

# THE OTHER CHINA

## Hunger: Part I

### The Three Red Flags of Death

Miriam London and Ivan D. London

**B**eyond the bland facade of China's great open cities and the green abundance of its showplace communes lies a vast country *in obscuro*—a China through the looking glass. In this, some say imaginary, country, people do not converse in *People's Daily* platitudes, but use a distractingly earthy language, enriched with sly puns and ancient proverbs; young men sing melancholy songs and brood over lovers and lost illusions; sons and daughters esteem their families above the Party; there are thieves, pickpockets, and prostitutes; village cadres keep "one eye open and one eye shut" to sideline business activities; women quarrel hysterically over their woks in communal kitchens; speculators slip in and out of towns buying and selling ration coupons; underground factories operate; farmers lavish care on their private plots while neglecting the collective lands; and massive numbers of the Chinese peasantry, immemorably patient and industrious, labor daily under hardship and deprivation for three meals of rice gruel and sweet potatoes a day.

In this China there has been a major famine, and beggars still roam from disaster areas in the North into the more fortunate South.... And here we must pause, deferring to the reader's possible surprise or perplexity. For however disconcertingly the "reality" of China has tended to dissolve, only to rematerialize and redissolve, during the restless era of Maoist communism, one premise has been taken as invariant by many observers: the famine-ravaged land of the past is gone. After centuries of recurrent misery the problem of feeding the myriad descendants of the Middle Kingdom—at whatever cost—has been solved.

Hunger in contemporary China—the elusive China that has become the humble doppelgänger of the People's Republic—is, nevertheless, the subject of this paper. Toward the evidence adduced below the reader's indulgence is accordingly entreated. For can he be certain on which side of the looking glass he stands?

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In 1958 a visionary Mao Tse-tung prepared for the instant transformation of a "poor and blank" China into the utopia of Communist dreams. In Peking that year the *People's Daily* declared rapturously: "The Greek mythology of ancient times was only a tale, a dream, an ideal. Today, in the era of Mao Tse-tung, heaven is here on earth." In the countryside not only would agricultural miracles be performed, but within the newly organized communes a sociopsychological transmutation of the peasant would occur, with collective facilities displacing private lives and personal cares. Money would become unimportant, food (served in common mess halls) and clothing would be free, and the peasants would no longer be bent in rapt servitude to the capricious soil, bound to the wheel of the seasons, but would be liberated for other diverse activities enhancing communal well-being.

Alas. The vast experiment—one year later to be criticized for its "departure from reality" by Defense Minister P'eng Teh Huai, at the cost of his dismissal and later vilification—seemed horribly and mistakenly to have adopted the blueprint of another, subterranean mythical region. The Great Leap Forward, part of the triumphal procession of the Three Red Flags movement, led directly into the Three Years of Natural Disasters (1960-62)—to cite the widely accepted official euphemism. Heaven and the Soviet Union were blamed by the authorities for the national misery following the Leap; the former for visiting allegedly unprecedented drought and other calamities upon the land, the latter for mercilessly exacting its pound of flesh in repayment of debts for previous "big-brotherly" aid. The sad truth is, however, that only planned human intervention could and did manage such a thoroughgoing, nationwide disaster. In every province misguided Party zeal and amateurism prevailed over both agricultural science and old peasants' wisdom. Indiscriminate application of the methods of intensive cultivation (deep plowing, close planting, and heavy fertilization), under the supervision of inexperienced young cadres, produced catastrophic crop failures even in the normally fertile rice paddies of South China. Ill-conceived projects, undertaken to irrigate the dry wheat-growing plains in North China in

order to convert them into high-yielding rice paddies, led to fatal alkalization of large areas of arable land. Within the commune itself the psychological dislocation of the peasantry induced a physical slowdown. Along with his personal belongings, the newly regimented peasant seemed to have shed also his feeling of personal responsibility. Control had been mysteriously assumed by a suprafarmer; things were presumably to be done for him anyway, whether he exerted himself or not. In the beginning, at least, many a peasant appeared to be a bewildered spectator at his own metamorphosis, his inventive and common sense equally suspended. The peasant, however, soon saw what was coming, long before the central authorities—beguiled by falsely inflated reports of bumper harvests from compliant cadres below—read the signs of disaster.

Serious researchers have not sought to minimize the gravity of China's economic collapse in the early sixties, but few have described it as other than severe "economic depression" with attendant "food shortages." Yet the tattered red banners of the failed campaign fluttered grotesquely over something more elemental and tragic. What the Chinese peasant saw in 1958 was the approaching specter of famine.

**W**as there famine in China during the years 1960-62?

In the August 10, 1962, issue of *China News Analysis* the noted authority on China, L. La Dany, ventured a "realistic estimate" of fifty million deaths from starvation and deficiency diseases within that period. The estimate was based on letters received from the mainland and on refugee reports. Elsewhere he cited an additional telling statistic: The number of food parcels mailed by Hong Kong residents to relatives inside China rose from 870,000 in 1959 to 3.7 million in 1961.

Our research over a ten-year period indicates widespread hunger during those critical three years, ranging from acute food shortage to what La Dany calls "real, black famine." The situation was far worse in the countryside than in the cities, particularly the major cities, which were supplied at the cost of the countryside. It was also worse and more prolonged in the North than in the South.

The following excerpts are a sampling from our interviews conducted annually from 1965 to 1975 with persons who shortly before had fled or legally emigrated from China. It should be pointed out that several of the statements recorded below were made spontaneously during the course of the interview, particularly in 1965-68 when our research was focused on topics unrelated to famine. The cumulative impact of such unsolicited material led us later to inquire systematically into the nature and scope of hunger in China.

The order of presentation begins with the South of China and follows an irregular line North and West.

#### *A peasant from Kwangtung*

At the beginning in the commune it was very different from now. Things were assigned then to members—free medicine, food, haircuts. Then later, nothing....I was very happy at first because everything was free and I got

\$6 JMP in addition. Even free clothing. They said it was the Three Red Flags, great progress. Send satellites, great progress. Satellites are very fast, aren't they? I think it meant you had to work fast. It was just like in the army; you were ordered to work—any time of the night even, you had to go. When you went to work, you had food to eat. The farming plan, according to the commune, was to plant "small" so there'd be "high productivity," a big harvest. So, many people worked on a small piece of land, leaving a lot of land untilled. Then we were supposed to plant like this: "a sky full of stars" [meaning rice plants all close together]; "a pair of dragons setting out to sea" [pairs of rows closer together instead of all equidistant]; "ants starting to move" [close spacing within each row]. We used all the fertilizer on a small piece of land. But there was no "high productivity" as the slogan said. There were many plants, no doubt, and very tall. But no yield. It just couldn't work; it had to change....Actually many of us



Province-level Administrative Divisions

didn't like the idea, but we couldn't help it. The plan came from "above." They said, "Plow deep three feet underground and each *mou* will yield 10,000 catties." Before, the water level in the paddy used to be above the ankle, now it went above the knee. But deep down the soil is no good, too compact. Only 4-5 inches on the surface are good. It wasn't correct, but we couldn't help it. We got orders. Even "sending satellites," we didn't like that, but it was no use. We were worried, but what could we do? No one spoke out; you'd be severely criticized if you did....So there came a time when there was no oil, no food. Everyone had to go hungry....No one ever dared say famine. The "above" asked people to use sugarcane waste for food, to eat sweet potato leaves, also some wild plants on the mountainside. People squeezed oil out of rice husks. No one ever mentioned the word! That was how we got through that time. It's not that people actually died of hunger. Just some people swelled up and got sick and died of the sickness. During those years there were very few births.

*A peasant from Kwangtung (Waiyeung County)*

The worst time was 1959-62, with 1960 worst of all. I was very young at the time—about 11-12 years old. It was terrible for me—I would search everywhere for any blade of grass or leaf to eat. I also ate live crickets. People got only 1.7 taels of rice a day. They ate things like mountain aspen leaves and young banana stems. In my large brigade there were about 2,000 people, and almost half of them died. It was like this: Someone dies in the morning, I carry him to the mountain to bury him. In the afternoon someone else will take me to the mountain for burial.

*An itinerant herb-medicine healer and temporary worker from Kwangtung*

During the Great Leap Forward in 1958 Chairman Mao ordered that people should get three meals a day. After a few months there was little rice left, so people ate gruel. When there was no more rice, some had to eat cassava, a starchy tuber, which is poisonous if eaten alone in quantity. In my native village about thirty persons died of poisoning from eating cassava. There were many cases of beriberi. Later I was sent to a large brigade in the countryside where about 80 persons had starved to death....The causes of the famine were very complicated. ...The central authorities' agricultural research had done something wrong; they'd ignored the traditional and historical way of sowing. "Central" thought that one seed becomes one plant, which gives many seeds. So they ordered people to plant seeds without much interspacing. It was too crowded, too close together, and the plants died. But the lower cadres reported a good harvest to "Central," saying the plan really worked. "Central" then asked for the grain. So the lower cadres sent them reserve grain, but even this was insufficient, so they counted in the grain from the next harvest, to be sent later. For example, if this year "Central" demands 100, but there's only 70, then you owe 30. Next year it's another 100, leaving 40. In that way the famine intensified.

*A student from Hainan Island (Kwangtung)*

Between 1959 and 1962 conditions in the villages were critical. There was a lack of basic foods. At the end of 1959 rice distribution was 2 taels a day for an adult, half that for a child. But the new year, 1960, brought worse: No more rice was distributed, and the peasants had to dig for roots in the mountains. The best foods we had were things like sweet potato leaves and pumpkin leaves. There were repeated rumors in 1960 that human meat was being sold on the black market in Haikou City....In 1965, when I was sent to the villages for three months as a member of a Socialist Education Work Team, I discovered that the campaign to "recall bitter [memories]" did not make the peasants think of the remote past [before Liberation] but of their sufferings during the recent Three Red Flags movement.

*A student from Kwangtung (Chungshan County)*

[In 1961-62] like the other [middle school students] I could afford only two meals a day. I ate no breakfast. There were four classes in the morning session. By 9 A.M. we were all so hungry we had to drink water to ease

the hunger pains. It does help. I want to point out that I myself could stand the hunger. But many others, especially the girls, could not. Some became so hungry they cried. Some local students went home, because even though there was no rice in the house, they might still manage to find a few sweet potatoes to eat. Truancy was common.

*A medical assistant from Kwangtung (Yunfu County)*

[In 1959] the communes had already run into trouble, and there was universal famine. Hunger caused a prevalence of edema and also fatal enteritis in children. The entire staff of our Health Station was ordered to conduct a survey in the villages in order to round up the critically ill among the great numbers of people afflicted and give them better food. So people with light cases tried to "requalify" for better food. No one was ever cured. ...At the time I thought the government had withheld food supplies to barter for machinery with Soviet Russia or to pay back Soviet loans. For Chou En-lai had once said something about the entire nation's trying to overcome difficulties for three years in order to pay back all debts. But later on I thought differently. There were other causes: First, the high degree of centralization in the communes reduced the available manpower [for agriculture]. Everybody's working together for the public and not for himself was inefficient. Second, the lower cadres blew up production figures in order to show how meritorious they were, and the higher echelons exacted taxes according to the padded figures. And, third, there was too much extravagance in the early days of the commune when rice was eaten three times a day without cheaper foodstuffs being used. A great shortage was felt in less than six months....The famine ended in 1962. According to the county commune statistics, several tens of thousands of people had died. All the older people passed away.

1 JMP [*Jen Min Pi*, i.e., "People's Money"] = US \$.52 (at current exchange rate)

1 *mou* = about 1/6 acre

1 *catty* = 1.1 pounds

1 *tael* = 1.1 ounces

A commune is made up of several large brigades further subdivided into small brigades. A small brigade often coincides with a natural village.

*A peasant from Fukien (Changlo County)*

The commune started in 1958, followed by three years of famine. I'll never forget those dates in a thousand years: 1959-61! Many people swelled up from hunger. The cause of the famine was very simple. First, the cadres went from house to house to remove all stored grain. Then they set up public mess halls (7-8 cooks in the smaller one, 10 in the larger). When food was ready, they beat a gong or raised a flag. As much was wasted in the mess hall as was eaten—it was a public mess hall, after all. And because there was no individual farming, very little was collected from the fields. For example,

sweet potatoes *that* big [demonstrates with cupped hands] were left in the fields! So we quickly went through everything until we were all sure it couldn't go on. The public mess lasted only about half a year, and then people were made to eat at home again, and control was restored by issuing everybody a fixed measure of rice—3 taels a day. Only that, nothing else.... In our own small brigade no one starved to death. Only, about six girls under twelve years of age were sold by their parents to better-off small brigades near the coast for sweet potatoes and rice. That is, they were "married off," but actually sold. The worst-off in our commune was the Lingnan Small Brigade, which was in the same large brigade as ours. In 1960 more than 60 people died there of hunger. It all had to do with their cadres, who were much stricter. Generally, if the cadres were more humane, they'd release more from the stockpiles intended for next year's seeding. A more understanding cadre would also give people permission to plant outside the field, that is, to *k'ai huang* ["open up the wilderness," i.e., plow up virgin land]. Or they'd permit people to leave the village to try to make a living elsewhere. But in Lingnan people were never allowed to do this. Where would they go if they were allowed to leave? They'd just drift. They'd go where they heard conditions were better. Poor as the situation was in Fukien, we were better off because Fukien is close to Kinmen [Quemoy] and Matsu [Nationalist-held islands]. Other provinces were worse off—like the part of Kiangsu north of the Yangtze River, or parts of Shantung. But worst of all in all China was Anhwei! People from Anhwei drifted even into Fukien Province. I felt it had to be the worst because I saw hundreds and hundreds of Anhwei beggars in three cities in Fukien—our own county seat, Foochow, and Nanping. They hung around eateries, hoping for leftovers. It's widely known that people in Anhwei stole food meant for hogs—plant roots, Chinese pumpkins. A large percentage of Anhwei drifts *every* year. Probably it's because of the Hwai River—it floods whenever there's heavy rain. And parts of the province are constantly in a state of drought.

*A worker from Amoy (Fukien)*

In 1961, when the three-year famine was already under way, the Communist Central Committee issued an order requiring [city] people to go into the mountains and farms to reinforce agricultural production. It took this opportunity to force all those people with a "history"—political undesirables—to work on the farm. I was one of the sacrifices. We lived with the peasants and ate about the same food—watery rice gruel.... The disaster was nationwide. It was not natural, but man-made—the inevitable result of the commune. For example, take a strong young man and a weak old one. No matter how they worked, they got the same recompense. So no one worked. Furthermore, the peasants were forced to practice overclose planting. There was growth, but no yield.

*A peasant from Fukien (Lienchiang County)*

On the coast where we were it was a little better during the famine, because people could get some fish to eat and

our commune issued some dried sweet potatoes for relief. But in the villages near the mountains people were more starved, and many swelled up and died.... In our village we ate everything edible. We peeled bark off the iron tree [*cycas revoluta*], soaked the inside white pith in water, chopped it into little pieces, and boiled it.... The worst place I heard of was Ningteh County in Fukien. There were a lot of refugees from Ningteh in our village. Many people just wandered into different places. But I heard that in many places people were too weak even to get relief food.

*A peddler and petty speculator from Fukien*

It was very bad in 1960. I myself knew of more than 100 people who died of hunger within Lienchiang City limits. We lived on wild plants because we were given so little rice—we had to cook it into a thin gruel. We ate sweet potato dregs when we could find them.... I heard this was all because China owed money to the Soviet Union and had to pay off the debt in farm products. Beautiful white rice was sent off to the Soviet Union, and we Chinese had nothing to eat. Another reason was the commune, where much food was wasted and the peasants didn't work hard. But mostly for the first reason.

*A doctor of Western medicine from Mang City (Yunnan)*

Around the time of the famine in 1962 hepatitis was common not only in Yunnan but all over the country. Newspapers and broadcasts constantly urged people to be careful about what they ate. Conditions in Yunnan then were no worse than elsewhere, but they were bad enough. I remember that, when our doctors or cadres had to go to Kunming—a five-day journey—they would come back with the story that all the way there and back they couldn't find in any restaurant a single dish of vegetables or other *ts'ai* [main dishes to eat with rice], only a cooked mixture of rice with sweet potatoes or pumpkins. In Kunming City itself the situation was no better. There was just no food. We were urged to collect something called "little ball water-weeds" [a form of algae, possibly nostoc, which is, in fact, predominantly carbohydrate] and put them in a tank, where they grow very fast. Almost 100 per cent protein—a substitute for *ts'ai*. Tasteless! But every family and cadre member was urged to grow it.

*A construction worker from Yunnan (Hsüanwei County)*

The hardest years in China were 1960 and 1961, when many people starved to death. People ate wild plants when they ran out of food. The older people bore the hunger worst, and a large number swelled up and died. At that time I was still in my home village. I would steal things from the fields and eat my loot up on the mountain. Then I'd take back anything left over to my *po mu* [an aunt who had adopted him].

*A peasant woman from Chekiang (Yiwu County)*

I was only thirteen in 1960 during the famine. That year I stopped going to primary school, and my parents sent me instead to chop wood on the mountainside about 23 kilometers away, near a relative's house. They sent me because, if they had gone off themselves to the moun-

tains for firewood, they'd have forfeited their *k'ou liang* [individual grain allotment] for work in the brigade. At that time the *k'ou liang* was not rice, but only some corn, turnips, and sweet potatoes. For 42 days during the hours I was out on the mountainside I had nothing at all to eat. So each day by the time I got back to my relative's house I had terrible pains in my stomach and would stuff it with any scraps of food I had. I boiled some of the grasses I'd picked in the mountains to get rid of the bad smell and then steamed them together with some corn. My relatives had not even enough food for themselves; I had to bring my own *k'ou liang* with me from home. Since that time I've always had trouble with my stomach.

During the first year of famine your body could still take it, but after two years people became too weak to work and production fell off. In 1960 around eight out of 100 or so people in my small brigade died after swelling up. There was no meat during those years. Even if some dead pig turned up, it was very expensive. But people would try any way they could to get money to buy a small piece—even if it meant selling everything they had. At least, if you died tomorrow, you'd die on a full stomach. A neighbor, an old man, heard once there was meat in the marketplace. So he went there and saw a crowd buying meat from a booth and eating it on the spot. People didn't know where the meat was from; they thought probably from some wild animal. It was delicious. It was only when someone found a human finger joint and nail that they realized what they were eating....I heard many stories of cannibalism practiced in secret. Children were warned about being kidnapped and butchered. In any case, children were not permitted out alone, because they were so starved they'd grab anything they saw to eat. If they stole from the fields, the family would be fined five to ten days' worth of *k'ou liang*.

A lot of people from our village went to the county seat to beg for food. Not young people between 18 and 30, because they didn't want to lose face. It was mostly old people and young children. They begged for leftovers at little restaurants where cooked noodles were sold. At these places there were also a lot of beggars from Anhwei Province, especially in 1960-61. The local people hated the Anhwei beggars, because there'd be no food left for them if the Anhwei beggars got at it first. I heard of local beggars beating an Anhwei man to death just for this.

Most of the restaurant customers were travelers from the outside, like engineers and professors, who were pretty well paid. There were leftovers sometimes, because noodles on the countryside were cooked with so little oil and had no taste. The travelers were just eating to fill their stomachs, so sometimes they couldn't finish. But more often what happened was that a lot of dirty hands would grab the bowl before the person who ordered it could even start eating. In that case he just didn't feel like eating at all.

#### *A student from Kiangsu*

During the big famine in 1960-62 the Party asked the people to eat "Leap Forward flour," which consisted of corncobs, corn silk, rice husks, and wheat husks ground together. This flour was described as highly nutritious and rich in vitamins. The peasants quipped that the

vitamins would keep the Party alive, not them. [The characters used to transliterate the sound "vitamin" into Chinese—wei-t'a-ming—literally read "sustain his life." Hence, the peasants' quip: It will sustain him, not me.]...Many people got edema and died on such food. In our small brigade back home about 10 per cent of the people died that way.

#### *A People's Liberation Army soldier from Shantung*

I remember the famine, although I was only seven in 1960. Many died of hunger then. I remember myself eating tree leaves and chaff. My grandmother didn't let me go outside as I pleased. She told me a story about cannibalism to frighten me. I can't recall the details....In Tsinan City there are always plenty of beggars from northern Shantung, but during those years there were more than ever. Why all the beggars? Because in districts like Tehchow, Hweimin, and Liaocheng much of the land is alkaline. It's because of the Yellow River....And the peasants don't want to work.

#### *A People's Liberation Army officer from Shantung*

On my first leave home in 1959 I found life very hard. The Great Leap had destroyed the general standard of living. But people still survived. When I went home again in 1961, I learned that my grandmother and uncle had starved to death. That year I saw trees stripped of bark for food....The military forces were also affected by food shortage; in 1961-62 the amount of food provided was decreased and substitutes were introduced. But conditions were better than for the civilian population.

#### *A geological worker from Chengtu (Szechwan)*

I was assigned to Szechwan after the Cultural Revolution, but I couldn't leave right away for my post, because it took longer there to bring the violent struggles under control. In 1970-71 I heard talk in Szechwan about the difficult times there ten years before. The circumstances were like this: a conversation started among friends about how many people had been killed during the Cultural Revolution in Szechwan. (This was in confidence, of course! And we hoped none of the cadre would ever learn of this. The government didn't want people to talk about deaths.) Well, it was estimated that a shockingly large number had died. Then someone thought to compare this with the number of people who'd died of starvation ten years before. That figure was also very shocking. In some places, they said, the number approached five figures. Jungching County was especially mentioned. Finally, the death rate became so alarming that, perhaps to avoid any political consequences, military storehouses were opened, and frozen food was released to the populace. There were frozen pigs in lengthwise halves. The chop on the rumps showed that the pigs had been placed into frozen storage in 1954, maybe as part of war preparation....Jung County had also suffered badly. According to one person who had lived there, the population was 800,000 in 1960, but so many died during those difficult times that by 1970 the population had still not been restored to that level. In that county there was said to have been cannibalism.

## 割齋相爭途載葶餓

### *An athlete from Tientsin*

The paradox of food scarcity in a great agricultural country like China troubled me. The Party blamed the terrible shortages in 1960-62 on natural causes, but in my mind I felt they must be due to Party policy....Athletes, high-level intellectuals, and the military were much better off. I received a generous sum for food every month. But the monthly ration of most people in the city barely lasted half a month. And when my friends and I traveled just outside the city, we saw people digging for roots and collecting edible plant material—tree leaves, bark, and wild grasses. They had to do this to supplement their meager rations. I felt the Party was so callous. It claimed success for the Three Red Flags movement at the same time that deep suffering was widespread among the people. Foreigners just don't understand the extent of this suffering....As a student at the Athletic College I was often asked to participate in welcoming foreigners at the airport. My healthy, robust, and cheerful appearance was meant to give foreigners the impression of well-fed, happy youth. In fact, quite the opposite was true for most young people.

### *An Indonesian Chinese student from Lanchow (Kansu).*

When I first entered China in 1960 [as one of a group of young Indonesian-born Chinese "returning" to the homeland], I stayed in Canton around a half a year. During that time all our activities were organized—visits to different places, even picnics. I couldn't go about by myself. So, in Canton, I didn't know anything about the disaster in the whole country. When our group was sent to Nanning in Kwangsi, we still weren't allowed to go about alone, so I still wasn't clear about conditions in Kwangsi, even at the end of 1961. Then I was assigned to a middle school in Kweilin, Kwangsi. Living together with my schoolmates, I began to understand the situation more. It was only then that I learned there had been a disaster in 1960. On the streets of Kweilin I saw a lot of beggars; mostly they seemed over 40 years old. Once when I was eating in a small overseas Chinese restaurant, just after my bowl was filled with rice, one of the beggars who were standing around seized it. I felt very bad. I couldn't understand why there were so many beggars, so I asked my teacher. He said that most of the beggars were of bad class background. He kept on talking on the subject of class background, but didn't explain any further....In 1964, when I was transferred north to Lanchow in Kansu, I found the situation much worse. There were more beggars in Lanchow in 1964 than there had been in Kweilin during 1961-63. These beggars had their children with them and begged for food or money at the railroad station. In Lanchow, if a beggar saw any food at all, he'd seize it. When the cadres saw beggars seize food from people, they'd beat them up. I thought this was too much, and I often defended the beggars, saying they took the food only because they couldn't stand the hunger. If a worker's food was seized, generally he wouldn't bother about it; he'd just let the beggar have it. The workers' attitude toward the beggars was better. But the cadres couldn't understand why the beggars didn't go back to their villages to work....Later I found out that conditions in Lanchow were actually the



"Living skeletons scrambling to cut flesh from those who have starved to death on the road." (Source: *Tragic Scenes of the Great Famine of 1877 in Honan.*)

best in Kansu; the rest of the province was even worse....People in Lanchow told me that the famine had started toward the end of 1959; things began to improve only in 1964. During the great famine some people ate a kind of clay called "Goddess of Mercy" clay, which was eatable but really indigestible. Your belly would swell up after eating it. As a result, many died in Kansu....I didn't hear any talk, however, of cannibalism.

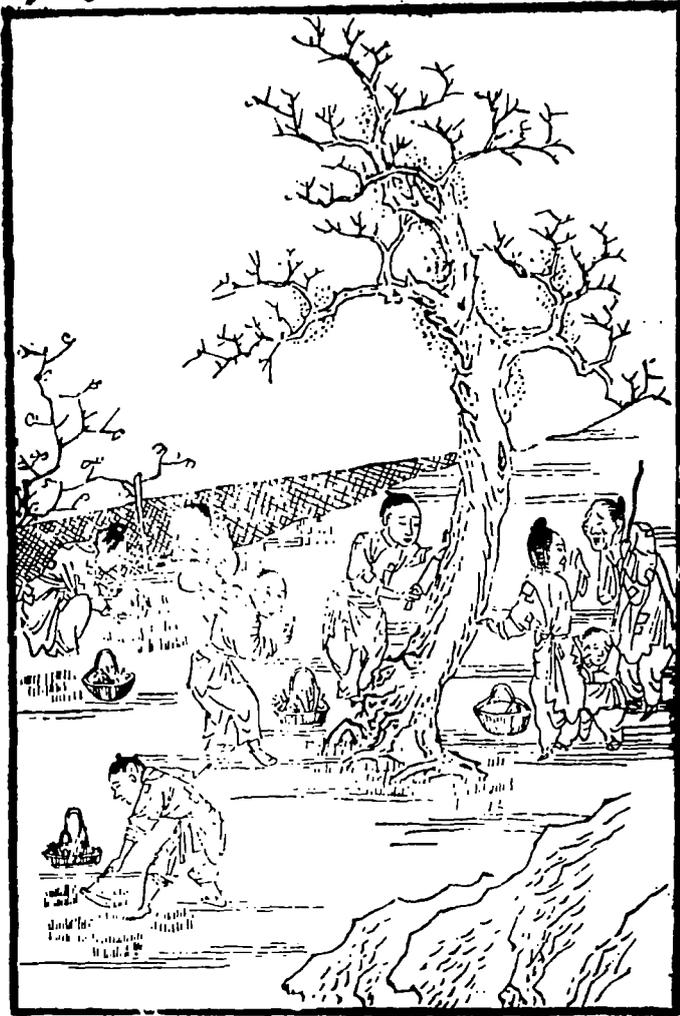
### *A Russian worker from Harbin (Heilungkiang)*

Nineteen sixty-one was a terrible year. People starved to death in Harbin by the thousands. Black markets flourished. With food in short supply, special restaurants were opened, which charged exorbitant prices so that a lot of money hoarded by the Chinese was forced out of hiding.

### *A Russian miller from Sinkiang*

After 1958 there was hunger. Many died of starvation. I myself suffered from lack of food, but, as a miller, I was a little better off....It's interesting. The Communists blamed everything on the drought; but before, even in years of drought, there was plenty to eat. So everyone understood it wasn't because of the weather. It was the

# 樹皮草根剝取充饑



“Stripping bark from trees and digging up roots of grass for food.”

authorities who were responsible for the famine.... Many Chinese fled into Sinkiang from other famine areas [in Tsinghai and elsewhere]; they had been deceived into thinking there was food there. [In 1962] Uighurs fled into the Soviet Union.

## *A Russian beekeeper from Sinkiang*

In 1958 the Communist authorities took such strange measures. For example, they herded all the cattle together without any care, so most perished. As a result of mismanagement there was massive loss.... We Russians survived by fishing and hunting, but otherwise there was nothing to eat. It was better in the cities than in the countryside.... The Communists defended this terrible situation by saying: We are building a better life. You should have patience.

**B**oth the geographical range and the grotesquerie of human suffering during 1960-62 in China are extended in other accounts of individual experience published over a period of years in Hong Kong. In March, 1961, La Dany, known for his cautious assessment of data, printed many details of several

eyewitness stories, including that of a Chinese woman from Mukden (Shenyang) in Liaoning Province, who revealed the following: “In August, 1960, a local paper reported that a man was executed in Mukden. The charge was that he had eaten six children of others. Although the paper reported to the effect that he was insane, it was widely said among the citizens that he was not insane, but sober and simply hungry. There are mothers who easily become overwrought when their children cry for more food to eat and strangle their own children. The frequency of this kind of tragic incident has lately increased in Mukden.”

In 1970 a profile sketch by La Dany of a young man from a small town north of the Hwai River in Anhwei—a remote area from which people rarely escape to Hong Kong—contained this paragraph: “During the Great Leap, in 1958-59, orders were given that the [young man’s] native district, a wheat-growing region, was to be turned into rice paddy fields. As there was not enough water, hundreds of thousands of people were ordered to dig canals to transform the dry region into a wet one. Normally the water is let lie in the paddy field for a few days and is then changed. The authorities did not realize that the soil in that region would not hold water even for a few days. The rice plants died and famine followed. Whole villages were depopulated. He himself was away at school, but his whole family died of starvation....”

One year later La Dany published the detailed reminiscences of a thirty-one-year-old refugee, for whom “the real watershed in the history of these twenty years [in China] was the famine in 1961-62. (This apparently shook him more than anything else and made a lasting impression).” The following is excerpted from the man’s account:

At the time [during the famine] I was already a cadre [member] of the State and I had to travel on business in various provinces. I had not enough food for myself and my belly swelled. My monthly ration was 28 catties of food, but much of this was of inferior quality. I was then in Ts’unyi in Kweichow.... In the streets weary old people could be seen leaning against the walls, holding small baskets containing the roots of wild plants. Soon we too stopped working and went to the hills in search of something edible. Ts’unyi is a small place with a population only about 300,000. There used to be dead bodies in the street. Once I saw two totally exhausted young boys in the street. A kindly policeman saw them and took them into a little inn to offer them something to eat. One of the boys ate slowly. The other had arrived at the stage of starvation at which he could no longer eat anything.

The July and August, 1974, issues of *China Monthly*, a Chinese-language journal published by the Union Research Institute in Hong Kong, contained two installments of an article on beggars in China by Chai Yu-kuei, a young researcher. In the first installment the following appeared:

I grew up in Canton. When I was a little boy, as I remember, Canton seemed to be a city without beg-

gars. The first time I ever saw beggars was in 1960....

Hordes of hunger-stricken people from Kwangtung Province swarmed into Canton like locusts. Countless peasants, young and old, male and female, looking pale and thin, were all over town, in the main streets and back alleys, wailing and begging for food. Although sympathetic to their plight, the residents of Canton, who themselves had barely enough to eat, could not give much help to these poor peasants.

My family was better off than the average citizen of Canton. As an 8th-grade technical worker, my father earned a monthly wage of \$130 JMP, the highest possible for a worker. But the whole of my father's monthly wage could buy only thirty catties of rice on the black market. Luckily, we had many relatives in Hong Kong, who sent us large quantities of rice, flour, sugar, oil, and other foodstuffs every month. Even with this help, I was often hungry. Since I was the eldest child and cherished most by my parents, they often took me to a restaurant for a good meal so that I would have better nutrition during my growing years. This restaurant, I recall, was a more expensive one, but it had one good feature: you could eat all you wanted. Every time we went there, our table was always surrounded by beggars, who never for a moment took their eyes off our food. Sometimes, even when I was not particularly hungry, I would order extra bowls of rice and, when the waiter's back was turned, would dump food into the containers held out by the beggars. My parents would merely shake their heads and sigh in sympathy.

Probably because of Canton's proximity to Hong Kong and Macao, making it a port of entry to foreign visitors, the authorities deemed it necessary to control beggars in the city, as a matter of face. The police and garrison troops would often round up the beggars and put them in detention houses in order to send them back to their native villages. There happened to be one such detention house near my home. On my way to and from school I often saw groups of feeble beggars being led to the detention house and bodies being removed on stretchers from the same house, destined for the cremation grounds on Teng Feng Road. Even as a young boy, my heart grew heavy at the sight of this.

I diligently searched, without success, for starving people or beggars to photograph," declared Edgar Snow in *The Other Side of the River*. During his 1960 sojourn in China he had not seen, he asserted, any evidence of "old-time famine," merely "food shortage," which was "nothing new." In addition to his own eyesight, he cited as supportive evidence an emphatic but curious statement by Gilbert Etienne in *Le Monde* (December 12, 1961), paraphrased by Snow as follows:

While noting signs of possible malnutrition such as "ballooning stomachs," "thin breasts," and "meagre bodies" of the "Asian norm" [!], Mr. Etienne wrote: "It may be said at the outset—and it is one of the rare points where we have the pretension to be categorical—that it is false to speak of 'general famine.'..."

In a 1962 "diary" a grandmotherly Anna Louise Strong assured her readers that, despite "great hardships in many areas," there were "no wholesale casualties...no scattering of starving people to beg and die along the roads...." In fact, there was something rather salutary emerging from adversity: "The three years' struggle tightened the commune organization by eliminating waste, correcting mistakes, and increasing both local initiatives and collective strength."

Miss Strong, however, went on to confide that in the "worst time" in 1960-61 people she knew in the cities of Tientsin and Kaifeng "lost as much as 30 pounds in weight and some even went to hospital for nutritional deficiencies and were treated by the physician's order for special foods." Honest after her fashion, she also noted the "most serious" case of "food shortage" that she had personally witnessed—in Liaoning Province, where the commune, she relates, made "carbohydrate cake," which seems to have been a ground mixture of corn-stalks, sorghum stalks, leaves, and tender bark with edible roots and some grain added. It may have actually added nourishment beyond the grain content, but its main function seemed to be to keep the stomach full and still the hunger pangs. The people slept as much as possible, rising once a day for a full meal to do house and farmyard chores, and thus kept in fair condition on little food."

Whatever the mass of contrary evidence to which it has been exposed, human reason clings, hopefully, to this rather cozy tableau of a Chinese village dreaming through the hungry hours. A white-haired foreign lady presides over the scene and, with matronly meticulousness, jots down a rustic recipe.

Even this strange human scene, however, dwindles to a pinpoint and is gone as one withdraws to that high plateau where policy is formulated and proclamations are made. In the 1962 communiqué of the Tenth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China a single phrase—"the temporary difficulties encountered by the Chinese people"—encompasses the agony of China under the Three Red Flags.

The phrase slips easily and credibly into the historical record. All else is suspect and belongs to that vanished China where every year, during the Seventh Moon, Hell opens its gates and multitudes of hungry ghosts swarm ravaging over the land of the living.

(This is the first in a series of three articles.)