



A Great Undertaking: Mechanization and Social Change in a Late Imperial Chinese Coalmining Community

Jeff Hornibrook

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Explores the social disruption resulting from industrialization in a Chinese coalmining community at the turn of the twentieth century.

Jeff Hornibrook provides a unique, microcosmic look at the process of industrialization in one Chinese community at the turn of the twentieth century. Industrialization came late to China, but was ultimately embraced and hastened to aid the state's strategic and military interests. In Pingxiang County in the highlands of Jiangxi Province, coalmining was seasonal work; peasants rented mines from lineage leaders to work after the harvest. These traditions changed in 1896 when the court decided that the county's mines were essential for industrialization. Foreign engineers and Chinese officials arrived to establish the new social and economic order required for mechanized mining, one that would change things for people from all levels of society. The outsiders constructed a Westernized factory town that sat uneasily within the existing community. Mistreatment of the local population, including the forced purchase of gentry-held properties and the integration of peasants into factory-style labor schemes, sparked a series of rebellions that wounded the empire and tore at the fabric of the community. Using stories found in memoirs of elite Chinese and foreign engineers, correspondence between gentry and powerful officials, travelogues of American missionaries and engineers, as well as other sources, Hornibrook offers a fascinating history of the social and political effects of industrialization in Pingxiang County.

Jeff Hornibrook is Professor of History at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh.

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