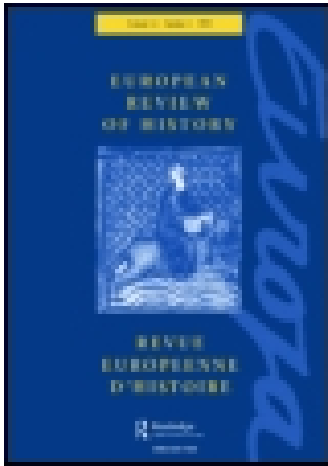


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## Coping with famine in Communist China (1949–62)

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Several studies of Mao's Great Famine based on archival material have appeared over the past few years. This article is less focused on the famine than on how existing responses to starvation were gradually eliminated in the years before the launch of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, as well as how covert acts of resistance offered some hope to villagers during Mao's Great Famine from 1958 to 1962. China, after all, was a country well attuned to famine, and coping mechanisms existed at all levels of society, starting from a variety of survival strategies adopted by the villagers themselves and reaching all the way to international interventions by organisations like the Famine Relief Commission. Few of these were left intact in the wake of the Communist conquest in 1949, as is seen in the first part of this article. On the other hand, villagers were quick to learn how to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. During the Great Leap Forward, these covert means of resistance were often the population's only hope for survival in many parts of the country reeling under the impact of famine, as seen in part two.

**Keywords:** famine; Communism; history; China; introduction

Between 1958 and 1962, Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up and overtake Britain in less than 15 years. By unleashing China's greatest asset, a labour force that counted in the hundreds of millions, Mao thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors. Instead of following the Soviet model of development, which leaned heavily towards industry alone, China would 'walk on two legs': the peasant masses were mobilised to tackle both agriculture and industry at the same time, transforming a backward economy into a modern Communist society of plenty for all. In the pursuit of a utopian paradise, villagers were herded together in giant communes which heralded the advent of Communism. People in the countryside were robbed of their work, their homes, their land, their belongings and their livelihood. Food, distributed by the spoonful in collective canteens according to merit, became a weapon to compel people to follow the Party's every dictate. Irrigation campaigns forced up to half the villagers to work for weeks on end on giant water-conservancy projects, often far away from home, without adequate food and rest. The experiment ended in the greatest catastrophe the country had ever known, destroying tens of millions of lives.<sup>1</sup>

Several studies of Mao's Great Famine based on archival material have appeared over the past few years.<sup>2</sup> This article is less focused on the famine than on how existing responses to starvation were gradually eliminated in the years before the launch of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, as well as how covert acts of resistance offered some hope to villagers despite mass starvation from 1958 to 1962. China, after all, was a country well

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attuned to famine, and coping mechanisms existed at all levels of society, starting from a variety of survival strategies adopted by the villagers themselves and reaching all the way to international interventions by organisations like the Famine Relief Commission. Few of these were left intact in the wake of the Communist conquest in 1949, as we see in the first part of this article. On the other hand, villagers were quick to learn how to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. During the Great Leap Forward, these covert means of resistance were often the population's only hope for survival in many parts of the country reeling under the impact of famine, as we see in part two.

### **The road to serfdom**

One of the founding acts of the Communist regime was land reform. It unfolded from 1947 in regions first conquered by the Communist Party and was over by 1952. Some regions had to go through the process twice. Although land reform varied enormously from place to place, the underlying strategy was often the same. In the north, for instance, work teams followed in the wake of the People's Liberation Army and closely studied the balance of power in newly liberated villages. They gathered information from Party activists, pored over the life stories of the villagers and then divided them into five classes, closely mirroring what had been done in the Soviet Union: 'landlords'; 'rich peasants'; 'middle peasants'; 'poor peasants'; and 'labourers'.<sup>3</sup> Their next task was to convince those identified as 'labourers' and 'poor peasants' to turn their hardship into hatred. This, too, took weeks of persistence and persuasion, as the work teams had to convince the 'poor' that the 'rich' were behind their every misfortune, having exploited their labour since time immemorial. In so-called 'speak bitterness' meetings, participants were encouraged to tap into a reservoir of grievances. Some vented genuine frustrations that had long been bottled up; others were coerced into inventing accusations against their richer neighbours.

After months of patient work, the Communists managed to turn the poor against the village leaders. A once closely knit community was polarised into two extremes. The Communists armed the poor, sometimes with guns, more often with pikes, sticks and hoes. One by one the class enemies were dragged out onto a stage where they were denounced by the crowd, assembled in their hundreds, screaming for blood, demanding that accounts be settled in an atmosphere charged with hatred. These were called 'struggle sessions', as the victims were mercilessly denounced, mocked, humiliated, beaten and killed.<sup>4</sup>

The pact between the Party and the poor was sealed in blood. All the land and assets of the victims were distributed to the crowd. The land was paced, measured and distributed to the poor. Grain was loaded into baskets, furniture was lugged away, pigs were driven along. Even pots and jars were placed into rattan hampers, making it look like moving day.

Land reform pitted villagers against each other, but as they denounced one another in ferocious meetings, the actual holdings in the countryside came to light. Soon the Communist Party knew exactly how much land there was. It determined how much each strip could produce and demanded that each household hand over a designated amount of grain.

The moral values and social bonds of reciprocity that had long regulated village life were severely eroded during land reform. By implicating all the villagers in the denunciation, beating and sometimes murder of a carefully targeted minority, all of them became permanently linked to the Party. Nobody was to stand on the sidelines. Everybody was to have blood on their hands through participation in denunciation meetings. A large

enough quantity of blood had to be shed to make any return to the past impossible. To make sure that the supporters of the old regime would never come back, many young men from poor families joined the army.

By all accounts, by 1952 over 10 million people had been expropriated and more than 40% of the land had changed hands. We will never know how many victims were killed in land distribution, but it is unlikely to be less than 1.5 to 2 million people from 1947 to 1952. Many more were stigmatised as exploiters and class enemies.<sup>5</sup>

Once traditional elites were eliminated during land reform, most villagers had nobody else to turn to in times of hunger but the Party itself. But it was not merely goodwill from more affluent neighbours in times of hunger that vanished with land reform. Shops and enterprises run by wealthier people were ransacked or went bankrupt. Before liberation not every villager was a farmer, and even those who tilled the fields often had sideline occupations, making handicrafts in their spare time to supplement the family's income. Now those activities were viewed as 'capitalist'. In all of Hubei province, by 1951, the income that most people in the countryside obtained from secondary occupations was cut in half compared to earlier years. More than ever before, the villagers had to rely on agriculture, all the more since their taxes had to be paid in grain. In many provinces the output of sideline occupations in the countryside would not match pre-war levels until the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

Lending soon came to a complete halt after land distribution, as everybody feared being stigmatised as an 'exploiter'. By 1950 the People's Bank of China, and by extension the Communist Party, was the only lender. The People's Republic issued its own People's Dollar, called the *renminbi*, and made it the only medium of exchange. Trade in its rivals – greenbacks, silver dollars and gold – was tolerated for a few months, but soon the money-changers were forced to close their doors.

Charitable institutions were disbanded. Those run by foreigners were targeted first. In 1950 the vast majority of hospitals, schools and churches under foreign management were taxed out of existence. Missionaries left in droves. Those who decided to stay sometimes became virtual prisoners in their own missions, forbidden to leave the compound. A month after China entered the Korean War in October 1950, arrests of foreign missionaries began. In mass trials and frenzied demonstrations they were accused of espionage and subversive activities. By the end of 1951 no more than 100 missionaries remained in China.<sup>7</sup>

Next came Taoist and Buddhist temples, along with other religious institutions. They were closed down, except for a few that were placed under government control. Priests, monks and nuns were sent to orientation centres to train as carpenters and seamstresses, while shrines to ancestors and local deities were destroyed. Monasteries were converted into barracks, prisons, schools, offices or factories, while copies of the Buddhist canon were burned and sacred images were melted down for their metal. Land under the control of religious organisations was confiscated. A Chinese Buddhist Association was formed in Beijing in November 1952: like the official 'Patriotic Church' set up for Protestants, it received funds from the state, preached according to the state and followed commands from the state.

Starting in 1953, villagers were grouped into co-operatives. Tools, working animals and labour were shared on a permanent basis. Farmers retained nominal ownership of their plot but secured a share in the co-operative by staking it along with those of other members in a common land pool. The co-operatives soon overshadowed the entire lives of the villagers, selling seed, salt and fertiliser, lending money, fixing the prices, determining the time of the harvest and buying up the crops.

But the most damaging blow to the countryside came later that year, when a monopoly on the grain was introduced. The state decreed that cultivators had to sell all ‘surplus’ grain to the state at prices determined by the state and in co-operatives run by the state. The system worked as follows. The government estimated what the yield per hectare of any given field would be. This figure was often much higher than the actual yield, and it was sometimes raised again under pressure to produce more. The government also determined the quantity of grain that each person should eat. This was set at roughly 13 to 16 kilos per head each month – a little more than half the required amount of unhusked grain to provide 1700 to 1900 calories per day. It was a starvation diet imposed equally on all villagers. This amount, as well as the land tax and the seeds required for the next sowing, was deducted from the estimated yield. What remained was considered surplus. It had to be sold to the state at a price fixed by the state. Extra grain above the basic ration could be bought back from the state by the farmers – if they could afford it, and if there were any grain left after it was used to feed the cities, fuel industrialisation and pay off foreign debts.<sup>8</sup>

One response to collectivisation was to leave the countryside. Villagers had always supplemented their income by going to the city in the slack seasons, working in factories or peddling goods. Sometimes they would stay away for years on end, sending remittances back home to support their families. But most of all, people took to the roads because they wanted to escape from famine. After the state imposed a monopoly on grain in 1953, many villagers voted with their feet and joined a massive exodus from the countryside. In the summer of 1954, 2000 refugees arrived in Shanghai by train every single day. Hundreds also landed by boat, some of them too poor to buy a ticket. Other cities, too, were straining under the influx of refugees from the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1953 the State Council had already passed a directive seeking to persuade hundreds of thousands of farmers in search of work to return to their villages. The attempt failed to stem the flow. In March 1954 even more stringent regulations were put on the books, curtailing the recruitment of workers from the countryside. In the following months the public security organs were beefed up, and substations were established everywhere to control the movement of people and guard the cities against a rural influx. Then, on 22 June 1955, Zhou Enlai signed a directive introducing the household registration system (*hukou*) to the countryside.<sup>10</sup>

It was the rough equivalent of the internal passport instituted decades earlier in the Soviet Union. Food was rationed from August 1955 onwards, and its distribution closely tied to the number of people registered in each household. The ration cards had to be presented at local grain stores, thus preventing the large-scale movement of people. But while the subsistence of urban residents was guaranteed by the state, rural residents had to feed themselves. From retirement benefits to healthcare, education and subsidised housing, the state looked after many of its employees in the cities, while letting people registered as ‘peasants’ (*nongmin*) fend for themselves. This status was inherited through the mother, meaning that even if a village woman married a man from the city, she and her children remained ‘peasants’, deprived of the same entitlements accorded urban residents.

The household registration system also carefully monitored the movement of people, even within the countryside, as a migration certificate was required for anybody thinking of changing residence. No government in China had ever restricted freedom of residence or prevented migration, except in contested zones during wartime. But in 1955 the freedom of domicile and freedom of movement came to an end for people in the countryside. Those who moved in search of a better life were now called *mangliu*, or ‘blind migrants’. It was a reverse homophone of *liumang*, meaning hooligan.

The household-registration system tied the cultivator to the land, making sure that cheap labour was available in the co-operatives. A mere step now separated villagers from serfdom, namely the ownership of the land. This happened in 1955–6 with the transformation of co-operatives into collectives resembling state farms in the Soviet Union. The collectives took the land from the villagers. They transformed the farmers into agricultural workers who received work points for their labour, which had to be carried out under the orders of a local cadre. Farmers were now bonded labourers at the beck and call of the state.

By the time Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward, most of the traditional exits from starvation in the countryside had been cut off. Very little stood between the villager and the state, which was further enhanced by the amalgamation of all collectives into gigantic people's communes of up to 20,000 households in the summer of 1958. Everyday life in the communes was run along military lines, as villagers were seen as foot soldiers in a giant army to be deployed in a continuous revolution. Almost everything, including land and labour, was collectivised. Communal dining replaced private kitchens, while children were left in the care of boarding kindergartens. A work-point system was used to calculate rewards, while even money was abolished in some communes.

### **Famine and covert resistance**

The famine that claimed tens of millions of lives between 1958 and 1962 was not the first the Communist regime had to deal with. Brutal grain requisitions were imposed immediately after liberation, leading to widespread shortages. Even in Manchuria, the country's breadbasket, the insatiable demands of the army during the Korean War in 1950 caused whole parts of the region to sink into starvation.<sup>11</sup>

Famine again stalked large swathes of the countryside in the spring of 1953. In Shandong three million people went hungry. Five million people were destitute in Henan, close to seven million in Hubei and another seven million in Anhui. In Guangdong over a quarter of a million people went without food. In Shaanxi and Gansu over 1.5 million people went hungry. In Guizhou and Sichuan desperate farmers sold the seeds on which their next crop depended: this was the case with a quarter of the people in some villages in Nanchong County. The practice was also common in Hunan, Hubei and Jiangsu. In Shaoyang County, Hunan, starvation compelled even farmers who used to be well-off in the past to sell everything they had. In many of these provinces desperate parents even bartered their children. Villagers were reduced to eating bark, leaves, roots and mud. Famine was a familiar challenge in traditional China, and natural disasters were responsible for a good deal of this hunger. The year of Stalin's death saw floods, typhoons, frosts and blights on an unprecedented scale. But many reports also pointed the finger at brutal grain levies as well as incompetence, if not callous indifference, on the part of local cadres.<sup>12</sup>

The following year was made worse by the grain monopoly. Deng Zihui, the minister who oversaw work in the countryside from Beijing, put it in a nutshell. In July 1954, 10 months after the system had come into effect, he admitted that before liberation, on average a villager had about 300 kilos set aside for food each year. Now that amount was reduced for every one of them, from north to south, to just about half a kilo a day, or a third less.<sup>13</sup> In Henan and in Jiangxi, 4.5 million people were in dire straits. In Hunan up to one in every six villagers went hungry. Three million lacked food in Shandong. In Guizhou and Sichuan, where up to a quarter of the population in mountainous areas did not have enough to eat, people bartered their clothes, their land and their homes. Across the country people sold their children, even in subtropical Guangdong.<sup>14</sup>

All along there was resistance. Already during the grain requisitions in 1950 villagers in the south openly defied the regime. In east China, some 40 rebellions rocked the countryside in the first three months of 1950 alone. Most occurred in poor regions, and the target was always the same: famished villagers turned against the state and stormed the granaries.<sup>15</sup> Unrest and rebellion flared again in 1953–4, as farmers opposed the grain monopoly. Sometimes pitched battles occurred between the people and the security forces. Luo Ruiqing, the head of security, counted dozens of cases of unrest and open rebellion in the countryside in 1955.<sup>16</sup>

But most of all, villagers developed covert ways of holding back food from the state. In the absence of help from better-off neighbours, clan or lineage organisations, religious groups, charitable associations and international aid, they learnt how to fight for themselves. These strategies were often their only hope of survival, in particular during the Great Leap Forward.

The most widespread tactic was to slack at work, allowing natural inertia to take over. Loudspeakers might be blaring exhortations to work, propaganda posters might extol the model worker who over-fulfilled the plan, but apathy more often than not governed the factory floor. In the countryside, apathy at work, besides being a result of malnutrition, was essential for survival, as every bit of energy had to be saved to get through the day. Farmers would till the fields under the watchful eye of a passing cadre, but as soon as he was out of sight they would drop their tools and sit by the road, waiting for the end of their shift. In parts of the countryside people slept all afternoon, placing their own sentries at key intersections along the fields. In some villages under a tolerant leadership, entire families would huddle together and sleep for days on end, literally hibernating through the winter months.<sup>17</sup>

Theft was endemic, its frequency determined by need and opportunity. Transportation workers were in the best position to pilfer state property, as millions of tons of goods passed through their hands. In the Wuhan Harbour Number Six Dock over 280 of all 1200 employees systematically stripped freight trains while pretending to carry out maintenance and repair work.<sup>18</sup> In Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, half of the 864 porters at the railway station stole goods.<sup>19</sup> Students took from the canteen, while in state shops clerks at the counter subtly doctored receipts or produced counterfeits. In the back assistants rummaged through the storage rooms.

Opportunity was greatest in the city, but need ruled the countryside, where many farmers had to survive famine by living on their wits. At every stage of the production cycle, villagers tried to keep back some of the grain from the demands of the state. This started in the field, even before the wheat or maize was fully ripened. Harking back to a traditional practice called *chiqing*, or ‘eating green’, villagers quietly clipped off spikes of grain straight from the field, husked and ground it in their hands and ate the raw, green kernels when out of sight from the militia. Eating the crop before it reached maturity was more common in the north, as hiding among dense rows of maize or in a field thick with wheat was easier than in a rice paddy. Maize was also a more durable crop, standing in the fields for a longer period of time, and thus allowing for a greater number of sprints to take place.<sup>20</sup>

Once the grain was threshed and bagged, it was bulked up with water and sold to the state – with or without the complicity of local inspectors. In Guangdong alone almost a third of 1.5 million tons of state grain suffered from a high water content in 1961, although poor storage conditions no doubt contributed to the rot in the subtropical south.<sup>21</sup> Once sold to the state, grain on the move was exposed to a plethora of thieving hands. In Guangzhou shippers would extract the grain with a bamboo tube and pour sand back



into the bags.<sup>22</sup> Guards in charge of state granaries stole. In the end, with the grain passing through so many grasping hands, one wonders how much actually reached the canteen table. In Suzhou local investigators estimated that out of a pound of rice only about half made it to its final destination. It was pilfered from the granaries, taken during transportation, pocketed by accountants, confiscated by cadres and finally filched by cooks before a bowl of rice was ever served in a canteen.<sup>23</sup>

When local cadres colluded with the farmers, powerful forms of collective theft, subterfuge and deception could emerge, shielding the village from the worst effects of the famine. Some villages kept two sets of books, one with the real figures in the village and another with fake numbers for the eyes of grain inspectors. Then the grain had to be hidden, which was no easy task in the midst of ferocious and often bloody campaigns to take it from the farmers. Throughout the country there were cases of village heads quietly distributing grain to the farmers, helping many to survive the famine. In Yixian County, Hebei, some 150 to 200 kilos of harvested grain per hectare were handed out in one commune.<sup>24</sup> But all too often the reverse was true. In many villages the cadres preferred to lower the grain consumption rather than to ask for help higher up the chain of command, as they feared being seen as slackers who would beg rather than work towards a higher crop.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, when the food ran out, people turned on each other, stealing from other villagers, neighbours or even relatives. In Nanjing roughly half of all conflicts between neighbours involved food, as people stole from each other, some of the incidents leading to fist fights.<sup>26</sup> In the countryside, fierce competition for survival gradually eroded any sense of social cohesion. In Liaojia village, just outside Changsha, larceny was so bad that desperate cadres could do nothing but tell the farmers to steal from other villages instead, for which they would not be punished.<sup>27</sup> And once community bonds in the countryside unravelled, the family became an arena for strife, jealousy and conflict. Most of the violence was committed by men and directed against women and children, although the victims also included the elderly. A few cases show deliberate starving of a weaker family member. In Liuhe, for instance, Wang Jiuchang regularly ate the ration allocated to his eight-year-old daughter. He also took her cotton jacket and trousers in the middle of the winter. In the end she succumbed to hunger and cold.<sup>28</sup>

The most effective strategy of survival in times of famine was to leave the village. Ironically, for millions of farmers the Great Leap Forward meant departure to the city rather than entry into a commune. As targets for industrial output were ceaselessly revised upwards, urban enterprises started recruiting cheap labour from the countryside, creating a migration of tidal dimensions. More than 15 million farmers moved to the city in 1958 alone, lured by the prospect of a better life.<sup>29</sup>

The great outflow from the countryside happened despite the internal-passport system introduced in 1955. Earlier patterns of migration and networks of contacts were used by villagers to make their way to the city. Those who returned to the village over the Chinese New Year encouraged others to follow, heading back as a group to enterprises where good connections had been established and few questions were asked. Letters were sent from the city, including money and detailed instructions on how to join the exodus. Some communes actually supported a form of chain migration by agreeing to take care of children and the elderly, as remittances from workers in the city contributed to the survival of the entire village. Many absconded in the middle of the night, while others walked away in broad daylight, claiming to visit a sick relative in town. In a few cases cadres themselves wrote letters of reference and provided travel permits, encouraging villagers to pull up stakes and take their chances in the city. Some made a profit by selling blank permits

bearing an official stamp.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, for instance further south in Guangdong, local cadres adopted a lenient attitude, sensing that more movement of people could alleviate the famine.<sup>31</sup>

The cumulative effect of this outflow could overwhelm the city, despite the cordon sanitaire designed to keep the urban population insulated from the rural famine. Thousands found their way into Nanjing every month, and by the spring of 1959 some 60,000–70,000 refugees had either arrived or transited through the city, overrunning the temporary shelters hastily erected by the municipality. Two-thirds were young men, and most came from the surrounding counties, although a number also hailed from Anhui, Henan and Shandong, the three provinces most affected by famine. Factories and mines secretly recruited them, paying them by piece rate, less than workers with residence permits. Some enterprises actually faked the necessary papers to register them locally, but the vast majority – some 90% of all factories – simply inflated the official number of workers in order to secure sufficient food to feed illegal workers.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, as the famine went on, whatever leverage some young migrants might have had on a black market desperately short of labour simply vanished, replaced by desperation for a scrap of food. By 1960 in Lanzhou some 210,000 migrants worked in factories without any pay, being given no more than board and lodging. Outside the provincial capital complicity from the leaders led to conditions of slave labour. In Tongwei, a steel factory locked up migrants and forced them to work themselves to death, refusing to feed them: a thousand died that year, as factory bosses were assured of a steady supply of vagrants and drifters looking for work.<sup>33</sup> Who knows how many factories operated in similar conditions?

As the years of famine went by, the motivations behind migration changed. In a nutshell, the lure of employment was replaced by the compulsion of famine. As a sense of despair grew, some would steal off into the mountains, hoping to survive on berries, insects and possibly small animals. But few actually made it, some being forced to return to the village, emerging from the forest with dishevelled hair and torn clothes, sometimes entirely naked, a wild look in the eyes, so changed that they were no longer recognised.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, when disaster struck, people left *en masse*, children in tow, their meagre possessions strapped on their backs; local authorities could only stand by and watch the exodus. Entire brigades left collectively – cadres, men, women and children – trading their clothes for taro along the way, with many of the adults and most of the children ending up stark naked.<sup>35</sup> All over the country people died by the roadside.

Violence was an act of last resort, as desperate farmers assaulted granaries, raided trains or plundered communes. In parts of the countryside, large groups would assemble along county and provincial boundaries and foray across the border, leaving behind a trail of destruction.<sup>36</sup>

But more often than not the target of peasant violence was the state granary. The scale of the attacks was staggering. In one Hunanese county alone, 30 out of 500 state granaries were assailed in two months in the winter of 1960–1.<sup>37</sup> Raids on trains were also common. People would gather along a railway and rob freight trains, using the sheer weight of their numbers to overwhelm the guards. This became increasingly common from the end of 1960 onwards, as the regime started to realise the extent of mass starvation and launched a purge of some of the most abusive Party members. In Gansu province, 500 cases of train robbery were reported by the local police in January 1961 alone. In one case over 4000 villagers ran amok, bringing to a halt a train from which every detachable portion of property was removed. In another case military uniforms were stolen from a wagon.

On the prowl days later, the villagers were mistaken for special forces by the guards in charge of a warehouse and given access to the grain unopposed.<sup>38</sup>

Violence begets violence. Sometimes the protective shield outsiders mistook for passivity and submissiveness broke down, and villagers erupted in a blind fury. In heated meetings at which higher quotas were introduced, farmers accused their leaders of starving them to death, some of the more disgruntled ones going so far as to assault and kill local cadres with cleavers.<sup>39</sup> But such examples were unusual. Ordinary people may have pilfered, stolen, lied and on occasion torched and pillaged, but they were rarely the perpetrators of violence. They were the ones who had to find ways of 'eating bitterness' – the Chinese saying for enduring hardship – by absorbing grief, taking pain and living with loss on a devastating scale.

In the last two years of Mao's Great Famine underground organisations sprang up. Most of these never posed a genuine threat to the Party and were easily crushed, but they did act as a barometer for popular discontent. Near Changsha a 'Love the People Party' was set up by a few disgruntled farmers in the winter of 1960–1 in favour of the freedom to cultivate and trade in agricultural products. They never stood a chance.<sup>40</sup> But more credible challenges came from the outer provinces. In the autumn of 1960, villagers in Xuanwei County, Yunnan, rebelled, an act of subversion that rapidly spread to several communes. The movement was backed by local cadres, including Party secretaries in the higher echelons of power. Weapons were seized, and hundreds of discontented villagers were rallied around slogans promising the abolition of the people's communes, a free market and a return of the land to the farmers. The army swiftly intervened, capturing and eliminating all but one of the leaders. In his report to Zhou Enlai, top security boss Xie Fuzhi mentioned a dozen similar incidents in the south-western provinces that year.<sup>41</sup>

Between 1958 and 1962, villagers were left on their own to deal with the catastrophe unleashed by the Great Leap Forward. If they were lucky, somebody up the chain of command tried to soften the blow. This happened in entire provinces such as Heilongjiang. If they were unlucky, they were driven to their deaths in a merciless regime founded on violence and intimidation. This was also the case for entire provinces, for instance Sichuan, Anhui and Gansu. And in every province, regardless of the man in power, willing executioners could invoke the words of the Chairman to whip up the workforce in one relentless drive after another. They were unlikely to declare defeat, accept the existence of a famine and ask for official assistance.<sup>42</sup>

In most cases, encouraged by the top leadership and fearful of being purged for being too soft, local cadres resorted to ever greater means of coercion, resulting in an orgy of violence that became all the more extreme as the incentives to work were removed. Much of this violence – as well as the majority of premature deaths – took place after a drastic purge in the wake of the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959, as Peng Dehuai and others who had expressed dissatisfaction with the Great Leap Forward were denounced by Mao and his acolytes for having conspired against Party, state and people. At every level – province, county, commune, brigade – ferocious purges were carried out, replacing lacklustre cadres with hard, unscrupulous elements who trimmed their sails to benefit from the radical winds blowing from Beijing. In 1959–60 some 3.6 million Party members were labelled or purged as 'rightists', although total membership surged from 13,960,000 in 1959 to 17,380,000 in 1961.<sup>43</sup> In a moral universe in which the end justified the means, many would be prepared to become the Chairman's willing instruments, casting aside every idea about right and wrong to achieve the goals he envisaged. As Lenin had put it many decades earlier, 'he who does not work shall not eat', and many local cadres used

food as a weapon to get rid of entire categories of people deemed to be dangerous or useless, including those too sick or old to work.

Only when the country was on the brink of complete collapse in late 1960 did Mao allow some form of ‘economic adjustment’ to take place. He did so first by blaming ‘rich farmers’, ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and other ‘bad elements’ for having ‘sabotaged socialist productive forces’.<sup>44</sup> Across the country a campaign unfolded to root out ‘class enemies’, often backed by powerful delegations sent by Beijing. In Gansu, for instance, a team sent by the Ministry of Inspection oversaw a major purge, which resulted in the downgrading of the First Secretary to Third Secretary of the provincial Party committee. Other regions followed, as one urgent order after another pressed for an overthrow of ‘abusive cadres’ in the people’s communes. On 3 November 1960 an emergency directive was finally issued allowing villagers to keep private plots, engage in side occupations, rest for eight hours a day and restore local markets, among other measures designed to weaken the hold of the communes over villagers.<sup>45</sup> This meant, in effect, that villagers were allowed formally to rescue themselves, as the state stepped back.

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### Notes

1. In focusing specifically on the changing responses to starvation, this article brings together and borrows extensively from two of the author’s previous books, namely *Dikötter, Mao’s Great Famine* and *The Tragedy of Liberation*.
2. A major recent study is *Yang, Tombstone*.
3. In Russian the vocabulary was *kulak* for rich peasants, *serednyak* for middle-income peasants, *bedniak* for the poor and *batrak* for labourers. The term for landlord was Mao’s invention. On land reform some essential studies include *Zhang, Yijiusijiu nianhou* and *Luo, Tudi gaige yundong shi*; on land reform as a political device to overthrow traditional elites one should also read the many essays of Qin Hui, for instance *Bian*, “Gongshe zhi mi” and *Qin, Nongmin Zhongguo*.
4. More evidence on land distribution as well as grain requisitions see *Dikötter, The Tragedy of Liberation*.
5. *Teiwes*, “The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime, 1949–57,” 36; see also *Shambaugh*, “The Foundations of Communist Rule in China,” 21–3.
6. *Gao, Lishi shi zenyang gaibian de*.
7. Foreign Office, The Treatment of Christian Institutions under the Present Regime in China, 29 Aug. 1951, PRO, FO371-92368, pp. 112–7; for a more detailed treatment, see *Dikötter, The Tragedy of Liberation*.
8. On the decisions and debated behind the monopoly, see the memoirs of one of the key players, *Bo, Ruogan zhongda shijian*, 267–80.
9. Background information in *Cheng and Selden*, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s *Hukou* System;” Shandong Provincial Archives, 12 April 1954, A1-2-236, p. 14; Ministry of Labour, Report on Migration from the Countryside, 4 Dec. 1953, Gansu Provincial Archives, 91-2-201, pp. 1–6; *Neibu cankao*, 5 Aug. 1954, pp. 76–7.
10. *Cheng and Selden*, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s *Hukou* System.”
11. Report to the People’s Congress, Jilin, 30 Dec. 1950, 2-7-47, pp. 59–60; Reports on Cooperativisation, Jilin, 19 Jan., 16 and 22 March and 23 June 1951, 2-7-56, pp. 2, 14–5, 26 and 84; for other examples see *Dikötter, The Tragedy of Liberation*.

12. *Neibu cankao*, 25 March 1953, p. 605; 4 April 1953, p. 83; 9 April 1953, p. 185; 20 April 1953, p. 417; 29 April 1953, p. 559; 22 June 1953, pp. 354–5; Report from the Ministry of Agricultural Work, 28 Aug. and 18 Sep. 1953, Jilin Provincial Archives, 1-7(2)-7, pp. 101–4 and 107–9.
13. *Oi, State and Peasant in Contemporary China*, pp. 48–9; Talk by Deng Zihui, 15 July 1954, Guangdong Provincial Archives, 209-1-22, pp. 1–5.
14. Instructions from the Centre on the grain monopoly, Guangdong Provincial Archives, 2 Jan. 1954, 204-1-337, p. 46; the reports on famine are in *Neibu cankao*, 7, 9 and 12 April 1954, pp. 70–1, 88–9 and 126; *Neibu cankao*, 13 and 14 May 1954, pp. 174–5; 186–7; *Neibu cankao*, 30 June 1954, pp. 371–2; *Neibu cankao*, 7 July 1954, pp. 117–8.
15. Report from the East China Bureau, 5 May 1950, Shaanxi Provincial Archives, 123-1-83, pp. 1–7.
16. Report by Luo Ruiqing at the National Conference on Public Security, Shandong Provincial Archives, 13 June 1955, A1-2-1377, pp. 66–7 and 72.
17. Sichuan Provincial Archives, 1959, JC9-249, p. 160.
18. *Neibu cankao*, 2 June 1960, pp. 14–15.
19. *Neibu cankao*, 19 Dec. 1960, p. 21.
20. *Thaxton, Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, 201.
21. Guangdong Provincial Archives, 1 March 1961, 235-1-259, pp. 23–5.
22. Guangdong Provincial Archives, 1 and 27 March 1961, 235-1-259, pp. 23–5 and 32–4.
23. Wuxian County Archives, 15 May 1961, 300-2-212, p. 243.
24. Hebei Provincial Archives, 13 Dec. 1960, 855-18-777, pp. 40–1.
25. Hunan Provincial Archives, 31 Dec. 1959, 146-1-507, pp. 120–1.
26. Nanjing Municipal Archives, 4 June 1959, 5003-3-722, pp. 77–81.
27. Hunan Provincial Archives, 13 Feb. 1961, 151-1-18, pp. 24–5.
28. Nanjing Municipal Archives, 10 May 1960, 5003-3-722, pp. 27–31.
29. Shanghai Municipal Archives, 12 March 1959, B98-1-439, pp. 9–13.
30. Zhejiang Provincial Archives, 3 March 1959, J007-11-112, pp. 1–6.
31. Guangdong Provincial Archives, 23 Jan. 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 10–12.
32. Nanjing Municipal Archives, 14 March 1959, 4003-1-168, pp. 39–49 and 14 Aug. 1960, 4003-1-199, p. 2.
33. Gansu Provincial Archives, 14 Jan. 1961, 91-18-200, pp. 47–8.
34. Guangdong Provincial Archives, 5 Jan. 1961, 217-1-643, p. 63.
35. Hebei Provincial Archives, 15 Aug. 1961, 878-1-6, pp. 31–44.
36. For instance Hebei Provincial Archives, 27 June 1959, 884-1-183, p. 135.
37. Hubei Provincial Archives, 6 Jan. 1961, SZ18-2-200, p. 22.
38. Gansu Provincial Archives, 24 Jan. 1961, 91-9-215, pp. 117–20.
39. Hunan Provincial Archives, 22 Nov. 1959, 146-1-507, pp. 44–6.
40. Hunan Provincial Archives, 17 Jan. 1961, 146-1-580, p. 29.
41. Yunnan Provincial Archives, 30 Nov. 1960, 2-1-4108, pp. 72–5; 2 Dec. 1960, 2-1-4108, pp. 1–2; see also 8 Nov. and 9 Dec. 1960, 2-1-4432, pp. 1–10 and 50–7.
42. This paragraph summarises an unpublished chapter entitled “The Geography of Death” in *Dikötter, Mao’s Great Famine*.
43. *MacFarquhar, The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, pp. 61, 179 and 206–7; *Lu, Cadres and Corruption*, p. 86, quoting from figures provided at the time in the *People’s Daily*; speaking in September 1959, Peng Zhen put the Party membership at 13,900,000 and the number of cadres purged over the two preceding years at 700,000; see Gansu Provincial Archives, 19 Sep. 1959, 91-18-561, p. 28.
44. *Mao, Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, vol. 9, p. 349.
45. *Zhonggong* (eds), *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian*, vol. 13, pp. 660–76.

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