

*Managing Famine, Flood and Earthquake in China: Tianjin, 1958–85*

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In this expertly organized, creatively conceived, lucidly written book, Lauri Paltemaa examines the Chinese Communist Party's handling of disasters during the Mao Zedong era. He concludes that at the local level, the Party's response to disasters was not entirely disastrous.

Drawing mostly on published sources but also on material from the Tianjin Municipal Archive, Paltemaa offers a refreshing analysis of local governance during the Mao years. Rather than using political campaigns or top-down orders from Beijing as his starting point, Paltemaa compares how city officials in Tianjin conducted themselves in the face of three different disasters: the man-made Great Leap Famine, a major flood in 1963, and the Tangshan earthquake of 1976 (which also caused extensive damage and loss-of-life in Tianjin).

Campaign politics actually caused and prolonged the Great Leap Famine. Paltemaa also finds, however, that even though political demands sometimes affected and intruded on disaster management, the Party's organizational structure, the division of urban society into *danwei*, and a mass mobilization model allowed it to respond effectively to the flood and the earthquake. In all three cases, Tianjin officials required permission and aid from central leaders in order to prioritize disaster relief over economic production. This took agonizingly long during the famine because it required admitting the failings of the Leap, but material aid and propagandistic praise arrived quickly after the disasters of 1963 and 1976.

Paltemaa presents his case studies in long, extensively documented chapters. The heart of the book is the chapter on the famine, which is 64 pages long, bolstered by 449 endnotes. This impressive achievement is now the best existing portrait of how a large Chinese city suffered through and recovered from the Great Leap Famine. When I went to the Tianjin Municipal Archive in 2004, I saw nothing useful or interesting about the famine. I had to go to the Hebei Provincial Archive to learn about Tianjin's experience. Paltemaa did better at the municipal archive. Archivists only allowed him to view municipal government documents, while refusing him access to files from the Communist Party bureaucracy. Nonetheless, Paltemaa found evidence of starvation and torture in the rural counties surrounding Tianjin. He also shows that urbanites suffered from hunger, long queues at grain shops, and a spike in crime. His overall conclusion confirms that city officials protected urban residents at the expense of rural lives: he calculates that "the famine killed anything between 619 and 3,744 city *hukou* holders," while 28,000–32,000 people in the municipality's rural areas died (p. 81).

Paltemaa's shorter chapters on the 1963 flood and 1976 earthquake lack the rich archival documentation of his study of the famine, but they are equally enlightening because the latter two disasters have received scant attention from scholars. Torrential rains in 1963 caused flooding that threatened urban Tianjin. Paltemaa's gripping narrative shows how provincial and municipal officials decided to blow holes in dykes to redirect canals to flood the city's rural suburbs. As he writes, "a larger urban disaster was exchanged for a smaller rural one" (p. 100). While generally praising the city's military-style mobilization of labour to mitigate flood damage, Paltemaa is much more critical of information management and propaganda during

and after the flood. *Tianjin Daily* reported extensively on the flood, but provided no information to city residents about how to survive or evacuate if the city were inundated. Paltemaa concludes that the newspaper's emphasis on "useless propaganda" shows that "risk to human lives was ultimately always a lesser concern than production figures" during the Mao era (p. 127).

Because Paltemaa's focus is on local case studies of disasters, he is not shackled to a political narrative emanating from Beijing. This means that instead of ending his book with the standard stopping point of Mao Zedong's death in 1976, he wisely extends his study to the mid-1980s. The unique vantage points that Paltemaa has chosen yield a new chronology that challenges tired timelines of the history of the People's Republic. A massive waterworks project to tame the Hai River began in 1965 and was not completed until 1979, "dramatically reducing flooding in the region" (p. 126). Also in 1979, 1.1 million Tianjin residents were still living in huts and other temporary dwellings erected in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake. Reconstruction continued during the early 1980s.

Paltemaa has done very well with the sources he was allowed to view. How might his study have changed if he had had full access to Party files, plus oral history interviews and other types of grassroots documents? My guess is that he would have uncovered more problems, foibles, and messiness, and he would have found more colourful human stories to illustrate how people experienced and handled disasters. The seemingly "effective" responses seen in Paltemaa's coverage of the flood and earthquake – in chapters that mostly lack archival sources – may be more a product of the celebratory tone of the publicly available record than a reflection of how Tianjin residents experienced the disasters. But to his credit, Paltemaa enriches his analysis with critical asides and a keen sense of the ironies of a political system that could be simultaneously effective and deadly.

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*Revolutions as Organizational Change: The Communist Party and Peasant Communities in South China, 1924–1934*

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"While the CCP had little presence in Hunan, peasants nonetheless staged a spontaneous and radical agrarian revolution. In Jiangxi, although the CCP directly created a revolutionary situation, peasants there remained passive and conservative," writes Baohui Zhang in his new book (p. 35). And yet, socioeconomic conditions and broad political situation were strikingly similar in the two provinces during the disturbed decade reviewed. To resolve that "puzzle," Zhang Baohui has rejected classical theories of agrarian revolution (outlined on pp. 35–52). He first argues against the Marxist class exploitation thesis: if poverty and exploitation breed peasant revolutions, how can it be that peasants' reactions were so different in Jiangxi and in Hunan, when the level of exploitation was similarly high in both provinces? He then criticizes James Scott's moral economy approach: the precapitalist rural economy of Jiangxi and Hunan had been weakened long before the imperialist aggression of the 19th century,