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978-1-107-11719-8 — Force and Contention in Contemporary China  
Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr  
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## Force and Contention in Contemporary China

Why is contemporary China such a politically contentious place? Relying on the memories of the survivors of the worst catastrophe of Maoist rule and documenting the rise of resistance and protest at the grass-roots level, this book explains how the terror, hunger, and loss of the socialist past influences the way in which people in the deep countryside see and resist state power in the reform era up to the present-day repression of the People's Republic of China Central government. Ralph A. Thaxton, Jr. provides us with a worm's-eye view of an "unknown China" – a China that cannot easily or fully be understood through made-in-the-academy theories and frameworks of why and how rural people have engaged in contentious politics. This book is a truly unique and disturbing look at how rural people relate to an authoritarian political system in a country that aspires to become a stable world power.

RALPH A. THAXTON, JR. is Professor of Politics at Brandeis University and a Research Affiliate at the Harvard University John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. He is the author of *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* (2008) and the winner of multiple international fellowships, including grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and the United States Institute for Peace. Professor Thaxton has been a fellow at the Dartmouth College John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding and a distinguished Croxton Lecturer in the Amherst College Department of Political Science.

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## Advance Praise for *Force and Contention in Contemporary China*

“This book is the culmination of a trilogy that will stand as the most important documentary study of rural China under communism. The singular message of this installment is that the reform era, for all its material advance, has done nothing to redress the legitimacy crisis produced by Maoism. Thaxton shows convincingly that China’s rural people have never accepted authoritarianism.”

Bruce Gilley,  
*Associate Professor of Political Science,  
Director of Graduate Programs in Public Policy,  
Portland State University*

“This work provides new insight into the mentality and actions of villagers for whom the post-Mao reforms have brought more injustice and hardship. While others have exposed the problems of reform, no other presents so clearly the peasant perspective of when and why things went wrong and who is to blame – often the central rather than just local authorities. Arguing that memories of the Great Leap Forward catastrophe played a powerful role in shaping resistance in the reform period, Ralph Thaxton will surely spark debate about the role of memory in political action and thus advance our understanding of the complexity of the Chinese countryside and the challenges that the CCP faces.”

Jean C. Oi,  
*William Haas Professor in Chinese Politics,  
Department of Political Science, and Senior Fellow,  
the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies,  
Stanford University*

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# Force and Contention in Contemporary China

*Memory and Resistance in the Long Shadow  
of the Catastrophic Past*

RALPH A. THAXTON, JR.

*Brandeis University*



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*For my grandparents – especially for Pearl, who was always there for me when I was a boy – and for Sarah, whose enterprising genius lifted us out of the coal mines and off the farm lands, giving me the chance to find my way to the University of Wisconsin and its great scholars.*

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important stepping-stones to this project. In many ways, these discussions motivated me to investigate how individual memories of encounters with power during the first decade of the People's Republic of China shaped the way in which rural people saw power in the aftermath of the greatest catastrophe of Chinese Communist Party rule.

I do not know how to sufficiently thank the many colleagues who put so much effort into reading the manuscript, offering critical suggestions for improvement, and encouraging me to think harder about how to present the case and the argument. Jonathan Unger, Bruce Gilley, Steven I. Levine, Michael Szonyi, Alfred Chan, Paul Cohen, and James C. Scott – all exceptionally generous colleagues – read the entire manuscript at different stages of its development. I am especially grateful for their critical insights, many of which I have relied on to improve this book. Jonathan Unger, Bruce Gilley, and Steven I. Levine went the extra mile, saving me from many errors and helping me place the case study in theoretical perspective. I hope this study lives up to their high standards.

I also have benefited greatly from the comments of Antonius C.G.M. Robben, Bruce Dickson, and Zhou Xun on the Introduction; Harold M. Tanner and Fei-ling Wang on Chapter 1; Thomas P. Bernstein on Chapter 2; Kay Ann Johnson, Susan Greenhalgh, and Kimberley Ens Manning on Chapter 3; Michael Szonyi on Chapter 5; Edward Friedman on Chapter 6; Christianne Hardy Wohlforth and Edward Friedman on Chapter 7; Neil J. Diamant and Edward Friedman on Chapter 8; Martin King Whyte, Dorothy J. Solinger, Sarah Swider, and Denise Walsh and Mary Elizabeth Gallagher on Chapter 9; and Peter Lorge and Edward Friedman on Chapter 10.

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*Acknowledgments*

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Devisch, and other workshop participants engendered a sea-change in my thinking about both the nature of the modern Chinese revolution and the meaning of the evidence I was gathering through interview work in the Chinese countryside. I also learned a great deal from interacting with colleagues in a seminar on political corruption during my tenure at the Princeton-based Institute for Advanced Study, from exchanges with colleagues while I was a visiting fellow at the Dartmouth College John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding, from a presentation to the Yale University Agrarian Studies Colloquium and later to the James C. Scott–Peter Perdue course on Agrarian Societies, and from lectures (and follow-up discussions) on “China’s Dangerous Future” given at the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College, in a Scott Hawkins Lecture sponsored by the Dedham College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University, and at Amherst College during my tenure as Croxton Lecturer in Political Science. Additionally, I want to thank Arthur Kleinman, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Lili Feng for inviting me to participate in workshops convened at the Harvard-Yenching Institute. My interaction with these three top-rank scholars and their colleagues was most rewarding. My engagement with participants in the Brown University Mini-Symposia on The Social Lives of Dead Bodies helped me further improve this work. This book also owes some of its insights to knowledge gained from exchanges with colleagues at the Conference on Communism and Hunger, sponsored by the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium and held at the University of Toronto.

This study was facilitated in part by grants from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and from the United States Institute of Peace. I am grateful to both institutions for their support. I also am grateful for the support of librarians at Dartmouth College, Amherst College, Brown University, Brandeis University, and Harvard University.

Yet my greatest heartfelt thank you goes to *the one with the stars in her eyes*. This book could never have been completed without her support, encouragement, and patience.

Waltham, MA  
March 1, 2016

## Cast of Characters for Da Fo Village and Several Other Villages in the Hebei-Shandong-Henan Border Area, 1945–2013

**Bao Chengling.** Head cook of the public dining hall in the commune period and the dictatorial, corrupt, and immoral principal of the Da Fo school in the Mao era and early reform period. Target of struggle led by Bao Sheping and the Da Fo teachers.

**Bao Chuanxi.** Poor and timid farmer. Bullied by Bao Wenxing. Forced to plead for right to use electricity and water his crops.

**Bao Haizhen.** Arbitrary Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader in Da Fo. Received more than his share of land in the 1982 land division. Target of arson.

**Bao Hongwen.** Da Fo farmer. Feared and disliked Bao Yinbao and his friends. Saw Bao Yinbao-led mafia as criminal and in league with corrupt CCP officials.

**Bao Junling.** Da Fo farmer who mounted a physical challenge to “electricity tiger” Bao Wenxing in the reform period, stirring memories of resistance to party leaders and their brutal cronies in the Great Leap era. Champion of more timid farmers.

**Bao Junwei.** Da Fo farmer and migrant worker. Said all Chinese officials are corrupt, and gave up on CCP-guided democracy.

**Bao Nianxi.** Eight years old at the start of the Great Leap Forward. Dropped out of school in 1960 because of hunger. Survived the great famine by secretly eating raw grain, sweet potato, and pumpkin crops in the collective fields. Thirty-two year-old farmer in 1983. Victim of Strike Hard campaign. Arrested and treated as a petty criminal for taking off government-monopolized chemical fertilizer from state trucks.

**Bao Ruimin.** Suffered a ten-year prison ordeal because of *yanda*, missing his chance to mentor his young sons. Petition writer for fellow prisoners falsely accused and arrested in the throes of the Strike Hard campaign. Unpaid Da Fo migrant worker who joined with other migrant workers to wage sit-ins at

homes of unscrupulous subcontractors in villages and towns in between Beijing and Da Fo. Leader of New Year's Eve dumpling rebellion.

**Bao Sheping.** Teacher and principal of Da Fo school in the reform era. Leader of protest against corrupt Mao-era principal and of movement to democratize the school administration. Driven by Confucian ethics imparted by his father to improve the school and serve the students.

**Bao Shunhe.** The corrupt, do-nothing reform-era Da Fo CCP secretary groomed by Mao-era party boss Bao Zhilong and nominated and placed in power by Liangmen township leaders fearful of democratic electoral process. Unaccountable to villagers and unavailable for consultation on important village issues.

**Bao Timing.** Co-leader of refusal tax resistance in Da Fo. Write-in candidate who actually won the election for Da Fo party secretary against CCP favorite Bao Shunhe. Denied office by Liangmen township CCP leaders who nominated Bao Shunhe and put the latter in power.

**Bao Wenxing.** Son of pre-1949 pauper, vagabond, and hustler Bao Zhigen. Appointed electrician by the Da Fo reform-era party leadership. Fierce beneficiary of the extension of the Li Peng-led electricity monopoly into Dongle county and Liangmen township. Known as the “electricity tiger.” Bullied both villagers and township leaders.

**Bao Xuejing.** Progressive Da Fo party secretary who first succeeded and turned against Bao Zhilong. Falsely accused and persecuted for attempting to democratize and make fair the process of land division in the early 1990s. Dismissed as party secretary.

**Bao Yibin.** Vice-party secretary of Da Fo brigade in the Great Leap Forward. Helped party secretary Bao Zhilong impose the Great Leap famine. At odds with Bao Zhilong in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution. Responsible for his mother's starvation in the Great Leap famine. Hated by many villagers, who held him responsible for his mother's death in 1960, for the moral decline of village leadership in the Mao era, for the corruption of the taxation process in the post-Mao period. Target of villagers' anger and contention in the 1990s.

**Bao Yinbao.** The post-Great Leap leader of martial artists in Da Fo village and Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area. Took up study of martial arts after the Great Leap in order to defend his family against CCP bullies. Co-leader of early reform-era tax resistance in Da Fo. Important player in the formation of parallel system of martial artist counterforce, power, and influence in Da Fo area, and kingpin and beneficiary of mafia operations in the wider border area. Saw himself as a modern-day Song Jiang.

**Bao Zhanghe.** Born in 1948. Mother died of hunger during the Great Leap. Reform-era Da Fo village public security chief and secret informant who ratted out pregnant couples to the Special Task Force. Target of villagers' silent contention and shaming. Turned to periodic migrant work to survive.

Exploited for many years in the Mao and post-Mao periods by subcontractors in the construction industry.

**Bao Zhifa.** Abandoned by his mother in the Great Leap famine. Joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1967 at age of nineteen in order to escape hunger in Da Fo. "Volunteer" to help the PRC build the Pakistan National Defense Highway. Important player in Da Fo area petitioner movement of PLA veterans looking for compensation for sacrifices in Pakistan.

**Bao Zhigen.** Local Da Fo area hustler and thug. Toady of Great Leap-era party boss Bao Zhilong, and pistol-toting rapist in the Leap period. Beneficiary of the extension of the Li Peng-supervised electricity monopoly into Dongle county in the early reform era.

**Bao Zhilong.** Leader of underground Da Fo CCP and militia force prior to 1949. Early CCP secretary in Da Fo. Vice-director of Liangmen People's Commune and corrupt enforcer of the Great Leap Forward. Target of villagers' anger during the Cultural Revolution. Beneficiary of reform-era economic change. Hoarded tax grain in his private home in reform period. Target of arson for Great Leap-era wrongdoings and for reform-era corruption and greed.

**Du Yufeng.** Pingyuandi village marital artist. Hired by businessmen to beat up competitors. Owner of three-story house, fierce Tibetan dog, and Land Rover. Operated mafia business under cover of a legitimate "Green Tea Shop" business establishment.

**Huang Xiangjun.** Director of the Dongle county Education Bureau in the reform period. Cunning and corrupt hustler who turned teacher reform into a racket to line his own pockets. Object of teacher exasperation and indignation.

**Li Changquan.** Corrupt Liangmen township leader who benefited from birth planning campaigns by issuing "second-child certificates" for a fee to farmers.

**Lin Zhiyan.** Liangmen village birth planning activist who was shocked by brutality of Special Task Force sent to enforce the one-child policy in the 1980s. Hated the government for such brutal enforcement.

**Pang Lianggui.** Da Fo teacher, farmer, and bread peddler. Ate tree leaves and stole from the public dining hall to survive the Great Leap famine. Feared the government escalation of the grain tax in the mid-1990s would lead to another great disaster, and possibly to a rebellion.

**Pang Siyin.** Member of pre-1949 Da Fo militia and later vice-secretary of Da Fo CCP. Astute and fairly objective critic of Deng Xiaoping reform policies and their implementation. Opposed Liangmen township officials' attempt to usurp Da Fo's old periodic market.

**Ruan Jingwei.** Da Fo migrant worker. Victim of nonpayment of wages by greedy subcontractors with "dark hearts."

**Wu Shunchang.** CCP chief of Liangmen township in early 1990s and sworn brother of corrupt party secretaries in different villages. Fought with Yan Zedong over the spoils of reform in front of villagers.

**Yan Zedong.** Head of Liangmen township government in the early 1990s. Target of physical assault by CCP party secretary Wu Shunchang, who challenged Yan's authority.

**Yang Faxian.** Dongle county martial artist who built a powerful army and fascist regime in the Hebei-Shandong-Henan border by recruiting orphans, small-time criminals, and ex-Kuomintang soldiers in the late 1930s. Leader of ultrarepressive Japanese Puppet Army in 1939–1945. Headquartered in Da Fo, this popular force fought CCP and killed 300 Eighth Route Army soldiers. Hero of Bao Yinbao and many of the reform-era marital artists.

**Zhao Junjie.** Leader of petitioning PLA veterans in Puyang county–Dongle county area. In touch with Jiangsu- and Henan-based veterans and important figure in the multiprovincial petition movement of veterans looking for just compensation for sacrifices in constructing the Pakistan National Defense Highway.

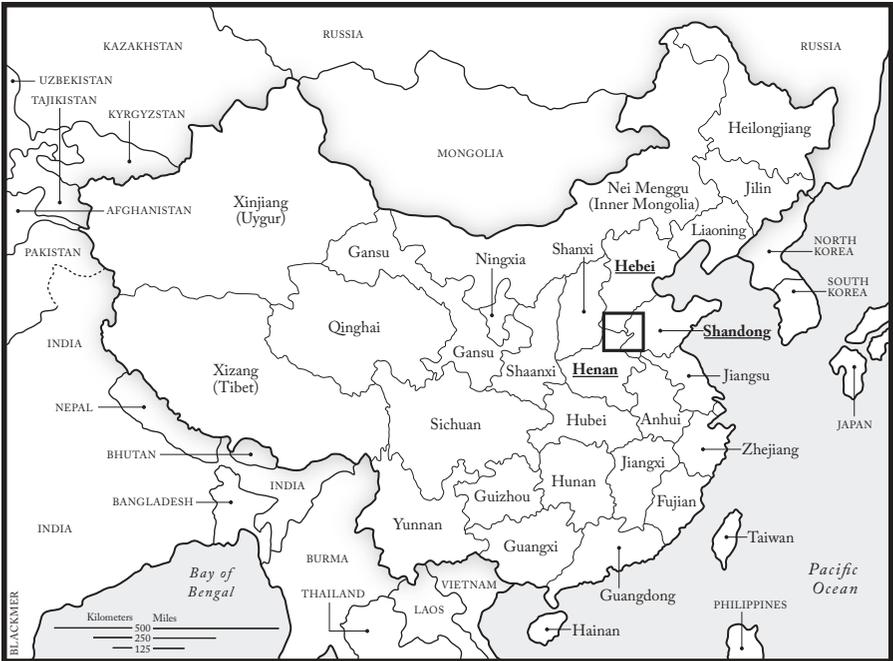
**Zheng Huiqing.** Da Fo farmer and nonparty member. Survived the Great Leap famine by eating unripened green crops in the collective fields. Expressed contempt for the reform-era police. Declared farmers could live without the police officers and government officials.

**Zheng Yunxiang.** Member of Da Fo brigade militia in the late 1950s. Maverick leader of an armed raid on collective fields of another brigade during the Great Leap famine. Punished by Da Fo party secretary Bao Zhilong. Fed up with the reform-era village and township leaders and with the Central government.

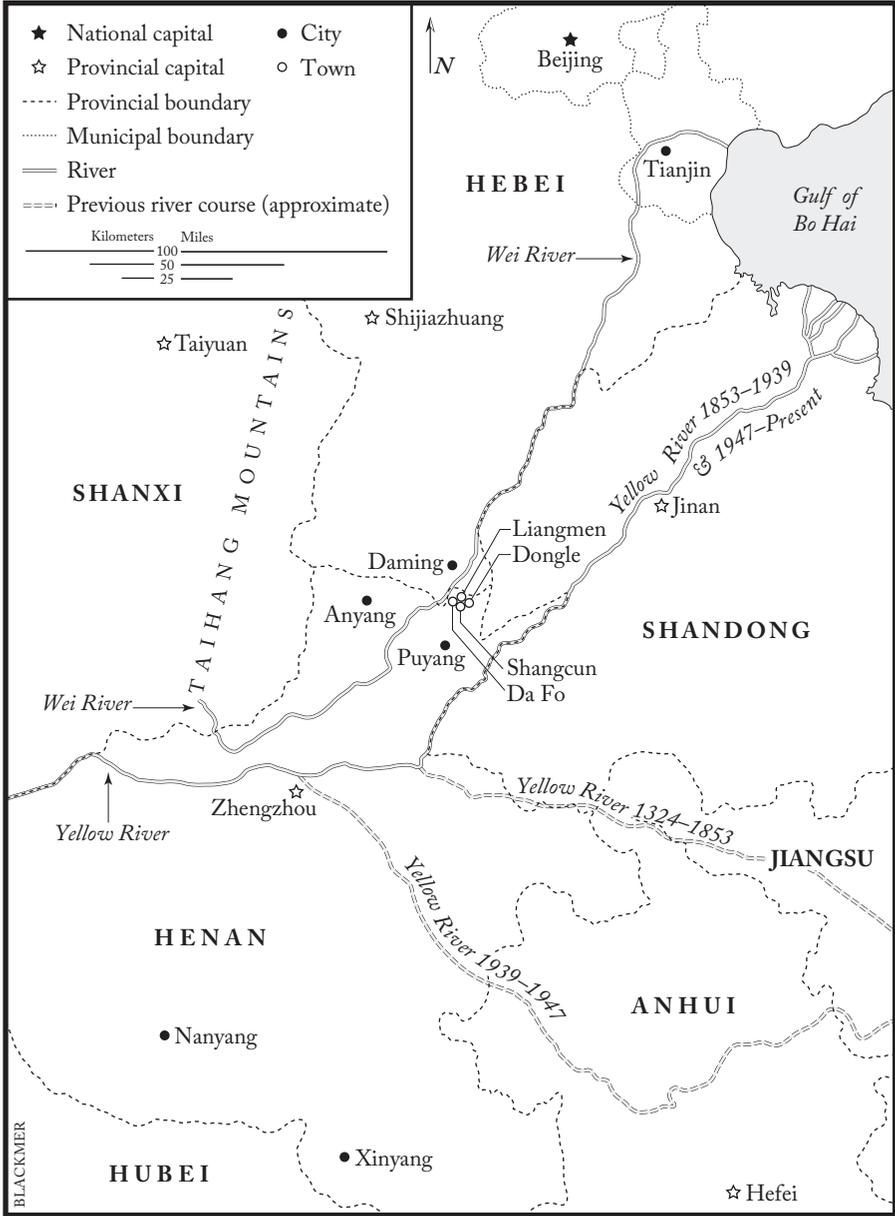
**Zhou Chunxue.** Poor, illiterate, and unskilled Da Fo farmer. Family reduced to ruin in the Great Leap Forward. Fled from unscrupulous subcontractors in Henan. Begged his way to Yongji city, Shanxi. Sued a subcontractor for inhuman treatment. Could not get procedural justice from CCP-controlled Yongji city court. Embittered by the cruelty and disappointment of reform.

**Zhou Jian.** Liangmenpo farmer. Questioned the motives of Central government leaders in abolishing the agricultural tax in 2006. Said Beijing did it out of fear of a ramified rebellion rather than out of benevolence. Later gained firsthand knowledge of corruption at the very top of the Central government. Disgusted with CCP leaders, both locally and nationally.

Maps



MAP 01. Provinces of China, neighboring countries, and area of study.  
 Map by Kate Blackmer



MAP 02. Hebei-Shandong-Henan border area, showing location of Da Fo village.  
 Map by Kate Blackmer