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Cultural Responses to Disaster in China

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By Pierre Fuller

A land of floods, fault lines and food crises, China has rarely been one of mercy in the Western imagination. Today, with millions of Chinese dealing with another world-class disaster on their soil, the Western press appears to be singing a different tune. For one, Tuesday’s New York Times heralded that “Many Hands, Not Held by China, Aid in Quake,” reporting that even official Chinese media sees private donations exceeding the state’s total so far of half a billion relief dollars. This “striking and unscripted public response” of “blood drives, cake sales, charity fund-raisers and art auctions” might even pose a threat, the paper ventures, to an authoritarian state whose monopoly on civil activity has been its mainstay. The question of political aftershocks from the recent tremor should be left to political scientists. More suitable for a historian is determining from where all this organized goodwill is stemming, unfortunately an area in which Western scholarship to date has been feeble at best.

Party sympathizers might lay claim to a social consciousness instilled by the 1949 revolution; others might say the seeds of civic activism were sown by Treaty Port-based New Culture modernizers of the 1920s; still others would credit the patriotic origins of the Chinese Red Cross or lay charity at the feet of nineteenth century missionary relief efforts. The tendency is to stress a singular introduction to China of certain ideals—Socialist, Western, Modern, Nationalist, Judeo-Christian—that are far more likely an amalgamation of disparate factors reaching as far back as China’s Classical past. Disentangling this Gordian knot is no easy task, requiring the study of a matrix of motives, voiced and unvoiced, cultural repertoires and historical contingencies.

Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley’s study of late Qing disaster, Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth Century China, gets us closer to this goal. As implied in her title, Edgerton dismisses the idea of any singular “Chinese” reaction to the great drought famine of the 1870s. Instead, she argues that Chinese responses reflected diverging priorities: between the inland and Treaty-Port cultures, and between government factions split over how to run a state wracked by incessant rebellion, Indian opium foisted onto its markets, and the specter of vital grain producers in drought-prone regions switching en masse to poppies.

Edgerton presents two main relief actors: first, a struggling central state conflicted over its moral inheritance of High Qing state relief activism (as described in Pierre-Etienne Will’s scholarship on famine policy in the High Qing, a period of stability and wealth in the long eighteenth century); and second, lower-Yangzi philanthropists, whom she places squarely in the Shenbao-reading, self-strengthening-minded culture of treaty port Chinese elites. These latter philanthropists converted local charitable traditions into national programs to compete with foreign missionaries relieving a Chinese famine field largely for the first time. Notably little relief appears to come from the rural northern communities themselves. Focusing on hardest hit Shanxi Province (where once-thriving industries had just been sidelined by the economy’s coastal reorientation), Edgerton relates the “ground-level
experience” of the famine’s horrors through the pens of several local literati. There, at ground zero, these accounts present a populace reduced to starvation, regardless of income, with village-level tensions exacerbated by famine effecting a total social breakdown. Still, a high expectation of aid from the center was expressed among these inland voices, who were no more than a few generations from the eighteenth century heyday of imperial relief. In contrast to earlier historical work, Edgerton defends “ultra-conservative” mid-level statesmen who lobbied to siphon funds from coastal defense and infrastructure projects to save what they saw as the foundation of the state, its rural population.

Edgerton does not focus on Western aid during this disaster, instead pointing out the tensions between the comparatively paltry Western relief efforts and the massively extractive Western commercial ventures. In an attempt to ease the state’s hemorrhaging of silver, one faction in the Chinese bureaucracy overturned the 1831 imperial ban on native opium production as a desperate import-substitution measure—just three years before the Great Famine. By the time of mass starvation, with one-tenth of Shanxi’s agricultural area planted with poppies, the London-based China Inland Mission journal *China’s Millions* remarked on how “humbling” it was that all of the money raised by the British public in a year to relieve famished North China amounted to the amount of silver the British Raj pocketed in just three days from its opium trade with China.

If the state and urban elite societies-turned-NGOs are the only actors of note in the 1870s crisis, what does this say of the ability of rural communities to help themselves? One suspects that back-to-back harvest failures might have translated into total famine in Shanxi, rendering a famine zone in which even nominal mutual assistance was impossible. But was this true all across the five-province famine belt? Maybe an example from current events could help raise the possibility of silent local activity there: What are we to make of the news that just a few days ago towards the southern end of the Asian continent, as foreign NGOs were kept at bay by a negligent junta, “wealthy Burmese” were seen depositing “enough” bags of rice at Buddhist temples serving as “makeshift camp(s) for refugees,” threadbare and ready to “do anything to survive.” Are these affluent locals and religious institutions consciously “stepping in” to a humanitarian vacuum? Or are they simply acting out another layer of local—and quite possibly ageless—charity that is often condemned to silence in the conventional sources from which histories are composed?

Pierre Fuller, PhD Candidate in History at the University of California, Irvine, is researching his dissertation on local famine relief in Republican China.