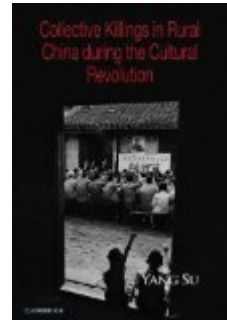


Yang Su. *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xix + 300 pp. \$27.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-17381-0.



Reviewed by Jeremy Brown

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Zheng Mengxu. Huang Tianhui. Wang Jianxun. Ask a group of experts on China's Cultural Revolution the significance of these names, and you're likely to draw blank stares. Yang Su's book aims to change that. Local officials and militia members including Zheng, Huang, and Wang were responsible for organizing and carrying out massacres of "class enemies" during 1967 and 1968. In parts of rural China, tens of thousands of people, including many children, were rounded up and executed simply because they or a family member had a bad class label. Some were shot; others were beheaded, pushed off cliffs, or hacked with farm tools. By documenting the killings and naming the names of Mao's "willing executioners" (p. 4), Su's book will reshape scholarly understandings of China during the Cultural Revolution. It also has much to offer to scholars of comparative genocide.

Most previous studies of the Cultural Revolution focus on urban Red Guards. Paying excessive attention to Red Guards has marginalized the much larger and far more horrifying story of col-

lective killings in the countryside. According to Su, between four hundred thousand and three million people were systematically exterminated in villages, but not at the hands of rampaging young Red Guards, and not as a result of a genocidal state policy. Instead, "neighbors killed neighbors" (p. 2).

Su seeks to explain why mass killings occurred even though top Chinese leaders in Beijing neither ordered nor encouraged them. (In fact, central leaders issued directives prohibiting massacres and eventually sent in the military to stop them.) He proposes a "community model" in which a combination of local factors, including clan rivalries, a breakdown in the legal system, dehumanization of enemies, and trumped-up fears of an imminent war, created a genocidal atmosphere. Su uses his community model to distinguish the Chinese case from previous studies of killings, from the Holocaust to the My Lai Massacre, that stress a top-down chain of command in which local officials obey their superiors. Su's focus on local communities, however, does not com-

pletely absolve Mao Zedong and other top leaders. Su argues that by launching the Cultural Revolution and warning that nefarious class enemies were plotting a comeback, central authorities indirectly sponsored the killings.

Su focuses on killings in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces and draws from official accounts in local histories compiled and published in the 1980s and 1990s, classified reports, and field interviews with about thirty survivors, bystanders, and witnesses. The firsthand accounts of survivors and family members make the book extremely powerful and gripping. After hearing that two of his brothers had been executed in rural Guangdong, for example, Du Jianqiang saved his own life by bringing anti-Mao slogans that he had written to a local public security office and asking to be arrested as a counterrevolutionary. Du figured that he had a better chance of survival in a faraway prison labor camp. In the same village, sixteen-year-old Huang Caijiao, who was targeted because he was identified by the state as the “son of a former landlord,” was knocked unconscious but escaped death in a mass execution. Huang woke up after his executioners departed and crawled to a nearby house to ask for help. Locals were too scared to assist him and he was seized by members of the local militia. They forced Huang’s cousin to murder him with a hoe the next day.

It is depressing and disturbing to read such accounts. But as I neared the end of Su’s chapter-by-chapter explanation of the various factors that created an environment in which collective killings could take place, I was surprised to find myself having a different reaction. I felt relieved that the scale of the massacres was not even worse. Extrapolating from spotty and incomplete data, Su provides varying estimates of the number of victims (“at least four hundred thousand” on p. 2 and “at least 1.5 million” on p. 66). Either tally is shocking, but what is remarkable is not that so many people died, but that many more did

not. In 1967 and 1968, hundreds of rural counties had the same volatile mix of ingredients that contributed to massacres of purported class enemies. Most Chinese villages experienced lineage feuds, had a sub-caste of people who had been disenfranchised because of a “landlord” or “rich-peasant” family background, were governed by mass movements rather than legal norms, and were told that the former exploiting classes would soon mount a counterattack. Most villages, however, stuck to a familiar formula of denunciation rallies rather than systematically killing the children of former landlords.

Su explains that Guangdong and Guangxi were especially violent because central authorities, wary of protracted instability in the two border provinces, deviated from the nationwide trend of allowing provincial leaders to be overthrown and replaced by mixed committees of old cadres, military men, and representatives from rebel factions. Instead, Guangdong and Guangxi’s original leaders emerged stronger than ever when Revolutionary Committees were formed in 1968, and they were especially repressive in cracking down against rebels who had sought to oust them. This argument makes sense, but it does not explain why Jiangxi, another exceptional province that followed the Guangdong/Guangxi pattern, did not experience extensive killings. Nor does it shed light on why Daoxian in Hunan province suffered one of the worst episodes of collective killings in summer 1967. I hope that scholars will address these questions by carrying out local case studies to determine which of the explanatory factors identified by Su were most important in contributing to—or preventing—killings in rural counties.[1]

Yang Su deserves great credit for uncovering the collective killings and for his penetrating analysis of their multiple causes. It is therefore unfortunate that such a significant book suffers from flaws in its presentation. Two chapters (chapter 4, “Class Enemies,” and chapter 6, “Demobilizing

Law”) disrupt the book’s narrative with meandering and repetitive summaries of secondary scholarship that take the reader far away from the local particularities of Guangxi and Guangdong. Su’s aims would have been better served by a few background paragraphs in the introduction. Likewise, chapter 9 (“Patterns of Killing”) mostly repeats points made earlier in the book. These are matters of preference, though, and do not undermine the book’s credibility. More serious are the many errors and inconsistencies in the footnotes. On at least two occasions, the words “[translation here]” appear instead of an actual English-language translation (pp. 108, n. 25; 180, n. 78). Other notes are simply wrong and lead readers astray. Note 33 on page 111, for example, tells readers to “see note 27,” but the source in note 27 has nothing to do with the relevant paragraph on page 111. Su’s findings about the collective killings of the Cultural Revolution are so important—and have been downplayed and censored by Chinese authorities for so long—that it would be a shame if sloppy citations allow critics to question his powerful conclusions. Cambridge University Press should make sure that the errors are fixed in a future print run.

Note

[1]. The best local case study of rural killings is Tan Hecheng, *Xue de shenhua: gongyuan 1967 nian Hunan Daoxian wenge da tusha jishi* [Bloody myth: An account of the Cultural Revolution massacre of 1967 in Daoxian, Hunan] (Hong Kong: Tianxingjian chubanshe, 2010). Yang Su draws extensively from Tan Hecheng’s pseudonymously published articles about Daoxian (Tan used the name Zhang Cheng to author several articles in a Hong Kong magazine in 2001). Unfortunately, because *Collective Killings* was already in production when Tan’s 604-page book was published, Su was unable to draw from it.

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