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978-0-521-17381-0 - Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution

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Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution

The violence of Mao's China is well known but its extreme form is not. In 1967 and 1968, during the Cultural Revolution, collective killings were widespread in rural China in the form of public executions. Victims included women, children, and the elderly. This book is the first to systematically document and analyze these atrocities, drawing data from local archives, government documents, and interviews with survivors in two southern provinces. This book extracts from the Chinese case lessons that challenge the prevailing models of genocide and mass killings and contributes to the historiography of the Cultural Revolution, in which scholarship has mainly focused on events in urban areas.

Yang Su is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. A social movement scholar, he has published work on social movements in the United States and in China. His research has appeared in flagship journals, including *American Sociological Review*, *Law and Society Review*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, and *China Quarterly*. A native of Guangdong, China, he holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University.

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To my teachers, past and present

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book presents and explains a chapter in human history of extreme suffering inflicted by extreme cruelty. The specifics are very Chinese but the lessons behind them are not. This writing coincides with the world community's anguish for the events raging on in Darfur and its most significant attempt to intervene yet: the indictment of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir for genocide. Only the future will tell whether this is an effective course of action, although some scholars and humanitarian groups have already complained that, in fact, the indictment may alienate a government whose cooperation must be sought.¹ Since the United Nations adopted its convention on genocide in 1948, the record of intervention has not been encouraging.²

One of the lessons I attempt to extract from the Chinese case is that collective killing, mass killing, or genocide is, according to Scott Straus, "a massively complex social phenomenon." This understanding requires us to look beyond the "genocidal policy," if there is any, of a rogue state. Short of regime change, it may be more effective to engage the government at issue than to alienate it because the government is the most capable agent of affecting other social factors that have implications on the outcome. In his groundbreaking work on the Rwanda genocide, Straus writes: "Genocide is ultimately about how ordinary people come to see fellow citizens, neighbors, friends, loved ones, and even children as

¹ For a forceful criticism of the indictment, see Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, "Justice Off Course in Darfur," *Washington Post*, A15, June 28, 1998. For more discussion, see a list of blogs at www.ssrc.org/blogs/darfur/ocampo-v-bashir/, accessed May 23, 2009.

² Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial, 3rd ed., 2003).

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‘enemies’ who must be killed.”³ However expedient legally and politically, merely laying the blame for genocide on a few state leaders may not lead to the outcome we desire. The dynamics that turn “ordinary people” into perpetrators must be appreciated and then altered. To adapt the benign saying: “It takes a village” – or a community – to kill collectively.

The seeds of this research project were sowed in my childhood memories. As an elementary school student during the waning years of Mao’s rule in China in the 1970s, I had no problem embracing the political education of the time. However, not every aspect of the indoctrination conquered this child’s mind. In violent struggle rallies in which humiliation and beating unfolded on stage, I would forget that I was supposed to see the targets as “class enemies.” Instead, I saw them just as human beings: a neighbor, a classmate’s father, or someone’s grandmother. As a raucous day gave way to the dead of the night, I could not remove the victim’s image from my thoughts. More troubling, however, was that grown-ups did not seem to have the same concerns. Toiling in the collectively owned rice paddies, they would converse casually about the previous day’s events. More often than not, a rally with struggle targets was considered more worthy of attending than one without them. Violence seemed to excite the adults. The conversations generated enormous confusion in me, for these were people with whom I was intimate and whom I knew to be otherwise kind and gentle. These early memories began to present the question of how ordinary people could lose their sympathy with the weak, a natural capacity that had remained in a child.

That the political system was at fault became evident to those of us who came of age in the 1980s – a time of awakening prompted by Chinese intellectuals. The enlightenment culminated as our bid for a clean break from the Maoist past in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement. Only in my graduate studies in sociology, however – first in China, then in the United States – did I begin to grasp the intellectual tools needed to comprehend the incomprehensible, starting with the concept of “social construction of reality” articulated by Berger and Luckmann.⁴ It dawned on me that my fellow villagers in the Mao years perceived a different

³ Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 2.

⁴ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

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reality from what I did as a child, although how their reality was constructed was yet to be explored.

Training to be a social movement scholar, I chose as my dissertation topic the mass movements in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. I collected data from *xianzhi*, or county gazetteers, as part of a larger project directed by Andrew Walder at Stanford University. I then discovered the fact of collective killings in Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, a widespread phenomenon yet barely known to scholars. After I graduated and took a teaching position, Andrew Walder, one of my advisors, suggested that I expand one of my dissertation chapters on the collective killings into a book manuscript. For this purpose, I co-taught a graduate seminar on genocide and mass killings with David Snow at the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine). After surveying the literature on the subject, I decided that the Chinese case had much to offer to existing scholarship, potentially with fresh lessons for policy making. In the meantime, I made field trips to China to interview survivors and witnesses. Over the years, I also obtained key government documents: some through my informants and some leaked to the public by exiled dissidents. I hope that this book provides a small voice for the victims in my village, in China, and beyond. I also hope that readers with childlike sympathy for human suffering find these pages informative and thought-provoking.

Acknowledgments

Writing a first book after graduation is not unlike writing a second dissertation thesis. In my case, not only did I have one of my former advisors direct me to a topic, I also enjoyed the encouragement and, at times, the verbal prodding from my other former mentors, John McCarthy and Doug McAdam. This book is rooted in the groundwork of my earlier apprenticeship with these scholars and their continuous support. Most crucial of all, I found a new mentor in Edwin Amenta, a senior colleague at UC Irvine. Without Professor Amenta as advisor, enforcer, reader, and editor, the writing of this book would never have been completed. Ed read and edited every line of all nine chapters. If the book does not appear to be written by a nonnative English speaker, he is the reason. Whenever I e-mailed him a new chapter, he would interrupt his vacation, with his extended family witnessing a book in the making. An accomplished scholar and author of three books, Ed also guided me through the publication process. To acknowledge his level of support, I find no appropriate

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language that does justice to my gratitude. As a Chinese saying goes: “No word of gratitude should be bestowed to a grand benevolence.” For these reasons, I dedicate this book to these teachers and many before them, including Chen Foguang, Chen Jian, Yang Xiaolian, and Yang Yuanxiang, four village teachers who many years ago saw me off to see the world.

The Department of Sociology at UC Irvine provided a supportive and nurturing environment for junior faculty members. Chair Wang Feng, following his predecessors Judy Stepan-Norris and Calvin Morrill, took special measures to guard our research time against possible distractions. Wang Feng, David Snow, and Calvin Morrill took me to many lunches that sizzled with advice and guidance. I thank them for uplifting my spirit and sharpening my intellect. I am also grateful for friendship from other colleagues in the department, particularly Stan Bailey, Nina Bandelj, David Frank, Ann Hironaka, Jennifer Lee, David Meyer, Andrew Noymer, Francesca Polletta, Evan Schofer, and Judy Stepan-Norris. My special thanks go to Wang Feng for his camaraderie, brotherhood, and generosity.

I thank my informants in Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces and those who made possible my acquaintance with them. I regret that I cannot list their actual names, but I hope the following pages do justice to their kind assistance and their courage to speak out. I would like to acknowledge the institutional support of the University Services Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The Centre, which was under the leadership of Jean Hung during my research, has been the most professional and researcher friendly of the research centers with which I have been associated.

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Xin He provided expertise on the legal system in Mao’s China; Chapter 6, “Demobilizing Law,” bears his contribution. Song Yongyi shared one of the important leaked documents with me. Ting Jiang and Feng Shizheng assisted me with the notes. Yong Cai created the maps. Support and assistance from the following individuals are also acknowledged:

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