Lucien Bianco, *Peasants Without the Party. Grass-roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China*

Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2001, 309 p.

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- 1 In recent years peasant protests over land expropriation for development as well as onerous taxes and fees have become an increasingly serious challenge for the Chinese state. The publication of Lucien Bianco's articles and book chapters on twentieth century peasant movements could not therefore be more timely. Published between 1970 and 1999, the thirteen chapters of the book cover an enormous range of topics. Seven chapters are devoted to peasant protest and uprisings during the Republican period. These include the role of secret societies, peasant resistance to the poppy tax—this chapter is a rich analysis of the complex and usually predatory social and political milieu in which peasants operated in the early 1930s—efforts to eradicate opium plants, resistance to land rent, looting and food riots, as well as horizontal conflict between clans and villages (*xiedou*). Important puzzles are addressed. If the reader wishes to learn why villages and clans at war with one another may sacrifice lives and treasure in disproportion to the issue at stake, here is the answer. Three chapters are devoted to the theme of peasants and revolution, one of which looks at how peasants responded to the CCP during the Yan'an period. Three chapters look at peasant resistance under Communist rule, of which one is a follow-up examination of *xiedou* after 1949.
- 2 The book reflects an immense research effort in primary sources, including in particular county gazetteers (*xianzhi*) and the Number 2 Archive in Nanjing. It exhibits Bianco's intense concern with data and evidence, which, given the subject matter, are often elusive. One chapter is entitled "How Credible are the Numbers?" (One of the more endearing qualities of this book is the author's willingness to be critical of his own work). There is a great deal of discussion of problems of measurement and of how to categorise peasant responses to the various elites that ruled over them. Bianco is strongly aware of regional and local variation. At various points the author makes

helpful comparisons with Western Europe, particularly France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and engages scholars such as Charles Tilly.

- 3 Bianco's core concern is to present peasants as actors in their own right, with their own identities, interests and ways of expressing them. They are not simply the passive object of elite policies and actions. Chinese peasants, in his view, had and still, to varying degrees, have the following characteristics in common: They are oriented towards their local community rather than towards the outside world. They are largely lacking in class consciousness. Class loyalties are far less important to them than vertical loyalties, a point that explains both the prevalence of *xiedou* and the relative paucity of conflict between landlords and tenants or landless labourers. They resist modernisation since they invariably have to pay the costs it incurs. The main source of revolt is predatory taxation and extortion. Their strategies are fundamentally defensive, reactive, and conservative, often motivated by outrage and anger. Revolts, however, are easily suppressed by military force.
- 4 The essays on revolution and the CCP emphasize the difficulties which the Party encountered in mobilising peasants. The CCP had to start with the recruitment of classless elements—bandits, secret society members, soldiers—and, in Yan'an, with the members of the local elite, particularly students. Peasant mobilisation could not really begin until a base area had been secured by military force. It took long, patient work and much learning before the CCP was able successfully to secure peasant participation. They would by and large have preferred to stay apart from CCP and KMT but were not in a position to choose. This point leads Bianco to emphasise that Communist mobilisation had a strong component of compulsion. Although Communist class categories were alien and difficult to accept, there were also real benefits which attracted support, especially among poor peasants. Bianco does discern growth in peasant revolutionary consciousness but eschews determinist structural theories to explain peasant participation in the Communist revolution.
- 5 With respect to the post-1949 era, Bianco emphasises the much stronger repressive capacities of the Maoist state. Thus, fewer *xiedou* erupted. There was relatively little violent resistance. Although there were instances of violence, especially destruction of livestock, for the most part peasants dragged their feet and productivity suffered during these years. Because the state became less repressive during the reform period, more space was opened up for a revival of resistance. Collective actions of various sorts, including tax resistance, reappeared. In recent years, contemporary researchers have found that peasant resistance has greater staying power and is beginning to be more organised. Peasants, especially peasant activists, are aware of central laws and regulations that would benefit them if they were implemented by the local authorities, whom peasants deeply distrust. Thus, such phenomena as "collective petitioning" for redress of grievances, in which groups of villagers travel all the way to their provincial capitals or even to Peking, suggest that while there are strong continuities with the past, there have also been significant changes. In sum, this excellent book is a major contribution to the literature on peasant resistance and deserves a wide audience.