

deserves a wide readership and should stimulate further research.

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Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from iron: cultural responses to famine in nineteenth-century China*, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 2008, pp. xxiii, 332, £23.95, \$39.95 (hardback 978-0-520-25302-5).

How is it possible to speak about the unspeakable? How can historians write about thoroughly disturbing historical experiences? How can we find the appropriate balance between empathy with those having to make impossible choices and the need to keep an analytical distance from the events, the sources and the people we are studying? The dearth of studies on one of the most lethal famines in China's history that caused, directly or indirectly, the death of an estimated 9 to 13 million people, suggests that there is no easy answer to these questions.

Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, inspired by studies on the Irish Famine of the 1840s, is perhaps the first author to have approached the North China famine of 1876–79 in its entire ambiguity and multi-dimensional complexity—a task that only became feasible by focusing explicitly on “cultural responses” to the famine rather than on writing its social or economic history.

The first two chapters of this book provide a succinct introduction to the historical setting and the experience of the famine in southern Shanxi, which was one of the worst hit regions. The description of the local famine experience draws largely on a ‘Famine Song’ belonging to the folk tradition, an extraordinary document preserved both in a manuscript version dating to the 1890s and an interestingly edited version published in 1986. Then she shifts to an analysis of the different responses to the famine. This part includes

four chapters dealing with the local, official, outside (i.e. western) and Jiangnan (i.e. southern elites) responses and the various ways they coped with, understood, and explained the famine in its local, national and international context (“from Suzhou to London via Shanghai”). The wealth of detail presented here shows nicely how these partly overlapping perspectives in themselves actually include many ambiguities, as for example the irreconcilable representations of the famine commissioner Yan Jingming, who is portrayed as a cruel slaughterer of rebellious salt workers in an orally transmitted folk story, but as a conscientious relief worker in the written tradition. At the same time the local ‘Famine Song’, purportedly stemming from the folk tradition, also supports the view that the government had the best intentions and did what was possible against all the odds, and, perhaps even more surprisingly, we learn that even today Yan Jingming’s story still causes heated debates among Shanxi villagers.

In the last part of the study the existential meaning of the famine experience is epitomized in what the author calls “icons of starvation”, from the female sacrifice required by Confucian family values, to the “feminization of the nation” (to save the women is to save the nation) and the metaphorical reading of the descriptions of cannibalism. Even though the significance of these signs is different at the different levels of analysis, it is striking that at all levels the foremost way to deal with the unspeakable was to turn it into moralizing accounts. These were located in very different discourses, ranging from the wrath of heaven at human greed and vice—a view that was shared by all, from the Shanxi villager to the foreign missionary—to the Chinese rejection of the blessings of industrial modernity (railways). “Famine was the antithesis of progress” (p. 130). Again, in this context the reader is surprised to learn that it is the alleged “conservatives” who ask for the use of foreign loans for famine relief, whereas the modernizers seem to be more concerned about funding their armies.

The book provides many insights into the intricacies of late Qing politics, but its main concerns are the different ways in which the famine was turned into stories that could be told so as to find meaning in this harrowing experience and draw some lessons from it: how to “never forget” (p. 74), but also how to create “a psychologically tolerable past” and how to cope with the “survivor’s guilt” (p. 54). But it is also about how to use folk stories and oral history materials in a historical study that deals with events that reach back nearly one and a half centuries. How far does living memory reach, and how should we read accounts that were put into writing at very different times under very specific historical circumstances. The tourist spectacle offered in the World Heritage city of Pingyao showing the magistrate performing a rain ritual at the City God Temple perhaps contributes little to the historical meaning of the famine, but it tells us a lot about the uses of history in contemporary Chinese society. The result of this fascinating inquiry is a highly readable but also shocking account of one of the most crucial historical events in late-nineteenth-century Chinese history.

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Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: the human sciences and the fate of liberal modernity, 1880–1930*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. ix, 229, £22.95, \$45.00 (hardback 978-0-8014-4627-6).

Renovating Russia is addressed primarily to historians well-versed in the current heated debates regarding Russian modernity and liberalism, as well as the continuities and ruptures across the revolutionary divide of 1917. Without clearly articulating it, Beer seeks to answer the eternal Russian question: “Who is to be blamed?” by searching for the intellectual roots of the Bolshevik regime. Historians have pointed variously to a number of western social

theorists including Comte, Spenser, Nietzsche, and Freud (to say nothing of the Bolsheviks’ officially acknowledged debt to Marx and Engels) as the intellectual forbears of the Soviet regime. Beer adds to this list several new names: Benedict A Morel, the father of “degeneration” theory, Cesare Lombroso, the major proponent of the concept of the “born criminal”, and a host of European psychiatrists who developed the concept of “mental contagion” or “crowd psychology”. Beer argues that the ideas of “social deviance”, elaborated during the pre-revolutionary period by the Russian “liberal practitioners of human sciences” on the basis of these three concepts, furnished the Soviet regime with the “language of social excision and coercive rehabilitation” (p. 201) that informed, legitimized, and enabled the regime’s violent project of radical social transformation. The first two chapters of the book explore Russian scholars’ responses to Morel’s theory of “degeneration”. The third examines their attitudes to Lombroso’s concept of the “born criminal”. The fourth analyses their investigations into “crowd psychology” and “mental contagion”, and the last one deals with the “appropriation” of these responses, attitudes, and investigations by Soviet psychiatrists and criminologists.

Historians of science and medicine will find in Beer’s volume a treasure-trove of previously unexplored materials on the history of Russian human sciences, but, accustomed to the sophisticated armoury of social and cultural history, they will be disappointed by the book’s weak analytical framework. *Renovating Russia* belongs to a particular genre: the “history of thought”, which could be called a *textual* history of ideas, since it is based entirely upon the examination of published texts and nothing else. In this genre, scientific concepts—completely stripped of their institutional, disciplinary, clinical, and investigative *contexts*—are debated and elaborated not by live people pursuing concrete research, or economic, social, clinical, or political objectives, but by an assemblage of “pure minds” defined exclusively and vaguely by their “worldview”,