

# Critical Dialogue

**The Sinews of State Power: The Rise and Demise of the Cohesive Local State in Rural China.** By Juan Wang. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 256p. \$69.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/S1537592719001440

— Ralph A. Thaxton Jr., *Brandeis University*

The nature of the state created by the Chinese Communist Party has long been of interest to scholars of pre-1949 Republican era and post-1949 Communist China. Juan Wang's wide-ranging and important new book sheds new light on this matter. Her theoretical and substantive empirical work is intended to show us how the state persisted, met with crisis, and survived across the Mao era and then well into the reform period.

The first chapter addresses the issue of rural governance and local protest. Rejecting grievance-focused research paradigms of protest and collective action, Wang wants to understand a puzzle: Why did protest persist in the reform era when the policy responses to popular claims and actions in this period were different from those in the Mao era, when Mao and his loyal cadres reacted to protest with abuse and harsh repression? Her answer is that, in the absence of systematic state repression, a new group of protest activists entered the picture—disgruntled village-level party cadres—who often incited and enabled farmers to take up collective action that frequently took the form of petitioning the state. An increasing percentage of collective petitions, up to 4%, were stimulated or organized by cadres whose authority had been undercut by reform and who were frightened by the uncertainty it portended. This trend “reflected a fundamental erosion of elite cohesion, a decaying functionality of rural government, and a transition in state-society relations” (p. 34). Wang wants to show the consequences of this phenomenon for the cohesion of rural governance.

The second chapter provides an analysis of the nature of Communist Party cadre recruitment and collective performance in the early Mao years and the post-Mao era. Although not a historian, Wang is very astute, because she shows that Mao's rural party leaders joined the party for privileges and personal gain, engaging in various forms of corruption and deviant behavior. Such behavior was embraced not only to resist change but also to feign obedience to and please their superiors. This study shows, interestingly, that the grassroots activists of the early Mao era were poor and illiterate “peasants” and demobilized war

veterans. Importantly, this chapter makes it clear that these same cadres were subjected to severe administrative punishment if they did not comply with the draconian procurement goals of Mao in the Great Leap Forward and that their personal safety was constantly threatened by the high Maoist state. The goal of the national leadership, ideally, was to promote “intrastate cohesion,” and this was done in the early reform era by moving toward a patronage system, village elections, a petition system, and new cadre screening and promotion systems to enable local people to challenge cadre abuse and corruption and provide the center with a more reliable political base. These changes were not easily implemented, however. Many of the old guard Maoists were still around and not always open to new leadership norms and codes of conduct, and some of the new public servant regulations ironically encouraged corruption and bribery. Still, this chapter shows that reform promoted local elite collaboration and reciprocal relationships between different local units of government (including the county and township levels) while also fostering the development of webs of nepotism among the cadres at these two levels. All in all, the reforms of the 1990s fostered intrastate alliances locally and helped stabilize routines of governance across the county and township levels. However, this process did not fully include or benefit village-level party cadres, many of whom were alienated from upper-level party leaders who were under pressure to put checks on the personalism and favoritism of the Mao era.

The central thesis of this work is found in Chapter 4. After analyzing the persistence of the imprint of the Maoist regime into the first decade of reform, as well as documenting policy evasion and predatory practices, including arbitrary extraction, that occurred across official local administrative levels in Chapter 3, Wang takes up the question of how central-government reforms dismantled the Mao era local state and in the process isolated and alienated village-level party cadres. In this period, particularly after Deng Xiaoping died in 1977, structural fiscal changes deprived both township- and village-level cadres of control over government revenue: agricultural taxes were abolished, new controls on township-level land expropriation and land-leasing schemes were established, new oversights on township budgets were instituted, funds earmarked for certain reform projects (improvement of education) were sent mainly to the county level, and

a downsizing of township-level cadre personnel took place. As a result, the central government threw its weight behind the development of a “county-level Leviathan,” and the township- and village-level cadres lost the power to rake in resources from the local community for their own purposes. At the same time, the township-level governments were obligated to meet unfunded central-government developmental mandates, so that they were expected to fund a range of projects with much less resources. The result, according to Juan Wang, was that village cadres concocted a host of predatory survival strategies, including resisting central-government-mandated changes and joining with rural gangs. Such cadres were alienated, and many felt abandoned and betrayed. The essence of Wang’s argument is that the old guard cadres felt they were being left behind and hence developed a set of grievances that they themselves expressed or used local farmers’ anger to express through petitions against reform and progress. In reality, they were increasingly at the mercy of county-level authorities and caught in the cross-fire of villagers’ anger and the efforts of township officials who had to hustle to save themselves. As Juan Wang artfully shows, this process crippled many of the agents of the lowest tier of the state and weakened both the extractive and coercive powers of the three-way local state (village, township, and county) system of alliance and collaboration that had continued during the first two decades of reform.

In exploring the implications of declining coercion and state capacity, Juan Wang makes an insightful contribution to our knowledge of the consequences of the central state’s attempt to dismantle the local, in some ways rival, state, particularly with regard to petitioning. Faced with greater stress and less rewards, village cadres sometimes turned the petitioning process into a weapon of a disempowered elite, encouraging and using petitions to retaliate against an unsupportive township or county government. With the central government insisting on maintaining stability, however, this put more pressure on the township- and county-level party leaders to thwart petitions, resulting in the county-level suppression of petitioners—either by preventing them from traveling outside their localities to petition Beijing or capturing and returning them home if they did reach the national capital. Villagers knew that local authorities were under national administrative pressure to thwart petitions, and so they often used this form of protest to pressure those authorities to address their claims and demands, knowing full well that the township and county leaders could not afford to let their petition letters and protests reach the center. I studied petitioning for many years, and I did not understand this complex dynamic until Juan Wang explained it.

The conclusion resonates with that of Susan Shirk’s study, *China: Fragile Superpower*: Wang emphasizes that the real problem for the Communist Party elite is not corruption or even repression, but rather the internal conflicts and

warfare within its own regime, especially at the lowest levels of political order where the party-state needs its cadre base to help maintain social stability. Whether the center can reinstitute some version of cohesion and collaboration within its ranks at this level remains to be seen.

Although this is an important study, I would have preferred that Juan Wang address four issues in more detail, with deeper reflection. First, Wang skates over who were Mao’s cadres, more or less accepting that they were “poor peasants.” Actually, the so-called poor peasants were not tillers at all but people from the ranks of drifters, rogues, and ruffians. They were brutal members of the *lumpen proletariat*, and some were criminals. Mao relied on these brutes to run his political campaigns, including those that rural people petitioned against. Second, Mao and his brutes did not, as Juan Wang claims, institutionalize and encourage petitions: instead, they suppressed them, just as central-government rulers did from 2005 to 2018. Third, the book’s central problem is that the case for a “new type of village activist” is based on 4% of the petitions being influenced and enabled by village cadres. But is 4% that significant a proportion? And who initiated the other 96% of the petitions, and how did they differ from the cadre-based 4%? Wang does not address these questions. Fourth, one cannot help but wonder if a stronger case might be made for path dependency. Wang takes up this critical issue in Chinese politics, but she does not analyze or discuss it thoroughly. After all, the Mao era also saw pandemic cadre corruption, lying, and coercion, yet neither Mao nor his successors reformed the work style that produced and reproduces this conduct. I see evidence for a path dependency argument in parts of Juan Wang’s important work. What I do not see is an understanding of why and how the cowardice of central-government elites inhibited a deep reform and of why elites at the apex of power feared the dismantling of their local political base and, in turn, relied on that base, sometimes routinely and sometimes in the crisis moments of state command, to maintain their autocratic system of power.

### Reply to Ralph A. Thaxton Jr.’s review of *The Sinews of State Power: The Rise and Demise of the Cohesive Local State in Rural China*

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— Juan Wang

Ralph Thaxton’s generous and perceptive review raises four questions, which touch on three issues. The first issue has to do with the empirical question about state–society relations in the Maoist era. Were Mao’s cadres “poor peasants” or “brutes,” people from the ranks of “drifters, rogues, and ruffians”? Did Mao’s cadres encourage petitions or suppress them? It is undeniable that many of the poor peasant activists who were recruited to become grassroots cadres in the villages were brutes. Being poor peasants in general or

being brutes in particular both indicate that the grassroots cadres originated in the villages and lacked common networks with their superiors in the townships and counties, as suggested by my book. As for the treatment of petitioners, there were multiple waves of political turbulence during the Maoist era, during which petitioners and rural protests were encouraged, mobilized, repressed, or ignored at times. It was not my intention to simplify state–society relations in the Maoist era. Although I did acknowledge the systematic retribution by local cadres against protestors, the dynamics of contentious politics during the Maoist era should be a book-length project, one that many scholars, including Ralph Thaxton, have examined carefully.

The second issue has to do with an interpretation of “significance.” Village officials in the late 2000s only led 4% of collective petitions. Is this significant enough? I think the answer is yes for the following reasons. The existing scholarship has discussed at length the other 96% of rural protests. My book points out an alternative type of village activists—village officials—who could have a profound impact on regime survival because they were system insiders. In addition, increasingly large numbers of village officials, in both developed and impoverished areas, have become disgruntled and motivated to undermine the work of their superiors. Furthermore, given the clandestine nature of their actions, we should also expect that a much higher percentage of petitions are actually being led or encouraged by village officials in reality.

The third issue concerns the overall development of Chinese politics. Ralph Thaxton and I agree about the importance of path dependence for a proper understanding of China, but hold differing perspectives on path dependence itself. Thaxton notes similar behavioral patterns over time, such as pandemic cadre corruption, lying, coercion, and the continuous struggle of villagers, as shown in his book. I focused instead on the mechanics that enabled the working of the state machine, both during the Maoist era and the reform period. I argue that the cohesion among officials across multiple levels of local governments was the institutional path that made possible both state-led growth and repression. However, broad socioeconomic and political changes altered incentives underlying the cohesion, which in turn, seeded off-path possibilities.

**Force and Contention in Contemporary China: Memory and Resistance in the Long Shadow of the Catastrophic Past.** By Ralph A. Thaxton Jr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 488p. \$99.99 cloth, \$39.99 paper.  
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— Juan Wang, *McGill University*

Ralph A. Thaxton’s book takes the reader on a heart-wrenching journey of learning about the suffering and

struggle of Chinese people in Da Fo village, Henan Province. Making numerous field trips since the 1980s, Thaxton earned trust from villagers and gathered amazingly detailed narratives from them. Building on 530 in-depth interviews of Chinese individuals, as well as township and village Communist Party leaders, Thaxton presents rural resistance in present-day China, at least in the deep agricultural interior provinces such as Henan, as being informed by memories of the catastrophic Great Leap Forward (GLF; 1958–61)—of suffering, injustice, insecurity, and government brutality.

For Thaxton, contention in present-day China carries the imprints of this particular past. His work convincingly challenges many observations about state–society relations in China. Instead of “accepting authoritarianism,” today’s villagers, as in the GLF period, continue to struggle to find space outside of authoritarian party-state control and “make do.” Instead of claiming “rightful resistance” and looking for protection from the national government against local ones, today’s villagers understand that, as in the GLF period, national and local governments are on the same side. Instead of overt protests and antiregime mobilization, today’s villagers choose everyday forms of resistance because of their fear of the regime based on their GLF experience.

Following Thaxton’s careful reconstruction of hardship as villagers live it, we see a China with an antagonistic relationship between the state and society, at least in “deep China.” The regime’s stability is, then, not a result of meritocracy, deliberative and inclusive policy making, institutionalization of various power-sharing rules, or its perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the people, as some scholars argue. Rather, what we observe could instead be a peaceful façade covering deep tension that is sustained through the fear of violence and the fragmentation of society.

There are certainly parallels between the periods of GLF and of reform (post-1978) in terms of the injustices experienced and mode of resistance resorted to by villagers in China. Reading the individuals’ stories in Thaxton’s work, we learn that, throughout the reform period, there have been continuous discriminatory policies and brutal repression, as well as villagers’ noncompliance in the forms of refusal or foot-dragging, as shown in strike hard campaigns (Chapter 1), taxation (Chapter 2), family planning policies (Chapter 3), rural schools and teachers (Chapter 4), veteran soldiers’ petitioning (Chapter 8) and migrant workers’ experiences (Chapter 9).

However, to what extent do such parallels reflect memories of the GLF and to what degree are those memories at work in today’s contentious politics? In the following, I consider the function of memories, the mode of resistance, and the connection between the two.

The first point is about how memories of the past affect current events. For Thaxton, because the

experiences of GLF were traumatic and there has been little political change since then, the memories about it are powerful, “informing” and “influencing” the resistance of those survivors to this day. Here, Thaxton focuses on *inframemoria* (p. 24), memories as concrete events stored by individuals and manifested in autographical narratives. Because of the temporal limitations of such memories, as recognized by Thaxton, their power dramatically decreases for those who are younger and do not have the same experiences.

Instead of these memories being held by individuals of one particular generation, however, I suggest that social contexts in Chinese villages can help socialize such memories and keep them alive, which in turn conditions the mode of resistance in China. Maurice Halbwachs suggests in his book, *On Collective Memory* (translated in 1992), that memories, over time, require a social context for their preservation. Group memberships and social context prod individuals into recalling particular events. The highly interpersonal setting of Chinese villages conditions the socialization of autographic memories of individuals. Even without physical representation of memories such as monuments or memorials, memories can be translated into community relations on a daily basis and as such play a pivotal role in shaping communities and orienting their politics. Although Thaxton does not interpret memory through this social context framework, his village stories nevertheless demonstrate how memories of the past affect family relations in later generations. Are memories of the GLF fading away, or have they become part of the collective memory of a community? It would be interesting to see what those young villagers, such as the 17- and 21-year-olds on his interviewee list (pp. 8–9), “remember” about that period and how they talk about village politics and family relations in the villages.

Understanding the socialization of memories through community relationships and their role as constitutive of village politics helps us understand the impact of memories about the GLF. The social framework of memory reaffirms that memories of suffering and injustice can have long-lasting impact in today’s China, as long as the social context permits. Therefore, memories about the GLF may last depending on the degree of change and continuity in the villages. An important source of change since the late 1990s is labor and population movement away from rural areas. Important sources of continuity include unjust policies that continuously marginalize and segregate villagers, as shown in Thaxton’s work.

This social context framework of memory also affects whether the GLF is the single most important memory affecting today’s village politics and contention. Have earlier memories of the Republic or imperial China affected family relations in the villages? Was it the GLF or the waves of political campaigns during the Maoist era, such as anti-rightist campaigns, four-cleanups and the

Cultural Revolution, that turned villagers against each other and had a long-lasting impact on village politics? How do we determine which historical memory is the most powerful?

The second point is about the mode of contention or everyday forms of resistance. What could have contributed to such forms of resistance and villagers’ view about the regime as a whole—instead of a few corrupt local officials—being unjust and repressive? Given that structural injustice and brutal repression continue over time, is it possible that, without the traumatic experiences of the GLF and its scarring memories, villagers would still pursue everyday forms of resistance, make do, and put little hope in Beijing? To what extent does making references to the GLF shape the decision to resist or how to resist? Scholars of Chinese workers, for example, have attributed the lack of mass mobilization to workers’ informal exit options, fear of repression, and the diversity of interests among them.

Connecting the function of memories and the mode of resistance and contention in Chinese villages raises the question of the mediating roles of village officials, my third point. Thaxton recognizes “two opposite modes of behavior” (p. 121) by grassroots-level village officials. On the one hand, village officials have implemented national policies and represented the brutality of the government since the GLF period. On the other hand, they have refrained from repression and have watered down extractive and coercive policies in fear of retaliation by their village neighbors inspired by memories from the GLF. If village officials oscillate between being repressive state agents and being sympathetic neighbors, how do their mediation and behavioral inconsistency affect villagers’ view about national policies and the regime? When are they more repressive or more accommodating? How does the memory of revenge affect the resistance by villagers?

These reflections are not meant as criticisms of this finely studied and deeply moving book. Rather, they are evoked by its meticulous effort to turn our attention to those who suffer silently and continuously, when the world has been preoccupied by the economic achievement and political stability of the regime.

### **Response to Juan Wang’s review of *Force and Contention in Contemporary China: Memory and Resistance in the Long Shadow of the Catastrophic Past***

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— Ralph A. Thaxton Jr.

Juan Wang’s insightful review of *Force and Contention in Contemporary China* is most welcome and demonstrates a clear understanding of my project. Wang raises three important issues about the book related to the role of memory, resistance, and the relationship between the two.

First, Wang wonders whether inframemories—that is, memories held by individuals who suffered at the hands of the state—resonate with younger people who did not directly experience Mao-era traumas. She suggests that the larger social context plays an important role by preserving individual autographic memories, allowing them to take a collective form and thus mobilizing groups to resist power. My oral history fieldwork suggests that individual memories of younger villagers were formed independently of group memories and do not depend on the latter for their power or durability. However, shared group memories might, as Wang suggests, strengthen individual memories. Thus, future research should explore both the factors that facilitate this strengthening effect and the variability in the political consequences of such fusion. My limited evidence from interviews with young villagers showed that some were reluctant to believe that the Maoists were as monstrous as older villagers claimed. At the same time, these youths were appalled that their parents and grandparents had not put up a stronger fight against Mao's cadres and insisted that they themselves would have thwarted Maoist cruelties with more potent resistance.

Next, Wang questions whether it was the Great Leap Forward per se or the later waves of Maoist political campaigns that turned villagers against one another and occasionally the regime itself. No doubt the later political campaigns mattered, but I focused on memories of the Great Leap to underscore an often overlooked point: the political methods of Communist Party cadres—their habitual lying, arbitrary rule, false accusations against opponents, blatant corruption, theft of private and state

property for personal gain, cover-ups of officials' crimes, gross violations of due process, and a deeply entrenched sense of entitlement that justified greed and grasping inside and outside of China—crystallized during the Great Leap Forward, and the features of this particular authoritarian work style remain a core aspect of this particular single-party regime's relationship with society in many parts of rural China today.

Finally, Wang asks about the mediating role of village officials—why they sometimes follow the national government's orders regardless of the consequences for local society and at other times sympathize with the needs and claims of villagers even if these are at odds with center policy directives. In my discussion of the post-Mao village party secretary who professed sympathy for the villagers, I note that he openly stated that his purpose was to serve the Communist Party first and rural society only second, even if the members of this society are his kin or neighbors. Thus, when the push of national policy collides with pushback from local social forces, he sides with the national Communist Party. Wang also poses the question of how this oscillation on the part of village officials affects villagers' perceptions of the regime and its national policies. Many innovative and sophisticated political science studies have examined this relationship. My own fieldwork adds an interesting observation: although the villagers I interviewed in Hua Country, Henan Province, have access to *People's Daily* (the "state newspaper" in the PRC), they seldom read it; instead, they use it to wrap freshly caught fish or even as toilet paper, silently expressing their gratitude that the state and its policy news are at least useful for something!