

Deprivation, Discontent, and Disobedience in Rural China:
Collective Learning in Southeast Henan^{*}

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August 23, 2007

**DRAFT IN PROGRESS:
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^{*} I wrote this paper during my 2006-7 tenure as a research fellow at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center's Institute for International Research. It is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the conference on "Reclaiming Chinese Society," University of California-Berkeley, October 27-28, 2006. I am grateful to the American Sociological Association for granting permission to reprint selections of text in the sections on "Data and Methods" and "Explaining the Anomalous Case of Southeast Henan" that were originally published in "Climbing the Dispute Pagoda: Grievances and Appeals to the Official Justice System in Rural China," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 72, no 2, 2007, 459-85. I would like to thank Michael Burawoy, You-tien Hsing, Ching Kwan Lee, Kevin O'Brien, Shao Jing, Ralph Thaxton, and Felix Wemheuer for their enormously helpful critical feedback. This paper also benefited from the help of Ren Donglai, Cai Jiahe, Kandis Scott, and Cao Shuji. I am solely responsible for all remaining defects.

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ABSTRACT

Using unique data from a 2002 survey of almost 3,000 rural households in six Chinese provinces, the author confirms prior research showing that excessive taxation was a widespread social problem, was associated with popular discontent, and spawned popular tax resistance in rural China. Within these generally established patterns, however, the survey data also show a conspicuous anomaly: Although tax burdens were not as heavy in southeast Henan as they were elsewhere, in this part of China they were popularly defined as exceptionally problematic and were associated with an exceptionally high prevalence of discontent and contention. The author argues that the Great Leap Famine of 1958-61 taught villagers in southeast Henan more than anywhere else to distrust local government. Through a process of *collective learning* from past experiences, villagers in this part of China are alert and responsive to signs of local government misconduct. By combining quantitative survey data and qualitative historical evidence, this paper shows that popular responses to current events are conditioned by historical legacies of large-scale traumatic events.

Taxation has defined popular deprivation, discontent, and disobedience in rural China for centuries.¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, rural taxation reemerged as a leading social problem, as a source and symbol of Chinese peasants' plight and of their increasingly vociferous claims advanced to higher levels of the state.² In the wake of escalating popular resistance to excessive taxation, a series of tax reform measures culminated in total, nationwide, universal tax relief in 2006,³ the historical significance of which is captured in the following popular saying: "Since the creator of the universe made heaven and earth, this is the first time the state has not collected imperial grain."⁴

My primary goal in this paper is to explain why, a few years prior to the abolishment of agricultural taxes, similarly heavy tax burdens were popularly defined as a serious problem in some areas but not in others. In other words, I attempt to explain wildly disparate levels of discontent with and resistance to similar objective economic conditions. The essential puzzle is the seemingly anomalous case of southeast Henan: Given that objective tax burdens in this part of China were not as heavy as they were elsewhere, why was taxation here popularly understood as exceptionally problematic, why did taxation here produce a seemingly inexplicably large

¹ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001; R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997; Kathryn Bernhardt, *Rents, Taxes, and Peasant Resistance: The Lower Yangzi Region, 1840-1950*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997; Roger V. Des Forges, *Cultural Centrality and Political Change in Chinese History: Northeast Henan in the Fall of the Ming*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

² Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance: Contentious Politics in Rural China*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Dali Y. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996; Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2006; Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002; Ian Johnson, *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China*, New York: Pantheon, 2004.

³ Edward Cody, "In Face of Rural Unrest, China Rolls Out Reforms," *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2006, A01; John James Kennedy, "From the Fee-for-Tax Reform to the Abolition of Agricultural Taxes: The Impact on Township Governments in Northwest China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 189, 2007, 43-59.

⁴ For example, Ge Rujiang, "Zhongguo Nongye Jinru 'Wu Shui Shidai,'" (Chinese Countryside Has Entered 'Age of No Taxes') *Liao Wang Xinwen Zhoukan*, 31 January 2005, 14.

incidence of tax resistance, and why was this part of China characterized by an exceptionally high degree of general discontent and general contention? My explanation for this apparent anomaly centers on memories of—and learning from—contextually-specific historical experiences. We will see that traumatic historical events help account for otherwise anomalous levels of contentiousness in later years.

The story of southeast Henan allows me to develop and illustrate the concept of *collective learning*. Southeast Henan contributes to our understanding of how micro-level perceptions of and responses to current events are conditioned by earlier macro-level historical events, of how traumatic experiences structure perceptions of current events. *Disasters* of the past have taught villagers to associate the *deceit* and *deception* of local government officials with *death*. Additional “D” words capture the character of disobedience in this part of rural China: In the face of official practices that bear an uncanny resemblance to those at the root of past disasters, rural China’s *diaomin*, “shrewd and unyielding people,”⁵ vigilant and assertive defenders of their interests, exercise *defiance*.

This paper is divided into six sections. In the first section I draw on the extant literature to provide an overview of the character, composition, weight, regional variation, and social and political consequences of rural taxation prior to the 2006 rescission of agricultural taxes. In the second section I describe my survey data and the methods of analysis I use to explain variation in the contentiousness of popular responses to rural taxation. In the third part of this paper I present the findings of this analysis. As we will see, the results of the analysis of the relationship between tax burdens and popular contention reveal southeast Henan as a “deviant case”—a case of exceptionally contentious responses despite unexceptionally heavy tax burdens. In the fourth

⁵ Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China,” *Modern China*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1996, p. 40.

part of this paper I try to explain the anomalous case of southeast Henan by focusing particular attention on the legacy of the deadliest agricultural tax in human history: the state grain levies of the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). In the fifth section of this paper I compare the concept of *collective learning* to competing conceptualizations of *collective memory*. In my conclusion, the sixth and final section, I discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of my findings. From a theory-building standpoint, I conclude that future research on claims-making must incorporate local variation popular responses to similar objective conditions. From a methodological standpoint, I conclude that future research has much to gain from combining quantitative and qualitative methods. With the larger aim of building and refining theoretical explanations, survey research can be fruitfully used to identify and select anomalous cases for in-depth qualitative research.

RURAL TAXATION IN CHINA: A REVIEW OF GENERAL PATTERNS

Taxes have become the symbol *par excellence* of rural social problems in China. Known as the “peasants’ burdens” (*nongmin fudan*), rural taxes were heavy and regressive, and produced widespread popular discontent manifested both in large-scale protests and riots and in individualized and household complaining and petitioning. In this section I review the research literature on the subject in order to establish expectations for the empirical analysis that follows.

Deprivation

Peasants’ burdens refer to a wide array of taxes and fees imposed on peasants, often irregularly and illegally. Despite their complexity and significant regional variation, what I refer to throughout as “rural taxes,” prior to their abolishment, were commonly divided into three categories: (1) state agricultural taxes, (2) township and village levies, and (3) miscellaneous

local fees. The technical details of rural taxation are beyond the scope of this paper, and are covered thoroughly elsewhere.⁶ But for the sake of establishing the extent and character of deprivation, it is nevertheless essential to review three basic properties of rural taxation.

First, according to State Council regulations implemented in 1986 and reaffirmed in 1991 and in 1993, rural taxes were not to exceed 5% of the township-level per capita net income for the previous year.⁷ For example, if the per capita net income for a given township was \$1,000 in the previous year, rural taxes in the current year could not lawfully exceed \$50 per household. Owing to considerable economic variation between villages within townships and between households within villages, and given that they were charged on a per capita basis as a head tax, these taxes were highly regressive. Within a township, poorer villages were burdened with higher tax rates than richer villages, and within a village, poorer households (and those with more members) likewise had heavier tax burdens than richer households (and those with fewer members).⁸

⁶ Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*; Claude Aubert and Xiande Li, “‘Peasant Burden’: Taxes and Levies Imposed on Chinese Farmers,” in *Agricultural Policies in China After WTO Accession*, edited by Wilfred Legg, Xiande Li, Michèle Patterson, Sally Taylor, and Alexandra Trzeciak-Duval, Paris: OECD, 2002, 160-79; Ran Tao and Mingxing Liu, “Urban and Rural Household Taxation in China: Measurement, Comparison and Policy Implications,” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2005, 486-505; Li Xiande, “Rethinking the Peasant Burden: Evidence from a Chinese Village,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 30, nos. 3-4, 2003, 45-74; Xiaobo Lü, “The Politics of Peasant Burden in Reform China,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1997, 113-38.

⁷ Li, “Rethinking,” pp. 45-6, 59; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*, pp. 15, 41, 52, 61, 167; Aubert and Li, “‘Peasant Burden,’” p. 174; Andrew Wedeman, “Budgets, Extra-budgets, and Small Treasuries: Illegal Monies and Local Autonomy in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 9, no. 25, 2000, 492; Johnson, *Wild Grass*, p. 27; Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*, p. 7.

⁸ For an illustration, see Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*, p. 61. On the regressive nature of rural taxes, also see Tao and Liu, “Urban and Rural Household Taxation”; Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin, *Inequality and Poverty in China in the Age of Globalization*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 134; Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin, “China’s Household Income and Its Distribution, 1995 and 2002,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 182, 2005, 356-84; Johnson, *Wild Grass*, pp. 26-7. Township and (administrative) village populations average about 20,000 and 1,000 respectively, although there is substantial variation.

Second, overtaxation was the norm, typically far exceeding the 5% statutory limit.⁹ Former Premier Zhu Rongji stated in 2001 that township and village levies accounted for 10% of peasant incomes. One estimate puts the various levies at over 15% of peasant incomes in poor villages and below 5% in wealthier villages.¹⁰ Putting all taxes and fees together, the *total* peasants' burden was even heavier. Considering *all* sources of taxes and fees, the peasants' burdens averaged 10-12% of net household income in the year 2000.¹¹ In the early 1990s, peasant households in some areas were paying 14-15% of their incomes to local governments,¹² while in other areas villagers were paying 20-40%.¹³ Before the 1995 experimental tax reforms in Anhui Province, one county reported total burdens of 30% of net incomes.¹⁴

Third, the regressiveness of rural taxes was further exacerbated by variation in local levels of industrialization. Peasants' burdens tended to be lower in more industrialized rural areas than in less industrialized areas because successful industrial enterprises formed a solid tax base for local government, obviating the need to bleed the peasants. For this reason, peasants' burdens were lower in coastal regions, including Jiangsu Province, and higher in inland provinces such as Henan, Hunan, and Anhui.¹⁵

⁹ Lü "The Politics of Peasant Burden," p. 118.

¹⁰ Bernstein and Lü *Taxation*, pp. 52, 60-1.

¹¹ Aubert and Li, "Peasant Burden," p. 169.

¹² Xiaobo Lü, *Cadres and Corruption: The Organizational Involvement of the Chinese Communist Party*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 210.

¹³ Wedeman, "Budgets," p. 492.

¹⁴ Bernstein and Lü *Taxation*, p. 184.

¹⁵ Bernstein and Lü *Taxation*, pp. 62-8; Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin, "Income and Inequality in China: Composition, Distribution and Growth of Household Income, 1988 to 1995," *The China Quarterly*, no. 154, 1998, p. 238.

Discontent and Disobedience

Much of the research literature on rural social conflict in rural China points to peasants' burdens as a major source of complaints that escalated to higher levels.¹⁶ Rural taxation was a major source of tax evasion as well as grievances and formal petitions that clogged the official complaints system.¹⁷ According to Carl Minzner, "By the 1990s, the focus of most petitions appears to have shifted to taxation issues."¹⁸ In a sample of 184 petitioners from 25 provinces across China who appealed in 1998 and 1999 to *The Farmers Daily* in Beijing, 63 complained about irregular fees, excessive agricultural taxes, suppressed agricultural prices, coercive collection of grain, and other related "burdens."¹⁹ Among 632 petitioners in Beijing's "petitioners' village" interviewed in 2004, 72% reported a grievance over peasants' burdens.²⁰

Nationwide public sympathy for the plight of the Chinese peasant was galvanized by the publication in January 2004 of *An Investigative Report of Chinese Peasants*, a sensationalist exposé and poignant account researched and written by two peasants-turned-authors of peasant tax protests in response to popular suffering.²¹ Selling over 100,000 copies in its first month before the state banned its sale (Ma 2004), and over 8 million bootlegged copies afterward

¹⁶ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, pp. 196-7; Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*; Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China*; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*.

¹⁷ Yuen Yuen Tang, "When Peasants Sue En Masse: Large-scale Collective ALL Suits in Rural China," *China: An International Journal* vol. 3, 2005, 24-49; O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*; Johnson, *Wild Grass*; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*.

¹⁸ Carl Minzner, "Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions," *Stanford Journal of International Law*, vol. 42, 2006, 103-79. Also see Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*, pp. 178-9.

¹⁹ Zhao Shukai, "Shangfang Shijian He Xinfang Tixi—Guanyu Nongmin Jin Jing Shangfang Wenti de Diaocha Fenxi" (Complaint Incidents and the Letters and Visits System: An Analysis of a Survey on the Problem of Peasants Coming to Beijing to Make Complaints), unpublished report dated December 1999, accessed October 10, 2006 at <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=2355>, on file with author.

²⁰ Zhao Ling, "Diaocha Xianshi Nongmin Weiquan Zhongxin Chuxian Zhongda Bianhua" (Survey Reveals a Major Shift in the Focus of Peasants' Rights Activism), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 2 September 2004.

²¹ Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Zhongguo Nongmin Diaocha* (An Investigative Report of Chinese Peasants), Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2004; translated into English as Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*

(Watts 2004), the peasants' burdens—and the hardships they created and resistance they spawned—are the central theme integrating all of its chapters.

DATA AND METHODS

My analyses of tax burdens and popular resistance rely on data from a 2002 survey on rural conflict. The 2,902 households included in the analyses performed for this paper are distributed across 37 villages in six provinces: 10 villages in Shandong, 6 villages each in Henan and Hunan, and 5 villages each in Shaanxi, Jiangsu, and Chongqing.²² The survey sites—depicted in Figure 1—were selected not randomly but purposively. Because the six survey sites were selected with the goal of maximizing regional and economic variation, the households interviewed are not intended to be representative of rural China as a whole but only of the six counties from which they were sampled.²³ All indications, however, suggest this is a representative sample. Age, educational, income, and occupational distributions in the sample closely match official statistics and published findings from nationally representative samples.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To simplify the presentation and interpretation of regional patterns and regional anomalies, the central task at hand, I report descriptive findings of data aggregated to villages

²² Until 1997, when it became a centrally administered metropolitan region, a status equal in rank to that of a province, Chongqing belonged to Sichuan Province.

²³ Throughout this paper I refer to the six survey sites as counties even though, from an administrative standpoint, some are municipalities. Hunan Province's Yuanjiang was upgraded from a county to a city in 1988. Shandong's Jimo was upgraded from a county to a city in 1989. And Jiangsu's Taicang was upgraded from a county to a city in 1993. However, for the sake of presentational consistency, and because the survey samples within these municipalities are rural, I nonetheless call them counties.

and counties. However, all the patterns reported in this paper are statistically significant in multivariate household-level models.

My objective measure of tax burdens comes from an estimate of the gross tax rate calculated as the annual sum of all taxes and fees (agricultural taxes, township and village levies, and miscellaneous fees) as a percentage of total gross annual household income.

Since my goal is to understand varying perceptions of and responses to similar objective conditions, I analyze three subjective measures of discontent. First, complaints about taxes are based on answers to the following question: “In the past five years, have you or a family member been in a dispute with the villagers’ committee or someone else over agricultural burdens?” “Agricultural burdens” (*nongye fudan*) is a popular euphemism for rural taxes and fees. Second, popular disrespect for village leaders is defined a response of either “some disrespect” or “great disrespect” to the statement, “Overall, people’s attitude toward villagers’ committee cadres is one of...” Third, popular discontent with village leaders is defined a response of either “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” to the question, “Overall, are you satisfied with the villagers’ committee?”

I also analyze two measures of disobedience. My first measure, a measure of tax resistance, comes from answers to the following question: “In the past five years have you or another family member failed to pay agricultural taxes either in full or in part?” I coded responses of “frequently,” “sometimes,” and “seldom” as having engaged in tax resistance by refusing to pay some or all agricultural taxes.²⁴ My second measure of disobedience comes from information about the mobilization of higher authorities. “Petitioned higher levels” equals “yes”

²⁴ “Almost never” and “never” are the remaining response categories. When “frequently” or “sometimes” are coded as having refused to pay some or all agricultural taxes (i.e., when “seldom” is not counted as tax resistance), the frequencies are lower but the pattern of regional variation is identical.

if any of the following three conditions is satisfied: (1) the respondent's family approached a higher-level government office in response to a concrete grievance,²⁵ (2) the respondents' family approached the legal system (including lawyers, courts, and judicial [*sifa*] offices) in response to a concrete grievance, or (3) the respondent answered "yes" to any of the following three questions asked without reference to a concrete grievance: (a) "Have you ever appeared in court as a plaintiff?"; (b) "Have you ever sought the advice of a lawyer over a matter of your own?"; and (c) "Have you ever consulted with a lawyer for some other reason, such as on behalf of a friend or a relative?"

FINDINGS

Deprivation

The survey data confirm the general patterns in the existing literature. As we can see in both Table 1 and Figure 2A, averaging 12%, and with county-level and village-level ranges of 6% to 23% and 3% to 33% respectively, gross tax rates in the survey data are consistent with the published figures reviewed above. Figure 2A also shows that peasants' burdens were highly regressive: as income increased, tax rates dropped. We can also see in Figure 2A that regional variation is consistent with earlier research findings: peasants' burdens were heaviest in the inland provinces of Hunan and Henan and lightest in the coastal province of Jiangsu. The areas with the highest incomes also, unsurprisingly, had the highest nonfarm labor force participation rates, a proxy for rural industrialization. In the Hunan and Henan samples, burdens averaged

²⁵ Respondents were presented with a list of 18 grievance types, included in which is "agricultural burdens." For each grievance they reported, respondents were asked to supply information on the actions they took in pursuit of redress (including no action).

19%, more than double the 8% in the remaining samples and more than three times the 6% in the Jiangsu sample.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discontent and Disobedience

The data also confirm that, owing to their excessive weight, their often ruthless extraction, and their regressiveness, rural taxes deepened peasant discontent and fomented popular resistance in China's villages. Table 1 shows a positive correlation between taxation and popular complaints, resistance, and petitioning. As we can see, on the whole, if we know the local level of peasants' burdens, we can make reasonably accurate predictions of the local level of discontent and disobedience. However, we can also see that the relationship is not perfect. Although the relationship between the weight of peasants' burdens and the popular propensity to complain about peasants' burdens was positive and strong, the data also reveal southeast Henan as a prominent exception to this general pattern. That is, similarly heavy burdens were not associated with similar levels of discontent and disobedience everywhere. Because average burdens in the Hunan sample were 70% higher than in the Henan sample (23.4% and 14.1% respectively), we might have predicted considerably more discontent in the Hunan sample than in the Henan sample. Likewise, because burdens in the Shandong sample were as heavy as those in the Henan sample (13.7% and 14.1% respectively), we might have expected the Henan and Shandong samples to similarly quiescent.

Contrary to such reasonably linear expectations, however, southeast Henan was by far the most discontented and the most disobedient in terms of grievances, resistance, and petitions even

though it was not the most deprived in terms of tax burdens. In Table 1 we can see that the likelihood of reporting an agricultural tax grievance was greater in Henan (41%) than in any other sample, was 2.5 times greater than the overall average (16%), and 4 times greater than the average in the remaining five county samples (11%). A similar pattern emerges from the two measures of popular discontent with village leaders. Exactly half of the Henan sample reported general “disrespect” of local cadres, a level of discontent three times greater than the 16% in the remaining five county samples. Likewise, almost half of the Henan sample (48%) reported being “dissatisfied” with the village government, a level of discontent five times greater than the 10% in the remaining five county samples.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The same patterns emerge with respect to petitioning higher levels of the state for help. The strength of the relationship is only moderate because villagers complained and petitioned about a lot more than burdens. According to the survey data, villagers who complained about taxation tended also to complain about other problems, such as water use, unpaid debt, and troublesome neighbors. In 2002, petitioning to higher levels appeared to have been fueled not specifically by peasants’ burdens but rather by a more diffuse syndrome of local distress characterized by taxation, grievances, and discontent.²⁶ On the whole, survey respondents were more likely to petition over housing property rights and personal injuries than about taxation.²⁷ With respect to petitioning, as with the indicators of discontent, the Henan sample is again, so to

²⁶ Also see Bernstein and Lü *Taxation*, p. 191.

²⁷ Ethan Michelson, “Climbing the Dispute Pagoda: Grievances and Appeals to the Official Justice System in Rural China,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2007, 470-1.

speak, off the charts. Here 22% of the sample reported petitioning higher levels of government, more than double the 9% in the remaining five county samples.

Excessive burdens were also met by another—and more common—form of resistance: refusing to pay. While only 5% of complaints about “agricultural burdens” led to petitions to higher levels of authority (with 44% leading to no response at all, or “lumping it,” literally “swallowing the loss”), a full 30% of respondents who reported grievances over agricultural burdens also reported refusing to pay some or all of their agricultural taxes. Meanwhile, only 7% of the remaining respondents who did not report grievances over agricultural burdens also reported refusing to pay taxes. As we can see in Table 1, the proportion of households that had refused to pay taxes was 20% in both the Henan and Hunan samples, more than three times greater than the 6% in the remaining four county samples. Consistent with the other patterns I have reported, tax resistance was equally severe in the Henan sample as in the Hunan sample even though tax burdens were far heavier in the Hunan sample.

Because the foregoing five measures of discontent and disobedience are internally consistent (see the correlation matrix in Appendix, Table A1), I combine them into an aggregate scale. Cronbach’s alpha is .94 among the six counties and .81 among the 37 villages, meaning they can be meaningfully combined with a great degree of reliability into a single index of discontent and disobedience (Table 1, Column G). On this aggregate scale, the Henan sample’s score (36.1) is two-thirds higher than the next-most contentious sample, the Hunan sample (22.2), and more than double the overall average score (15.3).

By graphically depicting the aggregate scale of discontent of disobedience, Figure 2B summarizes the empirical findings presented thus far. Excluding the Henan sample, the magnitude of taxation is an excellent predictor of popular discontent and disobedience. The

Henan sample is thus a prominent exception to this general rule. In the Henan sample, the degree of popular contentiousness is disproportionate to the weight of peasants' burdens. No amount of statistical finessing helped bring the Henan sample in line with the general pattern: In multiple regression models that control for contextual characteristics, the Henan sample remains a significant outlier.²⁸ Moreover, level of industrialization, per capita GDP, proximity to urban areas, proximity to rail transportation, and other socioeconomic indicators, were unable to “explain away” the gap between the Henan sample and other samples with similar objective peasants' burdens (details not presented). The Henan sample's unpredictably alarmist perceptions of—and vehement reactions against—similar objective conditions motivated my search for answers in its local history. As we will see next, a local history of profound trauma helps reconcile otherwise implausibly high levels of popular contentiousness in the Henan sample.

***EXPLAINING THE ANOMALOUS CASE OF SOUTHEAST HENAN: “REMEMBERING”
THE GREAT LEAP FAMINE***

As we just saw, the survey data point to an unexpected outlier. I have already established that the Henan sample is an unpredictably extreme—i.e., an anomalous—case of discontent and disobedience. Because it violates general patterns, the case of southeast Henan merits deeper qualitative scrutiny. Its local history suggests that popular responses to contemporary taxation were shaped by the deadly consequences of an earlier agricultural tax: state grain levies during the Great Leap Forward.

In rural China, Great Leap policies, such as agricultural collectivization, close-cropping, backyard steel production, water infrastructural development (irrigation, dams, and reservoirs),

²⁸ See, for example, Ibid.

and communal dining, created political incentives for local cadres to increase grain procurement quotas despite real declines in agricultural productivity. Local cadres, under enormous political pressure to uphold dangerously flawed policies, exaggerated agricultural yields and, in so doing, separated peasants from their harvests. Because grain was procured according to fixed percentages of total output, inflated production targets often left dangerously low—or altogether insufficient—quantities of grain for peasants to eat.

Dali Yang makes the ironic argument that the areas of China that displayed the greatest political loyalty to the regime by most faithfully implementing campaign policies were, owing to the colossal death toll of the Great Leap Famine (GLF) caused by this misplaced loyalty, the quickest to abandon collectivist policies and to embrace household farming and the market in 1978, only two years following the death of Mao in 1976. Of all provinces in China, Anhui experienced the highest rates of GLF mortality. Mortality rate increases between 1956 and 1961 were greater in Anhui than in any other province, almost fivefold vis-à-vis pre-famine baseline estimates.²⁹ According to Cao Shuji, 18% of the total population of Anhui died as a direct consequence of the famine, a rate of excess mortality far higher than in any other province.³⁰ Yang argues that it was no coincidence that peasants and cadres in Anhui, having *learned* from extreme levels of GLF mortality to be averse to economic dependence on the state, spearheaded the nationwide process of decollectivization, market reform, and economic autonomy. In short, the local extent of GLF trauma helped determine the local extent of “propensity for reform.”³¹

While Yang traces the roots of reform successes in rural China to the GLF, I extend his argument by tracing the roots of reform-era discontent and resistance—one of the dark sides of

²⁹ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, p. 38.

³⁰ Cao Shuji, *Da Jihuang* (The Great Famine), Hong Kong: Time International Publishing Co., Ltd., 2005, 282.

³¹ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, Chapter 5. Also see Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*, pp. 140, 148.

reform—to the GLF. To the extent that the *lessons* of the GLF *taught* villagers in Anhui, more than anywhere else, to fear excessive agricultural taxation, it was no coincidence that here various tax reforms were launched by the central government in 1995, 1998, and 2000 in response to exceptionally heavy peasants’ burdens and the violent tax protests they spawned.³² Just as it created a propensity for reform, it stands to reason that distrust in the local state fostered by the GLF also created a “propensity for contention” and a “propensity for resistance” against taxation.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In support of my argument that GLF mortality produced such a propensity for contention, Table 2 shows that Henan Province’s Ru’nan County suffered more than any of the other five county samples: Given that Ru’nan County was part of the infamous “Xinyang Incident,” we should hardly be surprised that, by every measure (Columns C, D, and G), this county sample suffered greater famine-related losses than any other sample. In one village in Ru’nan, half the population reportedly starved to death.³³ Overall, an estimated 36,000 people—or just over 7% of the total population—were killed by the GLF in Ru’nan.³⁴ Ru’nan County was squarely at ground zero of the GLF disaster.

³² Ray Yep, “Can ‘Tax-for-Fee’ Reform Reduce Rural Tension in China? The Process, Progress and Limitations.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 177, 2004, 47-56; Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*, pp. 201-4; Aubert and Li, “‘Peasant Burden,’” p. 174; Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*, p. xxv; Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China*, pp. 216-7.

³³ Wemheuer, “Stone Noodles.” According to estimates reported by Dali Yang, the 1960 provincial mortality rate in Henan was 39.6 per 1,000. See Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, p. 38. However, since, to the best of my knowledge, no other estimate of mortality in Ru’nan exists aside from Wemheuer’s, for comparability purposes I use his provincial estimate of 25.6 per 1,000.

³⁴ Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 252; *Ru’nan Xian Zhi* (Ru’nan County Gazetteer), Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Guji Chubanshe, 1996, p. 162.

At the time of the GLF, Ru'nan County belonged to Xinyang Prefecture (see Figure 1). Only in 1965, when Xinyang was split into two prefectures, did jurisdiction over Ru'nan shift to Zhumadian Prefecture. Xinyang was a national model for collectivization and communization. It was the home of China's first People's Commune, established in 1958.³⁵ Framed as a greater achievement than the Soviet launching of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, establishing a People's Commune was called "launching a Sputnik." In 1958 China's first People's Commune, the Chayashan Sputnik Commune, was established in Suiping County, immediately adjacent to Ru'nan County.³⁶ As we can see in Figure 1, the Henan survey site is located only 65 kilometers away from Chayashan. Thanks to its claim on the first Sputnik Commune, Henan Province carried the "red banner of the Great Leap Forward."³⁷ In the wake of the GLF, about one-third of Chayashan's population died of famine-related causes.³⁸

There is no disagreement that Henan's Xinyang Prefecture was one of the worst epicenters of starvation following the failure of the rural GLF policies,³⁹ accounting for between 1 and 4 million excess deaths.⁴⁰ According to Cao Shuji, 1.26 million deaths in Xinyang were caused by the GLF. Expressed another way, an estimated 15% of the total population of Xinyang died as direct consequence of the GLF.⁴¹ According to other estimates, between 10% and 30%

³⁵ Zhang Shufan, "Xinyang Shijian: Yige Chentong de Lishi Jiaoxun" (The Xinyang Incident: A Bitter Historical Lesson), *Bai Nian Chao*, no. 6, 1998, p. 39; Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, New York: Owl Books, Henry Holt and Company, 1996, p. 113.

³⁶ Like Ru'nan, Suiping originally belonged to Xinyang Prefecture and, since 1965, has belonged to Zhumadian Prefecture.

³⁷ Li Rui, "Xinyang Shijian' Jiqi Jiaoxun" (The "Xinyang Incident" and Its Lessons), *Yan Huang Chun Qiu*, no. 4, 2002, p. 19; Jean-Luc Domenach, *The Origins of the Great Leap Forward: The Case of One Chinese Province*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995, pp. 142-4, 151.

³⁸ Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 128.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-29; Gene Hsin Chang and Guanzhong James Wen, "Communal Dining and the Chinese Famine of 1958-1961," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1997, p. 5; Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 128.

⁴¹ Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 263. For a similar estimate of at least 1 million, also see Ding, "Canjuerenhuan," p. 76. Cao Shuji aggregated his GLF mortality estimates to Qing dynasty prefectural boundaries. The boundaries of Xinyang

of the population in this prefecture starved to death.⁴² At the time, Xinyang was one of about 160 prefecture-level administrative units nationwide and one of six prefecture-level units in Henan Province. But this single prefecture, which accounted for one-fifth of Henan's population, accounted for almost half of Henan's excess deaths.⁴³ With just over 1% of the national population in 1957, this single prefecture may have accounted for 4% of all excess deaths nationwide.⁴⁴

Exaggerated reports of agricultural production, more than any other reason, separated villagers from their grain.⁴⁵ For Henan as a whole, because the 1959 grain harvest was about 20 billion catties but was reported as over 40 billion catties,⁴⁶ 37% of the actual harvest was levied.⁴⁷ Perhaps because expectations for the "red banner" of Xinyang were highest, harvest reports here were distorted to an even greater degree. In Xinyang, leaders exaggerated the 1959 grain harvest of barely 2 billion catties to one of over 7 billion catties.⁴⁸ Consequently, Xinyang Prefecture was devastated more than any other part of Henan province. Half the grain harvest in Xinyang was reportedly levied.⁴⁹ In Guangshan County, 120 kilometers southeast of Ru'nan County (see Figure 1), over 70% of the harvest was reportedly levied.⁵⁰ Although it belongs to the larger "Xinyang Incident," Guangshan County's colossal devastation has also been

Prefecture during the GLF are essentially identical to the combined boundaries of Guangzhou and Runing Prefectures of the late Qing dynasty.

⁴² Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 128.

⁴³ Ibid. Also see Wemheuer, "Stone Noodles"; Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Cao Shuji estimates that the GLF killed 32.45 million people nationwide. $1.26 \div 32.45 = 3.9\%$. Ibid., pp. 263, 282. Other estimates of the total number of deaths attributed to the GLF range from about 18 million to about 30 million. See Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, pp. 37-8; Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, pp. 266-74; Chang and Wen, "Communal Dining."

⁴⁵ Thomas P. Bernstein, "Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurement During the Great Leap Forward," *Theory and Society*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1984, 339-78.

⁴⁶ Li, "Xinyang Shijian," p. 20; Zhang, "Xinyang Shijian Jiemi," p. 41; Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 123-4.

⁴⁷ Ding Shu, "Canjuerenhuan de 'Xinyang Shijian'" (The Cruel "Xinyang Incident"), *Open Magazine*, no. 3, 2001, p. 75. 1 catty (*jin*) = 500 grams or 1.102 pounds. 1 metric ton = 2,000 catties.

⁴⁸ Zhang, "Xinyang Shijian," pp. 40-1.

⁴⁹ Ding, "Canjuerenhuan," p. 76.

⁵⁰ Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 113.

documented as the “Guangshan Incident.” All told, about an estimated 130,000-150,000 people in Guangshan (or over one-fourth of the total population) died between 1959 and 1960.⁵¹ In some parts of Guangshan two-thirds of the population reportedly died.⁵²

But exaggerated reporting was not the only cause of excess mortality. Grain reserves were quickly consumed by mess halls that produced a “tragedy of the commons” phenomenon: People ate more in communal dining halls than they had at home.⁵³ In Xinyang as a whole there was only enough food for four months; in Guangshan County, food ran out even quicker, in three months. Many mess halls stopped cooking by the end of 1959 because they had run out of food.⁵⁴ An economist recalled his trip to Ru’nan County at the time:

[A] team of 13 investigators went to Henan Province’s glorious commune in Ru’nan County....They saw for themselves the serious consequences of pushing forward the extreme left line, of blowing the “Communist wind”: At first people stretched their stomachs by stuffing themselves with food. But it was not long before food ran out, after which they had no choice but to eat yams. Many people’s faces bloated with edema. What kind of “Communism” was this?⁵⁵

⁵¹ Yongshun Cai, “Between State and Peasant: Local Cadres and Statistical Reporting in Rural China,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 163, 2000, p. 785; *Guangshan Xian Zhi* (Guangshan County Gazetteer), Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Guji Chubanshe, 1991, 468.

⁵² Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, p. 128. Also see Zhang Chong, “Xinyang Shijian Jiemi” (Exposing the Xinyang Incident), *Dang Shi Tiandi*, no. 4, 2004, p. 40.

⁵³ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*; Chang and Wen, “Communal Dining”; Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China’s Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 73.

⁵⁴ Ding, “Canjuerenhuan,” p. 76.

⁵⁵ Yang Jianwen, “Yong Wenyuan: Shehuizhuyi Zhengzhi Jingjixue Tansuoze” (Yong Wenyuan: Explorer of the Socialist Political Economy), *Shanghai Jingji Yanjiu*, no. 8, 1995, p. 41. In Guangdong, “When the rice was gone, the villagers had only the sweet potatoes and cassava to fall back on....Their stomachs and bodies began to swell from malnutrition.” Potter and Potter, *China’s Peasants*, p. 73. In Fujian, “Each family was left to find its own food between fall 1959 and the next harvest of sweet potatoes at the end of that year.” Shu-min Huang, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village Through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989, p. 61.

All the foregoing problems were aggravated by relatively unfavorable weather conditions in 1959.⁵⁶ However, at the root of the famine was a combination of exaggerated harvest statistics—leading to the excessive levying of grain—and local government leaders’ systematic suppression of information about the true human consequences of their actions.⁵⁷

The Great Leap Famine Elsewhere in Rural China

To be sure, Henan Province’s Xinyang Prefecture was not the only part of rural China decimated by the GLF. Indeed, Yang characterizes the three provinces of Henan, Anhui, and Sichuan as “vanguards of Great Leap radicalism...”⁵⁸ In terms of absolute mortality, Sichuan Province, to which the Zhong County survey sample belonged at the time of the GLF, accounted for more deaths than any other province. As much as 13% of the entire population of Sichuan, by far China’s largest province before Chongqing became a separate administrative unit in 1997, died because of the GLF.⁵⁹ Although, at the time, Sichuan accounted for about 11% of China’s total population, Cao Shuji’s estimate of 9.4 million excess deaths in Sichuan represents 29% of his estimated 32.5 million famine-related deaths nationwide,⁶⁰ while Chang and Wen’s estimate of 8.2 million excess deaths in Sichuan represents 45% of their estimated 18.4 million deaths nationwide.⁶¹ Consistent with this grim picture of the famine in Sichuan, GLF-related mortality in the Zhong County survey sample was not far behind that of Ru’nan County (see Table 2). “Jung [Zhong] County had also suffered badly. According to one person who had lived there, the population was 800,000 in 1960, but so many died during those difficult times that by 1970 the

⁵⁶ Domenach, *The Origins*, p. 144-5.

⁵⁷ Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza, and Robin Zeitz, “Famine in China, 1958-61,” *Population and Development Review*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1984, pp. 630-1; Huang, *The Spiral Road*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, p. 143.

⁵⁹ Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 282.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Chang and Wen, “Communal Dining,” pp. 24-6.

population had still not been restored to that level. In that county there was said to have been cannibalism.”⁶²

If the GLF was similarly devastating in both Zhong and Ru’nan, why was the level of discontent and disobedience so much greater in Ru’nan than in Zhong? The answer, of course, lies in the magnitude of peasants’ burdens in Zhong County: As we saw in Table 1, at 6.6%, the tax rate in Zhong was less than half of Ru’nan’s 14.1% (Table 1) and not much greater than the official statutory limit of 5%. As we can also see in Table 1, despite their calamitous local history, villagers in Zhong County were not terribly deprived in terms of taxation, were not terribly discontent in terms of their evaluations of village government and its leaders, and were not terribly disobedient in terms of tax resistance and petitioning.

Thus, in the case of southeast Henan, the trauma of the GLF appears to have *catalyzed* otherwise unremarkable levels of taxation into truly remarkable levels of popular contention. By contrast, villagers in the Hunan sample were predictably discontent and disobedient in the face of their extraordinarily heavy tax burdens. Put another way, because GLF mortality levels were comparatively modest in the Hunan sample, villagers here were also comparatively tolerant of their extraordinarily heavy tax burdens. In short, we can more completely explain variation in the degree of popular contentiousness by considering both the degree of objective deprivation and the local history experiences that condition responses to objective conditions.

At the other end of the GLF mortality spectrum is Shaanxi Province’s Hengshan County. It is noteworthy that the Hengshan sample appears almost entirely unscathed by the GLF. In sharp contrast to official gazetteers from the other counties in which population declines are reported, the official Hengshan County gazetteer describes only “a decline in population

⁶² Miriam London and Ivan D. London, “The Other China: Hunger: Part I: The Three Red Flags of Death,” *Worldview*, vol. 19, no. 5, 1976, 8.

growth.”⁶³ Indeed, as we can see in Table 2, Hengshan’s population continued to grow throughout the Great Leap. This remarkable distinction can be attributed to popular resistance against Great Leap policies. In 1958 all six counties included in the survey established communes and opened mess halls in accordance with central directives. According to information reported in official county gazetteers, with the exception of Hengshan, all of the five other counties surveyed shut down their mess halls in 1960 (Jimo) and 1961 (Yuanjiang, Taicang, Zhong, and Ru’nan). In Hengshan, by contrast, “Peasants were unhappy [with the mess halls] because they seriously wasted food. They were closed the following year [in 1959].”⁶⁴ In the province as a whole, Shaanxi accounted for 2.9% of China’s population in 1957 but only about 0.5% of excess deaths from the GLF; probably no more than 1.0% of the provincial population died of famine-related causes.⁶⁵

Additional Sources of Historical Trauma in Southeast Henan

In Henan’s Ru’nan County, the lessons of the GLF were reinforced by two additional large-scale disasters caused by the failings and misdeeds of local government leaders: the Zhumadian flood caused by the collapse of the Banqiao Dam in 1975 and the HIV/AIDS epidemic caused by semi-official blood-selling outfits in the mid-1990s.

The Zhumadian flood of 1975 represents the largest dam failure in human history. Ironically the construction of the dams and reservoirs that failed had begun during the Great Leap as part of “Harness the Huai River” waterworks projects.⁶⁶ In early August 1975, a freak

⁶³ *Hengshan Xian Zhi* (Hengshan County Gazetteer), Xi’an: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1989, 120.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Chang and Wen, “Communal Dining,” pp. 24-6; Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 282.

⁶⁶ Yi Si, “The World’s Most Catastrophic Dam Failures: The August 1975 Collapse of the Banqiao and Shimantan Dams,” in *The River Dragon Has Come! The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China’s Yangtze River and Its People*, edited by Dai Qing, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998, 30-1.

typhoon producing torrential rains of historically unprecedented proportions strained this system of dams and reservoirs. Shortly after the Shimantan Dam broke, the much larger Banqiao Dam 30 kilometers to the south burst open, unleashing a torrent of 600 million cubic meters of water. A “wall of water six meters high and 12 kilometers wide” rushed into the Ru River (a tributary of the Huai River) and directly into the heart of Ru’nan County (see Figure 1). These breaches triggered a domino effect of dam failures. Within three days 62 dams and water reservoirs had collapsed. The result was a “300- by 150-kilometer lake” in the middle of Zhumadian Prefecture,⁶⁷ an area over 300 times larger than the submerged areas of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina precisely 30 years later.⁶⁸ Suiping County, the home of China’s first Sputnik Commune, was closer to the Banqiao Dam and was deluged before the swollen Ru River wreaked havoc on Ru’nan County. The villages in the Henan survey site are a mere four to six kilometers from the Ru River. One of the most important railway lines in China—the Jing-Guang line connecting Beijing and Guangzhou (see Figure 1)—was severed for 18 days.⁶⁹ Altogether, an estimated 230,000 people died during the flood and in its aftermath, although the official death count, limited to drowning deaths immediately following the flood, is a much smaller “over 26,000,” a downward revision from an earlier official death toll of 85,600.⁷⁰ An additional 11 million people were affected by disease and famine, and almost 60,000 buildings collapsed.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁸ The widely reported “80 percent of the city [New Orleans] is under water” is equivalent to about 144 square miles, or 373 square kilometers, less than 1% of the 45,000 square kilometers submerged in Zhumadian. John Schwartz, Andrew C. Revkin, and Matthew L. Wald. 2005. “In Reviving New Orleans, a Challenge of Many Tiers,” *The New York Times* 12 September, 2005, p.A13; Qian Gang, “1975 Nian Zhumadian Shuiku Kui Ba Shijian” (The 1975 Incident of the Breach of the Zhumadian Water Reservoir,” *Nanfang Zhoumo*, no. 1125 (25 August 2005).

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷⁰ Ibid.; Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*, Updated Edition. London: Zed Books, 2001, p. 115.

⁷¹ Qian, “1975 Nian Zhumadian Shuiku.”

Because of its poverty, villagers this part of Henan for decades had relied on extra income from selling their blood. In the mid-1990s a new technique was developed to extract plasma.⁷² Blood collection stations would often sort sellers into groups of the same blood type, feed their mixed blood together into a plasma-extraction machine, and then pump their mixed blood back into their bodies in order to allow them to sell their blood more frequently. Owing to this perilous method of selling blood, HIV-positive intravenous drug users traveling through Henan who sold their blood sparked an epidemic of HIV infections in the mid-1990s.⁷³

So-called “AIDS villages” are concentrated in the counties of Zhumadian Prefecture that formerly belonged to Xinyang Prefecture during the GLF. Villages in the nearby townships surrounding Shangcai’s county seat are known as “ground-zero for China’s HIV/AIDS epidemic.”⁷⁴ One of the most widely covered “AIDS villages,” Wenlou Village, located in Lugang Township, is only about 30 kilometers from the Ru’nan survey site (see Figure 1). According to local lore, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Henan originated from Ru’nan County because this is where the blood-selling activities were earliest.⁷⁵ A so-called “disaster zone of blood-selling” spans the southwestern portion of Shangcai County and the northeastern portion of Ru’nan County that includes the survey site. No different from the “Xinyang Incident” of the GLF and no different from the Zhumadian flood of 1975, local government officials were at the root of the HIV/AIDS outbreak in Henan. Many plasma-collection stations were lawful, semi-

⁷² John Pomfret, “The High Cost of Selling Blood: As AIDS Crisis Looms in China, Official Response Is Lax,” *The Washington Post*, 11 January 2001, A01; David Hsieh, “Chinese Media Portrays ‘Aids Villages,’” *The Straits Times*, 29 September 2001, A13.

⁷³ Joan Kaufman and Kathrine Meyers, “AIDS Surveillance in China: Data Gaps and Research for AIDS Policy,” in *AIDS and Social Policy in China*, edited by Joan Kaufman, Arthur Kleinman, and Tony Saich, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006, p. 50; Ann S. Anagnost, “Strange Circulations: The Blood Economy in Rural China,” *Economy and Society*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2006, 509-29.

⁷⁴ Vivien Cui, “Aids Activist Stabbed After Corruption Claim.” *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2006, 6.

⁷⁵ Wan Yanhai, “Jiankang Bao: Henan Renmin Jiankang de Zhexiubu” (Health Report: The Health G-String of the People of Henan), report dated 1 January 2001, accessed 11 October 2006 from <<http://www.aizhi.org/news/jkb2.htm>>, on file with author.

official operations that enjoyed the support of local government officials and state hospitals.⁷⁶ Little wonder that AIDS activist Wan Yanhai calls Henan's HIV/AIDS crisis the "Great Leap Forward of blood donation."⁷⁷

COLLECTIVE LEARNING IN THEORETICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

What does it mean to "remember" history? What does it mean to "learn" from history? Dali Yang, in explaining regional variation in support for market reforms, focuses on the "cognitive impact of the famine", the cognitive process of learning from past trauma. The causal mechanism at the center of the empirical relationship between the GLF of 1958-61 and the "propensity for reform" in the late 1970s and early 1980s is the "collective memory of its population, including the leadership."⁷⁸ Other research on collective memories of the GLF likewise tends to focus on conscious, communicative memory.⁷⁹ Beyond the specific case of the GLF, research on the relationship between collective memories of socialism and reform-era discontent and contention among Chinese urban industrial workers, too, conceptualizes memory in discursive terms.⁸⁰

Outside the China field, too, most research on collective memory privileges its reflective and

⁷⁶ Kaufman and Meyers, "AIDS Surveillance in China," p. 50; Philip P. Pan, "China Meets AIDS Crisis with Force: Police, Not Physicians, Answer Villagers' Pleas," *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2003, A01.

⁷⁷ Wan, "Jiankang Bao."

⁷⁸ Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, pp. 134, 291n51.

⁷⁹ Erik Mueggler, "Spectral Chains: Remembering the Great Leap Forward Famine in a Yi Community," in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, edited by China Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, 50-68; Kimberley Ens Manning, "Communes, Canteens, and Crèches: The Gendered Politics of Remembering the Great Leap Forward," in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, edited by China Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, 93-118; Ralph Thaxton, *Hidden Crisis: Memory, Voice, and Contention in the Aftermath of the Catastrophe of Maoist Rule*, n.d., unpublished manuscript; Wemheuer, "Stone Noodles"; Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, 69-70.

⁸⁰ Ching Kwan Lee, "The 'Revenge of History': Collective Memories and Labor Protests in North-Eastern China," *Ethnography*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2000, 217-37; Timothy B. Weston, "The Iron Man Weeps: Joblessness and Political Legitimacy in the Chinese Rust Belt," in *State and Society in 21st-century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*, edited by Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, 67-86; William Hurst, "Understanding Contentious Collective Action by Chinese Laid-Off Workers: The Importance of Regional Political Economy," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2004, 94-120.

communicative character. Collective memory is commonly conceptualized as *discursive memory*, memory consciously transmitted and received through linguistic communication. Past events are remembered through personal and second-hand experiences that circulate and persist in popular discourse, and such memories are often reproduced through commemorative ritual. Sociological research on “memory projects” focuses on deliberate efforts to shape and contest the meaning of past events through public commemoration.⁸¹

In contrast to this common conceptual understanding, collective memory is also conceptualized as unconscious and noncommunicative. Research also shows that past events can remain salient and palpable even if conscious memories of them fade and are elusive to the outside observer. History is not limited to past events constituted through discursive memory, but also includes past events constituted through unconscious practices, habits, and performance. Past events may have been discursively forgotten by those who nonetheless preserve their practical salience through performative bodily practices and habits. Research from elsewhere in time and place shows that past events supply social cues eliciting patterns of behavior among people who have forgotten the source of such cues. Past events provide lenses through which current events are interpreted and understood, or “schema through which the outside world is filtered” even if the people influenced by them are not consciously aware of their sources.⁸² History may be behaviorally manifested even if it is not cognitively manifested. Rosalind Shaw, drawing on both Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Giddens’ concept of practical consciousness, develops the concept of *practical memory* to explain the enduring day-to-day significance of the

⁸¹ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 71, no. 5, 2006, 724-51; Robert S. Jansen, “Resurrection and Appropriation: Reputational Trajectories, Memory Work, and the Political Use of Historical Figures,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 112, no. 4, 2007, 953-1007; Lyn Spillman and Brian Conway, “Texts, Bodies, and the Memory of Bloody Sunday,” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, 79-103.

⁸² Jennifer Cole, “The Work of Memory in Madagascar,” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1998, 627.

slave trade in Sierre Leone well over a century after it ended.⁸³ Practical memory is the durable, performative manifestation of history. It is unconscious habit shaped by past events. Practical memory, like habitus, is “embodied history internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history...”⁸⁴

Similar to the concept of practical memory is the concept of *bodily memory*. Also rooted in Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, bodily memory is both unconscious and shapes behavioral responses to social circumstances. “Bodily memory produces bodily behaviors elicited by social cues and contexts.” It consists of “...mannerisms learned and executed, seemingly automatically upon social cue.”⁸⁵ Although these concepts apply to a variety of cases and contexts, they are particularly applicable to violent historical events, to “painful, difficult traces of the past” that under ordinary circumstances are often invisible in popular consciousness and popular discourse.⁸⁶ In Madagascar, despite a deep colonial history and the brutal suppression of an anticolonial rebellion that killed 2% of the population in 1947, colonialism is “not evident in local discourse.”⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the legacy of colonialism resurfaced when electoral politics in the early 1990s “reminded” people of earlier colonial politics. People associated the political shenanigans of the elections with the treachery of colonial rule. “What the elections revealed was that while memory of colonialism was virtually absent from everyday life, it was clearly and powerfully evoked by the practices of government officials.”⁸⁸ Thus, key to the concepts of

⁸³ Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Chicago, 2002.

⁸⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990, 56; cited in Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, p. 68.

⁸⁵ Sandra Soo-Jin Lee, “Dys-appearing Tongues and Bodily Memories: The Aging of First-Generation Resident Koreans in Japan,” *Ethos*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2000, 206.

⁸⁶ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ Cole, “The Work of Memory in Madagascar,” p. 611. Also see Jennifer Cole, *Forget Colonialism? Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

⁸⁸ Cole, “The Work of Memory in Madagascar,” p. 618.

practical memory and bodily memory is the enduring practical significance of memories of past events that ordinarily lie dormant and elusive.

It follows from the foregoing that we should not be surprised if memories of the GLF continue to shape social and political behavior in rural China even if they are not disseminated discursively. In China there is virtually no public discussion of the GLF, much less a “memory project” dedicated to its commemoration. Even more surprising is the apparently limited amount of private discussion of the GLF. To be sure, research has repeatedly shown lively, vigorous, communicative memories of the GLF within the afflicted cohort of aging people who survived it. However, the extent to which and the means by which memories of the GLF are transmitted across age cohorts (“vicarious memory”⁸⁹) remain poorly understood.

Informal interviews conducted in 2006 and 2007 with several people from villages in Henan Province’s Zhumadian Prefecture (which formerly belonged to Xinyang Prefecture) suggest that discursive memories of the GLF may have faded. Interview subjects born after the GLF not only reported rarely participating in or overhearing conversations about the GLF, but also reported a surprising degree of nostalgia for the past. They tended to downplay the trauma of the GLF in order to highlight their discontent with current-day leaders. Instead of linking their mistrust of contemporary local leaders to the harm inflicted by leaders of the past, as I had expected, several made the surprising assertion that local leaders of the GLF-era were comparatively honest.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Jacob J. Climo, “Prisoners of Silence: A Vicarious Holocaust Memory,” in *The Labyrinth of Memory: Ethnographic Journeys*, edited by Marea C. Teski and Jacob J. Climo, Westport, CT and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995, 175-84; Iwao Ishino, “Memories and Their Unintended Consequences,” in *The Labyrinth of Memory: Ethnographic Journeys*, edited by Marea C. Teski and Jacob J. Climo, Westport, CT and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995, 185-201.

⁹⁰ I would like to thank Han Heng of Zhengzhou University and Shao Jing of Nanjing University for their assistance with these interviews.

Among even younger research subjects the situation is even more remarkable. According to a survey conducted in August 2005 of 184 high-school students in two schools in Zhumadian Prefecture, 171 (or 93%) answered “don’t know” to a question asking about their knowledge of the “Xinyang Incident.” Among the very few respondents who indicated possessing historical knowledge, several supplied factually incorrect information, such as “Anti-Japanese War,” “Cultural Revolution,” and “Falun Gong.” In October 2005 the author of the study conducted a separate survey of 41 high-school students in a school in Xinyang Prefecture after changing the wording of the question to an idiomatic euphemism for the famine: “crossing the grain threshold” (*guo liangshi guan*). Although 29, or 71%, of the respondents knew the meaning of this expression, not a single respondent attributed the famine to wily local state cadres who often used violent tactics to enforce Great Leap policies.⁹¹

Nonetheless, practical memories of the GLF may persist even if discursive memories of it are fading. It remains entirely possible that “...the collective memory of the Great Famine stayed alive without being elevated to the level of communicative memory.”⁹² Even if they lack discursive knowledge of the GLF, younger cohorts may still be learning from the GLF in a practical sense.

While I use GLF mortality to help explain variation in contemporary popular contention, Cao Shuji uses sources of large-scale mortality from the 19th century to explain variation in GLF mortality. According to his concept of *historical memory*, past disasters in China taught people to

⁹¹ Liu Baojun, “Guanyu ‘Da Jihuang’ de Guanfang Jishu Yu Minjian Jiyi: Yi ‘Xinyang Shijian’ Wei Li” (Official Narratives and Popular Memories of the “Great Famine”: The Case of the “Xinyang Incident”), M.A. Thesis, Nanjing University, Department of Sociology, 2006, 34-6.

⁹² Susan Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Trauma and Memory: The Case of the Great Famine in the People’s Republic of China (1959-1961),” *Historiography East & West*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, 51. Also see Vaclav Smil, “China’s Great Famine: 40 Years Later,” *BMJ*, vol. 319, 1999, 1620-1.

attach greater value to human life, to have greater respect for grain, and hence to resist Great Leap policies.

So-called “historical memory” refers to memory of past disasters hidden deeply in people’s psyches that in turn shape their responses to disasters. This factor had a huge influence on regional variation in [GLF] mortality...In 1958 all regions were subjected to similar amounts of political pressure. In regions that had experienced famines, the importance people attached to grain was vastly greater than in regions that had not experience famines, not only in the general population but also among local state cadres. Consequently, rarely in these regions were harvests exaggerated, and if there was exaggeration, it was within certain limits. The great importance ordinary people attached to grain stemmed from their memories of famines. This factor successfully dissipated pressure from higher levels of government.⁹³

Thus, placed against a deeper historical backdrop, the rejection of Great Leap policies and low levels of mortality in Shaanxi Province’s Hengshan County become more intelligible: Between the 1850s and the 1870s, an estimated 7.1 million people in Shaanxi, or over half of its total population, perished in wars and famines. Between 1928 and 1930 an estimated 3 million in Shaanxi died in famines caused by drought.⁹⁴ According to the Hengshan County Gazetteer, the total county population declined by over 30% between 1823 and 1911, from 97,653 to 67,659.⁹⁵ Also consistent with this conceptualization of memory and learning, the southeast parts of Henan Province that so enthusiastically embraced the Great Leap with such dire consequence were not affected by a massive drought-induced famine in 1876-78 that killed an estimated 7.5 million people in Henan. The 1876-78 famine was limited to the northern parts of Henan Province that,

⁹³ Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 294.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁹⁵ *Hengshan Xian Zhi*, p. 119.

perhaps owing to enduring historical memory of this trauma, sustained far lower levels of GLF mortality.⁹⁶

In sum, collective learning encompasses both cognitive and reflexive—conscious and unconscious—processes. It includes the cognitive process of attribution and prescription (both collectively and individually in the aggregate) on the basis of historical experiences that persist and circulate in popular discourse. That is, past experience serves as a lens or a filter through which people consciously and cognitively assess the risks and dangers of current events and the appropriateness of competing responses. But even if current events do not resonate cognitively with discursive memory, they may resonate viscerally with practical memory. Practical memory also shapes behavior through unconscious social conditioning in a Pavlovian sense, through unreflective social osmosis or mimicry. People learn to fear and distrust government in different ways. Fear and distrust are states that can be induced through cognitive thought processes. But they are also seemingly primordial states culturally inherited from preceding age cohorts.⁹⁷ Thus, the concept of collective learning is convenient shorthand (an omnibus concept) for cultural transmission when the specific mechanism is either unspecified or unknown, or both. It helps me explain the contentiousness of responses to current events in terms of memories of past trauma while allowing me to remain agnostic on the conceptual definition of collective memory.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Prior to the abolishment of agricultural taxes in 2006, “peasants’ burdens” in China were heavy, regressive, and strongly associated with deprivation, discontent, and disobedience. However, claims were not asserted uniformly even under similar objective conditions of deprivation.

⁹⁶ Cao, *Da Jihuang*, p. 290.

⁹⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

Villagers in southeast Henan reacted vehemently against increasing tax burdens in the 1990s by somehow drawing an association—consciously or unconsciously—with the deadliest agricultural taxes in human history, the grain levies at the root of the GLF. In the 1990s, by deliberately exaggerating average household income levels, local officials extracted higher levies and fees from villagers.⁹⁸ From villagers’ standpoint, taxation in the post-Mao reform era may have resembled the Mao-era GLF pattern of tricky accounting and misleading statistical reporting. Consistent with the findings I have reported in this paper, in areas less deeply affected by the GLF, this association was weaker and therefore spawned less contentious reactions. Villagers in southeast Henan Province appear to have “learned” from the GLF and remain fearful and distrustful of local officeholders. Whether they were conscious of it or not, tax-collection practices in southeast Henan may have triggered earlier “memories” of the deaths of their children, parents, grandparents, and neighbors. The 1975 flood and the more recent HIV/AIDS crisis caused by blood-selling may have reinforced popular fear and distrust of the local state.

I analyzed qualitative historical evidence in an effort to explain the seemingly anomalous case of southeast Henan. In statistical terms, historical evidence helps account for unexplained variance in the survey data. Variation in historical experiences explains otherwise anomalous variation in outcomes. In short, once we take local historical experience into consideration, southeast Henan no longer appears anomalous. A variant of the classical “method of difference” approach, this particular analytical strategy is also known as “deviant case analysis” or “anomalous case analysis.” Because the case with the *different* set of historical experiences is precisely the case with the *different* outcomes, I conclude that the outcomes are causally related to historical factors. By identifying previously unobserved explanatory variables, anomalous case

⁹⁸ Bernstein and Lü, *Taxation*, p. 95.

analysis is often used to build and to refine theoretical models.⁹⁹ In this paper, the payoff from this analytical strategy is the identification of local history as a necessary ingredient of theoretical explanations of variation in popular responses to similar objective conditions.

In order to understand contemporary contention, we need to understand how contextually specific historical events shape the popular definition of problems and the popular assertion of claims. Local historical variation helps explain local variation in the definition of and responses to similar objective conditions. While the findings I have reported in this paper strongly suggest that past events shape popular responses to current events, it remains the task of future research to specify more precisely how historical events constitute—and are constituted by—contemporary popular contention.

It has not been my task in this paper to problematize or explain the social construction of events as traumatic in the first place.¹⁰⁰ Instead, my conceptual definition of *trauma* privileges objective measures of suffering. However, future ethnographic study of how historical events in rural China are perceived as traumatic and of how past trauma helps frame and shape perceptions of new events promises to contribute to sociological research on trauma and collective memory. Future ethnographic research also promises to disentangle genuinely collective processes from individual and household processes that, in the aggregate, have collective consequences.¹⁰¹ To be sure, memories of trauma are direct and personal (individual) as well as indirect and vicarious (collective). But only through future research will we better understand the relative importance of—and dialectical interplay between—group and individual dynamics.

⁹⁹ Rebecca Jean Emigh, “The Power of Negative Thinking: The Use of Negative Case Methodology in the Development of Sociological Theory,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 26, no. 5, 1997, 649-84; Lisa D. Pearce, “Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Integrating Survey and Ethnographic Methods for Systematic Anomalous Case Analysis,” *Sociological Methodology*, vol. 32, 2002, 103-32.

¹⁰⁰ See Jeffrey C. Alexander, Neil J. Smelser, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

¹⁰¹ See Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1999, 333-48.

My research underscores the fruits of combing survey research and ethnography. The fit between survey evidence on popular claims-making and historical evidence on traumatic events demonstrates the theoretical payoff from combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Had we not gone beyond the survey data we would have missed the local historical experiences crucial to explaining regional variation in response to similar objective conditions. At the same time, had we not started with survey data we would not have known where to look for traumatic historical events. Thus, Michael Burawoy's "extended case method"—by which existing theoretical explanations are reconstructed through the ethnographic exploration of subjective meanings and local practices—can be fruitfully pursued after one or more cases are selected through survey methods.¹⁰²

On a more substantive note, prospects for popular contention in the wake of universal tax relief in 2006 are mixed: On the one hand, by alleviating objective deprivation, the abolishment of agricultural taxes may serve to reduce the subjective discontent and behavioral disobedience we observed in this paper. On the other hand, the loss of an essential source of revenue has critically compromised the local state's ability to provide public goods, very likely introducing or exacerbating alternative sources of discontent and disobedience.¹⁰³ Furthermore, as we saw, taxation was not the only problem of salience to China's villagers; they were discontent and petitioned for reasons other than taxation, including land expropriation. Insofar as local state cadres try to fill their budget shortfalls through "land grabs," by buying land from peasants at

¹⁰² Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1998, 4-33.

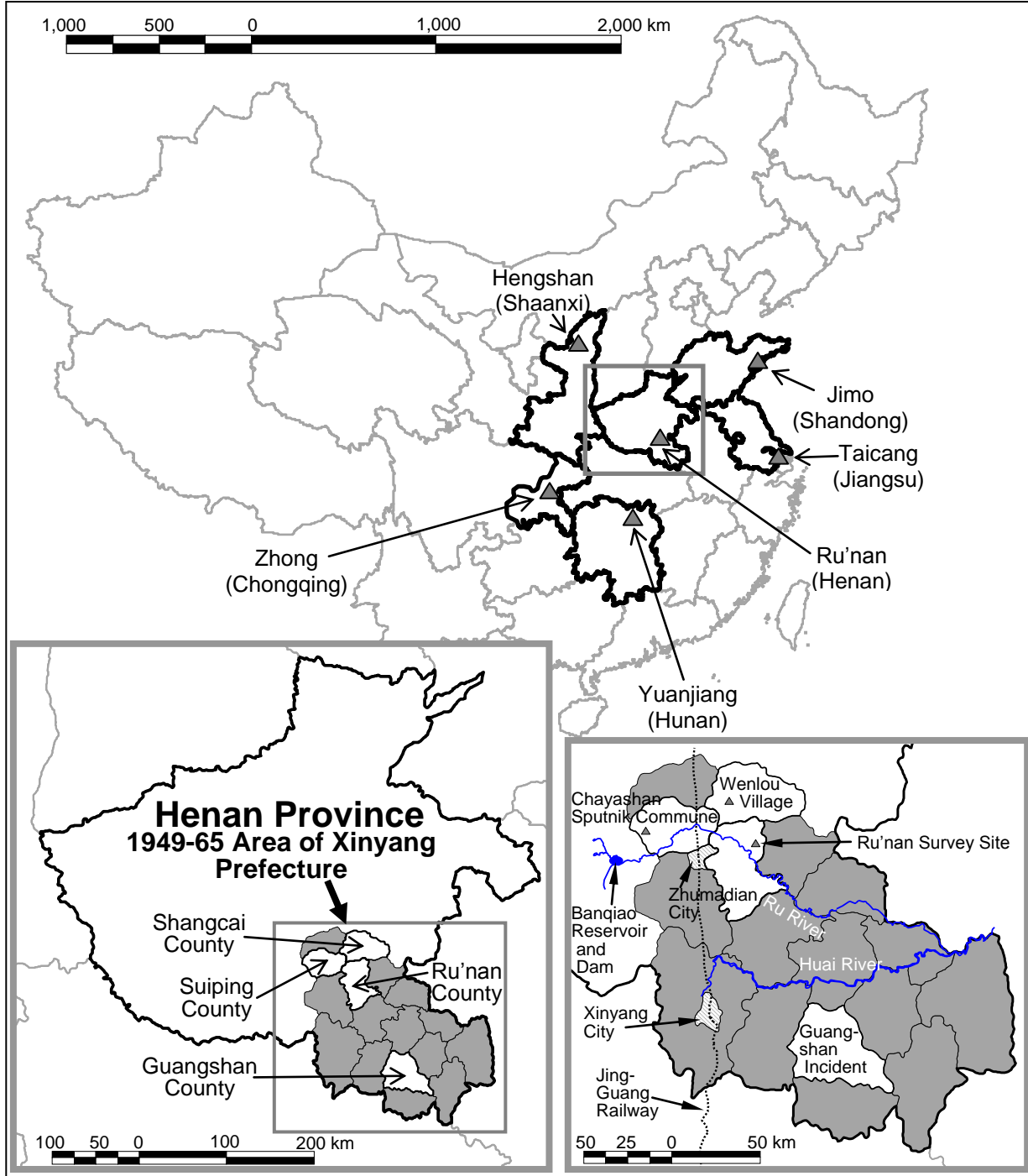
¹⁰³ Kennedy, "From the Fee-for-Tax Reform"; Yep, "Can 'Tax-for-Fee' Reform."

low prices and selling it to urban real estate developers for huge profits,¹⁰⁴ the abolishment of taxes may do little to solve the problem of deprivation, discontent, and deprivation in rural China.

¹⁰⁴ Eva Pils, "Land Disputes, Rights Assertion, and Social Unrest in China: A Case from Sichuan." *Columbia Journal of Asian Law*, vol. 19, 2005, 235-92; Kathy Le Mons Walker, "'Gangster Capitalism' and Peasant Protest in China: The Last Twenty Years," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 33, 2006, 1-33.

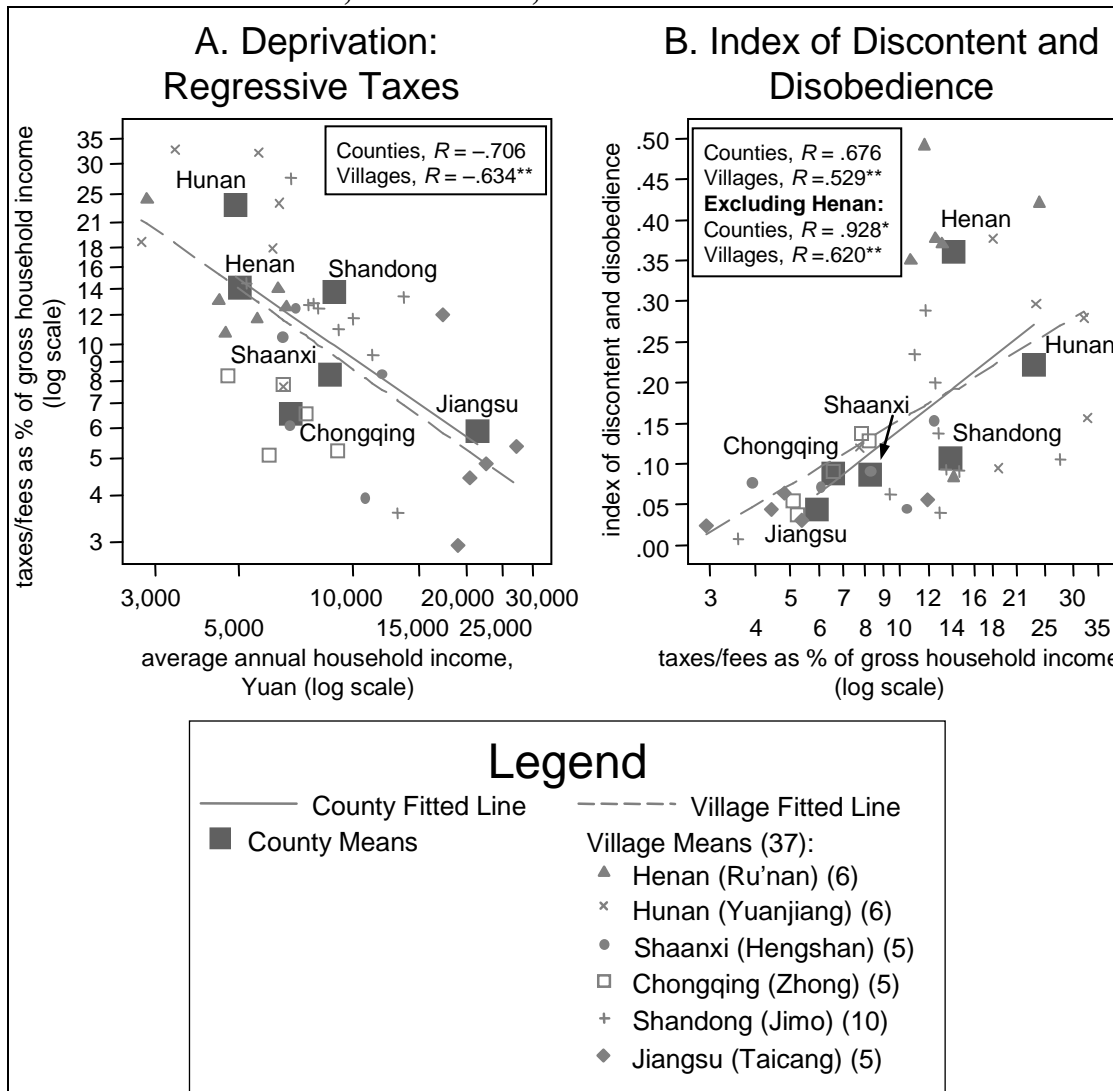
FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1. Survey Sites with Insets of Henan Province and Xinyang and Zhumadian Prefectures



Note: The selected portion of Henan Province in the insets depicts the 17 counties that comprised Xinyang Prefecture during the GLF, 8 of which became part of Zhumadian Prefecture in 1965.

Figure 2. Scatterplots of Objective Deprivation, Subjective Discontent, and Behavioral Disobedience, Rural China, 2002



Note: * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .001$.

Table 1. Indicators of Objective Deprivation, Subjective Discontent, and Behavioral Disobedience, Rural China, 2002

	Objective Deprivation	Subjective Discontent			Behavioral Disobedience		G. index of discontent and disobedience (average of B-F)
	A.	B.	C.	D.	E.	F.	
county	average tax/fee rate	reported agricultural tax grievance	disrespectful of villagers' committee cadres	dissatisfaction with villagers' committee	tax evasion	petitioning higher authorities	
Jiangsu (Taicang)	5.9%	2.6%	3.8%	3.4%	5.0%	6.8%	4.3
Shaanxi (Hengshan)	8.3%	6.2%	12.2%	6.4%	8.4%	10.4%	8.7
Chongqing (Zhong)	6.6%	11.5%	16.9%	6.3%	2.5%	6.6%	8.8
Shandong (Jimo)	13.7%	2.6%	20.3%	12.9%	7.8%	9.6%	10.6
Hunan (Yuanjiang)	23.4%	31.2%	29.1%	18.8%	19.8%	12.2%	22.2
Henan (Ru'nan)	14.1%	41.3%	50.3%	47.5%	19.9%	21.6%	36.1
TOTAL	11.9%	16.4%	22.2%	16.1%	10.7%	11.2%	15.3
N	2,879	2,902	2,806	2,782	2,877	2,902	n/a

Note: County samples listed in reverse chronological order according to “index of discontent and disobedience.”

Table 2. Demographic Consequences of the GLF, Six Counties, China

	mortality rate			D. 1959-61 excess deaths as a percentage of 1957 population	rate of natural increase (RNI)			H. index of GLF mortality (average of C, D, and G)
	A. 1957, 1962	B. 1959- 1961	C. percentage change		E. 1957, 1962	F. 1959- 1961	G. point change	
Shaanxi (Hengshan)	10.8‰	7.8‰	-27.8%	-1.0%	31.7‰	22.8‰	8.9‰	-6.6
Jiangsu (Taicang)	13.8‰	16.4‰	18.8%	1.2%	14.4‰	0.2‰	14.2‰	11.4
Hunan (Yuanjiang)	10.0‰	19.0‰	90.0%	5.1%	29.7‰	-1.4‰	31.1‰	42.1
Shandong (Jimo)	14.2‰	38.0‰	167.6%	6.5%	27.1‰	-15.4‰	42.4‰	72.2
Chongqing (Zhong)	12.7‰	38.5‰	203.1%	7.1%	25.4‰	-24.9‰	50.3‰	86.8
Henan (Ru'nan)	11.7‰	35.9‰	206.8%	7.3%	34.5‰	-21.8‰	56.3‰	90.1
TOTAL	12.6‰	30.4‰	141.3%	5.6%	26.1‰	-12.4‰	38.5‰	61.8

Note: County samples listed in reverse chronological order according to demographic impact of the GLF. “1959-61 excess deaths as a percentage of 1957 population” for Taicang, Yuanjiang, and Ru’nan calculated using data in Cao (2005). Values for the remaining three counties calculated using methods that replicate Cao’s applied to data published in county gazetteers. The RNI is defined as the number of births minus the number of deaths as a proportion of the population.

Appendix

Table A1. Correlation Coefficients for Indicators of Subjective Discontent and Behavioral Disobedience

		B.	C.	D.	E.	F.
B. reported agricultural tax grievance	counties	1.000				
	villages	1.000				
C. disrespectful of villagers' committee cadres	counties	.912**	1.000			
	villages	.485**	1.000			
D. dissatisfaction with villagers' committee	counties	.880*	.969***	1.000		
	villages	.611***	.860***	1.000		
E. tax evasion	counties	.889*	.823*	.808*	1.000	
	villages	.733***	.111	.301	1.000	
F. petitioning higher authorities	counties	.854*	.929**	.974***	.840*	1.000
	villages	.555***	.414**	.442**	.406**	1.000

Note: * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$. The Roman letters for each indicator correspond to those in Table 1.