

and politics of Hong Kong, to those working on British imperial history, and to all those interested in histories of press freedom and freedom of expression.

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## Accidental Holy Land: The Communist Revolution in Northwest China

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Xi Jinping's decision to lead the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) newly elected Politburo Standing Committee on a highly publicized pilgrimage to Yan'an at the conclusion the 20th Party Congress this year cannot but underscore the contemporary relevance of Esherick's latest monograph. As the author points out, Xi's personal story and claim to legitimacy are inextricably bound to Yan'an, as "the first true 'princeling' to rule China and the son of a Shaanxi man who rose to power in Shaan-Gan-Ning" (xxiii); his triumphant return to Yan'an to celebrate his re-election was all but pre-ordained, allowing him to highlight historic parallels. Touring Yangjialing, Xi proclaimed that the Seventh Party Congress had served to "point out just the right direction and opened up exactly the correct path that saw the Party traverse from victory to victory" (*Renmin ribao*, 28 October 2022, p.1). At the Yan'an Revolutionary Memorial site the next day, Xi asserted to his entourage that "in Yan'an, our Party not only gained a firm foothold, but also ushered in a major development, starting on the irreversible historical trajectory of development and growth" (*Renmin ribao*, 29 October 2022, p.1).

Xi would not be at all pleased with *Accidental Holy Land*, not least because of the author's injunction that "we must remind ourselves that Mao never wanted to be in Yan'an and that the Yan'an era was itself an accident of history" (p. 208). Esherick is insistent that "even an event as momentous as the Chinese Revolution must be understood as the result of a long process of multiple contingent events" (xxiv). In contrast to the Party's "determinism and notions of historical inevitability," he offers us an intriguing excursus on the "accidental" nature of "the world apart" that Yan'an became for Mao and early Party activists (p. 206) and trains our attention on the unexpected concatenation of developments that led them to find their footing in northern Shaanxi.

To be clear, "accidental" for Esherick means neither "coincidental" nor "random": unlike completely haphazard events, "accidents have causes" that can be investigated (p. 208). Yet one key assumption that he contests is that momentous events must "necessarily have big causes" (p. 208). Broader societal movements and intellectual trends may shed helpful light on major developments, "but they are insufficient to unravel the complex fabric of history" (p. 208). For example, Esherick notes, the fact that most Chinese political elites of the early 20th century, whether aligned with the Kuomintang or the CCP, believed in the likelihood of revolutionary transformation in no way foreordained the eventual outcome. "In this sense, the inevitability of *some* Chinese Revolution is plausible. But the form that *the* revolution took was the product of a vast array of local, national, and historical contingencies that can be unraveled only through precise attention to the details and



indeed the accidents of history” (p. 208, italics added). The accumulation of small, fortuitous events that transformed the outpost of Yan’an into the cradle of the Chinese revolution include the failure of the Long Marchers to reach He Long’s base in western Hunan, the unexpected breach with Zhang Guotao in Sichuan, and the fluke appearance of a newspaper report on a persistent but thriving rural soviet in Shaanbei (p. 196). Esherick stresses that, had this chain of happenstance not unfolded in the manner that it did, “there would have been no ‘Yan’an Era’ and the course of history would have been quite different if Mao had continued to the Soviet border” (p. 197).

This cascade of relatively minor contingencies was conditioned, of course, by the larger seismic shifts in the social ecology of northern Shaanxi over the *longue durée*, masterfully detailed in the first four chapters of the book. “Microhistory sometimes requires a macro lens” (p. 197), and Esherick provides one that is impressive in both scope and detail. The first half of the book offers an analysis of the troubled social geography of the region, drawing a vivid contrast between the more populated northeastern Shaanbei with the marginal Shaan–Gan borderlands, which had been largely depopulated during the final decades of the Qing by feuding local Han and Hui militias originally mobilized to defend against the Taiping rebels.

From this unpromising milieu emerged not one, but two key revolutionary figures that shape Esherick’s “accidental” history of northern Shaanxi: Liu Zhidan, a guerilla leader who gained a foothold in the western Shaan–Gan border region in communication with the Party’s base in Xi’an; and Xie Zichang, connected to the Party’s North China office, whose revolutionary labours resulted in a schools-based movement concentrated in the east (p. 266). Intermittent competitors and comrades, Liu and Xie led the effort to establish a Party foothold in northern Shaanxi in the mid-1930s. They also arguably represent two critical strategies used to build the revolutionary movement at the time: one relying on marginal secret societies and brotherhoods, and the other on disaffected intellectuals and idealistic students. After Xie succumbed to wounds sustained during a “foolhardy” guerilla attack on Hekou (p. 103), Liu Zhidan struggled to control the two wings and expand the Party’s hold in Shaanbei. To his credit, Liu’s leadership of the region’s Red Army forces saw the Communists establish either Soviets or revolutionary committees in over twenty counties in the Shaan–Gan border region (p. 112). Nevertheless, when a reorganization of the regional Party office put new leaders from Shanghai in control, Liu Zhidan was branded a “right opportunist”; his Shaan–Gan Soviet was targeted with a brutal purge that only ended with Mao’s arrival in 1935 (pp. 117–122). Liu Zhidan’s death only a few months later – “for which many in Shaanbei [still] believe ... Mao was responsible” (p. 136) – left a portentous power vacuum that Mao and the Long Marchers quickly filled.

Intriguingly, Esherick admits that *Accidental Holy Land* was not the book he had hoped and intended to write. Extensive fieldwork and archival research in Shaanbei villages led him to become increasingly and “deeply skeptical of any reified notion of the party. Though composed largely of peasants, it was not a peasant party; nor was it an alien military-political structure working its will to transform rural society” (xvii). Given that the Party’s “interests, concerns, and revolutionary ambitions differed at each level,” he had hoped to write “an ‘anthropology of the party’ to understand how these various levels learned to work together” (xvii). The inaccessibility of the Central Archives in Beijing – closed to all but the anointed few – steered the project in a rather different and unexpected direction. Esherick’s *Accidental Holy Land* stands as a provocative testament not only to his extraordinary breadth and intellectual vision as a historian, but also to how the problems of agency and contingency work equally on those who make the past and on those who seek to make sense of it.