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Excerpt: *Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes*

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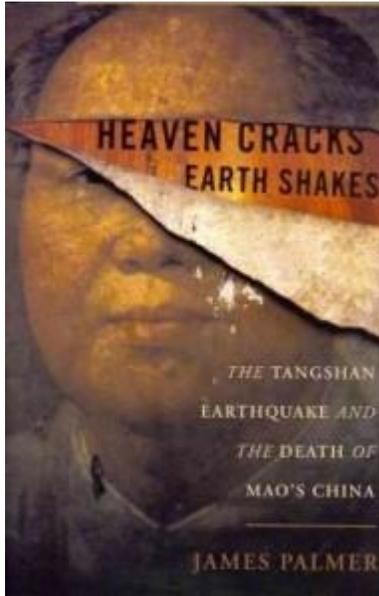
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[Excerpt: Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes](#)

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By James Palmer



When the Tangshan Earthquake hit northern China on July 28, 1976, the country was in the midst of a tumultuous year that would grow even more chaotic with Mao's death less than two months later. In retrospect, the massive earthquake has been viewed as a sign of trouble to come and a signal that major changes were on the horizon. In his new book, [Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China](#), James Palmer delves into the history of 1976, tracing the developments of that pivotal year for all in China, from the leaders residing within the walls of Zhongnanhai to the coal miners of Tangshan who saw their city leveled and nearly a quarter of a million people killed by the quake. In the excerpt below, Palmer describes life in provincial but industrious Tangshan before the earthquake hit.

Yu Xuebing was one of the seven black elements, and she wasn't happy about it. Her family had been branded as class enemies a long time ago, during the Anti-Rightist campaign of the 1950s, and the label had stuck. Being 'black' made it hard for her to find boys willing to go out with her—and although she was only fourteen in 1976, she liked boys. And if they weren't too scared of her family's reputation, they tended to like her.

Unusually, she was an only child, with elderly parents; her mother was already sixty. She had four cousins, though, who in the Chinese fashion she called sisters and brothers. Space was cramped in their house, so quite often they slept over at hers.

Her family had been harassed in the last ten years, because they had once been rich. In the 1950s they had even owned a private car, which at the time was about equivalent to owning your own

yacht. Her uncle, however, had got drunk and driven it into a ditch in the early sixties. Nobody in the county had been able to fix it, and it was left to rust by the side of their house.

In the early years of the Cultural Revolution, her uncle had been driven mad after being dragged out of his home for daily public criticism and beatings. Some of her relatives were in Taiwan now, having fled in 1949; her father sometimes wished aloud that he had gone with them.

During the first few years of the Cultural Revolution, Yu had lived in constant fear. She was only a small child at the time, but she picked up on the terror of the adults around her. She was disturbed by pictures of Liu Shaoqi's wife being humiliated in public, since the same was happening to her family. The local Red Guards broke into their house several times, looking for signs of bourgeois wealth that they could steal. They stripped the floorboards and the roof for hiding places, and came away with a gold bracelet, a gold ring and 90 yuan. They also took the family's precious sewing machine. After Deng's rectification of 1974, power in the village shifted, and her family was compensated for the lost cash, but they never saw the jewelry again.

Yu lived in a small village about a dozen miles outside Tangshan, with thirty-three other families. The road was still lined with crude effigies of Lin Biao, put up there in mockery after his 'flight' to Mongolia, along with more recent political slogans like 'Earnestly study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. For her, Tangshan was the city—it had a cinema, a library, a theatre, even a university. Going there was a rare treat. To outsiders, though, Tangshan was a backwater, overshadowed not only by Beijing but by the neighboring city of Tianjin, an hour's train ride away.

Tangshan was indeed a backwater, but it was also a powerhouse of heavy industry, nicknamed the 'Coal Capital' of China. Tangshanese coal drove Chinese industry, which was recovering strongly after years of decline. The first railway in China, only 7 km long, had been built in Tangshan to haul coal. Tangshan was still a major producer of rolling stock for China's ever-expanding rail system.

It was a mining town, founded with British and Belgian money in 1877 to exploit the massive coal deposits nearby. They, like other foreign powers, had even won the right to station troops there after the Boxer Rebellion, though only the Japanese ended up sending soldiers there. After the foundation of the PRC, nationalisation had transformed the mines from an outpost of colonial power into a symbol of the new China's industrial might.

The Kailuan mining complex, China's first coal company, produced 5 per cent of the whole country's coal. It had been designed by Herbert Hoover, later to be US president, during his stint as a mining engineer in China. Tangshanese liked to boast that, with about a million people, they were only a thousandth of the population of China, but produced a hundredth of the output. Economically, a single Tangshanese factory worker or miner was worth ten farmers. Pictures of new Tangshan industrial plants were among the first propaganda images produced by the PRC.

The city centre was on a low-lying plateau. Like most of Hebei, it was dry land, and in the spring winds choked the air with sand and dust. A few miles from the centre the hills started, scored

with quarries and vast slag heaps that formed an eerie grey desert. Heavy trucks trundled across worn roads, bearing Tangshan's coal to fuel the cities and steel factories of northern China.

Tangshanese prided themselves on being direct, blunt-spoken and strong. The workers of 1976 had been children during the grinding famine of the Great Leap Forward, and their growth had been stunted by malnutrition and starvation. Medical records from the Kailuan mines show an average height of only 1.57 metres, or just under 5 ft 2 in.

A stocky build was ideal for mining, and there was a strong Stakhanovite cult among the miners, with exceptionally productive workers receiving special bonuses, and a powerful sense of comradeship among the work gangs. Chinese miners had a long history of fierce leftist politics. In the first stages of the Cultural Revolution, the miners had formed their own revolutionary committees. The last five years had seen many 'model workers' drafted into politics or sent to universities to 'instruct the educated youth'.

About a quarter of the city was given over to heavy industry, mostly in the eastern mining district. The whole city covered about fifty square kilometres, and most people lived in one-storey houses, with thick load-bearing walls made of brick or stone. They often had heavy concrete roofs made of cast-offs from the mines. It was a style of building pioneered by the British as workers' housing. They had carried out seismological surveys of the planned mining area and found fault lines, but none serious enough, in their evaluation, to warrant putting up structures built to survive earthquakes. Only the houses and offices of the foreign staff were solid enough to withstand a severe quake.

Even after the foreigners left, newcomers to the mines had copied the buildings around them, throwing up weakly built, insecure houses, the roofs held up by heavy metal rods. In the fifties, new buildings, including multi-storey dormitories to house factory workers and university students, were thrown up with equal carelessness and speed.

Although regulations on earthquake-resistant building had been issued nationally in 1953, they weren't enforced. In the early years of the PRC, construction was modelled on the 'fraternal advice' given by the Soviet Union. The taller new buildings, like the official hotels and university dormitories, were built using plans provided by the Soviets, as were some of the factories. As in other Chinese cities, a couple of hundred Russians had been stationed in Tangshan in the fifties as technical advisors and overseers of the aid the USSR was supplying at the time. There would prove to be a marked difference in the survivability between the buildings the Soviets directly supervised and those put together on Soviet blueprints, but with inexperienced Chinese architects.

Excerpted from Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China, by James Palmer (Basic Books, 2012).

