



Seizure of Farmland Turns Peasant Woman Into Prote

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Chen Weiying, a farmer turned rights champion, examines a map showing the island where her farming village sits. (By Edward Cody — The Washington Post)

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By Edward Cody

Washington Post Foreign Service

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SANSHAN, China — When Chen Weiying rode up on the back of a sputtering motorbike that chaotic morning, what she saw changed her life.

Dozens of women were crying and shouting as uniformed policemen carried them away, Chen recalled, and three elderly farmers lay in the fields to block a squad of front-end loaders and dump trucks poised to attack the fertile earth. Chen decided on the spot — without planning, she said, and without thinking it through — that she could not stand on the fringes.

“Go ahead!” she shouted to her sister-in-law, Li A-Fang, who was driving the motorbike. “Go ahead! Get in there!” And so they did, Chen said, bursting through a line of uniformed policemen trying to keep people off the rich farmland that had been seized for the construction of a warehouse zone, despite a three-day-old protest by the peasants who had worked the land for years.

With that shout, Chen also crossed another line. A traditional southern Chinese farm wife on a lush

island in the Zhu River near Guangzhou, she began her transformation into a scrappy, sometimes violent opponent of local government and Communist Party authorities bent on developing Sanshan into an industrial zone.

Since that May 31 confrontation, Chen, a stocky, rough-hewn 43-year-old, has wrestled with policemen in three more farmers' riots, suffering bruises and scrapes but giving as good as she got. She has pestered officials up and down the Guangdong provincial hierarchy and put up with plainclothes police monitoring her movements. Police have subjected her to a long, intimidating interrogation.

Undaunted, she has grown into a vocal champion for peasants here who insist their fertile fields should not be bulldozed to make way for more of the warehouses, trucking docks and low-wage factories that have made Guangzhou the epicenter of China's new wealth.

"They say the development will bring everybody money," Chen said, referring to local officials and their partners in business, "but we know it will just bring money for them, not for us."

Across China, a quarter-century of expanding capitalism has unleashed powerful forces of change, but those left behind or hurt by the upheavals have few channels for protest in a political system monopolized by the Communist Party. They are increasingly turning to the streets, angry about pollution in their rivers, industry gobbling up their farmland, and poor working conditions in factories. The numbers of protesters have risen dramatically, Public Security Minister Zhou Yongkang acknowledged recently, despite draconian laws against unauthorized demonstrations and powerful security forces to enforce them.

Nearly all the protests have been touched off by specific economic and political disputes in towns and villages and were not directed against the party, which has ruled since 1949. Nevertheless, the spread of such disorders has become a major issue for President Hu Jintao's government, which is anxious to prevent them from coalescing into broader instability.

In her new role, Chen acknowledged in interviews, she has risked trouble with security forces, trouble for her husband and their two daughters, even jail time. But, she explained in her loud, gravelly voice, the rich farmland of Sanshan and the life her family has enjoyed here for 30 generations have to be preserved.

If their land is taken, she said, the only alternative for uneducated peasants such as her is to join China's migrant worker pool and provide more cheap labor for the assembly lines that have given China 9 percent annual economic growth.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "If I have to pay with my life to get back my land, okay. Because if I stop

struggling with them, I will starve, so it's the same."

Chen, with bobbed black hair around an open, round face, has the calloused hands, thick arms and coppery skin of her peasant forebears. She was born in Sanshan, as they were, and attended classes here through the second year of middle school. After service in the Red Army during the 1950s, Chen's father was named Communist Party secretary at a distant coal mine, so Chen, her mother and two brothers and two sisters worked their village farmlands without him under the communal system of the time. She later married a farmer's son. They have two daughters, ages 20 and 15.

The lives of Chen and the more than 10,000 other residents of her island were transformed in the 1980s. Agricultural reforms resulted in distribution of land to Sanshan's peasants for private farming. Chen and her husband got a little over half an acre. With their rich, alluvial plots, Chen and her neighbors quickly prospered, growing food for themselves and plenty of rice, sesame seeds and sugar cane for sale in nearby Guangzhou markets.

"Everybody in our village cultivated the earth," she said.

Over the years, the 4.8 square-mile island was steadily improved. Dikes kept out the floodwaters, canals brought irrigation, roads crisscrossed the island and bridges spanned the river, joining Sanshan's 3,000 houses to Guangzhou's urban bustle. Chen said villagers bragged that they got the highest yield per acre in China and their markets were just across the river.

On a recent visit, the crops looked carefully pruned, the land crisply divided by irrigation ditches. Banana plants stood in straight rows. Sod was stacked in neat piles awaiting sale. A man-made fishpond shimmered in the pale evening glow cast by lights from the nearby Guangzhou skyline.

"Our forebears and we ourselves did all this. It was not the government. We did it with our blood and the sweat of our brow," Chen declared.

The Threat Becomes Clear

In 1992, village leaders told the farmers that Nanhai District, which encompasses the several villages of Sanshan, had requisitioned land for industrial development. There was no resistance, although some farmers, including Chen, were worried. Most were under the impression that not all their land was being given up, she remembered, and that they would be compensated. Chen's family got \$1,235, she said, a handsome sum for a Chinese farmer, and still had most of their fields to farm.

By the middle of 1993, about a third of the farmland had been filled in, leveled and built up, mostly on the western tip of the island. Along with several factories and docking facilities, an apartment building rose, as did elementary and middle schools and a hospital. But villagers continued farming on the rest. The district government, which since the requisition had legal control over the land, began charging nominal rent for its use, but the peasants were still working and the crops were still coming in. "We couldn't have been happier," Chen said.

Then, last October, after 12 years of amiable compromise, the district government said the deal was over, that the rest of the land would also be developed. A number of farmers visited local authorities repeatedly to plead for a change of heart, to no avail. Chen was concerned, she said, but like most of her neighbors had not really understood what was about to happen.

The threat suddenly became clear in May, when a group of protesting farmers obtained a copy of the original requisition contract. The official papers revealed that back in 1992 Sanshan's village leaders had signed away all the farmland and that Nanhai District could legally use it at will. Chen was so shocked, she said, that she jumped headlong into the battle to save Sanshan's fields.

"I broke into tears when I saw the contract," Chen recalled. "I finally realized they had sold our land 10 years ago."

Chen urged her husband to join a protest that began in a condemned field on May 27. The farmers, who were camping in the field to block earth-moving equipment, had been given a May 30 deadline by local police. Move or be moved, they were told. On the morning of May 31, police executed their threat and Chen's involvement began with her dash on the motorcycle. "I was frightened, with so many policemen around, but I thought I had to get in," she explained. "Also, my husband was in there."

Once part of the melee, Chen recalled she was grabbed by a half-dozen uniformed policemen who tried to hustle her away. She struggled loose, and ran from the scene, weeping in frustration. On June 6, five villagers, including Chen, went to see the authorities: Guangdong's provincial security bureau, the provincial Communist Party discipline and investigation committee and a provincial People's Congress representative. What they got were promises to look into the matter.

A Nanhai District official, who declined to give his name, said an international logistics park consisting of warehouses and shipping docks would be built on the condemned farmland. "Please don't worry," he added in a telephone interview. "We are trying to let the farmers know establishing the logistics park is good for their development and long-term interests."

'Arrest Her!'

High water broke through the Sanshan dike system in late June, forcing the farmers to work frantically to repair the breach. The Nanhai District government did nothing to help, Chen complained, but the Guangdong provincial government dispatched 1,000 People's Liberation Army soldiers to pack sandbags. While everybody was busy at the dikes, Chen said the farmers later learned, the district's front-end loaders and dump trucks filled in more land, about 165 acres in all. The farmers were outraged, she said, because Nanhai authorities had found the time to fill in farmland but not to help to fight the flood.

The protests escalated. Chen said she mobilized 100 elderly farmers on July 1 to sit in a field to prevent filling operations. About 100 police officers showed up, accompanied by more than a dozen civilian officials, Chen said, and before long she heard one of them shout, "Arrest her! Arrest her!" A half-dozen policemen struggled to handcuff her, but she struggled, Chen recalled, and prevented them from getting the cuffs on her wrists.

"You can't cuff me. I haven't broken any laws," she recalled yelling at them.

When taken to the Nanhai police station with four others for several hours, Chen said, she was pressed for answers about who was behind the peasant protests. "I told them, 'We don't have a leader,' " she said. " 'All we know is that you violated the law. You government guys, all you worry about is making money. You don't help the people. You just help corrupt government officials.' "

The lead interrogator told her she risked four or five years in jail if she persisted in protesting, slipping in questions about her husband and daughters in a way that Chen interpreted as threatening, although she was not hit or otherwise abused. As she was being fingerprinted, she added, she broke down and cried.

Chen and the four others were released at 8 p.m. Hardly had she returned home, however, than she began preparing for the next day's protest, writing slogans on large sheets of paper and making them look like the country's red flag.

Rain poured down most of the day, but by 5 p.m., Chen said, about 1,000 farmers had gathered in the condemned fields to block scraping equipment. Ten carloads of police were on the scene. They did not drag away the farmers, Chen said, but arrested a young U.S. citizen who was filming the confrontation as part of his academic research.

The farmers thought he was a foreign journalist and, enraged at seeing him bundled away, made their way

to the local police station to demand his release. About 100 of them, with Chen in the front line,

rushed into the station compound, she recalled, while 1,000 more milled outside and shouted, "Free the journalist! Free the journalist!"

Riot police, called in to protect the station, whacked the farmers with batons. Chen said one woman had her teeth knocked loose. Chen said she was beaten dizzy. The American researcher was released about 7:30 p.m., she recalled, but a peasant woman who had been scrapping with riot police, identified as Xiao Shuntian, was taken into custody and held for a week.

Since then, Chen said, she has been under observation by plainclothes police.

A man watched over the top of his newspaper as Chen got off a ferry for a meeting Sept. 1 in Guangzhou with a Washington Post reporter. The next day, the reporter and his Chinese assistant were stopped by a dozen police officers as they drove off to visit Chen. After a long discussion and a short scuffle, the assistant was stuffed into a police van and interrogated for two hours before being released.

About 1,000 villagers gathered July 25 for an all-day confrontation with trucks trying to haul away earth. Chen said she and several other farmers lay down in front of the trucks to prevent them from moving. Police moved in, videotaping the protest.

By dusk, according to Chen and others who were present, several dozen police cars and about 400 policemen, some carrying anti-riot batons and shields, ordered the farmers to leave. Instead, the farmers pounded on the police cars and threw dirt clods at them. "Beat them!" the farmers heard, and a pitched battle erupted. Chen said she was kicked and struck with a baton. She tried to hit back, she said, but had trouble getting around the shields.

A half-dozen villagers jumped into the nearby river to escape the police. A dozen were injured but were afraid to go to the hospital for treatment, Chen said. Authorities later reported that one policeman was injured by a rock that hit his leg.

Nanhai authorities invited five representatives from each affected village to district headquarters in mid-August to try negotiations instead of fighting, Chen said. But the farmers first demanded a guarantee that they would not be taken into custody. When the guarantee was not forthcoming, she said, they refused to go.

Researcher Zhang Jing contributed to this report.

picture:Chen Weiying, a farmer turned rights champion, examines a map showing the island where her farming village sits. (By Edward Cody -- The Washington Post)

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