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WAS LIFE BETTER BEFORE MAO'S REVOLUTION

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

BROKEN EARTH

The Rural Chinese. By Steven W. Mosher. 317 pp. New York: The Free Press/Macmillan. \$17.95.

IN a famous study of the Chinese economy, "Land and

Labor in China," published in 1932, R. H. Tawney likened the rural Chinese to a man standing up to his neck in water and leading a life so precarious "that even a single ripple is sufficient to drown him." In recent years few foreigners have had Tawney's opportunity to observe rural China personally at any length. Steven W. Mosher, a Sinologist and anthropologist, fluent in two dialects of Chinese, is one of the rare ones. In "Broken Earth," a tough-minded account of rural China, the result of more than a year of field research in southern Guangdong Province, Mr. Mosher portrays a peasantry hardly better off than that described by Tawney.

Mr. Mosher's book belongs to a growing body of literature on contemporary China that, reversing favorable portrayals written in the early and mid- 1970's, places the People's Republic squarely in the 20th-century totalitarian mainstream. But, while others have stressed urban life, the havoc of such mass campaigns as the cultural revolution and the absence of political freedoms in Maoist and post-Maoist China, Mr. Mosher's emphasis is on the hardness and brutality of everyday life. In describing the countryside, he is more critical of the effects of the Communist revolution than other recent writers. He concludes that for the Chinese peasantry - at least the 400 million peasants in the southern part of the country where he did his studies - life was better during periods before the revolution of 1949 than after the country's new rulers began to overhaul age-old patterns of everyday life.

That conclusion is striking if only because, as Mr. Mosher observes, it is "the paramount myth of the Chinese revolution" that Communist rule, whatever it has done in other areas of life, has produced great strides in the countryside where 80 percent of China's one billion people live. Mr. Mosher writes that well into his stay in China, he too believed in this "paramount myth." On his second night in the village where he stayed, he was visited by Lao Baixing, an elderly village official, who enumerated the elements in the alleged transformation of rural life by the revolution: rationing, guaranteed rice rations, elimination of the exploiting landlord class, among other things.

Toward the end of his time in China, after he had interviewed dozens of peasants and seen numerous villages and observed the life and work habits of the people, Mr. Mosher developed a more complex picture of the putatively scourge-ridden past, and he had an appreciation for the hardships of the present. The lives Richard Bernstein, the United Nations correspondent of The New York Times, is the author of "From the Center of the Earth: The Search for Truth About China." of the peasants are more controlled by party leaders now than they were by the landholders in the past; goods are scarcer and more shoddy; locally grown products, such as silk, are taken away by the state to satisfy the current national plan. Mr. Mosher cites an article in China's official press reporting that only recently has per capita grain consumption equaled the levels of the years just after the revolution.

In the end, Mr. Mosher's challenge to the conventional assumption that rural life in China has greatly improved since 1949 is not definitive; there is no systematic weighing of the factors that make up the quality of life. Nonetheless, Mr. Mosher provides a good deal of persuasive evidence that the vast Chinese peasantry has fared far worse than was commonly believed.

Mr. Mosher's activities in China, and possibly the information he gathered there, have put him at the center of a controversy involving the Government in Peking and Americans responsible for academic exchanges with the People's Republic. Chinese officials, some time after Mr. Mosher left China in 1981, charged him with having committed various offenses

during his stay in the country, including bribing local officials, dealing in contraband and acquiring secret data. Stanford University, where Mr. Mosher was a candidate for a Ph.D., launched its own investigation of the charges. The investigation resulted in a 47-page report that has not been made public, but Stanford did announce that Mr. Mosher had engaged in "illegal and seriously unethical" acts. The anthropology department at the university unanimously voted to terminate his candidacy for the Ph.D. and, when Mr. Mosher appealed that decision, it was upheld by a special three-member committee appointed by Stanford's president last spring to review the case.

Since the records of the investigation have not been made public, some people still suspect that, whether Mr. Mosher violated the professional ethics of anthropology or not, part of his trouble sprang from the fact that he was simply a dogged and resourceful researcher who earned the animosity of the Chinese authorities by uncovering material they preferred to keep secret. After Mr. Mosher left China, he went to Taiwan for further academic research; there he published an article, complete with dramatic photographs, describing abuses in China's ambitious population control program, including the forced abortions of women in advanced stages of pregnancy.

What he has to say about the birth control program in "Broken Earth" is indicated by the title of his chapter on it: "Birth Control: A Grim Game of Numbers." Mr. Mosher describes China's Malthusian dilemma. In the Sandhead Production Brigade, where he lived, there had been a population increase of 130 percent in 27 years and the land under cultivation amounted to only one-sixth of an acre per person. Yet the population control program, as it was implemented there, seemed to contain many of the excesses and abuses of earlier mass campaigns in China. Zealous local leaders, eager to show success to their superiors, bludgeoned local resistance out of existence. Mr. Mosher describes a visit he made to an abortion clinic during one of the "high tides," during which women who have become pregnant in defiance of state plans are encouraged to have abortions. The women in the clinic, Mr. Mosher says, were in "physical and mental anguish." He reports on a meeting between pregnant women and party leaders who, cajoling and threatening, told the women that they really have no choice about having an abortion.

THE Chinese countryside described by Mr. Mosher is dominated by surviving traditions - bride prices, rural superstitions and ancestor worship - along with the plain hardships of rural life. He recounts a typical day of a peasant woman, Gin Sau, describing in vivid detail how, particularly for women, collectivism has increased rather than decreased the amount of labor that needs to be performed. Gin Sau, who also takes part in collective labor, has to run out to forage for grass for fuel while her husband takes a noonday nap. She gathers mulberry leaves to feed the collective's silkworms; she washes, sews and mends the family's clothes, and she cooks three meals a day in a convenience-free economy where, as Mr. Mosher puts it, "all food preparation starts from a gastronomical ground zero." She bathes the children, cares for the family's private chickens and hauls water from the village well - all in a traditional rural society that, contrary to China's propaganda claims about equality for women, really has little esteem for what it clearly regards as the second sex.

One of the most dramatic moments in this account of rural life comes when Mr. Mosher describes a husband brutally beating his wife, while villagers looked on, for having quarreled with his mother. "When it was over, not a single person moved to console the woman," Mr. Mosher writes. "She was left sobbing alone as they murmured approval of the man's actions."

THESE penetrating glimpses into real life are among the most vivid in the literature on contemporary China. Yet Mr. Mosher's account, valuable as it is, is marred by a relative scarcity of concrete description and a surplus of generality. It is not that his generalities are erroneous; Mr. Mosher is well informed about such subjects as the Chinese bureaucracy, corruption and the social costs of mass campaigns. But these matters have been well covered in other recent books and they divert our attention from what he is trying to write about. And Mr. Mosher surprisingly seems to miss numerous opportunities to bring the rural Chinese to life for his readers. There is not even a good physical description of the village where he lived. His own life as a foreigner in China is mentioned only tangentially. Characters from the village appear briefly and then pass from sight so that no rural personalities take on shape or substance. Mr. Mosher tells us of the persistence of tradition, but, except for one good account of a reburial ceremony in which the bones of a departed ancestor are disinterred and placed in an urn, very little of this tradition materializes. Indeed, he whets the appetite for sights, sounds, smells and anecdotes but he does not often satisfy it.

At the end of the book, Mr. Mosher says that, as he was concluding his stay in China, the village official, Lao Baixing, who had proclaimed to Mr. Mosher early in his stay the progress made under the Communists in China's countryside, returned to visit him. This time, Lao Baixing (which is a Chinese term for the common people and thus seems to be a pseudonym) admitted he had been instructed to make that first visit. Now he tells Mr. Mosher the truth. Life in the old days really wasn't bad compared to the present when there are shortages of everything and the party cadres have more arbitrary power than the

old landlords used to. Perhaps Lao Baixing exaggerates. Yet, the story illustrates just how elusive the truth is; like rice, it is rationed carefully by the political authorities. Mr. Mosher found out a good deal about the real situation, and his book considerably advances our understanding of what China's 34 years of revolution have wrought in the country's vast hinterland.

photo of Chinese workers harvesting rice

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