



DeMARE, Brian. 2022.
*Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit,
Businessman: Echoes of
Counterrevolution from
New China.*

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The latest book from Brian DeMare, a meditation on historical evidence set against the background of postrevolutionary Jiangxi, will interest both students and seasoned scholars. For this reader, it seems most useful as a primer for reading documentary sources in translation, particularly for designing a course on historical methods. Its tenuous connection to scholarly literature notwithstanding, *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman* should be read by anyone concerned with critical strategies for reading official sources.

DeMare introduces us to Poyang Town, describing landscape, historical context, and even its unique spoken language (*gan* 贛), and gives clear context for the central postrevolutionary tension in Jiangxi, namely the conflict between Nationalists (the Kuomintang, KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From Poyang, DeMare introduces an issue that haunts this book: how to use confessions as evidence to reconstruct or approximate the “perspectives of villagers” (p.1). For this reader, this insightful question brings to mind other scholarship not mentioned by the author (Curwen 1976; Chandler 2000).

Casefile 1 follows several intertwined stories. Smooth and dramatic, DeMare’s narrative blends small details with historical context. As with other chapters, DeMare summarises documents and renders their contents into appealing prose. This approach will attract a wide array of readers, but also has some limitations. For instance, describing bandits as “little more than small-time thugs” may seem strange, given the origins of “thug” in South Asia, or even problematic, considering its contemporary, marginalising uses in the Anglosphere (p. 23). Similarly, the observation that “most became outlaws as a means of survival during times of economic hardship” begs for engagement with the scholarly literature on banditry, including the Marxian underpinnings of “surplus population” arguments (p. 24). As DeMare observes, “During the revolution, words became weaponized” (p. 51). Perhaps the author could have scrutinised the weaponisation of words in scholarship as well.

Casefile 2 deepens the world created by documents, including the teleological language that informed the revolutionary understanding of the Chinese countryside. Particularly for peasant associations, the CCP narrative of social revolution flowed from very specific commitments (Cheek 2010) designed to address lingering imperial venality during the triumph of “New China.” Readers learn that the community self-defence system (*baojia* 保甲) was, like the imperial system itself, “a dream (...) shell with little substance” (p. 59). “Corruption” serves a similar purpose, setting the *ancien régime* apart from the new order (p. 60). The merits of this chapter are numerous; readers will learn a great deal about the flexibility of revolutionary language from Filial Zhou, one of the characters of this casefile (p. 64-6), and they will gain nuanced knowledge about township authorities and peasant associations (p. 66). Despite some incredibly interesting details, including consequences for infidelity, the persistence of conservative mores amidst revolutionary upheaval, and possibilities for recovering “agency” for women through sources infused with misogynistic traditions, this chapter ends with “a state that seemed to value rural citizens” that brought “the power of the state down to village society” (p. 77). This is certainly an echo, but perhaps not the kind foretold by the book’s title.

Casefile 3 concerns religion, dramatic works, and counterrevolutionary tensions. Here again, DeMare brings the past to life, including some clever notes that connect to his previous work on land reform and revolutionary theatre. However, by way of analysis, we read: “There is, of course, no way to definitively answer any of these questions. But despite lingering uncertainties, their confessions offer echoes of their voices and their truths” (p.102). Although laudably honest in frontloading doubt, this statement, perhaps the closest thing to an epistemological position in this book, leaves the reader with “echoes,” a kind of auditory empiricism in place of sceptical theorising. Then, the next sentence undoes this work: “There are no such voices or truths in this casefile” (ibid.). DeMare concludes this chapter with the astute admission that “this case, it seems to this historian, says much more about the cops than the criminals” (ibid.). An agreeable chorus could be found among other historians.

Casefile 4 follows Merchant Zha as he finds himself on the wrong end of an asset dispute, a story that enables DeMare to discuss local cadres, the brutality of KMT conscription, and the usefulness of “feudal” as a term of derision. The author’s invitingly conversational tone continues, but also gives way to a slippage into political language (“certainly worthy of execution by the People’s Government,” p. 108). At its best, this book gives us a rich vista into everyday life in “New China.” Read generously, it eschews the formal trappings of scholarly monographs, leaving analysis, conclusions, and connections to the reader.

However, DeMare misses some productive connections. Noting “[t]he way from archive to history is not a fixed path” (p. 131), DeMare could have evoked several scholars, including Nicholas Dirks and Annette Burton, but did not. Concluding that “the tales told in this book reveal the methodological arrival of state power at the grassroots level” (p. 133), DeMare ends without considering how we might critically engage with the “methodological arrival” of scholarship from archives.

DeMare closes this book thusly: “What really strikes me, and I suspect that many readers will agree, is how many questions we are

all left with as this book comes to a close" (p. 134). For this reader, it is very difficult to disagree with the author here. Buttressed by a preface, a bibliographic essay, and notes, these casefiles seem like a textual manifestation of a seminar, a characterisation substantiated by passing references to extensive and no doubt generative discussions between the author and students (p. 76, 144). Such a course would necessarily leave questions unresolved. For scholarship, expectations differ. However, there is a refreshing honesty in ambiguity, especially as an alternative to the certainties that official sources often claim. With his latest book, DeMare has conjured the powers of the analytical netherworld, leaving readers to map the space between voices and echoes.

References

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CURWEN, Charles A. 1976. *Taiping Rebel: The Deposition of Li Hsiu-Ch'eng*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.