

# Mao's Famine Revisited

## America's Grain Embargo Remembered

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*In 1910...a series of bad harvests in Hunan led to outbreaks of famine. Some desperate Hunanese united under the slogan, 'Eat Rice Without Charge,' seizing stores of rice from wealthier farmers. Among the shipments they seized was one that Mao's father was sending to the county seat of Xiangtan. Mao later recalled the ambiguity that this primal clash between family obligation and social desperation had aroused in him: he could not sympathize with his father—who continued to export rice from his farm in Shaoshan to the bigger county town markets despite the local famine—nor would he condone the violence of those who seized the property of others.—Jonathan Spence. *Mao, A Life*.*

## Plausibility Check

- How likely is it that *any* national leader would maliciously starve millions of fellow countrymen to death and destroy survivors' trust in him?
- How likely is it that a peasant like himself, who knew famine intimately, failed to notice?
- How likely is it that the greatest logistician in history—who fed millions of men on the march for decades while retaining the loyalty of the peasants who fed them—could not manage to share available food among the people he'd previously saved?
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Common sense and [Mao's record](#) suggests the likelihood zero. Even in movies, people with decades of compassionate behavior don't suddenly become bloodthirsty monsters or indifferent psychopaths and nor, as we shall see, did Mao.

## The Great Leap Forward

It began with Mao's promise to redivide China's land but, for him, real revolutions occur in human hearts and minds. Merely changing the ownership of assets, he said, is cosmetic, "To divide up the land and give it to the peasants is to transform the property of the feudal landlords into the individual property of the peasants, but this remains within the limits of bourgeois revolution. To divide up the land is nothing remarkable. MacArthur did it in Japan. Napoleon divided up the land, too. Land reform cannot abolish capitalism, nor can it lead to socialism".

Nevertheless, he kept his wartime promise and, in 1950, redistributed all of China's agricultural land to 300 million peasants. In 1953, he announced a Five Year Plan, the first step on a gradual path to collectivize the

country's semi-subsistence agriculture through cooperative work organizations. The newly-landed peasants gave the plan a mixed reception: a third of villages radically socialized their lives (some, like Huaxi Village, still do so) a third simply went along with it and a third dragged their feet or rejected it outright.

The Plan, however, produced insufficient excess to feed the rapidly doubling population and the millions of newly urbanized industrial workers who'd left their farms. Worse, it produced new inequalities, said Mao, "The spontaneous forces of capitalism have been growing in the countryside in recent years, with newly rich peasants springing up everywhere and many well-to-do middle peasants striving to become rich. On the other hand, many poor peasants are still living in poverty for lack of the means of production, some are falling into debt and others selling or renting their land. If this tendency goes unchecked polarization in the countryside will inevitably worsen". And China was racing against time, "You say China is a big country with a huge population, huge land and socialism, which you say is a superior system. Well then, prove it. If you can't surpass the U.S. in sixty years, what good are you? China will lose its citizenship of the planet". Insisting that the way lay forward, not back, he proposed doubling down.

## Racing Against Time

In 1959, communications were rudimentary, government inexperienced, goal-setting amateurish and the capacity to coordinate implementation was primitive, yet Mao was under relentless pressure.

He had already doubled food production and halved the death rate but, by 1958, the birth rate had quadrupled and he was racing to simultaneously modernize the country and feed new mouths while struggling under the West's crushing food, financial and technology embargoes and its constant threats of nuclear attack. As a matter of survival, he insisted, China must develop agriculture and industry *simultaneously* and, to compensate for the lack of capital and technology, combine popular enthusiasm and virtuous exertion to make what he termed a Great Leap Forward.

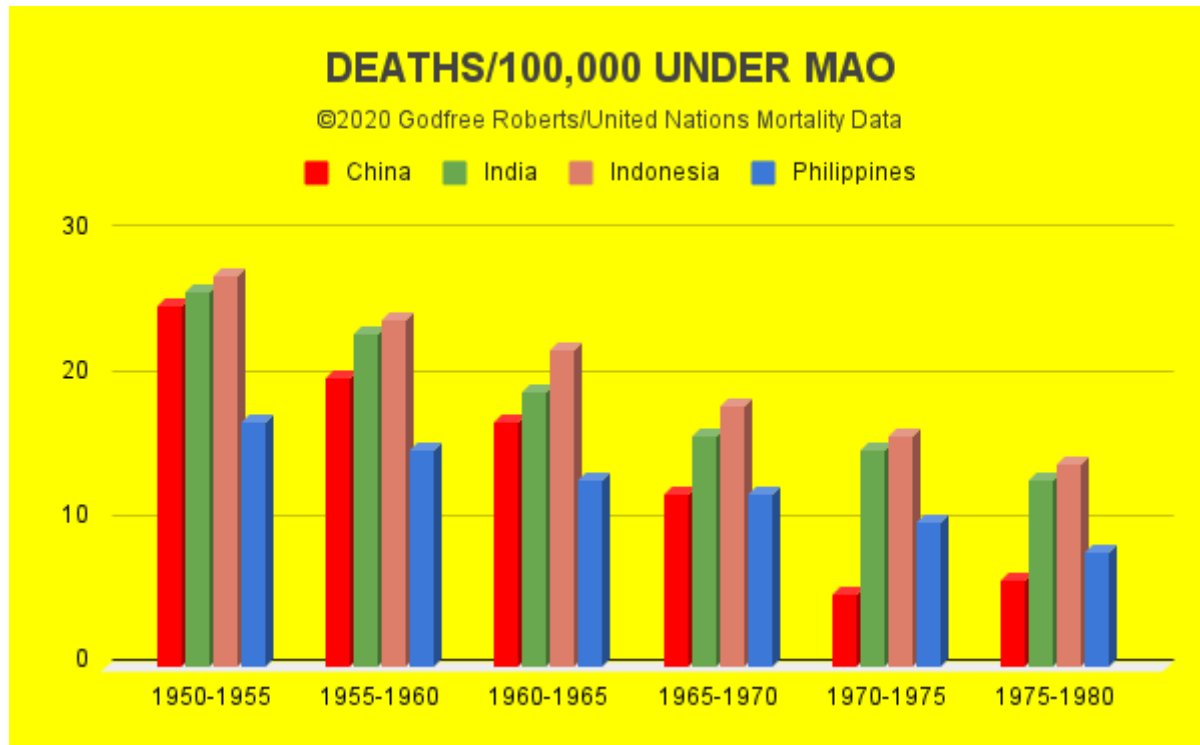
Innovative and enormously ambitious, it would overcome the growing threats of famine and foreign aggression while educating rural people about industrial production. Communalized peasants and workers would share responsibilities, communal child care and kitchens would free women to join the workforce and local, communal development would make reliance on expensive, nationwide infrastructure to transport finished goods unnecessary. Peasants 'walking on two legs' would develop light industry in the countryside while simultaneously erecting dikes, building dams and expanding irrigation. Increased agricultural productivity would free up labor for local manufacturing and, in the absence of capital, labour-intensive rural industries would meet local needs: locally produced cement would build local dams that, through locally made irrigation equipment, would water crops in soil enriched by locally made fertilizer<sup>1</sup>.

## Success

In three years, the Great Leap Forward raised coal production 36%, textile production 30%, electricity generation 26% and fixed national assets 40%, while building nine of the ten biggest reservoirs in China today. The gigantic Xinfengjiang Reservoir, one of thousands and a source of great national pride, still holds ten cubic meters of clean water for every Chinese citizen, generates billions of kilowatts of electricity, powers rural and urban development and plays a vital role in flood control and irrigation for Guangdong and Hong Kong, which rely on it to this day. Of all the industrial projects China would launch in the next fifteen years, two-thirds were

founded during the Great Leap. Even failed experiments like backyard steel furnaces, which did not operate year-around and did not impact farm harvests, did little damage to the economy.

People directly experienced improvements. According to the [US National Institutes of Health](#), the rise in life expectancy under Mao “ranks among the most rapid, sustained increases in documented global history. These survival gains appear to have been largest during the 1950s, with a sharp reversal during the 1959-61 Great Leap Famine, that was then followed by substantial progress again during the early 1960s”. Note the rise in mortality under bungling Deng Xiaoping:



## Failure

The entire Hunan region flooded and the spring harvest in southwest China’s rice bowl been lost to drought, ushering in a three-year El Nino event that would devastate the nation’s cropland and even Canada’s prairie wheat crop. Grain harvests fell by a third: from two hundred million tons in 1958 to to 147 in 1961, not to recover fully until 1965.

Mao felt the impact personally. In late 1958 his wife, Jiang Qing[1], and the cook prepared a family banquet for Mao’s teenage daughter, Li Na, when she came home from boarding school. The girl was so hungry and ate so fast that Mao and Jiang Qing stopped eating and watched as she devoured everything on the table. The cook and Jiang Qing were sobbing. Mao stood up and walked into the courtyard, not knowing what to say.

Yet propaganda officials were reluctant to change their sunny predictions<sup>2</sup> and so, as spring planting began in April 1959, Mao wrote directly to provincial, district, county, commune brigades and village production teams begging them not to boast about production ‘for at least ten years. Boastful, unrealistic rhetoric, *dahua gaodiao*, is dangerous because food is the number one priority and food shortages have such widespread effects’.

Thanks to ration books and Mao's logistical experience, everyone had something to eat every day. Journalist Sidney Rittenberg recalled that Party members were forbidden to stand in line to buy food—they were to let the people go first—and remembered a cadre who broke the rule and repented, “They had a big meeting where she made a self-criticism, weeping, weeping, weeping, saying, ‘I’m not a good communist, I put my children’s health above the health of the masses’. Can you imagine that today? Anything even remotely similar? Today it’s ‘get mine.’”.

In an era when life expectancy was still only fifty-eight, people over sixty, weakened by a lifetime of famine and disease, suffered cruelly. Mobo Gao<sup>3</sup> says that, after 1949, the only suicide in his village occurred during the Great Leap, “A woman hanged herself because of family hardship. The Great Leap Forward years were the only time in anybody’s memory that Gao villagers had to pick wild vegetables and to grind rice husks into powder to make food... Throughout my twenty years in Gao village, I do not remember any particular time when my family had enough to eat... as a rural resident, life was *always* a matter of survival. However, the Great Leap Forward made life even more difficult”.

In *A Curtain of Ignorance*, Felix Greene tells of traveling through China at the height of the famine in 1960, “With the establishment of the new government in Peking in 1949, two things happened. First, starvation—death by hunger—ceased in China. Food shortages, and severe ones, there have been; but no starvation. This is a fact fully documented by Western observers. The truth is that the sufferings of the ordinary Chinese peasant from war, disorder and famine have been immeasurably less in the last decade than in any other decade in the century”.

## Eye Witnesses

Ridiculing the Great Leap Forward as ‘[The Great Leap Backward](#),’ Edgar Snow, who had seen authentic death from hunger in pre-Mao China, saw no famine,

Were the 1960 calamities actually as severe as reported in Peking, ‘the worst series of disasters since the nineteenth century,’ as Chou En-lai told me? Weather was not the only cause of the disappointing harvest but it was undoubtedly a major cause. With good weather the crops would have been ample; without it, other adverse factors I have cited—some discontent in the communes, bureaucracy, transportation bottlenecks—weighed heavily. Merely from personal observations in 1960 I know that there was no rain in large areas of northern China for 200 to 300 days. I have mentioned unprecedented floods in central Manchuria where I was marooned in Shenyang for a week... While Northeast China was struck by eleven typhoons—the largest number in fifty years—I saw the Yellow River reduced to a small stream... Throughout 1959-62 many Western press editorials continued to refer to ‘mass starvation’ in China and continued to cite no supporting facts. As far as I know, no report by any non-Communist visitor to China provides an authentic instance of starvation during this period. Here I am not speaking of food shortages, or lack of surfeit, to which I have made frequent reference, but of people dying of hunger, which is what ‘famine’ connotes to most of us, and what I saw in the past”.

What were the effects of food shortages?

If we take twelve deaths per thousand—Mao’s proudest achievement to that point—as our benchmark, then famine-related deaths from 1959-61 total 11.5 million. But this seems suspiciously high because average grain production per head remained comfortably above India’s, and China’s peak death rate, 25.4, matched India’s 24.8 that year, and India experienced no general famine in that decade. Without communal distribution—which India lacked—the impact would have been worse. In *Hunger and Public Action*, Nobel economist Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze wrote,

Comparing India's death rate of 12 per thousand with China's of 7 per thousand, and applying the difference to the Indian population of 781 million in 1986, we get an estimate of excess mortality in India of 3.9 million per year. This implies that every eight years or so more people die in India because of its higher regular death rate than died in China in the gigantic famine of 1958-61. India seems to manage to fill its cupboard with more skeletons every eight years than China put there in its years of shame.. Starvation deaths and excessive deprivation are newsworthy in a way the quiet persistence of regular hunger and non-extreme deprivation are not”.

In democratic India today, [two million children starve to death every year](#) and nobody notices.

Without the 46,000 communally constructed reservoirs, the effects of later droughts would certainly have been disastrous, as William Hinton remembers in *Fanshen*, “When I spent three weeks in China in 1983, visiting several communes—which still existed then—I was told every time, ‘we built our water conservation system during the Great Leap’”.

We must also remember that the Great Leap relied on a gigantic migration of the fittest young villagers to new urban industries and the entry of women into the workforce—both of which suppressed the birth rate, already suppressed because nutritional deficits affect fertility. the Dutch famine of 1944-45 and the Bangladesh famine of 1974-75 cut fertility in half, as famines had always done in China.

## **Cui Bono?**

There were influential people, inside China and out, who wished to discredit Mao and who took to exaggerating—and even fabricating—statistics to make a gloomy picture darker. In assembling their arguments, Mao’s critics evidence a population deficit (fewer people around than expected) and impute births and deaths which may not have occurred. But historical famine fabrication is a simple matter, as historian Boris Borisov demonstrated in [Famine killed 7 Million People in the U.S.A.](#), a horrifying account of American famine deaths during the Great Depression, in which he employed the same techniques as Mao’s critics, but using more reliable US statistics:

“Few people know about five million American farmers—a million families—whom banks ousted from their land because of debts during the Great Depression. The U.S. government did not provide them with land, work, social aid, or pensions and every sixth American farmer was affected by famine. People were forced to leave their homes and wander without money or belongings in an environment mired in massive unemployment, famine and gangsterism. At the same time, the U.S. government tried to get rid of foodstuffs which vendors could not sell. Market rules were observed strictly: unsold goods categorized as redundant could not be given to the poor lest it damage business. They burned crops, dumped them in the ocean, plowed under 10 million hectares of cropland and killed 6.5 million pigs. Here is a child’s recollection: ‘We ate whatever was available. We ate bush leaves instead of cabbage, frogs too. My mother and my older sister died during a year’ (Jack

Griffin)...The U.S. lost not less than 8,553,000 people from 1931 to 1940. Afterwards, population growth indices change twice, instantly. Exactly between 1930-31 the indices drop and stay on the same level for ten years. No explanation of this phenomenon can be found in the extensive report by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Statistical Abstract of the United States".

Real famines are difficult to hide. Until Professor Borisov reported it, no-one had heard of a famine during the Great Depression yet, when one million people starved to death in colonial Ireland in 1846-47, the world knew immediately. When three million died in the 1943-44 Bengal famine the news raced around the globe. The idea that eight million Americans or thirty-million Chinese starved to death without anyone's noticing seems farfetched. China's weather-related harvests were no secret, and China's El Nino also brought drought throughout the Prairie wheat belt and reduced Canada's 1961 crop from 490 million to 262 million bushels. Yet nobody starved to death in Canada.

Taking advantage of the worldwide grain shortage, the US blocked grain shipments to China and assigned the CIA to monitor the success of the embargo. The Agency [reported](#):

**4 April 1961. [ECONOMIC SITUATION IN COMMUNIST CHINA](#). National Intelligence Estimate. Director of Central Intelligence. CONCLUSIONS:** The Chinese Communist regime is now facing the most serious economic difficulties it has confronted since it consolidated its power over mainland China. As a result of economic mismanagement, and, especially, of two years of unfavorable weather, food production in 1960 was little if any larger than in 1957 at which time there were about 50 million fewer Chinese to feed. Widespread famine does not appear to be at hand, but in some provinces many people are now on a bare subsistence diet and the bitterest suffering lies immediately ahead, in the period before the June harvests. The dislocations caused by the 'Leap Forward' and the removal of Soviet technicians have disrupted China's industrialization program. These difficulties have sharply reduced the rate of economic growth during 1960 and have created a serious balance of payments problem. Public morale, especially in rural areas, is almost certainly at its lowest point since the Communists assumed power, and there have been some instances of open dissidence.

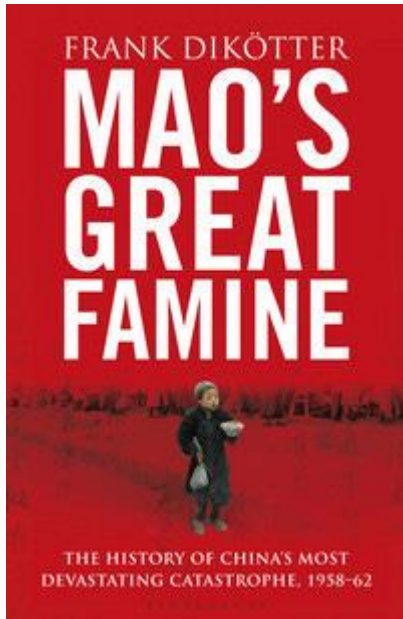
**2 May 1962. [PROSPECTS FOR COMMUNIST CHINA](#): National Intelligence Estimate. Director of Central Intelligence. CONCLUSIONS:** The future course of events in Communist China will be shaped largely by three highly unpredictable variables: the wisdom and realism of the leadership, the level of agricultural output, and the nature and extent of foreign economic relations. During the past few years all three variables have worked against China. In 1958 the leadership adopted a series of ill-conceived and extremist economic and social programs; in 1959 there occurred the first of three years of bad crop weather; and in 1960 Soviet economic and technical cooperation was largely suspended. The combination of these three factors has brought economic chaos to the country. Malnutrition is widespread, foreign trade is down and industrial production and development have dropped sharply. No quick recovery from the regime's economic troubles is in sight.

## The Miracle

Forty-five years later, a miracle happened: A sensational book, [Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe](#), claimed to have discovered forty-five million famine deaths. Western media reviewers were ecstatic: *Must rank as one of the most powerful, moving and yet frightening insights into The Great Leap Forward. Readers cannot help but be distressed by this book for when one tragedy leads to another*



*and then another you cannot read this historical truth without being moved. Of course the tragedies that are revealed involved tens of thousands of citizens leading to the largest human disaster of all time.*



But when a curious reader [asked](#) why the author had used a wartime [1946 Life Magazine photo](#) on the cover, he confessed that he could find no photographs of a Great Leap famine. Another reader observed that the crucial quote he attributed to Mao seemed utterly unlike Mao's known statements: "When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half the people die so that the other half can eat their fill". An archive check [revealed](#) it was taken from the transcript of a meeting convened to cut the number of ambitious Great Leap enterprises in half and the 'people' who would starve were not people at all, but over ambitious industrial projects.

The book insisted that, had Mao maintained his 1953 growth rate, China's population would have been twenty-seven million higher in 1961 and attributed the gap to famine deaths. But University of Chicago demographer Ping-ti Ho [pointed out](#) that the 1953 figures are not from a census, but from provincial estimates showing a highly dubious population increase of thirty percent between 1947 and 1953—a period of warfare, famine and intense revolutionary struggle—suggesting that the twenty-seven million 'missing' people probably never existed.

As Professor Borisov's article demonstrates, historical demography is more art than science and the claims of tens of millions of famine deaths are based, as British historian Gwydion Madawc Williams suggests, on 'comparing Mao to Mao in order to condemn Mao' by using leaps of faith and suspensions of disbelief. The process works like this:

- Use the lowest death rate attributed to Mao as the baseline but don't tell readers that the baseline was Mao's accomplishment.
- Note the increased death rate during the Three Bad Years.
- Ignore the fact that people were better off in 1961 than in the previous 100 years.
- Ignore the weather.
- Ignore the fact that life expectancy was fifty-six and almost all the dead were over sixty.

- Ignore the exodus of workers moving to cities.
- Ignore the fall in birth rates when women join the labor force.
- Ignore the fall in fertility that accompanies food shortages.
- Ignore universal food rationing.
- Ignore the USSR's withdrawal of aid in 1960.
- Ignore the fact that the peasants, armed for the first time in history, showed no discontent.
- Ignore the grain embargo.
- Mistranslate the key statement attributed to Mao.
- Select an evocative famine image from a previous era.
- Fit a linear time trend to the falling death rate.
- Claim deaths should have continued to decline steeply.
- Blame famine for the difference.
- Blame Mao for the famine.

## Conclusion

However severely we may judge Mao, he did not initiate the Great Leap with the aim of killing anyone and claiming that he did obscures his accomplishments, and even a superficial investigation like this demonstrates the opposite. Historian Han Donping, who lost two grandparents during the Great Leap, later [traveled](#) through Shandong and Henan provinces, sites of the worst shortages. Yes, farmers told him, the apparent abundance in 1958 led to carelessness in harvesting and consuming food and, insidiously, to the assumption that the government had absolved them of responsibility for their own food security. "I interviewed numerous workers and farmers in Shandong and Henan and never met one who said that Mao was bad. I talked to a scholar in Anhui who grew up in rural areas and had done research there. He never met one farmer that said Mao was bad nor a farmer who said Deng Xiaoping [Mao's successor] was good".

In reality, China's population increased from 650 million in 1958 to 680 million five years later, so Mao's actions cannot be compared to the vengeful murder of [10 million Congolese](#) by the armies of King Leopold, nor the [deaths of 35 million Chinese](#) at the hands of Japan's imperialist armies during 1937-45, nor the policy-driven famines created by the British in [India](#), [Ireland](#), Bengal and [Persia](#). But the narrative of 'Mao the monster' is assiduously cultivated, at great expense, to prove that socialism is a failure. But direct, comparisons suggest precisely the opposite.

Instead of 'How Many People Died Because Of Mao?' it is fairer to ask, 'How Many People *Lived* Because Of Mao?' If it's reasonable to attribute all unnatural deaths in China since 1949 to him, then it's reasonable to attribute the billions of lives beyond the life expectancy in 1949 to him, too. In reality, bad weather, famines and the US embargo caused most excess deaths and even today's neoliberal globalization is inflicting more death and suffering worldwide than the Great Leap.

### 1

Gao, Mobo. *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (pp. 89-90). Pluto Press.

### 2

Wu Faxian (2006), *Difficult years: Wu Faxian memoirs, volume 2, Chairman Mao: several important historical events and episodes that I was personally involved in*. Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe.



Gao, Mobo, [\*Gao Village\*](#)