

# 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, Jr.

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## *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*

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 during the post-Mao era of reform.

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* (1997) 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 (1974–75) and a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (2002) and has won numerous prizes and fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Humanities University Teachers' Fellowship, a Harry Frank Guggenheim Fellowship, a Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation International Fellowship, and the United States Institute of Peace Fellowship.



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FAMINE AND THE ORIGINS  
OF RIGHTEOUS RESISTANCE  
IN DA FO VILLAGE

RALPH A. THAXTON, JR.

*Brandeis University*



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*To my mentors – Edward Friedman, Maurice Meisner, and James C. Scott –  
in partial return for all they have taught me about China  
and the agrarian world*



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*Photos follow Chapter 7.*



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Now that the book is finished, it is time to thank the inhabitants of Da Fo for giving us their humanity and their history, and to move on to how they see the revolutionary past and the reform present. Because this book relies on their voices to narrate their history, I have attempted to protect them from any future penalty for their collaboration by using pseudonyms for the names of the key places, people, and officials in the rural county of this study. Whereas I have used pseudonyms for some of the key actors and villages beyond the boundaries of this county, I have used the real names of the county, prefectural, provincial, and national units, actors, and events that were linked with the fate of the people of Da Fo and Dongle County.

Waltham, MA  
March 1, 2008

## *Cast of Characters*

DA FO VILLAGE (GREAT BUDDHA),  
1920–1993

### *Communist Party Secretary Bao Zhilong and His Network of Clients*

Bao Zhilong: Uneducated leader of the Communist Party–led militia in 1938 and head of the militia during and after World War II. Da Fo Communist Party secretary in the early 1950s, vice-director of Liangmen district between 1951 and 1954, and the vice-director of the Liangmen People’s Commune in 1958–61. Da Fo party secretary for the post–Cultural Revolution period, into the early 1990s.

Bao Yibin: Son of Bao Yidai (popular Peasant Association leader in the 1945–47 period) and a graduate of the Public Security Bureau training academy in Dongle County. Da Fo party secretary in Da Fo during the Great Leap and its famine.

Bao Zhigen: Son of a landless manure collector and illiterate ruffian and opportunist. Client and toady of militia chief and party secretary Bao Zhilong.

Pang Lang: Corrupt Da Fo brigade accountant. Provoked the “dumpling rebellion” of early collectivization. Client of Bao Zhilong.

Pang Siyin: Member of the Bao Zhilong–led Chinese Communist Party (CCP) militia in World War II and later vice-secretary of the Da Fo CCP.

\*Liang Xiaolu: Wife of Bao Zhilong. Extremely corrupt. Did not engage in manual labor in the Great Leap Forward. Leaked Bao Yibin’s affair with another woman to his wife.

\* Denotes female member of the cast of characters.

*Other Important Characters*

Bao Guangming: Alienated farmer. Opponent of Bao Zhilong in the Great Leap famine.

Bao Hongwen: Younger brother of Great Leap-era party secretary Bao Yibin. Mistreated and betrayed returned People's Liberation Army (PLA) veteran.

Bao Huayin: Returned college student and a CCP leader of the county-level anti-Japanese resistance during World War II. Rose to high-level state position in Beijing in the late 1940s. Embittered by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward.

Bao Rulong: Son of Da Fo party boss Bao Zhilong. Studied martial arts in Luoyang in order to defend his father against angry villagers in the reform era.

Bao Tiancai: Graduate of Daming Seventh Normal College, returned student and founder of the Da Fo Communist Party branch in 1938.

Bao Yizhao: Da Fo party leader who rose to a prominent position in the Anyang prefecture government after the Civil War. Led an investigation into the causes of the Great Leap famine in Xinyang prefecture. Accused of being a rightist by Wu Zhipu.

Bao Yuhua: Benevolent landholder in the Bao lineage and leader of the educated and enlightened elite of Da Fo village in the pre-1949 period.

\*Du Rutai: Lost her one-year-old son to measles because party leaders insisted that she continuously work in the collective fields during the Great Leap.

Guo Weili: Arch Maoist, outsider, and Cultural Revolution terrorist.

\*Huang Fengyan: Female participant in Bao Zhigen's First Harvest Company in the Great Leap. Denied sick leave and embittered by inhumane treatment.

\*Ji Danying: Victim of the practice of Communist Party-connected leaders sleeping with the wives of farmers chained to collective fields during the Great Leap Forward.

\*Liu Jing: Spouse of imprisoned Bao Sunyuan, former Kuomintang party secretary of Dongle County. Target of Guo Weili and the Red Artists. Murdered in the Cultural Revolution.

Pang Chengling: *Baozi* seller and defiant participant in state-forbidden marketing during the Cultural Revolution.

Pang Zhonghua: PLA officer and Korean War veteran. Returned to Da Fo in the Cultural Revolution from working in a top-secret nuclear weapons research site.

\*Ruan Yulan: Conscripted production team leader in the Great Leap. Criticized by party leaders for allowing her exhausted female team members to catch up on sleep in the sweet potato fields.

Tang Guoyi: Farmer and composer of the doggerel ridiculing the watered-down soup of the public dining hall.

Tang Weilan: Farmer. Beaten mercilessly by Communist Party leaders at the Tong Tin River Dig labor camp in the Great Leap. Worked with work team to

## Cast of Characters

struggle against Bao Zhilong and party leaders in the aftermath of the Great Leap famine, both in the *fan wufeng* campaign and the Four Cleanups.

Zhao Jinjiang: Smallholder. Staunch defender of the independence of family-based farming and opponent of the land-pooling associations.

Zheng Daqing: Co-leader of prewar protest movement and member of the Eighth Route Army and PLA.

Zheng Tianbao: Son of Zheng Daqing. Worked for the Eighth Route Army during World War II and served in the Liangmen People's Commune Cultural Education Department during the Great Leap.

Zheng Yunxiang: Member of the Da Fo brigade militia in the late 1950s. Leader of an armed raid on the collective fields of another brigade during the Great Leap.



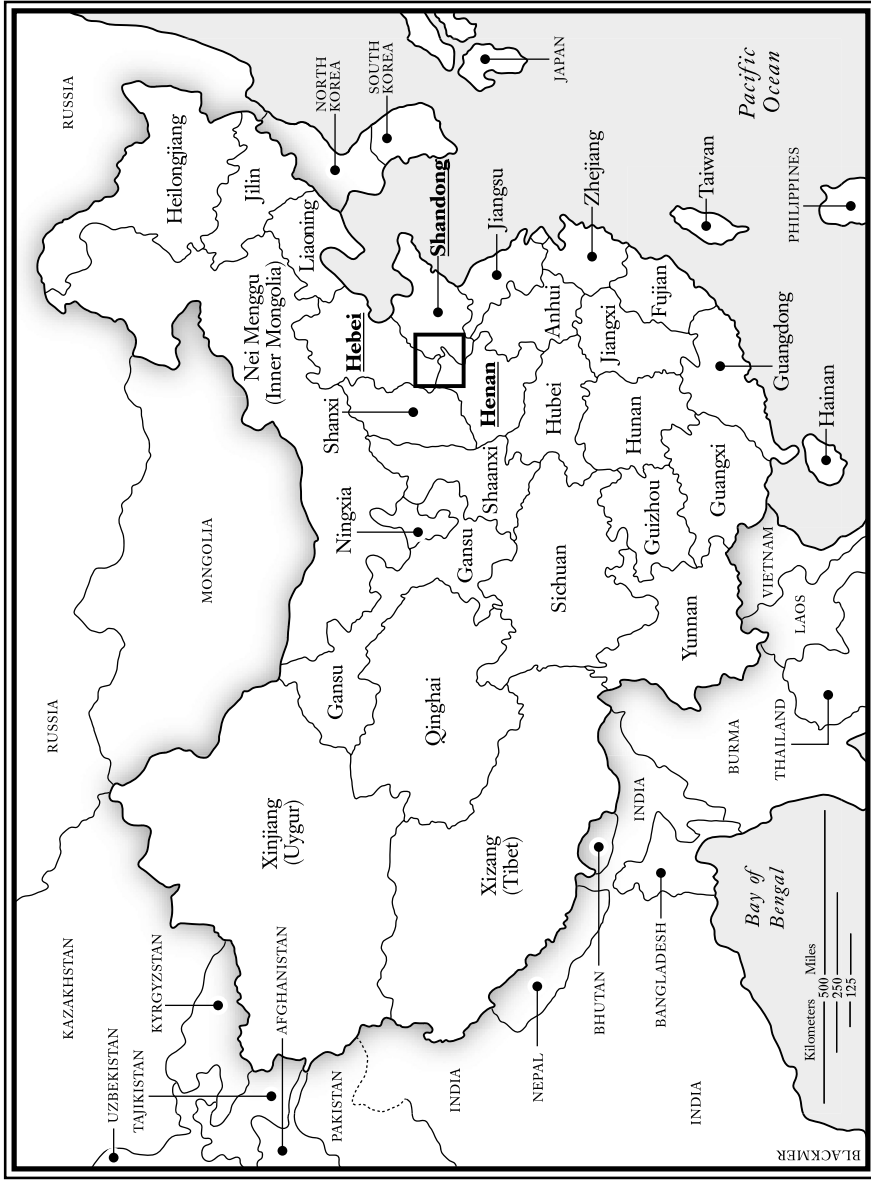
## *Chronology of Important Events*

1911	Qing dynasty falls; Republican period begins
1920–21	North China Famine
1928, Nov.	Nationalist government established
1931–35	Dongle County protest movement against salt police
1937, Dec.	Japanese invasion reaches Dongle County
1938, Mar.	Da Fo branch of CCP founded
1938, Apr.	Da Fo militia organized
1938, Fall	CCP tax reform; Japanese Army first appears in Da Fo
1939, Dec.	Puppet Army occupies Da Fo
1942	Henan Famine
1945, Apr.	Japanese forces defeated and driven out of Dongle County
1945, Aug.	Japanese surrender
1946, May	CCP land reform begins in Da Fo
1946–47	Civil War begins
1949–50	Communist victory in the Civil War; People's Republic of China created
1950	Korean War begins
1951, late summer	Mutual aid agriculture groups begin in Da Fo
1952, late year	Land-pooling associations begin in Da Fo
1953	Unified purchase and sale begins in Da Fo
1955	Agricultural production cooperatives (APC) formed in Da Fo; later that year, five-village APC established
1956	Wei River flood; APC disbanded
1958	Liangmen People's Commune established; public dining halls created in August; Mao's rectification movement reaches the countryside in December 1957–January 1958

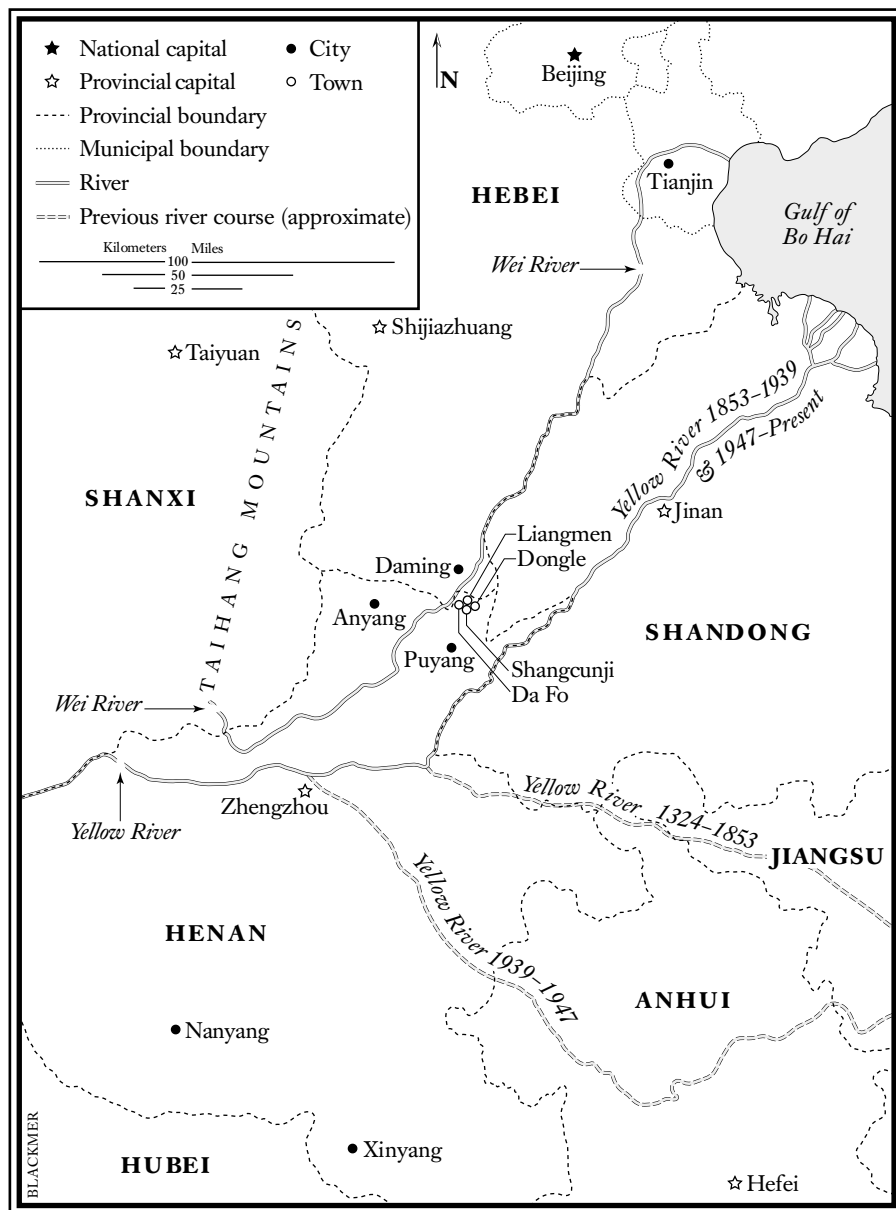
## Chronology of Important Events

1958–61	Great Leap Forward
1959, late	Grain ration reduced to 0.5 <i>jin</i> per day; high tide of Mao's anti-rightist campaign
1960, spring	Great Leap famine at full force
1960, late	<i>Fan wufeng</i> campaign
1962	Mao forced to give up chairmanship of CCP to Liu Shaoqi
1964	Socialist Education Movement
1964–65	Four Cleanups campaign
1966–73	Cultural Revolution in Da Fo
1966	Deng Xiaoping removed from power
1968–69	Liu Shaoqi expelled from Communist Party; dies in captivity
1973	Bao Zhilong returned to position of party secretary for Da Fo
1976	Mao Zedong dies
1978	Deng Xiaoping returns to power; Reform era begins with Deng's introduction of reforms at the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress
1982–85	Liangmen People's Commune disbanded
1982	Land division in Da Fo returns the village to individual household farming





**Map 1.** Provinces of China, neighboring countries, and area of study. Map by Kate Blackmer.



**Map 2.** Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area, showing location of Da Fo village. Map by Kate Blackmer.

# *Introduction*

## *The Great Leap Forward Famine and Chairman Mao's Catastrophe*

Denied entry into the U.S.-dominated global economy, in the middle of 1958, less than one decade after seizing national state power through a rural-based insurgency, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated a political campaign known as the Great Leap Forward. Aimed at promoting self-reliant economic growth and building a modern competitive state through rapid industrial development and the collectivization of agriculture, this campaign also was driven by Mao's desire to pilot a great leap from socialism to communism, an ideological goal that had implications for policy implementation and ultimately stoked fanaticism at all levels of governance. In the end, the Great Leap fell short of its economic and political goals and spawned a disaster in the Chinese countryside.

Mao Zedong and other key members of the Central Party Committee were forewarned of the disaster. Between mid-August and late October 1958, they received written petitions from rural farmers in Henan province. The petitions, some of which were penned by members of the Communist Youth League, pleaded with central party politicians to correct problems created by cadres in charge of the Great Leap locally. An August 11 petition addressed to Tan Zhenlin, who had fought under Mao's command in Hunan during the late 1920s and on whom Mao relied to push his rural policies in the Great Leap, complained that party cadres were falsely overreporting the harvest output so they could justify appropriating more of the food crop for the party-state and thereby achieve greater glory in the eyes of their superiors.<sup>1</sup> A second anonymous

<sup>1</sup> On Mao's connection to Tan Zhenlin, see MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 2:60–61, 82–84. On the first petition, see Yu Xiguang, *Dayuejin Kurizi Shangshuji*, 41–43, 61–64.

petition, sent to Mao on October 20, 1958, documented another problem: cadres were consistently breaking the law by severely beating farmers who did not obey their orders, targeting especially those who accurately reported the harvest output.<sup>2</sup>

For the first time, this second petition revealed to Mao Zedong the severity of some of the social problems engendered by the Great Leap Forward. In responding to it on November 29, 1958, however, Mao did not look for the causes of cadre behavior in government institutions or in his own national policies, but rather fell back on his premise that such events had occurred in no more than 10 percent of China's villages and were the result of local power falling into the hands of "a few counterrevolutionaries." Ignoring the petitioner's request for an independent, centrally directed investigation, he directed his followers in the Henan Provincial Communist Party Committee to look into the problem.<sup>3</sup>

The matter did not end there: between October 1958 and March 1959, Mao received internal reports of food shortages from junior party officials in Henan, Shandong, Anhui, Hunan, Jiangsu, and Hebei, and in late April 1959 shocked Politburo leaders informed Mao that a great famine had spread to fifteen of China's provinces and that 25 million rural people were facing starvation.<sup>4</sup> Mao did not mobilize state resources to manage this emergency. Instead, he compounded it. On the one hand, while on provincial inspection tours, Mao usually asked the first provincial level Communist Party secretaries about local grain production – not about local grain supply. On the other hand, Mao relied on these same party secretaries, all of whom were under pressure to produce a big surge in agricultural production, to provide information about potentially serious problems in communal food supply, and they invariably evaded specific revelations of the extent of the grain shortage crisis in the countryside.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while acknowledging that overzealous local party leaders had surrendered rural farm people to hunger, Mao declined invitations to visit besieged villages in remote interior provinces in the months following the late April 1959 famine alert. At the July 1959 Lushan Conference, in which defense minister Peng Dehuai warned Mao of the serious social and political consequences of the famine, the leader of the Communist Party refused to acknowledge he was making a great mistake and insisted on unconditional obedience to his Great Leap policy.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, Mao accelerated the Great Leap campaign by initiating an anti-rightist movement aimed at silencing party and nonparty opponents of the rapid transition to large-scale collective agriculture and the commune takeover of private farm household assets.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Yu Xiguang, *Dayuejin Kurizi Shangshuji*, 64–65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ling Zhijun, *Lishi bu Zai Paibuai*, 79–80.

<sup>5</sup> Huang Jun, "1960–61 Mao Zedong dui Lianghuang Wenti de Renzhi Jiqi Zhengce Diaozheng."

<sup>6</sup> Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, 87–88; Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster*, 202–05.

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, "Mao Zedong and the Famine," 421, 423–24, 429–37, esp. 433–34.

## Introduction

Whether Mao single-mindedly pursued his Great Leap agenda without regard to its cost to rural dwellers and, unlike Stalin, attempted to draw tillers to his vision without inflicting massive human suffering is a much debated issue. Initially, Mao proclaimed that his Great Leap was aimed at rescuing the rural poor from a marginal existence,<sup>8</sup> and it seems that the Maoist system of procurement was designed to mitigate the social cost of squeezing primitive capital from the farm population.<sup>9</sup> Yet this system, which in theory was aimed at returning food back to the villages by reselling a part of the state-appropriated harvest at a “reasonable price,” had a deleterious impact on per capita consumption in rural China.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the miscarriage of this system has been attributed to misinformation based on seriously flawed communication between central government leaders and rural cadres, Mao Zedong himself was substantially responsible for the misinformation crisis of the Great Leap. According to local knowledge, in the first decade of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao and his local party base systematically dealt with voiced popular complaints over grain extraction by instituting public criticism of county- and village-level dissenters – a process that devastated the ageless practice of addressing the misrule of high and mighty officials through deferential petitions. As this study indicates, the suppression of such complaints correlated strongly with Maoist government attempts to gain control over the grain harvest.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, Mao Zedong argued for an agricultural collectivization that would restore prosperity to rural people and make them equal with urban workers and urban cadres. However, Mao’s industrial policy not only maintained the unequal economic disparities between rural and urban China, it also reinforced social and political discrimination against country people.<sup>12</sup> Throughout most of the collective era, and especially during the Great Leap Forward, Chinese farm households were trapped in an apartheid system. This system, which was called the people’s communes, was aimed at maximizing production for provisioning the cities and constructing offices, factories, schools, and social insurance systems for urban-dwelling workers, cadres, and officials. Rural people who criticized it were labeled dangerous. Those who attempted to escape it were denied exit by party-orchestrated public struggle, which, in the end, further jeopardized survival.

Although leading scholars have shown that Mao did act to curb some excesses of the Great Leap from time to time, it is important to place the Great Leap and the horror it produced in the villages of China in the context of the Mao-led

<sup>8</sup> For this view, see Meisner, *Mao’s China*, 191, 196, 207–08.

<sup>9</sup> See Bernstein, “Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants”; Ash, “Squeezing the Peasants”; and Bernstein, “Mao Zedong and the Famine,” 427. According to Bernstein, Mao told cadres attending a Zhengzhou conference that peasant livelihood was important and farmers would need to conceal a portion of their harvest if they were to survive.

<sup>10</sup> Ash, “Squeezing the Peasants,” 960–61, 971–72, 975.

<sup>11</sup> Zhou Weihai, interview, August 29, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Wemheuer, “Grain Problem,” 13–18.

revolutionary takeover of state power beginning in 1945. From the perspective of this historical process, it seems that Mao was consistently pushing for radical transformation on all fronts, and that any retreats to moderate policy on Mao's part were the product of his penchant for quick change and imperious trickery: he gave in momentarily to ultimately get his way, and his retreats were ebbs within a systematic pattern of resolute advance.<sup>13</sup> When, for example, Mao launched the 1946–47 land reform, he had to pull back because he could not afford to alienate conservative smallholders while the Civil War raged. When Mao attempted to nationalize the grain market through unified purchase and sale in 1953, he was forced to retreat by reports of rural cadre skepticism and popular discontent over this veiled form of procurement. In mid-1955, when Mao launched the agricultural production cooperatives, he again was compelled to retreat from this move against the proprietary rights of tillers, in part because the smallholding “middle peasants,” whom Mao labeled “malcontents,” refused to sell their surpluses to the state and wanted to back out of the big production cooperatives to farm their own land.<sup>14</sup> Then, in 1957–58, after starting the anti-rightist movement in the countryside and then pushing ahead with the Great Leap Forward in poor interior provinces, Mao himself acknowledged that his own aspirations and the zealous acts of his cadre base had combined to produce chaos and food supply problems.<sup>15</sup> Yet when implored to pull back by Marshal Peng Dehuai, Mao Zedong reacted by crushing Peng and reinventing the repressive anti-rightist policies of the past. As Thomas P. Bernstein has shown, this development created a political climate that allowed the Great Leap to quickly generate a disaster in much of the countryside.<sup>16</sup> Seen in this context, the calamity of the Great Leap seems to resonate with Mao's long-standing belief in the necessity of the radical transformation of rural society.<sup>17</sup> Thus, even though Mao expressed compassion for rural people, he had been hardened by Kuomintang state violence, and he had come to understand both pre- and post-1949 China as a huge country with pockets

<sup>13</sup> I am much indebted to Edward Friedman for helping me grasp this point and the political history that demonstrates it. Personal correspondence, May 1, 2007. Also, on Mao's incessant push of his own transcript, which began even prior to unified purchase and sale, see Strauss, “Morality, Coercion and State Building,” 893–912, esp. 912.

<sup>14</sup> On this point, also see Mao, *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao*, 5:208–11, where Mao admits to seeing multi-province reports on the detainment of “middle peasants” who complained about collectivization. The smallholders refused to sell grain surpluses to the state and wanted to leave the cooperatives to farm on their own land. Though many of them voiced fears of food shortages, Mao accepted official reports that these “middle peasants” were “malcontents” who actually were not suffering. Three of these cases were from Henan villages, and Mao referred each case to “Comrade Wu Zhipu” for review.

<sup>15</sup> Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster*, 162–63, 164–67.

<sup>16</sup> Bernstein, “Mao Zedong and the Famine,” 421–23, 431–32, 445.

<sup>17</sup> Here I have benefited from correspondence with Edward Friedman (May 1, 2007) and Alfred L. Chan (May 20, 2007). Still, the basic starting points for this interpretation are in the works of Tsou, “Revolution, Reintegration, and Crisis,” 307; MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 2:333, 3:275–83; and Chan, *Mao's Crusade*, 15.

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of famine and flood disaster, so he was accustomed to massive human suffering. After seizing national power, Mao convinced himself that he could extract huge amounts of grain from rural China, and, after all was said and done, Mao allowed his cadre base to compel farm households to endure a life of semi-starvation so that he could promote internal economic colonization and enable China to catch up with the global powers quickly.<sup>18</sup>

Championed by Mao himself, the supreme leader of the newly established PRC, and impressed on the countryside by means of Mao's autocratic style of policy making and his revival of wartime structures and strategies to force the advancement of collective agriculture, the Great Leap Forward engendered the worst famine in modern world history.<sup>19</sup> This famine took the lives of 40 to 55 million rural people;<sup>20</sup> at least 32.6 million people died as a result of food deprivation alone.<sup>21</sup>

### *The History of a Single Rural Village*

As Gregory Ruf observes, the trauma of the Great Leap Forward “had a profound influence on the shaping of popular consciousness,” particularly on how China's village people viewed – and still view – the Communist Party.<sup>22</sup> Yet official party historiography in the PRC has presented the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward with little reference to the trauma it inflicted on individuals, families, and communities or to the damage it did to the Communist Party's legitimacy in the countryside.<sup>23</sup> This book takes us inside the disaster of the Great Leap Forward through examination of a single rural village in which Maoists achieved supremacy. It is the first of two linked volumes about how China's rural people

<sup>18</sup> See Mao, *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao*, 5:190–210, 8:336–38. In a July 5, 1959, essay, Mao urged rural people to eat less and said they should be prepared to suffer one, two, even three more years. Clearly, he was looking to solve the problem of grain production through their suffering. To be fair, Mao also said private vegetable plots should be restored. However, because this *Wengao* information was to be disseminated only among cadres, ordinary villagers were not likely to catch wind of it, and, in any event, the drift of Mao's thinking most likely reinforced an official culture in which the welfare of the state superseded that of rural people. Compare with Chang and Halliday, *Mao*, 392, 426–27.

<sup>19</sup> MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 2; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village*; Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster*; Smil, “China's Great Famine,” 1619–21; Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China*, vii; Chan, *Mao's Crusade*, 28–30, 40–42, 48–49. On Mao's policy of war communism as the originator of the famine, see Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village*, 219–35, and Spence, *Mao Zedong*, 133–45. For a brilliant analysis of the Great Leap as a Maoist military campaign, see Wemheuer, personal correspondence, 2003, 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> The early conservative estimate was 30 million. See Bannister, “Analysis of Recent Data” and *China's Changing Population*. For an estimate of 40 million, see Jin Hui, CASS, 193; also Jian, Shen, and Jiu, *Lao Xinwen*, 1. For the estimate of 45 million, see Teiwes and Sun, *China's Road to Disaster*, 5, and for the outer limit estimate of 55 million, see Yu Xiguang, *Dayuejin Kurizi Shangshuji*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Cao Shuji, “1959–1961 Nian Zhongguo de Renkou.”

<sup>22</sup> Ruf, *Cadres and Kin*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Taking the Heat Out.”

remember the politics that imposed the famine of Mao's Great Leap Forward, about how some resisted and eventually escaped its grip, and about how their memory of this traumatic injustice has shaped the politics of everyday resistance ever since. Relying substantially on oral political history, it provides the first in-depth history of how one village's people experienced the ultimate catastrophe of Maoist rule. I have drawn on individual memories of encounters with the ground-level agents of Mao's Great Leap Forward to show how rural people attempted to survive and resist this formative episode of socialist state building and then, in its aftermath, strove to recover the liberties, entitlements, and enterprises they lost to its brutality.

The fundamental premise of this study is that during the Great Leap Forward Famine, the Chinese Communist Party lost its mandate to rule in the same interior rural places where it had earlier based its insurgency against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. My central hypothesis is that the individual and collective recollections of the style of Communist rule that crystallized in this formative phase of state making – autocratic, brutal, corrupt, and distrustful – when combined with the plunder, forced labor, and starvation of the famine itself, turned Chinese villagers against the Communist Party, in which they had earlier placed their trust, and motivated them to seek basic social rights and local self-governance through protracted resistance to Communist rule. The persistence of this resistance and the memories of state-delivered pain that made it necessary have complicated the efforts of post-Mao reformers to regain political legitimacy with village dwellers in the agricultural interior. As I will explore in the second volume of this study, the memory of loss and suffering in the Great Leap famine has conditioned Chinese villagers to think about their relationship with the Communist Party in ways that do not bode well for the continuity of socialist rule, though the degree to which popular memories of the famine have been attenuated, or transformed, over time for post-Great Leap generations remains an open question.

Trained in agrarian studies and Chinese politics, I had long aspired to undertake a research project on how Chinese villagers experienced the waves of state intrusion of the twentieth century. When I first began my field work in rural China in the 1980s, my interest was in how Mao and the Communist Party won control over the Chinese mainland from the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) following World War II and how village people saw Kuomintang state interventions in their lives. Two experiences shifted my focus and led to my interest in the Great Leap campaign as a famine-inducing state failure. First, while interviewing in remote villages during the late 1980s, I found that villagers would respond to questions about the 1942 Henan Famine with stories of their personal suffering in the radical scarcity of 1958–61. I began to understand that they had been impoverished by two different famines, the first during the era of Nationalist governance and the latter after the Communist party-state had supposedly resolved the food insecurity of the past. Later, as I interacted with scholars who



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were studying the impact of war, famine, and repression on popular memory in other societies, I began to realize that I was positioned to play a role in uncovering the story of how Chinese villagers experienced the greatest trauma of Maoist politics: the Great Leap and its famine. This led to my interest in presenting an oral history of how the people of one village remember their experiences with socialist rule under Mao.

This volume is based on interactive interviews and intimate discussions with both ordinary villagers who suffered from the Great Leap famine and village-level Communist Party leaders who participated in and sometimes imposed the politics engendering the famine. Between 1989 and 2007, I conducted and/or supervised approximately four hundred in-depth interviews with villagers aged twenty-one to eighty-five in Da Fo, or “Great Buddha,” village, a rural market village situated on the North China Plain in Dongle County, Henan province. I chose to conduct research on the long-term history of this village on the advice of farmers in another village in Dongle County where I was interviewing during the late 1980s. They told me that if I wanted to discover how the Communist Party succeeded in the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance of 1937–45 and to learn more about the fate of the party in the post-1949 period, then I should go to Da Fo. When my official Dongle County hosts learned of the farmers’ suggestion, they turned pale and protested that *they* could find a more appropriate village for me to study. I soon learned that Da Fo was nicknamed “the old headache” by both Kuomintang and Communist Party cadres. On sensing the official reluctance to allow me to go to Da Fo, I played a hunch and dug in my heels. Fortunately, the local Dongle County historian whom I had befriended and worked with in studying the rise of the Communist Party in the pre-1949 countryside supported my choice.

Da Fo’s location in the interior of Henan province, where present-day rural village living standards are on par with those in rural Albania and the Philippines,<sup>24</sup> offered distinct advantages for my research. First, the province had been assailed by radical Maoist initiatives during the Great Leap Forward, as Wu Zhipu, the first party secretary of Henan, sought to please Mao by imposing the Chairman’s Great Leap transcript on the countryside to the extent that the famine’s death rate soared. In addition, through my previous research in this remote area of rural Henan province, I had won the trust of many rural people in the region. I could talk with them frankly, and I had learned the agrarian history of the triprovincial North China border area where they and their ancestors lived.<sup>25</sup>

Although it would be difficult to establish the “representativeness” of Da Fo for all of China – and although it is clear that “the old headache” and the rest of Henan were subject to comparatively radical repression due to Wu Zhipu’s

<sup>24</sup> Heilig, “Poverty Alleviation in China.”

<sup>25</sup> For my previous study of this border area, see Thaxton, *Salt of the Earth*.

enthusiasm for implementing Mao's Great Leap Forward – the village certainly shared a number of features with thousands of other twentieth-century villages in the larger area where it is located: Its soil grew acutely saline over the course of the twentieth century, causing grain crop yields to decline. In consequence, villagers became increasingly reliant on off-farm market income for subsistence and developed well-honed family strategies for surviving famine. The village suffered violence serially at the hands of bandits, warlords, Kuomintang agents, Japanese occupiers, and Communist Party cadres. It produced its fair share of locally raised party leaders who under normal circumstances should have been more benevolent toward villagers than imported cadres. Its inhabitants suffered a great disappointment with Maoist-style politics, and, since the founding of the PRC, they have resorted to ageless modalities of resistance to misrule and deprivation.<sup>26</sup>

Da Fo was attractive for another reason: Unlike Wugong village, a model socialist village studied by Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden for their seminal work *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, Da Fo village never became a model socialist pacesetter, nor did it become the headquarters of the people's commune to which its people were forced to belong. Choosing it for study thus gave me a unique opportunity to clarify the unofficial relationship of one rural community to the people's commune, the lower tip of the party-state. By choosing Da Fo, I could begin to penetrate the inner layer of what James C. Scott has called "everyday resistance" to the death grip of the Great Leap in one village, a task that eluded Friedman and his associates because, as they point out, Wugong village benefited from its position in the communal state hierarchy, and hence Mao's Great Leap did not force its residents into the forms of desperate resistance taken up in villages in which the famine was far worse.<sup>27</sup> In recording this inner history, I revisit Dali Yang's pathbreaking work, *Calamity and Reform in China*, and I show how the resistance unfolded on the ground, why it became entwined with contention, and how it provided a way out of the Maoist disaster. Following in Yang's footsteps, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* better positions us to explicate the relationship between popular resistance to socialist dictatorship in the Great Leap era and the coming of reform in the short- and long-term aftermath of this calamity.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Julia Strauss (October 14, 2003) and Steven I. Levine (February 11, 2006) for helping me struggle with this section.

<sup>27</sup> Although Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden spin a rich, eye-opening narrative of the resistance of rural people, their most telling examples of resistance to the Great Leap famine are derived not from Wugong village itself but from different villages under the domination of Wugong commune party leaders and from villages across Raoyang County. A great strength of their work is that it shows there was resistance in many villages, both within the commune and across the county, and that in Wugong and Raoyang discontent with Maoist collectivization persisted and fueled resistance well after the famine officially ended. See *Chinese Village*, 224–25, 230–31; see also Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Revolution, Resistance, and Reform*, 7, 10, 12, 214–16.

<sup>28</sup> Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China*, 1–67.

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The two linked volumes that are the result of my long-term study of Da Fo together form a political history of one rural community's evolving relationship with pre-Maoist, Maoist, and post-Maoist rulers. I have explored this relationship through interdisciplinary research occurring at the intersection of political sociology, cultural anthropology, and political psychology. Hence, this first volume focuses substantially on how villagers remember their encounters with Communist Party agents of the Maoist state during the Great Leap episode, but in order to do so its narrative necessarily reaches back to the periods of Nationalist rule, Japanese occupation, and civil war, during which the local Communist leadership style took shape, and forward to the 1980s and 1990s, when hidden resentments against Da Fo's Great Leap-era Communist Party leaders finally began to be more openly expressed. The story thus sheds new light on the nature of the legitimacy crises that developed under three different regimes – those of the Kuomintang, the Japanese (administered through their Puppet Army), and the Communists. During the Japanese occupation of the Second World War and in the subsequent years of civil war, Da Fo village became a bastion of Communist Party power. By studying it, I began to grasp how and why the party was able to sink deep roots in one rural community. I then looked at how Mao's grand design affected those roots in the decades following the Communist victory of October 1, 1949.

Although the documented memories of the Great Leap survivors expose the politics of Maoist delusion and deception, this book does not present an open-and-shut case against the unprecedented violence of socialist rule. Though some of its voices support such an interpretation, others, particularly those of village power wielders, do not. In the final analysis, this book shows that village history both before and after 1949 has been enveloped in violence and that, tragically, the acknowledged horrors experienced by rural villagers in the pre-1949 era in some ways prepared the ground for the unbelievable horrors of the Maoist disaster.

Even if my findings on Da Fo are correct, a single case study cannot prove a thesis. Da Fo might be an exception to the general pattern of why and how rural contention has developed in China. The value of any case study is that it can help us generate new theories, disprove overly deterministic ones, and shed light on previously unknown causal processes. *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* does not seek to disprove any deterministic theory of rural contention. Instead, it develops a new approach – an approach that is grounded in historical memory – that might be used and refined by others to understand why contemporary rural China is such an incendiary place. It also shows in depth the relationship between memory, resistance, and protest during and long after an episode of massive state cruelty, thereby inviting further reflection on how important memory is to contention and where memory works specifically to inform the discursive framework through which rural dwellers press rulers to repair the past by righting wrongs and admitting their imperfections. In this respect, this book is also about the learning process that can open up a public conversation over inherited state

violence, which Roger I. Simon reminds us is essential to the successful invention of elementary forms of democratic life.<sup>29</sup>

Although this book is focused largely on one village, I value comparison. Thus, I have drawn on data from several villages and counties in the Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area in which Da Fo is located and from several other Chinese provinces in order to make a few comparisons that highlight both the typical and the atypical features of Da Fo's experience with socialist rule. There are more than a million villages in rural China. Surely not all of them were affected by the Great Leap Forward Famine in the same way, and popular responses to the famine as well as memories of the famine and its damage most likely vary from place to place. Surely too, however, the narrative of this one village's political history, woven together largely from individual memories of the most traumatic episode of the Mao era, contains threads of a historical relationship with agents of the Maoist party-state that were shared with scores of other rural villages. I hope that this work will challenge future scholars to further explore the distinctions and similarities between the political experiences of rural communities more or less transformed by the Great Leap and its famine.

### *Memory, Politics, and Oral History Methodology*

Despite the fact that Da Fo village was savaged by three different regimes and experienced three different famines – the North China Famine of 1920–21, the Henan Famine of 1942, and the Great Leap famine of 1958–61 – it had an unusually high number of survivors who were in the fifty-five to eighty-five age group at the time of my study. Most of them had clear and keen memories of the past, and they gave me reliable oral testimony that reflected the changing history of the village over most of the span of the twentieth century. Following Paul Thompson, I especially needed these aged “voices of the past” to get beyond “haphazard reminiscence” and construct a coherent historical narrative of village life before Mao's Great Leap.<sup>30</sup>

I treat these individual trauma survivors as members of complex family and community relationships, probing several dimensions of popular memory. My research seeks to extend the work of many Western scholars of contemporary rural China who have relied on personal histories to understand villagers as individuals.<sup>31</sup> The Maoists attempted to suppress and erase popular memory of the famine, but, as Daniel L. Schacter has pointed out, memories of war, famine, repression, and other traumas often persist in popular consciousness long after the actual traumatic event itself. “The intrusive memories that result from such

<sup>29</sup> Simon, *Touch of the Past*, 6–7.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 23, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Chan, Madsen, and Unger, *Chen Village*; Huang, *Spiral Road*; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village*; Ruf, *Cadres and Kin*; Mueggler, *Age of Wild Ghosts*.

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experiences,” Schacter informs us, “usually take the form of vivid perceptual images, sometimes preserving in minute detail the very features of a trauma which survivors would most like to forget.”<sup>32</sup> The interviews I conducted for this book confirm that many villagers still live with the traumatic Maoist past.

In working with the narrative memories of villagers I encountered, I drew from Paul Connerton’s wisdom and considered how the Maoist famine was experienced individually and collectively by villagers according to three categories of perception: the semantic memory acquired through assimilation of moral teachings about proper conduct; the memory formed by bodily presence, appearances, and movement, resulting in embodied memory; and the habitual memory that is formed from quotidian life-serving performances.<sup>33</sup> The oral testimonies in this study help us understand how day-to-day experiences with the political agents of the Great Leap campaign affected these various forms of memory and how each form of memory shapes the social and political activities of villagers today. Though I do not explicitly discuss particular categories of memory in the chapters that follow, I have drawn on them in developing my analysis.

I also have explored the political worldviews of villagers through the concept of differentiated memory, seeking to find out why people who survived the same political event hold different memories of it. For instance, I have asked why and how local Communist Party leaders were able to gain followers in the years before the Great Leap by manufacturing a generalized official memory of Maoist sacrifice for a new socialist polity aimed at serving the rural poor but were subsequently unable to use official memory to structure how all villagers saw the socialist polity after the famine (though they were able to influence the memories of some villagers). The radical practices of the Communist Party enforcers of Maoist rule in the Great Leap Forward altered the ways in which villagers remembered, and hence perceived, the party-state.

I take seriously Eric Selbin’s observation that “there is a societal memory which is up for grabs, a battlefield where various groups struggle to protect and extend their interpretations of society’s past.”<sup>34</sup> *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* shows that rural China’s survivors of the Great Leap Forward Famine hold obstinate memories of pain and loss inflicted on them by agents of the Communist Party and that they use these memories to question the legitimacy of the post-Mao political order. As I will explore in a subsequent volume, some of the disputes over the tax burden, family planning, and entitlement to education in the post-1978 reform era occur in the context of constantly remembered past injustices, and the preserved memory of the worst episode of socialist-inflicted pain and

<sup>32</sup> Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> On semantic memory, see Madsen, *Morality and Power*, and Schwarcz, *Bridge Across Broken Time*. On embodied memory, see Stoller, “Embodying Colonial Memories,” and Feldman, “Punition, Retaliation.” On habitual memory, see Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, esp. 34–35, and Thaxton, *Salt of the Earth*.

<sup>34</sup> Selbin, “Agency and Culture,” 82.

loss is drawn upon to direct protest and contention in the present.<sup>35</sup> The present volume reminds us that the memories of injustice and loss in the Great Leap episode contain, as Jun Jing has argued, “some highly explosive energies.”<sup>36</sup> We cannot fully grasp the evolution of contentious struggle in the Chinese countryside without reference to the catalytic power of the memory-driven emotions of the trauma survivors we meet in this book.

For the most part, Western scholarship on the origins of protest under reform in rural China relies upon printed sources, but politics in rural Chinese villages is still by and large a verbal, orally documented phenomenon. It cannot be fully understood by relying mainly on inscription, in part because much of what is voiced in interaction between the sub-county agents of China’s contemporary Leninist political order and village dwellers is not recorded. Oral history is, in the words of Paul Thompson, “the *first* kind of history,” and it offers a way of narrating the past through interaction with country people whose knowledge of facts and patterns is based on memory.<sup>37</sup> *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* is in part an attempt to rescue this older mode of oral history from its long-standing subordination to documentation through inscription. To be sure, I have attempted to supplement and corroborate the interview data with printed Chinese sources, including articles on provincial- and county-level history, local history materials and local county gazetteers, secret inner party documents and inner party reference materials, a few personal memoirs, a village party branch report, and the Great Leap Famine Archive on the Internet.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, attempting to write this village history made the need for a return to oral history quite obvious: the evidence from official documents, particularly in post-1949 China, often seemed inadequate or politically slanted. It seems that the socialist state collected information on the Great Leap’s crash mainly from the county level and that the details of the famine and popular resistance to it in rural villages usually did not find their way into official documents. Communist Party censors continue to screen and suppress much of what makes its way into print, and this, too, limits the availability of primary source materials about the Great Leap famine. Through oral history, however, Chinese villagers speak to us from minds stockpiled with memories of their actions, thoughts, and feelings, most of which were previously voiced, if at all, within the framework of local oral tradition.

The bias against relying on rural dwellers to help us create historical representations of state and revolution in twentieth-century China is strong among Chinese intellectuals, many of whom disdain popular memory and seldom question whether the official Communist Party-crafted history of revolution and reform is in accordance with the habitual memory of rural people. My research

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 82–83. On this approach, also see Kleinman, “How Bodies Remember,” 703–23.

<sup>36</sup> Jing, *Temple of Memories*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 25, 26–37.

<sup>38</sup> Da Jihuang Dang An (The Great Leap Famine Archive), Xin Guancha, (New Observations), 2000, <http://www.xgc2000.com>, hereafter referred to as GLFA.

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demonstrates, however, that China's rural people have placed their memories of political history in significantly different frameworks than those offered by scholars whose focus is on national historical moments and campaigns, globally driven political events, or reform-era protest issues and events. In particular, in popular memories, the state intrusion of the Great Leap was interpreted at the village level as a greater *systemic* challenge to the permanency of peasant livelihood and culture than any other twentieth-century political intrusion in China. Bruce Gilley cautions that these memories constitute a volcano of pent-up grievances, and, if China's Leninist dictatorship falls, they will leap to the front to provide a graphic picture of how China's "little people" suffered under socialist rule.<sup>39</sup> *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* reveals that this process is already underway in one part of the remote countryside. It provides us with a ground-level view of how popular memory has directed the efforts of villagers to settle scores with the perpetrators of the Great Leap's harm, and it makes us aware that memory of past injustice has shaped subsequent attitudes toward the party-state.

Because I am aware that oral testimony is subjective and subject to influence and manipulation, I used several methodological procedures to depoliticize and maximize the reliability of the interviews. In order to avoid ending up with a biased sample of pre-selected respondents chosen by the Da Fo Communist Party secretary and his close network of cadres and clients, I insisted on and won the freedom to choose my interviewees from any household. I was able to conduct more than 90 percent of the interviews without supervision or monitoring by any PRC authorities (university hosts, foreign affairs bureau officials, or provincial- and county-level historians). My Chinese research assistant, who was trained in Western social science research techniques of in-depth interviewing and who grew up in a rural Chinese village, assisted in most of the interviews. Together or separately, we made approximately twenty-two trips to Da Fo village between 1989 and 2007. On only two occasions did a local historian or a local foreign affairs official accompany us to the village. Part of the reason I gained such accessibility was the trust we had won from interviewing people in scores of villages within this northern Chinese border area during the 1980s.

Of course, as all China scholars who attempt to do field work in the PRC know, it is difficult to conduct research in a village completely free of state controls.<sup>40</sup> Rural China is not rural Mexico. One can not just walk into a village and start interviewing villagers without going through certain political networks and protocols, and power holders often attempt to monitor and inhibit research. Fortunately, before I took up this study of Da Fo, I had had more than a few encounters with monitors and inhibitors, so I was prepared to deal with some – though certainly not all – of these problems. When I interviewed in Cheng Guan village, Puyang County, between 1985 and 1987, for example, I was placed under

<sup>39</sup> Gilley, *China's Democratic Future*, 221.

<sup>40</sup> See Friedman, "Learning About a Chinese Village," 2.

the supervision of a county-level party historian who insisted on sitting in on some of my interviews. His purpose was to ensure that I interviewed local village people who remembered pre-1949 history in line with the Communist Party's interpretation of a small, early 1930s peasant rebellion that was officially led by the party. On one occasion, when I ventured away from the usual interview site and located a fragile, aged ex-beggar who had played a role in leading this rebellion against the Kuomintang police state, the county party historian seemed to panic. When I insisted on interviewing such nonparty old-timers, he frowned and sulked for days on end. He was alarmed and upset by my incursion into "incorrect history."

Nor did my kind provincial-level hosts, both of whom were party historians and hence connected with the ruling party-state, facilitate all of my research, some of which, ironically, they only imagined I intended. When I interviewed in Qi Ji village, in Hua County, in 1987, they were horrified that I had found out that this village existed. The village's Catholic farmers had mounted fierce resistance to the Kuomintang police state in the early 1930s, and it was they who had taken the lead in what supposedly was a Communist Party-led rebellion. My hosts did not want to go with me to this wretchedly poor, remote place, which we had to find by soliciting verbal directions from farmers in different villages. At this point, I was only interested in studying how the Communist Party had brought rural people under its banners in the pre-1949 period, and I had made this clear to my hosts. Out of fear that I would stumble onto prohibited information, however, they overreacted. In attempting to inhibit me from getting at such information, they actually drew me to it. One insufferably hot June afternoon, I decided to break away from household interviews earlier than usual and go check in with the village chief – someone I liked immensely. As I approached the outer wall of the village chief's home courtyard, I overheard the voice of one of the party historians. Unaware of my presence, he was admonishing the village chief: "You can tell him anything you like about what happened here before 1949, but do not dare tell him one damn thing about what happened here after 1949!" Several years later, on one of my return visits, the village chief and several of Qi Ji's farmers told me that two hundred people – at least one-ninth of the village's inhabitants – had died in the Great Leap famine. This episode stimulated my interest in what happened in rural China after 1949.

The problem of party monitoring and blocking is an intractable one for Western scholars of China, but, in studying Da Fo village, I got lucky, and I was quick to seize on this luck and turn it to my advantage. I started my research in Da Fo and in Dongle County four years after I had done extensive oral history interviewing in many other villages and several other counties. Toward the end of this interview work, I befriended a competent and knowledgeable local county historian whose chance for a full life had been ruined by the Cultural Revolution. We instantly hit it off. I listened to him. I realized he had vast and deep knowledge



## Introduction

of local history. I came to respect him. In private, he told me that he agreed with my approach – that is, he felt that I was right to rely on rural people and their memories and not the printed materials of the Communist Party. I learned that he had to be careful about what he could help me to learn and see, but in working with him I found a way to get beyond monitoring. This sympathetic county historian “supervised” several interviews without unduly restricting our freedom to question villagers, and, in due time, my Chinese research assistant and I were allowed to interview villagers with or without the county historian present. Once I established mutual trust with this county historian, official blockage also was less and less an issue. For one thing, my provincial-level hosts, the party historians, gladly stayed in the rapidly modernizing Puyang City to engage in rest and recreation rather than accompany me to hot, dirty Da Fo, with its drab food and dirt toilets. These city-based party historians had no desire to return to the grimy and impoverished world of village China, a world they associated with Mao-era deprivation.

Eventually, I learned to work within and outside of the local party-state. By the early 1990s, I was interviewing villagers without being chaperoned by provincial or county-level actors. But what surprises me, in retrospect, is how little village party leaders, including the Da Fo party secretary, did to inhibit my interviewing. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that I genuinely showed interest in their personal lives and that I listened to their perspectives on their triumphs and disappointments, all of which were influenced by war, famine, and Mao’s state. As *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* makes clear, their memories of the Great Leap’s human cost often were conditioned by their ties to the party-state, but their collaboration helped me better grasp both the official and unofficial roots of China’s current crisis.

To be sure, China is a country in which a dominant single-party state has attempted to maintain controls on memory in order to prevent the emergence of political opposition from below.<sup>41</sup> Knowing the allegiances of different groups, particularly among villagers, is of great importance in grasping the politics driving the Maoist leap into the famine, and knowing the extent to which different villagers actually shared Mao’s enthusiasm for revolutionary socialism is also important, for this has influenced how various groups of villagers remember the direction of the Great Leap – to some, it was progress, but to others, it was an incapacitating setback. This point cannot be overemphasized, because, in the early 1950s and the years building to the Great Leap Forward, the Communist Party introduced a new political language portraying and praising China as a revolutionary nation and a society utterly and totally committed to “class struggle,” the targets of which became those who reacted negatively to the ways in which Mao’s designs affected their lives. According to Zhang Letian, this revolutionary

<sup>41</sup> Beja, “Forbidden Memory, Unwritten History,” 1.

language colored everyday discourse at the village level, and it apparently was used incessantly by village-level party activists in charge of the Maoist campaigns against “rightists” and “class enemies”; this same language was used to legitimate the creation of the people’s communes at the outset of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>42</sup> Whether it significantly influenced popular consciousness – particularly how nonparty ordinary villagers received and responded to the Great Leap and its institutions – remains to be discovered. I suspect that by asking questions with words drawn from the official revolutionary language of the Maoist era, one can easily understate resistance to Mao’s utopian experiment, though by not using the words of the dominant party-state, one has to be careful not to overestimate the extent to which the weak and the powerless could resist. By and large, I have relied on the latter strategy of getting at popular memory. While keeping in mind that the language of Maoist ideology mattered, I wanted to encourage those I interviewed to tell me how they conducted their lives in ways that were not framed and directed by the state-organized expressions and events so impressively covered in conventional approaches to China under socialist rule, and I also sought to encourage them to voice how they saw and remembered their everyday attempts to survive a long period of political extremity.<sup>43</sup>

In order to achieve this goal, I first chose interview subjects by the technique of “snowball sampling” outlined by Earl R. Babbie.<sup>44</sup> Each individual informant helped me build up a network of native villagers who had participated in, witnessed, and somehow survived the Great Leap Forward and its famine. Many of them also had memories of the decades of history before and after this calamity. This technique helped me to draw in villagers from all walks of life and from different lineages, villagers who had spent their entire lives in Da Fo and those who had left it for both short and long periods, and villagers who had a range of knowledge about resistance to state injustice at the village, township, and county levels from 1920 to 2007. It also allowed me to build up a database that avoided the pitfalls of Communist Party-controlled sampling. During multiple trips to this village, my research assistant and I were able to engage in extensive conversations with individuals and conduct many small group discussions. Approximately 25 percent of the people we interviewed were either members of the Communist Party or of party-state networks, and many of them were implicated in the politics that imposed this disaster. The other 75 percent had no history of direct party involvement, though some people in this nonparty sample were connected to party members by virtue of marriage and kinship ties.

<sup>42</sup> Zhang Letian, “Guojia Huayu de Jieshou Yu Xiaojie,” 1–2. On this point, see also Kimberley Ens Manning’s important essay, “Marxist Maternalism,” 349–50, 357–59, 364–66, 371. On the importance of formal language as an instrument of state power, see Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words*, 1–29.

<sup>43</sup> Here I build on Kerkvliet’s insightful approach, though he is not dealing with the exceptional or with extremity. *Everyday Politics in the Philippines*, 9–11.

<sup>44</sup> Babbie, *Practice of Social Research*, 214–15.