

Mao's Great Famine:

Ways of Living, Ways of Dying

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The Grey Zone

From 1958 to 1962 China was pitched into a hell of inconceivable proportions. Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to overtake Britain, then still seen as an industrial superpower, in less than 15 years. By unleashing China's greatest asset, a labour force counted in the hundreds of millions of people, Mao thought he could catapult his country past its competitors. In pursuit of a utopian paradise everything was collectivised, villagers being herded together in giant communes that heralded the leap from socialism into communism. In the countryside, people had their work, homes, land, belongings and livelihoods taken from them. In collective canteens, food, distributed by the spoonful according to merit, became a weapon used to force people to follow the party's every dictate. Irrigation campaigns compelled up to half of the villagers all over the country to work for weeks on end on giant water-conservancy projects, often far from home, without adequate food or rest. Those left to cultivate the land were ordered to participate in controversial agricultural innovations such deep ploughing and close cropping. Combined with the elimination private property and the profit motive, these experiments resulted in a steep decline in grain output. But instead of sounding the alarm, local cadres were

pressured by their superiors to report falsely ever greater yields. To protect their jobs they handed over a correspondingly bigger share of the crop to the state, putting villagers on a starvation diet. The experiment ended in one the greatest mass killings in human history, with a minimum of 45 million people worked, starved or beaten to death.¹

The term 'famine', or even 'Great Famine', is often used to describe these calamitous years of the Maoist era, but the term fails to capture the many ways in which trade, industry, housing, society as well as nature - besides countless human lives - were destroyed under radical collectivisation. Pots, pans and tools were thrown into backyard furnaces to increase the country's steel output, which was seen as one of the magic markers of progress. Livestock declined precipitously, not only because animals were slaughtered for the export market but also because they succumbed en masse to disease and hunger - despite extravagant schemes for giant piggeries that would bring meat to every table. Waste developed because raw resources and supplies were poorly allocated, and because factory bosses deliberately bent the rules to increase output. As everyone cut corners in the relentless pursuit of higher output, factories spewed out inferior goods that accumulated uncollected by railway sidings. Corruption seeped into the fabric of life, tainting everything from soy sauce to hydraulic dams. The transportation system creaked to a halt before collapsing altogether, unable to cope with the demands created by a command economy. Goods worth hundreds of millions of yuan accumulated in canteens, dormitories and even on the streets, a lot of the stock simply rotting or rusting away. It would have been difficult to design a more wasteful system, one in which grain was left uncollected by dusty roads in the countryside as people foraged for roots or ate mud.

The attempt to leap into communism also resulted in the greatest demolition of property in human history - by far outstripping any of the World War II bombing

campaigns. Up to 30 or 40 per cent of all housing was turned into rubble, as homes were pulled down to make fertiliser, to build canteens, to relocate villagers, to straighten roads, to make place for a better future beckoning ahead or simply to punish their occupants. The natural world did not escape unscathed either. We will never know the full extent of forest coverage lost during the Great Leap Forward, but a prolonged and intense attack on nature claimed up to 50 per cent of all trees in some provinces. The rivers and waterways suffered too: throughout the country dams and canals, built by hundreds of millions of farmers at great human and economic cost, were for the greatest part rendered useless or even dangerous, resulting in land slides, river silting, soil salinisation and devastating inundations.

The blithe use of the term 'famine' also lends support to the widespread view that these deaths were the unintended consequence of half-baked and poorly executed economic programmes. Mass killings are not usually associated with Mao and the Great Leap Forward, and China continues to benefit from a more favourable comparison with the devastation usually associated with Cambodia or the Soviet Union. But as fresh archival evidence demonstrates, coercion, terror and systematic violence were the foundation of the Great Leap Forward. As the first part of this chapter shows, people died prematurely of many man-made causes, from torture and summary execution to deliberate starvation. Many vanished because they were too old, weak or sick to work - and hence unable to earn their keep. People were killed selectively because they were rich, because they dragged their feet, because they spoke out or simply because they were not liked, for whatever reason, by the man who wielded the ladle in the canteen. Countless people were killed indirectly through neglect, as local cadres were under pressure to focus on figures rather than on people, making sure they fulfilled the targets they were handed by the top planners.

But as we see in the last part of this chapter, many more managed to survive, against all odds, dispelling the simple notion of the people as mere victims. Despite the vision of social order that the regime projected at home and abroad, the party never managed to impose its grand design, encountering a degree of covert opposition and subversion that would have been unheard of in any country with an elected government. In contrast to the image of a strictly disciplined communist society in which errors at the top cause the entire machinery to grind to a halt, the portrait that emerges from archives and interviews is one of a society in disintegration, leaving people to resort to whatever means available to survive. So destructive was radical collectivisation that at every level the population tried to circumvent, undermine or exploit the master plan, covertly giving full scope to the profit motive that the party tried to eliminate. As famine spread, the very survival of an ordinary person came increasingly to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. As Robert Service points out, in the Soviet Union these phenomena were not so much the grit that stopped the machinery as the oil that prevented the system from coming to a complete standstill.² A 'perfect' communist state could not provide enough incentives for people to collaborate, and without some degree of covert accommodation of the profit motive it would have destroyed itself. No communist regime would have managed to stay in power for so long without constant infringements of the party line.

Some historians might interpret these acts of survival as evidence of 'resistance', or 'weapons of the weak' pitting 'peasants' against 'the state'. But techniques of survival extended from one end of the social spectrum to the other. Just about everybody, from top to bottom, stole during the famine, so much so that if these were acts of 'resistance' the party would have collapsed at a very early stage. It may

be tempting to glorify what appears at first sight to be a morally appealing culture of resistance by ordinary people, but when food was finite, one individual's gain was all too often another's loss. When farmers hid the grain, the workers outside the village died of hunger. When a factory employee added sand to the flour, somebody down the line was chewing grit. To romanticise what were often utterly desperate ways of surviving is to see the world in black and white, when in reality collectivisation forced every survivor, at one point or another, to make grim moral compromises. Routine degradations thus went hand in hand with mass destruction. Primo Levi, in his memoir of Auschwitz, notes that survivors are rarely heroes: when somebody places himself above others in a world dominated by the law of survival, his sense of morality changes. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi called it the grey zone.

Ways of Dying

The Chronological Brackets of Horror

An enduring myth, first propagated by the communist party itself in the aftermath of the catastrophe, is that the horror of famine was limited to three years, namely 1959 to 1961. But people were already dying as a consequence of hard labour combined with a starvation diet as early in early 1958. The term Great Leap Forward was first used in the context of the water conservancy drive launched in the winter of 1957-8. The masses, Mao believed, were the country's real wealth, and they should be mobilised during the slack winter season, before the spring ploughing, to transform the countryside. If water could be diverted to irrigate the thin top soil of the many impoverished villages strewn across the arid north, if floods could be contained with

giant dykes and reservoirs in the subtropical south, the yield of grain would jump. All over China tens of millions of farmers joined irrigation projects: collectively, so the propaganda went, they could accomplish in a matter of months what their forefathers had done in thousands of years. People were marched off in groups to construction sites far away from home and family, made to perform exhausting labour all day long for months on end, sometimes throughout the night without any rest, poorly fed and barely clothed, and exposed to the elements, come snow, rain or heat. Some were being driven to the edge of starvation on gigantic irrigation schemes, pushed hard by cadres afraid of being labelled rightists.

The first deaths by starvation appeared as early as February 1958, for instance in Yunnan. By the summer some 13,000 were reported to have perished in the single county of Luliang alone.³ Local leader Chen Shengnian rigidly adhered to the party line, organising military squads who patrolled the village streets with leather whips, making sure even sick villagers went out to work in the fields or on the Xichong reservoir.⁴ At first the bodies were buried in coffins, but after a few months they were simply covered in mats and dumped in the ditches and ponds near construction sites.⁵

Throughout the country mass mobilisation on water conservancy schemes continued unabated for several years, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of exhausted villagers already weakened by hunger. This did not stop magically in 1961. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, villagers continued to die until the very end of 1962 - if not beyond. In Sichuan, under the iron grip of Li Jingquan, the public security bureau itself compiled figures in 1963 which determined that 1.5 per cent of the population had died in the previous year, meaning that some 300,000 people had perished prematurely in that province alone.⁶

'He Who Strikes First Prevails'

Another common misconception is the idea that the state mistakenly took too much grain from the countryside because it assumed that the harvest was much larger than it was in reality – a myth at most partially true for the autumn of 1958 only. In most cases the party knew very well that it was starving its own people to death. At a secret meeting in the Jinjiang Hotel in Shanghai dated 25 March 1959, Mao specifically ordered the party to procure up to one third of all the grain, much more than had ever been the case. At the meeting he announced that 'When there is not enough to eat people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.'⁷

One of the reasons for the ruthless extraction of grain is that China went on an international shopping spree during the initial frenzy of the Great Leap Forward. As the bills were coming in by the end of 1958, Zhou Enlai, with the support of his colleagues and the backing of the Chairman, relentlessly pressed the countryside into fulfilling ever greater procurements in order to meet foreign commitments. There was a deliberate effort to get at the grain before the farmers could actually store it. As Mao commanded at the Jinjiang Hotel meeting, 'he who strikes first prevails, he who strikes last fails.' Tan Zhenlin, put in charge of agriculture by the party's secretariat, clarified what this meant a few months later in June 1959 in a telephone conference on procurements. He explained that the grain should be taken before the farmers could eat it: speed was of the essence, as each side tried to get to the grain first. 'But this saying of "he who strikes first prevails" should only be used by county and regional party secretaries, if it were used below that level it could easily lead to misunderstandings.'⁸ Already a year earlier Tan, while addressing some of the leaders

of south China in October 1958, made clear the need for a forceful approach: 'You need to fight against the peasants... There is something ideologically wrong with you if you are afraid of coercion.'⁹

Mao's Willing Executioners

On the ground, 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 1961.¹⁰ In a moral universe in which the means justified the ends, many would be prepared to become the Chairman's willing instruments, casting aside every idea about right and wrong to achieve the ends he envisaged.

However important a turning point the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959 may have been, many party members had already been replaced by an earlier purge that coincided exactly with the launch of the Great Leap Forward in late 1957. It is well known how half a million people - many of them students and intellectuals -

were deported to remote areas to do hard labour after the collapse of the Hundred Flowers campaign in the summer of 1957. But just as important was the campaign of repression that targeted hundreds of thousands of party members critical of economic policy, starting with several provincial party leaders who were purged and replaced by close followers of Mao. 'Anti-party' cliques were uncovered almost everywhere in the first months of 1958. Mao prodded the provincial leaders on: 'Better me than you as dictator', he declared in March 1958, invoking words from Lenin. 'It's similar in the provinces: is it going to be Jiang Hua or Sha Wenhan as dictator?'¹¹ In Zhejiang Sha Wenhan was hounded by Jiang Hua, and similar battles took place in Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, Anhui, Liaoning, Hebei and Yunnan, among other provinces.¹²

Opposition from within the party was silenced, as any critical comment about grain procurement or excessive quotas simply became unthinkable. In Yunnan, for instance, the inquisition had resulted in the removal of some 2,000 party members by the summer of 1958. One in fifteen top leaders were fired, including more than 150 powerful cadres working at the county level or above.¹³ In Luliang, the local leader was savaged for having giving in to 'farmers' rightist demands' for grain the previous year. He was replaced by Chen Shengnian, the man who trained military squads with leather whips to make sure that every farmer was contributing to the Great Leap Forward, as we noted above.

Violence

There were countless local cadres like Chen Shengnian, and many used violence as a routine tool of control. It was not used occasionally on a few to instil fear in the many,

rather it was directed systematically and habitually against anybody seen to dawdle, obstruct or protest, let alone pilfer or steal - a majority of villagers. Every meaningful incentive to work was destroyed for the cultivator - the land belonged to the state, the grain he produced was procured at a price that was often below cost of production, his livestock, tools and utensils were no longer his, often even his home was confiscated. The local cadre, on the other hand, faced ever greater pressure to fulfil and overfulfil the plan, having to whip up the workforce in one relentless drive after another. In some places both villagers and cadres became so brutalised that the scope and degree of coercion had to be constantly expanded, creating a mounting spiral of violence. Overall, across the country, maybe as many as half of all cadres regularly pummelled or caned the people they were meant to serve - as endless reports demonstrate.

Beatings were common, but the stick was only one tool in the arsenal of horror devised by local cadres to demean and torture those who failed to keep up. As the countryside slid into starvation, ever greater violence had to be inflicted on the famished to get them into the fields. The ingenuity deployed by the few to inflict pain and suffering on the many seemed boundless. People were thrown into ponds, sometimes bound, sometimes stripped of their clothes. Villagers were stripped naked and left in the cold. In Liuyang, Hunan, a team of 300 men and women were made to work bare-chested in the snow. One in seven died.¹⁴ In the summer, people were forced to stand in the glaring sun with arms spread out (others had to kneel on stones or on broken glass). This happened from Sichuan in the south to Liaoning in the north.¹⁵ People were also burnt with hot needles or branded like cattle with a sizzling iron. In Sichuan a few were doused in petrol and set alight, some burning to death.¹⁶

Boiling water was poured over people. As fuel was scarce, it was more common to cover people in urine and excrement.¹⁷ Liu Desheng, guilty of poaching a

sweet potato, was covered in urine. He, his wife and his son were also forced into a heap of excrement. Then tongs were used to prise his mouth open after he refused to swallow shit. He died three weeks later.¹⁸ Mutilation was carried out everywhere. Hair was ripped out.¹⁹ Ears and noses were lopped off. The case of Wang Ziyou was reported to the central leadership: one of his ears was chopped off, his legs were tied up with iron wire, a ten-kilo stone was dropped on his back and then he was branded with a sizzling tool - as punishment for digging up a potato.²⁰ Sometimes husbands and wives were forced to beat each other, a few to death.²¹ People were also intimidated with mock executions and mock burials.²² They were also buried alive. This was often mentioned in reports about Hunan. By a very rough approximation, between 6 and 8 per cent of all the people who died prematurely, 2 to 3 million, were buried alive, tortured or beaten to death.

Food as a Weapon

Cadres had a choice. They could improve the living conditions of the villagers - against all odds - or instead try to meet the party's targets. The one came at the expense of the other. Most took the path of least resistance. Once that choice had been made, violence assumed its own logic. In conditions of widespread penury it was impossible to keep everybody alive. There simply was not enough food left in the village to provide even reliable farmers with an adequate diet, and in the climate of mass repression following the 1959 Lushan plenum it did not look as if the problem of shortages was about to be solved very quickly. An expedient way to increase the available food was to eliminate the weak and sick. The planned economy already reduced people to mere digits on a balance sheet, a resource to be exploited for the

greater good, like coal or grain. The state was everything, the individual nothing, his worth being constantly assessed through work points and determined by the ability to move earth or plant rice. In the countryside farmers were treated like livestock: they had to be fed, clothed and housed, all of which came at a cost to the collective. The logical extension of these bleak calculations was to cull those judged unworthy of life. The discriminate killing of slackers, weaklings or otherwise unproductive elements increased the overall food supply for those who contributed to the regime through their labour. Violence was one way of dealing with food shortages.

But the most common weapon was food, all the more since all of it was in the hands of the cadres with the advent of the people's communes and collective canteens after the summer of 1958. The grip cadres had over the food supply was reinforced even further as almost everywhere pots and pans were taken away. Hunger became the punishment of first resort, even more so than a beating. Yu Wenming, deputy party secretary of a commune in Chuxiong county, clubbed six farmers to death, but his main tool for discipline was hunger. Two recalcitrant brothers were deprived of food for a full week, and they ended up desperately foraging for roots in the forest, where they soon died of hunger. One of their wives was sick at home. She too was banned from the canteen. An entire brigade of seventy-six people was punished with hunger for twelve days. Many died of starvation.²³ On a much larger scale, describing what happened in several counties in Sichuan, one inspector noted that 'commune members too sick to work are deprived of food, it hastens their deaths'. In the first month the ration was reduced to three ounces of grain a day, then in the following month to two ounces. In the end those about to die were denied any food at all. In Jiangbei and Yongchuan, 'virtually every people's commune withholds food'. In one canteen

catering for sixty-seven people, eighteen died within three months after they were barred from the premises on grounds of sickness.²⁴

Few reliable figures exist, but a team of inspectors who looked closely at a number of brigades in Ruijiang county, Sichuan, believed that 80 per cent of those who had died of hunger had been denied food as a form of punishment.²⁵ And even those who were given food in the canteen often received less than they were formally entitled to. As one farmer explained, the ladle that was dipped into the pot could 'read people's faces'. By this he meant a phenomenon that many interviewees recalled, namely that the man in charge of the canteen deliberately discriminated against those he considered to be 'bad elements'. Whereas the spoon reached deep to the bottom of the pot for good workers, it merely skimmed the surface for 'bad elements', who were given a watery concoction: 'The water looked greenish and was undrinkable.'²⁶

Report after report alleges that the sick were also forced to come out and work in the fields. Of the twenty-four villagers suffering from oedema who were compelled by cadre Zhao Xuedong to take part in labour all but four died. In Jinchang Commune those who were lucky enough to be given medical treatment were driven to perform heavy labour by the local party secretary as soon as they were released from medical care.²⁷ Throughout the country those who were too ill to work were routinely cut off from the food supply - a decision easily reached by those cadres who interpreted illness as opposition to the regime. In the worst places even those who managed to accomplish their daily task were only given a bowl of watery rice.

Suicide

Suicide reached epidemic proportions. For every one murder, an untold number suffered in one way or another, and some of these opted to end their lives. Often, it was not so much the pain that pushed a person to end his life, but the shame and humiliation endured in front of other villagers. A set phrase was that such and such, having strayed from the path, 'was afraid of punishment and committed suicide'. 'Driven to their deaths' or 'driven against the wall' were also common expressions used to describe self-murder. In Fengxian, Shanghai, of the 960 people who were killed in the space of a few months in the summer of 1958, ninety-five 'were forced into an impasse and committed suicide', while the others died of untreated illnesses, torture or exhaustion.²⁸ As a very rough rule of thumb (figures, again, are woefully unreliable), about 3 to 6 per cent of avoidable deaths were caused by suicide, meaning that between one and three million people took their lives during the Great Leap Forward.

Accidents

On the ground both zealots and dawdlers set the tone. Party activists cut corners, reduced standards, ignored safety and abused the workforce as well as every piece of equipment in their relentless quest to meet higher production targets. On the factory floor and in the fields, ordinary people tried to counter the blow of each new production drive with the force of collective inertia. But widespread apathy and negligence, while easing the pressure from above, also had a corrosive effect on safety in the workplace, as people abdicated responsibility for anything that did not concern them directly. And as collectivisation produced growing shortages of food, clothes and fuel, much riskier techniques of self-help appeared, from lighting a stove

in a thatch hut to stealing safety equipment, leading in turn to more accidents. Worker fatigue only made matters worse, as people fell asleep by the furnace or at the wheel.

To this should be added a simple if grisly calculation: failure to fulfil a target could cost a manager his career, while violation of labour safety attracted a mere slap on the wrist. Life was cheap, costing a lot less than installing safety equipment or enforcing labour legislation. After all, what were a few deaths in the battle for a better future? Foreign minister Chen Yi, comparing the Great Leap Forward to a battlefield, was adamant that a few industrial accidents were not going to hold back the revolution: 'it's nothing!', he shrugged.²⁹

As safety was considered a 'rightist conservative' concern, industrial accidents soared. In Guizhou the provincial party committee estimated that the number of accidental deaths had multiplied by a factor of seventeen in early 1959 compared to a year earlier.³⁰ The exact number of casualties is unknown, as few inspectors wanted to pour cold water on the Great Leap Forward with talk of death, while enterprises routinely concealed accidents. Li Rui, one of Mao's secretaries purged in the wake of the Lushan plenum, later estimated the total of fatal industrial mishaps in 1958 at 50,000.³¹

For each accidental death several people barely escaped with their lives. But in the midst of the famine, even a minor injury could spell doom. Workers rarely received compensation for an industrial accident, and were often ruined by medical expenses or sacked from their jobs. In the countryside food could be used as a weapon by rapacious cadres. Absence from work, even for a medical reason, was met with a reduced food ration. Infections, malnutrition or partial invalidity reinforced each other, putting sick people at a disadvantage in the struggle for survival and all too often dragging them down in a vicious circle of want.

Disease

Not all people die of hunger in times of famine. Common illnesses such as diarrhoea, dysentery, fever and typhus claim many lives first. The precise impact of each disease is extremely difficult to ascertain, not only because of the size of the country and the diversity of conditions on the ground, but also because some of the most problematic archives happen to belong to the health services. In a climate of fear in which millions were labelled as 'rightists', few subjects could be more sensitive than that of disease and death. Moreover, the health services themselves were battered by collectivisation, and then they were overwhelmed by famine victims, before they simply collapsed. Hospitals even in major cities - let alone in the countryside - were stripped of resources, and by 1960 doctors and nurses were fighting for their own survival. In Nanjing, for instance, up to two-thirds of all nurses and doctors were sick. They were ill because the hospitals had become catalysts in the spread of disease and death. As one report indicated, flies and other vermin could 'frequently' be found in the food, causing diarrhoea among staff and patients.³²

Despite limited information, a striking feature of the famine is the low incidence of epidemics. Typhus, also called gaol fever, hospital fever or famine fever, was mentioned, but did not seem to kill in large quantities. Some 10-15 per cent of victims could succumb to typhus, typhoid and relapsing fever in times of famine, but this may not have been the case in China, probably because the regime rapidly isolated epidemics. Other major epidemics that historians have come to associate with famine are also noticeable for their absence from the archives. There were higher incidences of smallpox, dysentery and cholera, but there is little archival evidence, so

far, of millions being swept away by major epidemics. And the official gazetteers published decades after the famine by local party committees do not mention them frequently either. On the contrary, where disease is mentioned the set sentence is invariably that 'deaths by oedema caused by inadequate nutrition were high'.³³

The picture which emerges from the record is that of a country in the grip of a whole variety of diseases, rather than suffering from the impact of two or three epidemics historically associated with famine alone. And this wide-ranging increase was as much due to the destructive effects of collectivisation on virtually every aspect of daily life, from crowded kindergartens, filthy canteens and hazardous workshops to under-equipped, overcrowded and understaffed hospitals, as it was a consequence of widespread starvation per se. In Hunan some 7,500 children died of measles in 1958, twice as many as in the previous year, as families were forced to leave their offspring in congested kindergartens. Cases of polio were fifteen times higher in 1959 than in 1958. The incidence of meningitis doubled, attributable, again, to disastrous conditions in boarding kindergartens.³⁴ Hepatitis soared. In a strange reversal of fortune, it affected privileged city residents rather than the impoverished masses in the countryside. In the cities of Hubei one in five suffered from the disease in 1961.³⁵ Malaria was endemic. In the summer of 1960 up to a quarter of all villagers in parts of Wuxi suffered from the disease.³⁶ Snail fever, or schistosomiasis, caused by a parasitic worm that attacks the blood and liver, was prevalent. Hookworm, which sucks blood so voraciously that it leads to anaemia in the host, was common, even though reliable statistics remain elusive. But the problem was serious enough for the health authorities in Hunan to set a target of curing three million infected people in 1960 - in a mere eight counties.³⁷

The destructive effects of collectivisation increased a whole range of illnesses, including poisoning, as people took to famine foods. Villagers scoured the forest for plants, berries and nuts. They combed the hills for edible roots and wild grasses. In desperation, they scavenged for carrion, rummaged through rubbish, scraped the bark off trees and in the end turned to mud to fill their stomachs. Some of the grasses, mushrooms and roots they foraged were toxic. Few villagers actually knew what they were eating, as children were often the ones in charge of slipping out at night and finding wild herbs. 'In those days', one survivor reminisced, 'it was not possible to go out to look for known herbal remedies. We ate everything. We ate any plant that was green. We did not care, as long as we knew that the plant was not poisonous. We ate almost anything.'³⁸ Cassava, a starchy tuber that could be milled into tapioca, is an excellent source of carbohydrates, but the leaves are highly toxic and cannot be eaten raw. In Guangxi province some 174 people died in a single month after eating it without proper soaking and cooking.³⁹ Cocklebur, a weedy plant, was another hazard, leading to nausea and vomiting as well as twisting of the neck muscles, followed by a rapid pulse, breathing difficulties and eventually death. In ten days the toxic weed claimed 160 victims in Beijing.⁴⁰ Infected animals were eaten by the famished, even in the outskirts of the capital. In Huairou county, lambs contaminated with anthrax were regularly devoured by starved villagers.⁴¹

When nothing else was left, people turned to a soft mud called Guanyin soil - named after the Goddess of Mercy. Once eaten the soil acted like cement, drying out the stomach and absorbing all the moisture inside the intestinal tract. Defecation became impossible. In every village in Liangxian county, Sichuan, several people died a painful death, their colons blocked up with soil.⁴²

But most of all, people really did die of starvation - in contrast to many other famines where disease loomed large on the horizon of death. One reason, suggested above, is that the party closely monitored infectious diseases. But collectivisation also brought about organisational chaos and the collapse of rural health care, which was rudimentary in the best of cases. A more plausible explanation is that people in the countryside starved to death much more quickly than elsewhere, reducing the window of opportunity during which germs could prey on a lowered immunity. The only available food was in the collective canteens, and access to these was controlled by local cadres. Under immense pressure to come up with tangible results, many local officials used food as a weapon. As we have seen, villagers who did not work were not given any food. And those who could no longer work were often exhausted. Death followed promptly.

Ways of Living

Feasting through Famine

As the famine developed, the ranks of the privileged swelled. Despite continuous purges, the party membership increased by almost half, from 12.45 million in 1958 to 17.38 million in 1961.⁴³ Party members knew how to take good care of themselves. One way to feast through famine was to attend frequent meetings, where everything was provided for by the state. Another ploy was to organise 'product testing' sessions. In Yingkou, Liaoning, over twenty cadres convened one morning in March 1960, systematically working their way through a range of local produce, starting with cigarettes, and moving on to tinned produce, fruit and biscuits, all the while helping

themselves to copious portions of rice wine. By the end of the day, satiated and drunk, three of the testers had vomited.⁴⁴

During the famine the feasting and drinking (*dachi dahe*) that took place in party meetings in the cities and the countryside was a common complaint. Rapacious officials were often known as 'Piggy Cadres', after the character in the famous Chinese novel *Journey to the West* who was part human, part pig, and legendary for his laziness, gluttony and lust.⁴⁵ But in the countryside villagers did not always stand idly by watching the pillaging. An orgy of slaughter marked the countryside in 1958, as farmers killed off their poultry and livestock as a form of resistance against the people's communes. Spurred on by fear, rumour and example, they opted to eat the fruits of their labour, or store up a supply of meat, or sell their assets on the black market and save some cash, rather than hand over their belongings.

Sometimes ordinary people could eat copiously because they were lucky enough to be looked after by their cadres, who used every political skill to turn their unit into a bastion of abundance in the midst of starvation. On the other hand poor supervision of the food supply chain in some urban units occasionally meant that workers had plenty to eat. In Hebei an investigation showed how workers sometimes moved from one canteen to the next, eating their way through a series of meals. In one dining hall the tables were routinely laden with produce, which spilled over onto the floor. In a further case of an embarrassment of riches, some workers took food back to their dormitories, although much of this was never eaten. The floor was covered in a layer of yellow mush, as people trod on the discarded buns.⁴⁶

Wheeling and Dealing

Whatever their position in the social hierarchy, virtually everybody, from top to bottom, subverted the system of distribution, covertly giving full scope to the very profit motive that the party tried to eliminate. But people in the party were in a better position to use the system for their own personal benefit than those outside it. And they showed endless entrepreneurial guile in devising ways to defraud the state. The Wuhan Oil Purchasing Station, for instance, traded hundreds of tons of oil, gas and coal to provision lavish banquets for its cadres.⁴⁷ These practices permeated the country, as a parallel economy was created by travelling representatives sent to circumnavigate the rigid supply system. Purchasing agents built up social contacts, wining and dining local officials, and traded their way through a shopping list provided by the enterprise for which they were working. Bribes were common. Nobody knew how much trade took place in this shadow economy, but one investigation team put the amount of goods shipped out of Nanjing to other units without any official approval at 850 tons for the month of April 1959 alone. Hundreds of units were involved, some actually counterfeiting shipping permits, using false names, printing fake certificates and even shipping in the name of the army in order to make a profit.⁴⁸

Creative accounting could hide misappropriation of funds. Accountants would invent expenditures which were never incurred, in some cases claiming funds of up to a million yuan. In Luoyang, Henan province, a ball bearing factory built a 1,250-cubic-metre swimming pool, sending the bill up as a 'heat lowering device'.⁴⁹ Endless borrowing from state banks was also a common ploy. As Li Fuchun pointed out when he noted a deficit of 3 billion yuan in the summer of 1961, many units borrowed from the bank to feast.⁵⁰ And then there were those who simply stole from the state, dispensing with clever accounting tricks altogether. A large assembly hall in Nanjing

East Station, entirely built from stolen material under the direction of station manager Du Chengliang, was a monument to organised theft.⁵¹

One of the many paradoxes of the planned economy was that everybody traded, even ordinary people. But as the famine gained ground and hunger gradually eroded the social fabric of everyday life, people turned inward. Everything was on sale. Nothing escaped the realm of trade, as bricks, clothes and fuel were bartered for food. In Hubei a third of the workers in big factories survived on loans. Some were so deeply in debt that they sold their blood to survive.⁵² But the situation was infinitely worse in the countryside. From a single district in Huangpi, Hubei, some 3,000 families took their spare clothes to sell in Wuchang, where they also begged for food.⁵³ In Cangxian county, Hebei, a third of villagers sold all their furniture, some even the roofs over their heads.⁵⁴ People bartered all they had in Changshou county, Sichuan, including the clothes from their backs.⁵⁵

Before they died some people sold their offspring, more often than not to couples who could not have children of their own. Wu Jingxi got five yuan for his nine-year-old son from a stranger, a sum which covered the cost of a bowl of rice and two kilos of peanuts. His heartbroken wife, the enquiry discovered, cried so much that her swollen eyes were losing their vision. Wang Weitong, mother of two, sold one of her sons for 1.5 yuan and four steamed dough buns. But many, of course, never found a buyer for their children.⁵⁶

On The Sly

Under the cloak of collectivisation, backed up by the naked power of the militia, party officials proceeded to strip people of every conceivable possession - in particular in

the countryside, where farmers were more often than not defenceless in the face of rapacious cadres. It was a war of attrition on the people, as every new wave of plunder nipped in the bud even a faint hope of actually owning something private. Most people had little recourse against open pillage. But they were not passive victims, and many devised a whole range of strategies of survival. The most common one 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 overfulfilled the plan, but apathy more often than not governed the factory floor. In a typical workshop of forty workers in Beijing, half a dozen would habitually crouch around the stove to warm up in winter, while others would leave the factory in daytime to queue for goods or watch a movie. Cadres simply did not have the means to control every worker and punish every disciplinary breach.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ In some villages under a tolerant leadership, entire families would huddle together and sleep for days on end, literally hibernating through the winter months.⁵⁹

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 1,200 employees systematically stripped freight trains while pretending to carry out maintenance and repair work.⁶⁰ In Hohhot, Inner Mongolia,

half of the 864 porters at the railway station stole goods.⁶¹ 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 it was easier to hide among dense rows of maize or in a field thick with wheat 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 sprees to take place.⁶²

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, although poor storage conditions no doubt contributed to the rot in the subtropical south.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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. In Yitang commune, Hubei, to take but one example, some 110 tons were hidden behind false walls, inside coffins or in wardrobes. In some cases local leaders distributed the grain immediately after the harvest and urged farmers to eat as much as they could before the militia would strike.⁶⁶ Throughout the country there were cases of local leaders 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.⁶⁷ But all too often the reverse was true. In many villages local leaders 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.⁶⁸

In the end, when the food ran out, people turned on each other, stealing from other villagers, neighbours or even relatives. In Nanjing some half of all conflicts between neighbours involved food, as people stole from each other, some of the incidents leading to fist fights.⁶⁹ In the countryside, fierce competition for survival gradually eroded any sense of social cohesion. In Liaoja 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

'Dear Chairman Mao'

Some wronged villagers were confident enough to appeal to the law. But more often than not litigation was meaningless, all the more since the judicial system crumbled under political pressure. In response, many turned instead to a tradition of complaint in the form of letters and petitions. As misinformation proliferated within the party bureaucracy, every level feeding false reports and inflated statistics to the next one up, the state security tried to bypass official organs and reach straight down to street level. It paid close attention to popular opinion and encouraged anonymous letters of denunciation.⁷² Class enemies, after all, could worm their way into the ranks of the party, while spies and saboteurs were lurking among the masses. Popular vigilance was necessary to ferret them out: the people monitored the party. Even the most insignificant nobody had the power to put pen to paper and bring down a mighty cadre, a negligent local official or an abusive bureaucrat. Arbitrary denunciation could strike at any time up the ladder of power. And people wrote furiously, sending bags of letters each month to beg, protest, denounce or complain, sometimes coyly and humbly, occasionally vociferously. Some denounced their neighbours over a trifle,

others merely sought help in changing jobs or moving house, and a few went into a long tirade against the entire system, peppering their letters with anti-communist slogans. They wrote to newspapers, the police, the courts and the party. Some wrote directly to the top leaders. In doing so they reproduced a long-standing imperial tradition of petitioning the emperor, but they also demonstrated their belief that abuses of power were local, not the result of a campaign of collectivisation initiated by Mao himself: 'if only Mao knew'. Justice, surely, had survived in the capital. Letters offered hope. Xiang Xianzhi, a poor girl from Hunan, had a letter addressed to the Chairman stitched inside her coat for a full year before handing it over to an investigation team sent by the provincial party committee.⁷³ But many letters never reached their destination, as the post office and the public security bureau routinely opened the mail, which led to the arrest of the authors of denunciations for 'anti-party' or 'counter-revolutionary' activities. No wonder some people turned to violence instead.

Robbers and Rebels

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.⁷⁴

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 thirty out of 500 state granaries were assailed in two months in the winter of 1960-1.⁷⁵ Raids on trains were also common. Farmers 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. After provincial boss Zhang Zhongliang was demoted in Gansu province, some 500 cases of train robbery were reported by the local police in January 1961 alone. In one case some 4,000 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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷ 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 the 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.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

But nothing could destabilise the regime even in its darkest hour. As in other famines, from Bengal and Ireland to the Ukraine, most villagers, by the time it became clear that starvation was there to stay, were already too weak even to walk down the road to the next village, let alone find weapons and organise an uprising. In any event, even a mild form of opposition was brutally repressed and severely dealt with: leaders of riots or uprisings faced execution, while others were given an indefinite sentence in a labour camp. Yet something more tenacious than coercion prevented the appearance of a credible threat to the rule of the party. The most common technique of self-help in times of mass starvation was a simple device called hope. And hope dictated that however bad the situation was in the village, Mao had the best interests of his people at heart. A common conviction in imperial times was that the emperor was benevolent, but his servants could be corrupt. Even more so in the People's Republic, the population had to reconcile a vision of utopia trumpeted by the media with the everyday reality of catastrophe on the ground. Widespread was the belief that cadres who were abusive failed to carry out the orders of a beneficent Chairman. A distant entity called 'the government' and a semi-God called 'Mao' were on the side of good. If only he knew, everything would be different.

Exile

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 fifteen million farmers moved to the city in 1958 alone, lured by the prospect of a better life.⁸⁰

The great outflow from the countryside happened despite formal restrictions on the movement of people. 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.⁸¹ Elsewhere, for instance further south in Guangdong, local cadres adopted a lenient attitude, sensing that more movement of people could alleviate the famine. In Lantang commune a mere one in seven of all workers in a brigade

participated in collective labour. The others performed private work or traded with neighbouring counties, some going as far as Haifeng, over 100 kilometres down the coastline.⁸²

After they arrived at their destination, many migrants would be met at the station by a friend or by a tout recruiting labour.⁸³ Others found a job on the black market. Called 'human markets' (*renshi*) in Beijing, they opened early in the morning in the midst of chaos, as a mob of unemployed men pushed, shoved and jostled for attention as soon as a prospective employer turned up. Most lived in temporary shelters, a few stayed with friends and family. Some were recruited underground by state companies, others were hired by private individuals for menial jobs or domestic service.⁸⁴

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 60-70,000 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 per cent of all factories - simply inflated the official number of workers in order to secure sufficient food to feed illegal workers.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ All over the country people died by the roadside.

¹ This chapter draws heavily on Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe*, London: Bloomsbury, New York: Walker Books, and chapter 37 provide the detailed archival evidence on which this estimate is based.

² Robert Service, *Comrades: A history of world communism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 6.

³ Yunnan, 12 Sept. 1958, 2-1-3077, pp. 55-77; 12 Sept. 1958, 2-1-3076, pp. 97-105; Sept. 1958, 2-1-3075, pp. 104-122.

⁴ Li Rui, *Dayuejin*, vol. 2, p. 363.

⁵ Yunnan, 20 Nov. 1958, 2-1-3078, pp. 116-123; 22 Aug. 1958, 2-1-3078, pp. 1-16.

⁶ Sichuan, 23 Feb. 1963, JC67-112, pp. 9-12.

⁷ Minutes of Mao's talk, Gansu, 25 March 1959, 19-18-494, pp. 44-8.

⁸ Telephone conference, Gansu, 20 June 1959, 91-18-539, p. 41.

⁹ Speech by Tan Zhenlin, Oct. 1958, Hunan, 141-2-62, p. 148.

¹⁰ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, *The coming of the cataclysm, 1961-1966*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 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, 19 Sept. 1959, 91-18-561, p. 28.

¹¹ Mao's speech on 10 March 1958 at Chengdu, Gansu, 91-18-495, p. 211.

¹² On these purges see Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and purges in China: Rectification and the decline of party norms*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.

¹³ Yunnan, 25 Sept. 1958, 2-1-3059, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Hunan, 15 Nov. 1960, 141-1-1672, pp. 32-3.

- ¹⁵ *Neibu cankao*, 21 Oct. 1960, p. 12; Sichuan, JC1-1721, 25 May 1959, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Sichuan, 27 Jan. 1961, JC1-2606, p. 65; 1960, JC1-2116, p. 105.
- ¹⁷ Guangdong, 12 Dec. 1960, 217-1-643, pp. 33-43.
- ¹⁸ Hunan, 3 and 14 April 1961, 151-1-24, pp. 1-13 and 59-68; also Hunan, 3 Feb. 1961, 146-1-582, p. 22.
- ¹⁹ *Neibu cankao*, 21 Oct. 1960, p. 12.
- ²⁰ *Neibu cankao*, 30 Nov. 1960, p. 17.
- ²¹ Hunan, 1961, 151-1-20, pp. 34-5.
- ²² Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 60-4.
- ²³ Yunnan, 9 Dec. 1960, 2-1-4157, p. 170.
- ²⁴ Sichuan, 2 May 1960, JC1-2109, pp. 10 and 51.
- ²⁵ Sichuan, 1961, JC1-2610, p. 4.
- ²⁶ Interview with Wei Shu, born 1920s, Langzhong county, Sichuan, April 2006.
- ²⁷ Sichuan, 1960, JC133-219, pp. 49 and 131.
- ²⁸ Yunnan, 22 May 1959, 2-1-3700, pp. 93-4.
- ²⁹ Hunan, 5 Nov. 1958, 141-1-1051, p. 123.
- ³⁰ Chishui, 27 Feb. 1959, 1-A10-25, 1959, p. 2.
- ³¹ Li, *Dayuejin*, vol. 2, p. 233.
- ³² Nanjing, 7-10 Oct. 1961, 5065-3-467, pp. 33-7 and 58-61.

³³ A systematic analysis of all county gazeteers appears in Cao Shuji, *Da jihuang: 1959-1961 nian de Zhongguo renkou* (The great famine: China's population in 1959-1961), Hong Kong: Shidai guoji chuban youxian gongsi, 2005, and a good example is p. 128.

³⁴ Hunan, 5 Jan. 1959, 141-1-1220, pp. 2-3; Hunan, 1962, 265-1-309, pp. 4-5.

³⁵ Hubei, 1961, SZ1-2-898, pp. 18-45.

³⁶ Wuxi, 1961, B1-2-164, pp. 58-66.

³⁷ Hunan, 25 Nov. 1960, 265-1-260, p. 85; Hunan, 8 Dec. 1960, 212-1-508, p. 163.

³⁸ Interview with Zhu Erge, born 1950, Jianyang, Sichuan.

³⁹ Reports from the Ministry of Health, Hubei, March and Dec. 1960, SZ115-2-355, pp. 12-15.

⁴⁰ Beijing, 14 April 1961, 2-13-135, pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ Beijing, 3 July 1961, 2-1-136, pp. 23-4.

⁴² Sichuan, 31 Aug. 1961, JC1-2620, pp. 177-8.

⁴³ Lu, *Cadres and corruption*, p. 86.

⁴⁴ *Neibu cankao*, 6 March 1961, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Guangdong, 5 Sept. 1960, 231-1-242, pp. 72-7.

⁴⁶ Hebei, 8 May 1959, 855-5-1758, pp. 97-8.

⁴⁷ *Neibu cankao*, 2 June 1960, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁸ Nanjing, 27 May 1959, 4003-1-279, p. 242.

⁴⁹ *Neibu cankao*, 7 Dec. 1960, pp. 14-15.

- ⁵⁰ Speech at Beidaihe, Gansu, 11 Aug. 1961, 91-18-561, pp. 51 and 55.
- ⁵¹ *Neibu cankao*, 8 Aug. 1960, pp. 5-7.
- ⁵² Hubei, 7 Aug. 1961 and July 1962, SZ29-1-13, pp. 73-4 and 76-7.
- ⁵³ Hubei, 18 Sept. 1961, SZ18-2-199, pp. 6-7.
- ⁵⁴ Hebei, 6 May 1959, 855-5-1744, pp. 101-3.
- ⁵⁵ Sichuan, 1962, JC1-3047, pp. 1-2.
- ⁵⁶ Shandong, 10 Aug. 1959, A1-2-776, p. 72.
- ⁵⁷ Beijing, 24 March 1961, 1-28-28, pp. 2-6.
- ⁵⁸ Sichuan, 1959, JC9-249, p. 160.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with Ding Qiao'er, born 1951, Huangxian county, Shandong, Dec. 2006.
- ⁶⁰ *Neibu cankao*, 2 June 1960, pp. 14-15.
- ⁶¹ *Neibu cankao*, 19 Dec. 1960, p. 21.
- ⁶² Thaxton, *Catastrophe and contention in rural China*, p. 201.
- ⁶³ Guangdong, 1 March 1961, 235-1-259, pp. 23-5.
- ⁶⁴ Guangdong, 1 and 27 March 1961, 235-1-259, pp. 23-25 and 32-34.
- ⁶⁵ Wuxian, 15 May 1961, 300-2-212, p. 243.
- ⁶⁶ Hubei, 22-3 Feb. 1959, SZ18-2-197, pp. 6-8 and 12-14.
- ⁶⁷ Hebei, 13 Dec. 1960, 855-18-777, pp. 40-1.

⁶⁸ Hunan, 31 Dec. 1959, 146-1-507, pp. 120-21.

⁶⁹ Nanjing, 4 June 1959, 5003-3-722, pp. 77-81.

⁷⁰ Hunan, 13 Feb. 1961, 151-1-18, pp. 24-5.

⁷¹ Nanjing, 10 May 1960, 5003-3-722, pp. 27-31.

⁷² On denunciations in the Soviet Union, one will read with pleasure Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Signals from below: Soviet letters of denunciation of the 1930s', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 68, no. 4 (Dec. 1996), pp. 831-66.

⁷³ Hunan, 31 Dec. 1961, 141-1-1941, p. 5.

⁷⁴ For instance Hebei, 27 June 1959, 884-1-183, p. 135.

⁷⁵ Hubei, 6 Jan. 1961, SZ18-2-200, p. 22.

⁷⁶ Gansu, 24 Jan. 1961, 91-9-215, pp. 117-120.

⁷⁷ Hunan, 22 Nov. 1959, 146-1-507, pp. 44-6.

⁷⁸ Hunan, 17 Jan. 1961, 146-1-580, p. 29.

⁷⁹ Yunnan, 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.

⁸⁰ Shanghai, 12 March 1959, B98-1-439, pp. 9-13.

⁸¹ Zhejiang, 3 March 1959, J007-11-112, pp. 1-6.

⁸² Guangdong, 23 Jan. 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 10-12.

⁸³ Hebei, 11 March 1959, 855-5-1750, pp. 91-4.

⁸⁴ Beijing, 23 Jan. and 31 Aug. 1959, 2-11-58, pp. 3-4 and 8-10.

⁸⁵ Nanjing, 14 March 1959, 4003-1-168, pp. 39-49 and 14 Aug. 1960, 4003-1-199, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Gansu, 14 Jan. 1961, 91-18-200, pp. 47-8.

⁸⁷ Guangdong, 5 Jan. 1961, 217-1-643, p. 63.

⁸⁸ Hebei, 15 Aug. 1961, 878-1-6, pp. 31-44.