

Puk, Wing Kin, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Rational Riot? Flood, Food and Fury in Jiading in 1849

In 1849, Jiading, a county west of Shanghai, was struck first by flood, then by famine. Grain price rocketed, the locals strongly believed, because merchants secretly shipped grain out of Jiading. Out of desperation the locals stormed rice shops. The county government conveniently confiscated the rice shops and arrested the merchants. This paper does not dismiss the locals as mobs, nor finish the event with a down-putting from the perspective of economics "common sense". Instead, this paper explores the interaction among various players: the poor, the gentry, the merchant, the government, etc., in the "game" of surviving the famine. In so doing this paper brings back the socio-cultural context in which "economic rationality", "money", and "finance" hardly assumed any priority, whereas "fear" and "fury" of the local community proved to be more powerful in constructing and transforming "reality". This paper ends with a discussion on the "blind spot" in the study of economic history.