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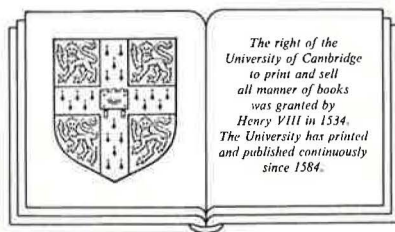
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Drought and hunger in Africa:

denying famine a future

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*Famine and famine relief: viewing Africa in the
1980s from China in the 1920s*

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During 1984 and 1985, as the tragedy of the Ethiopian famine has been played out in Africa, another human drama has unfolded in the United States and Europe. Although anticipated by experts for years, and in progress for months, the famine in Ethiopia did not reach the American public's attention until October 1984, when NBC evening news aired a BBC special about Ethiopia. As they ate dinner, Americans could watch with horror the spectre of emaciated, fly-ridden bodies dying of starvation before their eyes. During the following winter and spring, millions of dollars poured into relief organizations such as Oxfam America and Catholic Relief Services, completely overwhelming their staffs. Rock stars, having already made a best-selling record, *We Are the World*, donated their talents to the ultimate transoceanic media event, 'Live Aid'—grossing millions more for African relief.

A year later, the crisis in Ethiopia has peaked. Although several million remain 'at risk', homeless and severely malnourished, summer rains in 1985 have brought the hope of a successful harvest in some areas. The flow of millions of dollars of international assistance has helped to limit the number of human fatalities. Yet, as Africans and African specialists know, the deep underlying causes of famine have not been addressed, and the deteriorating economic conditions in much of sub-Saharan Africa suggest that hunger and famine will continue to haunt Africa for the foreseeable future.

Just as Africa seems to be the 'basket case' of the world today, half a century ago, it was China that was called 'the land of famine'. From the late nineteenth century, massive famines hit China like relentless waves, taking millions of lives. The 1876–79 drought-related famine in north China may have cost 9–13 million lives. Floods in the 1890s cost additional thousands. Each decade of the twentieth century brought major catastrophes. Nature seemed cruel and unforgiving, as droughts and floods

alternated to create what seemed by the 1920s to be a chronic condition of famine in one part of China or another.

The American public was well aware of 'the starving Chinese'. Pictures of ragged and wide-eyed Chinese children filled the American newspapers. Unlike today, however, the real medium of fund-raising was neither journalists nor rock stars, but missionaries. In an era when thousands of young Americans went out to Asia to serve Christ, churches were the backbone of the relief effort. Collections were taken, sermons preached, relief stamps sold. The China Famine Fund of 1921 churned out slogan after slogan to nag the American conscience. 'Famine relief is a sermon without words', the posters said, 'Pick a Pal in China', 'Give China a chance to live!' '15 million starving – Every minute counts'. Articles explained, 'How your dollar reaches a starving Chinese'. 'Self-Denial Week' was proclaimed. No contribution was too small. One could buy 'Life-saving Stamps'. 'Each mercy stamp purchased for 3 cents provides food for one day for a Chinese' (Presbyterian Historical Society, 82/20/11).

In many respects the problems faced by Africa today resemble those experienced by China in the first half of this century. First, recurrent African famines take place in a physical environment whose natural instability and vulnerability have been exacerbated by human behavior. In the Sahel, the effect of drought has been greatly magnified by the spread of the desert southward, which, in turn has probably been caused by overgrazing of livestock, deforestation, and other land-use practices. In north China, similarly, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, the natural tendency of the Yellow River to overflow its banks had been greatly increased by neglect of dike repairs, and also by silting generated by continual deforestation of the upland areas.

Second, famine in Africa occurs in the context of a population explosion, which is sometimes mistakenly taken to be the cause of the famine itself. Despite poverty and hunger – some would say because of them – Africa's population is growing faster than that of any other region of the world. Unlike Africa, China by the early twentieth century had already experienced centuries of high population density, but the rate of population growth seemed to many contemporary observers to have accelerated and to be creating Malthusian pressures on the land.

Third, the very low standard of living of large sectors of the population in Africa was also found in China in the 1920s and 1930s, and was frequently observed by foreigners. Chinese peasant life was characterized by malnutrition and poverty, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy.

Fourth, low productivity in agriculture is held largely responsible for

Africa's increasing inability to feed itself, but the reasons for this low productivity are disputed. Similarly, both Chinese and foreigners in the 1920s and 1930s agreed that Chinese agriculture could be more productive, but disagreed about the causes of agricultural stagnation.

Fifth, wide income inequalities in Africa are intensified by a growing urban-rural disparity in living standards and opportunities. In China before 1949, an ever-widening urban-rural gap seemed even more stark because most of the major cities were treaty ports where foreign privileges and the foreign presence were prominent.

Finally, Africa's serious economic problems are unfolding in a political context that is, in most African countries, quite unstable. In Ethiopia, of course, full-scale secessionist wars have greatly contributed to the severity of the famine. Likewise, China between 1911 and 1949 was in a state of political disorder, in which the major actors were militarists whose primary concern was their own survival.

Such apparent similarities – although on further examination they may be more apparent than real – strongly suggest that Africans may well wish to consider what lessons the Chinese experience with famine may contain for them. China has, after all, managed to avoid any major famine in the last 20 or more years. Although still a very poor country, China is proud of its self-sufficiency in food. With the recent economic reforms, there is every hope that the material life of the Chinese people will continue to improve. So far has China come from being 'the land of famine' that last spring the Chinese Red Cross received donations from thousands of ordinary Chinese people, including school children, to aid famine victims in Africa (*China Daily*, 23 May 1985).

International relief in China

International involvement in famine relief for China began in the 1870s, when a young Welsh Baptist missionary named Timothy Richard began to work in Shantung and Shansi provinces in north China, where successive years of drought had produced a devastating famine. Richard and his colleagues saw that 'the famine itself has given us unprecedented opportunities for the preaching of the Gospel'. Although Governor Tseng Kuo-ch'uan of Shansi had at first been reluctant to accept aid from Western missionaries, fearing that foreigners would only stir up trouble among the people, through persistence and sincerity, Richard finally received permission to dispense famine relief in some villages. He and his colleagues conducted house-to-house surveys to make sure that relief, in the form of

a cash dole, was given to those who were truly needy. At the same time, he never lost an opportunity to pass out religious tracts. Despite 2 years of hard work, Richard later had to admit that his efforts had ultimately accomplished little either to win converts or to alleviate famine. As he gained more experience in China, Richard began to realize that famine relief was not enough. He became convinced that only economic development would allow China to prevent the recurrence of famines. To this end he later advocated the building of railroads, the development of mining and other industries, and other reforms that would make China stronger. Richard turned from direct proselytizing to trying to educate the Chinese elite to the importance of both political and economic reforms. In the 1890s he played a key role in shaping the ideas of Chinese reform leaders through his publication, the *Wan-kuo kung-pao* (*The Globe Magazine*), a magazine that offered translations of key works of Western philosophy and science.¹

Most other foreign missionaries in the late nineteenth century, however, saw famine relief as a definite opportunity to spread the Gospel. The Rev. Arthur H. Smith, an American Congregationalist, reported in 1890 that the work of his mission in Shantung province had been greatly helped by 'the judicious use of famine relief in the past winters' (ABCFM, 21/112, 8 December 1890). His colleague C. A. Stanley said that he had spent much time in the distribution of famine relief during the flood of that summer, which had caused great suffering, but 'it is hoped that we may be able to follow up this opening with evangelistic effort later on' (ABCFM, 14/44, 30 April 1891). Smith appealed to his superiors at the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in New York for more relief funds, observing shrewdly that 'there are many in the U.S. as in China, who will give to philanthropic objects, who will not give to missionary objects' (ABCFM, 21/111, 25 August 1890). Missionaries thus saw the distinct material benefits, as well as spiritual ones, in the giving of famine relief.

Missionary involvement in famine relief produced, however, much misunderstanding. Just as Chinese had sometimes thought Catholic missionaries were stealing babies (when, in fact, they were rescuing abandoned infants to place in an orphanage) so, too, famine relief provoked unfortunate incidents. At one Shantung mission in 1893, for example, on one Sunday groups of Chinese men from villages as far as 15 or 20 miles away came to attend church services. Their travel expenses had apparently been subsidized by people in their villages, who thought they would be able to obtain famine relief. When no such relief was given, there was great consternation. It emerged that when a young Chinese minister had recently

taken the names of people in these villages professing an interest in Christianity, those enrolled mistakenly thought they were being registered for famine relief (ABC FM, 14/135, April 1894). Chinese converts whose motives were material rather than spiritual were referred to as 'Rice Christians'. Whatever their motives, all Chinese Christians, and the foreign missionaries who guided them, became the targets of waves of anti-foreign hostility that culminated in the Boxer Rebellion at the end of the century.

After 1900, as famines continued to strike in one part of China or another, the foreign relief effort grew from fragmented local efforts into more coordinated and organized campaigns. During the north China famine of 1920–21, caused by a drought that threatened to be as devastating as the 1876–79 crisis, foreign and Chinese relief organizations amalgamated to form the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee, with primary responsibility for west Chihli province, while corresponding organizations, such as the North China International Relief Society of Tientsin, the American Red Cross, the Honan Famine Relief Committee of Kaifeng, etc., had jurisdiction over other regions.

The 1920–21 north China famine provoked a tremendous outpouring of generosity in the United States. At the request of President Woodrow Wilson, the banker Thomas W. Lamont agreed to chair the China Famine Relief Fund. Through a vigorous nationwide fund-raising campaign, the Fund collected over 4 million dollars, which were transferred to the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee for its use (Nathan, 1965, 6). John Earl Baker, one American prominent in this relief effort, wrote in his memoirs that in China also there was a 'contagion of philanthropy' in both the Chinese and Western communities in Peking and Tientsin. Among the Westerners, the more people gave to relief, the more others joined in. 'It became the socially correct thing to donate bridge winnings to some relief fund, and one became sure of a moment in the spotlight by letting it be known that shortly one was "going down to the famine area"' (Baker, 1943, 71, 81–2).

Individual generosity was not limited to bridge winnings. Baker once received a donation of 40 cases of chewing gum, with instructions that their contents be distributed to the 'starving Chinese'. Baker was caught on the horns of a dilemma. He was on the one hand alarmed by the prospect of what hungry Chinese, totally unfamiliar with chewing gum, might do with it – and what it might do to them. On the other hand, he could not afford to offend the American donor of the 40 cases. Nor could he risk scandal by giving it away to the American volunteers in the field. Baker finally hit upon an inspired plan: he instructed the American volunteers – a rag-tag

group of marines, engineers, infantrymen, etc. – to use every opportunity to “demonstrate” the use of chewing gum to the famine victims, thus assuring that Americans would speedily consume the 40 cases without offence to the well-meaning donor (Baker, 1943, 72–3).

Chewing gum aside, the 1920–21 relief effort was considered by the Western volunteers to have been a great success. All told, the estimated mortality in this famine was half a million, a relatively low toll compared to the estimated 9–13 million who died in the 1876–79 famine. Rail lines that could speed grain shipments to some of the famine areas were a critical new factor. Techniques of survey, inspection, food distribution, etc., that had been developed by missionaries in previous famines were employed to good effect in this famine. John Baker masterminded a large-scale work-relief program in western Shantung that built many miles of roads and was considered a model for future operations.

So successful was the fund-raising side of this campaign that it still had not peaked when the famine was declared over. The China Famine Relief Fund was embarrassed to find itself with 2 million dollars of unexpended funds. A substantial portion of this money was turned over to Nanking and Yenching Universities for agricultural research to support famine prevention. Another portion was used to underwrite the establishment in September 1921 of the China International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC) by the Peking United group and other relief organizations as a permanent relief organization (Baker, 1943, 81, 157–66). The CIFRC functioned for almost two decades as the key private voluntary organization for relief operations. Its directors and constituents were both Chinese and foreigners, and it had branches and projects in most of the provinces.

The CIFRC saw itself not as an emergency relief organization but an organization dedicated to seeking a ‘permanent improvement’ of conditions in China. It sought to define famine broadly, as a condition ‘where drought or flood has reduced any considerable portion of the respectable countryside to a diet of unwholesome substitutes’. Relief should be given in such conditions, even if there was no increase in the death rate. In addition, the CIFRC stressed that the principle of labor relief, rather than free relief, should be applied whenever possible. The public works that resulted from such labor should benefit the local community, but the community should in due time repay the CIFRC for the cost of the project. Finally, the CIFRC stressed that emergency relief was not sufficient but instead efforts should be directed toward the prevention of famines, particularly through river control projects (Nathan, 1965, 13–16).

Thus the ultimate objective of the CIFRC was to foster individual and

community self-reliance. People should be required to work for their relief so that they would not become dependent on a dole and thus become permanently 'pauperized'. Borrowing the concept of 'pauperization' from the English Poor Laws of the nineteenth century, the CIFRC principles subscribed to a fundamental assumption about human nature that also prevails in American welfare legislation – that people will cheat and be lazy if given the opportunity, and that work and morality are linked.

In promoting community self-reliance, the CIFRC devoted its greatest efforts to public works projects, particularly the building of roads, bridges and dikes. John Baker had set a high standard of productivity in 1921, when he supervised the construction of 128 km of mountain road in Shansi province in 164 days by 20 000 laborers. This two-lane, paved road crossed five mountain ranges, ranging between 750 and 1500 m in height, and crossed twelve rivers (Baker, 1943, 99). By 1936 the CIFRC had built a total of 3200 km of new roads in fourteen provinces, repaired 2000 km of old road, sunk 5000 tube wells, dug 3 large irrigation canals, and built 1600 km of river embankment (China International Famine Relief Commission, 1936, 9–12).

In addition to the bricks-and-mortar approach to famine prevention, the CIFRC also promoted social reform. The establishment of rural cooperatives of various types – primarily credit cooperatives – became a major thrust of its activities in the 1930s, and by 1936, some 20 000 cooperatives had been sponsored. Between 1922 and 1936, the CIFRC disbursed a total of about 50 million Chinese dollars, of which more than half went to such rural reconstruction projects, and about 22 million was spent on free relief. More than half of the CIFRC funds came from the Chinese government or individual Chinese donors (China International Famine Relief Commission, 1936, 9–12).

Although famine relief work had become fully secularized, the overwhelming majority of Americans involved in it were missionaries, and there were close ties between church groups and famine relief organizations. Ninety-five out of 125 foreigners on CIFRC committees were missionaries (Edwards, 1932, 695). While there were still some hard-core evangelical types who criticized missionary participation in famine relief work on the grounds that it drew attention away from spreading the Gospel, most missionaries saw relief as charitable work, a 'ministry of loving deeds', that must be performed, even if no evangelical results were accomplished (Blom, 1932, 696–9). More critically, missionaries saw that fundamental structural reform of the Chinese economy and society would facilitate the long-term prospects for Christianity in China. To this end, they engaged in a wide

range of secular activities in addition to famine relief, such as the building of hospitals, schools and universities. Finally, most missionaries tacitly understood that famine relief campaigns were extremely useful in attracting the American public's support for church work in China (Baker, 1943, 189). Their critics, in turn, accused them of creating 'missionary famines' simply to raise more funds for missionary work (Baker, 1943, 80).

Whether their motives were religious or secular, Americans approached the reform of China with characteristic energy and enthusiasm. Despite the grim conditions in China, Americans were invariably full of optimism. O. J. Todd, the Chief Engineer for the CIFRC from 1923 to 1935, perhaps best exemplified this 'can-do' attitude. Known as the 'River Tamer', he supervised numerous flood-control and road-building projects. He regarded the Chinese as hardworking and easy to teach; traditional Chinese methods, he felt, needed only the extra benefit that could be provided by Western technology and good leadership. So spectacular were his accomplishments, and so large his ego, that in the foreign community he was known as 'Todd Al'mighty'.²

Through the reports of missionaries or the writings of influential authors such as Pearl Buck, Americans at home developed a special sympathy for China. The Chinese peasant, as depicted by Pearl Buck in *The Good Earth*, was a simple creature, but essentially virtuous and hardworking – a worthy object of American patronage and charity. By perceiving Chinese as honest and hardworking, and seeing the potential in Chinese villages for self-sufficiency and even democracy, Americans were essentially re-creating China in their own image. Many Americans developed a deep and sentimental attachment to China, one that was difficult to sever or alter after 1949.

The international famine-relief effort in China flourished in the 1910s and 1920s, when civil disorder was most rampant. After 1928, the new Nanking government under Chiang Kai-shek sought to impose its political control over such foreign activities. The CIFRC, and other such Sino-foreign organizations, continued to function, but with the clear understanding that foreigners participated under Chinese supervision. Some Americans were uneasy about the close association between their charitable efforts and the new government. In 1929 the American Red Cross sent a major commission to China, which produced a report attacking the CIFRC for transcending its original objectives and becoming a permanent, all-purpose philanthropic organization. Famine relief, the Red Cross asserted, should be given only in disasters where the cause was unmistakably 'natural', i.e. a flood or

drought, and not in cases where the cause was demonstrably 'political'. If China could count on foreign assistance under any circumstances, then a dangerous situation of dependency would develop, the Red Cross argued. 'Sympathizing deeply as we do with the efforts of patriotic Chinese to bring about these happy conditions, we nevertheless believe that China should be permitted to work out her own salvation and that to extend relief in the absence of conditions plainly due to an act of God – natural causes – but retards her ultimate recovery' (Nathan, 1965, 16–22; American Red Cross, 1929, 30).

The Red Cross also criticized the CIFRC's concentration on labor relief and public works. In real crises, it argued, labor relief did not help those in greatest need; only grain should be used in such situations. Moreover, labor relief tended to benefit the wrong people and the wrong localities. Rich landowners tended to reap an unintended benefit from irrigation projects funded by foreigners. The locality where the project was built was not necessarily the same as the area needing relief the most. In any case, the report asserted, the Chinese government should assume full responsibility for the type of public works sponsored by the CIFRC, and it should not rely on foreign assistance.

The CIFRC's public response to this report was: first, that it was a Sino-foreign organization representing Chinese interests as well as foreign. Second, the criterion for the giving of relief should always be need, and not politics. Third, the basic causes of recent disasters were fundamentally 'natural'; politics had merely exacerbated the situation. Privately, however, the CIFRC staff regarded the Red Cross report as an attack on the Nationalist government.

Infuriated by the report, William Johnson, an American missionary active with the CIFRC in Kiangsi province, drafted a sharp rebuttal entitled 'Politics and the Red Cross', in which he openly denounced the report as a politically motivated attack on the Kuomintang government.³ Johnson wrote that 'the American Red Cross has lost its soul' (Johnson papers, 18 January 1930, 27/11). Although he tried to get his article published in the United States, more moderate members of the relief community suppressed the report for fear that a public airing of these issues would interfere with fund-raising (Johnson papers, 7 March 1930, 14/235). Indeed in the previous year, 1929, there had been considerable reluctance to launch a major fund-raising campaign for famine in northwest China because the American public's interest was at a low ebb. Some were opposed to giving relief when 'brigandage' was so rife in the famine area. No matter which side of the

political fence they were on, the foreign relief organizations all realized that the American public would more readily give money for disaster relief than for long-term development projects.

The 1931 flood of the Yangtze River provided the Nationalist government with an opportunity to assert its control over disaster relief. Probably one of the largest floods in world history, the Yangtze disaster affected all of central China and parts of the north and east, covering a territory of 87 000 km² and resulting in damage of billions of dollars of property. The National Flood Relief Commission that was set up employed many foreigners. Indeed, its director-general was Sir John Hope Simpson, who had long experience with relief administration in India and Greece. John Earl Baker, Dwight W. Edwards and several other Americans active in the CIFRC were also recruited to service, but these foreigners were considered to be advisors to the Chinese government, and the Chairman of the Commission was none other than T. V. Soong, Minister of Finance and brother-in-law of Chiang Kai-shek.

The relief effort was greatly aided by the purchase of 450 000 tons of wheat and flour from the United States, purchased on long-term credit from the Federal Farm Board. Although the costs of shipment and other relief work were substantial, the Commission received only about 1.25 million dollars from foreign donations, and raised the rest – a sum of 20 million dollars – through private Chinese contributions and a 10% customs surcharge (China, National Flood Relief Commission, 1932, 7–13; Stroebe, 1932, 676).

This relief effort was remarkably successful on the whole. No serious food shortage resulted, and the price of grain was kept low. Repairs to 7000 km of dikes were completed by 30 June 1932. The Nationalist government, and its foreign supporters, regarded these accomplishments as another sign of its political legitimacy (Stroebe, 1932, 678; Baker, 1943, 371). Like the Imperial rulers of the past, the Nationalists celebrated their success in river control through the publication of a commemorative volume (China, National Flood Relief Commission, 1932).

This success was, however, short-lived. After 1932, Japanese invasion, Communist insurgency, and then civil war, totally preoccupied the Nationalist government. Warfare and occupation made conditions even more desperate for millions of Chinese. In their classic of wartime reporting, *Thunder Out of China*, Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby (1946) described graphically how millions starved in Honan province in 1943 while tons of grain in neighboring provinces were blocked by opposing warlord factions.

International relief in Africa

Most of the problems and controversies experienced by Americans in China in the 1920s have also been encountered in Africa in the 1980s. Granted, there are two fundamental differences. One is that Americans do not play the dominant role among foreigners in Africa nor do they have the sentimental attachment to Africa that they had toward China. For better or worse, Africa is little on the American consciousness. The second is that religious motives and church groups do not figure so strongly in development work in Africa. Catholic Relief Services and World Vision are among the largest of the American private voluntary organizations working in Africa, but they operate in a context that is largely secular.

The most overwhelming problem for foreign governments and agencies who wish to give aid in Africa is that of *political recognition* and *political authority*. In Ethiopia, a hotly contested and protracted internal war has rendered the giving of relief not only difficult, but also dangerous. Some agencies such as Lutheran World Relief and Oxfam America, holding to the principle that need should be the principal criterion for the receipt of aid, have sent relief both to the areas controlled by Ethiopian government and to territory controlled by the Eritrean and Tigray Liberation movements. They have transported food into Eritrea and Tigray at night through neighboring Sudan. Such maneuvers have repercussions both in the United States and in Ethiopia. Oxfam America, for example, was under intense pressure from some of its former employees, who have formed an alternative group, Grassroots, to support the Liberation movements alone and not the Ethiopian government. Catholic Relief and World Vision, for their part, are being privately criticized by other agencies for working too closely with the Ethiopian military.

The war in Ethiopia takes place in the larger context of the superpower struggle for influence in Africa. Although the socialist Mengistu government had appealed for international aid as early as 1983, when it foresaw the impending crisis, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) did not send significant quantities of food directly until forced by the public pressure after the BBC-NBC news broadcast in the fall of 1984. Allocations by USAID have always been closely tied to political considerations. Over the last few years, the largest recipients of aid in sub-Saharan Africa have been the Sudan, Liberia, Somalia and Kenya – each critical to the United States' strategic interests in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean (Lancaster, 1985, 183). Food aid must also be seen in relationship to the very substantial amounts of military assistance being

given to Africa. The Soviet Union, for example, provided over three billion dollars of military equipment to Ethiopia between 1977 and 1984, while providing only a small amount of food aid in the 1984 crisis – the equivalent of about 3% of the amount given by the United States (Schwab, 1985, 223; Shepherd, 1985b, 7).

Some Americans familiar with Ethiopia regard its government as primarily a military junta, whose socialism should not be taken too seriously. It is a 'nasty, brutal government', and 'the basis of all its policies is coercion', says one Ethiopian specialist. On the other hand, the same specialist as well as some relief workers have given high marks to the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, the agency that coordinates the relief effort, saying that its officials are highly experienced professionals. High marks are also given to its counterparts, the Eritrean Relief Association and the Relief Society of Tigray. Other relief workers have been much more critical of the Ethiopian government but dare not speak their minds. One French relief organization, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), that has openly criticized the government's resettlement policy has now been expelled from the country (*The New York Times*, 4 December 1985). Only in comparison to the Haile Selassie government, which suppressed news of the 1974 famine, can the current Ethiopian government be said to have reacted promptly and responsibly to the current famine.

The *organizational difficulties* that the CIFRC experienced in China have been substantially manifested in the current African crisis, and indeed may be considered an unavoidable part of the international relief business. Like the missionaries in China, the private voluntary organizations (PVOs) in Africa realize that the American public would rather give money for emergencies than for long-term economic development. Donations that are necessarily spent on administrative costs or held over to the following year for development spending, rather than spent on food directly fed to starving children, are a potential source of embarrassment to PVOs. Bob Geldof, who generated millions of dollars through the 'Live Aid' concert, now has to go on television to explain why his committee cannot spend the money as fast as it has been coming in. Catholic Relief Services, the largest American PVO in Ethiopia, had by June 1985 spent only US\$9 million out of the US\$52 million it had received (*Newsweek*, 26 August 1985, p. 68).

Sensitive to public criticism, PVOs have a tendency to suppress unfavorable news for fear that the public will stop contributing. News of food that gets diverted to the military, or trucks that cannot be driven for lack of spare parts, are the current-day counterparts to the chewing gum cases that might not reach famine victims.

Rivalry among PVOs can also be intense. In Ethiopia, foreign and Ethiopian PVOs are organized under an umbrella organization similar to the CIFRC in China: the Christian Relief and Development Association. To date, any unflattering stories about competition have not been publicized, and are likely to remain suppressed until the end of the crisis. Relief workers seem to think, however, that the unseemly competition that existed among PVOs in Cambodia – as described in William Shawcross's indictment, *The Quality of Mercy* (1984) – has been avoided in Ethiopia. Even those who think Shawcross's account extremely biased admit that the atmosphere along the Thai border, where some PVOs chose to work, was 'poisonous', and that there was 'too much money for the problem'. In Ethiopia, by contrast, PVO and government efforts have been generally well-coordinated.

Finally, the *criticisms of food aid* voiced by the American Red Cross in China in 1929 seem to have anticipated the much larger controversy in the 1980s about the value of food aid. The giving of food aid, except during crises, is criticized because it is said to create dependency by the host government on cheap foreign solutions, and to create disincentives in the agricultural sector by lowering the producer prices for food. In addition, food-for-work, an important aspect of many international food programs, has been criticized by Tony Jackson in *Against the Grain* (1982), among others, for the same reasons the American Red Cross gave in 1929: it benefits the wrong people and the wrong localities.

Interestingly, modern concepts of *economic development* and *development aid* also seem to have been anticipated by Western ideas in China earlier this century. In Africa, the focus of development efforts has shifted from large-scale engineering or industrial projects that were initiated in the 1960s to small-scale, local projects. The current wisdom among development experts is that such projects are likely to produce local initiative and self-sufficiency, which in turn will generate greater economic development. Whether the projects have been large or small, however, the fact remains that after 20 years and billions of dollars of foreign assistance, the African economy is in more trouble now than ever before. During the 1970s, sub-Saharan Africa received US\$22.5 billion in development aid from the West, but per capita food production declined by an average of 1.2% per year. According to Jack Shepherd, production of major food crops falls by about 2% per year, while the volume of food imports has increased 9.5% per year. By 1981, sub-Saharan Africa received 3.7 million tons of food aid each year, but this year it will have received 9.6 million tons of food (Shepherd, 1985a, 43).

The causes of Africa's persistent underdevelopment, the subject of several

other papers in this volume, are a matter of great controversy. Some experts tend to stress the unfavorable international context in which African countries have had to operate their economies, pointing to such factors as the declining world market for Africa's cash crops, unfavorable terms of trade, and high oil prices. Others tend to fault the behavior and policies of African governments, especially with respect to agricultural pricing and currency overvaluation that tend to favor the urban consumers at the cost of the rural producers. What all these analyses share is the assumption that in the foreseeable future Africa will continue to need substantial amounts of international assistance. Even those who have been critical of past uses of foreign aid continue to advocate its maintenance at the levels of the past (Shepherd, 1985*a*, 46).

'Lessons' of the Chinese experience

While it would be foolish for an outsider to pass judgment on the relative merits of these African issues, the Chinese conquest of famine over the past decades does, I believe, contain some lessons for Africa today. The appropriate lessons, I shall argue, are not the obvious ones.

There are several key aspects of the Chinese developmental experience in the period since 1949 that should be considered. First, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), virtually all forms of Western assistance and trade that had been so prominent during the earlier Republican period were curtailed and, after about 1959, all forms of technical and financial assistance from the Soviet Union were also terminated, leaving China to pursue an independent path, free of foreign interference. Second, through rapid steps, the organization of agriculture became collectivized into large-scale communes. In this it was the mobilization of labor rather than new technology that was emphasized. Third, the distribution of grain was strictly controlled by the state through a system of rationing in the urban areas and a minimum guarantee in the countryside. Fourth, both food production and food distribution were managed by a highly centralized and powerful state apparatus that placed high priority on eliminating famine.

While it is the first three aspects that comprise the distinctive characteristics of the 'Maoist' model of development, in my view it is the fourth characteristic – state policy – that may have been the most critical to the Chinese experience and that may be the most relevant to the African crisis. Almost complete economic self-sufficiency, as the ultimate expression of Chinese nationalism, may have been indispensable in establishing the

legitimacy of the new national government, but it can hardly be said to have contributed directly to the elimination of hunger and famine. Collectivization may also have had greater political benefits than economic. Although grain output in China increased 75% from 1952 to 1977, agricultural growth barely kept pace with population growth (Tang & Stone, 1980, 13), and per capita grain output in 1980 was probably no greater than in the 1930s (Li, 1982, 701). Although it is too soon to evaluate the commune system definitively, the spectacular increases in output since the beginning of de-collectivization in 1978, strongly suggest that the communes may have inhibited growth by stifling individual initiative and motivation.

The system of food rationing, backed by a state reserve system, was probably the most important factor in the elimination of famine in China. Although the average per capita caloric availability of food in 1980 was probably no better than that in the 1930s, the critical difference between the two periods was that strict controls under the PRC assured the most equitable distribution of extremely meager resources. In a very real sense, then, the Maoist model gave higher priority to the *social* goal of equitable distribution than to the purely *economic* goal of growth. This degree of control over the distribution of food resources has probably never been achieved by any other government in world history, and it could not have been achieved in China without a highly powerful state system. Our growing understanding of China's state-granary and grain-price reporting system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moreover, permits us to understand that the food-distribution policies under the PRC represent an intensification of state policies from previous eras of Chinese history rather than a completely new direction (Li, 1982, 702).

The Maoist model has, of course, had a broad appeal to radical movements all over the world. Policies of isolation, at least from Western trade and aid, have been adopted in Cuba, Burma and other socialist countries, while land reform at least, if not collectivization, has been on the agenda in countries as distant and different as Ethiopia and Nicaragua. It is becoming painfully clear, however – at least to some observers – that such policies have often failed to raise the level of productivity. Even more painful should be the recognition that the Maoist model has now been repudiated by China, the very country that created it.

By contrast, the policy of strict rationing, which did work remarkably well in China to spread meager resources, is unlikely to be attempted on such an ambitious scale by any other country because it would be politically unpopular and, therefore, impossible to implement. The critical factor is not the type of ideology, political system or social policy, but a state policy

that places the very highest priority on eliminating hunger and famine. It is state policy, together with the political capability to enforce it, that I believe are the transferable lessons of the Chinese experience.

Such a view is likely to meet serious objections. In Africa, many enlightened people regard the state and bureaucracy as the cause of the problem, not its solution. They see the clumsy manipulations of agricultural marketing boards and the corruption of their politicians as the very source of food distribution problems and, consequently, advocate a free market to eliminate the bottlenecks and disincentives that have occurred. To this, one can only respond that political control seems unavoidable in a situation crying for rapid solution. The relevant choice is between good government and bad, not between having political controls and not having them.

Second, there are those on the Chinese side who will surely object that in China, too, overcentralization of state power has had disastrous, indeed tragic, consequences. The Chinese government has now acknowledged that during the 'three lean years' of the Great Leap Forward, 1959-61, a massive famine did occur in China. Some American demographers now calculate that as many as 30 million may have died of hunger and malnutrition during those years - making the Great Leap Forward the largest famine ever recorded in world history (Ashton *et al.*, 1984). Although bad weather certainly was a factor, this famine was primarily the result of overwhelming pressure put on communes to say they had fulfilled the unreasonable quotas of the Great Leap, when in fact they had not. It was, in short, truly a man-made famine (Bernstein, 1984).

State power can be a terrible force for evil, but whether it must necessarily be so, and whether the Great Leap famine was an inevitable consequence of overcentralization, or an aberration, is not yet clear. Here again, it seems that the choice must be between enlightened state policy and unenlightened policy, and not between policy or no policy.

Finally, some may object that the highly politicized model of famine prevention and control developed in China may be totally inappropriate for Africa and other areas of the world. China, after all, has had a unified state and culture for thousands of years, and bureaucratic centralization has not been difficult to achieve there. But African states lack the tradition of national unity and the political culture of bureaucratic rule.

Certainly, Africa has a great disadvantage in this respect, but it is not the Maoist model, or even a Chinese model, that I am advocating, but simply state policy that will place the highest priority on eliminating hunger and famine. Such policy must necessarily be appropriate for its culture. India may serve as an example of another populous and poor country that

has eliminated famine through appropriate state policy, but a policy distinctly different from the Chinese model.

In the 1960s and earlier, it was India, not Africa, that was considered the most dangerously food-deficit area of the world, the 'basket case' of its time, and among the largest recipients of grain from the United States under Public Law 480. Today, India is self-sufficient in food and even an exporter of rice. Although this happy turn of events has often been attributed to the recent successes of the Green Revolution, India has, in fact, succeeded in avoiding famine for a far longer period of time, virtually since its independence. The Bengal Famine of 1943 constituted such a psychological trauma, as well as a human tragedy, for the Indian people that, in the view of many observers, no Indian government since then could afford to permit famine to recur. To this end, India possesses a Public Distribution System for food, a key element of which is a system of fair price shops in urban areas (Chopra, 1981, chapters 1 & 27). In addition, as Michelle McAlpin's chapter (this volume) illustrates, India has effective famine-warning and famine-relief systems. Despite devastating drought and severe crop shortages in Bihar in 1966-67, and again in Maharashtra in 1970-73, for example, no actual famine took place, if famine is measured by excess mortality.

Despite this commendable record in famine prevention, India is still tormented by widespread hunger, malnutrition and poverty. According to one estimate, perhaps one-third or more of India's population is malnourished (receiving fewer than 2100 calories a day; Sanderson & Roy, 1979, 107). As Amartya Sen has pointed out, there is a profound irony in the fact that India's life expectancy is much lower than China's (Sen, 1984, 501).⁴ Measured by all standards of human welfare, life in China for the very poor is far more secure than life for India's poor. Yet, it is India that has completely avoided famines over at least the last 30 years, while China produced the Great Leap famine. In India, Sen asserts, a famine such as the Great Leap's could not have occurred because the more open political system would not have allowed it. Yet, from the African perspective today, what is most important is what the Indian and Chinese experiences share: a high priority assigned to the prevention of famine, and a state apparatus able to implement food control.

Africa's path?

My emphasis on policy and politics has several implications for issues raised by others in this volume. First, it suggests that the emphasis given to

economic development may be misplaced. Current economic development projects that stress local initiative and self-sufficiency assume a bottom-up-type of development process, whereby economic development will be achieved gradually and political development will follow. The expectation that political democracy will necessarily emerge from economic development is based on Western liberal assumptions that may well prove to be disappointing. My stronger objection is that this model is too slow to address the immediate threat to millions of Africans of hunger, disease and starvation. To meet the African food crisis, strong and enlightened political leadership must take precedence over gradual economic planning.

Second, economic development models often bypass the very poor and ignore their immediate problems, a point stressed by Randall Baker (this volume). Like him, I believe that the urgent questions posed by hunger and famine must be addressed as issues separate from, and prior to, long-term economic development projects. Both the examples of China and India show – albeit in strikingly different ways – that even very poor countries can do what Baker has suggested: move national food security, especially for the very poorest, up to the highest priority and solve successfully that problem even before agricultural production ‘takes off’. While the economic development of poor countries will eventually solve the problem of widespread hunger and malnutrition, the elimination of famine need not wait for that higher stage of development.

Third, the priority assigned to policy and political development places the question of international assistance, the original focus of this chapter, in its proper context. Foreign aid need not be summarily rejected by African nations as a precondition to their true political independence, but it can be used effectively if closely controlled by a responsible host government. China’s use of foreign assistance after 1928, and its selective use of World Bank and other international financing at present, are two examples of use of foreign aid conditional on domestic Chinese political control.

In conclusion, an international perspective, and particularly a Chinese one, suggests that there is both good news for Africa and bad news. The good news is that famine in Africa *will* eventually end. In modern times each region of the world has, in turn, broken out of its famine cycle, and Africa will not be an exception. The experiences of China and India in particular should bring hope to Africa. The bad news, however, is that it may be much more difficult for Africa than for China or India, primarily because it lacks a tradition of political unity and bureaucratic experience. In addition, the militarization of politics and the superpower competition for influence in Africa greatly handicap the efforts of governments to

implement a 'food first' policy.⁵ What is important for Africans is that their governments' political fortunes should be linked to their ability to put a stop to famine, not just for the urban middle class, but for the rural poor as well.

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Notes

1. This material is summarized from Bohr, 1972.
2. Conversation with John K. Fairbank, Cambridge, Mass., March 1985.
3. Johnson was a fitting defender of the Nationalists, since he knew Chiang Kai-shek and his wife personally, and was later to work closely with them on rural projects designed to challenge the Communist initiative in Kiangsi (Thomson, 1969, 58–65). Still later, after 1949, he continued to speak for the Nationalist government by playing a major role in the China Lobby.
4. Sen states that life expectancy in India is 52 years, while life expectancy in China is 66–9 years. According to the 1984 *World Population Data Sheet* (Population Reference Bureau, Washington, DC), life expectancy in India was 50 years, and in China 65 years.
5. This term is borrowed from the title *Food First* by Lappé & Collins (1977).

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