

LESSONS FROM CHINA'S GREAT FAMINE

Mao Yushi

While the Great Famine (1959–61) is one of many famines throughout China's history, this does not undermine its significance in China's modern history. Unlike other tragic famines in the past, the Great Famine was caused by avoidable human mistakes—not by inevitable natural disasters.

There has been a great deal of scholarship in the West on the Great Famine, where it is known as the “Great Leap Forward.” Several excellent books, such as Jasper Becker's *Hungry Ghosts* (1997), Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* (2010), and Ralph Thaxton's *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China* (2008), have explored the catastrophe from many angles, including the political decisions made by Beijing and local governments. Yet there had been comparatively little work coming from China. Now, thanks to the work of Chinese reporters, scholars, and especially Yang Jisheng's in-depth work *Tombstone* (2012), we have a more complete picture of this dark time in China's recent past.

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Mao Yushi is Co-Founder and former Chairman of the Unirule Institute of Economics in Beijing, and the 2012 recipient of the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. This article is adapted from comments the author made in response to a speech given by Yang Jisheng at Unirule's Biweekly Academic Seminar on September 27, 2013. The author thanks Ma Junjie for translating his comments, Zhang Lin for assistance in calculating casualties from the Great Famine, and Jude Blanchette and Jim Dorn for editorial assistance.

Personal Reflections

I was in my early 30s when the Great Famine took place. Labeled as a “rightest,” I was persecuted along with thousands of others. At that time, many rightists were removed from their posts and sent to the countryside for re-education. During the Great Famine, many did not survive as they succumbed to hunger and disease. I was reduced to the lowest human form by the end of the Great Famine, constantly stalked by the nightmare that I could never shake: hunger. As a survivor with firsthand experience, I know that scores died during the Great Famine. As an economist and a concerned citizen, I felt an obligation to find out exactly how many people died during this catastrophe.

Calculating the True Number of Deaths

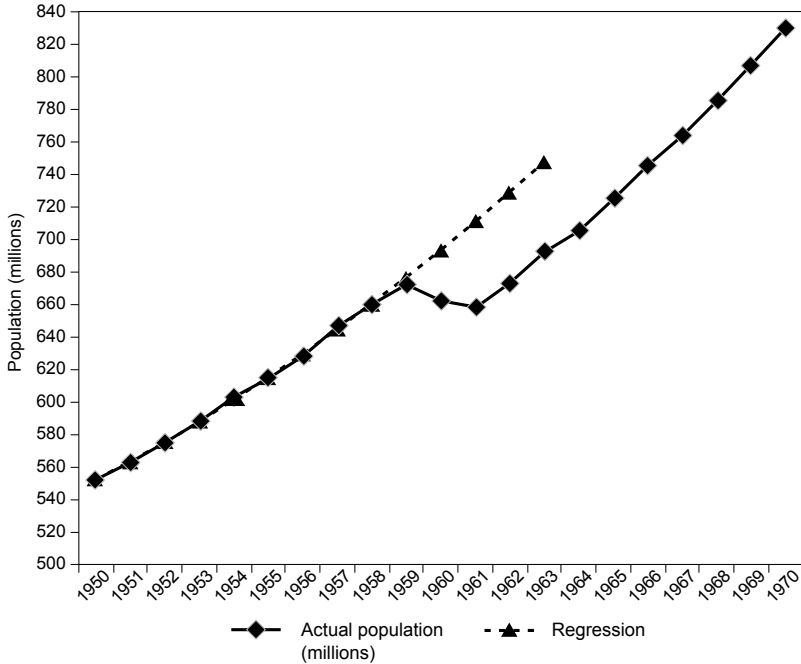
The causes of the Great Famine may be open to questions and debate, but the number of the deceased during this period must not be overshadowed by the necessity to be attuned to political sensitivities. It is the duty of survivors like me to determine the exact number of the deceased during the famine so that they can be remembered and a lesson for the nation can be learned.¹

As shown in Figure 1, the vertical axis represents population and the horizontal axis the period from 1950 to 1970. According to the government’s statistical yearbook, the population of China grew continuously until the end of 1958. However, between 1959 and 1961, the population plummeted. In 1962, the population resumed its growth. The solid black line represents the actual population during this period in millions. According to the trend line of the previous years, using the method of quadratic regression, the population would have been 711.18 million by 1962, as shown by the dashed line after 1959.² Compared with the real population of 658.59 million in 1961, the difference is 52 million individuals. What does 52 million mean in this context? It represents those who would have been born as well as those who would not have experienced abnormal deaths.

¹Editor’s note: Most of the calculations in this article are from Mao Yushi’s “Method for Calculating Deaths in the Great Famine” (2011).

²The fitted value (10 million) = $54.074 + 1.0684N + 0.02933N^2$. Where $N = 1$ when year = 1950.

FIGURE 1
THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT FAMINE ON
CHINA'S POPULATION



Two factors contributed to this loss of 52 million individuals. The first is those females who did not give birth, while the other factor is death by starvation.³ If we subtract the would-be newborns, we will have the number of deceased from hunger, or the victims of the Great Famine. But we also need to ask: How many infants would have been born during this period? Taking into account the average mortality and fertility rates of the period, I concluded that 16 million babies should have been born between 1959 and 1961. The math behind this is relatively simple: 52 million minus 16 million gives us

³Editor's note: Frank Dikötter (2010), in his study of the famine, highlights the role of another factor in the death toll between 1959 and 1962: violence. Cadres would often resort to beatings when the desired results were not achieved by the peasants under their control.

36 million. We now have the number of unnatural deaths: 36 million. During the Great Famine, 16 million babies were not born who otherwise would have been, and 36 million individuals starved to death. The only problem with this calculation is the accuracy of the population statistics from the government. I have doubts about government statistics, which may affect the accuracy of this estimate.

What does 36 million mean? If we take a look at the casualties from WWII, we see that approximately 30 to 40 million died, including casualties in the European and Pacific theaters. This comparison shows the stunning fact that the Great Famine killed as many as the Second World War.

Considering the accuracy of this figure, I am sure it invites disagreement. Four hundred thousand Japanese died in Mainland China after the Lugouqiao Incident (also known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident). This number is accurate as the names of those who perished during the invasion are listed at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. But one must ask: How many Chinese people died? We don't know for sure. Some say 29 million, which means that for each Japanese casualty in the war, 60 to 70 Chinese lost their lives. I find this figure hard to treat as true. According to my estimate, the number of Chinese casualties during the Second World War is less than 10 million.

This is just to show that we should have our own judgment about statistics. Thirty-six million is my own judgment of what happened in the past, and others may doubt the veracity of that figure. Yet there are no sources other than the government statistics bureau for such information, which is also one of the many impediments for our research.

There are 30 provincial capitals in China, and the 36 million deaths from the Great Famine are equal to a Nanjing Massacre in every capital five times over. The numbers are so large they become senseless, but what I see in these statistics are lives just like yours and mine. They deceased long ago, but they leave us an obligation to speak on their behalf and to always speak the truth. We can't allow people to cover the truth by saying they died not because of the Great Famine but due to their malnutrition or health problems. It's ruthless and inhuman to deny these facts.

Li Shengming of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published an article entitled "How Did the Lie of the Death of 30 Million Come into Being?" (2013) in the *China Social Sciences Journal*. I was

stunned and infuriated by his claim that the high number of casualties in the Great Famine was wrong and those who died had nobody but themselves to blame. It's beyond comprehension how people could even make such a claim.

This 36 million accounted for 5.5 percent of the total population of 660 million. There were 700 people in the small village where I stayed during this period, and roughly 80 to 90 died from hunger or related diseases. The casualties accounted for 10 percent of the population of that small village in Shandong. As Yang Jisheng (2012: 394) rightly points out, the death rate varied from province to province, with Anhui, Henan, Sichuan, Gansu, and Shandong being the most seriously affected. It's not how wealthy the province was or how developed agriculture was in a certain province that accounted for the variance in death rates. In certain provinces, relatively few people died even though agriculture was less developed. But many died from hunger in provinces like Henan and Sichuan where agriculture was rather developed.

I concluded before that the nationwide death rate of the Great Famine was 5.5 percent. I have extended that calculation to the average death rate for the three decades of Mao Zedong's rule, which was 1.1 percent. This means 11 people out of 1,000 died of diseases, earthquakes, and other reasons during Mao's rule. The average death rate in the three decades after the reform and opening up was 0.66 percent, a decrease of almost 50 percent. In addition, another 10 million people died for various reasons in political movements. Roughly estimated, about 3 to 4 million people died during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). I've done extensive work to estimate the unnatural deaths during Mao's rule. But still I am not confident in my judgment, which is mostly based on common sense and information from the mass media. During the three decades under Mao's rule, 230 million died. Death due to political reasons amounted to 45 million to 50 million. For every four normal deaths, there was one abnormal death. After the reform and opening up in 1978, up to now, death due to political reasons decreased to about 200 to 300 thousand, which is a huge improvement. I think the most remarkable achievement of the reform is that deaths for political reasons have been greatly reduced, while during Mao's Zedong's rule one could only count on fate to die or survive.

According to the *China Statistical Yearbook* (1984: 397), China exported 4.15 million tons of food during the first year of the Great Famine, an amount that could feed 20 million people for a year with

each person consuming some 200 kg of food annually. This means most of the deaths during the famine could have been avoided if there were no food exports and the food was reasonably distributed. As a matter of fact, food was sufficient in the international market during this period, but Mao Zedong was too complacent and arrogant to decide to export food and instead acted as if “New China” was doing a good job of feeding its people. But what was the reality?

Holding Mao Zedong Responsible

Mao Zedong, along with some other people, should be held responsible for the death of so many people during peacetime. I am not accusing him of killing people intentionally. The Lushan Plenum was supposed to set the right track by correcting the problem of radicalness. But it took a shift as Mao targeted Peng Dehuai, which was purely Mao’s responsibility. As Yang has written (2012: 389), 20 million people would not have perished if the Lushan Plenum were not held. What’s more, the famine was reported to Chairman Mao continuously between 1959 and 1960, but he chose to ignore the disastrous news. Later, Mao sent PRC President Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai to deal with the famine, but to no avail. I doubt if Mao ever felt a sense of guilt, as he later persecuted Liu Shaoqi and other formerly close comrades. I think it is purely deluded and ill-informed to still uphold his flag in China. The Chinese people are a great people and they can’t be blinded by Mao’s mistakes.

Institutional Reasons for the Great Famine and Devastation

Yang (2012: 486) describes the institutional reasons for the great number of deaths during the Great Famine, which were caused by a system characterized by monopolies and food stamps. Starvation did not occur in urban areas on a scale even close to that in the countryside. The reason was simple: the urban population was guaranteed food stamps, which enabled them to obtain 15 kg of food per month. No matter exactly how much food one could obtain, starvation sounded like a far-fetched idea as one still had access to food anyway. People in rural areas, however, were not provided with food stamps. They grew their own crops, and after handing over a considerable proportion of the food they grew to the government, the remainder

was at their own disposal to either consume or sell on the market. If the government decided to collect more from the farmers, they were left with nothing to eat.

To take a step back, what is more reliable, food stamps or currency? If one loses one's food stamps, he cannot expect to gain additional stamps from his fellow citizens, as there are none to give. During the time of the famine, food stamps equaled life. Without food stamps, one did not eat. We should remember this lesson when we hear of new government programs to "help" us. For example, the current program to construct the *Baozhang fang* (保障房), or secure, housing might be treated with more skepticism after reviewing the history of similar projects. Perhaps a more realistic outcome is for the stock of affordable housing to shrink once the government project gets under way.

During the Great Famine, I was 30 years old and working at the Railway Research Institute. Our basketball court had been transformed into a field to grow wheat. The authorities asked the people not to waste our energy in order to save food. Not only was our basketball court turned into a field, but other research institutes experienced similar transformations.

Lester Brown, the American environmentalist and founder of Worldwatch, in his book *Who Will Feed China?* warned that the expanding number of golf courses in China is endangering the food supply (Brown 1995: 60). That claim is way below professional standards and judgments. Yet golf courses can only be developed if there is sufficient land. I can only speak for myself in saying that I have doubts about the professionalism and ethical standards of someone like Lester Brown. It is a shame that he is popular in China.

Conclusion

The Chinese government has been trying one way or another to ban talks and discussion on the Great Famine. This leads to a bigger concern of mine. How can a society be sustained when it is built on lies? Famine sounds like a far-fetched topic of the modern world, but the Great Famine along with the great toll is real. The lessons we learned are not in vain, and they should remain so even if my generation passes away. The current regime of China, be it under the rule of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, or even Deng Xiaoping, should not hold itself accountable for the Great Famine. Deng Xiaoping

may still be involved one way or another, but this regime under President Xi Jinping should not associate itself with the one in the past. Therefore, it does not make any sense to cover the truth and stand by the guilt of Mao's rule as the legitimacy of the current regime is not dependent on Mao's rule but on the success of the reform and opening up.

I hope the Chinese people will not forget the Great Famine, and I believe the lessons learned from it will throw light upon the future.

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