



Companion Xianglin Wang and Yixin Chen at 16

*In the space  
between two worlds Yixin Chen  
gleans lessons for the future*

A CONVERSATION WITH UNCW ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY

YIXIN CHEN AS TOLD TO KIM PROUKOU

PHOTOS BY YIXIN CHEN

*A*t that instant the glint of the vigilant Communist reappeared in the headman's eyes, and his voice turned hostile.

"What is the name of that song of yours? I'm asking you what it is called!"

"Mozart..." I muttered.

"Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao," Luo broke in.

As if he had heard something miraculous, the headman's menacing look softened. He crinkled up his eyes in a wide, beatific smile. "Mozart thinks of Mao all the time," he said.

"Indeed, all the time," agreed Luo.

This was our first taste of re-education. Luo was eighteen years old; I was seventeen. The universities were closed... and all the young intellectuals were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants... The real reason was unclear... At the time, Luo and I often discussed it in secret like a pair of conspirators. We decided it all came down to Mao's hatred of intellectuals..."

*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, a novel by Dai Sijie

In 1970, at age 16, UNCW Professor Yixin Chen was one of 17 million young intellectuals "sent down" from the city where he had lived with his parents to be "re-educated" by the peasants of Laoqu (pronouncing *lau chu*). As Chen explained,

"Mao believed that urban youths in schools had long been educated by bourgeois ideas and needed to reform their minds under the guidance of a social class whose communist consciousness he trusted."

**“MY EXPERIENCE AT LAOQU LEFT ME WITH THE RESOLVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE LIVING STANDARDS OF THE PEASANTS COULD BE ADDRESSED AND THE BURDEN OF THEIR LIVES LIFTED.”**



“Year after year, I felt the frustration of the poverty and contended with the extreme, poor living conditions. There was no electricity, running water or medical services. There were no houses built of bricks and cement, only mud or thatch. There was no news from the outside world, except for the government newspaper, which was delivered to Laoqu by a postman every five days.”

The peasants worked 10 hours each day in the fields for a daily income of 35 cents – roughly 50 U.S. dollars a year – after the subtraction of a food quota, which, according to Chen, “was roughly 500 pounds of unprocessed grain a year and never satisfied the stomach.” Meat was eaten rarely. Livestock was needed as exchange for kerosene, clothes, soap, or pencils and notebooks for the children. “My experience at Laoqu left me with the resolve to understand how the living standards of the peasants could be addressed and the burden of their lives lifted.”

In 30 years, little has changed for the peasants as social and economic disparities between city dwellers and their counterparts in the Chinese countryside continually widen, but neither have the years diminished Chen’s resolve to bring sound historical perspectives to bear in the analysis of these problems. “I sought to understand and learn what policies would work for Chinese agriculture.”

In 1977, when China resumed university entrance examinations abolished by Mao during the Cultural Revolution, Chen was able to continue his education. Completing graduate studies at Nanjing University, he was hired there as an assistant professor. At Nanjing, he met William C. Kirby, now Geisinger Professor of History at Harvard University and director of the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, who, at the time, was a visiting professor from Washington University in St. Louis. Kirby encouraged Chen to come to the United States to complete a doctoral dissertation under his direction at Washington.

“My study of the rural cooperative movement, first introduced to China as an agricultural credit system by American missionaries in the early 1920s, made me aware that, rather than a failure, the Nationalist policy was an unfinished practice.” In fact, Chen believes that the rural cooperative was one of many promising programs that the Nationalists adopted but which time, war and civil strife forestalled.

“Although results were limited, the financial assistance that the missionary-inspired Nationalist cooperatives extended to the peasants in the 1930s did help them. Unfortunately, the Japanese invasion in 1937 wiped out all the cooperatives in North and South China confounding the emerging results of Nationalist policies, of which the rural cooperatives were only one.”

The Nationalist strategy of using technology in the broad sense, credit at lower terms for the peasant farmers, agricultural extension services, better seeds, livestock, fertilizers, etc., would have required government support and policy because the agricultural sector, by itself, could not sustain the necessary investments. The Communists, all too willing to appropriate the power of the state, used this power to convert the social structure rather than to directly address the economic problems – precipitating the Great Leap Forward Famine.

“The revolution altered the social structure by destroying the landlord class in order to redistribute their property and put an end to tenant-farming, a practice that obligated 45 percent of the rural households to pay half of their annual harvest to landlords in the common crop-share rent system. But, redistribution never changed the core problem: the tension between man and land,” Chen says.

Regarded as a major scholar in his native China and recognized internationally as an authority on the agricultural policies of the Nationalist Chinese government prior to the Communist revolution, Chen is considered one of the most important revisionist writers in the field. In addition to his teaching and research activities at UNC Wilmington, both UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke University employ him as an adjunct lecturer. Chen has helped many UNCW faculty members and students to make trips to China where he is completing oral histories and field interviews documenting peasant recollections of the Great Leap Forward Famine.

“Realizing that villages have few written records and most of the Great Leap generation is passing away, I have visited over 20 villages in two Chinese provinces interviewing the peasants and collecting oral histories that have resulted in two recent articles.”



Chen points out that while today's China is emerging as an economic powerhouse, it remains an agricultural country where rural residents make up 62 percent of its 1.3 billion people. "Grain imports continue because 80 percent of all agricultural production is needed for the farmers' own consumption. In the U.S., 3 million farmers produce for 300 million people with a great surplus of products. While in China, 300 million peasants manually labor in fields on smaller-sized farms than the farms of the 1920s."

"Profoundly," he concludes, "the Chinese state needs to creatively re-conceptualize agriculture in light of its high population-to-land ratios, shifting emphasis away from traditional grain production to a broader notion of wider participation in a comprehensive food system that includes storage, processing, transportation, marketing and trading of cotton, vegetables, meat, and various kinds of food; an approach that would allow Chinese agriculture to modernize and permit the peasants to greatly improve their living standards."



Top left: Chen interviews a peasant at Huacun, a village in central China. Top right: Here in Shimen, a village founded in the mid-Tang dynasty, 7th century, a former "model" peasant in the 1950s stands with his nephew. Middle left: In Dongyu, a village founded in the early Ming Dynasty, elderly peasants work in these fields for self-support as young people leave for the cities. China has no social security system for rural people. Middle right: Fangkeng, located in the mountains in Eastern China. Founded in the Song Dynasty, 11th century, and set in a naturally beautiful environment with stone quarries for construction needs, Fangkeng is relatively better off than most villages. Bottom left: A woman and her niece tend to their rice fields in Huacun. Bottom right: A peasant in Dongyu tries to dry newly harvested wheat on his rooftop.