



THE PEOPLE SPEAK

by B. Michael Frolic

In 1971, as part of a research project on the gap between the city and countryside in China, B. Michael Frolic, a Canadian political scientist and former diplomat, began to interview refugees living in the British colony of Hong Kong. Intrigued by the richness of their stories, he soon decided to collect firsthand accounts of daily life in China. Three themes emerged: the insistent grip of totalitarian politics; the humor of the Chinese; and the ways in which old customs have been adapted to the new ideology. Several hundred thousand former citizens of Mao's China live in Hong Kong; between 1972 and 1976, Frolic questioned 250 of them. To protect his subjects, Frolic kept their exact identities confidential. Here we present selections from six of his interviews.

The Backdoor

An intellectual from the southeastern coastal city of Fuzhou discusses the paradox of privilege in the People's Republic:

Chairman Mao tells us, "To know the taste of a pear, you must eat the pear." He means that you cannot understand life from the outside, by just sitting around thinking. Not all our pears are sweet to eat; some are rotten and others have never ripened, so the China I present to you will not be one-sided, but it is a fair picture, at least to one who has lived there. That means it is also a view of China that some people may not want to hear. There is not always glory in the everyday routine of ordinary men.

How is it that, despite Chairman Mao and despite the Cultural Revolution, the privileged few still manage to scoop away the extra rice from our bowls and take it for themselves? Those at the bottom seem destined to stay there, while those at the top

gorge themselves on the fruits of Revolution. I am not bitter, only puzzled at how this came about.

Everybody in China knows about the backdoor. It means using your personal connections to bribe people with money or material goods so you can get something you can't obtain through normal ways, through the "front door." Using the backdoor has been a common practice in China, but it really flourished during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Now it is a major part of our life. When you have scarcities and a privileged group, then you have a society full of backdoors. The backdoor can be found at the top, in government organs, in the Party, the Army, through the entire system right down to the very bottom. The general gets his marble bathtub through the backdoor, and the ordinary worker his "Flying Pigeon" bicycle the same way. People take the backdoor for granted and do not regard it as something disgraceful or "antisocialist." On the contrary, those who know how to use the backdoor are regarded as clever people, whereas those who don't are considered stupid.

A Borrowed Enemy

What to do when "class enemies" cannot be found for public criticism sessions? A Shanghai housewife describes how her neighborhood political committee solved a predicament reminiscent of Orwell's 1984:

At the start of the Cultural Revolution, we had a few genuine "landlord/Kuomintang" types, but they had either died, moved away, or were too sick. Efforts to find a genuine class enemy in our midst were not too successful. We had one fellow in mind—he wasn't really a class enemy, and as a matter of fact his father had been a worker and he himself had been a sailor. But he had become mentally unbalanced and used to go around talking about all the foreign places he'd visited in his younger days and how he'd like to go again. He used to sing "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Great Helmsman" all day long, and he'd change the verses around so that he and Chairman Mao were sailing around the world together, making revolution in all the foreign ports he'd once visited. At first the residents' committee decided to make him our choice to be struggled, but then we had second thoughts because he was too old and silly for something like that. What if he had a heart attack in the middle of the event? Or if he started singing and wouldn't stop?

We decided to find someone else but didn't have a suitable candidate. Finally, the chairman of our committee said, "Why

not borrow a class enemy from the adjoining neighborhood? It doesn't really matter if he lives here or not, just as long as he's a genuine class enemy. We can have a first-rate struggle session, everybody can participate, and the leadership will be pleased."

So we "borrowed" a class enemy from next door and had our struggle session. He was a veteran of such struggle sessions, about 50 years old, a known collaborator with the Kuomintang. We built a platform, assembled the masses, denounced him for his crimes, and shouted revolutionary slogans for most of a Sunday afternoon. Then we returned our borrowed class enemy, none the worse for the wear (we had promised we would avoid any physical violence and would return him unharmed), and everybody was satisfied.

The Study Session

A former Beijing (Peking) office worker describes a political study group:

Political study sessions took place on two afternoons and two evenings every week. They were presided over by my section leader, Old Zhou, at least until the Cultural Revolution.

It went like this. A bell would ring at 2:00, and after the bell had sounded you picked up your chair and tea cup and went to a larger office and sat down. Then, when everyone in the section was assembled, Old Zhou would begin the meeting. Let's say the meeting was called to discuss the New Year's editorial that had just appeared in *People's Daily*. He would say, "All right, today, as you know, we are going to discuss the New Year's editorial. Let's reread the editorial, and then we'll have a discussion. Now let's start reading." At this point, each of us volunteered to read the editorial out loud. The idea uppermost in everyone's minds was that if you read it out loud first, then you wouldn't be called on later to analyze it. One lucky person was chosen, and he read it out, loudly.

Then Zhou would proclaim, "Fine, now let's start the discussion!" The room suddenly became silent because nobody

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wanted to be the first to risk saying the wrong thing. Zhou glared at us, pleaded, and finally became angry. "Come, come, speak up. Don't hold back!" Finally, one who knew how to talk well under any circumstances, and had a good political sense, spoke a few carefully chosen words. He would start somewhat timorously, and then the rest of us relaxed our tensed muscles. He invariably went on for about half an hour, cautiously repeating and embellishing but never straying from the editorial's meaning. The tenseness went out of the room. It became routine. Five or six began to doze in their chairs. The rest of us picked out a few choice phrases to repeat out loud if called upon later. The room was too hot; the voices droned on; cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air.

Wu was a bachelor in his mid-thirties. He loved to play pranks and make jokes. Once I remember attending an important political meeting of our section. A girl in another office was there, and it was always easy to make her laugh. So, in the middle of the most serious political discussion on dialectical materialism, Wu deliberately caught her attention and then slowly opened his mouth to smile at her. He had wrapped his teeth in silver cigarette paper, and the effect was startling. He looked like one of those Soviet experts with their silver teeth. She started to giggle uncontrollably and quickly disrupted the whole meeting. Another time, he was sitting at a meeting and suddenly asked loudly, "Who is Feng Zixiu? I always hear comrades criticizing this person, but I have never heard of him."

(*Feng*, *zi*, and *xiu* are the Chinese characters that stand for feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism, not for anyone's name.) There was a stunned silence, and then the meeting burst into laughter. The section leader was trapped. He had to keep a straight face and could do nothing.

City Life

A former economist-planner describes his days in Beijing:

Living in Beijing is a privilege for most Chinese. We all try to get a permit to live in the city, because it's the center of everything.

When other parts of China had food shortages, we were better off in Beijing, probably because the Party wanted Beijing to be well stocked to show foreigners that all was well. Also, many high-level cadres live in the city, and they always demand special privileges. We had the best cultural events, and I went to any performance that was playing. I probably saw every film shown in Beijing. I remember seeing lots of foreign films, especially Soviet, but also English, French, and Japanese. Some of them I saw six or seven times just because they were different to see and do. On days off, I walked a lot, did some shopping, or rode my bicycle.

I never had a serious girlfriend. I was an outsider, a southerner, with a broken career and a bad class background.

Arranging a Marriage

Despite a half-century of Communist Party calls for the emancipation of women, the custom of arranging marriages lives on in the Chinese countryside. The story told by this woman of Guangdong province suggests that the hierarchy of status has been turned upside-down, but class background remains a paramount consideration.

The matchmaker found a family of good class background with a strong, healthy, and attractive daughter. Both parents agreed upon the bride price, dowry, and wedding arrangements, and Little Brother seemed to like her when they met. But the daughter was aloof and resisted the marriage. It turned out that she fancied another young man and wanted to marry him, but he had a bad class background and her parents objected. When Little Brother found out that she had a boyfriend, he didn't want to marry her.

The matchmaker was on the spot because she had failed and

our family had lost face. It was rare to find an eligible bride who openly resisted a match because she had someone else in mind.

Drawing on all the resources she had at her disposal, the matchmaker combed the surrounding area, visited teahouses, and finally came up with a candidate, the daughter of a peasant family in a neighboring commune. The bride's family wasn't rich, but their political status was excellent. Her eldest brother was a brigade cadre, her father a respected peasant. Because they were classified as "lower-middle peasants," the bride's family wouldn't demand too high a bride price. On the other hand, because our class status was inferior to theirs—we were "middle peasants"—they used that to their advantage in bargaining over the arrangements, saying, "Once our daughter enters your household, she will have suffered a loss in status. These days you know how valuable it is to be lower-middle peasant; middle isn't bad, but lower-middle is better."

Life on the Re-Education Farm

In 1968, the Chinese government set up "May 7 Cadres Schools" across the countryside. Their purpose: "re-education" of the bureaucracy through farm work. As is revealed in this tale narrated by a former Beijing bureaucrat, the "schools," which were at first symbols of the Cultural Revolution's antielitism, soon took on the atmosphere of summer camps.

We decided to buy the pig after the head of the military control commission visited our school and was appalled by the condition of our pigs. He had heard the local gossip: "Those city slickers at the May 7 Cadres School are so dumb they can't even raise pigs." We were a local embarrassment. Surrounded by sleek, fat, pink peasant pigs, our scrawny pigs had lost face.

We had an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. Director Lin said, "We have poorly applied Chairman Mao's Thought to our work. Skinny pigs are proof of that." The Party secretary then asked the question, "How do we apply Chairman Mao's Thought to get fat pigs?"

Squad Leader Ho (who knew the most about pigs) replied that, according to Chairman Mao, one must investigate the problem fully from all sides and then integrate practice and theory. Ho concluded that the reason for our skinny pigs had to be found in one of three areas: the relationship between the pigs and their natural environment; the relationship between the cadres and the pigs; and the relationship among the pigs themselves. He went on to say: "I've investigated each of these three relationships. The principal contradiction is the relationship

among the animals themselves. Our pigs are skinny because their ancestors were skinny pigs. In the case of our present pigs, the internal factor (the pig itself) is the main contradiction, and external factors (the food they eat, the way we care for them) are only a secondary aspect."

After Ho sat down, both the party secretary and Director Lin congratulated him for his brilliant application of Chairman Mao's theory of contradictions to the concrete problem of pigs. "In taking Chairman Mao's teaching to heart," said Director Lin, "you have clarified the problem for us. We need better pigs in order to produce better pigs. How many do we need?" Squad Leader Ho replied that in his opinion only one would be necessary but that it must be outstanding.

A pig is then purchased at more than three times the usual price.

The Thousand-Dollar Pig arrived six weeks later, in a wooden crate on the back of a truck. Sitting beside him was the expert. Neither pig nor expert impressed us at first glance. The Thousand-Dollar Pig didn't look much different than any of the fatter local varieties. His piggish red eyes peered sullenly out at the cadres who came to look at him. He lay around weakly flicking at the flies crawling all over him. The expert stuttered and had a difficult accent. Half the time, we couldn't understand what he was saying.

Like all long stories, there isn't much of an ending to this one. I guess the Thousand-Dollar Pig was a success. But was it worth the overall cost? The pig did upgrade the quality of our pork production, although nowhere the grandiose level we had originally envisaged. We could never repay the investment. Eventually, the peasants came out of curiosity to see the great pig. Of course, they knew the whole story—all the details—and they used to laugh uproariously at Beijing's folly in bringing a pig so many kilometers for so much money.

The pig became a celebrity at our school because he outlived several sets of cadres over a number of years. Eventually, back in Beijing, when we were assigning cadres on rotation to go to Henan, we didn't say they were going to the Henan May 7 Cadres School, but that they were being assigned "to the Land of the Thousand-Dollar Pig."

