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Kill Thy Neighbor

Around the time of the traditional moon festival in the autumn of 1967, Sha Kaichu was rounded up by militiamen from his village, his own neighbors. He was denounced and roughed up in a "struggle" rally in the town square in Xiaojiang Village in Hunan. The next morning, he and five others were escorted to the commune's headquarters. Sha implored them to allow higher officials to hear his case: "I fought the war for our country. Please consider the efforts I have made. . . . "

Sha, thirty-seven and a father of three, had been the head of his family since his early twenties. His father, a landlord, was killed during the Land Reform movement of 1952. Sha joined the Chinese Voluntary Army to fight in the Korean War. After his discharge he worked in his village as a tractor driver. Sha had committed no crime but now was being singled out as the son of a landlord. A few days before his apprehension, his loved ones pleaded with him to hide; rumors of killings had come from other villages. He was too proud and confident to do so, citing his contribution to the country.

Sha considered himself to be safer than the other five male descendants of landlords being marched to the headquarters, but he was wrong. The village leader and the militia had decided to kill all of them at the roadside, 4 *li* (1 li equals 0.5 kilometers) shy of their destination. Zheng Mengxu, Sha's executioner who bludgeoned him to death, was no stranger. The Shas and Zhengs had been next-door neighbors since the Land Reform. Sha's father's house had been confiscated and granted to Zheng, who at the time was a shiftless drifter from another village. Zheng was

not sorry about the murder. He yelled joyously, "*Tai hao le! Tai hao le!*" ("This is great! This is great!"), as he returned to the village.[1]

The story of Sha, his fellow victims, and his neighbor–executioner was, sadly, far from unique. During the Cultural Revolution, tens of thousands like Sha – at least four hundred thousand and possibly as many as three million – were killed in the countryside villages by neighbors like Zheng.[2] The victims' only crime was their political label as a "class enemy." There were no army, Red Guards, or systematic bureaucratic machinery of genocide; rather, neighbors killed neighbors. Days of rage in the squares brought rivers of sorrow that still flow through the villages today.

Nearly four decades after Sha's death, I visited his first cousin Sha Kaiping and his wife Ms. Li, both in their late seventies, in the suburban subdivision of University Hills in California, a neighborhood basking in sunshine and enjoying an ocean breeze. The house is provided by the University of California, Irvine, where their son is a member of the faculty. Sha's death happened thirty-eight years ago in faraway China, but when I sat with Sha and Li in their backyard, I was startled by the vividness and urgency in their voices. Li was spared due only to a technicality: Although she was the daughter of a former landlord, her husband's family was classified as "middle peasant" and therefore so was she.[3]

Archival records and field-research interviews unmistakably document events similar to the one in Xiaojiang Village in Hunan in the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, which I label as episodes of "collective killing." During the Cultural Revolution, previous categorizations and designations that resulted in discrimination were used to justify wholesale extermination. Hunan experienced killings in late summer 1967; mass killings lasted into late 1968 in the province of Guangxi. Here, I cite examples from the *Chronology of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi*,

[1] Personal interviews with Sha Kaiping and his wife, Ms. Li, 2005. I use pseudonyms throughout to protect the informants' identity; but I keep the real names of persons or places if they are already published or otherwise available in official records.

[2] Andrew Walder and Yang Su, "The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing and Human Impact," *The China Quarterly* 173 (2003), pp. 75–99.

[3] When I conducted field research in China, I did not obtain official records about the Xiaojiang Village killings. However, *Jianghua County Gazetteer* published in 1994 listed an entry that recorded a wave of "illegal killings" in 1967, resulting in 743 deaths in the county. That number may include the six Xiaojiang villagers. Similar to other county gazetteers, which I introduce in more detail in Chapter 2, the gazetteer was compiled and published by the local government.

based on government-sponsored post–Cultural Revolution investigations, which was officially published in 1995:

- October 2–4, 1967; Quanzhou County: Seventy-six members of the so-called Four-Type families in a village were killed.
- November 1967; Rongxian County: Sixty-nine people were killed in Licun Village.
- April 30, 1968; Ningming: One hundred eight people were killed in a siege.
- July 24, 1968; Binyang County: Mass killings occurred in every commune; 3,681 people were killed.
- August 18, 1968; Fengshan County: 1,331 people were killed.

Puzzles about Collective Killings

In his book, *Love Thy Neighbor,* Maass writes about the Bosnian ethnic cleansing in the early 1990s: "What intrigued me most about Bosnia was the question it posed about human beings – how could they do such monstrous things? How could a man wake up one morning and shoot his neighbor in the face and perhaps rape the neighbor's wife for good measure? How could they forget, as though it never existed, the commandment to love thy neighbor?"[4] I repeatedly encountered the same vividness and urgency that I heard in Li's and Sha's voices when I interviewed other witnesses and survivors in China; their stories never failed to move me. I strove to understand what constituted their extraordinariness and to formulate appropriate research questions for a historical and sociological inquiry.

The first extraordinary dimension of such killings concerns selection of the victims. They were killed not for any crime or for their current class position but rather for their family background. Many were children of former landlords or rich peasants. When Sha Kaichu's family was classified as landlords during the Land Reform, he was barely an adult. He could not have committed the crime of "exploitation" of the poor; in any case, his father had already been killed for that crime. During the Cultural Revolution, labels such as "landlord" and "rich peasant" reflected no economic reality because the land had been confiscated and redistributed fifteen years earlier. Neither did these descendants of landlords or rich

[4] Peter Maass, *Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War* (London: Papermac, 1996), p. 14.

peasants pose any source of resistance to the government: They had been deprived of all political rights and were under surveillance. Therefore, selection of victims recalls genocide and mass killing: Individuals were singled out to be killed – along with their family members – for their kinship ties.

The second extraordinary dimension is the sheer rawness of the killings. The weapons were ad hoc and primitive – farming tools are the most commonly cited. In the killing of Sha and the five other victims, only one rifle was available and the killers were reluctant to spend bullets. Among the six dead, five were bludgeoned with a hardwood club. In another community, Liu Xiangyuan's perpetrators pushed him and his two children off a cliff.[5] Such a primitive method of killing seems to have been typical. Informants in the Hakka counties in Guangdong and Guangxi mostly used the word *bo/* – in Hakka dialect it means *strikes that produce a dull impact* – to describe the killings in those months. As a child, I once watched buffalos being butchered. An old buffalo would first be trapped and then a group of men would advance with large hammers to *bo/* until it lost consciousness. It was a horrifying scene.

One is also struck by the intimacy of the killings, which is the third extraordinary dimension: They took place in familiar neighborhoods, often among friends and acquaintances. In Hunan, Zheng Mengxu lived next door to his victim Sha Kaichu. In Guangxi, Liu Xiangyuan, before being ordered to jump to his death with his children, addressed his killer Huang Tianhui by his first name, "Tianhui."[6] The execution sites – riverbanks and roadsides – were part of a familiar setting.[7] Together, the primitiveness and intimacy underscore the fact that the killers were ordinary civilians rather than institutional state agents, such as soldiers, police, or professional executioners. State agents kill because of their institutional role; ordinary civilians kill for their own reasons. To borrow Goldhagen's memorable phrase, Chinese perpetrators were Mao's "willing executioners."[8] A village or township was turned into a willing community during those extraordinary days of terror in the Cultural Revolution,

[5] GXWGDSNB *Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao* 广西文革大事年表 [The Chronology of Main Events of Guangxi's Cultural Revolution], unpublished document.
[6] GXWGDSNB.
[7] Personal interview with Du Zhengyi, 2006.
[8] Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1996).

for the killers inflicted the atrocities in the name of their community, with other citizens tacitly observing.

The fourth extraordinary dimension is that the killing of neighbors was a public enterprise. In a normal community, a killer often becomes a fugitive after a murder, fleeing from the crime scene to avoid capture. With political killings, it is the potential victims who are on the run. Two of my informants took extraordinary measures to escape: One hid in the wilderness for months, the other had himself committed to prison.[9] In the Xiaojiang Village case, Zheng happily announced that he had killed his neighbors. He made a point of standing in the neighborhood with a rifle hanging around his neck, chanting to broadcast the deaths. The publicity of the killings says as much about the bystanders as the killer; that is, the killings appeared to be undertaken on behalf of the entire community. The tragedies usually unfolded in the open for days or months at a time.

In one way or another, these extraordinary dimensions echo other historical events in which neighbors collectively and publicly murdered their neighbors. The most notorious for American readers may be the Salem witch-hunts of 1692. Teenagers and housewives from respected families publicly accused their neighbors of being "witches" or "wizards," knowing that the crime would be punished by death. A few months into the wave of accusations, trials, and imprisonments, twenty-two people had been hanged or stoned to death, including church members, a successful merchant, and a priest.[10] On a summer day in 1941 in the village of Jedwabne in Poland, half of the town murdered the other half: sixteen hundred men, women, and children – all but seven of the town's Jews. In that case, what designated the victims is unmistakable: being a Jew. This event occurred during World War II in which Nazi Germany slaughtered six million Jews. Instead of a gas chamber or a killing field operated by soldiers, the Jedwabne pogrom took place in an intimate community.[11] The 1994 Rwanda genocide did not involve advanced

[9] Personal interviews with Du Zhengyi and DuJianqiang.

[10] Marion Lena Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969); Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origin of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

[11] Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press, 2001). The

weaponry or professional personnel. Using machetes, ordinary Hutus turned against their Tutsi neighbors in their homes and churches, on the hillsides, and in the sugar fields. In one hundred days, eight hundred thousand Tutsis were killed.[12]

Central to all of these events is the fact that the community was willing. The collective murders described previously were carried out in the name of the community. Past research tends to treat collective murders (e.g., genocide and mass killing) by focusing on the perpetrators and analyzing their motives, psychology, and resources.[13] Recognizing a willing community expands the focus to include not only the perpetrators but also the bystanders and, indeed, the entire community. When communities kill, they define the target as either an unredeemable criminal or an enemy. Although the killing may not be committed by the majority of the community, the entire community is involved in the process of defining or, to use a social-movement term, framing.[14]

A community willing to kill collectively exists in the context of state institutions. The state, by definition, is responsible for order, given its supposed monopoly on violent means. Therefore, large-scale killings can be seen to result from the state's sponsorship, acquiescence, or simple failure to stop them, or some combination of the three. At one extreme, there may be an endorsement by the state apparatus. For example, in the summer of 1793, the French Revolution was threatened by internal enemies and conspirators as well as foreign powers. The new government passed legislation that stipulated mass executions. The "Reign of Terror" lasted ten months, taking the lives of as many as forty thousand people, and is a clear example of state-sponsored public terror.[15]

exact number is disputed in later accounts, especially forcefully by a report from a group of Polish historians. See Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[12] Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

[13] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[14] To be elaborated upon later.

[15] David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London: Abacus, 2006). The example may not be clearcut, however; some argue that the bloodshed was caused by various competing factions radicalizing one another.

At the other extreme, however, killings may result from the incapacity of the state. A case in point is the lynching of blacks in the United States, which took place in communities that are often portrayed as "lawless" or "extralegal." A typical lynching event consisted of a sequence of interactions between state law enforcement and the lynching mob. Here, the state, which usually played the role of protector of the black victim, was too weak to succeed. The leaders of the lynch mob would outmaneuver a sheriff and his deputies, kidnap the prisoner, and execute him before a gathering crowd.[16]

The Chinese collective killings appear to fall between these two extremes. On the one hand, they were highly organized and carried out in the name of the state. On the other hand, the acts were committed by ordinary citizens with considerable autonomy. In this book, I address the following questions: 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? Was there an extermination policy sent down from the Center or provincial authorities? Alternatively, was it a phenomenon of local improvisation? Could it represent a failure of control at the state's weakest reaches of society? In summary, the paradox of the primitive nature of the killings and their high level of organization warrants our attention.

Limits of The State-Policy Model

Killing civilians in large numbers is an age-old phenomenon.[17] Since World War II, its conceptualization has been shaped by the enormity of the Holocaust, in which Hitler and the Nazi regime killed more than six million Jews. In 1948, the United Nations (UN) passed the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." Lemkin and other framers clearly had the Holocaust in mind when they

[16] Despite such a usual sequence of parallel actions for and against the lynching, few would take it that the occurrence of lynching is due only to the state failure. Instead, the state is culpable in many ways – its support of white domination in the South, its agents' "incompetence," and its failure to persecute the perpetrators for future deterrence. See James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1982); W. Fitzhugh Brundge, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[17] Chalk and Jonassohn provide a litany of episodes since the early history of humanity. Frank Robert Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Also see Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.

defined *genocide* as an act of a nation-state to eliminate an ethnic or national group.[18] Other conceptions of genocide also are preoccupied by central state policies, state-led exterminations, and institutionalized state killers. Later scholars expanded the concept to include cases in which victims are defined other than by ethnic, national, or religious characteristics. Valentino uses the term *mass killing* instead, and defines it as "the intentional killing of a massive number of noncombatants."[19] Other concepts such as *politicide*, *democide*, and *classicide* were developed to address killings in communist countries.[20]

Despite myriad variations and endless debates, the essential elements originated in the UN definition survive to this day. One element is the persistence of the idea of eliminationist policy intent at the central-state level. Related to this is the perspective that the killings are orchestrated by a fully functional state bureaucracy. In his three-volume classic, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Hilberg wrote:

> Established agencies relied on existing procedures. In his daily work the bureaucrat made use of tried and tested formulas with which he was familiar and which he knows to be acceptable to his superiors, colleagues, and subordinates. The usual practices were applied also in unusual situations. The Finance Ministry went through condemnation proceedings to set up Auschwitz complex, and the German railroads billed the Security Police for the transport of the Jews, calculating the one-way fare for each deportee by the track kilometer.[21]

[18] Essays in two anthologies provide a comprehensive review on the concept of "genocide" and its variants. See Chalk and Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide*; George J. Andreopoulos and Harold E. Selesky, *The Aftermath of Defeat: Societies, Armed Forces, and the Challenge of Recovery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994). Also see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[19] Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2004), pp. 10–11.

[20] Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, "Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases since 1945," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1988), pp. 359–371; Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003), pp. 57–73; R. J. Rummel, *China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991); R. J. Rummel, *Never Again: Ending War, Genocide, & Famine through Democratic Freedom* (Coral Springs, FL: Lumina Press, 2005); Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.

[21] Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), pp. 994–995.

Similarly, Arendt's famous concept of the "banality of evil" greatly contributed to the intellectual prominence of the state-policy model.[22] This state-policy model – that is, genocide and mass killing conceived as state policy and carried out through bureaucratic operation by state officials – has been the baseline for scholars introducing other cases of genocide or mass killing.

Building from the state-policy model of genocide and mass killing, some scholars explore the reasons for "obedience" in such an evil undertaking. Kelman and Hamilton use the My Lai Massacre as an empirical anchor point and conceptualize the authority structure in which the "crime of obedience" is likely to be committed. The authors define the My Lai Massacre – a mass murder of 347 to 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, by the U.S. Army on March 16, 1968 – as a "sanctioned massacre," suggesting a command structure and subordination. According to them, soldiers follow such brutal orders because of an authority structure and prior processes of routinization and dehumanization.[23]

The state-policy model's influence remains strong in recent comparative studies. In Harrf and Gurr's massive project on political violence, *Minority at Risk*, the unit of analysis is the nation-state. The main criterion they employ to judge whether a case is genocide or politicide is the central state's intent in its policy.[24] Valentino also argues that mass killing is mainly a result of the strategic choice of a small number of elites in authority positions. In his qualitative comparison of various cases of mass killing, his unit of analysis is also the nation-state.[25]

However, the state-policy model hinders academic inquiry into collective killings. To prove their association to alleged state policies, the perpetrator's association to the state becomes an exclusive focus. Because it is treated as a state-policy decision, the social processes between the alleged policy and the eliminationist outcome fall outside the scope of inquiry as if, once the policy were set, everything else would follow

[22] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

[23] Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 1–20.

[24] Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust?" Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, "Toward Empirical Theory of Genocides and Politicides: Identification and Measurement of Cases since 1945."

[25] Valentino, *Final Solutions*.

automatically. Inquiries of this sort are generally not interested in explaining the variations in mass killings across communities within the same country.

Moreover, as other studies have shown, the state-policy model's empirical base is weak. Among thousands of cases of civilian killings in human history, the Holocaust may be the only true fit. The majority of civilian-killing cases, however, lack some of the model's essential ingredients, such as centralized commands and official killers. Even in the case of the Holocaust, the state-policy model may miss a major part of the story, as recent scholars have argued. For one thing, historians have found documentation for the so-called Final Solution policy to be elusive. It is unclear how much of the Holocaust was due to top-down command.[26] For another, the perpetrators acted more on individual conviction and initiative than their trial testimony tried to present. Recent scholars such as Goldhagen and Mann focus squarely on the perpetrators' anti-Semitic ideology and all manner of personal initiatives unprompted by bureaucratic roles and state-policy directives.[27] The thrust of their argument is that the perpetrators may be members of the state bureaucracy, but they take on a self-constituted identity in the act of killing.

A second group of studies that veer from the state-policy model includes detailed accounts of more recent genocide and mass killings. In the 1994 Rwandan case, the killers were Hutus from all walks of life instead of a well-organized state army or even a nationally coordinated militia. According to Gourevitch, the only way to coordinate different parts of the country was via a radio station.[28] Straus found that in many local communities, the previous government administration was overtaken by a newly self-constituted militia leadership that oversaw the genocide, and that the severity of violence differed from one hamlet to another.[29] Even in the case of Cambodia in the 1970s, many killings took place despite explicit orders to stop.[30] The Jedwabne

[26] Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).
[27] Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.
[28] Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*.
[29] Straus, *The Order of Genocide*.
[30] George J. Andreopoulos and Harold E. Selesky, *The Aftermath of Defeat: Societies, Armed Forces, and the Challenge of Recovery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).