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Tibet, 228, and Ta-pa-ni: Some lessons for us all

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As we struggle to make sense of the maelstrom of violent resistance and its suppression, not to mention cope with our own feelings as concerned observers, it might be useful to consider the following:

*Such outbreaks are invariably sparked by a complex combination of socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious factors.

*The violence is never a case of black and white; it is simply red, with aggressors and their victims far outnumbering any heroes. When tensions boil over, the initial targets tend to be symbols of authority (policemen, officials), but can also include men and women who are stigmatized and persecuted as scapegoats. However, when the empire strikes back, it uses violence on a much larger and more systematic scale, with those who end up being punished including not only the original aggressors but many innocent victims as well.

*Casualty figures vary wildly, and are rarely subject to critical analysis. In the case of the Ta-pa-ni Incident, estimates of the dead have ranged from a few hundred to tens of thousands, but my analysis of archival and demographic sources puts the total at slightly under two thousand. It is also essential to note that the dead included men who fell on the field of battle, men who were rounded up and systematically executed, men who died in prison, women, children, and the elderly who were indiscriminately massacred, and children who died of exposure and disease while hiding in the mountains. All were victims, but death came to them in many different forms.

*The process of mythologizing the history of violent resistance begins almost as soon as the brutality. In the past, the state did most of the myth-making, or at the very least made its voice heard above all others. This is not the case in today’s world, where we are overwhelmed by a wealth of information provided by all sides of a conflict, much of which is not rigorously scrutinized before being further disseminated.

*Once mythologizing processes are underway, their greatest casualty is the truth about those who suffered. Complex causes are ignored in favor of simplistic explanations, while the identities of victims end up being subsumed by stereotypical images constructed by the myth-makers. Think about it: How much do we really know about victims and their loved ones, regardless of whose hands they perished at?

Our responsibility is to cut through the Gordian Knot of myth and stereotype in order to better understand the diverse experiences of all people caught up in acts of violent resistance (regardless of whether they are aggressors or victims), as well as contemplate what their tragic fates can tell us about our past and our future.

Tags: 2008 Tibet