

Changing disaster relief regimes in modern China viewed through four famines, 1870s-1950s

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Once afflicted by frequent episodes of famine, today China is growing in importance as a player in the overseas aid and development sector, a role in which the Chinese state looms large. This paper examines four famines in China's recent past to shed light on the changing nature of state involvement in disaster relief at home in modern China while also demonstrating the breadth and diversity of relief agency in past Chinese society. It makes the case that customary disaster relief principles and methods were active well into the 20th century, and that the statist model of today's People's Republic is not an essential characteristic of Chinese humanitarian organisation. Rather, the extent to which the post-Mao Chinese state will continue to have a dominant role in the country's re-emerging civic and charity sector is, as in the past, a function of the political developments and other contingencies that lie ahead.

Introduction

With large gains in wealth and food production in recent decades, China has shed a long-standing reputation as a 'Land of Famine' (Mallory, 1926). Meanwhile, Chinese institutions have become major players in the aid and development sector in sections of the globe more recently troubled by severe food scarcity, such as sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars have stressed the heavy role of the Chinese state in aid operations generally, both overseas and at home, a role that has come under criticism (Hirono, 2013; Brautigam, 2009). But is the state integral to Chinese humanitarian action? What was the role of the Chinese state in the past? Who took up the burden of relief provisioning? What principles lay behind humanitarian action? Using the example of famine, this paper aims to contribute to a growing interest in the humanitarian legacies of the global south by shedding light on the sheer

diversity of actors in the humanitarian space in China historically. In the process, it touches upon fundamental issues of state power, relief agency and humanitarian principles in China's past, issues with immediate relevance to Chinese aid ventures today and in the years ahead.

This paper examines four famines in modern China, defined as the period since the First Opium War of 1839-42. It first examines the disastrous famine of 1876-79 and the successful famine relief effort of 1920-21 to show 1) the internationalisation of relief in the late 18th and early 20th centuries; 2) the multi-layered nature of China's relief system, incorporating official and nonofficial efforts at all levels; and 3) the persistence of traditional, indigenous relief practices in China well into the 20th century. The paper then shows how in the famine of 1928-30 civil war and the changing priorities of the Chinese state contributed to the collapse of a relief regime that had worked well earlier in the decade. It ends with the 'Great Leap Forward' famine of 1958-62, which produced the highest death toll of any famine in modern history and which marked a culmination of radical changes to the priorities of the modern Chinese state and society.

This paper makes several broad points: The recent surge in Western and Chinese attention towards the 'Great Leap' famine is hugely important (Thaxton, 2008; Dikotter, 2011; Yang, 2012) but it also risks reducing public perceptions of the long and varied Chinese experience of famine to its mid-20th century Maoist form. (Of the three other famines covered in this paper, each of which was akin to a full-scale war in terms of human destruction, only one has a book devoted to it in English.) Second, the *pre*-Maoist model of relief in China was not strictly statist, and today earlier Chinese relief regimes are returning in relevance as Chinese society slowly reacquires the elements of a civil society it possessed before the communist revolution in 1949, a development prominently played out in the broad-based response to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. A second major point of this paper is that Western (and in some cases Chinese) accounts of past disaster relief in China have

overemphasised the international, largely Western role at the expense of indigenous relief efforts. Institutions and relief groups operating over long-distances generate far more of the publicity and record-keeping later used by historians than do informal or temporary relief agents originating in or near the disaster field. Not unique to China, this is arguably a universal problem that can lead to understandings of disaster events that exaggerate the roles of international or exogenous relief agencies. Threaded through this paper then are examples of local and regional relief informed by traditional ideologies well into the 20th century.

It should be noted that in the space here one cannot possibly address a host of important issues related to disaster relief, including poverty, profiteering, corruption, disease-control, refugee movement, or the principles behind humanitarian action in any detail; rather, the limited aim here is to sketch changing relief regimes that kept people from dying, or failed to do so, using the example of drought in modern China. Lastly, we should include a cautionary word on numbers, which, in the case of China, rarely fail to be massive. Regularly rounded by the million, mortality in major Chinese disasters is often wide-ranging and in dispute. Determining mortality rates is even more difficult (see Garnault, 2013). There is, unfortunately, no room here to address this important statistical and historiographical problem, but it should certainly be borne in mind throughout the discussion below.

Traditional Chinese models of relief

Before charting the evolution of famine responses in modern China, we must first establish a benchmark of values and practices from earlier centuries to better appreciate the changes that are the focus of this paper. Historically, the Chinese state presided over one of the most elaborate poor relief and granary systems in the early modern world (Will and Wong, 1991), one that in the 19th and 20th centuries underwent a period of severe crisis that played out in some of the largest flood and drought famines in history. China's North – large

sections of which were highly unstable ecologically, such as the flood-prone and highly-saline North China Plain – was drier and generally poorer than the more fertile and productive South, and consequently suffered many of these famines. For this reason, this paper focuses on North China, using drought as a constant.

Foraging for ‘famine-foods’ such as tree bark and leaves by the destitute was an annual occurrence in much of China (and may even have *increased* in the 20th century); full-fledged famine as an event worthy of central government action was then a matter of the scale of hunger and the social and fiscal disruptions it could cause. In the three monumental pre-Mao famines discussed in this paper, drought crippled harvests in hundreds of counties across China’s northern plains and mountainous northwest. In each famine, total food availability declined, at least at the regional level, and extraordinary interventions in the food supply were required to avert mass starvation.

The Qing imperial house (1644-1912), like the Ming (1368-1644) before them, were seated in northern China but drew much of their revenue from the more affluent central and southern sections of the empire. This involved conveying massive volumes of annual tax grain northward over an elaborate system of canals, and meant the bureaucracy centred in Beijing remained attuned to harvest levels and grain price fluctuations around the empire. As a countermeasure to harvest or market distribution failures, the Qing presided over a centuries-old cultural repertoire of food security and famine relief administration that peaked in effectiveness in the 18th-century height of the dynasty’s power (Will, 1990; Li, 2007).



Map of China, circa 1920, with places named in the text.

For many, widespread crop failure rendered the main means of accessing food legally for most people – growing, buying or working for it – out of the question. The causes of hunger are of course varied and complex. For one, economic causes play out differently depending on the level of a region’s commercialisation, which varied widely even within Chinese provinces. And then while extreme poverty certainly factored in famines in China, where large sections of the population lived on the very margins of existence, the three pre-Maoist famines discussed in this paper in fact occurred in regions with relatively low levels

of tenancy or wealth disparity, striking, by and large, communities of poor owner-cultivators. Of course extreme dearth was frequently exacerbated, if not caused, by inaction, exploitation or corruption by neighbours, merchants, or officials, leaving the desperate to turn to begging or banditry. But relief precedent set by earlier generations of Chinese created expectations among the poor for a fourth means to legal sustenance beyond growing, buying or working for it, what we might term 'customary relief', which was fulfilled in varying degrees depending on time and place.

This customary relief consisted of transfers of grain (discounted, loaned, or free), cash, congee, clothing, coal, and other relief goods. Considerable administration was devoted to determining who was entitled to such assistance. Imperial authorities routinely classified drought districts into grades of harvest failure and the proportion of its affected residents; through house-to-house canvassing, residents were then classified into five grades of immediate need (Will, 1990, p. 34). Able-bodied males were expected to seek temporary employment elsewhere during crises, or to join work-relief projects repairing canals or roads; many men routinely left for neighbouring or distant regions at the first sign of harvest failure, as did farm-hands, vagrants and other residents not officially recognised as permanent members of the community (Will, 1990, p. 257). The remaining members of 'rich' and 'middling' families – these were traditional classifications with criteria that varied with time and place – were normally expected to weather food crises on their own. This generally left women, children, elderly and infirm from 'poor', 'very poor' and 'destitute' households to the care of famine relief operations.

So far, we have framed these as official measures, but in practice the initiative, financing and management of relief operations were shared by people at multiple levels of society, and acting in official, quasi-official and personal capacities. While the religious and ethical traditions informing such efforts varied, arguably the most significant was the

Confucian value system shared by the empire's gentry elite and members of the imperial civil bureaucracy. Official and elite concern for public welfare was often couched in the terms of Confucian paternalistic governance, with district magistrates and elites alike, not to mention the emperor himself, frequently positioning themselves as 'father and mother officials (*fumu guan*)' of the common people (Rowe, 2001, pp. 326-405). Extending beyond the formal state apparatus, then, relief activity sprang from macro, meso and micro levels. At the imperial macro level, a corps of civil administrators from the Court down to the district magistrate carried out relief provisioning and tax adjustments across the empire using an evolving body of disaster-relief treatises and manuals (Will, 1990; Huang, 1984). At the regional or meso level, and mainly in more commercial areas with sufficient private resources and long-distance social networks, relief sprang from the ranks of merchant, scholar-elite or monastic circles. And at the district or village level, relief took the form of mutual aid measures between farming households, and hand-outs or congee stations set up by more capable families. These meso and micro levels of relief comprised informal spheres of activity that worked either parallel to, or in coordination with, imperial macro measures, depending on the crisis (Zhang, 2000, pp. 96-100; Liang, 2001; Smith, 2009). Lastly, it should be pointed out that the relief systems described above apply to China's agricultural population, which comprised the vast majority of Chinese until late in the 20th century. The needy among those plying non-agricultural trades, such as peddlers and artisans and residents of commercial cities in general, were largely left to the hands of privately-endowed charities such as guilds and benevolence halls (Rowe, 1989, pp. 100-10; Rankin, 1986, pp. 99-130).

Three main points should be taken away from this: that relief in pre-modern China was multi-faceted and multi-layered; that it was designed to primarily benefit farming households which formed the core of the empire's fiscal and ideological systems; and that it was gendered, targeting persons deemed the weakest and most vulnerable: the old, young,

and frail, and females in general. The latter is especially noteworthy for the risks it poses for social stability, which is especially prized by Confucian ethics. While the notion of a capable ‘well-ordered state’ with a so-called ‘mandate of heaven’ to rule is indeed central to traditional Chinese relief (Hirono, 2013, p. S207), caring for the weakest during crises at the expense of those most likely to join the ranks of bandits – able-bodied males – suggested a paternalistic concern that went beyond merely keeping society in order. (One measure often employed to counter these risks was the hiring of local young males by their communities as crop-watchers during periods of crisis, giving them a stake in the defence of local resources.)

Table 1: Major modern Chinese famines
(CCFRF, 1879, p. 7; Xia, 2000, pp. 395-9; Yang, 2012, pp. 395-6)

Timespan of famine conditions	Period	Scope	Estimated mortality
1876-79	Qing Dynasty	Shanxi, Zhili (Hebei), Shandong, Henan, Shaanxi	9-13 million
1920- 21	Chinese Republic ('Warlord era')	Zhili (Hebei), Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi	500,000
1928-30	Chinese Republic (period of consolidation under the Nationalist Party)	Gansu, Shaanxi, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Rehe, Chahar, Suiyuan	10 million
1958-62	People's Republic of China (The 'Great Leap Forward')	21 provinces (Anhui, Sichuan and Guizhou suffer worst)	36-45 million

The great north China famine of 1876-79

A few decades after two successive ‘opium war’ defeats to Britain, a calamitous drought visited China. The hybrid cultures and societies of the so-called ‘treaty ports’ created after these defeats along the Chinese coast, such as Shanghai and Tianjin, were major catalysts for much of the change seen in China’s modern period. These cities would also add new dimension to the traditional disaster relief regimes described above. Marked by a new

dynamic of urban (coastal) assistance for rural (inland) communities, relief of the great north China famine of the late 1870s saw two major developments: new agents entered the Chinese famine field, including for the first time Western aid actors and – largely in response to this – relief over long-distances by Chinese elites who increasingly framed their efforts in nationalistic terms. In the 1870s, China’s reputation in a wider world had become a motivation for disaster relief. That said, this change cannot be taken too far: the monumental death toll of the late 1870s would largely be a result of a breakdown in imperial and local relief *capabilities*, but not in the traditional ideologies underpinning relief, which we sketched earlier, and which were still very much part of official and rural life.

The drought that visited China in 1876 was likely unprecedented in scale and severity, developing in coastal Shandong before spreading inland to four more provinces and leaving bone-dry soil two meters deep in places. It was part of a complex global meteorological event contributing to the deaths of between 9 and 13 million Chinese plus millions more in India, Brazil, and elsewhere (CCFRF, 1879, p. 7, 21; Davis, 2001). In China, mountainous and landlocked Shanxi was hit hardest. After three years of back-to-back harvest failures, the once-prosperous province of banking, mining and other light industries lost, at the very least, one third of its roughly 16 million inhabitants to famine-related flight and death.

The Qing ordered the diversion of Beijing-bound tax grain barges to the drought zones, afterwards setting up an official relief headquarters in Tianjin to coordinate local committees raising money from gentry and merchants, orchestrate discounted grain sales to rein in prices that were tripling in places, and set up distribution and refugee centres. (CCFRF, 1879, pp. 49, 67; Bohr, 1972, pp. 30, 48, 61). Enormous obstacles, however, prevented the swift transfer of relief supplies from productive regions to the drought zone. A rain-deprived canal system largely dried up by 1877 and bottlenecks in the mountain passes paralyzed grain carts heading into Shanxi (Bohr, 1972, p. 43). Meanwhile, the Court was

divided between assigning funds for famine relief and investing in coastal defence and military campaigns in Inner Asia along the frontiers of the British Raj and Tsarist Russia (*Celestial Empire*, 1878). The magnitude of the 1870s drought had overwhelmed an ill-prepared, under-financed, and pre-occupied imperial apparatus.

While not necessarily the first instance of missionary famine relief in China, the size and stature of the foreign effort in the late 1870s was unprecedented, establishing orphanages and relief centres in numerous sections of the famine field using 204,560 silver ounces collected worldwide, mostly from Great Britain (Hyatt, 1966, p. 110; CCFRF, 1879, pp. 29-31). Operating out of Christian missions that had begun sprouting around the empire, the foreign relief activists worked separately from Chinese relief operations and were largely ignored in the famine relief pronouncements of the Qing government (CCFRF, 1879, p. 25).

In contrast, China's nascent modern press centred in the treaty ports did take notice of the fact that foreigners were making relief initiatives (Rankin, 1986, p. 141). At the *regional* level, Chinese philanthropists in the Yangzi delta had already been relieving rebellion and flood ravaged areas since at least the mid-1800s. But in light of reports of these new foreign initiatives, they expanded their own charity relief operations into the distant North in 1877 and soon were working closely with official relief operations there and raising enormous sums of money (Wue, 2004; Rankin, 1986, pp. 141-50; Zhu, 2006) This included 2.5 million silver ounces from a single fundraiser and Suzhou-native who also commissioned a series of graphic famine illustrations, including depictions of cannibalism, circulated in China and as far away as Britain (Edgerton-Tarpley, pp. 131-55; *The Graphic*, 1878). Elite competition with foreign aid efforts and a growing sense of shame at the plight of fellow Qing subjects helped engender a national consciousness that, for the first time, entered the traditional mix of motivations behind famine relief in China, at least among urban elites. And the Qing state recognised this, appreciating for the first time the fund-raising potential of overseas Chinese,

who for political reasons it had held in suspicion since the fall of the preceding Ming Dynasty; Beijing appealed to Chinese in Singapore for relief monies, for example, the moment it opened its first consulate there in 1877 (Peterson, 2005, p. 94).



“CANNIBALISM”



A MAGISTRATE DOLING OUT RELIEF

‘The Famine in China – Drawings by a Native Artist’,
from *The Graphic*, July 6, 1878, in the author’s collection.

In sum, disaster relief was internationalised in 1870s China in several key ways: a precedent was set for foreign relief on Chinese soil, financed by monies from as far as Edinburgh and Adelaide. And while the imperial government had long conducted relief operations that spanned the empire, private relief in 1870s China acquired empire-wide – ‘national’ – and international dimensions. In other words, ‘inputs’ (conduits for the collection, dissemination and publicising of human needs over the course of the crisis) increased tremendously in the 1870s famine, going both national and global through media, Chinese diaspora and missionary networks. However, distribution ‘outputs’ (channels for the

delivery of relief on the basis of informational inputs) failed spectacularly due to multiple reasons, including inadequate transport technologies considering the scale of the crisis.

Lastly, it should be noted that the contributions of these media and networking innovations, while important, cannot be taken too far: traditional relief efforts in the 1870s likely outstripped that generated by Chinese urban communities or from overseas: a single Shanxi county, for example, raised relief subscriptions of 200,000 silver ounces by 1878, nearly equal to the entire foreign aid contribution over the four years of famine (CCFRF, 1879, p. 35), and evidence of substantial village-level relief can be found in local county histories from across the famine zone. Local relief practices and traditional ideologies persisted and would continue even into our next famine nearly half a century later.

The great north China famine of 1920-21

The early 1900s saw a steady rise in national and international charity relief efforts in China. Through the example of the great famine of 1920, this section aims to show that these highly publicised national and international campaigns were crucial in the relief effort and in engendering the development of formal non-governmental relief institutions in the country, but they did not replace traditional and local relief measures. Rather, they worked alongside them. The relatively low death toll from the 1920-21 famine was as much a function of *continuities* with Qing-era customary relief measures at multiple levels of Chinese society than it was of foreign or urban innovations and interventions. In short, a multitude of relief agents and methods, including those at the village and county level, coalesced into a flexible and resilient system in 1920-21.

The Chinese state had finally given formal endorsement to nongovernmental relief efforts in China at the turn of the century. Two factors led to this: a chastened Qing Court

after its disastrous backing of the Boxer Uprising in 1900, and the regime's participation in the Hague Convention the year before. The latter paved the way for the formal establishment of a Red Cross chapter in Shanghai in 1904 to handle refugees from the Russo-Japanese war in China's northeast (Zhu, 2006, pp. 488-92; Reeves, 2005, pp. 65-76; Zhang, 2007, p. 6). Soon afterwards, in 1906, China's first joint Chinese-foreign relief operation formed in Shanghai to relieve a flood-famine in nearby Jiangsu; with this event the spearheading of foreign relief in China also passed from British to American hands (CCFRF, 1879, p. 15; Darroch, 1907, pp. 3, 24).

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 a republican government was formed, and within nine years large sections of North China – the same five northern provinces, in fact, that were stricken half a century before – experienced a rainless 12 months; anywhere from 20 to 30 million people were estimated to be destitute and in need of assistance. By 1920 the Chinese republic was also disintegrating into provincial 'warlord' domains. Several key factors, though, helped limit the death toll this time to 500,000 people: the hardest-hit drought areas were more accessible in 1920-21, thanks to several thousand miles of rail lines built largely with foreign financing since the late Qing; the drought lasted only a year, compared to three back-to-back years in the 1870s; and foreign involvement in famine relief in China reached an all-time high in 1921, part of a larger, mostly American, outpouring of post-war relief activity in Russia and elsewhere. Urban relief committees comprised of prominent Chinese and foreign diplomats and businessmen around China, along with Christian missions in the field tapping into a global missionary network, generated and distributed over \$17,807,000 for the relief of some 7.7 million people by May of 1921, including \$2.48 million raised by the American Red Cross for its own work relief projects centred in Shandong.²

It must be stressed, though, that Western accounts of this famine put the total relief expenditure in 1920-21 at \$37 million (PUIFRC, 1922, pp. 20-26; Nathan, 1965, pp. 5-10; Li, 2007, pp. 294-302), which is an impossibly low figure for what was necessary to maintain over 20 million destitute for 9 months, and it gives the impression of an oversized foreign role of 40 percent of all relief in China that year. Estimates of required relief funds at the outset of famine conditions in 1920, however, ranged from \$120 million to \$200 million (PUIFRC, 1922, p. 16; *North China Herald*, 1920). Countless unidentified Chinese relief actors were left out of recognised relief totals for the famine. This accounts for this huge difference between required famine funds and what histories of the event suggest was actually spent, a point I have argued elsewhere (Fuller, 2013). In 1920, local and regional relief was robust, a fact little recognised by historians.

During the first half of the famine in 1920, Chinese efforts at the local, provincial and national level had sustained millions of the destitute, and in many cases continued to do so until the rains returned in the spring when the international efforts were finally fully mobilised. As for trains, they were indeed instrumental, but the humanitarian role of technology depends, of course, on how it is used. The volumes of grain the Chinese Ministry of Communications moved down its rails from Manchuria in January 1921, midway through the famine, were an increase of six-fold over previous years (*North China Herald*, 1921). This is especially noteworthy since this southward movement of grain from Manchuria coupled with a northward movement of a million refugees there at a cost of \$7 million to the central state, was between the domains of rival Chinese military factions that would soon be at war with each other.

Stressing the fluid, state-subsidised transport of relief in the autumn of 1920 is important for two reasons: it demonstrates that important members of China's 'warlord' establishment acted as carry-overs from Qing-era Confucian norms of paternalistic

governance, initiating and overseeing, for example, mass clothing distributions and refugee shelter operations benefitting hundreds of thousands of people in greater Beijing (Fuller, 2013). And it allows us to trace multiple conduits of Chinese relief mobilisation on a national scale, which we first saw in the 1870s and which by 1920 was facilitated by a vibrant and relatively free news media that included more than 100 daily newspapers in Beijing alone (*Beijing zhi*, 2005, pp. 42-53). Railway records reveal, for example, dozens of Chinese aid agencies – central, provincial and county governments, as well as Buddhist groups, relief societies and associations of sojourning merchants and workers based on hometown ties – moving 102 million kilos of relief grain into the famine zone in December 1920 alone, much of it free of charge (*Zhengfu gongbao*, 1921).

Chinese society in 1920-21 produced a well-spring of privately initiated relief at the micro, meso and macro levels, informed by a diversified media industry that included privately-run daily and weekly periodicals dedicated to famine relief (*Zhenzai ribao*, 1920; *Jiuzai zhoukan*, 1920) while working both parallel to and in tandem with government agencies. In other words, the overall relief effort comprised a wide variety of information inputs and distribution outputs. This involved traditional and modern methods working alongside each other and, crucially, backing each other up, including militarists and merchant-gentry acting as carry-overs of imperial-era relief legacies working alongside international relief societies wiring in monies worldwide. Relief transportation was a similar hybrid of archaic and modern technologies: motor vehicles were still rarely used in relief convoys in 1920; instead, tens of thousands of ox-carts performed the crucial last leg from limited railheads to the wider countryside in over 300 counties.

So what had changed? The American Red Cross employed work-relief programs as disaster-prevention measures in 1920-21. But these were hardly innovations to Chinese famine policy (Will, 1990, pp. 257-62). Instead, they were foreign interventions in an area

from which the weakening Chinese state had largely de-invested since the mid-1800s. What *was* new about work relief in the republic was an emerging discourse on ‘work ethics’ and the ‘usefulness’ of the poor and famine-stricken to the nation-state. Recipients of customary relief in 1920-21 were still largely selected in a similar fashion to the 1870s, prioritising females of all ages, old men and boys in Beijing soup kitchens and village-level mutual aid programs, while excluding drug addicts and able-bodied men (Li, 2007, p. 275; *Laifu bao*, October 10, 1920; *Minyi ribao*, 1920; *Yishi bao*, 1920). But a discourse began to infuse the question of work relief in 1920-21, and signalled a valorisation of ‘productivity’ over unconditional assistance – what one historian has called a criminalisation of indigence (Chen, 2012) – that would not fully play out until the re-ascendance of central state power under the Nationalist and Communist regimes (ARC, 1921, pp. 211-12).

The decade that followed the 1920 famine was a socially and politically transformative one and by the late 1920s, famine would play out very differently. The rise of the Nationalist and Communist parties would bring a turn to Leninist-style single party politics that would soon extend state control over this budding civil society (Fitzgerald, 1996). Since the 1800s, the Chinese state had become increasingly reliant on international finance, customs revenues and other sources of income, as opposed to taxes from its agricultural base, making it less inclined to invest in infrastructure in the ecologically fragile interior, which had been a priority of the traditional Chinese state. Both of these trends – valorisation of ‘productivity’ over unconditional assistance, and the goal of state-strengthening at the expense of rural communities – would culminate in the Maoist famine of the 1950s. But first, decades of civil and anti-Japanese war would contribute to a maelstrom of disasters from the late 1920 through the 1940s.

The great northwest China famine of 1928-30

China circa 1930 saw a flowering of charity relief efforts that were in many ways similar to a decade earlier. But this time they were decidedly overwhelmed. And fundamental changes to Chinese governance and society were well underway, changes that sapped famine responses at all levels, from the central leadership to local communities. Disentangling natural from man-made disasters becomes an increasingly fruitless exercise going into the 1930s. The extent of the humanitarian crises brought on by drought and flood, and exacerbated by militarism and war, from the rise of the Nationalists in 1928 to the Japanese invasion of 1937, was possibly unmatched in Chinese history to that point (Xia, 2000, pp. 384-394; Li, 2007, p. 307).

Throughout most of the 1920s, the main famine prevention organ in China was controlled by non-Chinese. The eight international relief groups that had formed in response to the 1920-21 famine soon amalgamated into the China International Famine Relief Commission, a quasi-official organ whose constitution built in a one-man majority of foreign executives designed to keep the determination of relief needs and the disbursement of funds out of official Chinese hands citing possible corruption or mismanagement (Nathan, 1965, p. 12). In the following years of intensified civil war, the Commission devoted funds piecemeal from public fund drives and, from 1926 onwards, another customs surtax, to well-digging, road construction, and credit cooperatives in various sections of the country (Xue, 2008). The Commission, one of a few relief agencies with national reach through the 1920s had, in its own words, 'given up' on holding annual executive meetings 'due to the disorganized conditions of travel,' and had not held an annual meeting of its executive committee from March 1925 to November 1928 (CIFRC, 1928, p. 11; Godement, 1976, p. 11). Much of this disruption was due to the northward drive by the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek from 1926-28 and the May 1928 Japanese seizure of the main rail line in Shandong.

In December 1927, the Commission declared that 'excessive dryness' and locusts had brought 'natural calamity' to 70 counties in north China (CIFRC, 1928, p. 7). By May of 1929, 'one of the most wide-spread and severe famines in many decades' had spread inland to the upper reaches of the Yellow River, enveloping Inner Mongolia and Gansu and Shaanxi in the northwest, where in 300 counties across eight provinces 'three successive harvests... failed to materialize,' leaving in total more than 50 million people 'severely affected' (CIFRC, 1929, p. 1; CIFRC, *Annual Report 1929, 1930*, p.42). Yet only an average of three grain trains a month travelled between Manchuria and north China for much of 1928, and by the following year only 100 of 1,000 locomotives in north China were reportedly moving at all, as great sections of the famine field doubled as a theatre of civil war (Godement, 1976, pp. 90-93).

The Commission's stress on meteorological factors was in part addressed to the American Red Cross, which would determine in late 1929 that 'artificial causes [were] largely predominating' in the Chinese famine and so declined to join the relief effort (Bicknell, 1929, p. 207). Internationally, the Commission was largely on its own, although funded in part by a China relief fund in New York. It was also woefully unprepared. Owing to the fact that it 'follow[ed], in the interest of economy, the practice of not maintaining personnel in active service in the interim between famines,' at the beginning of 1929 the Commission had no committees in the hardest-hit northwestern provinces (CIFRC, 1929, p. 1). When it finally did project itself to the northwest, it did so minimally in light of the human needs. In the case of one northwestern province, Shaanxi, the Commission brought in 408 tons of grain in 1929, handed out cash, and set up 11 soup kitchens and nine refugee centres and orphanages when the numbers of famine-stricken in the province hovered at seven million people (CIFRC, *Annual Report 1929, 1930*, p. 42; Xia, 2000, p. 388).

After assuming nominal leadership over the fractured country in 1928, Chiang Kai-shek acknowledged the importance of the international Commission as a temporary measure while his regime launched its own Department for Relief Affairs in 1928 (Janku, 2011, p. 237, 246). It is unclear how much the Chinese government raised and spent on relief from customs surtaxes, official pay deductions and other means in 1928-30 but it was clearly less than the regime's \$2.3 million monthly military expenditure – half its overall budget – on its attempt to unify the country under Nationalist rule (Xia and Kang, 2001, p. 146). War, three years of drought, and the remoteness of the disaster zone combined to precipitate possibly 10 million deaths in 1928-30 – or 20 percent of the destitute famine-afflicted population, compared to a loss of less than 3 percent of famine sufferers nine years earlier.

Nonetheless, there are notable similarities with the dynamics behind relief in 1920-21. The military governor, running the Manchurian bread-basket after the death of his father in a Japanese bomb plot earlier in 1928, continued his father's policies of dispatching relief to north China – \$1 million in this case – and settling some 300,000 refugees in his Northeastern domains (Janku, 2011, pp. 237-39). Military men had also begun shipping Manchurian grain to the drought zone on behalf of native Chinese relief agencies in the Fall of 1927 before the international Commission had even declared famine (CIFRC, 1929, p. 8). Native-place associations in 1928-30 also produced publicity on needs in the drought zone and pressured the Nanjing regime to act (Janku, 2011, p. 251) while 'purely Chinese relief organizations' from Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist as well as non-sectarian circles had, the famine Commission noted, 'helped largely but inconspicuously in relief work (CIFRC, *B (41)*, 1930, p. 19). The Chinese Red Cross, which had played only a minor role in 1920-21 relief, made a larger contribution, opening refugee centres in Shaanxi, Henan, and elsewhere in the 1929-30 famine zone (Li, 2011, p. 73).

So, aside from full-fledged war, what in Chinese society had changed since 1920? At the highest levels, the Chinese state, in the form of the newly-installed Nationalist regime based in Nanjing, further reorientated itself toward coastal, urban and industrial concerns, the prioritisation of state-strengthening and the servicing of foreign debts, largely at the expense of a rural hinterland repeatedly struck by disaster (Alitto, 1979; Pomeranz, 1993; Thaxton, 1997). Meanwhile, increased party influence over press content under the Nationalists, as well as wartime distractions and the Great Depression begun in 1929, reduced public attention to the northwest famine. Poverty and refugee policy also became vested with wider concerns: usefulness to industrialisation and defence against Japanese invasion as well as the global stature of the nation-state (Lipkin, 2006; Muscolino, 2010), while the regime placed previously autonomous civic groups such as the Chinese Red Cross under state control (Reeves, 2012). Many of these developments, as we will see, were carried further by the ideological rivals of the Nationalists when the Communist Party took power in 1949.

At the micro level, the 1930s saw the continued weakening of the mutual aid systems communities had in place to combat the ecological crises that lay ahead. Official village heads, who replaced informal village leadership in the early 1900s, now worked as tax agents for increasingly extractive military regimes that drained rural communities of able-bodied men and resources. Villages across north China had also experienced an overall increase in social stratification and a decline in community solidarity, trends that only accelerated with the wars and disasters of the 1920s (Huang, 1985, pp. 249-74; Duara, 1988; Chang, 2007). Escalating civil war from 1924 made the requisitioning of farmers' carts by feuding armies standard practice across large sections of the country (Waldron, 1995, pp. 144-49), emptying entire districts of what had been an essential mode of grain transport in 1920-21.

In short, while the drought of 1928-30 was geographically remote and massive in both scale and duration, it was also caused by considerably constricted relief inputs compared to

1920-21 and outputs that were either lacking or devoted to warfare. North China had again experienced mass starvation on the scale of the 1870s. Still, in China's history of disasters, revolution would soon lead to a famine that was in a class of its own.

The 'Great Leap' Famine of 1958-62

Alleviating hunger had been a stated goal of Chinese revolutionaries (Yue, 1999, pp. 150-83), and the cause was often framed as an advancement of the interests of the peasant-farmer through land reform. In some important ways the aims of public welfare were met in the newly-established People's Republic, for example with huge drops in infant mortality and gains in life expectancy. But in a mid-1950s bid for overnight industrialisation, dubbed the Great Leap Forward, Party policy stripped China's complex political economy down to a system of resource allocation by party-dictate that privileged those deemed 'productive' for revolutionary and state-strengthening purposes, namely industrial workers and urban residents generally. The customary relief explored throughout this paper so far could be seen as an extension of Amartya Sen's notion of 'transfer entitlements' (Sen, 1981), such as social security and guaranteed employment, which are grounded in political or legal claims on sustenance, to include moral obligations that reflect normative codes of social behaviour. In the mid-1950s, the Party limited transfer entitlements to urban Chinese (in the form of the so-called 'iron rice bowl' of guaranteed sustenance from one's work unit) and enforced new codes of behaviour based on 'self-reliance' and sacrifice to the state and the revolution, which served to delegitimise acts of relieving hunger (Brown, 2012, pp. 29-52). Restrictions were also placed on migration to cities from the countryside, creating for the first time a legal distinction between urban and rural dwellers and a formal separation of urban and rural spheres (on the intellectual background to this development, see Cohen, 1993). The Great

Leap had turned the Qing policies of resource re-allocation and rural investment completely on its head, and it would come at a colossal human cost.

In 1958, amid the transition to collectivisation and the launching of the Great Leap, abnormal weather revisited parts of China, but certainly not at levels sufficient to account for the mega-famine that ensued across 21 provinces. The reasons for the death of many millions were complex, but almost entirely man-made and politically driven. After a brief interval of land reform and rural cooperatives, the Leap's communes stripped farming families of any legal claim on the grain they produced in favour of an urban industrial work force with a prioritised food supply (Brown, 2012, pp. 53-76; Yang, 2012, pp. 168, 340). The fear and fervour of the 1957 anti-rightist movement, in which merely 'talking about hunger in the countryside was considered an "ideological problem"' (Felix Wemheuer quoted in Brown, 2012, p. 58), facilitated forced grain extractions from rural communities in ways that were reminiscent of the Soviet Union's attacks on the kulak farming class in the 1930s (Yang, 2012, pp. 223-229).

With the social levelling and closing off of Maoist China to much of the world, gone were charities or the possibility of international assistance; gone was an even marginally independent press able to spread word of the starvation of millions, and even the age-old famine response of flight was restricted by the newly-installed system of household registration (*hukou*) that tied people to their place of assigned employment (Thaxton, 2008, pp. 162-70; Yang, 2012, pp. 50, 127). The protections accorded by past regimes to farming families and females in particular were overturned, with women routinely expected to work the commune's fields, and often despite severe malnutrition, pregnancy, or other conditions, in place of men mobilised for extensive irrigation projects (Hershatter, 2011, pp. 236-66; Thaxton, 2008, pp. 139-143). For China's rural communities, nearly all customary relief

measures were gone – even punishable – pushing people to cannibalism at levels likely not seen since the 1870s (Yang, 2012, pp. 13-14, 229-33, 302).

In striking ways, the Great Leap carried Western and reformist or modernist critiques of ‘backward’ traditional relief systems and actors in earlier Chinese famines to their logical extreme. In the obsessive search for ‘perfect’ technical solutions to age-old problems, common sense was jettisoned in search of bumper harvests and spontaneous industrialisation, attempts were made to do away with the ‘inefficient’ family structure through communal kitchens, massive irrigation projects exhausted an over-stretched rural workforce, and when mass starvation set in, the party monopoly on information inputs and distribution outputs made relief impossible, even unthinkable.

Conclusion

The nature of the Chinese state and society had changed so much by the 1958 famine that fixation on this event as a prototype for Chinese famines in general would be completely misguided (see Becker, 1996, pp. 9-23). When the Communist state intensified grain and labour levies on the rural population in the 1950s, there were no customary relief agents autonomous from the state, and next to no social defence mechanisms left against mass starvation. Since the Great Leap debacle, and especially since the decollectivisation of the 1980s, the Party has redirected state investment in China’s rural areas, sometimes with remarkably positive effects on rural incomes. And post-Mao responses to domestic disaster have been remarkably different, exemplified by the aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008. While it may be tempting to interpret the outpouring of civic and private relief responses in 2008 to be Chinese society assuming modern or Western humanitarian norms, history suggests otherwise. The resurgence of religious, native-place and other traditional forms of association parallels forms of organisation seen in the 1920s that engendered much

of that period's vibrant relief activity (Bell, 2008). Meanwhile, today's Chinese state – not to mention 'China' itself – is an increasingly complex and dynamic animal that Western media coverage and commentary often fail to 'disaggregate' into its many parts and interests (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2011). The prevailing post-Mao dynamic is not one simply of state command over social institutions but arguably one of blurred boundaries between civil society and organs of the state, a symbiotic relationship in which activists play 'embedded', as opposed to antagonistic, roles in official operations, as a set of scholars has argued (Ho and Edmonds, eds, 2007). The extent to which the Chinese party-state will continue to have a dominant role in the country's re-emerging civic and charity sector, at home and overseas, is, as in the past, a function of the political developments and struggles that lie ahead, and not of any essential Chinese (Confucian or otherwise) cultural inclination towards heavy-handed governance.

The 1920-21 famine was roughly equal in geographic extent to the horrific famines of 1876-79 and 1928-30. But the fact that the drought was centred closer to the coast and lasted only 12 months amid relative peace doubtless led to the much lower loss of life. Still, lessons might be drawn from the relief success of 1920-21. The international dimension was indeed important, but the year saw a multi-layered system of relief using the widest variety of inputs and outputs, innovative and more primitive alike, which maximised resilience to logistical failures or disruptions. Meanwhile, the local was crucial, and warlords, sectarian leaders and other stakeholders, who by virtue of their position preside over input and output channels already firmly in place in the afflicted communities, were instrumental agents of relief.

In sum, the main observations made about China in this paper have broad implications: First, historians have laid too much stress on the international dimension to disaster relief in modern China; even at their peak, foreign contributions were both considerably smaller than the totality of Chinese relief responses and slower to mobilise.

Second, instances of effective famine relief in 20th century China were not necessarily due to the institutionalisation, modernisation, or ‘rationalisation’ of relief methods. On the contrary, successful relief involved traditional social networks and relief systems already in place at the outset of crisis, which meshed with outside urban and foreign relief interventions in the countryside. Third, the multi-layered nature of past relief in China suggests the statist-model of today’s People’s Republic – not to mention the Maoist model – is not an essential characteristic of Chinese humanitarian organisation but rather a function of a particular moment in a long history of fluctuations in state power and adaptive relief strategies. These points make a case for the complexity of China’s past experience of disaster, but in ways that can hopefully offer lessons for the challenges that lie ahead.

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