Socialist revolution in China owes its early success to the countryside, where the establishment and consolidation of revolutionary power was based on peasant participation. Extensive research on the history of communist rule in China over the past half century has focussed on the question of how the CCP set up and sustained its macro-project of social administration and its meta-discourse of revolution. Facing the new political power in 1949 was the destitute expanse of the countryside, and its supposedly poor, backward, ignorant, selfish, apathetic peasant population, covering the length and breadth of the country. The reconstruction of the countryside and the transformation of the peasant masses thus constituted the most arduous task of state modernisation. Researchers addressing this issue from the perspective of the state have tended to take as their starting point the question of how revolutionary mobilisation succeeded. In contrast, research on grassroots perspectives investigates how ordinary peasants came to believe in revolutionary ideals and how they were drawn into political life. This essay emphasises the grassroots perspective, and discusses the issue of rural administration through a focus on the practices and forms of peasant-state relations, in their linked top-down and bottom-up trajectories. The key issue that this essay seeks to explore concerns how state ritual functioned as a technique of political power in the social transformation of the countryside.

The history of the relationship between state and civil society has long been an important topic of anthropological and sociological debate. Analytical and narrative convenience in this debate has produced a series of corresponding terms, such as state and society, elite and popular, high and popular culture, modernity and tradition, formal and informal systems, and so on. However, the use of these terms sometimes leads to a binary opposition in our field of vision and reflection, constructing the state and civil society as polarised objects of research, each with their own different characteristics and
operational logic. Hence, the categories of the formal, legal, ideal, modern and universal all fall within the first term and those of the informal, ritual, superstitious, traditional and particularist, in the latter. However, the trajectory of the modern state has by no means followed a linear logic of progression from tradition to modernity. The state and the ideology of state emerged from within local society and culture; its origins are both distinct from and inseparably linked to local society and culture. As the result of the victory of peasant revolution, the People’s Republic inevitably carries the deep impression of rural society and culture. Because of this, the mutual relationships and intersections between state and civil society, ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions, high and low culture, dominant ideology and popular ideas and so on offers us a crucial analytical lens on to the constitution and transformation of society and culture.

We face the following questions in attempting to understand how rural society was penetrated and changed by state power: how were the history of village communities and the life course of families and individuals linked to broader social structures and their transformation? How were they related to the historical evolution of the nation-state? How might we understand and explain the operations of the system through individuals’ life histories and the micro-dimension of popular history? How could ordinary peasants, so attentive to the needs of daily living and survival, be mobilised and drawn into political life as active participants of the national project with revolutionary enthusiasm and struggle?

Our ‘pitch’ in answering these important questions is the ‘campaign’ (yundong). The last half century in China can be thought of as a distinctive historical process in both the history of the Chinese nation and the history of human civilisation as a whole, in which the establishment and consolidation of new political power has been channelled through the principal mechanism of the political ‘campaign’. Wave upon wave of successive ‘campaigns’, big and small, have dominated the entire society. Unlike the ‘event’ emphasised in research on Western life courses, and unlike the significant moment or specific date of daily life that anthropological research often focuses on, the ‘campaign’, as it was shaped in China over more than half a century, became a normal mechanism of social mobilisation and operation in China for more than half a century. Neither explosive, special or extraordinary, the ‘campaign’ became the main mechanism through which state succeeded in embedding its political power in the daily lives of the masses of ordinary people.