

Official jailed for murder role

By **GEOFFREY CROTHALL** in Beijing

THE former head of China's richest village has been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for his role in the torture and subsequent death of a villager.

Yu Zuomin, the mastermind behind the rise of Daqiu Zhuang village in the past decade, pleaded guilty to charges of harbouring criminals, obstructing police investigations, bribery and the unlawful detention and control of people, Xinhua (the New China News Agency) reported yesterday.

In all, 26 people, including Yu's son, were sentenced during a mass trial at the Tianjin Intermediate People's Court on August 23 and 24, Xinhua said.

A court officer contacted by telephone from Beijing confirmed the sentences in

what is believed to be one of the biggest crackdowns on the abuse of power by local officials in China.

Yu had been Communist Party boss of Daqiu Zhuang since the 1960s and was believed to be well connected to the family of Deng Xiaoping.

Yu's case revolved around the death of a village worker, Wei Fuhe, on December 13 last year and the subsequent armed standoff with police from Tianjin sent to investigate the incident.

The court concluded that Yu had harboured the four main suspects in the case and made financial arrangements for them to abscond, Xinhua said.

Yu also instructed his village militia to use violence to prevent police from investigating the case, the official news agency said.

Unofficial reports claim

that up to 1,000 officers surrounded the village in February only to be met by militia men, allegedly armed with machine-guns.

The standoff reportedly lasted three days before Yu allowed officers to enter the village by which time the four suspects had disappeared.

Yu and his son, Shaoming, also paid out tens of thousands of yuan in bribes to a government official in order to obtain confidential information about the investigation. Yu Shaoming was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.

The trial brought to light hitherto unknown abuses of power by the 63-year-old village leader and his associates.

In December last year, Yu was said to have organised the detention and beating of three other workers at the village-owned Huada

Company whom he suspected of embezzlement.

Earlier, villagers, at the behest of Yu, had beaten and detained a teacher and 27 students on a school trip from Beijing and had also "restricted the personal freedom" of relatives of a man beaten to death by Yu's cousin in April 1990.

Yu was sentenced to 10 years for bribery, six years for harbouring criminals, three years for obstructing justice and a total of six years for the unlawful detention and control of others. The sentences were combined to 20 years with the deprivation of political rights for two years.

Liu Yunzhang, the principal culprit in the murder of Wei Fuhe, was sentenced to death, suspended for two years, while two others involved in the beating were sentenced to life imprisonment.



Wah Kiu Yat Po

Fall from grace . . . Yu Zuomin, the former head of China's richest village, faces 20 years' imprisonment for his role in the torture and subsequent death of a villager.