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The Great Leap Backward

By NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

The story behind Mao's policies of the late 1950's, which led to the starvation of tens of millions

In the late 1950's and early 60's, China suffered a prolonged and terrible famine. The human toll was higher than from any other famine in modern times -- and in all likelihood, greater than from any previous famine in human history. While a precise count of the victims will never be possible, Western analyses of official Chinese census figures subsequently indicated that as many as 30 million Chinese perished from "excess mortality" between 1959 and 1961. Even today, the sheer magnitude of that catastrophe seems almost incomprehensible: it would be as if the entire population of California had been swept off the face of the earth.

Unlike so many earlier bouts of mass starvation in Chinese history, this one did not come on the heels of extraordinary flooding or exceptional drought: China's own meteorological records confirm that weather conditions across the country were actually slightly better than usual during the deadly years between 1958 and 1962. This was, instead, a man-made disaster: there was nothing "natural" about it.

In 1958, Mao Zedong's Communist Government unleashed the fateful "Great Leap Forward" campaign; wildly ambitious targets notwithstanding, the program swiftly and methodically brought about a nationwide collapse of Chinese agriculture (a calamity never before witnessed in this ancient land). Yet instead of immediately redressing the damage they had caused, the merciless utopians of China's new dynasty insisted on forcing their experiment forward and made a point of denying relief to the country's desperate peasants -- thereby vastly and needlessly magnifying the human cost of the tragedy.
Unlike other monumental atrocities in living memory -- the Holocaust, the gulag, Khmer Rouge Cambodia -- the story of China's state-sponsored famine remains largely unknown to the world's informed public. For unlike the Nazis, the leaders of the Soviet Union or the Pol Pot regime, the Government and party responsible for the great Chinese famine are still in power -- and still suppressing information about the carnage they wrought. With "Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine," however, there is at last an accessible -- and, as it happens, a masterly -- account of the greatest peacetime disaster of this century.

The author, Jasper Becker, is a British journalist who serves as Beijing bureau chief for the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post. Ably drawing on Western academic sources, unpublished Chinese Government documents he has obtained and hundreds of interviews with famine survivors conducted both in China and beyond its borders, Mr. Becker manages to re-create the cataclysm in chilling -- at times almost unbearable -- detail.

Mao Zedong's armies "liberated" mainland China in 1949 and set to work immediately to build a new society. While China's newest rulers claimed to govern by rationality and "scientific socialism," in reality Mao and his acolytes believed themselves bound neither by the laws of men nor even by the laws of nature. They held that with will power, sweat and a superior ideology the rules of biology, chemistry and physics could be rewritten: according to their bizarre world view, infant piglets could be made to spawn litters, broken glass could fertilize crops and earthen embankments could be put to the same exacting use as concrete dams.

Fortified by its faith in this false science, Beijing decreed in 1958 that impoverished China would overtake Britain in 15 years. (A little later, Mao judged this timetable insufficiently ambitious and declared that China would instead surpass Britain in two years!) The same political campaign that was to make China wealthy overnight, moreover, was also charged with the post-haste transformation of the Middle Kingdom into the world's first fully Communist society. The prime instruments in this millenarian scheme were the newly organized "People's Communes" in the countryside, huge collectives that socialized feeding as well as farming. Peasants were permitted to eat only in the communes' public mess halls as a matter of principle, Mr. Becker explains, for in the Great Leap Forward "the Communist Party's explicit aim was to destroy the family as an institution."

Things began to go wrong almost immediately. Promised that China was entering an era of permanent abundance, peasants gorged themselves even on grain that should have been held for seed. (And why not? Nothing -- not even the seed -- belonged to them anymore.) But as production was heading down, the state's exactions of grain from the communes were rising constantly, for the Communist Government had swallowed its own propaganda about the upswing supposedly under way in the countryside.

"In many parts of the country," Mr. Becker writes, "around the Chinese New Year of 1959, starvation set in and the weak and the elderly began to die." But, he adds, when "stories of food shortages reached Mao's ears he refused to believe them and
jumped to the conclusion that the peasants were lying and that 'rightists' and grasping kulaks were conspiring to hide grain in order to demand further supplies from the state." For the crime of being hungry, the peasants were sentenced to political terror; throughout the countryside, "anti-hoarding" campaigns applied brutal tortures to uncover nonexistent caches of secret food.

Chinese Communist Party continued to deny there was a food problem. In fact, "China rebuffed all offers of assistance, even those by neutral international bodies such as the League of Red Cross Societies." Even worse, Mr. Becker reports, "over the three years from 1958 China doubled her grain exports and cut her imports of food. Exports to the Soviet Union rose by 50 percent and China delivered grain gratis to her friends in North Korea, North Vietnam and Albania."

China's leadership also did what it could to obstruct farmers' frantic efforts to save themselves and their families. Mr. Becker grimly notes that Mao "insisted that the peasants continue eating in the collective kitchens, describing these as the 'key battlefield of socialism.' " With the help of a Soviet-style internal passport system and a vigilant public security force, moreover, peasants caught fleeing a stricken locale were routinely sent back to perish at home.

Finally, in late 1961 and early 1962, naked exigency forced the Chinese Communist Party to recognize the extent of the crisis it had created. The most deadly innovations from the Great Leap Forward were quietly abandoned or reversed; almost immediately, this artificially manufactured famine came to an end.

"Hungry Ghosts" presents eyewitness testimony by ordinary Chinese people depicting the horror of daily life between 1958 and 1962. Readers should be forewarned that some of these vivid recollections will be gut-wrenching. All across the country, famine visited death and unspeakable degradation upon the people. In Tibet, "People ate cats, dogs, insects. Parents fed dying children their own blood mixed with hot water," one survivor reported. "In the yellow-earth country of northwest China," Mr. Becker writes, "people abandoned their children by the roadside in holes dug out of the soft soil" in the forlorn hope that some travelers would discover and take pity on these waifs. Cannibalism, according to diverse interviewees, became a widespread practice.

Yet it was worse than that: even as villagers were slowly dying of starvation, China's "officials . . . created a nightmare of organized torture and murder" in the countryside. Suffice it to say that Mr. Becker provides ample evidence that Pol Pot was not the first Marxist ruler to subject Asian peasants to wanton and inventive state violence.

One of the most amazing aspects of the great Chinese famine was Beijing's success in concealing it from the outside world. The Chinese Government was aided in its shameful task by a procession of witless or willing Westerners. After visiting China in 1959, for example, Lord Boyd-Orr, former director of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, enthusiastically declared that Mao's Government had "ended the traditional Chinese famine cycle." Edgar Snow, the American journalist
who had chronicled Mao's struggle in the 30's, was invited back for five months in China in 1960; he attested that "I saw no starving people in China, nothing that looked like old-time famine." And the future French President, Francois Mitterrand, in a fawning interview with Mao Zedong in 1961, uncritically broadcast the Great Helmsman's lie: "The people of China have never been near famine." Although some Western academics, journalists and politicians did warn of the famine while it was occurring, the full demographic dimensions of the catastrophe were unknown to Western analysts until the 80's -- nearly a generation after the event.

In fact, Mr. Becker suggests, a great deal of information about it is still being concealed by the Chinese Communist Party: "A fuller account of the famine may have to wait until the party's own archives are open to researchers but this is unlikely to occur so long as those who share responsibility for the famine remain in power." (And as "Hungry Ghosts" documents, the entire party was complicit: even "pragmatic" Deng Xiaoping, China's current paramount leader, waxed enthusiastic about the Great Leap Forward at the time.) In this powerful and important book, however, Mr. Becker has well begun the job of filling in the blank pages of modern Chinese history -- and in so doing, has offered both a grim tribute to the dead and a challenge to our consciences.

Nicholas Eberstadt is a researcher with the American Enterprise Institute and the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. His books include "The Poverty of Communism" and "The Tyranny of Numbers."

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