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DBW-3 1997
EAST ASIA

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The Spirit of Dagan Village Leadership and Poverty (Part 1)

GUIZHOU, China

DECEMBER 1997

I used to believe that because China is a huge agricultural country — 80% of its population lives in the countryside — only those who understand Chinese rural society can really know China. But when I traveled to survey impoverished mountain regions in provinces like Guizhou, Guangxi and Yunnan, I was stunned to discover poverty that surpassed even that which I had encountered more than twenty years ago when I was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. This forced me to reconsider: our country has been industrializing for more than forty years, we have been reforming for almost twenty years; how can these areas' economies remain in such primitive autarchy, in such abject poverty? Now I have come to believe that China is a large developing country of extreme imbalance, almost twenty years of reform have only exacerbated this disparity. Only those who understand Chinese rural poverty can really know China.¹

—Hu Angang, Economist, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

By Daniel B. Wright

Fifty-five pairs of eyes stared intently at me across the classroom. Pensive and serious, the 55 town mayors and party secretaries listened as I introduced varieties of worldwide poverty and current economic development models. As we exchanged eye contact, I could only imagine the weight of concern that must occupy these men's and women's minds — they are responsible to for leading rural, mountain townships in counties that are poor, so poor they have been designated as "impoverished" by Guizhou's provincial government.² And this is within one of China's most backward provinces. Indeed, the men and women who sat across from me lead China's poorest of the poor.

Provincial and prefectural leaders realize they must get through to the minds of local officials if poverty alleviation efforts are to fully take hold. Toward this end, Qiannan Prefecture's Office of Poverty Alleviation began a project this past summer to organize semi-annual, week-long training seminars that will last through the year 2000. Over a three-year period, more than 300 town mayors and party secretaries will receive training in poverty alleviation policy, management techniques and development models, as well as enjoy the camaraderie of sharing a week with others who face similar challenges.

Qiannan Prefecture's People's Congress President, Mr. Wu Jiapu, delivered

¹ Kang Xiaoguang, *Zhongguo fupin yu fan fupin lilun* (Chinese Poverty and Poverty Alleviation Theory) (Nanning: Guangxi People's Press, 1995), 9.

² Seminar participants represented five of Qiannan Prefecture's seven "impoverished" counties: Changshun, Dushan, Huishui, Libo and Sandu (Luodian and Pingtang not included). Qiannan Prefecture has a total of ten counties and two cities. The poverty line is based on an average annual rural per-capita income of 650 yuan (\$79) and average annual per-capita grain production of 650 kg.

the training seminar's opening address. "Comrades, each of you comes here today from the front lines of poverty's battlefield." The president spoke without expression. Mentally pacing back and forth, he spoke in slow, measured sentences; thin streams of cigarette smoke rose gently above his head during the periodic silence. "Your task in the fight against poverty is both challenging and glorious.... You carry heavy burdens.... You must reject blind optimism... You must emulate the hard-working, never-say-never spirit of Dagan Village."

The reference to Dagan Village caught my attention. I am familiar with the Dazhai production brigade of the 1950s, a model commune (not called village at the time) in Shanxi Province that, because of its residents' hard work, reported a dramatic fivefold production increase. Dazhai's work ethic and stunning results were said to prove Mao Zedong's vision of rural self-reliance and revolutionary zeal. To promote Dazhai's spirit to the nation, a front-page article in a December 1964 edition of *People's Daily* featured a photograph of Dazhai brigade leader Chen Yonggui standing next to Chairman Mao. The caption below the photo read: "In agriculture learn from Dazhai." Chen quickly climbed to prominence, all the way to a position in China's Politburo, China's highest governmental body.³

I have also heard and read much about the revolutionary soldier of peasant background, Lei Feng, who was canonized by Mao Zedong as a model proletarian during the 1960s. Though killed in 1963 by a falling telephone pole, the 23-year-old peasant conveniently left behind a beautifully written diary that displayed an unusual selflessness and passion to serve the people. As one of his many quotable quotes, Lei Feng wrote, "I will be a screw that never rusts and will glitter anywhere I am placed." After Mao Zedong eulogized Lei Feng, he instantly became a model for all to emulate. "Learn from Lei Feng" campaigns — in which his "spirit of a screw" and other admirable qualities were exalted for all to follow — sprang up nationwide in the 1960s; they were resurrected in the early 1980s and then again immediately after the events of 1989.

But I had not heard of Dagan Village. A Dazhai for the 1990s? The spirit of Dagan Village was something I would have to look into after the training seminar ended. Meanwhile, the afternoon seminar with the town mayors and party secretaries turned out to be quite enjoyable.

Many of the serious dispositions lightened a bit as we had time to get to know each other during breaks and after the session concluded. In fact, to my delight, a casual reference I made during the presentation to my love for fishing resulted in invitations from several mayors. "We're poor, but we have lots of fish in our rivers!" one mayor said proudly.

"Prefecture leaders from the capital [Duyun] come to my town to fish; I stand right next to them when we fish, we use the same bait, but they catch all the fish. Could you come to my place and show me some tips?" another mayor remarked. Typical fisherman humility, I thought to myself.

"Emulate Dagan Village in our work for twenty years and there would be no one in our country that lacked food to eat."

—Jiang Zemin

"Of course. I'd love to," I accepted. "We can chat as we fish."

Others, however, remained quite serious, even in their private comments.

"Foreigners underestimate the seriousness of our poverty," one mayor told me.

Another official lamented, "Our town faces tremendous difficulties."

I wanted to follow up on these invitations immediately, but I decided it would be best to look first into the ideal each was supposed to emulate in their leadership of local poverty reduction — the spirit of Dagan Village.

EMULATE THE SPIRIT OF DAGUAN

Though Dagan Village sits high in the remote karst⁴ mountains of Luodian County in southern Guizhou Province, it has become a nationwide phenomenon. All major newspapers and television documentary programs have told Dagan's story. A photographic exhibition has even taken the spirit of Dagan on the road. Dagan Village's leader, Party Secretary He Yuanliang, has risen to national fame as well — he is a "national model worker" and was a delegate to this year's Fifteenth Party Congress in Beijing. The Guizhou Province delegation hosted a booth and press conference at the Congress to promote the spirit of Dagan Village. Since the campaign to emulate Dagan began at the end of 1996, some 80,000 visitors — mainly busloads of government officials — have made the journey to "learn from the spirit of Dagan." That's an average of over 200 a day! Apart from my disappointment with not being able to interact with Dagan's villagers, my trek to Dagan Village, just a seven-

³ With Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in late 1978 and official permission to criticize the Mao-era, Dazhai commune was publicly discredited by a *People's Daily* article in 1980. Chen Yonggui had overreported production figures, underreported available land and exaggerated grain sales. Chen Yonggui lost his Politburo seat in 1981.

⁴ Karst describes rocky geological configurations characterized by irregular limestone formations. In karst mountain regions, the barren mountains are completely rock-covered with little soil. Rainfall drains off immediately; cultivation and irrigation are practically impossible.



hour bus ride from Duyun, was well worth the trip.

Mr. Chen, Assistant Party Secretary of Luodian County, met me outside the Luodian Guest House at 8:00 a.m. We climbed into a jeep and began our day-trip to Dagan Village. After a steep ascent, which seemed to take us into the clouds, the driver pulled off to the side of the road, a dizzying height above the craggy valley below. We climbed out of the vehicle at the first point-of-interest: a bend in the road that provided a panoramic view of layers upon layers of mountain tops that disappear into the fog — it seemed as though I was looking out of an airplane window. A roadside sign introduced karst geology, including: “Karst geology is not suitable to support human life. In most areas of the world where karst formations exist, emigration is the only solution.” We got back in the jeep and Party Secretary Chen began the Dagan story.

Nine times during the 1970s, Dagan’s Village Party Secretary, He Yuanliang, tried and tried again to arrange emigration for his people. In order to raise needed travel funds, Party Secretary He even sold the tile roofing off his home for 60 yuan. None of his attempts succeeded. Dagan Village’s 200 families were left in the early 1980s with a meager *annual* per-capita income of 50 yuan, 60 *mu* of cultivable land and an average annual per-capita grain production of 130 kilograms.⁵ In other words, they were stranded in abject poverty.

The breakthrough came in 1983 when several Dagan residents working on a road-construction crew took note of the way roads are cut into mountainsides: rock is exploded and crushed into gravel, the area is leveled and then packed with ground stone and dirt. They had an idea. Perhaps the same method could be used to turn their rocky landscape into plots of cultivable land. Two village brothers returned home to experiment with a small, stony section of hill outside their doorstep. The

first harvest from that patch of reclaimed land yielded 25 kilograms of grain. There was hope.

The following winter, Party Secretary He convened the annual village meeting for “three days and three nights.” The village emerged united around a plan: “Clear plots of land in the valley rock crevices, plant trees on the slopes to each side; plant enough grain for each family, diversify the rest of the village resources.” Equipped with a strategy and under the dogged servant-leadership of Party Secretary He, Dagan’s residents began the remarkable journey of transforming — mostly with primitive tools like hoes, sledge hammers and home-made explosives — rock slopes into step-like terraced plots of cultivable land.

Official 1996 statistics show that 12 years of effort resulted in 1,038 *mu* of arable-land plots and an annual per-capita income of 1,008 yuan (\$120). Dagan Village’s current per-capita income surpasses Luodian County’s absolute poverty line by almost 500 yuan.

A decade of struggle has given rise to legends as well; these heroic stories are communicated to the visitor on stone tablets placed near where the event occurred. Our jeep pulled over at each of these scenic spots. On the roadside over-looking one series of fields, the sign’s heading read “Blood Field.” It continued:

From 1987 to 1988, land reclamation efforts in Dagan Village reached a high level of intensity. Because Mr. Wang Mingguang, a village resident, worked day and night on his field, he became overly fatigued. He was so exhausted that, after igniting a homemade explosive, he did not move to a sufficiently safe distance from the explosion. He was severely injured, including the loss of one eye and three fingers on his left hand. After recovering from his injury, however, Mr. Wang continued to

⁵ At that time, 50 yuan equaled less than \$20. 60 *mu* = approximately 10 acres (1 *mu* = 0.0667 hectares = 0.10 acres).



Stunning mountain scenery greets the visitor to Dagan Village. The roadside sign reads: “Karst geology is not suitable to support human life.” This is how the Dagan story began.

reclaim land. His current total is seven *mu* — an average of 1.8 *mu* per family member. To commemorate the spirit of Dagan Village, which in order to create a livable home does not fear sweat and blood, this plot of land is named “Blood Field.”

Before we climbed back into the jeep Party Secretary Chen reminded me, “This, again, demonstrates the hard-working, never-say-never spirit of Dagan.” I nodded my head — the mantra was beginning to sink in: *the hard-working, never-say-never spirit of Dagan.*

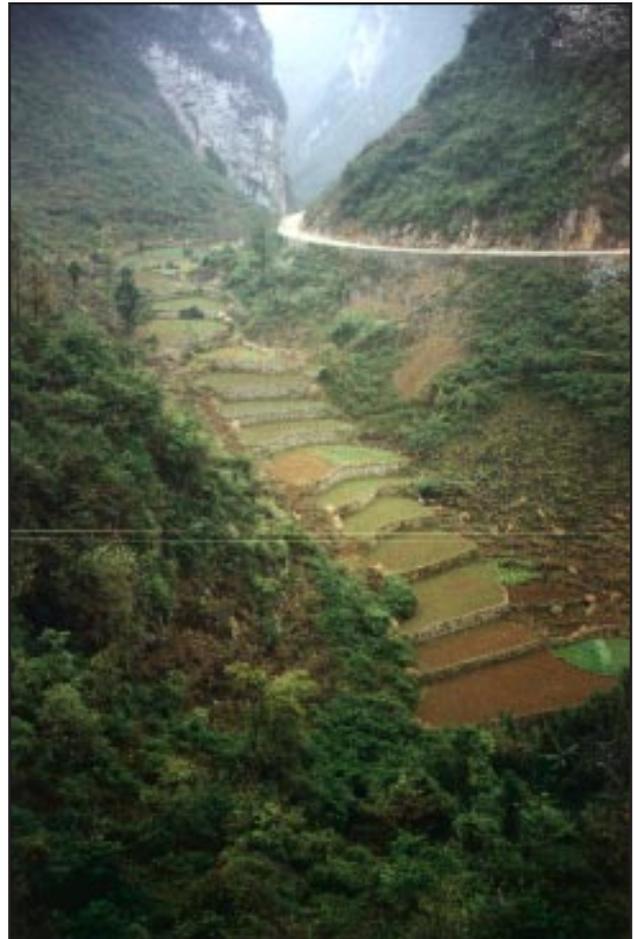
As the tour neared its end, the 37-year-old Chen spun around in the passenger seat and said, “I’m getting my MBA through a correspondence course at Nankai University, Zhou Enlai’s alma mater in coastal Tianjin. I’ll complete the degree this year. By the way, is Lee Iacocca still a big deal in the U.S.?”

I about swallowed my tongue. “Actually, if I recall correctly,” I recovered, “he was more a phenomenon of the 1980s and early 1990s.”

“Oh yes, of course, now it’s Microsoft’s Bill Gates. Gates is the man!!” Party Secretary Chen followed this with an exuberant thumbs-up. The irony of it all was just too wonderful. Yet it’s exactly the MBA/Bill Gates mix in the life — and aspirations — of a Communist Party Secretary in a remote Guizhou county that describes so well China in the 1990s. And Party Secretary Chen is the norm, not the exception.

Feeling that we had finally connected, I asked Party Secretary Chen several questions: “What do you believe is the usefulness of Dagan as a model village?”

“There are really two answers to that question,” Chen responded. “The primary usefulness is the spirit of



Tiered plots of cultivable land reflect similar construction techniques as the road cut into the mountainside above. Because the area’s mountains are so steep and the valleys so narrow, no more than four of Dagan’s 200 families live together in any one location.

Daguan. We can all learn from Daguan, regardless of our position in society. The hard working, never-say-never spirit of Daguan is very much the national spirit of the Chinese people. This needs to be encouraged. The second aspect of Daguan's usefulness as a model village is the 'scientific approach' Party Secretary He used to solve his problem — he used a rational, well-thought-out method to create a living for his people in an otherwise uninhabitable land."

"And what is the main difference between the Dazhai and Daguan models?"

His answer veered from the script, "Dazhai was a model commune in a planned economy; Daguan Village is a success story in a *private* economy [*siren jingji*- his words." His response should have read "socialist market economy."] Perhaps he was still entertaining thoughts of Bill Gates.

I then asked, thinking out loud, "Do you ever think Party Secretary He wakes up in the morning wishing he had never been discovered? That he and his village could have enjoyed quiet success without all the fanfare and nuisance of 200 tourists a day treading through his vegetable garden?"

"No. Mr. He is a Communist Party member, a servant of the people. The more he is able to reach with his message, the happier I think he would be. It's his duty."

At what point Daguan Village's success was "discovered" is not entirely clear. The literature says that until 1990, Daguan had not asked for "one penny" from the government. After 1990, Daguan's chronology reports a steady stream of attention and high-level visits, though Daguan did not become a nationwide phenomenon until the end of 1996. My personal impression is that Party Secretary He and his village are legitimate and demonstrate a truly remarkable work ethic. After the higher-ups selected the village as a model, however, I also believe that life became much easier. Party Secretary Chen told me that, to date, the government has contributed 520,000 yuan (\$65,000) to Daguan Village, mainly in low-interest loans, infrastructure improvements such as road improvements and promotional activities. Perhaps quality dynamite, truckloads of soil, the best fertilizers and visiting botanists to ensure that crops remain green, as well, I thought. One thing's for sure now: Daguan will not fail. It can't. It's a model village.

The extent to which Daguan Village is self-made, in my opinion, is not nearly as significant as what *the hard working, never-say-never spirit of Daguan* communicates about those who promote it. The basic fact that, in 1997, model villages are still in the government's motivational toolbox is interesting to me. Several years ago a central-government official in Beijing explained to me his under-

standing of this "model psychology." Deep in the Chinese psyche, he said, is the fear of being different. Like the Chinese sayings, "a man dreads fame as a pig dreads becoming fat" and "shoot the bird that takes the lead," there is a worry over standing out.⁶ The government capitalizes on the correlate to this mind-set by elevating model villages and workers, along with the drumbeat to emulate. Like positive peer-pressure, once a momentum is created, no one dares to be left behind — at least in appearance.

The Daguan spirit also reflects what the government believes it will take to continue to make progress in the struggle against poverty. In 1978, 260 million people (33% of the rural population) lived in absolute poverty. Reform-driven economic growth reduced that number to 65 million (8% of the rural population) by 1996. The majority of rural poor are now concentrated in resource-deficient areas and comprise entire communities located mostly in upland sections of China's interior provinces. Through Daguan, as an example of success amid this form of poverty, the government communicates to the remaining 65 million (local officials in particular) the qualities it desires to see promoted: self-reliance, creativity, selfless leadership and the refusal to give up.

Amid ongoing poverty reduction efforts, Daguan Village also serves as a showcase — a government laboratory used to demonstrate poverty-alleviation methods such as land reclamation, Party Secretary He-style: "clear plots of land in the valley rock crevices, plant trees on the slopes to each side." With 200 visitors a day, Daguan also provides an opportunity to show off new ideas: concise water-storage receptacles (5-feet deep, 10-feet in diameter) used to capture rainwater appear to be the recent push. Daguan Village now has more than 255 of them; one tank built alongside each series of fields demonstrates a solution to mountain-related irrigation problems. The county government provides the materials in the form of a loan; the farmer pays back the loan in increments.

The extent to which Daguan marriage and childbirth policy is being promoted as exemplary is unclear, but it's worth mentioning. Before a Daguan couple can get permission to marry, they must first clear one *mu* of land — six months' to a year's work. A great way to test the relationship, I suppose. Before a couple can receive the required approval to have a child, they must clear another *mu* of land. According to Party Secretary Chen, this insures that there will be enough food to go around (the annual production of one *mu* of land supports one adult).

From a broader perspective, the government believes the spirit of Daguan is a message for all — not just for the country's impoverished mountain communities. The tremendous challenges that face China during the post-Deng era, particularly in the areas of economic reform, will leave many needing to take good notes from Party

⁶ "人怕出名猪怕壮"; "枪打出头鸟"

“Who cannot be moved by the astounding achievements of those people [Daguan Village] who, under the most severe natural conditions, persisted for 12 years? Who can resist the tears that well up in your eyes? This hard-working, fighting spirit is the soul of the Chinese people. It is the pillar of China’s survival and development. This spirit is not only required during periods of war, it is just as necessary during times of peace. Not only do backward areas of the country need this spirit, prosperous areas of our country need it as well. And not only rural areas, but every sector of work in the city can learn from the spirit of Daguan. With this kind of spirit, we can find the needed strength to overcome every obstacle. We can continue to advance the formidable task of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

—editor’s note to front page article on Daguan Village in February 16, 1997, edition of *People’s Daily*

Secretary He and his village. The government realizes that now is the time to remind the country that life-after-Deng will not be a piece of cake — the economy cannot grow at +10% per year forever, and painful, necessary reform must be pushed forward. The Chinese people must recall the spirit that enabled them to survive the turmoil common throughout this century.

Enough of the government’s perspective. What does the common person think about the spirit of Daguan? What difference does the spirit of Daguan make to those appointed to lead China’s poor — the town and village leaders who live each day staring desperate need in the

face? Is Daguan Village truly an encouragement or have people grown weary of government models? Is Daguan derided as Dazhai theater; scoffed at as a naive, out-of-date Lei Feng? Or is Daguan’s model-spirit an effective public-relations tool that will motivate people to improve their lives and overcome their challenging surroundings? These are questions I will pursue next month as I make follow-up visits to see the town mayors and party secretaries I met at December’s training seminar. Their answers and their attitudes toward leading Guizhou’s poor should reveal much about the realities of Guizhou’s poverty and the prospects for finding relief. Perhaps I’ll get some answers over a just-caught fish dinner. □



Across the street from Party Secretary He’s home, solid rock (right) juxtaposed to a cleared plot of soil (left) demonstrates the difficulty of clearing land in Daguan Village. In November 1996, State Councilor Chen Junsheng participated in this plot’s land-clearing work.⁷ As a result, the plot was named “Hearts-united,” because, as the literature reads: “This plot expresses the shared breath, joined fate and united hearts of China’s leaders with the masses of China’s poor mountain regions.” Daguan’s public relations usefulness is multifaceted; government concern for the poor is an important part of the Daguan message.

⁷ Chen Junsheng is China’s senior policymaker for agriculture, rural development and poverty reduction.

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Institute of Current World Affairs Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the

Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two

years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [East Asia]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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Author: Wright, Daniel B.
Title: ICWA Letters - East Asia
ISSN: 1083-4265
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs,
Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: Sub-Saharan Africa; South Asia,
Mideast/North Africa;
Europe/Russia; The Americas

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4265) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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