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The Making of a Hurricane

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China's land reform movement (1945-1952), an agrarian revolution aimed at redistributing land and transforming class relations, is explained with two twinned ideas: land reform was not only economic, it was political; and land reform was a ritual that was learned and taught, a process of violence that left deep traces on the political culture of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this meticulous researched, carefully crafted, and deeply compelling work, Brian DeMare explores these two threads with a history of land reform as a narrative, a story that became a movement. *Land Wars: The Story of China's Agrarian Revolution* is divided into five chapters that parallel land reform's process, from the arrival of the work teams to their work of mobilizing bitterness, from the creation of class categories to violent struggle, and from the transformation of consciousness to the ways in which land reform was the crucible for subsequent political campaigns.

Together the chapters of *Land Wars* portray the fine-grained local articulations of what became a China story, as prescribed by Mao Zedong in 1927 when he wrote his "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan." While Mao's millenarian vision is the starting point, DeMare braids Mao's report with other classic narratives of land reform, including Zhou Libo's *The Hurricane*, Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines Over Sanggan River*, Zhang Ailing's *Love in Redland*, and William Hinton's *Fanshen*. While these accounts provide the frames for *Land Wars*' five chapters, DeMare's research uncovers myriad other narratives, from those presented in official newspapers to those that appeared in internal work reports, and from those recorded by participants in the moment to those recalled years later in memoir. These accounts carry the reader across China, sweeping from North to South China and drilling down into printed collections on China's Southwest and archival documents from two Sichuan counties. Incorporated into this history—but less evident in the text—is the skillful deployment of earlier generations of social science research. For example, DeMare cites Wugong Village in Hebei Province (Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden) and Chen Village in Guangdong (Chan, Madsen, and Unger), among others.

For DeMare, the *story* of land reform is front and center, inextricable from the *history* of land reform. As he writes of the Hunan Report, the "story was never intended to be confined to the page…the party moved to bring Mao's narrative to life" (160). *Land Wars* is therefore a book that examines the logic of the hurricane, a tempest that was not inevitable but rather the product of central policies and local experiments, of China's Civil War and then the Korean War, of political violence and unintended consequences, of ideological drivers and material incentives. DeMare addresses the idea of land reform as economic and political throughout, illustrating the interplay of political power and material rewards at the level of specific campaigns like "double reduction," (9-10) and as both means and ends in the ultimate moments of struggle (106, 108). To the idea of land reform as a ritual, DeMare's contribution is to show the power of story. Recalling classic works like Michael Schoenhals' *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, as well as more recent work that has argued that exhibition narratives functioned as political scripts, DeMare shows how land reform accounts—both fictional and political—were themselves handbooks (12, 25).[1]

The ambition and scope of *Land Wars* is reflected in its ability to draw together not only the latest in PRC history, but also other social scientific accounts of China's Communist revolution, from anthropology to political science to sociology. Like those in Yan'an who created what David Apter and Tony Saich call a "discourse community," participants in land reform were driven by a narrative that functioned as a discourse.[2] In examining the interplay between experimentation and law (7), DeMare documents a central feature of CCP politics that Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry have described as "guerilla policy making."[3] As a study of a campaign, *Land Wars* is a contribution to the literature on campaigns as a form of governance as well as their unintended consequences (69-71). The book's focus on land reform "as a powerful tool in the remaking of China's national political culture" (20) speaks to recent work that highlights the CCP's successful deployment of culture, the role of culture in political legitimacy, and even the repeated trope of the struggle session in artistic representations of the revolution (101).[4] *Land Wars* reflects DeMare's previous book on opera troupes in the revolution, showing how land reform was a ritual (160), one that employed theater (49) and opera (97) and which—via "speaking bitterness"—created its own participants and cultivated their narratives (59-60). The story of land reform refers to recent PRC history and its treatment of rumor (41), of exhibition (61, 65, 70, and 118), and of bitterness as a kind of emotion (53, 60, 71).[5] *Land Wars* also provides a pre-history to recent works on gender and the revolution, showing how women could be the activists of land reform (63) as well as the targets (104), how sexualized violence and its punishment were based in class and politics (97), and how *fanshen* was portrayed as a feminist awakening (140) when in reality it reinforced the deep-rooted patriarchy of rural China (142).[6] Above all, *Land Wars* addresses the interdisciplinary understandings of class, detailing the creation of class categories (76-85, 92-93), the ambiguity and contingency of class labels, the way such labels were made physical with dunce caps (102, 164) and cloth patches (110), and how class categories were naturalized (98), with "local cadres reclass(ifying) villagers until the village books matched party ideals" (147).[7]

China's "Liberation" has been called a tragedy, but in *Land Wars* Brian DeMare demonstrates that it was not one tragedy but many tragedies.[8] Moreover, this is not an account of sheer terror but a history of its political logic, in all its complexity and humanity. Make no mistake, there is no shortage of horror, from the estimated death toll of two million (161-162) to countless examples of brutal violence (103, 109, 111). But the hurricane of land reform had its own internal logic, from the influences of

contemporary events like the Chinese Civil War (55) and the Korean War (117), the use of violence to compel violence (42), the gap between the perceived wealth of landlords and what they owned in reality (106, 110), the dynamic between cadres and local activists (122-123), and the use of violence to measure success and evaluate cadre promotion (115). In addition to these many contradictions, the process of land reform was bedeviled by changes in course (89) and the folly of trying to apply one model universally, whether in one region like North China or across all of the country (53, 86, 89, 147). *Land Wars* is a deeply human treatment that reveals personal tragedies, from the internal struggles of students and intellectuals who participated (45-46) to leaders—including Xi Zhongxun—who argued for moderation (87, 114, 126), from resistance on the part of local villagers (123, 126) to ambivalence among work team members themselves (145). DeMare acknowledges that "economic *fanshen*, while far from universal, was in fact real" (153), but shows in detail the tragedies of its failure: there was not enough land and property to go around (146), there was a "broad failure to transform the country," and in the wake of land reform cadres themselves became corrupt (152-153) and redistribution resulted in a return to disparity (154). The tragedies of land reform would beget more tragedies, from a new class of enemies that would "eat bitterness for the remainder of the revolutionary era" (157) to the persistence of violent class struggle in political repertoire (163) to a present-day CCP which continues to derive legitimacy from the narrative of land reform (163, 164, 166).

In the same way that Mao's vision of the hurricane embedded its argument in a story, DeMare's argument that the land reform story was itself an historical actor is inherent in the construction of the book. Throughout, there is a tension between material motivations and cultural drivers, as when "speaking bitterness" led to direct economic benefits (53) and when activism could serve as a cover for greed and revenge (121). But in the end, it is stories that matter, and the line between fiction and non-fiction are blurred. *Land Wars* recalls Perry Link's introduction to the short stories of Chen Ruoxi, in which he suggests that fiction be read as true stories, that the Ren Xiulan "story was *xiaoshuo*, but not fiction…Ren Xiulan was Ren Xiulan."[9] In the same way, DeMare blurs the boundaries between the hurricane as a story and land reform as an experience. In some cases, the reader may wish for more demarcation. Though in the introduction the authors of various narratives are transparent (28-33), in the later chapters these narratives are stitched in without indication of their provenance, and in some cases the voices of the narratives inflect the language of the historian, especially in descriptions of the "evil tyrant." Two editorial solutions might be to include footnotes directly on the page, or to distinguish between fictional and historical accounts with italics or a different font.[10] But perhaps this is precisely the point of *Land Wars*, a history of a story, a book about fiction that becomes fact, a narrative that will become its own land reform classic.

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[1] Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), and Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[2] David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[3] Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

[4] Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Xiaobing Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[5] Steve Smith, "Fear and Rumour in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s," *Cultural and Social History* Vol. 5, Issue 3 (2015), pp, 269-288; Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution*; Guo Wu, "Recalling Bitterness: Historiography, Memory, and Myth in Maoist China," *Twentieth-Century China*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (October 2014), pp. 245-268.

[6] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao, *Across the Great Divide: The Sent-Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[7] Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[8] Frank Dikotter, *Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[9] Perry Link, "Introduction to the Revised Edition," in *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, by Chen Ruoxi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. xxii-xxv.

[10] The narrative historian of colonial America, John Demos, chooses to use italics to distinguish fiction from fact in *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Vintage, 1995).