; $17.95)

Ralph Bauldijens

Economics, as a discipline and a profession, is currently in an embattled state. Bedrock theories and traditional verities, confidently articulated for several decades, have been exploded by the realities of the 1970s and 1980s. Certainty is now displaced by unpredictability. At the heart of this confusion is a central question: What creates and what sustains economic growth? Creation is of vital concern to poorer societies; the inability to stabilize and order growth is a critical problem for the more affluent. Answers and explanations cascade down on policy-makers and the public alike. Supply-siders and demand-siders (Friedmanites and Keynesians), purveyors of class analysis (Marxists), advocates of new economic orders (Third Worlders), peddlers of nationalization and privatization (Mitterrandistes and Thatcherites) vie for the ultimate truth. But who should we believe, and why?

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