

The Great Leap Backwards

I first learned about China's great famine shortly after my family and I arrived in Baoding, China, in 1984. We were there to teach at Hebei University as part of a faculty exchange agreement. The January 16th, 1984, issue of *Beijing Review*, an English-language weekly, had a report, "Age Distribution of China's Population," about China's efforts to stem its growing population through its one-child policy. The charts and tables did indeed show that population growth had been stabilized. They showed something else as well: Within a sample of 10 percent of China's population, there were 2,737,743 19-year-olds, 1,067,672 21-year-olds, and 1,944,603 24-year-olds.

The dramatic drop-off in the number of 21-year-olds seemed impossible. How could the number of births have dropped by half in three years and then zoomed back up two years later? I started asking people questions. Generally, they said they didn't know about population figures and couldn't answer. One young man told me there had been a famine during which his grandmother had died . . .

The editors of *Beijing Review* apparently believed that nobody would associate the drastic zigzags of population with a disaster, and they were more or less correct. The information was available to all foreign experts living in China in 1984, and yet nobody paid attention.

A year later, I came across an article in the December, 1985 issue of *Scientific American* by Vaclav Smil, who wrote that in the years 1959-61, census figures in China "put the number of excess deaths in that period at 30 million and the number of postponed births at about 33 million. No other famine has been so devastating."

Smil obtained his information from census fig-

ures provided by the Chinese government. I started asking around, just as I had done in China in 1984. Nobody knew anything or seemed interested.

Finally, in 1996, Jasper Becker's *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* appeared. Becker reported the number of victims as at least 30 million, but probably more. The book was reviewed and a few people paid attention, but the famine never became a major issue, and the general public remained ignorant of it.

DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962, by Frank Dikötter. Walker, 2010, 446 pages.

Now that *Mao's Great Famine* is available, more details — more horrible details — are known than before. Dikötter, who is professor of humanities at the University of Hong Kong, explains how this happened: "[A] new archive law has recently opened up vast quantities of archival material to professional historians, fundamentally changing the way one can study the Maoist era."

There was no crop failure. The disaster was man-made, caused by the Great Leap Forward, a series of policies intended to make China richer and stronger — but disastrous from the start.

The first of these policies was diverting water to use for irrigation. "Some 30 million people were recruited in October 1957," Dikötter writes. "By January, one in six people was digging the earth in China. . . . At its peak, some 160,000 people had been made to work on the project, and most of these were villagers diverted away from agricultural work. At least 2,400 died, some in accidents, but many more as a result of a brutal regime which forced workers to slave day and night in order to reach ever higher targets."

People were evicted from their farms and homes

in order to make room for reservoirs — reservoirs that were never completed. “A special group of victims were displaced by the irrigation and reservoir schemes launched during the Great Leap Forward. There were several million of them. In Hunan alone, well over half a million people were evacuated. A third of a million, if not more, were evicted in each of the giant projects that were started at the Three Gate Gorge in Henan, Xin’anjiang in Zhejiang and Danjiangkou in Hubei.” (These areas are all in central China.)

The second policy was forcing farmers to follow a policy of deep plowing. Mao for some reason believed that this would increase productivity. “Villagers, of course, knew better,” Dikötter notes. “They had tilled the land for generations, and knew how to care for a precious resource on which their livelihoods depended . . . Many were incredulous, trying to reason with the cadres. . . . But advice was ignored. . . . Most villagers, having witnessed a series of anti-rightist campaigns since 1957, were too wily to object in public.”

The third policy, by far the most destructive, was ordering farmers to build backyard furnaces and to melt their tools and produce steel to make China a powerful industrial nation. They also were told to cut wood to use to melt the metal. “Villagers dispersed into the forests in search of fuel . . . Trees were randomly felled, keeling over on villagers.” The cost of destroying tools and hunting for wood was enormous: Famine followed as the night the day. The steel, moreover, turned out to be useless: “Iron ingots from rural communes accumulated everywhere, too small and brittle to be used in modern rolling mills.”

Farmers were the victims who suffered most.

China’s major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin suffered as well, but less than villages, as “all three cities, as well as Liaoning, were placed under special protection.”

Mao was deceived by the very system of thought control he had instituted. Li Zhisui, the official who accompanied him on his visits, was told that “farmers had been ordered to transplant rice plants along the Chairman’s route to give the impression of a bumper harvest. . . . Mao was delighted. As

reports came in from all over the country about new records in cotton, rice, wheat, or peanut production, he started wondering what to do with the surplus food.”

Li Zhisui, alas, did not say a word to Mao about the fraud. Mao never learned that his deep-plowing policy was nonsense, or that the steel from backyard furnaces was useless. Countless party officials kept their mouths shut: “At every level party officials badgered their subordinates for the truth but were deceitful to their own superiors, contributing to a maze of self-deception.”

There was one hero, however, who tried to tell Mao the truth: Peng Dehuai, China’s Secretary of Defense. At meeting of party leaders in the city of Lushan in July, 1959, he tried to reveal what was really happening in China. In response, “Mao delivered an ultimatum,” Dikötter writes. “[L]eaders would have to choose between Peng and himself, and the choice would bring about enormous political consequences for the party.” Not a soul at the Lushan meeting dared to confirm the information Peng had produced. He lost his position and was placed under house arrest for the next sixteen years.

Zhou Enlai, Chairman Mao’s right-hand man, never expressed the slightest opposition to anything Mao did. Two years after the Lushan conference, in 1961, when the destruction caused by the famine could no longer be hidden, “Zhou Enlai,” writes Dikötter, “always circumspect, acknowledged some of the errors made in the wake of the Lushan plenum, and then, to help the Chairman save face, openly accepted blame for everything that had gone wrong.”

In my opinion, Zhou’s silence and the consistent dishonesty of the party officials were consistent with Marx’s utopian dream of a time when the state will wither away because there will be no political disagreement since there will be no economic differences. In order to uphold this fantasy, the state practices thought reform — *sixiang gaizao* in Chinese — which has been an explicit practice of all Marxist societies, not only China’s.

Famine has been just as prevalent under communism. Stalin engineered a famine as part of his war against the kulaks; Pol Pot’s regime killed about two million Cambodians, out of a population of

seven million, many through starvation. In North Korea, starvation still continues.

China, however, unlike the USSR, did not even have a period of relative improvement after the 1949 takeover by the Communist Party. A year later, China entered the Korean War, into which it sent 2.3 million troops, according to John King Fairbank's *China: A New History*. During that war, China also began its policy of purges. "In 1951-52," Dikötter writes,

the Three-Antis Campaign (against corruption, waste, and bureaucratism) was targeted on officials in government, in industry, and in the party. The concurrent Five-Antis Campaign attacked the capitalist class, who at first had been left in place. Under charges of bribery, tax evasion, theft of state assets, cheating in labor or materials, and stealing of state economic intelligence, nearly every employer could be brought to trial.

There had been famines in China throughout history, with one recorded as early as 875 CE, but there was never anything anywhere in the world equal to the Mao-made famine. According to Dikötter, "The death toll . . . stands at a minimum of 45 million excess deaths," with "some historians speculat[ing] that the figure stands as high as 50 to 60 million people. It is unlikely that we will know the full extent of the disaster until the archives are completely opened. . . . Yu Xiguang, an independent researcher with a great deal of experience, puts the figure at 55 million excess deaths."

Society broke down:

As famine set in, the villagers started cannibalising their homes, either bartering the bricks for food or burning the wood for fuel. If the thatch on the roofs had not been consumed by fire, it was taken down and eaten in desperation. . . . The situation varied tremendously from place to place, but overall, the Great Leap Forward constitutes, by far, the greatest demolition of property in human history.

This loss of property should in no way be interpreted as the beginning of an egalitarian society.

"A wall was created between cities and the countryside," Dikötter observes, "but an equally important fault line ran between ordinary people and party members. . . . Even the quality of cigarettes varied according to rank. At the apex of the party stood the leadership, who had special residences ensconced between high walls, security guards around the clock and chauffeured cars. . . . Above them all was Mao, living in opulence near the Forbidden City where emperors had once dwelled, his bedroom the size of a ballroom."

Meanwhile, people were so desperate that they sold their children, "more often than not to couples who could not have children of their own. . . . Wu Jingxi got five yuan for his nine-year-old son from a stranger, a sum which covered the cost of a bowl of rice and two kilos of peanuts. . . ."

Cannibalism occurred, not surprisingly. "A few people ate human flesh. . . . Soon the practice appeared in every region decimated by starvation, even in a relatively prosperous province such as Guangdong."

Yet throughout the famine, China continued to export food. "President John Kennedy, apparently, noted coolly that Beijing was still exporting food to Africa and Cuba . . . adding that 'we've had no indication from the Chinese Communists that they would welcome any offer of food.'"

Chairman Mao had decided that peasants should not own or rent homes but live in dormitories, and the family unit should be replaced by the commune. Men and women were often separated in this "great drive to regiment the countryside," Dikötter writes. "Most of the displaced people ended up not in dormitories as envisaged by model communes but living on the streets, destitute."

The source of this information was *Renmin Ribao* ("People's Daily"), China's national daily (October 6th and 13th 1958). "Destroy Straw Huts in an Evening, Erect Residential Areas in Three Days, Build Communism in a Hundred Days," said the slogan of the day, and the newspaper reported on the policy without mentioning the numbers of people living on the streets. This tearing down of homes was, like so much else in Mao's China, sheer idiocy for the sake of a cause. **Jc**