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Ian S. McIntosh
IUPUI, imcintos@iupui.edu

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Political Pilgrimage during China's Cultural Revolution: The Case of Dazhai

Ian S. McIntosh

School of Liberal Arts at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI)
imcintos@iupui.edu

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-76) political pilgrimage was a tool for promoting the communist ideal of collectivism. This paper explores the creation in the 1960s by Chairman Mao Zedong of one of the foremost sites of political pilgrimage, the small agricultural commune of Dazhai in north-central China. I argue that in the days of militant atheism, all the factors usually associated with the creation of a religious pilgrimage site were present and utilized to great effect by the communists to create a 'super symbol' of China's desired future. These factors included a miracle, charismatic leadership, altruism, poignant sites of historical significance, rituals of remembrance, and a sacred mission that would inspire the impoverished Chinese masses to strive unceasingly towards the revolution's goals. Through careful marketing (and propaganda), national leaders sold the Dazhai story to the Chinese people through political speeches and media reporting, and persuasive posters, banners and songs. At its peak, millions of peasants visited the commune, either voluntarily or at the invitation of the state, to learn about Dazhai's agricultural techniques and the peoples' spirit of self-sacrifice. In this paper, I describe my own visit to Dazhai from Australia in 1977 and speculate on the long-term legacy of the Dazhai agricultural experiment, and of this political pilgrimage. In contemporary Dazhai, tourists have the opportunity to reflect on the commune's heroic past, but also to consider the environmental damage caused by a model of development that was rich in revolutionary zeal but poor in science.

Key Words: China, Dazhai, communism, commune, agriculture, peasants, Mao Zedong, altruism, Cultural Revolution, Great Leap Forward, Chen Yonggui

Dazhai as 'Super Symbol'

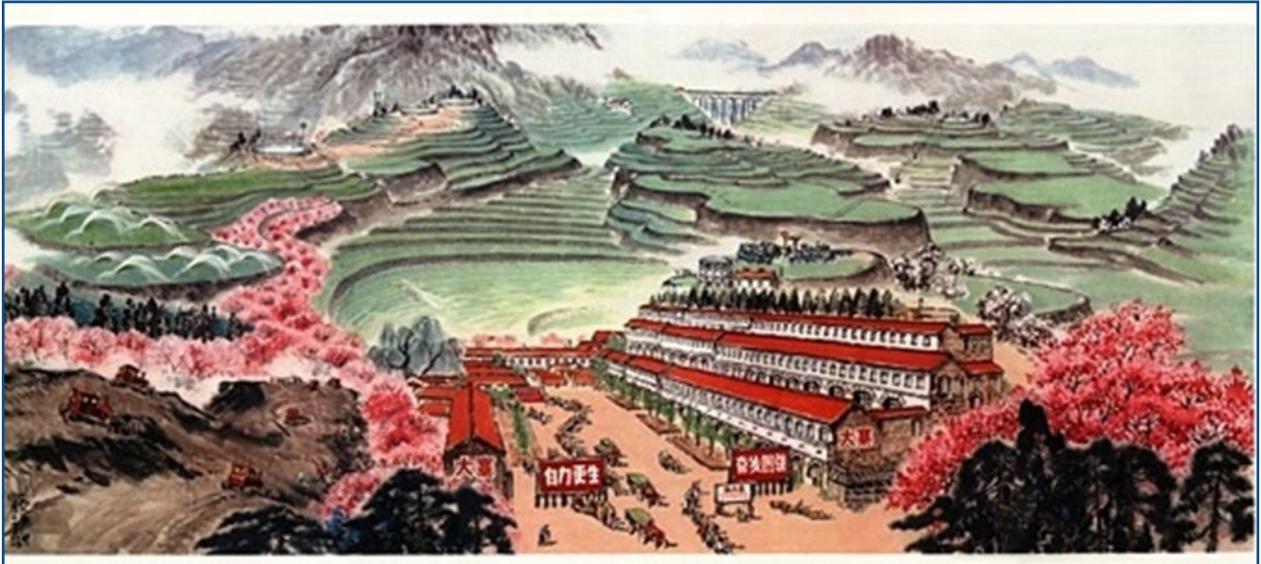
Throughout China, there is a growing interest in religious tourism and pilgrimage. By some estimates, over 80% of the population are engaged in some form of religious practice (Yang, 2011). Chinese nationals are flocking to sites of pilgrimage and motives are varied.^[1] In former times, natural sites and temples associated with Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism that were 'ling', a Chinese word for mystical or efficacious, attracted pilgrims because they believed that the power of the deity was located there. On pilgrimage, they would seek a vision of the deity, perform penance, or ask for blessings. Today, apart from such religiously inspired motives, pilgrims visit these sacred or cultural sites out of curiosity and for peace of mind. They know something is missing in their lives, something not found in the materialism that their world offers as a cure-all.

However, just 50 years ago, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the

goal was to preserve the 'true' communist ideology by purging all remnant capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, a policy of militant atheism was enforced (Krauss, 2012; Yuan, 1988). The Communist Party of China deemed religion to be the 'opium of the people' and to achieve their goals they shuttered sites of religious pilgrimage. However, pilgrimage continued in new forms. In the 1960s and 70s, authorities popularized the idea of political pilgrimage and one of the most important pilgrimage sites was the tiny north-central Chinese commune of Dazhai. This was to become a mecca of collectivist agriculture and a shrine to China's communist ideals. According to Oakes and Sutton (2010:13), Dazhai became a 'super symbol' invented by the state to promote the spirit of collectivism, where the needs of the group took priority over the needs of individuals. At its peak, over a period of more than ten years, millions of peasants came to Dazhai to witness a so-called miracle in agricultural development.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the making of Dazhai as a political pilgrimage site. I track the commune's history from liberation from the Japanese

1. Editor's note - see Volume 6(i) of this Journal - <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss1/>

Figure 1. An idealized view of the Dazhai Commune.

Chinese posters.net

during World War Two, to the 1960s when political pilgrimage began at the behest of Chairman Mao Zedong, and finally to early 1980s when a sea-change in government economic policy put an end to such pilgrimages. I describe the nature of these political pilgrimages in the light of my own observations from a visit to the commune in 1977. Then I investigate the key elements utilized in creating this mega-site of political pilgrimage, including a miracle, mythology, charismatic leadership, and so on. Finally, I describe the Dazhai of today and the recent rise in tourist numbers, but in particular, I outline the legacy of the commune's failed model of agricultural development and its broader implications.

Oppression, Liberation, Fame and Obscurity

In 1945, at the time of liberation from the Japanese, Dazhai had a population of several hundred uneducated peasants living in primitive cave dwellings adjacent to Tigerhead Hill. Centuries of poor husbandry and deforestation had severely eroded Dazhai's fields. Productivity was extremely low. These people were the poorest of the poor. Land distribution was very unequal with property owners and wealthier peasants holding the largest area while the majority had little hope for any improvement in their circumstances. Zhao and Woudstra (2007:174) describe how the peasants suffered grievously from exploitation and oppression. The situation would not change in any significant way until the emergence of an entirely new developmental paradigm: collectivism. The Communist Party considered that giving up private ownership was the

only way for the masses to find relief from grinding poverty. By fully embracing the communist ideal, the people of Dazhai were able to transform their village, in a very short period, from being the archetype of all that was wrong in China, to a posterchild for the new collectivist ways.

For those Chinese sent to the countryside for reeducation between 1966 and 1976 during the Cultural Revolution, a pilgrimage to Dazhai was invariably on the agenda. Chairman Mao had facilitated the transportation of more than ten million citizens to this remote commune in Shanxi Province for short educational visits. At various points of time, there were upwards of 20,000 pilgrims arriving each day to learn in detail about Dazhai's success in agriculture.

Figure 2. The old cliffside dwellings of the Dazhai peasants prior to liberation.

Source: Tachai. The Red Banner (1977)

Figure 3. Dazhai in 1977.



Source: Tachai. *The Red Banner* (1977)

Dazhai was a place where the pilgrim could experience firsthand the spirit and meaning of collectivism. It was here that the red banner of communism would fly for 10,000 generations! Peasants, both male and female, were motivated with the spirit of altruism. Their goal was to destroy the old ways, including all vestiges of religion, Confucius' teachings, and bourgeois capitalism. During this period in Dazhai, the very idea of private enterprise for personal gain was unthinkable. Hundreds of other villages in rural China would try to emulate Dazhai's achievements in cultivation and communal living. Working as one, they would 'conquer nature' and thus attain freedom from it. By so doing, they could feed the starving millions, and raise the living standards of the impoverished masses. These were lofty goals, but then the people of Dazhai wanted to provide a lesson for humankind. As Chairman Mao said, this would be China's gift to the world (Yin and Hua, 1977).

I visited Dazhai from Australia in 1977 with the first post-revolution wave of foreign visitors. Other visitors around this time included President Lee Kuan Yew who modernized Singapore, and the dictator Pol Pot of Cambodia who was responsible for the deaths of millions of his own people. Visitors interpreted Dazhai's message through the lens of their own developmental paradigms and personal interests, and these two leaders presumably saw the promise and

practice of collectivism in entirely different ways. By the early 1980s, with the realization that the Dazhai model of development was a pathway to environmental ruin (leveling the countryside for crop production was not a means of conquering nature) the village fell into obscurity, and went the way of many utopian communities. Today Dazhai attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists interested in reminiscing about its Herculean past. Long gone are its glory days.

What is Political Pilgrimage?

Even in the most religious of settings, pilgrimage is an inherently political phenomenon. Often subsidized by the government or other political interest groups, political pilgrimages invariably commemorate group sacrifice for the greater common good and are therefore critical to the identity of a people (Davidson and Gitlitz, 2002:485). In many places, the state and religion are inseparable, with leaders manipulating the religious realm to endorse their rule. Elites can build political support, for example, by investing in selected pilgrimage shrines. Spain's fascist dictator Francisco Franco was a frequent visitor to Santiago de Compostela and he bolstered his own personal support through this popular Catholic pilgrimage. The pilgrimage to Mecca, likewise, augments the power of the centralized Saudi Arabian state (Davidson and Gitlitz, 2002).

In the United States, the catch cry of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', inspires civil religion pilgrimage, or political pilgrimage, to places such as the Gettysburg Civil War Battlefield or the Mall in Washington D.C. where the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution and other sacred documents are housed (Greenia, 2012). I view Dazhai in a similar light. This small village was a place of pilgrimage created by China's political leaders to guide the nation in its struggle to usher in a new world order. There were at least three categories of pilgrims to the commune. There were those who came of their own free will to witness the 'miracle' of Dazhai. Then there were those, perhaps the vast majority, sent by authorities to learn about the commune's agricultural methods and spirit of collectivism. Finally, there were the visiting Red Guards, the fanatical student-led paramilitary (see Krauss, 2012; Yuan, 1988) who would perform revolutionary routines at Dazhai. For the latter, and perhaps many others, pilgrimage to Dazhai was a political act or even a rite of passage designed to endorse the national identity and validate the state's sacred precepts.

By many accounts, on returning home to their respective villages, pilgrims would demonstrate their political zeal by trying to emulate what they had observed at the commune (Zhao and Woudstra, 2007). By so doing, they were contributing to what they understood to be the bigger picture: freeing the poor working classes from the shackles of exploitation by the so-called 'man-eating' or capitalist classes. A pilgrimage to Dazhai in the 1960s and 1970s was indeed a sacred journey for many of those political pilgrims who were helping China send a message to the world about how things must be in the future.

What I Saw in Dazhai in 1977

In the late 1970s, I was one of 5000 international pilgrims to visit Dazhai. My visit was at the beginning of winter and I stayed in one of the austere apartments in which the peasant families lived. These replicated the mountain cave residences that the villagers had lived in prior to liberation. In the central square, I saw the 'happy man's tree', an old willow that used to be known as the tree of suffering. We heard that this was where the poor would be whipped or even executed on the flimsiest of charges by the landowners.

Figure 4. Dazhai children gather around the 'Happy Man's Tree', formerly the 'Tree of Suffering' in the center of the commune, circa 1977.



Source: Tachai. *The Red Banner* (1977)

Figure 5. The Unity Aqueduct, Dazhai, circa 1977.



Source: Tachai. *The Red Banner* (1977)

By 1977, however, the tree had become a place for discussing the ideals of the communist revolution, sharing community news, and distributing grain. I had the honor of meeting the leaders of the production brigades and party branch members. From them I learned that through mass mobilization and often without machinery, the people had built the mighty terraces in Dazhai's seven severely eroded gullies on Tigerhead Hill. I saw the massive aerial cableway that ferried the quarried stone for construction, and compost and manure for the wheat fields. I remember, also, the unity aqueduct and the Army and People Canal that the peasants had built to bring in water from over five miles away. It was an astonishing sight.

Despite appearing very bleak that winter, Dazhai, nevertheless, deeply moved me. The bare hills and the bitter cold stood in stark contrast to the warmth and enthusiasm of the people. With open arms, they welcomed me, and shared the story of their progress towards collectivism and Marx's cherished mantra of 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' (See Marx, 1975)

Mine was but a small glimpse into the realities of life in Communist China. The entire trip was a mere three weeks and my stay at Dazhai was for just two days. My

group had visited a number of steel factories and primary schools in other parts of China, and witnessed Beijing's famed cultural sites and underground city, and the picture in my mind was of an emerging model society. How wrong I was! The Cultural Revolution, the 'ten years of madness', had resulted in the deaths of untold millions of innocent citizens (Krauss, 2012; Jicai, 1996). Limited access to alternate narratives had significantly biased my outlook. At that time, I was strongly in favor of the Dazhai model of development and of the socialist path in general. On my return to Australia, I joined the Australia-China Friendship Association, carried posters of Chairman Mao in Brisbane's May Day parade, and reached out to groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and other left-wing politicians advocating for Australia to follow China's revolutionary path. I became engaged in social justice and welfare work with Australia's indigenous peoples, the Aborigines, often described as the original communist society. One of my early projects in Australia's Northern Territory was to replicate China's Barefoot Doctor program designed to bring basic health care to the people living in China's rural areas. In my case, the program would benefit Outback Aboriginal people who had little to no access to modern health care.

Years later, I would hear reports that were highly critical of Dazhai. Some argued that the peasant leaders wildly exaggerated Dazhai's agricultural yields, or that it was only with the help of the People's Liberation Army that the seemingly impossible production targets were met (Zhao and Woudstra, 2007). Others claimed that the government had perpetrated a massive hoax by creating the illusion of a utopian community, and that the ideals of altruism and self-sacrifice were unsustainable and wrong-headed (Lu, 2001; Poole, 1995). More importantly, though, I heard that the Dazhai model, when copied across the length and breadth of China, had been the harbinger of an environmental disaster of colossal proportions, the implications of which are still being felt today (Mann, 2008).

Nevertheless, the experience of Dazhai changed my life. Members of China's younger generations know little about this commune. In the early 1980s, Chinese authorities no longer promoted Dazhai in the public consciousness as a place of destiny (Poole, 1995), though lately tourism has reignited curiosity about this once famous village. However, anyone born before or even during the Cultural Revolution will know about Dazhai. The values and ideals that this commune represented, including the steadfast belief in saving humanity from itself, seem foreign in the China of today. Political faith in the Marxist ideal is no longer the rule of law and private faith has spread across the country. People are free to choose their own religion, so long as it is one of the major five religions, including Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism and Islam, or indigenous folk religious.

What can we learn about the universal phenomenon of pilgrimage from the Dazhai case study? Creating the model community was an uphill battle from the start for both the peasants and the central government, and there was no shortage of propaganda. The process required all the spiritual fervor usually associated with the creation of a religious pilgrimage site. In this case, however, the religion was Marxism, Chairman Mao's 'little red book' was the Bible, and Dazhai was the sacred pilgrimage center of collectivism.

Creating a Pilgrimage Site

Many factors contribute to the making of an ideologically sound political pilgrimage site, including but not limited to miracles, an inspirational history and mythology, charismatic leadership, a powerful long-term vision, the identification of sites of significance, and rituals of remembrance. Then, with the support of

the machinery of the state, including marketing campaigns, the sacred path is set in place. All of these factors were present in the 1960s at the small rural village of Dazhai when thousands of political pilgrims were arriving in the commune each day from across China.

Miracles

Why was Dazhai singled out as a place of political pilgrimage? While Dazhai was not impacted by the great famine during what was termed the Great Leap Forward and the 'three difficult years' (1959-1961) in which up to twenty million Chinese starved to death (Xun, 2012), a disastrous flood in 1963 destroyed Dazhai's roads, embankments, crops and washed away the topsoil. Of the village's 80 families, 78 lost their homes (Yin and Hua, 1977).

From this scene of devastation, the peasants started to regroup and their resolve inspired the nation. With an ideology of self-reliance and self-sacrifice, they advocated the 'three no's': refusing state relief grain, state relief funds, and state relief shelter (Weeks, 1977). With a slogan of 'field first, home second', agricultural lands were reconstructed during the daylight hours, and homes were rebuilt at night. The villagers built massive new terraces in just two years and they rebuilt their housing in under three years. No outside resources or assistance was required. The villagers' personal savings met all costs. Extraordinarily, harvests showed no downturn. It was a sensation. Many in China considered their achievements miraculous (Yin and Hua, 1977).

Figure 6. Chairman Mao greeting the Dazhai peasant leader, Chen Yongwei.



Source: Tachai. *The Red Banner* (1977)

Chairman Mao took notice of this great accomplishment and in his speech to the Chinese people in 1964 he referenced the peasants' complete abstinence from the notion of personal enrichment as 'the Dazhai spirit.' Such was the inspiration drawn from the miraculous occurrences at Dazhai that it was said that Dazhai flowers were soon to be seen blooming everywhere across China (Yin and Hua, 1977). Flowers were an important symbol in China's communist philosophy. In the 1950s, Chairman Mao had initiated the 'Let one hundred flowers blossom movement' in an effort to bring forth views critical of communism from the informed citizenry, in what was inevitably a failed effort to strengthen the party. The reference to 'Dazhai flowers' blooming across China was the ultimate endorsement of the supposed achievements and promise of the Dazhai 'spirit'.

Charismatic Leadership

Chen Yonggui, the peasant leader of Dazhai during the Cultural Revolution, was the son of an uneducated peasant. In the 1920s, his father was destitute. Fearing that his whole family would perish, he sold his wife along with Chen's brother and sister into slavery. Then, in a fit of despair, he hung himself on a tree by the grave of his ancestors. At that time, such stories were not uncommon. At the age of eight, the orphan Chen worked as a shepherd and then as a laborer. Unable to endure the cruel exploitation and oppression of his masters, he ventured further afield but could not avoid what he described as the two curses, beatings and starvation, and he returned to Dazhai as a hired hand (Yin and Hua, 1977).

In 1942, underground workers of the Communist Party came to Dazhai and were welcomed by the poor. Nearby towns were still in Japanese hands and they would often attack Dazhai. The Japanese invaders had a policy towards Chinese resistors of 'burn, loot and kill'. In 1942, more than 40 young and middle-aged men from Dazhai's 60 households were slaughtered for their anti-Japanese activities. Chen's own uncle was burned to death in a kiln at this time (Yin and Hua, 1977).

Chen Yonggui's credentials for leadership of the revolutionary movement in China, when viewed in the light of his humble beginnings, were second to none. His achievements in motivating his fellow peasants and building Dazhai into a model village were widely recognized throughout the country. He was the very embodiment of the change from within that China wanted to demonstrate to the world.

Mythology

The ancient Taoist fable about a 'Foolish Old Man' who was able to move mountains is a story in praise of the virtues of perseverance and willpower. In the 4th century BCE, a 90 year-old man annoyed by the obstruction caused by certain mountains sought to dig through them with hoes and baskets. When questioned by onlookers about this impossible task, he replied that while he may not finish in his lifetime, his descendants, through many generations, would remove the mountains. The Gods were impressed with his determination and hard work and ordered the mountains carted away.

In a speech in 1945, Chairman Mao re-interpreted this story as a call for collective action:

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism. The other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away? (Yin and Hua, 1977)

Chen Yonggui epitomized this foolish old man. He believed that if the work of transforming the barren gullies of Dazhai into productive fields could not be achieved in his lifetime, then his children and grandchildren would complete the work. In the early 1960s, the entire village consisted of just 300 people, but under Chen's leadership, and with his unflinching dedication to the cause, the villagers were motivated to great heights.

In 1964, inspired by the developments at Dazhai and the dedication to the revolution demonstrated by its people, Chairman Mao, issued the slogan 'Nongye Xue Dazhai - 'In Agriculture learn from Dazhai.' Almost immediately, the village became a site of communist pilgrimage emblematic of the fierce struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Poole, 1995; Weeks, 1977). Chen Yonggui and his comrades became national heroes.

Sacred Mission

China in the 1970s was a socialist state ruled by a dictatorship of the proletariat. The working class and poor peasants were the masters. The Communist party branch of Dazhai taught its members not only to love their work brigade, and their small collective, but also

to concern themselves with the interests of all of China, and the worldwide struggle of liberation (Weeks, 1977). The peasants were motivated by the idea of raising the status of women for, in Chairman Mao's words, they held up 'half of the sky'. Through their actions, Dazhai villagers would solve the fundamental question of what one should live for. Their sacred mission was to free the oppressed peoples of the world and end mass poverty - altruism and collectivism was the chosen methodology. As I mentioned earlier, the successful application of this strategy to end suffering would be China's great contribution to humanity.

Sites of Significance

In 1977, there were only a handful of places open for public visitation that had the political clout of Dazhai. There was the Jinggang Mountains, the site of China's first revolutionary base of operations in 1927, and Nanniwan, where revolutionary fighters enjoyed a victory in the war of resistance against the Japanese.

There was also the oil-mining town of Daqing, which the Chinese government celebrated as an example of industrial production. However, in terms of political pilgrimage, Dazhai was in a league of its own. While Dazhai's signature canals and terraces, and the unique architecture of the living quarters, attracted pilgrims, it was the aforementioned willow tree in the community's heart that attracted the most attention. At this place, poor peasants would be beaten for failing to pay rent, or for any suspected offence. Here, they were forced to sell their children or stand mute witness to the burials of those killed by property owners and their agents, the corpse wrapped only in tattered matting (Yin and Hua, 1977).

During my visit to the commune, this tree was known as the 'happy man's tree' and it was the symbolic of the immense transformation that had occurred in the village and region. For those pilgrims who wanted to see Dazhai's 'flowers' blossoming throughout the world, this was indeed a sacred site!

Rituals of Remembrance

There were two annual holidays at Dazhai during the Cultural Revolution, one celebrating the Spring Festival and the other on Army Day in August when there were various joyful recreational and cultural activities (Yin and Hua, 1977). In order to carry forward the revolutionary tradition of class struggle, new customs emerged at Dazhai that were replicated around China. During the Spring Festival, Dazhai's peasants would cook a 'recall-bitterness' meal made of things that they ate to allay their hunger before liberation, like grass. They did this so that the younger generation would not forget the suffering of their forebears and preserve their hatred of the exploiting or 'man-eating' classes. As Chen Yonggui said, 'We must never forget the hungry the minute our own stomachs are full!' (Yin and Hua, 1977). Another ritual was to carry manure on shoulder poles up to the hill fields. Such rituals were essential for building rapport between generations and ensuring continuity in the struggle.

Marketing or Propaganda?

The sustainability of any political pilgrimage requires the active support of the machinery of the state. In Dazhai's case, this was achieved in a number of ways but in particular by: 1. Promoting Chen Yonggui to the position of Vice-Premier for agriculture in the People's Republic of China 2. Enforcing at a national level the correct political stance towards the class struggle, and

Figure 7. Communist Party propaganda inspired by the Dazhai 'spirit' of collectivism.



Chinese posters.net

Figure 8. Chen Yongwei, center, in a poster praising the Dazhai model for agricultural development



Chinese posters.net

3. Through the strategic use of posters promoting the Dazhai spirit that even the illiterate could understand (Lu, 2001: 11).

By 1966, two years after Mao's famous declaration on Dazhai, the violent class struggle in pursuit of a pure proletarian society was well underway. For the central government, it was important for the citizenry as a whole to have the 'correct' political stance, and Dazhai was critically important in defining this stance. According to Lu (2001), Dazhai was both an experiment and an absolute model of political correctness. Any criticism of the correctness of this model was deemed an ideological flaw that could be punishable with imprisonment or worse. One villager bussed to Dazhai in the late 1960s described the atmosphere as cult-like. One group he witnessed had walked for two weeks just to see the calluses on a Dazhai laborer's hands.

At this time, visitor numbers to Dazhai were increasing at a dramatic pace, spiking in 1969 with 3.5 million visitors. Many were drawn by the popular songs and dances celebrating Dazhai, the best known being

'Dazhai Yakexi', or 'Great Dazhai'. This song describes the happiness of an indigenous Uyghur farmer from the far west of China after visiting Dazhai (Longji Rice Terraces, n.d.). The ubiquity of the red colored posters of Dazhai was another critical factor. These posters depicted the commune as the embodiment of China's most ambitious hopes for a land transformed (Salter, 1978:43). According to Lu (2001:1), posters targeted millions of uneducated peasants and were a powerful cultural instrument for the construction of a new social reality and organizational culture. Centered on the themes of industriousness, unity under party leadership, and the important role of women, the posters glorified Dazhai's peasants. The message was that hard work would guarantee miraculous success regardless of how harsh the local conditions.

Post-1979 - The Making of a Tourist Site

With the widespread recognition of its deficiencies, the Dazhai model of agriculture was phased out by the central government beginning in 1979. Much to the displeasure of Chen Yonggui, communal land was

Figure 9. On sale for tourists at Dazhai today are Chairman Mao trinkets and other communist memorabilia.



Photo by Author

redistributed to individual families (Poole, 1995). The emerging free market economy and the implementation of new laws allowing for a degree of religious freedom, completely altered Dazhai's fate. It fell into obscurity, only returning to the public gaze in the 1990s as a tourist destination that focused largely on nostalgia for the communist past.

In the reform period (post-1979), some older Dazhai villagers appealed to the government to resume worship of the god of Tigerhead Hill and to venerate its sacred green and white stones. At the dawn of time, there had been an epic battle here between the white tiger from the Kunlun Mountains and the green dragon from the eastern sea. Such was the disruption caused by this clash that the people could not live their lives. It was only through the intervention of the Bodhisattva Guanyin that the conflict was resolved and peace restored (Martinsen, 2007).

In the days before the revolution, the idea of conquering nature went against the fundamental principles of Chinese tradition and religion. To be in conformity with the Tao of Heaven meant respecting the environment. One would adapt to the world, not change it. Large-scale excavations were thus prohibited. This belief protected the land from excessive damage and soil erosion (Shunxun and Foit-Albert, 2007). During the Cultural Revolution,

Figure 10. Peasant leader Chen Yongwei's statue at Dazhai, now a major tourist attraction in the village

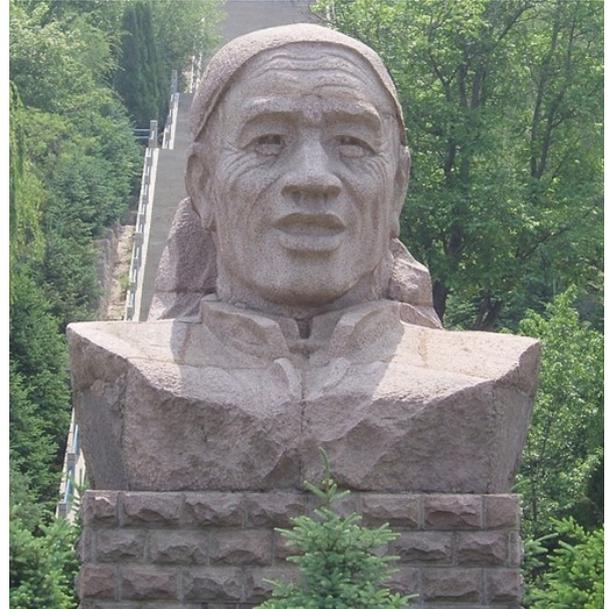


Photo by Author

however, the Communist Party considered such ideas old-fashioned and they were tossed aside. People had to conquer nature if they were to rise above poverty. Sacred beliefs associated with the Dazhai landscape were suppressed and the sacred green and white stones, representing the dragon and the tiger, were blasted apart in creating the terraces on Tigerhead Hill. Some now say that this caused massive spiritual harm and a number of unexplained deaths (Martinsen, 2007).

As in any other village in China, the people of Dazhai once again worship the gods of old, and also new gods. The villagers say that there is no conflict in the belief in Guanyin, dragon and tiger stones, or even Chairman Mao. Some even worship the latter as a god of wealth. They say that without Chairman Mao, there would be no Dazhai today and no tourist dollars. Some go so far as to describe Chairman Mao as being like their bank account, an endless source of funds (Martinsen, 2007).

Visitor behavior today has changed to an extent unrecognizable to earlier pilgrims. Local attractions now draw 300,000 tourists each year and create around six million yuan in revenue (Xinhuanet, 2002). Tourists have the option of visiting the pavilion dedicated to Premier Zhou Enlai and the nearby statue and grave of Chen Yonggui. A museum and a large Buddhist temple on Tigerhead Hill honoring the Bodhisattva Guanyin also attracts many visitors.

Although once seen as a mecca of collectivist agriculture, not a single Dazhai household is presently engaged in farming (Xinhuanet, 2002). Chen Yonggui's daughter Guo Fenglian, once affectionately described by the nation as the 'iron maiden' is now an astute businessperson (Poole, 1995). Her work as chairperson of the Dazhai economic development company has led to the establishment of twelve businesses including chemical, building materials, drinks and garments, and farm produce. The Dazhai brand, which Guo proudly promotes and exploits for greatest effect, has made the villagers somewhat affluent. Guo argues that the 'Dazhai spirit' is still alive, albeit in a new form, even though it is hardly recognizable to the pilgrims of yesteryear (Xinhuanet, 2002).

The Fallout

How serious was the failure of the Dazhai model for agricultural expansion? In hindsight, the motto 'Man must conquer nature' coined by the Communists in 1958 with the Great Leap Forward represented a serious error of judgement (Xun, 2012). Encouraging villagers in over 300 of China's counties to copy Dazhai's methodology was a mistake of vast proportions (Mann, 2008). China's various regions are distinguished by different topographical and ecological conditions. An appropriate development strategy in one area may not be applicable elsewhere. According to Zhou and Woudstra (2007: 197), the mantra 'learning from Dazhai' was responsible for the irreparable degradation of lakeside wetlands, grasslands and forests across China, leading to massive soil erosion and other environmental problems. By the mid-1970s, as much as 30% of the total rural labor force was devoted to following in Dazhai's footsteps (Lu, 2001) which Mann (2008) says represented one of the greatest wastes of labor in human history. Tens of millions of people were forced to work night and day on projects that had no possibility of success.

As early as 1964, the people of Dazhai were aware of the steady advance of the Gobi Desert and had even formulated a seven-year afforestation plan on Tigerhead Hill to halt desertification. However, this was too little too late. Today, China has initiated the 'Three North's Project', a 2800 mile band of trees across China's northern frontiers, which, according to Mann (2008) is the world's biggest afforestation program. This 'Great Green Wall of China', which started with the plans of humble Dazhai peasants, is the one all-important project that has emerged from the failed Dazhai experiment. Ultimately, we may all be

beneficiaries of the hard-won ecological lessons deriving from the history of land clearance, over-farming, and soil erosion.

Conclusion

At Dazhai, poverty and altruism were glorified. The people of this tiny rural commune were the poorest of the poor but also rich in so many ways. The uneducated peasants, backed by the machinery of the state, were intent upon creating a utopian society that would guide future generations into peace and prosperity. They would find meaning in their lives by helping others. The starving and oppressed masses worldwide would be the beneficiaries of their personal sacrifices. In promoting this ideal vision during the Cultural Revolution, the state created Dazhai as a political pilgrimage site. As with the creation of religious pilgrimage sites, authorities would utilize the stories of miracles, the sacred mission, charismatic leadership, mythology, rituals and sites of significance to inspire the masses to greater heights.

This experimental model of agriculture and communal living failed but not before many millions of pilgrims were exposed to Dazhai's life-changing message. While the pilgrimage to Dazhai has been relegated to the footnotes of Chinese history, and tourism is now the major industry of the village, not easily forgotten is the spirit of giving that produced the development 'miracle' of the 1960s and 1970s, and the hard lessons that helped change the course of Chinese history. So many pilgrims, including myself, were ignited with a passion for social and environmental justice that continues today.

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