

What was peasant life like?

There has to be much guesswork about peasant life in China, because there are nothing like the records of the medieval villages of Europe. There are a few official handbooks for peasants on how to grow the best crops, and some tomb objects, but much is assumed because peasant life has changed very little over the centuries.

Peasant order

Farmers were very skilful. Their work was very detailed – more like gardening than farming. They relied on knowledge of local soils, weather, plants and fertilisers, especially in the rice fields. They grew huge amounts of food.

Work on the land and its crops resulted in close family and village life. The head of the family and village elders were respected and this resulted in peace in the countryside for much of the time. The peasants were too busy providing food for the family, paying taxes, and avoiding forced labour, to be troublesome. In return the peasants were protected by the Emperor's government. Several Han edicts open with, 'The world is based on agriculture,' showing how valuable village life was to China's peace and prosperity.

Peasant disorder

Poverty was real and could be caused by harsh taxes. This poem by a Song poet expresses this:

Source D

They do not grudge tending the rice in spring
But fear the payment of taxes in the autumn;
The evil officials act like sparrows or rats
And the thieving clerks like locusts or caterpillars;
They take extra with their enlarged measures.
People cannot avoid being flogged to make them pay up
And are further oppressed with private debt;
No smoke rises from the abandoned homesteads,
Never once in their lives have they tasted
Rice clean and bright as the cloudstone;
Those who eat it are always the idle
The mouths who grow it are forever watering.

Rebellion could result from harsh taxes, forced labour, and floods and droughts. In a crisis peasants often fled from their villages and beggars would roam around. The government lost taxes and had to hand out tools and seeds to assist the people in returning to normal life. At such times the peasants might rebel.

Peasant Calendar

A short text on peasant life survives from about AD 100 to 170

and gives an ideal view of twelve months. Here are some of the tasks.

1st month

New Year's Day: keep the festival. Purify themselves before offering strong drink to the shrine of their ancestors; pray for happiness and prosperity.
There are few jobs so send the boys to school.
Transplant trees like lac, bamboo, pine and oak.
Sow melons, gourds, onions and garlic.
Sweep up decayed leaves, and manure the fields.
Prune the trees and break up heavy ground.
Visit social superiors.

2nd month

Offer leeks and eggs to lord of the soil and spirits of the seasons.

3rd month

Practise archery in case of robbers.
Repair gates and doors; replaster walls and apply coat of lacquer. Break up the arable land soil, and light sandy soils.

5th month

Cut hay and collect firewood because the rains will soon make the paths too muddy to use.
Put bran for animal fodder in the winter in sealed jars to keep out maggots.
Collect herbs.

6th month

Textiles spun by the women; later the women dye the cloth and make it into clothes.

8th month

Cut hay, and offer leeks and eggs to lord of the soil and spirits of the seasons.
Present piglets and millet to the ancestral graves.

9th month

Check weapons, and prepare for the needs of the sick and orphans in the coming winter.
Repair granaries and storage pits.

10th month

Women work on the hemp and make sandals.

12th month

Pay visits to social superiors.
Slaughter pigs and sheep; fast and purify themselves, and offer wine to their ancestors.
Assemble the plough; feed the oxen well, ready for the next year.

For the first eight months of the year crops are grown and tended. All year brewing and preserving takes place.

EVIDENCE: PEASANT LIFE

- 1 Would you have preferred to live and work in the North or in the South of China? Write a letter to a friend being educated in a city who is missing village life explaining your choice by reference to the evidence.
- 2 For the area that is **not** your preference, present an official report to encourage people to live and work there. Include its special features, problems and contrasts.
- 3 a What impressions of peasant life do you get from the peasant calendar?

- b How useful is it as evidence?
- c What other aspects of peasant life would you like to learn about that are not mentioned here? Explain why.
- 4 a What do you think this peasant saying means: 'The collective earth is an orphan; the private plot is a child.'
- b Does the information on pages 30 to 33 support this saying?
- 5 Using the civilisation chart on page 7, decide whether this evidence for peasant life adds to, or reduces, the idea of China as a civilisation.

Village homes were usually a single courtyard with the main building positioned to the north, and other outbuildings like a pigsty nearby. The buildings were wooden with bamboo frames, and had a thatched or tiled roof. There was little privacy. Stone, which was regarded as a noble material for carving and ornamentation, was reserved for bridges, roads, ramparts and Buddhist towers.



This Han pottery model was found in a tomb. It shows a pen full of sheep.

Everyone in the village, except the old, lame and infirm, worked from dawn till dusk to cut, thresh, dry and store the rice at harvest time. Children looked after the buffaloes and fed the animals in the yard (pigs, chickens and sometimes edible dogs) throughout the year, as well as gathering scarce firewood and collecting water from the well. In the winter some villages had schools where the children could learn the basics of writing and arithmetic.

