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Book reviews



Zhou Xun (ed.),
The Great Famine in China,
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THOMAS P. BERNSTEIN

This collection of archival documents is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the Great Leap Forward famine that has appeared in the last few years. Professor Zhou Xun spent four years collecting a thousand archival documents. She chose 121 for this book. They came from six provincial Party archives and five city or county archives. They are listed in an Index of Documents together with dates and identification numbers. Some are presented in full; most are excerpted. Quite a few documents came from other provinces, distributed horizontally presumably on the initiative of the central authorities, from whom seven documents emanated directly. Each of the eight chapters plus an Epilogue is accompanied by several pages of helpful explanations.

The chapter headings indicate the range of issues covered: 1. "Famine in the Communes (March-September 1958);" 2. "Terror, Repression, and Violence (1958-1961);" 3. "Seasons of Death (1959-1962);" 4. "Cannibalism (Late 1959-early 1961);" 5. "Devastation in the Countryside (1958-1961);" 6. "The Turn to Religion (1957-1962);" 7. "Strategies for Survival (1959-1962);" 8. "Letters of Complaint (1957-1962)," plus an "Epilogue" for 1961-62. The chapter titles can be misleading: Chapter 3 contains 14 documents, but seven of them are not about deaths; rather, they consist of reports and requests for medicine for preventing and curing famine-related diseases, especially oedema and gynaecological illnesses induced by severe malnutrition and extremely hard labour. A detailed if sometimes incomplete index provides guidance to specific topics. A reader unfamiliar with the phases of the GLF can also consult a helpful Chronology of major developments.

Zhou's choice of the 121 documents reflects her intention to show how bad the Leap was. She wants "to help the reader understand how and why the catastrophe unfolded, as well as the enormity and sheer horror of what took place" (p. xiv). She justifies repetitiousness because it establishes "that the tragedy and devastation did not occur on a single occasion in one particular place but took place over and over again throughout China between 1958-1962" (p. xiv). Her approach raises the question of balance. It would have been helpful had she provided some information about the 879 documents that she did not include.

The provincial distribution of the documents is extremely skewed: 56 per cent to Sichuan, 15 to Hunan, and 12 to Guizhou. Four came from Guangdong and Shandong respectively. Gansu, Jiangsu, Henan, and Yunnan supplied three each, and one each came from seven other provinces. Here, too, the question of balance arises. In 1957, the national mortality rate was 10.8 per 1,000. It peaked at 25.4 per 1,000 in 1960, the worst of the famine years. The mortality rates in 1960 in Sichuan and Guizhou were far above the average at 54 and 52.3 per 1,000, respectively. Only Anhui ranked higher with 68.6. One of the challenges of GLF famine research is to explain such variations. Why was the death rate in Shaanxi only 12.3 per 1,000? On this point the book is of little help.⁽¹⁾

The documents are also not equally distributed among the years of the GLF. Around two thirds originated in 1961 and 1962. They were the product of Mao Zedong's call in late 1960 to investigate what had actually occurred. Mao had received a report in October 1960 about the "Xinyang Incident" in a Henan prefecture where deaths from hunger and violence totalled 1.05 million or 14% of the population, deeply shocking the Chairman.⁽²⁾ Mao responded by blaming lower-level officials, not higher ones. He used the class enemy trope to label offenders. He ordered investigations prompting central, provincial, and county Party committees as well as specialised agencies such as civil affairs and health departments to find out what officials from counties to villages had done. Their reports do not shed light on the role played by extreme Leftist provincial Party secretaries in promoting anti-Rightist terror. Still, the reports contain rich, often gruesome detail on events in the preceding period. What can one learn from the documents?

1. *Famine in 1957-58.* It is often assumed that famine started only in the late fall of 1958. But a "summary" of telephone reports distributed by the General Office of the Central Committee and dated 25 April 1958 documents widespread, acute food shortages and starvation in 16 provinces and autonomous regions. As is well known, food shortages occur regularly in rural China during the spring when the old harvest is more or less used up but the new one is still green (*qinghuang bujie* 青黄不接). But these reports go well beyond such normal occurrences.

In Anhui, 1.3 million people "are without food supplies." In Shandong, 670,000 people lack food; 150,000 have fled their home villages. In Guangdong's spring famine, almost a million people lack food and "seven people have died of starvation." In Gansu, "degrees of food shortage have occurred in 21 counties.... In Hui County...(S)evere famine has become prevalent, and people have been eating tree bark and grass roots.... Since December 1957, 2,031 people have suffered from oedema and 795 have died.... In a number of places it is no longer possible to carry out any productive labor owing to severe malnutrition."

The document blamed local cadres for not uncovering food problems and providing for timely resale of grain. It mentioned fear of the Rightist label but did not put its finger directly on the obvious cause, which was that the

1. Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, p. 38.
2. See Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, Chapter 1.

1957-58 procurements were conducted during a harsh anti-Rightist and socialist education campaign that pushed officials to achieve extreme results (Document-2, henceforth cited as D-plus the number).

2. *Mao's responsibility.* A "top secret" document sheds light on this contentious issue. It consists of Mao's interjections on a report on grain procurement by Li Xiannian, a Politburo member in charge of trade, at the Shanghai Party conference on 25 March 1959. Mao labelled shortfalls in grain procurement as not just "disappointing" but "in some aspects terrible." He called for a relentless effort but "it can't be seen as vicious." He added: "As long as the amount of grain being procured does not go above a third [of the grain produced], peasants will not rebel.... Every province must adopt Henan's method: 'He who strikes first prevails; he who strikes last fails.' This is a real lesson."

Just what Mao meant by one third is confusing, since he didn't distinguish between gross and net procurement, the latter meaning resale to rural areas struck by disaster and those that specialised in non-grain crops. But his choice of words undoubtedly helped inspire the extremely harsh collection tactics of the 1959-60 procurement season, in which an unprecedented 39.7% of the grain crop was seized while net procurement reached a record 28% at a time when grain output had declined sharply.⁽³⁾ This extraction was the major source of the 1959-1960 famine.

Mao's most damning statement was on starvation:

To distribute resources evenly will only ruin the Great Leap Forward. When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half the people die so that the other half can eat their fill (D-5).

Some scholars believe that this shows Mao's readiness to accept mass death on an immense scale. My own view is that this is an instance of Mao's use of hyperbole, another being his casual acceptance of death of half the population during a nuclear war. In other contexts, Mao did not in fact accept mass death. Zhou's Chronology shows that in October 1958, Mao expressed real concern that 40,000 people in Yunnan had starved to death (p. 173). Shortly after the March 25 meeting, he worried about 25.2 million people who were at risk of starvation.⁽⁴⁾ But from late summer on, Mao essentially forgot about this issue, until, as noted, the "Xinyang Incident" came to light in October 1960.

But Mao's hyperbole may well have inspired many subordinates to press procurements to the point of condemning people to death. Shortly after his remarks, a "counterrevolutionary" poster appeared in Jining Prefecture, Shandong, with the message that, "In the Soviet Union, 70% of the population starved to death in order to build communism.... And Chairman Mao has given orders to let half the population starve to death...." (D-118). In 1961, the Party committee of Wanxian Prefecture, Sichuan, quoted a "former" Party secretary of a commune in which 14.5% of members had died as saying, "A few dead is nothing.... Our socialist system determined that death is inevitable. In the Soviet Union, in order to build the socialist system, about 30% of the people died" (D-3).

3. *Information flow.* How well were the central authorities informed of the 1959-60 famine? Intense anti-Rightist pressures had led to gross exaggerations about output but also motivated officials to intercept upward communications that contained truthful reports. The book contains six cases in which investigators found that local authorities intercepted, opened, and withheld letters sent to Mao, the Central Committee, and the provincial committees.

A Guizhou county Party secretary ordered public security to withhold 100 letters, labelling anonymous ones as "anti-socialist" and "counterrevolutionary." One intercepted letter to Mao was sent by a cadre in the propaganda department and reported exaggeration of output and mass starvation. He became a target of "struggle," public humiliation, and reassignment to hard labour (D-103).

In Sichuan, a villager pleaded with "higher authorities" to "save our lives." His brigade Party secretary had confiscated all the peasants' rations, reducing them to eating grass and bark. This official uncovered the identity of the author, forged evidence against him, and had village bullies savagely beat him. By April 1960, 128 peasants in this brigade had died of hunger (D-104).

A third is from Shizhu County, Sichuan, where a "former" county Party secretary and others sought to conceal their errors and crimes, which included beating "a number of people to death" during the anti-rightist campaign. They blocked villagers' letters of complaint, prompting some to walk to other counties to mail their letters (D-105).

4. *The search for hidden grain.* This was part of the anti-Rightist campaign of 1959-60. Since officials had lied about output, they were desperate to find grain to meet the procurement quotas. This led to a sequence in which top county officials maltreated their subordinates, who in turn abused those below them. In the just-mentioned Shizhu County, in order to force cadres to find hidden grain by any and all means, beatings and other forms of torture were inflicted on "Party secretaries, brigade leaders and accountants... After they returned to their local areas, grass-roots cadres also held denunciation meetings and physically tortured villagers...." Some were "starved to death." A commune Party secretary announced that "any cadre who does not take part in beating is a rightist." The commune's death rates ranged from 20% to 50%. The investigators noted that letters sent by ordinary people about these events were "fairly accurate" (D-9).

In June 1960, the Hunan Provincial Party Committee received a report about a "reign of terror" against cadres in Liling County. Since October 1959, "several county-level conferences... set an example for inflicting physical violence on cadres which then became prevalent in the communes, becoming worse at each level down." In 11 communes, 235 people were denounced at a Party conference and 120 people were beaten up, "causing three deaths" and 17 serious injuries. "More than 20 types of torture were employed, most of them extremely dangerous." "In some communes, 'beating frenzy' is like an evil wind sweeping through society from the top down" (D-8). During 1959-1960 the "wind of communism" was revived. One cannot but wonder whether this "frenzy" was induced not only by fear of punishment but also by apocalyptic visions of instant entry into the communist paradise.

Such horrific documents raise the question of balance. How many lower-level officials did not join in the repressions? One clue is that in May 1961 it was revealed that 70% of a stupendous 3.65 million cadres had been wrongly labelled as Rightists in 1959-60.⁽⁵⁾ The clear implication is that there must have been many officials who in some way or other either refused to participate in the violence or opposed it in some other way. The book gives

3. See Felix Wemheuer, "Hunger and Food Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union," forthcoming, Table 2.

4. T. P. Bernstein, "Mao Zedong and the Famine of 1959-1960," *China Quarterly*, No. 186, June 2006, p. 427.

5. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Coming of the Cataclysm*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 179.

instances of upward reporting by cadres during the height of the terror, but not many.

5. *Peasant survival methods*. Some ate tree bark and grass; other consumed "immortal earth" (D-88). Still others sold children. Quite a few fled; some young women turned to prostitution. Others turned to spirit mediums and faith healers: "If you want food to eat, you should follow spirits, not cadres" (D-68). Cannibalism was the most extreme survival tactic. The book contains cases from Gansu, Sichuan, and Guizhou. In one Gansu municipality, 41 such cases were found as of March 1961. The list of culprits, stratified by class, reports "survival" as the reason for eating human flesh (D-26).

Collective actions included widespread food riots. A striking and perhaps politically motivated incident took place in 1961, when 20-30 peasants invaded a county Party compound in Changshou, Sichuan, "peeled the bark off all the trees and consumed it" (D-88). Between September 1960 and late January 1961, 30,000 incidents of train robberies by "groups" in 23 provinces were reported to the Ministry of Public Security (D-83). There were acts of resistance to the levelling of graves and careless exposure of bodies, part of a "war on the dead" (D-47). Revolts of unspecified size were reported from Hunan, Guangxi, and Jiangxi involving secret societies and clustering around December 1958 (D-62). Bitter satires about life in the communes were posted in a variety of places.

In early 1959, some villagers in a Shandong commune wanted to go to Beijing. "They want Chairman Mao and the Party to seek revenge for them" (D-108). Conversely, in 1961, "Down with Mao" posters were found in a commune in Ningxiang County, Hunan. But rumours also circulated that Mao had appointed Peng Dehuai, purged in 1959 for criticising the Leap, to the governorship of Hunan (D-113).

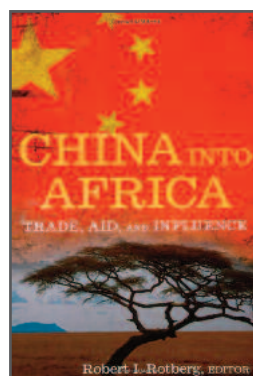
Harsh denunciations of Mao came from Xinchang, a Tibetan prefecture in Sichuan in early 1959. In one township it was said that "Chairman Mao is more brutal than Deng Xiuting," a former-warlord. "We are treated worse than slaves." Ethnic groups can organise "to wreck this so-called people's government." Han cadres are worse than indigenous ones. "When it comes to grain procurement, the people's government is much more brutal than former slave owners." But only "very small" counterrevolutionary organisations were formed (D-111).

A truly subversive act was a letter written by two Youth League members from Nanjing and mailed to various Party committees in early 1962. It was a wholesale indictment of the disasters caused by communisation. The letter appealed to the Centre to "discard dogma" and abandon the whole enterprise. Rather naively, the authors suggested that China advise other communist countries to avoid this kind of disaster. Recipient officials were ordered to destroy the letter (D-110).

Finally, the chapter on "Devastation in the countryside" sheds further light on the immense damage done during the Leap to agriculture, forests, water resources, and peasant housing, etc. Hu Yaobang, then head of the Youth League, spent 25 days travelling through Hunan and Anhui in the fall of 1961. He commented: "Unless one sees the situation with one's own eyes, it's impossible to believe how awful it is" (D-42).

In sum, while this book raises questions of balance, it is nonetheless a highly informative collection of original documents.

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Robert I. Rotberg (ed.),
China into Africa: Trade, Aid and Influence, Washington D.C.,
Brookings Institution Press, 2008,
350 pp.

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With 54 countries, a land size of 30.2 million km² and a population of about one billion,⁽¹⁾ Africa is far from being a homogenous entity. Favourite backyard of the colonial powers, this fictional construction of Africa has always been the object of a multitude of attentions and fantasies. These many hopes and fears have recently taken a new dimension as another giant has strategically penetrated the African territory, giving rise to numerous concerns and comments. Since the 2006 Beijing summit and publication of the first comprehensive Chinese *White Paper on China's African Policy*, China's presence in Africa is indeed being scrutinised by many observers from policy makers to businesses and academics. While this "strategic partnership" is not always welcomed and envisaged as the "win-win cooperation" advertised by Hu Jintao in his 2006 Beijing address, some analysts deliberately take the opposite side to deconstruct myth and discourse and tell "the real story" from proven facts.

Among the many academic publications released in the past few years, I have chosen to present a group of three books, either individual or collective, which give a good account of the main issues arising from China's renewed engagement in Africa. In reviewing these books, this essay also proposes to reflect upon the many ways to approach this complicated question from a multidisciplinary perspective as well as the role Africa could play in China scholarship.

Let us start with a simple fact that sheds some light on an often heated but not always well-documented debate: China's presence in Africa is hardly new. In *China in Africa: A Century of Engagement*, David H. Shinn (former US ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso and adjunct Professor in international affairs at George Washington University) and Joshua Eisenman (Senior Fellow in China Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council) provide us with an excellent historical overview of China-Africa relations. Cleopatra herself was probably wearing Chinese silk, and the first trade relations could be dated from the Han Dynasty. According to a number of authors, however, it is with the fifteenth century naval expedition of Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim eunuch in the court of Ming dynasty Emperor Yongle, that China-Africa relations reached a significant level in a number of eastern African territories corresponding to the present Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. This promising pacific encounter did not last for long, since Emperor Chengzu prohibited the construction of new ships for overseas expeditions in 1436 (Shinn and Eisenman, p. 17; Snow, 1988). But for today's Chinese leaders Zheng He remains the initial model of a "non-threatening" "going out policy"

1. Compared with 9.6 million km² for China with a population of 1.3 billion.