

# Preface

This book is a sequel to *Gao Village* (1999, 2014), and is an update starting from 1997, when *Gao Village* left off. However, this book is very different from *Gao Village*, not only in terms of structure but also in content. The first *Gao Village* book, which “has put the village on the map” in the words of comments from a couple of readers, arranged the content in terms of themes such as education, health care, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, whereas this book focuses on individual personalities. Thus, there is a chapter on the poorest in the village, a man named Gao Lati; a chapter on the richest person, Gao Wenshu; and two chapters on one of my brothers, Gao Changxian, and his wife, Gao Mingxia, when I discuss the Gao clan-run hotel business. The rationale for this arrangement is my belief that in the Mao era, *Gao Village* was vertically organized, whereas in the post-Mao era China, it is horizontally organized. Many *Gao* villagers do not live and work in the village anymore, but are scattered all over the country. The personal lives of Gao Changxian, Gao Mingxia, and Gao Wenshu reflect both what is happening in and outside *Gao Village*. These personal stories not only demonstrate, but are also related to, changes in other parts of China.

It is interesting and also relevant to mention, however briefly, two aspects of readers’ responses to the first *Gao Village* book. The first aspect is that reviews of the English version of the book are more positive than comments from readers of the Chinese version. In China,

formal reviews of *Gao Village* (which was later translated into Chinese and published by the Chinese University Press in 2014) were rarely seen as the book is unofficially banned, but the occasional comments on social media are passionately divided: those who like it, like it and those who don't, hate it. This leads to the second aspect of the responses: those of the left political persuasion have been more sympathetic with the book, whereas the anti-communist and anti-Mao readers tend to be condemning. In other words, readers take positions: Maurice Meisner (a Marxist scholar), for instance, commented in a personal communication to me that *Gao Village* was “the best village study in the field”; no Chinese liberals would ever be so generous. The fact that the Chinese “liberal” intelligentsia would publish commentaries in the influential *Nanfang Zhoumo* newspaper condemning the book without even having read it was not surprising.

Of course, many critiques of *Gao Village* are not political, at least not overtly or consciously. Some are critical of *Gao Village* due to their conceptual approach. The economic rationalist approach, especially the neoliberal kind, for instance, would not be inclined to accept my description of education and health care during the Cultural Revolution years as the “golden period” in Gao Village, because their approach dictates that only free market systems and private ownership of means of production can be the most efficient in allocating resources. The post-Mao Chinese political and intellectual elite who genuinely wanted to say farewell to the concept of revolution—and not to just the 1949 Revolution but any revolution, including the French Revolution—would be least likely to accept my description. They in fact go further, according to comments made on social media, and accuse me of defending the inhumane Cultural Revolution by ignoring my qualification that it was the “golden period” within the context of Gao Village and only in the areas of education and health care. Some Chinese commentators even engaged in personal attacks, to which I did not think it was worth responding.

However, writing *Gao Village Revisited* is in many ways my response to the concerned readers of the first Gao Village book. I have received requests from time to time from readers who would like to read an update of the village, including high school students and people

who attended my talks on Gao Village, such as my talk in 2017 at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies. This book also addresses my rather negative portrayal of rural China from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, which was not a Maoist defense but a socio-economic concern for the rural Chinese who were at the very bottom of society; my concern for the future direction of rural China; my adopted methodology, which is not only “thickly descriptive” but also trans-disciplinary, a methodology that it is often claimed to have merit but is very difficult to practice, as scholars are by definition trained in a single discipline; and my aspiration for a conceptual approach to understand China that is not only “Chinese” but also global. More of this is expressed in the appendix.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my debt to those who have contributed to the final product of this book, while realizing the impossibility of including them all. First of all, I would like to thank my relatives and Gao villagers, Gao Changxian, Gao Mingxia, Gao Changwen, Gao Wenshu, Gao Lati, and all the others mentioned in the book, for their assistance and their hospitality. Second, I would like to thank the many Gao villagers who are not mentioned but with whom I spoke and who helped me with personal or village information. Thirdly, I thank Kathrin House who read and edited every chapter of the draft before I handed it in to the publisher. I would also like to express my gratitude to the reviewers of the book commissioned by the publisher, who took the trouble not only to read the draft but also made comments, all of which were valuable and enabled improvement of the final product. May I also thank Dr. Lian Jia, who read the draft from time to time and encouraged me along the way. Let me further thank the publisher, The Chinese University Press, for commissioning this book, not only in English but also a Chinese version that will follow. Finally, I thank the publisher’s editors Roberta Raine and Rachel Pang for their painstaking and meticulous editing and rigorous comments, which have further improved the manuscript and helped to turn it into this book. They are the kind of editors that every publisher should have.

It goes without saying that any errors and mistakes are my own.