CHAPTER FIVE

CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN RURAL CHINA:
A CASE STUDY OF DONGSHENG VILLAGE,
CHANGQIAO MUNICIPALITY, ZHANGPU COUNTY,
FUJIAN PROVINCE

Foreword

Since China implemented its policy of reform and opening to the outside world, rural areas have undergone great changes. As far as economic restructuring is concerned, the current contract responsibility system replaces the “people’s communes.” As to the political system, civic organizations are beginning to emerge and a self-governing system based on civic organizations in villages is gradually being implemented. Economic and political restructuring is taking place in rural areas. This reflects Deng Xiaoping’s strategy for reform: “Since 80% of our people live in the country, China’s social stability and its economic development depend above all on the development of the countryside and the improvement of rural living standards” and: “Devolving authority to the local level and to the people, which in the countryside means the peasants, is the height of democracy” to cite but two pronouncements.¹ Actually, China’s problem can be equated with the rural problem, because there are over 800 million peasants among an overall population of 1.2 billion Chinese people. The same is true of civic organizations. At present, there are 2,135 counties, 44,689 townships and towns and about 740,000 administrative villages in China.² Since the 1990s, civic organizations have mushroomed in townships, towns and villages. According to conservative estimates, more than 3 million civic organizations at sub-district level have been registered or are awaiting registration, accounting for over two-thirds of all civic organizations. Without a thorough analysis of rural civic organizations

¹ Deng Xiaoping, Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (Volume III), [Beijing:] Renmin chubanshe, 1993, pp. 77–78 and p. 252.
and governance, we can hardly expect to gain an understanding of China’s political state.

In the present study, the author takes the village of Dongsheng in Changqiao municipality, Zhangpu county, Fujian as a case in point. The development of rural civic organizations and the changing mode of rural governance are of particular importance because the village is advanced in terms of economic and cultural development as well as in its social and political structures. Zhangpu County, in which Dongsheng village is located, lies under the jurisdiction of Zhangzhou in Fujian, one of China’s coastal “open counties,” approved by the State Council. Zhangpu is located between the two special economic zones of Xiamen and Shantou. It is close to the Taiwan Straits in the east, to Shantou in the south and to Zhangzhou and Xiamen in the north. The county has twenty townships and towns and eleven farms, as well as forestry stations, saltworks and tea plantations, with a total population of 790,000. Its area encompasses 1,981 square kilometers, its cultivated land 35,351 hectares (530,000 mu), while mountains cover 109,388 ha (1.64 million mu) and shoal 62,164 ha (932,000 mu). In 1997, the gross national product of the whole county was RMB 4.06 billion. Its total output value of industrial and agricultural production was RMB 9.95 billion, of which industrial production accounted for RMB 7.772 and agriculture for RMB 2.182 billion. Local revenue was RMB 216 million. The yearly per capita income of urban residents was RMB 5,096, compared with an income for peasants of RMB 2,920. This contrasts with an approximated RMB 2,160 in 1998.3

Before 1949 Dongsheng was called Xiyan village. Its exact history cannot be ascertained. But “Yiyuan Hamlet”—the core of its architectural heritage—has a history of over 300 years. For most of their history, villagers lived mainly in the “Yiyuan Hamlet,” comprising more than 30 houses.4 Generally speaking, there was one household per house. After 1949, the population increased and the village gradually expanded. At present, the village counts 1,156 people, in 265 families. Just over 100 residents migrated from other places, mostly hired laborers from neighboring counties or further north. Most villagers share  

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4 *Tulou* is a traditional local-style compound, built as a round multi-storied edifice, which can accommodate dozens of households. People of the same clan usually live in the same compound.