

PEASANT RESISTANCE

Lucien Bianco: *Wretched Rebels: Rural Disturbances on the Eve of the Chinese Revolution*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University East Asia Center, 2009. Pp. xv, 271. \$39.95.)

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Wretched Rebels is an abridged translation of Lucien Bianco's *Jacqueries et révolution dans la Chine du XXe siècle* (Editions de la Martinière, 2005). *Jacqueries* systemized the analysis of *Peasants without the Party* (Sharpe, 2001), a volume that anthologized articles and papers Bianco published between 1970 and 1999 and that won the Association for Asian Studies Joseph R. Levenson award in 2003. Despite this complicated bibliographic context, *Wretched Rebels* stands alone as an incisive and valuable overview of rural unrest in twentieth-century China, representing the distillation of a lifetime of scholarship on the Chinese revolution by one of the giants in the field.

The work's central focus is the nature of unorganized—by revolutionary parties, secret societies, or popular sects—peasant resistance and its implications for Chinese revolutionary history. Though Bianco writes from a perspective sympathetic to the plight of oppressed farmers, he is no apologist for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A vocal critic of Maoist excess in the 1970s, Bianco here soundly refutes Maoist historiography by establishing with exquisite historical detail the comparative lack of peasant class consciousness in prerevolutionary China. In short, he finds that peasants resisted taxes far more often than rents, and that most collective action represented a broad-based coalition of landowners, tenants, and laborers. Only rarely did the poorest peasants take action against the landholding class, since it was the state, not rural class structure, that was the main target of peasant disturbances. Tax resistance was omnipresent, while the imposition of modernizing policies by the late Qing and Nationalist (GMD) states, and the brutal wartime conscription practices of the latter, also incited considerable violence. Ultimately, “antitax revolts were the best and most consistent expression of the discontent of the great majority of Chinese villagers” (90).

The first two chapters establish the typology of rural movements governing the book's analytical frame, drawing from a data set of 3,648 disturbances assembled mainly from local gazetteers, accounts compiled for the *Wenshi ziliao* (Cultural and Historical Materials) series, and materials from the First and Second National Archives of China and US State Department archives. Though cognizant of the mixed nature of many of these incidents and forthright in addressing the problems that this poses for his analysis, Bianco establishes a taxonomy that is instructive and largely convincing. At the broadest level he differentiates movements that opposed the state and those that did not. The former, the subject of chapter 1, are subdivided into antitax disturbances, opposition to state policies, and resistance to conscription. The latter, the focus of chapter 2, comprise “social movements” driven by vertical

cleavages in social structure pitting rich against poor (mainly rent resistance and food riots), and “horizontal conflicts” between villages, clans, or other groups of equivalent socioeconomic status. Chapter 3 discusses the repertoire of action available to peasants, including the practice of handing over farm tools (*jiaonong*)—a practice unique to the Chinese context.

Next, Bianco addresses the question of how deep-rooted social inequity did not produce movements on the scale of those opposing the state. To understand why the most disadvantaged (rural laborers) and exploited (debtors) elements of rural society rarely revolted on their own initiative, he delves into the issues of rural wages and moneylending. Though these practices created great social inequities, employers and creditors were rarely targets of discontent. “We should not, for all that, exonerate the rich,” Bianco writes, for the local bullies were often employers and creditors deeply involved in exploitive practices (88). The next three chapters are the heart of the book, enumerating in great detail the conditions producing spontaneous rural collective action against the state described in chapter 1: taxation, reform policies, and conscription. The concluding chapter, “Permanencies,” argues for continuities between collective rural action in twentieth-century China and seventeenth-century France, on the one hand, and contemporary Chinese rural disturbances, on the other.

Though Bianco is sympathetic to the peasants' plight, *Wretched Rebels* diverges from CCP historiography by placing the locus of struggle in antigovernment tax resistance orchestrated by landowners and not the surging rural proletariat canonized by Mao. However, if the book's focus on unorganized unrest denies it the standard protagonists—e.g., the revolutionary parties or popular sects—the villains remain familiar. Local bullies and evil gentry (*tuhao lieshen*) remain ubiquitous—often playing a key role in enacting oppressive tax initiatives—and Western imperialism is still culpable for exacerbating the structural conditions necessitating them, as the Boxer indemnities helped drive rural tax increases. The costs of modernity in the form of the late Qing New Policies intensified this burden. After 1911 came the militarists, and inevitably the GMD. Nationalist sympathizers will find no solace here: Nanjing's ineptitude at securing revenue from the rural sector—which still accounted for 33 percent of GDP in 1933—was compounded by its inability to rein in injustices perpetrated by rapacious local elites whose minions often controlled the levers of state power. And it was only under GMD rule that tax increases outstripped rises in agricultural prices, a situation that swelled the ranks of debtors (who outnumbered other farm laborers four to one) and tenants. Finally, the appalling conscription measures introduced by the Nationalists during the anti-Japanese war produced resistance that for the first time equaled in scope that directed against tax measures (159).

One of the book's strengths is the sure-footed ease with which the author traverses his vast array of sources, constructing a convincing picture of the hardships of rural life in early twentieth-century China. Bianco is also

forthright in addressing various scholarly interlocutors, as in his discussion of how best to interpret peasant resistance to modernization initiatives (142–43). Refreshing as well is the candor with which he addresses the shortcomings of his data, for example, the lack of reliable information on the social background of the leaders of most revolts, or the degree to which the complexity of individual cases resists his categorization scheme. And yet, while these concerns do not challenge the validity of the author's central premise, they do point to an issue regarding sources. To categorize material in reform-era gazetteers and *Wenshi ziliao* compilations is ultimately to tabulate narratives about events, not events themselves, and while literary analysis is far beyond the scope of the author's goals or interest, more could be done to address the nature of these sources and their construction. (As it is, readers curious about sources are inconveniently directed to consult relevant sections of *Peasants without the Party*.) Readers interested in the relation of rural culture to resistance may also come away unsatisfied. Bianco's approach leaves little room for consideration of religion or popular culture in the formation of rural mentality, and while he blames the late Qing and GMD states for the coercive methods used to promote modernization policies in the countryside, he fully endorses the impulse behind them, since "the impact of ignorance, superstitions and peasant traditions still today acts as a brake on the modernization of the country" (158).

Overall, this is an indispensable volume encapsulating a lifetime of research and scholarship on rural conditions in early twentieth-century China. While readers of French will want to consult the original text, everyone else—specialists and students alike—should put *Wretched Rebels* on their short list of required reading on the Chinese Revolution.

—John Williams

BALANCING INCOMPATIBLES

David Kilcullen: *Counterinsurgency*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. vii, 251. \$15.95, paper.)

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In this book, David Kilcullen—a much-heralded advisor to the US government on counterinsurgency—pulls together his writings and thoughts on the subject from various stages of his career. The result is a provocative and revealing compendium that is admittedly also lacking somewhat in coherence. The book includes a chapter from Kilcullen's doctoral work on counterinsurgency in Indonesia, a declassified monograph on the Australian-led