

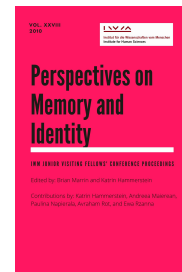
A Forgotten Calamity.Henan during the Great Famine (1958–1961)

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Throughout the three and a half thousand years of its recorded history, the province of Henan has had more than its fair share of natural disasters. The proximity of the notoriously unpredictable Yellow River and the dependence on weather sensitive crops to feed its vast farming population caused famine and plague occur with an almost “natural” regularity. Droughts and floods came and went leaving behind decimated and impoverished peasant communities that over time always managed to rebuild their villages, bring the land back under cultivation and so temporarily restore their fragile fortunes. Slack government or corruption would sometimes aggravate the consequences of natural catastrophes; rarely, however, could man’s actions alone be blamed for their incidence. Against this background, what set apart the calamities that befell Henan in the second half of the 20 th century was not only their unprecedentedly high death toll, but also the fact that human nature alone took the blame for bringing them about.

So, at least, is the conclusion that can be drawn from the story told by Yang Jisheng, a retired Xinhua News Agency reporter whose most recent book *The Tombstone. A History of the Great Famine in China in the 1960s* [1] opens with a section on Henan. This is in many respects an important book. First of all, it provides the most up-to-date, comprehensive and detailed, though due to political constraints, still incomplete account of the Great Famine in China, a little known and thus distressingly under-researched incident of mass starvation that occurred in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, an ambitious attempt at swift modernization undertaken by the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong’s leadership in the late 1950s. The material presented in the book is based on ten years of intensive research, during which Mr. Yang, an agricultural engineer by training, a journalist by profession and nowadays a magazine editor and amateur historian [2], looked up relevant documents in twelve provincial archives, conducted more than one hundred interviews with eye witnesses, survivors and former party functionaries and consulted a substantial number of already existing works on the subject by both Chinese and Western historians, thus accumulating an impressive amount of

information concerning the events of the period. Thanks to his insider status and a dense network of contacts among former and present Xinhua reporters, Mr. Yang was able to draw on sources that in their bulk are still unavailable to international scholars.[3] However, his book's merits derive not only from a privileged access to this huge and largely untapped pool of data stored in Chinese archives and individual memories. Rather, what distinguishes *The Tombstone* as a historical study is the author's ability to put the meticulously recorded facts and figures in a broader context of provincial, national and even international politics, thereby underscoring their intricate connections and constant interplay.

Beginning with the bottom-up approach, Mr. Yang first analyzed the situation in twelve geographically and economically diverse provinces that shared the experience of mass starvation but varied greatly in regard to its direct causes, scale and consequences. Then, moving from the provincial to national level, he compared the conditions in the cities to those prevailing in the countryside. The argument contained in this section goes a long way towards explaining why the Great Famine was primarily a rural phenomenon that deeply affected food producers, but largely spared city-dwellers. Finally, shifting focus from economy to politics, Mr. Yang gave a detailed account of the power struggles within the national leadership in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their main protagonists, political stakes and final outcomes had already been known to Western scholars for quite some time, however, by quoting examples from provincial, county or even village level politics, Mr. Yang demonstrated how these confrontations, their unpredictability and see-saw dynamics notwithstanding, had an instantaneous and dramatic impact on every aspect of life in the People's Republic. Some of these conflicts originated from outside of the country. Although, socially and economically, China was almost completely sealed off in those years, in regards to politics, international factors still played a crucial role in defining the state policies. So, according to Mr. Yang, Khrushchev's Secret Speech at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 and then his meeting with Mao during the latter's visit to Moscow in the autumn of the following year were the catalysts that caused the latent tensions within the Chinese leadership to escalate in a series of dramatic showdowns: the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956, the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the Conference of Lushan in 1959, the Seven Thousand Conference in 1962 and finally the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966. Only if we realize, as Mr. Yang's provincial statistics help us to do, the exponential increase in numbers of the persecutors and the persecuted as these campaigns were reaching deeper and deeper into society, are we able to understand how tremendous were the upheavals brought about by even the slightest changes in the balance of power. While much could be said in this context about the astonishing irresponsibility of political leaders for their actions, Mr. Yang shows much restraint in passing judgments. Instead, his argument is characterized by a consistent effort to depict the individual decisions and actions, that as a consequence cost the lives of 36 million people, in their whole irreducible complexity as defined by political rivalries, institutional constraints and ideological imperatives. Moderation as well as richness and depth of historical texture are the qualities that make *The Tombstone*, despite its gruesome topic, such an interesting book to read and ponder over. This book, like the history of the Great Famine, begins in Henan.

The province of Henan, one of the most populous in China,[4] is a large swath of agricultural land on the southern bank of Yellow River. It constitutes a part of Ping Yuan, the Central Plains, that is regarded as the cradle of Chinese Civilization. The ancient dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou established their capitals there, in Luoyang and Anyang respectively. The rulers of Northern Song also resided in Henan, in the city of Kaifeng. Inhabited by ethnic Han Chinese, this predominantly rural, relatively poor region was traditionally a stronghold of the Communist Party. Unlike the East, which is flat, the western part of the province is mostly mountainous, providing a convenient terrain for guerilla warfare. The intensity of Communist activities during WWII resulted in many particularly harsh retributive campaigns carried out by the Japanese army against the local peasantry. The prefecture of Xin Yang is located in the South of the province. At the end of 1950s it comprised two cities, Xin Yang Shi and Zhu Ma Dian, as well as eighteen rural counties, which altogether covered an area of 28 000 square kilometers and were home to eight and a half million people. During the nine months between October 1959 and June 1960 this rustic part of the country became the scene of the infamous Xin Yang Incident (大跃进). This innocuous name denotes the death by starvation of one million rural residents of the prefecture, approximately one third of all the lives claimed by the famine in the province of Henan.[5] The official history of the Great Famine began here even though Xin Yang was neither the first, nor the only place where mass starvation occurred. Here, however, it was exposed for the first time.

Just a year and a half before, Xin Yang enjoyed a very different kind of notoriety. The first People's Commune was established there, in Chayashan Village, Suiping County on the 20th April 1958, elevating Henan to the position of a nationwide leader in collectivization. The provincial government enthusiastically reported a bumper harvest already in the first year of the communes' existence. This enthusiasm fed on the data provided by the communes themselves. In the summer of 1958, county after county started to compete frantically in "launching sputniks"[6], i.e. reporting record breaking crops per unit of land that officially were to have resulted from the new organization of agricultural production. Even if at first some local cadres displayed a certain restraint in informing their superiors of incredibly high crops, pressure from above and the fierce rivalry between communes quickly made over-reporting a mandatory practice for everyone. Due to excellent weather conditions, the harvest in 1958 was good, therefore the inflated reports did not yet affect food supply in villages. Besides, the grain quotas for that year were calculated on the basis of data from the previous year which meant that they were still reasonably low.[7] The situation changed in 1959. There was not enough rain in the summer, yields were much lower, but grain quotas unprecedentedly high. Already in June the prefecture cadres knew that the drought had diminished crops, however their only reaction was to organize a political campaign run under the blatantly absurd slogan: "*Severe drought, excellent crops*".[8] The provincial officials were also aware of the imminent crisis in Xin Yang and for a while, encouraged by what seemed like wavering in Beijing's stance on collectivization, debated some politically acceptable ways of reducing the burdens imposed on the prefecture. However, when the news of the outcome of the Conference of Lushan reached the province in early August 1959, the Party leaders in Henan realized that in order to conform to the new directives, they would have to not only equal but surpass the plainly unrealistic grain acquisition goals set in the previous year.

Therefore, even though the grain production in Xin Yang decreased by 46.1% in comparison to 1958, the local cadres reported crops ten times higher than those actually collected. In the situation of blatant over-reporting, it meant that in some cases what was due to the state amounted to as much as 45–55% of what was harvested, moreover, the lower rungs of administration, acting on their own initiative, added a 20% surcharge on the quotas assigned by the province. As a result, peasants were left with grain that could last them only four months. As early as October 1959, 3751 communal dining halls providing meals for 370 000 people closed due to lack of provisions.[9] This number increased steadily during the following months.

Confronted with the dramatic food shortages and, from their perspective, the even more ominous inability to fulfill the plan for grain acquisition, the commune cadres launched a vigorous campaign against the alleged hiding of crops.[10] It targeted one third of small production brigades, specifically, those with the lowest ratio of fulfilled quotas to reported crops. Routinely it consisted of search and confiscation, struggle sessions and various forms of mental and physical torture applied to the brigade members. The campaign, however brutal, could not solve the basic problem. After dining halls in some parts of Xin Yang Prefecture remained closed for eighty days, people began to die in great numbers. Not much was done to help them; on the contrary, some village leaders, afraid to make a bad impression on their superiors, forbade the dying to leave houses and banned those who, too weak to walk unaided, propped themselves on sticks from showing up on public roads. The bodies of the deceased were kept indoors or just left to rot on the side of the road. A Xinhua reporter who often visited Xin Yang countryside at that time told Mr. Yang how he traveled in a car with some county officials through the area with emaciated corpses scattered everywhere in sight, and how they all acted as if they had not noticed them. It was only in the Spring of 1960 that the village leaders mobilized survivors to drag the corpses from the fields to large pits. They were buried there anonymously, with often as many as one hundred to a grave.

In terms of the number of victims, Huai Dian People's Commune in Guang Shan County was the one most affected. In the summer of 1959 the members of this commune harvested 5955 tonnes of grain, however the reported figure was 23 050 tonnes. The accumulated grain quotas jointly assigned by the province, prefecture and county committees equaled 6000 tonnes. Huai Dian delivered 5195 tonnes. As a consequence, the commune that in the summer of 1959 numbered 36 691 peasants divided among 8027 households, by June 1960 lost, "due to unnatural causes", 12 134 of its members, in other words, 33 % of its original population. 780 households or every tenth family in Huai Dian People's Commune, were wiped off completely. Additionally, 381 of the commune members were accused of intentionally damaging the corpses of 134 people, a euphemism for cannibalism.[11] Huai Dian might be the unit with the highest number of victims, however other communes in the area were hit almost as hard. For instance, in the nearby Huai Bin People's Commune as many as 20 % of the inhabitants succumbed to hunger. The official report drafted in the spring of 1960 confirmed that between October 1959 and April 1960 436 882 people in Xin Yang Prefecture starved to death. At the same time the report admitted that the actual death toll was probably higher.[12] Many families did not register the death of their relatives with the local authorities because they wanted to

retain their food coupons. An unknown number of deaths occurred before October 1959 and after April 1960. Village leaders were reluctant to provide the investigators with precise figures regarding the starvation cases in their brigades, whereas the investigators themselves tended to distort statistics by artificially increasing the number of deaths “due to natural causes”. In other words, at that time few people were interested in establishing the real number of victims claimed by the famine in Xin Yang.[13]

However incomplete, the official report on Xin Yang Incident from June 1960 contained some information that can be helpful in understanding how the Great Famine unfolded in the provinces. Just a glimpse at the statistics concerning the class background of the victims provides interesting insights as to the power structure in villages. Less than 2% of the fatalities came from the ranks of the Party, 13% were classified as poor or middle peasants, but as many as 31% belonged to one of the five categories of the so-called black elements: landlords, counterrevolutionaries, rich peasants, bad elements and rightists. [14] Clearly, those regarded as enemies of the Party were most affected, however their exact class status is less certain since individual class assignments were often made at the whim of local cadres.

The investigation also exposed the drastic measures taken by local leaders to diminish the seriousness of the crisis, until it became impossible to conceal the incidences of mass starvation from the outside world. Although most of them did so out of fear of deviating from the Party line, the fact remained that even when peasants were starving by the thousands, some cadres still forbade them from starting fires at home, roaming the fields in search of edible plants and leaving villages for bigger towns and cities.[15] Check-points were set up on public roads and in railway stations. The mail was censored, and letters with information on the famine were intercepted. In cooperation with the Public Security Bureau, illegal detention centers for fugitives were established in every town, the largest of them in Xin Yang City, which held 190 000 people. In one of the rural counties, the local Party committee supervised the construction of 67 checkpoints, and as many detention centers, which altogether housed 9 330 inmates, 2 195 of whom were killed or critically injured by the guards.[16] Another method to cover up the incidence of starvation was the widespread practice of reporting fatalities as resulting from illness, the most popular among them the so-called “bloating disease”. Even family members, anxious not to become an object of repression, often referred to their starving relatives as fatally ill. Doctors who ordered better nutrition as the best cure for the “bloating disease” were routinely demoted and criticized during public meetings.[17]

The efforts to cover up were not restricted to the low ranking officials. The first commission entrusted with the task of investigating the Xin Yang Incident arrived in the prefecture in April 1960. Even though they saw famished people and withered bodies everywhere they went, the investigators from Beijing prevaricated in their work on the final report, wary of the way it would be received by the members of the Central Committee. They remembered all too well what happened to Peng Dehuai, who had dared to criticize the Great Leap Forward during the Conference in Lushan in the summer of the previous year , and they did not want to share his lot. Eventually in June 1960 the

commission submitted their subdued report to Liu Shaoqi, the President of the State Council, who, upon reading it, sent it to Zhou Enlai, the Prime Minister. In November 1960 the document landed on the desk of Mao Zedong, the Party Chairman.

The central investigation into the Xin Yang Incident and the prospect of imminent trouble it spelt for the local Party organization stirred into action the higher officials in Henan. In July 1960 the provincial and prefectural dignitaries held a joint meeting during which they discussed how to avert criticisms arising from the report and, if this strategy failed, how to exonerate themselves from responsibility for the facts contained in it.[18] Only reluctantly was the incidence of famine conceded in the drawing remarks of the meeting; however, the Party bosses were quick to emphasize that whatever decisions they took were inspired by the idea of revolutionary experimentation promoted by Chairman Mao. At the same time, they suggested that the responsibility for the mistakes committed during the implementation process should be assumed by those directly involved in it, i.e. the lower functionaries of the Party. This interpretation won a fervent proponent in the person of Mao Zedong, who after reading the report on the Xin Yang Incident deemed that the famine had been caused by the intensification of the class-struggle in the countryside, which revealed serious deficiencies of the socialist consciousness among the grass-roots. Once the question of responsibility was thus settled, immediate actions were taken against the wrong-doers. In a sweeping operation conducted in the closing months of 1960, the envoys of the central government demoted, imprisoned or selected for criticism virtually all of the Xin Yang cadres from the level of prefecture downwards, which meant that within days the whole administrative apparatus in the counties, communes, and big and small production brigades, was purged and re-filled with activists from other regions.

Admittedly, few among those punished were innocent. To quote again the example of Huai Dian People's Commune: the Party there was represented by 1510 activists employed in administration of the commune, production brigades and small production brigades. The investigation in the aftermath of the Xin Yang Incident discovered that of this number 628 cadres were personally involved in physical maltreatment of the commune members, which accounted for 45.1% of the communal Party apparatus. It was further revealed that direct violence was used in relation to 3 528 persons, 231 of whom were cadres themselves. As a result of brutal mistreatment, 558 persons died during or immediately after being beaten by cadres, 638 died within days of the beatings, 141 sustained permanent injuries and 14 were driven to suicide.

The abuse, both physical and mental, was a daily occurrence in the communes, however it reached its climax during the campaign against private consumption and hiding of produce in the autumn of 1959. Those commune members who failed to deliver the grain assignments arbitrarily imposed on them or who in any way displeased the cadres were hung on a beam in the communal dining hall and beaten with carrying poles, drenched in freezing water, stripped naked and dragged through the village, or less dramatically but in times of famine even more lethally, denied meals at the communal dining hall.[19] Among all this misery and deprivation, the cadres reveled in power and privilege; graft and nepotism were rife. When ordinary commune members saw their rations reduced to

scarcely more than a bowl of watery soup per day, their superiors freely raided the communal stores and appropriated for themselves large stocks of rice, vegetables and meat. Though excused from laboring in the fields, they enjoyed special meals at the communal dining halls where all the coveted jobs in food preparation were reserved for their dependants and cronies. This conspicuous lack of solidarity with the lot of their fellow men becomes even more disquieting in light of the fact that the low level cadres in Henan, as elsewhere in China, were local people who brutally ruled over the communities they had grown up in, and did so on behalf of the Party they often were not even members of. If furthermore we realize that in spite of their privileged position the cadres' families were also affected by the famine, the question of the sources of their loyalty and ruthlessness will become inevitable. [\[20\]](#)

According to Mr. Yang, these could be traced back to the profound impact of the political campaigns of the previous years on the Party apparatus in Henan. In a nutshell, before the cadres turned into the merciless oppressors of village populations, they themselves had been subjected to much mental and physical ordeal at the hands of the Party leaders. Statistical data seem to corroborate this hypothesis. During the first wave of the Anti-Rightist Campaign at the turn of 1956 and 1957, 70 000 Henan activists were branded as rightists. If this figure is compared to the 550 000 alleged rightists exposed in the whole of the country, it becomes clear that Henan, with its 15% share of all the targets, sustained disproportionately heavy losses. Furthermore, these 70 000 "rightists" also accounted for roughly 15% of the Party membership in the province, which meant that the purge went deep enough to make itself felt in practically every cell of the organization. Hard though the original Anti-Rightist Campaign might have been on the Henanese activists, a decisive role in the Great Famine was played by the so-called Anti-Pan-Yang-Wang Campaign, a local prelude to the nationwide Anti-Rightist Opportunist Movement of 1959. Due to its temporal and spatial proximity to the outbreak of mass starvation in Xin Yang, it is viewed by Mr. Yang as one of its direct causes.

The Anti-Rightist Opportunist Campaign, which in the rest of the country gained momentum in the wake of the Conference of Lushan, in Henan made an earlier start due to a personal conflict between the First Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee Pan Fusheng and the Deputy Secretary Wu Zhipu. The conflict began in 1953 when the province of Henan, after 1949 part of a bigger administrative unit, was re-established with its historical borders. Pan Fusheng's nomination for the post of the First Secretary was greeted with much dissatisfaction in the local apparatus because Pan was not Henanese. The most disaffected was his deputy, Wu Zhipu, who was a local man and therefore believed himself to be better qualified for the job. He soon realized that the best way to win the coveted nomination was by currying favor with the central government, or more precisely Chairman Mao. [\[21\]](#) As it happened, the controversies surrounding the issue of the Land Reform, its pace and ultimate goal, provided Wu with ample opportunity to ingratiate himself with the Great Helmsman. When in the mid-1950s Pan joined the intra-party discussion on agriculture and cautiously proposed a three-year transition period for collectivization, Wu outbid him by claiming that it could be completed within a year. Coming as close as possible to what was believed to be Mao's own stance on the subject, Wu also argued for a dramatic increase in the size of production units, a full

collectivization of livestock and a total abolition of private plots. His proposals were unpopular in the countryside where as early as 1956 peasants had aired their dissatisfaction with the excessive size of the already existing higher cooperatives. These protests were silenced by the Anti-Rightist Campaign, though the fundamental problems they had arisen from persisted or even showed signs of aggravation: the first incidences of hunger cropped up in Henan in early 1957. Under the circumstances, Pan Fusheng opted for a slowdown in the pace of collectivization and a temporary return to the previous system based on individually cultivated plots of land. However, in the atmosphere of increasing radicalization that within months was to produce the Great Leap Forward, Pan's sensible proposals were greeted with hostility. The Anti-Pan-Yang-Wang Campaign began in August 1957, but it was not until May 1958, when Mao finally confirmed Pan's diversion from the Party line, that it reached its climax.^[22] Still, on this occasion the most vitriolic speech that branded Pan as the rightist opportunist was delivered by Wu Zhipu, the new provincial First Secretary.

Thus in July and August 1958 the Henan Party apparatus was subjected to another round of political purging. It was conducted by use of by then all too familiar means: denouncing posters, struggle meetings, public criticisms and self-criticisms, as well as other forms of mental and physical torment inflicted on the targets themselves, their relatives, friends, colleagues and whoever else was suspected of being their accomplice. The measures became more brutal as the campaign moved down the administrative ladder. What could be a verbal attack at a county committee meeting, became a regular thrashing by the time it reached the brigades, however, even then it was called a "dispute". It is difficult to establish the exact number of those "disputed against", nonetheless according to Mr. Yang's estimate approximately 200 000 Henan activists fell prey to the Anti-Pan-Yang-Wang Campaign that soon after its inception merged with the Anti-Rightist Opportunist Campaign.^[23] Together they put such fear in the cadres' hearts that even if it had been to cost thousands of peasants' lives, they would not have risked opposing the Party directives.

Already in February 1960 Wu Zhipu was informed of the mass starvation in Xin Yang Prefecture, but unsure as to the proper political interpretation of this fact, he took no action until April, when, having been alerted through other channels, Beijing dispatched its investigative commission to Henan. Wu was spared in the first wave of the rectifying campaign and only partly criticized by the Central Committee resolution passed in January 1961. The scale of the famine in other provinces was still unknown, so Mao was able to impose his class struggle/insufficient class consciousness explanation on the other members of the Politburo. It was only after a stream of reports on the mass starvation elsewhere in the country reached Beijing throughout 1961 that Wu Zhipu's position as the head of the province became indefensible. He was quietly recalled and transferred to a high but much less exposed post in the central government. According to testimonies quoted by Mr. Yang, Wu Zhipu, though never officially prosecuted, was for the rest of his life plagued by feelings of guilt for what happened to the people of Henan.

Henan was one of the 12 provinces, out of the total number of 29 in the whole of the country, that was hit particularly hard by the Famine. The others were: Sichuan, Guizhou, Anhui, Shandong, Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei and Liaoning, however, serious incidences of starvation were also recorded in Jiangsu, Jilin, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Hebei. In terms of geographic location, ethnic composition and economic development these regions hardly constitute a homogenous entity. Among them there are northern, southern, eastern and western provinces. Some, for instance Henan, are inhabited predominantly by Han Chinese, while others, like Yunnan, have ethnically mixed populations. The group includes the relatively well-developed coastal regions of Guangdong, Zhejiang and Jiangsu as well as the poor provinces of the Interior, Gansu and Qinghai. Also in temporal terms, the Famine was a dispersed phenomenon. Its first incidences cropped up in Winter 1958, just months into the Great Leap Forward Campaign, whereas the last recorded cases occurred in the late Spring of 1961. The only province where the Famine lasted incessantly throughout the three-year period was Sichuan. It also affected the largest number of communities there, which, next to the vastness of its agricultural population, helps to explain why Sichuan's death toll of 10 – 12 million was the highest in the country. Though lower in absolute terms, the human losses in Gansu were even more acute since they amounted to one million in a province of 13 million. What, on the other hand, made the outbreak of hunger in Henan appear so drastic was its extreme concentration in time and space. The Xin Yang Incident concerned just four counties and it took scarcely more than half a year to claim the lives of one million people. The total number of victims of the Great Famine is difficult to establish. The official estimates quote the figure of 17 million, though Mr. Yang, after a thorough analysis of all the available data believes it was closer to 36 – 37 million. In 1958 the population of China was estimated at 659 940 000, with 553 030 000 of the Chinese still living on the countryside.

Notes:

[1] „ ????????????????? (????????????? 2008, 5 ?)”, [Yang Jisheng, Mubei, Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuanguang jishi (Xianggang Tiandi Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 2008)].

[2] Yang Jisheng was born in 1940 in Xishui County, Hubei Province in the family of a poor peasant. In 1960 he entered Qinghua University in Beijing and six years later graduated from the Mechanical Department with a degree in Agricultural Machinery. In 1968 he found employment with the Xinhua News Agency Branch in Tianjin. He retired from the post of a senior economy reporter in 2001. In 2000 he became deputy editor of ???? (Yanhuang chunqiu), a magazine dedicated to the “unbiased study of ancient and modern, Chinese and Western history”. Mr. Yang's first book, ????????? (An Analysis of Chinese Social Classes) was published in Hong Kong in 2001, and then in a censored version in Mainland China in 2006. In 2004 his second book ????????? (The Political Struggles in China during the Era of Reform) appeared in Hong Kong. This book contained many unpublished materials collected by Mr. Yang in the years 1976–1989, most importantly three lengthy interviews with Zhao Ziyang conducted before June 1989.

[3] His excellent contacts notwithstanding, Mr. Yang experienced many setbacks in his search for relevant sources. In one incident, he was allowed to view the titles of the reports concerning the spread of the Famine in Guizhou, only to be refused to read their contents. However, in his book he copied the numbers of the files in hope that researchers would be granted access to them in the future.

[4] According to a recent census, Henan's population nears 99 million, which makes it the most populous province in China in terms of registered residence. However, the actual population of Guangdong is larger than Henan's, comprising as it does a large number of migrant workers registered in other provinces.

[5] Mr. Yang estimates that another two million people starved in the neighboring prefectures of Nan Yang, Xu Chang and Shang Qiu.

[6] The first sputnik was launched in March 1958 in Pi County, Sichuan Province, shortly after Mao's visit there, during which he announced collectivization as the next step of Land Reform.

[7] Ever since the Communist Party had introduced planned economy in China, units of production encountered problems while trying to achieve goals set by the government. During the Great Leap Forward, however, political pressure was so intense that it became practically impossible for lower ranks to officially admit their failure to fulfill the plan. That initiated a vicious circle of higher production goals, more inflated reports and in the case of agriculture, ever larger grain quotas.

[8] The drought in Henan in the summer of 1959 was a fact, however under normal circumstances, it could hardly produce mass starvation. Other provinces that suffered heavy losses during the Great Famine, consistently reported favorable weather conditions in those years.

[9] The system of grain acquisition and distribution was fairly complicated. Production brigades delivered all their crops to the communes that first subtracted grain quotas assigned by the state and then divided what was left into four basic categories: grain for the consumption by town population and non-agricultural workers (the Party cadres and their dependents were included in his category), seeds, fodder and lastly, the grain for use by the communal dining halls. Since the state did not guarantee minimal daily rations for agricultural workers, in the situation of grain shortage, their food entitlements got reduced drastically, in some places to as little as 200 grams of watery rice gruel per day. In other places, the communal dining halls simply shut down, leaving the commune members with no food supply whatsoever.

[10] The idea that any difficulties in fulfilling grain quotas are due to hiding crops by the peasants originated in Guangdong. In the summer of 1958 the province registered bumper harvest that coincided with the launch of collectivization policy. Together these two events resulted in exaggerated reports and wasteful use of food at the communal dining halls. Consequently, the grain reserves for the next year were exhausted after only four months of excessive consumption. At the turn of 1958 and 1959 local leaders

appealed to the state to return to the communes some of the grain they had delivered in the form of grain quotas. The provincial officials, armed with the inflated reports responded with a campaign directed against private consumption and hiding of produce (?? ?????). Peasants' households were thoroughly searched and any foodstuffs found there confiscated. The Guangdong experience was promptly reported to Mao who in February 1959 instructed other regions to use analogous procedures in dealing with the problem of unfulfilled grain quotas.

[11] A large majority of the confirmed cases of cannibalism involved the consumption of human organs or body parts obtained from the corpses of the deceased. Sometimes families would exchange the bodies in order to avoid eating the flesh of their relatives. Rarely was the man-consumption preceded by manslaughter. In general, the Party cadres did not prosecute cannibals, provided their activities did not violate other provisions, for instance, the ban on trade in foodstuffs. Where, like in Anhui Province, a tougher stance on cannibalism was assumed, the local leaders resorted to the measure they were most familiar with, namely organizing struggle meetings against people caught eating human flesh.

[12] Another governmental commission that investigated the situation in Xin Yang in the summer of 1960 confirmed 549171 cases of death caused by starvation.

[13] It is hard to determine whether this attitude was a result of bureaucratic negligence or an effect of political pressure. Much evidence points to the latter. For instance, when a population census in Sichuan in 1960, that was conducted by use of some more advanced methods, made evident that in 1959 several counties registered a negative population growth, the Party officials criticized statisticians for the lack of proper understanding of the idea of census and without further ado ordered them to correct the results.

[14] The report provides no hints as to the class background of the remaining 54% of the victims, that under the circumstances, could have been difficult to ascertain. However, the pattern of positive and negative discrimination seems clear, especially since it is confirmed by examples from other provinces. For instance, in the winter of 1960 the provincial government in Gansu began to distribute food and clothing to the victims of starvation. The program explicitly excluded those with the five elements' background.

[15] Unlike in Henan, the peasants in Guangdong were granted freedom to move. They were allowed to leave their distressed communes and also engage in a small scale trade in whatever foodstuffs they managed to find.

[16] Officially, the detention centers were set up to help implement the central directive announced in March 1959 that, in an effort to curb chaotic urbanization, prohibited peasants from migrating to the cities. Originally, this measure was not directed at the victims of the famine but conveniently it came to be used against them.

[17] Another example of the cover-up efforts comes from Gansu: a local cadre recalled to Mr. Yang how one night she had been woken up by a phone call from the county office and demanded to immediately gather peasants and cut down all the trees that lined the

road. The problem was that their shorn trunks could have offended a higher official who was expected to visit the area.

[18] It seems that it was a common response to the famine on the side of higher officials. In this context Mr. Yang quotes also explanations for inactivity given by prefectural cadres from Anhui. At first they thought that the famine was small in scale, so they or their subordinates could handle it themselves. When however the real dimensions of the calamity became to be known, they felt obliged to conceal it not to be held responsible for it. The general rule was: never inform the superiors of the problems with implementing their policies.

[19] What a devastating effect the latter measure could have is illustrated by a story from Sichuan related by Mr. Yang. Two children, aged 8 and 9, being very hungry, stole some animal fodder from the communal stable. The village leader punished them and their mother by withdrawing food coupons for a day. The mother claimed that without food she could not work so eventually she was given something to eat. Her children, however were given nothing so the following day they again tried to steal the fodder. This time the village leader deprived the whole family of food coupons for five days. The day after the desperate mother drowned her children in the river.

[20] A cadre's wife from Guang Shan County recalled to Mr. Yang how in the winter of 1959 some relatives came from a nearby village to beg her for help. She was afraid that someone might accuse her of hiding fugitives, so she sent them back. Soon afterwards her grandmother and older sister died of starvation. A prefectural propaganda secretary kept on criticizing an allegedly over-pessimistic assessment of the economic situation offered by a colleague until he was reminded by the colleague in question that his father had starved to death on a public road while his wife and children had been eating human flesh to survive.

[21] However, there are no reasons to believe that Wu's affection for Mao, though obviously not disinterested, was totally dishonest. Wu admired Mao not only as a leader, but also as a person and tried to emulate him. Besides, the two had quite a lot in common: both were intellectuals who reveled in reading and writing Chinese poetry and collecting old manuscripts.

[22] Except for Pan Fusheng, the targets were Yang Gong and Wang Tingdong, both high ranking provincial functionaries accused of siding with Pan.

[23] The direct correlation between the number of targets of political campaigns among the cadres and the number of victims of the Great Famine among the peasantry is confirmed by the example of Gansu. It lost one million of its 13 million population to the famine of 1959 –19 60. Shortly before 190 000 of the local cadres were purged in the two waves of the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

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