

CRIMINAL VILLAGES AND ROVING CRIME

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XI JINPING TIME AND AGAIN stresses that the Chinese Dream is the dream of the ‘old one hundred surnames’ *laobaixing* 老百姓, the common men and women of China. This dream, however, involves what development theorists have termed a ‘betting on the strong’ strategy, where there are many who do not ‘get rich first’ and some that never will. From being one of the most equal nations in the world nearly four decades ago, China is today listed as one of the most unequal nations in the world. Economic reforms brought much prosperity for some, but also created a system with two kinds of people: the haves and the have-nots.

Like the American Dream, the people who fall outside the grand narrative of the Chinese Dream tend to organise themselves in ways that

lie outside the legal rules and accepted norms of society, in an attempt to merely get by. The politics of *weiwēn* 维稳, or stability maintenance, has developed China into a virtual surveillance state. Yet instead of a population paralysed by control, illegal entrepreneurialism — involving fraud, corruption, thievery, and other criminal activities — is flourishing, as I document with my former students in *Crime and the Chinese Dream*, published in 2018 by the Hong Kong University Press (with a forthcoming e-book by Oxford University Press).

In the countryside, illegal pathways to wealth are so common that many parts of the countryside can best be described as an ‘underworld’ economy. ‘Fang Village’ in southern China is one example. There the so-



Criminal poster wall in Guangzhou

Image: Børge Bakken

called ‘cake uncles’ 饼叔 who, having struggled to get by the traditional way by planting cash crops and pig farming, ventured into illegal logging and cigarette-making. After the local authorities cracked down, however, they started new businesses involving cake delivery. The entrepreneurs of Fang

village started their criminal careers delivering cakes while falsifying account books. While selling on credit one year and not asking for payment before the next year, they exaggerated the number and agreed price of cakes sold by falsifying the original numbers and signatures. Not until they had tak-

en the activities out of the village were they able to get away with their illegal trade. This kind of roving crime has become the hallmark of success for these entrepreneurs, and they have now branched into much more diversified trades, even setting up branches in Beijing and Shanghai and other big cities. Because their entrepreneurialism brought prosperity to the village, and any crimes were committed outside their jurisdiction, local officials turned a blind eye.

Other ‘criminal villages’ have specialised in organised large-scale shoplifting, car theft, and burglary. In Guangzhou, a large industry of migrant workers leaving the assembly line to work as illegal motorcycle taxi drivers was partly quelled by the authorities, who simply banned motorcycles from the entire city. The practice was repeated in many other cities in Guangzhou, but the illegal taxi drivers have constantly relocated their businesses, playing cat and mouse with the police. The illegal trade also involves serious violence. In one example, investigative reporter Fu Jianfeng 傅剑锋 has written and lectured extensively about a ‘robbery village’ in Guangxi. His reports were first published in the newspaper *Southern*

Weekly 南方周末, and his findings have now allegedly been published in book form. The young men from the village (some only juveniles) went to train stations and other crowded places in the bigger cities and cut off selected victims’ hands with cleavers, and then robbed people in the ensuing panic. Fu followed a juvenile gang member from the village through the legal system, revealing the desperation felt by rural people who feel they have no legal means to enrichment open to them. Many of his fellow gang members have since been executed.

Other examples include villages, typically in poor south-western provinces including Yunnan and Guangxi, where the whole local economy is based on the production and transportation of illegal drugs. A local lawyer told me that in just one local prison in Xishuang Banna in Yunnan (with a total population of less than a million), there were more than 200 inmates on death row awaiting immediate execution. The Supreme People’s Court has recently introduced poverty as a mitigating circumstance for those eligible for immediate execution because such executions are now being nearly exclusively practiced against poor peasants and migrant workers. Often the

executed are mere 'drug mules' who typically transport the drugs from the villages to the cities on the east coast. Other villages produce and trade in illegal firearms, or specialise in falsifying documents. There are even villages involved in human trafficking, mainly of girls into places where local men cannot find brides. Tens of thousands of children are allegedly kidnapped in China each year, and parents have organised themselves into teams, visiting criminal trafficking villages to look for their kids.

Village specialisation along local and clan lines has always been a common practice in the Chinese countryside, with the possible exception of the Maoist days. During the Qing dynasty, the guilds and trades were also specialised along *tongxiang* 同乡 — common village lines. For example, blacksmiths all over China were known to come from Ningbo, while the so-called 'sing-song' girls seemed to come from Guangzhou. One can now see this organising principle in all kinds of legitimate industries as well, and the criminal counterparts follow these well-beaten but traditional tracks of organisation in China.

The village base and transient character of so-called roving crime

is, of course, a matter of opportunity, and in the example of Fang village, the opportunistic fraudsters soon became the modernisers and local heroes of the village. The cake uncles were the first to build three-storey houses in the village, and the village girls chose the young men in the cake-uncle industry as their preferred spouses (there are but a few female fraudsters). The trade has now also spread to neighbouring villages, which have made deals with the original cake-uncle village. The decentralised character of the police force makes roving crime much more lucrative than any legal approach. The villagers have even formed a system of pooling money for buying fellow fraudsters out of the rather short arm of the law. A reduction of a potential ten-year sentence to a one-year sentence typically used to cost 10,000 yuan, while the much more difficult process of a full withdrawal of a case will cost up to 100,000 yuan in bribes and other costs. While the cooperation of these illegal networks is advanced, the desperation of those who have no legitimate opportunities to get rich or just to get by are even more evident by the extreme risk behaviour involved in the operations. Some even pay the ultimate prize of execution.

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