

Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution, Yang Su, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 300 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-17381-0.

Deconstructing Evil

THE GREAT PROLETARIAT Cultural Revolution (GPCR) was bloody, violent, and disastrous—this is no secret. According to county records and the Chinese Communist Party’s post-mortem investigation in 1984, as many as 1.5 million Chinese perished because of collective killings in the countryside at the height of the GPCR (37).

To sweep the killings under the general mantle of Mao Zedong’s criminal regime, however, is to assume too simplistic a position. There is no doubt that Mao was to blame. This position, unfortunately, does not explain the circumstances surrounding the collective killings in the Chinese countryside.

Entire families of “class enemies” were murdered not by Red Guards or soldiers, but by neighbors and erstwhile friends. The methods of execution were far from systematic; victims were bludgeoned, stabbed, or thrown off cliffs.

Yang Su offers a new perspective, attempting to analyze the role of ordinary people in the violence of the GPCR. Su asks, “why did such an extreme form of killing appear in the time and place it did? How did state sponsorship induce ordinary citizens to become killers?” (7).

Yang Su argues that the current state policy model of genocide is insufficient to explain many of the mass murders throughout history. In fact, it hinders further study into the nature and rationale of genocide, since it simplifies the issue by assigning all blame on the state.

Su deliberately uses the term “collective killings” to demonstrate the reality of mass murder in smaller units, such as townships and counties. Current scholarship focuses on the national view, ignoring the distinct reality that collective killings do occur on a more local level.

Instead of the generally accepted state policy model, Su proposes the “community model of genocide” (11) as a more accurate means of studying mass murder. As he puts it: “collective killing can be seen as a special form of collective action” (19).

The Community Model

The state policy model of genocide relies on a “top-down” perspective, focusing on the state’s role in the violence. With Su’s community model, however, the focus shifts towards the role of local actors. It looks at local conditions, community friction, key actors, and their response to state policies.

Here, the state is present but its role is indirect. The willing participation of local actors in collective killings (at times even in direct disobedience of state policies) is the crux of the study. The community model acknowledges the contrast between state-sponsored violence and collective killings. Where mass murder sanctioned by the state is viewed as an extension of its bureaucracy, community-led collective killings are emergent, reactive, unpolished, and unsystematic (11–19).

Su outlines five key processes that contribute to community-based collective killings:

...(1) the historical underpinning of social grouping, (2) the designation of killing categories, (3) the preparation of potential perpetrators, (4) the demobilization of the law, and (5) the removal of moral constraints through framing war (220).

Framing War and the Breakdown of Law

The community model is emergent and reactive rather than systematic and bureaucratic. There is a sense of urgency compelling local actors, turning them against neighbors and leading them to commit mass murder.

They believed that certain segments of the population were dangerous. These enemies sought to overthrow the Communist government and destroy the country. Never mind that many of the landlord descendants—the usual “enemies”—were not organized, had no money or clout, and had shown no indications of rebellion. It was—to them—a pre-emptive strike. With a “war” state of mind in place, all “normal” procedures of handling enemies would no longer apply.

The Paradox of State Influence

At the heart of Su’s community model of genocide is a most interesting conflict. To create an atmosphere conducive to community-based collective killings, there must be both state mobilization and state breakdown.

In the cases in which policies of explicit extermination seem to be absent, state policies such as discrimination against minority groups and stigmatization of so-called state enemies may take on a genocidal dimension and result in massive numbers of killings, by way of mediating actors in between (258).

The state provides the means, but it is the local actor who makes the killings possible. Su’s research showed a high number of collective killings in Guangdong and Guangxi, but there were many more communities where little to no collective killings were recorded (taking into consideration that *all* records were underreported).

Limited Sources

The chief limitation of Su’s book, obviously, is China’s unwillingness to provide information. His research cites three major sources: county gazetteers (the *xianzhi*), post-GPCR investigative reports, and interviews with survivors.

During a brief window wherein China sought to review its GPCR mistakes, the government commissioned a number of investigations in order to study the collective killings in rural areas of the country. When the reports proved too shocking, however, the initiative was quickly shut down.

Nevertheless, these investigative reports form the meat of Su's research. Beyond the statistics provided by the *xianzhi*, these reports clearly show the extent of violence and significant role of local perpetrators with no discernible state connections. The executions lacked organization or planning, with most victims killed by the roadside with nothing more than farming tools.

Lessons

Despite its limitations, Su provides a unique means of analyzing collective killings. The public executions during the GPCR were borne of local and national circumstances.

At the same time, however, Su's community model offers a new way of understanding genocide beyond China's borders. The state policy model is insufficient. It is misleading and potentially distracts from underlying factors that allow such atrocities to happen time and again.

It is too easy to lay the blame on megalomaniacs, while the role of ordinary men in collective killings remains unnoticed. Hopefully, Su's community model will allow scholars to finally draw the right conclusions and find a way to end these atrocities once and for all.

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