



Eating Bitterness

New Perspectives on China's
Great Leap Forward and Famine

EDITED BY KIMBERLEY ENS MANNING
AND FELIX WEMHEUER



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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Preface

Eating Bitterness grows out of a workshop held under the same title at the Institute for East Asian Studies (Sinology) at the University of Vienna in November 2006. At the workshop, Chinese and Western scholars gathered together to discuss their findings about the Great Leap Forward and famine and to raise new questions about state-society interaction during this decisive period in People's Republic of China (PRC) history. We hope that this volume contributes to what is emerging as a rich field of study in both China and the West.

There are a number of individuals and institutions that aided in the publication of *Eating Bitterness*. We are indebted to Professor Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik for hosting the original workshop and encouraging us to develop this project to its present state. Professor Timothy Cheek also served as an important early advocate as we sought to move the volume forward. By providing translation funding at an early stage of the project, Concordia University enabled us to include the chapters written by the four Chinese scholars. We also wish to thank the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation and Concordia University for providing the necessary subvention funding for the publication of *Eating Bitterness* as well as the University of Vienna for providing support for some of the copyediting. Finally, Felix Wemheuer thanks the Austrian Science Foundation (FWF) for his Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship Abroad. Much of the work on this book was completed while he was in residence at Harvard University during the 2008-9 academic year.

A volume with as many authors as this could not have come to pass without the support of a wider community of colleagues. We are particularly indebted to three anonymous reviewers for providing detailed and extremely valuable comments at the review stage of the publication process. We also wish to thank those who read and provided comments on the introductory chapter: Jeremy Brown, Heath B. Chamberlain, Yixin Chen, Richard King, Ralph A. Thaxton, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, and

Susan Whiting. We hope that the final version of the introduction and book does some modicum of justice to their extensive knowledge and insights.

Finally, we wish to thank those with whom we worked most closely on this project over the past three years: the volume's contributors; our editors, translators, and assistants; and our families. We feel extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with such a talented group of scholars. Indeed, although the contributors have been trained in a wide variety of disciplines and are at varying stages of their careers, we believe they offer some of the finest examples of cutting-edge scholarship being produced on the Maoist era today. We are also grateful to the numerous people who contributed their editing and translation skills to the realization of this project. Our editors at UBC Press, Emily Andrew and Randy Schmidt, skilfully and professionally guided us through the publication process. Laraine Coates, our production editor, guided us through the editing process with admirable organization and efficiency. We were also aided by the timely assistance of several translators: Jiagu Richter, Sascha Mundstein, and Robert Mackie. We especially appreciate the contributions of Robert Mackie, who oversaw the final translation of all of the Chinese chapters included in *Eating Bitterness*, and Wolfgang Zeidl, who carefully combed the manuscript to ensure the accuracy of the *pinyin*. We also wish to thank Sarah Comrie for her wonderful editing and organizational skills as we prepared the manuscript for submission.

On a final note, we wish to thank our families for their support as we developed this project. Felix Wemheuer would like to thank his wife, Li Xiaoqing. Kimberley Manning is especially grateful to Jason Ens and Patricia Manning, who made sure she had the time and means to write and edit during a period of family expansion, and her children Elijah and Thea, who have been a source of tremendous joy and sustenance.

Acronyms

ACWF	All China Women's Federation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CUHKA	Chinese University of Hong Kong Archive of Contemporary Chinese History
GCAWF	Gaoshan County Archives Women's Federation
HAPC	Higher Agricultural Producer Cooperatives
HPA	Hebei Provincial Archives
HDA	Hexi District Archives
HCAWF	Huoye County Archives Women's Federation
LAPC	Lower Agricultural Producer Cooperatives
MCPCA	Macheng County Party Committee Archives
<i>NBCK</i>	<i>Neibu cankao</i> [Internal reference]
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
WCAWF	Wenhe County Archives-Women's Federation Documents

Introduction

Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in 1949, Mao Zedong declared that “not even one person shall die of hunger (*buxu esi yi ge ren*).” Hunger, however, was endemic; during the winter of 1949-50, for example, approximately 7 million refugees were fleeing famine conditions. Moreover, it was clear that, despite orders to prevent famine deaths, provincial Party authorities were not complying with instructions to publicize the anti-famine mandate in Hebei Province, a region particularly hard struck. Dong Biwu, future head of the Central Relief Committee, instructed the Hebei authorities that they would only be able to fulfill Mao’s mandate were each cadre at each level of government willing to investigate the situation: openness was best.¹ And yet, despite Mao’s vow and the administration’s attempts to build an open government system that could both prevent and respond to natural disaster, China would find itself beset by the most devastating famine in modern history within ten short years. Indeed, between 1959 and 1961 some 15 million to 43 million peasants starved to death.²

Until the 1980s and the Chinese government’s release of population statistics, few outside of China understood the seriousness of the deprivation that swept the country at the end of the CCP’s first decade in power. While several major English-language works were subsequently published on the topic, however, neither the famine nor the Great Leap Forward Campaign (which contributed to the onset of the famine) has attracted the same sustained level of scrutiny in either China or the West as has, for example, the Cultural Revolution. In many ways, this is not surprising. The CCP authorities are reluctant to draw attention to an event for which they bear much responsibility. It was thus not until the 1980s, when Western scholars began to examine population records themselves, that many began to understand the depth of the famine. But while censorship explains part of the silence, it does not tell the whole story. The particular

violence inflicted on the urban-based intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution rendered a skewed vision of the events that preceded it, including the Great Leap Forward and the Great Leap Forward Famine. Indeed, while the Cultural Revolution preoccupied a whole generation of Chinese intellectuals, China-watchers, and China scholars, the relationship between the Great Leap Forward and famine has largely been overlooked, treated as a precursor to the Cultural Revolution or explained away as a Maoist aberration.³

With the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the famine, however, it would seem that a sea change is under way. In 2008 alone, two new major studies on the topic were published: Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone (Mubei)* and Ralph Thaxton's *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*.⁴ Insofar as both of these works draw upon a wealth of previously unavailable sources, they offer important new insights into the famine, many of which reflect the perspectives of peasants who struggled to survive this calamity. But these works do more than this. Indeed, they not only lay bare the immediate devastation wrought by the famine, but they also begin to reconstruct alternative histories of China's experiment with state socialism. In Yang's and Thaxton's retellings, the Great Leap Forward and famine are symptomatic of a deeply flawed system of state terror. Their works thus stand as significant political interventions at a key moment when the CCP leadership is striving to maintain its legitimacy.

Like Yang and Thaxton, *Eating Bitterness* draws on a wealth of new sources to ask new questions about the Great Leap Forward and famine – questions that focus, in particular, on the many non-central Party elite actors who contributed to, ameliorated, suffered from, and resisted the events that played out in the years between 1957 and 1962. In the following chapters, contributors make use of a variety of sources, including oral histories, ethnographic research, and archival research, as well as more traditionally available sources, such as print media, biographies, and socialist realist literature. Insofar as the contributors are engaged in a variety of larger research projects – projects that reflect different disciplinary preoccupations and curiosities – they build outward from past works (including those of Yang and Thaxton) while simultaneously pointing to new lines of inquiry. It is in this way that questions regarding historiography, peasant resistance, state power, and gender politics (to name just a few subjects of interest) are rendered in a new light in the chapters presented here. Moreover, by presenting work from two research communities in one collection, work that has for the most part been undertaken in mutual isolation, we hope to spur further academic cross-fertilization. Ultimately, we hope that *Eating*

Bitterness will contribute to emerging debates about the production of the historiography of the PRC, including the often complicated challenge of interpreting China's socialist past through its globalizing present.

The Great Leap Forward and famine are usefully understood in both historical and comparative contexts. Therefore, we begin this introduction by offering a brief discussion of China's historical struggle with famine, the emergence of famine under state socialism, and comparative explanations of famine more generally. We then highlight the key events surrounding the start of the Great Leap Forward and famine before going on to explore why elite explanations of these phenomena have dominated scholarly discussion in the West. After that, we introduce some of the new scholarship on the grassroots that is emerging in China and the West, and then we discuss the major themes of *Eating Bitterness*: ideology and discourse, grassroots turmoil and party responses, and the politics of peasant resistance. Finally, we conclude with some brief thoughts on the politics of memory.

China: State Socialism in a "Land of Famine"

China has often been described as a land of famine.⁵ According to Lillian Li, "no other civilization has had such a continuous tradition of thinking about famine, and no other nation's modern history has been so influenced by hunger and famine."⁶ And, indeed, the worldview of imperial China made the ruler responsible for providing relief aid in the event of famine. Rulers who ignored this responsibility risked losing the "Mandate of Heaven," or the right to govern.⁷

Famine did, in fact, periodically devastate large regions of China from the late nineteenth century through until the founding of the People's Republic. Scholars estimate that between 9 million and 20 million people died in the North China Famine of 1876-79.⁸ Historians similarly estimate the excess mortality at 10 million for famines that took place between 1896 and 1900.⁹ After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, many famines continued to occur. Among the most serious are those that saw the deaths of 500,000 people during the 1920-21 drought¹⁰ and the deaths of 10 million during the North China Drought (between 1928 and 1930).¹¹ During the Sino-Japanese War in 1942-43, 2 million to 3 million people died of famine in Republican-controlled areas of Henan Province.¹²

When the CCP assumed power in 1949, China was one of the poorest countries in the world. The Chinese GDP per head in 1950 was only one-fourth of that of the United Kingdom in 1820, and it was less than the Irish GDP on the eve of the Great Famine of 1847-50.¹³ On the eve of

collectivization in the Soviet Union in 1928, per capita grain output stood at nearly 500 kilograms, while China produced only 285 kilograms per capita in 1952.¹⁴ The new revolutionary government in Beijing gained a large part of its legitimacy thanks to its promise to end poverty and famine in China. These were not easy goals, considering that China was devastated by the many years of Japanese occupation and by the civil war between the Communists and the Guomindang. Indeed, for much of the 1950s, China stood on the brink of catastrophe. In order to overcome poverty, the CCP promoted industrialization; launched large irrigation projects; and organized education, hygiene, and health campaigns in the villages and cities. Millions of peasants were mobilized to reclaim new land. In 1953, the central leadership, under the urging of Mao Zedong, concluded that only collective agriculture could solve China's problems. Despite a series of crises with collectivization, however, the CCP managed to prevent widespread famine until the Great Leap Forward Famine began in 1959.¹⁵

China's Great Leap Forward Famine resulted in a higher death toll than any previous famine. And yet this was not the first famine to occur under state socialism.¹⁶ When Mao declared in 1949 that China should "lean to one side" and learn from the Soviet Union, three major famines had already taken place in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Specifically, between 10 million and 15 million people died in civil war-related famines in Russia and Ukraine between 1918 and 1921;¹⁷ some 6 million to 8 million people died of famine in the aftermath of the collectivization of agriculture in 1931-33;¹⁸ and between 1 million and 2 million people perished in the famine of 1947.¹⁹

Although overall famine mortality in the Soviet Union and China was significantly higher than the mortality rates of the twentieth-century famines in Africa and India combined, major theories of famines have not given much consideration to famine under state socialism.²⁰ When Amartya Sen's major work, *Poverty and Famine*, was first published in 1981, for example, little was known about the real extent of the Great Leap Forward Famine.²¹ His entitlement approach, which suggests that famine could occur without a serious decrease in production, is primarily based on his analysis of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Sen argues that people starved not for lack of food but, rather, because they lost their entitlement to food.²² Later Sen and Dreze pointed out that the lack of democracy and free press in China was a major reason for the Great Leap Forward Famine, while India managed to escape major famine after gaining its independence in 1947 thanks to the development of democratic institutions.²³ However, while Dreze and Sen acknowledge that, by forcing a government to take action, a free press can prevent major famines, it is less successful

in preventing endemic malnutrition in everyday life. Comparing India's and China's death rates and applying that difference to the Indian population of 781 million in 1986, they estimate the excess normal mortality in India caused by malnutrition and related diseases at 3.9 million people per year.²⁴ While democracies are more likely to prevent famine than are dictatorships, some scholars argue that certain dictatorships did establish effective systems of food security. Others criticize the argument linking democracy and famine prevention because political systems such as the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia and the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras successfully prevented famine despite the lack of free press and other democratic institutions.²⁵ Stephen Wheatcroft even argues that the Soviet Union and China finally managed to break out of the historical cycles of famine after the Communist parties learned their lessons from the earlier major catastrophes.²⁶ While it is true that no major deadly famine occurred in the Soviet Union after 1947 or in China after 1962, it must be said that poor nutrition and hunger were widespread in rural China until the mid-1980s.²⁷

Many questions remain regarding the origins of the Great Leap Forward Famine and its consequences for the people who experienced it. Before discussing some of this volume's contributions to comparative understandings of famine, we offer a brief overview and analysis of the pre-existing scholarship on the Great Leap Forward and famine.

From the Cusp of Communism to Descent into Famine

The Great Leap Forward began slowly in the late fall of 1957 before picking up speed in the spring and summer of 1958. After Mao Zedong famously announced in November 1957 that China would overtake Great Britain in steel production within fifteen years,²⁸ the Party began to encourage the development of large infrastructure projects such as the building of new dams and irrigation works. Over the winter of 1957-58, hundreds of thousands of peasants were mobilized by rural authorities to work for weeks or even months on job sites far from their homes. In March 1958, the Central Committee decided to establish big collectives (*dashu*) and push rural industrialization.²⁹ An even bigger push towards radicalization began in the summer of that year.

In August 1958, at a conference held at the summer resort of Beidaihe, the Central Committee decided to organize peasants into a new administrative unit: the People's Commune (*renmin gongshe*). Within a few short weeks, the People's Commune was being celebrated as the most important bridge to a communist society. A massive new administrative unit that encompassed up to fifty thousand people, the People's Commune was

expected to abolish the sharp disparities between countryside and city, peasants and workers, and intellectual labour and manual labour. Ultimately, the People's Commune was to serve as the basic unit of communist society when the state finally withered away. Indeed, in August 1958, the Chinese government declared that the realization of communism was close at hand.³⁰ For the first time in the history of state socialism, a ruling communist party placed the transition to communism on its immediate agenda.

The Great Leap Forward fused classic Marxism with Maoist experimentation. On the one hand, it sought to realize Karl Marx's vision of the abolition of the differences between manual work and intellectual work, city and countryside;³¹ on the other hand, it embraced a Maoist utopianism in which the individual could overcome great odds through willpower alone.³² Furthermore, the newly founded theoretical organ of the CCP, *Red Flag* (*Hongqi zazhi*), sought to develop a Chinese program for the transformation to communism. Its editor, Chen Boda, dreamed of a new all-around communist man (*quanmian fazhan de gongchanzhuyi xinren*) who was simultaneously a soldier, peasant, worker, and intellectual.³³ To this end, the *Red Flag* made numerous references to the young Marx, who considered the abolition of the division of labour as a key element of communist society.

Prior to the Beidaihe Conference, the Great Leap Forward was primarily conducted as a program for rapid economic development. With the establishment of the commune system, the Great Leap Forward became the most radical social revolution that Chinese villagers had ever experienced. Model communes in provinces such as Henan and Hebei abolished almost every form of private property.³⁴ The borders of "natural villages" were dismantled. Tens of thousands of peasants and many villages were now administered by one commune. In some places, local CCP organizations sought to abolish family structures – a goal aided by the fact that, in some areas, husbands and wives were assigned to work in different brigades, that the elderly were sent to the old people's homes, and that children were placed in the newly established daycares and kindergartens (see Manning and Wang Yanni, this volume).

Of all of the new institutions established during the Great Leap Forward, the CCP leadership considered the establishment of public dining halls (*gonggong shitang*) as the key factor in the transformation of rural habits and the means of creating a collective spirit among the peasants.³⁵ Similar to the expansion of collective daycares and nursing homes, the establishment of public dining halls was also celebrated in the public press as a means of liberating the female workforce. Cooking at home was prohibited.

As a result, the communes took over the management of the food supply and its distribution. As envisioned by the CCP leadership, the public dining halls were to become the primary locus for social activities, including meetings and weddings. Mao Zedong equated the ultimate goals of the Great Leap Forward and the establishment of the communes with the dining halls, arguing that “communism means eating for free.”³⁶ On model communes, the communist principle of distribution according to need (*an xu fenpei*) was introduced (see Xin Yi in Chapter 5 of this volume), theoretically rendering hunger a problem of the past.

The militarization of the rural workforce proved a key element of this development strategy. As Chen Jian argues, the People’s Liberation Army attacked Guomindang forces on Jinmen Island as a means of rousing enthusiasm for the Great Leap Forward.³⁷ Under the slogan “militarize the organization, move as if in battle, and collectivize everyday life” (*zuzhi junshihua, xingdong zhandouhua, shenghuo jitihua*), communes and brigades were organized according to military ranks, and Party secretaries were made “commanders” (*shuji dang tongshuai*). *Red Flag* proclaimed that the peasants were naturally attuned to militarization.³⁸ Indeed, the same military methods that resulted in the CCP’s victory over Japanese imperialism and the Guomindang were adopted to fight a war against nature in order to minimize the threat of droughts and floods. Moreover, the Central Committee decided that every Chinese peasant between the ages of sixteen and sixty years should become a soldier of the People’s Militia (*minbing*).³⁹ The days of inefficient and “unscientific” organization of rural production were seemingly over.

The dream of an accelerated transformation to communism, however, quickly turned into a nightmare of unforeseen proportions. As early as the winter of 1958-59, reports of local famines were beginning to emerge. Both Mao and the rest of the CCP leadership recognized that the People’s Communes were leading to mismanagement and thus sought to moderate the Great Leap policies during the first half of 1959. During the two important conferences held in Zhengzhou in February and April of 1959, the CCP leadership tried to calm the “winds of communism” (*gongchan-feng*).⁴⁰ At these meetings, the Party leadership clarified that the present goal of the Great Leap Forward was the construction of socialism rather than the transformation to communism. The Central Committee decided to reintroduce plots for private use (*ziliudi*) and to allocate distribution according to work performance (*an lao fenpei*). Emphasis on the mandatory nature of the dining halls was revised: peasants could eat in the public dining halls on a voluntary basis.⁴¹ At this time, the Central Committee condemned practices of “absolute egalitarianism” (*juedui pingjunzhuyi*),

while, in his letters to Party cadres, Mao criticized ineffective production methods and false reports.⁴² The Central Committee authorized smaller brigades to become the central units of production in the commune. As a result of these new policies, the Great Leap continued, but the CCP leadership tried to correct the most serious mistakes and to rectify (*zhengdun*) the movement.

The period of readjustment lasted only a few short months. Indeed, in July 1959 any hopes of moderating the impact of the Great Leap Forward were dashed at the now infamous Lushan Conference. In a personal letter to Mao, Minister of Defence Peng Dehuai criticized the steel campaigns and voiced his concerns about the severity of the crisis facing the nation. Mao condemned Peng's criticisms as "right-wing opportunism" (*youqing jihuizhuyi*) and opened up a power struggle.⁴³ As a result of the Lushan Conference, Peng was dismissed from office. During the next few months, the CCP leadership launched a "clean-up" campaign within the Party against thousands of so-called "right-wing opportunists." As a consequence, the Great Leap Forward became infused with radicalism for the remainder of 1959. Planning targets, especially for steel production, again skyrocketed.⁴⁴ According to official statistics, over 70 percent of peasants were forced to eat communally, despite the fact that the public dining halls offered less and less food.⁴⁵ In January 1960, the Central Committee even decided to expand the People's Communes to the cities. The Party leadership, once again, made the transformation to communism a top priority.

In the meantime, famine deepened and spread across rural China. Reports of mass starvation in the Xinyang region of Henan Province reached the central government in Beijing in October 1960.⁴⁶ While the so-called "Xinyang Incident" (*Xinyang shijian*) seems to have played a central role in changing the minds of the leadership regarding the Great Leap Forward,⁴⁷ the near depletion of grain reserves in Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin may have been an equal source of concern, as Jeremy Brown makes evident in his chapter. In the late autumn of 1960, the central leadership introduced new policies to stop the famine. Against the backdrop of this growing crisis, Mao could no longer ignore the severe problems that the Great Leap Forward had generated.

Despite the fact that it was never officially declared over, the Great Leap Forward quietly came to an end when the central government made the decision to redefine commune management according to the so-called Sixty Articles (or the "Work Regulations on Rural Communes") in 1961.⁴⁸ As a consequence of the new regulations, private plots were reintroduced, and production teams were once again based on family and village structures. In addition, the Party abolished the public dining-hall system and

prohibited production teams from organizing steel production. Grain was imported from the West in order to feed the population, and the tax burden of the peasants was lowered. In January 1962, at the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, Liu Shaoqi and Mao Zedong sought to analyze the origin of the “leftist mistakes” of the Great Leap.⁴⁹ In the aftermath of the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, however, the CCP leadership focused on the future, and all discussion of the origins of the disaster ceased. As far as the leadership was concerned, the nightmare of the Great Leap Forward Famine was over.

The Great Leap Forward and Famine: Perspectives on the Party Centre and Emerging Questions about the Grassroots

The historical narrative that we have just laid out, one very much focused on Mao and his colleagues, is no doubt familiar to most scholars of modern history in China and the West. And, indeed, most research on the Great Leap Forward has focused on the Party centre. The original focus on elite decision making during the Great Leap Forward and famine makes sense, however, for four very good reasons. First, up until the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars were limited in their ability to gain access to primary source material other than media reports and documents authorized for publication by the CCP. Moreover, the vast bulk of this primary material was itself written by and focused on political elites. In other words, scholars did not look to non-elite sources because there was little available at the time scholarship on this topic began.

Second, there were pressing questions to answer about the Party centre. And, indeed, despite the limitations of earlier source material, a whole generation of China scholars became very astute at deciphering inner-Party manoeuvrings to explain pivotal events in the evolution of the PRC – including the events surrounding the Great Leap Forward. To this end, debates both inside and outside China have focused on why the Party leadership launched the Great Leap Forward, why it sided with Mao Zedong after Peng Dehuai gave voice to the widespread criticism among the provincial leadership, and why it continued with the Great Leap Forward once its disastrous consequences became apparent.⁵⁰

Elite-centred scholarship has also produced important hypotheses about the major contributing factors to the onset of famine. In two of the earliest studies carried out by Western scholars, for example, economists Walker and Kueh re-evaluate Chinese statistics to explore the relationship between the Great Leap Forward and famine. In his work, Walker argues that agricultural production was highly unstable in the 1950s and that the government sought to balance the huge disparities between the grain

surplus and non-surplus regions. Before 1958, Walker suggests, the CCP successfully prevented famine, but the grain procurement policies nonetheless generated dissatisfaction at the grassroots. This carefully balanced system between the provinces, however, collapsed when over-enthusiasm and the “winds of exaggeration” blew during the Great Leap. According to Walker, high procurement rates ultimately contributed to famine.⁵¹ Kueh, on the other hand, lays greater emphasis on bad weather than does Walker for the serious declines in production in 1959 and 1960. However, he believes that, without the government’s decision to reduce the grain-sown area and to institute high procurement rates, peasants would have been able to survive the natural disaster.⁵² By way of contrast, Yang as well as Wen and Chang argue that the policy of eating in public dining halls was a major contributing factor of the famine.⁵³

The third reason for the original focus on elite decision making during the Great Leap Forward and famine also has to do with disciplinary training. When the Great Leap Forward and famine occurred fifty years ago, Western historians and political scientists were still being trained to focus on elite policy making and structures of governance. At the same time, and just as important, many scholars had no way of knowing what was actually transpiring on the ground. While the radical political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s transformed many academic assumptions and led to new lines of scholarship, it has taken some time for new grassroots understandings of the Great Leap Forward and famine to emerge.⁵⁴ Ultimately, it was not an academic but a journalist who “broke the story” of the famine by focusing on the grassroots. In 1996, Jasper Becker received international attention for the publication of *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine*. In this work Becker documents the famine where it hit hardest – places such as Xinyang in Henan Province and Fengyang County in Anhui Province. For the first time, stories of mass starvation, cannibalism, and terror reached a broader audience in the West.

The final reason that grassroots perspectives on the Great Leap Forward and famine have taken time to emerge has to do with the fact that the Great Leap Forward itself was not implemented in a unified way. As it happened, the first Western studies undertaken at the village level in the late 1970s and early 1980s were located in the provinces of Guangdong and Jiangxi, areas removed from the epicentre of the famine (see Chen’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of Jiangxi). In contrast to the massive number of deaths experienced in Henan, Anhui, and Sichuan, many people residing in South China fared much better. As a result, the authors mention shortages but no widespread mass starvation and, consequently, devote only a few pages to the famine.⁵⁵

It was not until the publication of *Chinese Village, Socialist State* that an academic work tackled the Great Leap Forward and famine at the village level in any detail.⁵⁶ Both this path-breaking study and Eric Mueggler's widely acclaimed *The Age of Wild Ghosts* illustrate some common dynamics of the period of the advanced collectives and the Great Leap Forward – specifically, the challenge of meeting high procurement rates, the toll of the mass mobilizations on local populations, and the loss of women's power. But even within these similarities there are marked differences. Whereas Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, the authors of *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, focus on the development of the “model” Wugong People's Commune in the famous Raoyang County (Hebei Province), Mueggler's study documents the struggles of the Lòlop'ò people in the area of Zhizuo, Yunnan. Vast regional, political, and cultural differences separate the field sites: for example, while Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden argue that the famine ended the “honeymoon” between the peasants and the CCP, many of the Lòlop'ò viewed the increasing encroachment of the new state (especially on the practice of rites) as ominous from the earliest days of the regime. The loss of female power was in some ways more acute in Zhizuo as well, especially once powerful women elders were deprived of their spiritual and practical roles in maintaining family granaries.⁵⁷

Writing on the early 1950s, Brown and Pickowicz suggest that how one experienced this period “depended on geography, social standing, timing, and chance.”⁵⁸ We would argue that the same insight should be applied to the Great Leap Forward and the intense period of deprivation that began during this movement. The tremendous diversity in implementation and outcome means that learning about the grassroots during this period is a great challenge. Moreover, because scholars are starting somewhat late to focus on the social dimensions of the Great Leap and the famine, we have a great deal of catching up to do. Many open questions, both old and new, remain before us. For example, we still know little about the utopian dimensions of the Great Leap Forward and how they relate to the emergence of famine. Indeed, Schoenhals' study of utopianism in 1958 is an intellectual history that does not consider ideological developments within the broader society.⁵⁹ The pivotal year of 1960 remains a large gap in both Western and Chinese scholarship as well. Moreover, there is still much to understand about the long-term consequences of the Great Leap Forward and famine, including the period of readjustment (1961-63). To date, MacFarquhar and Zweig have considered the relationship between the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), and Yang has considered the impact of the Great Leap Forward on the start of the economic reforms (1978).⁶⁰ However, MacFarquhar's work on the Great Leap

Forward and the famine comes from the perspective of historical background – indeed, it is an analysis of the origins of the Cultural Revolution, which MacFarquhar traces back to the mid-1950s.⁶¹ It is only recently, with the publication of Mueggler’s and Thaxton’s work, that we are beginning to build on Yang’s earlier insights to comprehend the lasting impact that the famine had on rural communes and its role in catalyzing the agricultural reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, we also need to revisit questions regarding the cause of famine itself. In this vein, one of the most important puzzles with which we need to come to terms is why famine deaths were so variable across provinces, regions, and even villages. When it comes to rewriting the history of the PRC and solving the puzzle of mass starvation in the modern era, both the Great Leap Forward and the famine require more sustained attention, particularly to the grassroots.

Linking New Perspectives from China and the West

At least three major research projects, by Wemheuer,⁶² Thaxton,⁶³ and Manning,⁶⁴ respectively, focus on the Great Leap Forward and use ethnographic, oral history, and archival tools to better understand village life during this time. These three scholars conducted oral history interviews in different counties in Henan Province in order to better understand how ordinary people contributed to, experienced, and resisted the Great Leap Forward and famine. In another extensive project on the Great Leap Forward, Chen Yixin uses similar methodological tools to understand the role of provincial-level leadership as well as grassroots factors in the provinces of Anhui and Jiangxi.⁶⁵ Brown, Chen, King,⁶⁶ Manning, Thaxton, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik,⁶⁷ and Wemheuer all ask questions about how the Great Leap Forward has been remembered in official histories and literary texts, about the institutional and ideological foundations of villager and activist participation in this movement, about gender politics, about urban-rural relations, about the origins of the famine, and about the long-term impact of the famine with regard to acts of resistance and violence during the Cultural Revolution and Reform eras. Of particular interest to several of these scholars are the deeply differentiated experiences of the Great Leap Forward and of the famine, and they ask questions that, in many ways, re-examine the role of local leaders. Why did some local leaders turn a blind eye to behaviour that undermined the collective before, during, and after the famine? Why did other local leaders choose to openly contest certain policies and/or petition for relief? And why did others, perhaps the majority, continue to implement policies (including turning over remaining grain reserves) that imposed such sustained suffering?

At the same time, in the PRC, some extraordinary scholars have also been carrying out research on the Great Leap Forward and famine. With the publication of several books in Chinese, this small group of scholars has ignited a new set of debates about the Great Leap Forward on the mainland.⁶⁸ One of the most outstanding of these works is the two-volume *Mubei* (Tombstone).⁶⁹ Yang, a former journalist with the New China News Agency, was personally affected by the events that occurred between 1958 and 1961: his father starved to death during the famine. In the first volume of this work, Yang documents horrifying details about the famine and the political terror waged against the peasants in the most affected provinces, including Henan, Sichuan, and Anhui. The second volume offers harsh criticism of the “emperor” Mao Zedong.⁷⁰

Many of the Mainland scholars covered their own research costs to travel to villages and conduct oral history interviews as well as to explore new sources in local archives. They have also been actively training a new generation of scholars. Gao Wangling (from People’s University in Beijing) and Gao Hua (from Nanjing University), for example, have encouraged many of their students to carry out research on the Great Leap. This scholarship offers the promise of providing divergent explanations of the Great Leap Forward and famine from those of the CCP, an issue Weigelin-Schwiedrzik addresses in her chapter. The questions being considered by these scholars include: How did the People’s Communes operate? Who made decisions about resource allocation? How was power distributed at the local level? What forms did rural resistance take during the Great Leap Forward? Why did the vast majority of peasants *not* rise up in violent rebellion when so many were dying around them? Why was the Party able to maintain its power structure at the local level during such an unprecedented social and political crisis?

Eating Bitterness brings these two, largely independent, research communities together. As we believe this volume makes clear, European-, North American-, and Chinese-based research communities have much to learn from close exchange and collaboration. Indeed, we are pleased to present some very challenging findings from the PRC to an English-speaking public and to link these findings to the growing body of research in the West.

Regimes of Truth: Discourses of Emancipation and Fear in the Great Leap Forward

Eating Bitterness begins with an examination of several important studies published by scholars working in mainland China. Whereas intellectuals in China have made the Cultural Revolution a sustained topic of research and rumination for over twenty years, the Great Leap Forward is only

beginning to receive the attention of Chinese scholars and public critics. Indeed, for much of the 1980s the “scar literature,” or literature of the wounded, focused on losses that intellectuals suffered during the Cultural Revolution – an intellectual effort that was initially sanctioned by the CCP as it, too, tried to distance itself from its Maoist past. The Great Leap Forward and famine, however, were topics of an altogether different nature. It was China’s peasants, not intellectuals, who suffered the most during this period, whether from forced labour assignments or from the hunger that gripped most of rural China from 1959 into 1962 and even 1963. Because the CCP has considered peasants a natural revolutionary ally in the establishment of the People’s Republic, the Party leadership has been less tolerant of public discussion of what essentially produced the greatest crisis of its now near-sixty-year rule; instead, it sought to define the historical record in its 1981 “Resolution on Some Questions Concerning the History of the Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China.” According to the Resolution, the Great Leap Forward was the result of a leftist (Maoist) leadership in which economic laws were ignored. The Resolution also cites the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and a series of natural disasters during this key period as contributing to the famine.

As Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik argues in her chapter, much of the scholarship on the Great Leap Forward and famine that has emerged in China does not directly contest the 1981 Resolution. Nonetheless, as more detailed information about the famine has become available in China, emerging scholarship (including several of the chapters in this volume) is beginning to directly challenge the idea of the Party’s “natural” alliance with Chinese peasants. In “Re-Imagining the Chinese Peasant,” Weigelin-Schwiedrzik offers an important analysis of several recent texts published by Chinese intellectuals, including the writing of Mao’s former secretary, Li Rui, and the research of social scientists Zhang Letian and Gao Wangling. The scholarship of Zhang and Gao decentralizes history and diversifies the historical record, she argues, because of the local nature of their sources: county archives and, in the case of Gao, oral interviews with peasants as well. Moreover, the idea of “peasant power,” whether active or reactive, is central to this scholarship – an idea that implicitly acknowledges that the interests of peasants have been, and in some cases continue to be, directly at odds with those of the Party-state. The theme of peasant power has been an important source of debate in English scholarship on Maoist China as well, a topic to which we shall return shortly.

Ironically, and as Weigelin-Schwiedrzik discusses, it was fiction writers, not social scientists, who, in some of the earliest treatments of the famine, began to explore the theme of peasant resistance in the root-seeking

literature of the post-Mao era. In their fictionalized historiographies, writers such as Yu Hua and Mo Yan have offered some of the most evocative accounts of the famine and of how peasants struggled to survive it. As Richard King reminds us, some intellectuals may have contributed to the construction of a “curtain of ignorance” by publishing glowing accounts of the Great Leap Forward during its height in 1958 and 1959. In his chapter, King discusses intellectual efforts both to collect and to record “new folk songs” (*xin mingge*) as well as to develop fiction to inspire the labouring masses during the Great Leap Forward. By the time of the Great Leap, the Anti-Rightist Campaign had effectively silenced the CCP’s critics, so all that was left were efforts that matched the Party’s agenda of the moment. King documents the role these intellectuals played in mobilizing individuals to commit to the campaign and also points to their silence when it came to recording the devastation that followed.

King also focuses on a central, albeit often overlooked, aspect of the Great Leap Forward: the mass mobilization of women. With the development and expansion of universal child care, nursing homes, and public dining halls on the new communes, the CCP leadership sought to liberate the labour of rural women from the home, thus enabling them to devote themselves fully to the tasks of socialist construction. Fictionalized characters such as Li Shuangshuang, as well as local labour models, were exalted throughout the land for their ability to outdo men in competitions and to work in twenty-four-hour shifts. But what did this look like on the ground? Kimberley Ens Manning’s chapter examines how the expansion of social welfare facilities interacted with powerful discourses of sexual equality in rural Henan and Jiangsu during the Great Leap Forward. Her work suggests that some women, with little regard for health and safety, not only willingly embraced the mobilization but also pushed themselves and others to achieve the heroic tasks assigned to them. In so doing, they ended up subverting long-standing CCP policies regarding the protection of women’s physiological and reproductive health. Radicalism during the Great Leap Forward was ignited, in part, by powerful state discourses about sexual equality – albeit discourses that contained serious contradictions as they manifest in local Party institutions.

Radicalism, however, was also motivated by fear. While scholars have long assumed that rural cadres exaggerated production and relied on coercive mobilization methods during the height of the Great Leap Forward in order to avoid censure from the Party, little is known about how the Anti-Rightist Campaign transpired in rural areas. Felix Wemheuer argues that the Socialist Education Campaign, the rural extension of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, actually shaped how individuals could speak and think about

hunger over the course of the fall of 1957. In his chapter, Wemheuer analyzes the Socialist Education Campaign as a discourse that established a truth regime regarding the relationship between food and hunger. Indeed, Wemheuer shows how the Party effectively established a narrative that told of peasants “faking” hunger in order to obtain food aid from the state. Simply put, peasants who complained of hunger were accused of hiding grain reserves. Thus, eighteen months before severe hunger began to afflict parts of rural China, it became impossible to openly discuss food shortages. Wemheuer argues that hunger turned into famine, in part, because to name deprivation was to be labelled a “rightist.”

Coping with Loss: The Politics of Appropriation, Substitution, and Deprivation

For many peasants the earliest months of the Great Leap Forward were a time of confusion and hope, promise and fear. As Xin Yi documents in his chapter, the initial wildly enthusiastic reception of peasants and rural cadres to the nationwide effort to transform the countryside quickly gave way under the weight of broken promises and mounting chaos. In his study of the free-supply system (*gongjizhi*), Xin Yi shows that the practice actually varied widely from region to region and failed to provide people with many of their basic needs. Instead of ensuring the livelihood of peasants, the free-supply system was marked by instability, disunity, and low pay. Ultimately, Xin Yi argues that the severe dysfunction of the free-supply system increased the power of rural cadres and undermined the social order.

Wang Yanni provides additional compelling evidence as to the sheer arbitrariness and chaotic nature of the earliest months of the Great Leap Forward. Whereas Xin Yi focuses on the shortcomings of the free-supply system, Wang focuses on communization more generally – that is, the efforts to collectivize labour and property. Drawing on reports from county archives as well as oral interviews in Macheng County, Hubei Province, Wang documents the overwhelming impact that house demolition, grave destruction, and the militarization of daily life had on the peasants of her home county. As a consequence of her findings, Wang rejects the idea that communization was in any way driven by the utopian ideals of peasants; rather, she sees rapid communization as a kind of “industrialization” and “militarization” of the people.

The loss and deprivation experienced by many peasants, and described so vividly by Wang, contributed to and exacerbated a mounting nationwide problem: famine. Both Gao Hua and Chen Yixin examine how various levels of leadership confronted the famine after it began to emerge in 1959.

Gao Hua focuses in particular on the Party's advocacy of campaigns to "augment" and "substitute" the dwindling food supply. His research reveals a great deal about the CCP's attempts to create a new scientific discourse focused on food substitutes to compensate for what was, in fact, inadequate nutritional sources. His research also reveals a great deal about the Party's initial unwillingness to face the growing crisis as well as how, once it finally did so, it prioritized the health of cadres (especially urban cadres) over the health of "the masses."

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Great Leap Forward is that, while few were untouched by the severe shortages that plagued China in the late 1950s and early 1960s, not everyone suffered equally. In his insightful chapter, Chen Yixin compares the provinces of Jiangxi and Anhui during the Great Leap Forward and famine. Whereas, between 1958 and 1961, excessive deaths accounted for 18.37 percent of Anhui's population, they accounted for only 1.06 percent of Jiangxi's population for the same period – a shocking disparity given that these are neighbouring provinces. Chen attributes the wide gap in the two provinces to several important factors, including agricultural conditions, the in-kind agricultural tax, and the political attitudes of the provincial leadership. Chen's work highlights the need for future studies to focus on how local conditions contributed to or minimized famine devastation.

Urban Promises, Peasant Power, and the Party's Struggle for Legitimacy in a Post-1949 China

Of all the disparities that increased during the Great Leap Forward and famine, one of the greatest was the urban-rural divide. Over the course of the late 1950s, the CCP placed increasing restrictions on the ability of peasants to migrate within the nation – especially from villages to cities. Urban and rural society was divided by the household registration system (*hukouzhì*), which forced peasants to stay in their villages. Whereas urbanites were supported by a state-organized food distribution system, villagers had to depend upon themselves for their survival.⁷¹ At the same time, peasants were becoming increasingly aware that state grain requisitions were being used to feed urbanites. As Wemheuer discusses in his chapter, the Socialist Education Campaign was waged, in part, to counter peasant protests regarding differences between city and country. However, while millions of peasants managed to acquire temporary employment in urban factories and workshops during the early stages of the Great Leap Forward, few achieved the same rights and benefits as did workers in the state-owned system. The gaping disparity between urban and rural dwellers during the famine, a disparity enforced by municipal and central leaders, would

contribute to the decline of the CCP's legitimacy in the eyes of the many peasants forced to feed urban workers, even when their own survival was at stake. Between 1962 and 1963, some 20 million people were sent back to the countryside in order to decrease the burden of the state and the urban society. Back in the countryside, they disappeared from the payroll of the state and had to rely on work points in the People's Communes and, later, on the production output of private plots (after they were re-introduced in 1961).

Jeremy Brown's careful study of state-society relations in Tianjin during the Great Leap and famine suggests that those in the cities may have known a lot more about the rural famine than was previously believed. According to Brown, the human toll of the famine was very visible in Tianjin during the winters of 1959 and 1960. Indeed, Tianjin residents witnessed starving farmers on the city streets, while some hosted rural relatives who sought refuge in their homes. Even more significantly, Brown shows that, during the Great Leap Forward, city leaders actively ignored the famine plaguing the rural counties surrounding Tianjin – counties for which they were responsible. Brown's study offers compelling evidence of the Party leadership's determination (municipal and central) to maintain the livelihood of urban workers at the expense of that of peasants.

The porous boundaries between city and village also meant that peasants in many locales were increasingly aware of the urban-rural disparity. This glaring inequality, Ralph Thaxton argues, severely undermined the legitimacy of the CCP and led to peasants resisting and undermining state appropriation of grain. In his chapter, Thaxton discusses the practice of *chiqing*, or eating unripened standing crops, as a popular form both of survival and of resistance during the famine. By the early 1960s, the practice had become so widespread that it threatened the state's ability to extract the grain it needed to feed workers in the cities. The CCP thus implemented the household responsibility system to protect its ability to continue to expropriate grain from the countryside. In contrast to the widely held belief that the Party devised the household responsibility system to save the peasants from famine (what Thaxton calls the "administrative intervention paradigm"), he argues that the delegation of responsibility for the fulfillment of the grain quotas to peasant families was a way for the state to gain greater control of the harvest and, thus, to exert more power over the peasantry.

Like Thaxton, Gao Wangling also focuses on peasant interactions with the Party-state. Drawing upon ten years of research in Mancheng County, Gao analyzes peasant resistance to collective economic structures and how this resistance evolved over the course of the famine. He shows how

Chinese peasants not only carried out what he calls counter-action (*fanxingwei*) but also how this counter-action deconstructed and transformed state regulations. According to Gao, counter-action includes behaviour such as stealing grain, going slowly (*mo yanggong*), and “concealing production and distributing privately” (*manchan sifen*). Gao emphasizes that the peasants were forced to carry out counter-action in order to survive. The accumulated consequences of nationwide practices of counter-action, Gao argues, harmed the grain policies of the state and caused a serious crisis within collective agriculture.

Concluding Thoughts

As a number of the chapters in *Eating Bitterness* make clear, surviving the famine depended in no small part on one’s ability to negotiate with the Party-state. In this respect, they shed new light on debates within Western scholarship regarding the role of peasant power and resistance in the Mao era. In this final section, we would like to briefly comment on this issue as well as to return to our earlier discussion about modern state famine. We conclude with a few brief remarks about the politics of memory.

Some twenty years ago Vivienne Shue argued that rural communities were effectively able to deflect the Maoist state through subversive practices.⁷² The state’s reach, she contends, was limited by the fact that CCP policies had increased the insularity of rural communities (or what she refers to as “cellularity”). Daniel Kelliher’s *Peasant Power in China* goes one step further, arguing that peasants were not only autonomous from the Party-state but also provided the impetus behind the decollectivization of agriculture.⁷³ According to Kelliher, local experimentation led to the state implementation of the household responsibility system in the reform era. Interestingly, Thaxton, Shue, and Kelliher all acknowledge the influence of James C. Scott. Scott’s notion of “everyday forms of resistance,”⁷⁴ or the slow and often silent struggle over crops, rent, labour, and taxes through pilfering, poaching, and foot dragging, plays a central role in their understanding of how peasants related to the socialist state. Gao’s concept of “counter-action” is also similar to Scott’s concept of “everyday forms of resistance.”⁷⁵ Peasants not only undertook collective action, submitted petitions, and participated in minor forms of pilfering of communal goods but also fled famine areas on foot. Despite the increasing restrictions of the *hukou* system, peasants were much more mobile during the famine than has previously been acknowledged. Thus, while it was true that peasants could not easily flee certain regions (such as Xinyang) because of administrative and military fiat, others continued to enter cities (Brown) and neighbouring provinces (Chen) in order to ensure their survival. The

fact that a number of these chapters find compelling evidence of peasant resistance and ways of escape during what, arguably, was the most repressive period for China's peasants lends greater weight to the argument that peasants have never been passive victims when confronted with twentieth-century modernization projects.

But surviving the famine did not just depend on one's ingenuity, courage, and resourcefulness: it also depended on the kind of state encountered. To this end, what stands out with respect to the Great Leap Forward is not so much the unified imposition of authoritarian high modernism, as is suggested in Scott's more recent work,⁷⁶ but, rather, a dynamic and highly fragmented process in which local leadership often played a role in determining life or death.⁷⁷ Chen Yixin's work, for example, deftly illustrates the crucial role that provincial leadership played in Jiangxi in preventing greater famine deaths. Similarly, leaders at lower levels of the state either exacerbated the famine by aggressively pursuing state procurement policies or alleviated it by turning a blind eye to peasant counter-action. China's lack of democratic institutions during this period cannot tell us why some local leaders *did* try to protect their communities.

These findings thus bring us back to some older questions about local leadership during this key period.⁷⁸ In the volume as a whole, we see that leaders in cities, counties, and villages played complex roles at the margins of the state. Their subjectivity as actors, state, or society was not always readily apprehended and, indeed, often changed depending upon the issue at hand. In his recent book, Thaxton suggests that local officials in Da Fo Village, Henan Province, had been shaped by their previous experience of being marginalized as poor peasants in the "old society" and by their involvement in war. They imposed the Great Leap Forward on their neighbours with a particular self-righteousness. Like Thaxton's work and that of Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, Manning's work on women's activism emphasizes the importance of local leadership ties; however, in this case, the gendered dimensions of mass mobilization wove an intricate web of relations between leaders and their kin and between leaders and led. Local women leaders were not hardened war veterans, although some acted as though they were.

Comparative studies of famine, we would suggest, would be well served by including a much sharper focus on local actors. Comparative political scientists, including some China scholars, have increasingly called for the need to disaggregate both state and society, "to recognize the blurred and moving boundaries between states and societies and to view states and societies as mutually transforming."⁷⁹ To apply such a perspective to the Great Leap Forward and famine is not to dispute the highly militarized,

regimented, and often brutal way in which people were mobilized during the Great Leap, as is so evident in Wang Yanni's chapter. Nor is it to embrace the CCP's official explanation of the famine: that lower-level leaders were responsible for much of the excess and violence while the central government was responsible for setting the incorrect strategy of the Great Leap Forward. But it is to suggest that we might be well served to apply a longer and more textured view of the institutionalization of the grass-roots Party structure. The fact that, as early as the winter of 1950, Hebei Party authorities were not promoting the policy to prevent famine deaths suggests that something within the political system rendered it unpalatable to report the local crisis – a tendency that would only be magnified in successive campaigns (especially the 1957 Socialist Education Campaign). While much more study is still needed, *Eating Bitterness* suggests that a variety of complexly interacting factors, including ideological commitment, fear of reprisal, local conditions, and personal allegiances, shaped how local leaders contributed to and sought to ameliorate the famine in their local communities.

Many of the local perspectives on the Great Leap Forward and famine presented in *Eating Bitterness* were informed by the use of interview data. Given that many of the individuals who lived through this period as teenagers or adults are rapidly aging, a certain kind of urgency accompanies this task. How do we understand or, as Joan Scott urges, *explain* the memories shared?⁸⁰ Recent scholarship on the “politics of memory” in China suggests that collective memory is complex, uneven terrain and that it is never wholly innocent.⁸¹ The task of explaining what happened and why it happened is rendered even more difficult given the trauma that so many endured as a consequence of the Great Leap Forward mobilizations and famine. Indeed, the famine itself presents a dilemma with which holocaust historians have struggled for years: how to name the unnameable.⁸² And yet the perils of ceding collective memory to the Party-state may outweigh the perils involved in reconstructing new visions of the past. In the absence of a physical memorial or a truth and reconciliation commission, we hope that this volume provides one means of marking the fiftieth anniversary of the famine and its continuing impact on the development of the People's Republic.

Notes

- 1 Zhuan Xiezu, *Dong Biwu zhuan* [The Biography of Dong Biwu] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2006), see 685-92.
- 2 Estimating the total number of famine deaths remains a controversial issue. Based on Chinese population statistics published in the early 1980s, scholars have derived different figures. Peng Xizhe calculates 23 million deaths in fourteen provinces (see Peng

- Xizhe, "Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces," *Population and Development Review* 13, 4 [1987]: 649). Ansley Coale comes to the conclusion that 16.5 million people died, while Basil Ashton counts 30 million deaths and 30 million missing births (see Ansley Coale, "Population Trends, Population Policy, and Population Studies in China," *Population and Development Review* 7, 1 [1981]: 85-97; and Basil Ashton and Kenneth Hill, "Famine in China, 1958-1961," *Population and Development Review* 10, 4 [1984]: 613-45). Jasper Becker estimates 43 million to 46 million casualties on the basis of an internal investigation of the Chinese government (see Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* [London: John Murray, 1996]). See also Penny Kane, *Famine in China, 1959-61: Demographic and Social Implications* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); and Carl Riskin, "Seven Questions about the Chinese Famine of 1959-61," *China Economic Review* 9, 2 (1998): 111-24.
- 3 David Bachman's work on the institutional origins of the Great Leap Forward is an important early exception in this regard. See David Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
 - 4 Two other important works by mainland authors were recently published as well: Dong Fu (a pen name), *Maimiaoqing, caihua huang* [Wheat Sprouts Green, Rape Flowers Yellow] (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shuwu, 2008); and Qiao Peihua, *Xinyang shijian* [The Xinyang Disaster] (Hong Kong: Kaifang chubanshe, 2009). See also the recently edited collection of mainland scholarship by Song Yongyi and Ding Shu, *Dayuejin – Dajihuang: Lishi he bijiao shiye xia de shishi he siban* [Great Leap Forward – Great Leap Famine: The Truth and Analysis under Historical and Comparative Perspectives] (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shuwu, 2009).
 - 5 Walter Hampton Mallory, *China: Land of Famine* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926).
 - 6 Lillian Li, *Fighting Famine in North China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.
 - 7 Jennifer Eileen Downs, "Famine Policy and Discourses on Famine in Ming China, 1368-1644" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1995), 42. See also Pierre-Ethienne Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650-1850* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1991).
 - 8 Li, *Fighting Famine in North China*, 284; Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 7.
 - 9 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 7.
 - 10 Li, *Fighting Famine in North China*, 284.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 304.
 - 12 Li, *Fighting Famine in North China*, 284.
 - 13 Cormac O'Grada, *Famine: A Short History*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 244.
 - 14 Y.Y. Kueh, *Agricultural Instability in China, 1931-1991: Weather, Technology, and Institutions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 17.
 - 15 Kenneth R. Walker, *Food Grain Procurement and Consumption in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
 - 16 Regarding comparative research, see Thomas Bernstein, "Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984): 339-77; Felix Wemheuer, "Regime Changes of Memories: Creating Official History of the Ukrainian and Chinese Famine under State Socialism and after the Cold War," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, 1 (2009): 31-59; and Matthias Middell and Felix Wemheuer, eds., *Hunger and Scarcity under Socialist Rule* (Leipzig: University of Leipzig Press, forthcoming 2010).
 - 17 R.W. Davis and Stephen Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 403.
 - 18 See Wemheuer, "Regime Changes of Memories," 31.
 - 19 Elena Zubkova, *Russia after War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 47.

- 20 Devereux's book on theories of famine is mainly based on the African and Indian cases. See Stephen Devereux, *Theories of Famine* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993). For an important and recent exception, see Dennis Tao Yang, "China's Agricultural Crisis and Famine of 1959-1961: A Survey and Comparison to Soviet Famines," *Comparative Economic Studies* 50 (2008): 1-29.
- 21 For a critique of Sen's treatment of the famines under socialism, see Peter Nolan, "The Causation and Prevention of Famines: A Critique of A.K. Sen," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 21, 1 (1993): 4-5. Sen's reply, "The Causation and Prevention of Famines: A Reply," was published in the same issue (29-40).
- 22 See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
- 23 Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 214.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 For a discussion of these debates, see Michael Ellman, "The 1947 Soviet Famine and the Entitlement Approach to Famine," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 24, 5 (2000): 620.
- 26 Stephen Wheatcroft, "Soviet and Chinese Famines in Historical Perspective," in *Hunger and Scarcity under Socialist Rule*, ed. Matthias Middell and Felix Wemheuer (Leipzig: University of Leipzig Press, forthcoming 2010).
- 27 See, for example, Jean Chun Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Fu Shenglun, *Gaobie ji'e* [Farewell to Hunger] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999); and Wheatcroft, "Soviet and Chinese Famines." The Tibetan government in exile argues that major famines occurred in Tibet between 1961 and 1964 and between 1968 and 1973, during which time a total of 342,970 Tibetans starved to death. See *Tibet: Proving Truth from the Facts* (1996), <http://www.tibet.net/>.
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- 29 "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu ba xiaoxing de nongye hezuoshe shidang de hebing wei dashe de yijian" [View of the Central Committee on the Merger of the Small Collectives into Big Collectives] and "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu fazhan difang gongye wenti de yijian" [View of the Central Committee Regarding the Development of Local Industry], in *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian* [Selected Important Documents since the Founding of the People's Republic of China], ed. Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1995), 11:223-30.
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 - 41 Luo, *Daguofan*, 118.
 - 42 Mao Zedong, “Dang nei tongxin,” *Neibu cankao* [Internal Reference], 12:283-86.
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 - 52 Kueh, *Agricultural Instability in China*, 260.
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- 67 Susanne Weigelin-Schweidrzik, "Trauma and Memory: The Case of the Great Famine in the People's Republic of China (1959-1961)," *Historiography East and West* 1, 1 (2003): 39-67.
- 68 Gao Wangling, *Renmin gongshe shiqi Zhongguo nongmin fanxingwei diaocha* [Investigations of Counter-Action: The Chinese Peasants in the Era of the People's Commune] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2006); Jia Yanmin, *Dayuejin shiqi xiangcun zhengzhi de dianxing: Henan Chayashan weixing renmin gongshe yanjiu* [A Typical Example of Rural Politics during the Great Leap Forward: A Study of Henan's Chayashan Satellite Commune] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2006). For example, see also Cao Shuji, *Dajihuang* [The Great Famine] (Hong Kong: Shidai guoji chubanshe you xian gongsi, 2005). This book re-estimates population statistics during the famine based on the county gazetteers. Yu Xiguang's *Dayuejin: Ku rizi* [Great Leap: A Bitter Life], vol. 1 (Xianggang:

- Chaoliu chuban gongsi, 2005), on the other hand, is a collection of archival documents and letters written during the famine.
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 - 70 More recently, Qiao Peihua, a faculty member at the Henan Party school, has published an in-depth account of the starvation that afflicted many of the residents of the Xinyang region of Henan. See Qiao, *Xinyang shijian*.
 - 71 Regarding the separation between rural and urban society, see Sulamith Potter and Jack Potter, "The Position of Peasants in Modern China's Social Order," *Modern China* 9, 4 (1983): 465-99; Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Construction of Spatial Hierarchies: China's Hukou and Danwei Systems," in *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China*, ed. Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich, 23-50 (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); and Kam Wing Chan, "The Chinese Hukou System at 50," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50, 2 (2009): 197-221.
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 - 76 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
 - 77 For a recent critique of the concept of "authoritarian high modernism" as it was applied in Tanzania's villagization, see Leander Schneider, "High on Modernity? Explaining the Failings of Tanzanian Villagization," *African Studies* 66, 1 (2007): 9-38. See Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), for his process-oriented understanding of the modern state.
 - 78 See, for example, Michael Oksenberg, "Local Leaders in Rural China, 1962-65: Individual Attributes, Bureaucratic Positions, and Political Recruitment," in *Chinese Communist Politics in Action*, ed. A. Doak Barnett, 155-215 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969); Thomas P. Bernstein, "Cadre and Peasant Behavior under Conditions of Insecurity and Deprivation: The Grain Supply Crisis of the Spring of 1955," in *Chinese Communist Politics in Action*, ed. A. Doak Barnett, 365-99 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969). Jean Oi's seminal study on the division of the harvest emphasizes the importance of local leaders in this process. Oi documents compelling evidence of the role that team leaders played in evading state grain procurement. See Jean Chun Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
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- 81 Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, eds., *Re-Envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007). Many scholars have thoughtfully engaged similar questions about the politics of memory in China. See, for example, Erik Mueggler, *The Age of the Wild Ghosts*; Gail Hershatter, "The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s," *Signs* 28, 1 (2002): 43-70; and Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*.
- 82 See, for example, Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

1 Re-Imagining the Chinese Peasant: The Historiography on the Great Leap Forward

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

Up until quite recently, the Great Leap Forward was both a myth and a taboo in Chinese historiography. The myth is related to the question of successfully combining the “general truth of Marxist-Leninism to the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution”; the taboo is related to the Great Famine as being the most abominable effect of the Great Leap on Chinese society and economy.¹ Myth and taboo are closely connected: as long as the myth about the Great Leap dominated the historiography of the post-1949 era, the taboo about the famine had to be upheld. However, as soon as the myth about Mao’s ability to successfully sinicize Marxism was open to deconstruction,² the taboo about the famine was no longer enforced. And, vice versa, the more the Chinese public learned about the Great Famine, the less it was prepared to believe in the myth that the Chinese Communist Party had found a successful path to socialism. Recent discussions about the Great Leap Forward and its relationship to the Great Famine are part and parcel of re-imagining the relationship between the CCP and the Chinese peasantry. As a result, what was imagined as a natural alliance is now regarded as a strained relationship full of conflict and mistrust. This conflict exists today and will shape China’s future for many years to come.

The Historiography of the Great Leap before 1976

Party history textbooks of the Maoist era usually refrain from going into detailed descriptions of the post-1949 era, and they especially avoid referring to the Great Leap Forward.³ However, textbooks that came out during the early 1970s, after universities had been reopened and students had to attend CCP history classes, discuss the Great Leap at some length.⁴ They argue that, in the initial years after the communist takeover, China suffered under the pressure of having to imitate the Soviet Union and, therefore, ended up in the same kind of crisis as was encountered in East-

ern Europe in the early 1950s. Mao Zedong analyzed the situation and came to the conclusion that socialism in China had to be different from socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe. He strongly criticized Stalin's approach to the political economy of socialism and came up with the idea that, in developing its own economy, China mainly had to rely on its enormously large workforce. In discussing the experience of organizing cooperatives in the Chinese countryside, he convinced himself that Chinese peasants supported the idea of collectivization and, thus, that the reorganization of the countryside would work out much better in China than it had in the Soviet Union. This is why Cultural Revolution textbooks on Party history argue that the Great Leap was the first success that the Party, under Mao's leadership, could claim with regard to distancing itself from the Russian experience and in finding its own path towards socialism – a path that would be fundamentally different from what the Communist Party of the Soviet Union summarized as its own experience in the “Short Course of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,”⁵ which was instituted under Stalin's leadership.⁶

It is interesting to note that the pattern on which post-1949 Party history was modelled resembles the pattern for pre-1949 Party history. In its initial phase, the CCP was highly dependent on Comintern advisers and followed their ideas about the future of the Chinese revolution closely. After the defeat of the First United Front, however, the Party, step by step and through several rounds of struggle between the correct revolutionary line and wrong “leftist” or “rightist” lines, learned its lesson. It realized that only by defining a strategy for the Chinese revolution that was based on Marxist-Leninism as well as on an in-depth understanding of the particularities of Chinese society could it lead the revolution to victory.⁷ The ability to combine Marxist-Leninism with the particularity of China was the basis for victory, and the particularity of China consisted of the fact that the peasants were the main force of the revolution. Consequently, the CCP showed its ability to adapt to the situation in China by gradually retreating to the countryside and developing its strength through organizing the peasants. When the CCP took over China in 1949, it shifted its attention from the countryside to the cities; however, with the Great Leap Forward, it invented a strategy for socialism in China that was based on peasant support, agriculture, and the countryside. So it shifted its focus back to the rural areas. In both cases, the learning process took six to seven years and was accompanied by line struggles inside the Party. However, the parallels between the two stories ends when it comes to discussing the problem of defeat. Whereas, in the case of pre-1949 CCP history,

the defeat of the First United Front and the loss of many lives in 1927 were openly declared to be the beginning of the learning process, in post-1949 CCP history the Party could not risk admitting another such defeat. The learning process, which involved adapting to China's particular situation, is therefore described as one that resulted not from fundamental failure but, rather, from Chairman Mao's ability to analyze the situation and to convince his comrades of his ideas.⁸

Rare examples of a more detailed account of what happened during the Great Leap Forward are to be found in internal teaching materials distributed to worker, peasant, and army students during the later years of the Cultural Revolution. In these textbooks, the Great Leap Forward is described within the aforementioned framework and is closely related to the eighth inner-Party line struggle against Peng Dehuai. The Great Famine is euphemized as "temporary economic difficulties"⁹ that were brought about by "the treacherous clique under Khrushchev tearing existing contracts to pieces and forcing their specialists to return to the Soviet Union as well as several years of natural disasters."¹⁰ The anti-Chinese and anti-communist attacks by Russian revisionists were matched by those from other imperialist and revisionist countries and were accepted by revisionists in China such as Liu Shaoqi. During the "Meeting of 7,000 Cadres" in January 1962, Liu Shaoqi criticized Mao for having attacked Peng Dehuai too strongly and for not having acknowledged that Peng Dehuai's arguments against the Great Leap were correct. This showed, according to the CCP textbook, that Liu Shaoqi was a member of Peng Dehuai's clique and was strongly opposed to Mao's ideas about socialism in China. This, it said, is when Liu showed his true face for the first time.

The Great Famine and its death toll are not mentioned. Nor does the text admit that Liu Shaoqi had expressed the Party's apologies during the Meeting of 7,000 Cadres in light of the terrible losses brought about by the Great Leap. Instead, the narrative of success and victory relates the Great Leap to the Cultural Revolution and praises both as signs of Mao's ability to fight revisionism.

The Historiography on the Great Leap since the End of the Maoist Era

With the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the argument about the need to fight revisionism lost its persuasiveness, and the model that replaced the old narrative put the 1950s in a positive light while juxtaposing them to the ten years of chaos that occurred between 1966 and 1976.¹¹ The Great Leap is seen as an early example of Mao Zedong's development of "ultra-leftist" ideas about socialism in China,

which would turn out to be highly erroneous. The 1981 “Resolution on Some Questions Concerning the History of the Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” states:

The 2nd Plenary Session of the 8th Party Congress passed the resolution on the general line and other points of fundamental importance. The correct side about this resolution is its reflecting the wish and strong demand of the masses to change the state of underdevelopment of our economy. Its mistake consisted in underestimating the role of economic laws. However, because of the lack of experience in building socialism and a lack of knowledge regarding the laws of economic development as well as the overall economic situation in our country, but even more so because Comrade Mao Zedong as well as many comrades from the central to the local levels became self-satisfied and arrogant as a result of our victory, we started to become impatient in expecting success and to overestimate the role of subjective willingness and subjective endeavour.¹²

The Great Famine is still not depicted as such: “During the years 1959 to 1961 the economy of our country came across severe problems, and the state as well as the people had to suffer great damages because of mistakes that had been committed during the Great Leap Forward and the Campaign against Rightists, as well as because of natural calamities having taken place. On top of that, the economy was badly affected by the Soviet Union perfidiously tearing contracts into pieces.”¹³ The volume, which was specially prepared for members of the army, gives explanations of the most important arguments presented in the 1981 Resolution. Explanation 94 discusses the “three difficult years” as a problem related to the Soviet Union. It refers to the Soviets as having signed a friendship treaty with China in order to help socialism to develop but then, as a consequence of ideological conflicts that arose since the mid-1950s, suddenly retreating and leaving China with many unfinished projects and a great debt to repay.¹⁴

The explanations given by the Central Documentary Bureau on Party History (*Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi*) treat the topic in a similar fashion to the 1981 Resolution, with the slight but important difference that it gives the Great Leap Forward and the Anti-Rightist Campaign the greatest share of blame for the catastrophe, while natural disasters and the retreat of the Soviet Union are seen as problems that exacerbated the situation.¹⁵ The Great Leap Forward is clearly no longer regarded as a sign of the CCP’s ability to find a successful road to socialism; rather, it is

regarded as a major mistake that caused harm to the people. The myth of the Great Leap was no longer upheld, and, subsequently, more and more details about the Great Famine were revealed to the public.

Ten years after the 1981 Resolution had been passed, Hu Sheng's 1991 volume *Seventy Years of the Chinese Communist Party* stated quite bluntly:

Comparing the year 1960 with the year 1957, the average amount of consumed grain among the urban and rural population sank by 19.4 percent, with grain consumption among the rural population dropping by 23.7 percent. Consumption of vegetable oil sank by 23 percent, the per capita consumption of meat by 70 percent. Because some areas were not sufficiently supplied with food, edema was a disease that frequently occurred. The death rate rose notably. According to official statistics the population of the whole country decreased by 10 million in 1960 compared to the year before. In special areas such as the Xinyang district in Henan, there was a death rate of more than one hundred per thousand in nine counties, more than double the usual rate. Even though we had hoped for the masses of the people to live through better days as soon as possible, the consequences were that these facts made people grieve. These are the most serious consequences and a lesson to learn from the mistakes made during the course of the Great Leap Forward and the organization of People's Communes.¹⁶

Six years later, the discussion of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine had reached a point at which the death toll could no longer be kept secret. It was under these conditions that Li Chengrui, then the director of the Statistical Bureau of the PRC, published an article in the official PRC journal of Party historiography, *Research on CCP History* (*Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*), discussing the research that had been conducted inside and outside the PRC regarding the number of casualties caused by the Great Leap Famine. Obviously, his article is not concerned with giving an explanation of why the famine could have taken place; rather, his purpose is to define the correct method of counting casualties. Thus, he tries to convince the reader that 17 million people died as a consequence of the Great Leap Famine and that calculations indicating higher numbers were incorrect.¹⁷ After the myth of the Great Leap was replaced by criticism of the Great Leap, the taboo about the Great Famine was replaced by a "scientific method" of dealing with the death toll and by acknowledging the fact that millions of people had died as a consequence of the Great Leap. By that time, quite a few monographs on the Great Leap and the Great Famine had been published outside China. Some of them were translated

into Chinese,¹⁸ and questions about the Great Famine could no longer be suppressed. However, it took Chinese-language academic research on the Great Leap and the Great Famine quite some time to discuss these issues in public.

Explaining the Famine

Three approaches to explaining the relationship between the Great Leap and the Great Famine – the political, the structuralist, and the socio-political – have emerged so far. Li Rui, as a major player at the central leadership level during the Great Leap, represents the political approach. He looks at the reasons for the Great Leap and views the Great Famine as the sign of a political defeat caused by Mao's false assessment of the situation. His focus is on elite politics.¹⁹ Zhang Letian, who represents unofficial historiography, takes a structuralist approach. He tries to explain the relationship between the Great Leap and the Great Famine by referring to the Big Commune System (*dagongshe zhidu*) as the major reason for the nutrition crisis in the Chinese countryside.²⁰ Gao Wangling, a historian from outside the system of Party historiography, represents the socio-logical approach to the question. His focus is on state-society relations, and he stresses the fact that state and peasant society were diametrically opposed in the pursuit of their respective interests. The Great Famine was a consequence of the state's inability to safeguard the interest of the peasantry, and it was a turning point in the relationship between the state and rural society.²¹

Li Rui draws on his personal memories in writing his two-volume book on the Great Leap, but he stresses several times that his interpretation of the situation is in accord with the 1981 Resolution.²² His book spells out in great detail what the Resolution only hints at. In his conclusion, however, he is much more outspoken than is the Resolution in his critique of the myth that Mao Zedong's path to socialism was more adequate for China and better than the path taken in Stalin's Soviet Union. "We did not invent a new model," he explains, and he argues that the idea that socialism needed heavy industrialization was as accepted in China as it had been in the Soviet Union.²³ The so-called "Chinese path towards socialism" is, in his view, simply a matter of combining the Soviet model of developing a socialist economy with the wartime experience of mass mobilization.²⁴ He vividly describes Mao's doubts about adhering to Marxism and his pride in developing new theories about socialism in underdeveloped countries, and he summarizes the discourse of the time as follows: "What the Great Leap meant when demanding 'to get rid of superstition' was, speaking frankly, that one felt Marxism would no longer have any vitality."²⁵ Mao

played a crucial role in this and, therefore, is to be held responsible for the disaster that was the Great Leap Famine. He developed a utopian approach to solving the problem of China's lagging behind in economic development, and he based it on the idea that the "masses" would be willing and able to engage in overcoming China's poverty: "When the majority of the masses is in a low state of cultural refinement, these mass movements can easily become blind and have devastating consequences ... The chaos that came by during the 'Great Leap' and the 'Great Cultural Revolution' as a consequence of mobilizing the masses constitutes a painful lesson that will stay with our nation for a long time to come."²⁶

Quite interestingly, Li Rui traces Mao's tendency to develop utopian ideas back to Kang Youwei and the "Book of Great Harmony," which, according to Li Rui, must have had a deep influence on Mao.²⁷ However, that Mao could find support for his ideas is due to the fact that China was an underdeveloped country in which, despite the scarcity of resources, both the masses and the leaders hoped to achieve equality in the shortest possible period of time. This is where the tendency to "underestimate the role of economic laws" originates. Mao related directly to the masses and their wish to overcome poverty, and he did not listen to other leading members of the CCP, who finally gave in to him: "It is sad to say, but the Party did not do anything about Mao Zedong's incorrect ideas and actions, which is why he developed these things to the extreme."²⁸ Li Rui's analysis of the Great Leap indicates that the CCP was unable to make use of its victory by developing China's economy and having the Chinese people live under decent conditions. It is a story of the tragedy of good intentions, and his point of departure is the fact that, since 1978, the CCP leadership has been pursuing more successful policies. He warns against the possibility of "chaos" re-emerging in China if people do not analyze the reasons for past defeat, and he is critical of the fact that "capitalism has already been restored."²⁹

Zhang Letian also wants to draw his readers' attention to the potential of utopianism to mobilize the peasant masses in China:

When the People's Communes were first founded, the government painted a wonderful image of a new socialist village for the peasants. Two-storied houses, electricity and a telephone, good living conditions, an egalitarian and harmonious society, a happy and nice life. However, after one year, the commune had not led the peasants to what they had anticipated as a "paradise of happiness." To the contrary, the commune had led peasants to a life of widespread hunger and starvation. With the village economy stagnating, the ideal started to dissolve. The logic of rural

economy and social evolution defeated inventions based on subjectivism and nice words of mobilization. They forced the government into compromise. Consequently, the system of big communes had to transform into a system of small communes.³⁰

Neither bad weather nor conflicts with the Soviet Union had caused the troubles.³¹ Production sank even though most production factors were developing quite well: “The centralized commune system strained the natural village, it destroyed the traditional way of life of the peasants, and the peasants only complied because of political pressure.”³² Under these circumstances, the peasants became passive, and the cadres at the local level replaced adequate management with waste and insanity. Because the peasants were under heavy political pressure, they had no way to organize their own survival and to resist the local cadres. Thus, the idea of solving the problem by retreating to a smaller collective was not the result of pressure from below but, rather, of pressure from the top. The peasants accepted this, however, because it meant “more freedom,” which they used to reshape the commune to an extent that fundamentally changed its structure. Subsequently, it no longer conformed to the ideas of the CCP leadership and, in fact, generated an incessant fight between peasants and Party over what was the right form of collectivization.³³

For Zhang Letian, collectivization per se was not a problem; rather, it was a viable solution to the plight of peasants and agricultural production in China. However, when Mao ordered the organization of communes, he overtaxed the peasants and organized the communes in a manner that had an unhealthy effect both on peasant life and on agricultural production. After the commune adjusted to the reality of the Chinese countryside, things went much better for the peasants. The commune, however, never realized its positive potential. Consequently, the peasants were unable to enjoy the positive aspects of collectivization and instead had to pay a high price for something that had no discernible advantage.

Obviously, Zhang Letian regards the Great Famine as the result of a system failure. As stated in the 1981 Resolution, the Party erred because it underestimated the time necessary to overcome traditional structures in the Chinese countryside. Its desire to organize peasants beyond the constraints of rural traditions coincided with the peasants’ hope for a better future. This is how the idea of the Great Leap was accepted by the Party, the local cadres, and the peasants, and this is how it generated the Great Famine, leaving the people without any way of escaping its deadly effects. In Zhang’s narrative, the Great Leap is an erroneous idea that generated an erroneous system. The peasants did not have the power to

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20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper (100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Eating bitterness : new perspectives on China's great leap forward and famine / edited by Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer.

(Contemporary Chinese studies, 1206-9523)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7748-1726-4

1. China – History – 1949-1976. 2. Famines – China – History – 20th century. 3. China – Politics and government – 1949-1976. 4. China – Economic policy – 1949-1976. 5. China – Social conditions – 1949-1976. 6. China – Economic conditions – 1949-1976. I. Manning, Kimberley Ens II. Wemheuer, Felix III. Series: Contemporary Chinese studies

DS777.56.E28 2011

951.05

C2010-905264-1

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund) and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Additional funding from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and Concordia University is greatly appreciated.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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