



Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village (Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics)

By Ralph A. Thaxton Jr

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This book documents how China's rural people remember the great famine of Maoist rule, which proved to be the worst famine in modern world history. Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr., sheds new light on how China's socialist rulers drove rural dwellers to hunger and starvation, on how powerless villagers formed resistance to the corruption and coercion of collectivization, and on how their hidden and contentious acts, both individual and concerted, allowed them to survive and escape the predatory grip of leaders and networks in the thrall of Mao's authoritarian plan for a full-throttle realization of communism - a plan that engendered an unprecedented disaster for rural families. Based on his study of a rural village's memories of the famine, Thaxton argues that these memories persisted long after the events of the famine and shaped rural resistance to the socialist state, both before and after the post-Mao era of reform.

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- Sales Rank: #2087798 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Cambridge University Press
- Published on: 2008-05-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.21" h x .98" w x 6.14" l, 1.30 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 408 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"...a horrifying and convincing condemnation of the Maoist programs that during the Great Leap Forward caused starvation among the rural population between 1959 and 1961 and beyond. Over almost twenty years Thaxton interviewed four hundred residents of Da Fo, in Henan province, people who had been traumatized by years of famine, humiliation, torture, and death....If there is another book that shows more profoundly how Mao, whose portrait still hangs in Tiananmen Square, inflicted disaster on a particular place, I haven't read it."

Jonathan Mirsky, The New York Review of Books

"This book is a major achievement. Based on more than 20 years of field research, it paints a vivid picture of how the Great Leap Forward was experienced in one village. It shows that enforcement of policies disastrous for villagers precipitated bitter conflicts between peasants seeking to protect their customary family entitlements and brutal and cruel cadres who did the bidding of a regime blinded by utopian dreams, hubris and fanaticism. Thaxton places this rivetting story in the context of the history of the village from the 1930s on and of the decades since the collapse of the Leap. This enables him convincingly to show that violence and brutality were deeply embedded in earlier revolutionary processes. And it enables him to argue provocatively that the legacies of Great Leap abuses continue to inform the mentalities of villagers to this day."

Thomas P. Bernstein, Professor emeritus, Columbia University

"Having gained extraordinary access to hitherto unavailable sources in rural China, Ralph Thaxton has written a path-breaking book which continues a career of important scholarship aimed at exploring the vicissitudes of popular responses to painful traumas and cruel local officials. A major work."

Edward Friedman, University of Wisconsin

"Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China offers an all-too-rare picture of what it was like for peasants to survive the Great Famine caused by the Great Leap. Thaxton's volume is an iconic and deeply arresting account of mass starvation, trauma and suffering, but also of endurance and resistance. This is a work of real importance that will be influential with China scholars and scholars of catastrophe and resistance generally. A strong achievement!"

Arthur Kleinman, Harvard University

"This is a remarkable study of a Chinese village and county, based on in-depth on-site research. The farmers in this region experienced the darker side of the Chinese revolution, and Ralph Thaxton's devastating, intriguing account vividly brings to life their trials and travails from the 1950s up into the post-Mao 'reform era'."

Jonathan Unger, Director, Contemporary China Center, Australian National University

"This excellent book adds to the literature on the causes, events, and consequences of Mao's disastrous policies, which created famine, then civil war...Highly Recommended"

Choice

"Highly readable and informative ... essential reading ..."

About the Author

Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr, is a Professor of Politics and the Chairman of the East Asian Studies Program at Brandeis University. He is the author of *Salt of the Earth: The Political Origins of Peasant Protest in China* (1977) and *China Turned Rightside Up: Revolutionary Legitimacy in the Peasant World* (1983). He was named a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of California Berkeley Center for Chinese Studies (1974-5) and a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (2002) and has won numerous prizes and fellowships, including a Harry Frank Guggenheim Fellowship, a Chang Ching-kuo Foundation International Fellowship, and the United States Institute of Peace Fellowship.

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