

informants will be as interesting as the critiques of government policy and the insights into drug use and community action. Coupled with a fluid and readable writing style, this makes it a valuable contribution to the fields of Chinese studies and anthropology. I suspect it will be used by undergraduate and postgraduate students of both. As with many good books, Liu's study raises a number of further questions for the engaged reader, and we come away with a desire to know even more about the Nuosu, the current problems they face in Limu and what the future holds for the general population of Liangshan Prefecture.

DYLAN SUTHERLAND

Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward. Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village

RALPH A. THAXTON

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In this long-awaited monograph, Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr. offers a compelling and original analysis of the causes and consequences of the Great Leap Forward famine (1959–1961). Unlike the vast majority of scholarship on the famine, which has tended towards a macro treatment of the event, this work focuses on the experiences of people who experienced the famine first hand: in this case, the inhabitants of a village, “Da Fo,” in Northern Henan. Based upon some 400 interviews undertaken over a period of 20 years, the author thoughtfully shows how the institutional foundations of the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP), laid years prior to the famine, made Da Fo more susceptible to food scarcity during the Great Leap Forward (GLF), and how the famine has continued to impact the physical, cultural, and political constitution of this community well into the present day.

Similar to other Western scholars who have studied the famine, Thaxton lays blame for much of the catastrophe at the feet of Mao Zedong. And yet, Thaxton offers an original contribution by showing how local institutional dynamics, many of which were in place years before the GLF, exacerbated the misconceived policies being dictated by the centre. In Da Fo we learn, for example, that the local leadership took shape during the violent period of the anti-Japanese war and the civil war. It was the brutality of these earlier conflicts that fostered the authoritarian work style so prevalent among local CCP leaders before and during the GLF. These hardened militia men demanded exorbitant sacrifices from the people in their charge, and were largely indifferent to local suffering when the crisis began to take hold in 1959.

A historical, path-dependent approach to explaining how the local leadership exacerbated the crisis is similarly useful for understanding why Da Fo's residents did not rise up when faced with endemic hunger. Many local farmers believed in the benevolence of the CCP because of its effectiveness as an agent of aid in previous times of crisis. Indeed, when famine beset the region in 1942, it was the efforts of the CCP that largely alleviated some of the worst of the hunger. The conception of the CCP as saviour was reinforced again in 1956, when it provided aid in the wake of a major river flood. This strong belief that the CCP would come to the rescue, Thaxton argues, prevented contention in the earliest days of the GLF famine crisis. Only when it became clear that help was not forthcoming did villagers choose to

engage in “low-profile resistance” such as gleaning from the collective fields and eating crops before they were fully ripe (*chi qing*). Ultimately, Thaxton argues, these quiet acts of contention enabled the vast majority of citizens of Da Fo to survive, and thus obviated the need for full-scale rebellion.

The assertion that Da Fo’s farmers consciously resisted the most extreme policies of the GLF is consistent with a rich literature on China’s countryside both before and since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. While some may question whether secretly feeding oneself and one’s family from the collective fields during a time of starvation should count as an act of “resistance,” Thaxton’s work shows that this and other forbidden activities were always carried out in a highly regulated social context imbued with local understandings of justice. It was primarily women, for example, who engaged in *chi qing* and begging. It strikes this reader that these feminized forms of resistance would not have taken the shape that they did in the absence of, on the one hand, the large-scale mobilization of women into agricultural fieldwork, and on the other, distinct notions of social propriety that dictated how state regulations should be evaded. In Da Fo, villagers and leaders alike made conscious decisions about the crisis that were rooted in their world view of justice – a view that at times placed them directly at odds with the conception of justice being implemented by the central leadership.

Although Thaxton effectively builds upon the argument that covert forms of resistance such as *chi qing* did much to undermine the rural collective economy throughout the Mao era, he is less convincing as to whether or not the rural residents of Da Fo themselves came to question the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Even the much more overt and violent forms of retribution that have sprung up during the reform era have remained directed at local leaders for their specific famine-era crimes, rather than directed at the central leadership largely responsible for designing the policies in the first place. With a second volume on Da Fo in progress, one suspects this argument will be fleshed out further in the future.

In the meantime, *Catastrophe and Contention* has made a huge contribution to the study of modern Chinese politics. While it is true that Da Fo may be “one tiny star in the galaxy of China’s million villages” (p. 269), Thaxton’s deeply researched, passionately engaged, and well-written monograph has done exactly what an excellent case study should: opened up whole new vistas of inquiry. This book will serve as an indispensable resource for scholars and students alike seeking to make sense of a deeply complex period in the People’s Republic of China and its on-going imprint on the politics of today.

KIMBERLEY ENS MANNING

Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China’s Great Leap Forward and Famine

Edited by KIMBERLEY ENS MANNING and FELIX WEMHEUER

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This fine collection contains an introduction and eleven essays, three of which have previously been published (two of those in Chinese). The first half of the book focuses broadly on ideological aspects of the disastrous Great Leap Forward, from its launch amid considerable fanfare in May 1958 to its dismantlement by Liu Shaoqui and his