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China's Great Leap Famine:

Malthus, Marx, Mao, and Material Scarcity

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“Do not worry about scarcity; worry about uneven distribution.” — *The Analects*, c. 285 B.C.

“To distribute resources evenly will only ruin the Great Leap Forward.” — Mao Zedong, 1959

In 1958, Mao Zedong announced that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was ready to take a “Great Leap Forward” into full-fledged communism. By mobilizing the revolutionary energy of the masses, China would produce steel surpassing that of Britain, increase agricultural yields to support not only the domestic population but also China's international allies, and achieve the utopian communist society envisioned by Marx and Mao, in which the divisions between city and countryside, worker and peasant, intellectual and manual labor would be overcome.² State organs around the country soon began producing visions of the bounty that awaited those willing to endure “three years of struggle” in order to achieve “ten thousand years

1 I thank Jeremy Brown, Felix Wemheuer, and Zhun Xu for their helpful recommendations, but these fine scholars are not responsible for any errors or analytical weakness in this chapter.

2 Felix Wemheuer, “Dining in Utopia: An Intellectual History of the Origins of the Public Dining,” in *Hunger and Scarcity under State-Socialism*, ed. Matthias Middell and Felix Wemheuer, 277-301 (Leipzig: Leipzig University, 2012), 287; Felix Wemheuer, “‘The Grain Problem is an Ideological Problem’: Discourses of Hunger in the 1957 Socialist Education Campaign,” in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberly Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, 107-29 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 124.

of happiness.”³ The propaganda poster from 1959 depicted in Figure 1 is one such example: the caption reads “The vegetables are green, the cucumbers plump, and the yield is abundant.”

But during those same years, China experienced the worst famine in human history. Tens of millions of people died. Even as propagandists painted the portrait of imminent paradise, local cadres began filing reports on the mounting devastation. By 1961, a report from Sichuan documented, “Villagers have resorted to living on wild herbs and tree bark. Every day in [Chongqing’s] Beifu district more than 100 people have been seen going out in groups to search for food. All the banana trees in the People’s Park, the old people’s home in the district, and the local state farm have been ripped up and the roots consumed by hungry villagers.”⁴ The most chilling reports told of people resorting to cannibalism, including parents eating their children and people murdered for human consumption.⁵

For historians of modern China, and especially of rural China, questions of abundance and scarcity are inescapable. They fill both the rhetoric and the reality of our field of study. In recent years, one period in particular has captured the attention of scholars: the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the devastating famine (1959-1961) that accompanied it. Explaining what brought the utopian vision of the Great Leap to its knees, how many people were lost, and above all what caused them to die has increasingly occupied scholars—and of course the Great Leap’s survivors and their descendants have their own understandings of what happened and who

3 Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 191; “Zou San Xian, fang xincun” [Going to three counties, visiting the new countryside], *People’s Daily*, 27 April 1959, 11. See also Matthew D. Johnson, “Cinema and Propaganda in the Great Leap Forward,” in *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750-Present*, ed. James A. Cook et al, 219-39 (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014).

4 Zhou Xun, ed. *The Great Famine in China, 1958-1962: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 132. In fact, facing desperate scarcity, the state had itself developed a program to promote such “food substitutes.” See Gao Hua, “Food Augmentation Methods and Food Substitutes during the Great Famine,” in *Eating Bitterness*, 171-96.

5 For a review of the literature documenting cannibalism, see Cormac Ó Gráda, “Great Leap into Famine: A Review Essay,” *Population and Development Review* 37.1 (2011): 191-202, on 197-98.

was to blame.⁶ This paper will not seek to add any new answers to such questions. Rather, it will focus on the differing ways material scarcity and the distribution of limited resources have been understood over time, and the role these concepts played both in the lead-up to the Great Leap famine itself and in ensuing debates over its historical significance. In particular, the famine offers a valuable, if very painful, opportunity to consider Marxist interpretations of scarcity and the interesting historical twists that have occurred when those Marxist interpretations have confronted famine in a state-socialist context—a context in which, the PRC state promised, “no one would starve to death.”⁷

Two puzzles lie at the center of this discussion. First, Marxism teaches that food scarcity is primarily a political, rather than a natural, phenomenon. Yet, in the wake of the Great Leap, the socialist Chinese state determined the cause of the shortages to be largely weather-related and refused to use the term “famine” at all, referring only to “three years of natural disasters.” Among scholars, critics hostile to socialism have been among the most likely to reject the notion that weather played a significant role in the famine, while those more sympathetic to socialism have been more inclined to grant some role to natural causes or at least to insist on the need to test the data before dismissing weather as an influence.

Second, we might think that as Marxists and socialists, Mao and his followers would have specifically recognized uneven distribution of resources as a political problem underlying poverty and starvation; indeed, the vision of the Great Leap was colored with a radical egalitarianism that promised to dissolve society's most fundamental inequities. And yet, at key

6 Scholarly interpretations will be discussed in detail below. On popular memories and assigning of responsibility, see especially Ralph Thaxton, *Calamity and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Felix Wemheuer, “Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China,” *The China Quarterly* 201 (2010): 176-194.

7 Felix Wemheuer, *Wemheuer, Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 7. See also Matthias Middell, “Famine: A Global Perspective,” in *Hunger and Scarcity in State-Socialism*, 9-27.

moments, Mao and other leaders vehemently defended the practice of uneven distribution as necessary to socialist development. On the other side, critics of the socialist state have leaped to criticize the inequities of Maoist policies and have invoked Amartya Sen's concept of food entitlement to highlight the Chinese state's failure to distribute food where it was needed.

This paper will begin with a discussion of the concept of scarcity in Marx's writings and how a Marxist analysis allowed Mao in 1949 to conceptualize famine in political, rather than natural, terms. The second section shows how Mao's distinctively voluntarist brand of Marxism shifted the balance from political to ideological factors in analyzing food shortages. In the third section, I explore a central paradox of Great Leap policy as communist utopianism bumped up against the practical needs of distributing scarce resources for socialist economic construction. The final section surveys diverse interpretations of the Great Leap famine, demonstrating the unexpected ways in which Malthusianism, Marxism, and Maoism have provided intellectual resources for the analysis of natural, political, and ideological causes of scarcity and famine in the Great Leap Forward.

Dialectical Materialism: Food Problems as Political Problems

Among the most important intellectual legacies of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is the critique of theories that interpret social and political phenomena as facts of nature. Marx identified this problem even in the work of Charles Darwin, whose contributions to materialism Marx greatly appreciated. In a letter to Engels in 1862, Marx wrote, "It is remarkable how Darwin has discerned anew among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labor, competition, elucidation of new markets, 'discoveries' and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence.'"⁸ With his critical awareness of the influence of capitalist ideology, Marx saw in

8 Marx to Engels, 18 June 1862, in *The Letters of Karl Marx*, ed. and trans. Saul K. Padover, Englewood Cliffs:

Darwin an unconscious tendency to interpret nature through the lens of specific social experience, and then to bring the natural “laws” thus identified back into the interpretation of society, with all the supposedly objective force of science.

But far more than Darwinism, it was specifically Malthusianism that troubled Marx, though he rarely tackled Malthus as directly as one might expect.⁹ In volume 1 of *Capital* (1867), Marx zeroed in on what superficially appeared as a recent confirmation of Malthusian principles: the Irish Great Famine and the apparent solving of the problem through mass exodus from Ireland to the United States. As Marx wrote with dripping sarcasm, “Here, then, under our own eyes and on a large scale, a process is revealed, than which nothing more excellent could be wished for by orthodox economy for the support of its dogma: that misery springs from absolute surplus population, and that equilibrium is re-established by depopulation.” However, as Marx went on to explain, Ireland had not suffered an “absolute surplus” of population (that is, a surplus defined according to some law governing how many people can be supported by natural resources), but rather a “relative surplus” (that is, a surplus created by the demands of capitalist production). Marx asked, “What were the consequences for the Irish laborers left behind and freed from the surplus population?” He answered, “That the relative surplus population is today as great as before 1846; that wages are just as low, that the oppression of the laborers has increased, that misery is forcing the country towards a new crisis.” Why? Because capitalist agriculture had “crushed” small farmers and forced them to become laborers desperate to work even for pitifully low wages.¹⁰ Thus, for Marx, poverty and famine in Ireland were the result not of any natural law of population dynamics, but rather of historical processes accompanying capitalism.

Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 156-57.

9 Michael Perelman, *Marx's Crises Theory: Scarcity, Labor, and Finance* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 27-55.

10 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Elecbook, 2001 [1867]), 1006.

By no means was Marx's critique of Malthusianism a denial of the natural world: Marxism is first and foremost a materialist philosophy. However, for Marx and his followers, a materialist analysis must include not only the means of production (the land, its mineral resources, etc.), but also the social and political structures that govern who controls those means. For Marxists, scarcity can never signify merely a lack of sufficient land, water, and fertilizer to produce grain. It must also take into account the organization of labor and resources. It is this dialectical relationship between nature and society that lies at the heart of Marxist understandings of scarcity and allows for a critical understanding of the way Malthusian claims to represent natural processes have shored up the “dogma” of the “orthodox economy” of capitalism.

Writing in 1949, on the eve of communist victory in the Chinese civil war, Mao Zedong invoked Marx's dismissal of Malthusianism in his own triumphant dismissal of U.S. imperialism as propounded by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, whom Mao dubbed the “spokesman of the bourgeoisie.” Reacting to Acheson's recent analysis in a white paper on China, Mao especially took issue with Acheson's characterization of China as wracked by two centuries of mounting overpopulation that had resulted in “unbearable pressure upon the land,” which “so far none has succeeded” in overcoming. Mao further suggested that behind Acheson's history lesson lay his “hope” that the Chinese communists would similarly fail, such that “China will remain in perpetual chaos and that her only way out is to live on U.S. flour, in other words, to become a U.S. colony.” Rebutting Acheson's analysis and challenging his alleged “hope,” Mao wrote, “It is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China's population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production. The absurd argument of Western bourgeois economists like Malthus that increases in food cannot keep pace with

increases in population was not only thoroughly refuted in theory by Marxists long ago, but has also been completely exploded by the realities in the Soviet Union and the Liberated Areas of China after their revolutions.” For Mao, it came down to a Marxist “truth”: “revolution plus production can solve the problem of feeding the population.”¹¹

Voluntarism: Food Problems as Ideological Problems

Thus for Mao in 1949, as for Marxists more generally, food problems were fundamentally questions of political economy and not the products of insurmountable natural laws governing the relationship between population and resources. What distinguished Maoism from many other forms of Marxism was an extraordinary faith in the ability of the masses to overcome material obstacles, given only their revolutionary spirit and the wise guidance of the communist party. This Maoist emphasis on “voluntarism” intensified the degree to which social and political explanations of phenomena were preferred over natural ones, added a strong ideological component to the analysis, and raised the bar for utopian visions of communist paradise rapidly achieved.¹² In the same 1949 essay cited above, Mao declared, “Of all things in the world, people are the most precious. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, as long as there are people, every kind of miracle can be performed. We are refuters of Acheson's counter-revolutionary theory. We believe that revolution can change everything, and that before long there will arise a new China with a big population and a great wealth of products, where life will be abundant and culture will flourish. All pessimistic views are utterly groundless.”¹³

In this oft-quoted speech were some of the seeds of the PRC state's early reluctance to

11 Mao Tse-tung, “The Bankruptcy of the Idealist Conception of History,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1969), Vol. IV, 451-53. For Dean Acheson's white paper, see United States Department of State, *The China White Paper, August 1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).

12 Frederic E. Wakeman, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Meisner, *Marxism*.

13 Mao, “The Bankruptcy,” 454.

interpret its swelling population numbers in Malthusian terms—it was only after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978 that the infamous “one-child policy” came into being, and even then Chinese leaders studiously avoided appearing to endorse Malthusianism.¹⁴ And here too were seeds of the Great Leap Forward—Mao's boldest, and ultimately deadliest, endeavor. Dissatisfied with the slow pace of development China had pursued under the guidance of Soviet advisors, in 1958 Mao sought to propel China directly into full-fledged communism. In just a few years, Chinese communes (ranging from about 10,000 to about 100,000 members) were expected to become self-reliant entities capable of providing a high living standard to all. Longstanding social distinctions would vanish, as peasants acquired the products of industry and people across social classes learned to participate both in material production and in the arts and sciences. Meanwhile, dining halls would facilitate gender equality, freeing women for participation in collective labor, and would establish that, in Mao's words, “communism is eating for free.”¹⁵

What would make this metamorphosis possible? Nowhere was Mao's voluntarism more apparent than in his expectations that the Chinese people could achieve “every kind of miracle,” including “leaping” over stages of economic development to arrive at communism before any other nation in the world. And as further foreshadowed in Mao's 1949 speech, during the Great Leap Forward, doubts as to the people's ability to achieve such feats would be considered “pessimistic” and “utterly groundless.” Worse yet, those who expressed such doubts risked being labeled “rightist” or “counter-revolutionary,” which came with dire, and not infrequently deadly, political consequences.

Especially relevant here is the shift in attention from the political to the ideological realm.

14 Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

15 Wemheuer, “Dining in Utopia,” 287. See also Xin Yi, “On the Distribution System of Large-Scale People's Communes,” in *Eating Bitterness*, 132. On the abuses that accompanied calls for gender “equality,” see Kimberley Ens Manning, “The Gendered Politics of Woman-Work: Rethinking Radicalism in the Great Leap Forward,” in *Eating Bitterness*, 72-106.

Although politics and ideology are obviously related, they are importantly distinct. Political problems are rooted in power imbalances and may be addressed through collective struggle to gain control over resources and decision making. Ideological problems are rooted in the mind and are typically addressed by using education and propaganda to mold consciousness.

Consistent with a voluntarist analysis, the Mao-era state emphasized ideological transformation as fundamental to socialist economic construction.¹⁶ *People's Daily* articles frequently addressed the relationship between problems of labor power, method, technology, or other practical concerns and problems of “thought”—often concluding that ideological shortfalls constituted the most important stumbling blocks on the road to economic development.¹⁷

In the summer of 1957, the state determined that it had paid insufficient attention to “thought work” in the countryside and launched a “socialist education campaign” to rectify the situation.¹⁸ In August, *People's Daily* published an article, “Grain Problems and Thought Problems,” that cast recent complaints about food shortages in ideological terms. It reported the example of one county in Shanxi Province, where 90 percent of commune members had been complaining that they were experiencing a grain shortage, but after undergoing education and discussion, only 10 percent concluded they actually lacked sufficient grain. Selfish individualism was reportedly to blame for the peasants' unreasonable expectations, and if it were not overcome, socialist construction in China would “suffer serious harm.” Incorrect thought was said to run

16 Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). Note that the post-Mao state has also often sought to promote adherence to new models of economic development through ideological molding.

17 “Shi jishu wenti, ye shi sixiang wenti” [It's a technology problem, but also a thought problem], *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 28 March 1958, 2; “Laoli wenti he sixiang wenti” [Problems of labor power and problems of thought], *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 6 October 1958, 2; “Shi sixiang wenti, haishi shiji wenti” [Is it a thought problem or a practical problem?], *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 4 August 1963, 2; “It's a methodological problem, but also a thought problem” *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 18 August 1963, 2.

18 Ralph Thaxton and Felix Wemheuer have described this campaign as an extension into the countryside of the far better remembered Anti-Rightist Campaign, which targeted intellectuals and political cadres in the urban areas. Thaxton, *Calamity and Contention*; Wemheuer, “The Grain Problem.”

through the ranks of cadres as well. At the local level, cadres suffered from “departmentalism” that led them to focus only on securing “immediate small advantages” for the peasants in their own commune or village, while overlooking “the peasants' long-term interests and the state's fundamental interests.” Meanwhile, even cadres at the county level and above possessed too “narrow” an understanding of collectivism, seeing it as “simply a way right now of distributing to everyone a bit more, letting them eat a bit better,” instead of “thinking about the entire country's socialist enterprise and the problem of the peasants' future trajectory.”¹⁹ At every level, the problem reportedly lay in an ideological failure to grasp the principles of socialist development and commit to the sacrifices required for its achievement.

Socialist Construction: Defending Uneven Distribution

In the *People's Daily* article just cited, the specific ideological problem of concern to state leaders was the desire on the part of peasants and cadres to spread existing resources more evenly to boost local or individual consumption, rather than concentrating it at the national level to achieve rapid industrial development. Felix Wemheuer has characterized this as a specific manifestation of a “permanent struggle between the state and the peasants over the agricultural surplus,” which “resulted in a politicization of hunger in which the definition of an adequate ration became part of the conflict itself.”²⁰ This was where the rubber met the road: it was all well and good to critique Malthusianism and capitalism, but once in power the PRC state had to make hard decisions about how to invest scarce resources in socialist economic construction while still supplying the people's basic needs.

The tension between local and national needs represented one of the fundamental

19 “Liangshi wenti he sixiang wenti” [Grain problems and thought problems], *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 5 August 1957, 1. See also Wemheuer, “The Grain Problem,” 115.

20 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 258.

paradoxes of the Great Leap Forward. The promise of the Great Leap was society's imminent arrival at the stage of communism itself: an egalitarian society in which all Chinese people, urban and rural, could achieve their full human potential while satisfying their needs freely from the pool of collectively produced wealth.²¹ In 1958, Mao had even spoken of communism as the “three no” (no government, no state, no nationalities), suggesting that he envisioned (at least momentarily) the withering away of the state that Marx had predicted would occur naturally when communism was achieved.²² Replacing the nation-state would be myriad self-reliant communes; indeed the discourse of self-reliance achieved a salience during the Great Leap Forward not found since the days of the revolutionary base areas when Chinese Communists faced economic blockades.²³ Given the strength of this vision, we can understand why the Great Leap would have encouraged a strongly localist mentality. However, the chariot engineered to carry China to this paradise operated according to strikingly different economic principles. Before China could arrive at communism, it needed to accomplish economic development based on rapid industrialization at the national level. And this intermediate goal apparently required drastic measures to extract massive quantities of grain from the countryside. Ten thousand years of happiness was said to lie on the horizon for China's peasants, but *first* they would need to sacrifice, withstanding profoundly unequal treatment to subsidize the immediate needs of China's industrial development.

This economic pattern was in fact already established in the early 1950s. The irony is well captured in Mao's 1953 attack on rural reformer and latter-day Confucian Liang Shuming. During the 1930s, Liang had been among the most influential Chinese figures grappling with the

21 On the difficulties of the “free-distribution system” and its quick abandonment, see Xin Yi, “On the Distribution System.”

22 Wemheuer, “Dining in Utopia,” 287.

23 Sigrid Schmalzer, “Self-Reliant Science: The Impact of the Cold War on Science in Socialist China,” in *Science and Technology in the Global Cold War*, ed. Naomi Oreskes and John Krige, 75-106 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014).

rural economic crisis in efforts to “reconstruct” Chinese villages from the bottom up. He was highly attuned to the threats Western economic imperialism posed to rural China, and he was committed above all to the welfare of Chinese peasants. In the early 1950s, he decried the income gap between peasants and workers produced by the Soviet model of economic development, and he cited the guidance found in the Confucian classics—“Do not worry about scarcity; worry about uneven distribution”²⁴—when he called upon the state to allocate some of the workers' income to peasants. Indeed, the notion that the government bore responsibility for the redistribution of resources to guarantee the welfare of the empire's subjects had long been a fundamental principle of Chinese statecraft.²⁵

Perhaps Liang imagined that he would be successful in his appeal to a leader known for his commitment to abolishing the “great divide” between peasants and workers.²⁶ Instead, Mao harshly criticized Liang at a 1953 conference: “Your idea is not to have the peasants increase their income through their own efforts in production but to equalize the earnings of the workers and peasants by taking away part of the former's earnings to distribute among the latter. If your idea were adopted, wouldn't that spell the destruction of China's industry? Such a diversion of the workers' earnings would mean the ruin of our country.”²⁷ Mao thus argued that the solution to Chinese rural poverty lay not in redistribution but rather in the increases that a collectivist economy would bring to agricultural production—a position not entirely unlike that of conservative U.S. politicians who are skeptical of redistribution and instead seek to address

24 *Lunyu* [The Analects] 16:1. For the full passage, and a somewhat different translation, see E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 153.

25 Pierre-Etienne Will and Roy Bin Wong, *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650-1850* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1991).

26 Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 324-28.

27 Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. V (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 127.

poverty through economic growth.²⁸

During the Great Leap Forward, a *People's Daily* article criticized the same Confucian adage that Liang had quoted to make a more specific point related to economic planning:

To construct a steel rolling mill requires steel, and steel is just what is most lacking at present and just the thing that everyone most needs. So how do we use the limited steel we have? Should it be according to the principle 'Do not worry about scarcity; worry about uneven distribution,' whereby we divide it all up so that each person has the same amount? Or do we first concentrate it in order to construct a steel rolling mill? Without doubt, we should choose the latter. It's much like eating eggs. When there are few eggs and many people, the eggs can be divided up to make one meal. Although that would solve a few immediate needs, the next step would be difficult to take. But if everyone temporarily exercises restraint, and allows the eggs to hatch into chickens, the chickens will produce more eggs. In this way, not only will people eat more eggs, but they will regularly have eggs to eat.²⁹

On its surface, this explanation appears very logical—even obvious. But understood within its historical context it takes on a different significance. Here, in very plain language, is a justification of policies that required enormous sacrifice on the part of local communities and individual peasants, and that appeared to fly in the face of the egalitarian vision of communism the state had promised in return for peasant labor. In what must be the most widely cited example of Great Leap policy at the grassroots level, peasants were asked to surrender their cooking pots (which the communal dining halls promised to make redundant) to help the state produce steel for its industrialization drive. This form of resource management was neither as innocent and

28 Writing on both the Soviet Union and China, Wemheuer notes, “The Communist parties made it clear that a distribution of wealth and resources alone could not solve the problems of the country but that huge sacrifices had to be made to build up a modern industrial nation.” Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 242.

29 “Bian gang chengcai” [Turning steel into raw material], *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 17 November 1958, 1.

logical as the *People's Daily* analysis would suggest, nor as brutal and irrational as the cooking pot example is typically taken to imply. Rather, the extraction of resources from the countryside was a central element of China's economic plan for socialist development through rapid industrialization fueled by agricultural collectivism.

I would further argue that this is the context in which we should understand Mao's alleged suggestion, which Mao's critics have seized as evidence of his barbarism, that the state should allow half the people to starve in order to feed the other half.³⁰ He made the comment at a conference in Shanghai in March 1959 during a discussion of economic planning. While the final, most disturbing line is often taken in isolation, a fuller account of his argument reads:

In the next three months we need to put our efforts into developing our industry. We must be forceful, relentless, and precise. Our leadership in charge of industry should act like the First Emperor of Qin.³¹ To distribute resources evenly will only ruin the Great Leap Forward.

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.³²

Placed in this larger context, Mao's comment remains characteristically unfeeling and undiplomatic, but it also becomes more obviously a statement about the necessity of uneven distribution of resources in the effort to industrialize, rather than a literal proposal to solve existing food shortages by starving half the population. As Anthony Garnaut puts it, "The

30 Zhou, *The Great Famine*, 25; Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 88; Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 466. Note that Yang Jisheng has disputed that Mao ever said this (<http://insideoutchina.blogspot.ie/2011/12/yang-rebuts-Dikötter-on-famine-research.html>); see also Cormac Ó Gráda, "Great Leap, Great Famine: A Review Essay," *Population and Development Review* 39. 2 (2013), 333-346. For a related Mao quotation about letting half the people die, see Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 458; for a critique of Chang and Halliday's interpretation of the quotation, see Thomas P. Bernstein, "Mao Zedong and the Famine of 1959-1960: A Study in Wilfulness," *The China Quarterly* 186 (2006): 421-45, 443-44.

31 The First Emperor of Qin (Qin shi huangdi) was a famously autocratic leader despised especially by the Confucians for his inhumane policies but credited for standardizing the written language, currency, and units of measurement, and for developing transportation and other economic infrastructure.

32 Zhou, *The Great Famine*, 25.

‘people’ whom Mao was willing to let die of starvation turn out to be not people at all, but large-scale industrial projects.”³³

My intention here is neither to defend nor to vilify, but rather to emphasize the importance of the principle of uneven distribution in Maoist economic planning, including in the Great Leap era. The kind of radical, egalitarian redistribution that offends right-wing critics of socialism did appear vividly in the propagandists' portraits of the promised utopia that awaited, and a “taste” of this future might perhaps have been found in the communal dining halls.³⁴

However, even the dining halls represented part of a larger plan to concentrate scarce resources for investment: they facilitated increased state control over grain and so increased procurement to feed Chinese cities and international allies aiding China's industrialization, and they further allowed the state to extract resources from peasants in the form of their cooking pots. This is one face of what Engels, Lenin, and other Marxists have referred to as “state capitalism”: the state replaced the bourgeoisie as the owner of the means of production, but it behaved in a somewhat parallel manner, extracting resources from the people for investment in state industrialization projects.

Interpreting the Great Leap Famine

Very few people today deny the Great Leap famine outright. Those who continue to express skepticism must do so in the face of overwhelming evidence. However, the extreme

33 Anthony Garnaut, “Hard Facts and Half-Truths: The New Archival History of China’s Great Famine,” *China Information* 27.2: 223–246, on 235-38; see also Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 56-57. Garnaut further supplies an important phrase left out of Zhou's version of the document, which makes still clearer the context of the quotation as it relates to industrialization.

34 David Zweig argues that it also was reflected in the practice of transferring resources from wealthier to poorer which he says was “widespread during the Great Leap” despite being criticized by Mao in 1959. He also shows, however, that such transfers occurred not just among units at the same bureaucratic level, but also from the local level up the chain to concentrate resources at higher levels. David Zweig, *Agrarian Radicalism in China, 1968-1981* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 7.

sensitivity of the issue for the PRC state, its salience for much larger questions, and perhaps most importantly the ontological flexibility of the concept of scarcity all make for great variability in the explanations people have produced as to what happened and why. The scholarly literature on the Great Leap famine has mushroomed over the past decade, and I cannot hope to do justice to it all here. Instead, I will focus on how Malthusian, Marxist, and Maoist perspectives have continued to inform interpretations of the famine's causes and broader significance.

Widely remembered in present-day scholarship is the story of Liu Shaoqi, then China's president and Mao's heir-apparent, who visited his home village in Hunan Province in 1961 and not only personally witnessed the devastation but also heard from a peasant what was reportedly a common understanding among locals at the time: that only three-tenths of the calamity was attributable to natural causes, while man-made factors were to blame for the remaining seven-tenths.³⁵ This acknowledgment of the political reasons underlying the famine would not survive the resurgence of radicalism in the mid-1960s, when Mao sought to reestablish party authority and popular commitment to the revolution through an expanded Socialist Education Campaign (1964-66) followed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Skirting both the severity of the crisis and its causes, the leadership studiously avoided mention of the famine at all, instead adopting the term “three years of natural disasters.”³⁶ While natural disasters are a different form of “nature” than Malthus's supposedly “natural” law of population dynamics, it is nonetheless striking that when confronted with famine in a state-socialist context, these particular Marxists avoided analyzing the famine from the perspective of political economy and instead resorted to blaming nature.

³⁵ This episode appears in many places. Among the most useful is Wemheuer, “Dealing with Responsibility,” 180.

³⁶ This phrase first appears in *People's Daily* already in 1961, seen for example in a report on a speech by Zhou Enlai: “Zhou Enlai zongli juxing shengda guoqing zhaodaihui” [Premier Zhou Enlai Holds a Reception for National Day], 1 Oct 1961, 1.

After the Cultural Revolution, party leaders took stock of recent history under the new paradigm established by Deng Xiaoping. The official verdict on the Great Leap Forward was that “Mao Zedong and many leading comrades... were impatient for quick results and overestimated the role of man's subjective will and efforts”; moreover Great Leap policy “overlooked objective economic laws,” and the political campaign against so-called Rightists “gravely undermined inner-party democracy from the central level down to the grassroots.” The document did not acknowledge the famine per se, but recognized the “serious losses to our country and people” from 1959 to 1961, which it attributed “mainly... to the errors of the Great Leap Forward and of the struggle against 'Right opportunism' together with a succession of natural calamities and the perfidious scrapping of contracts by the Soviet Government.”³⁷ Preserved in this assessment is a prominent role for natural forces outside of state control, alongside a familiar scapegoating of the Soviets for the effects of the Sino-Soviet split, but in first place an attribution of “errors” to Mao and other leaders. While hardly an analysis worthy of Marx's treatment of the Great Famine of Ireland, this assessment contains some of the germs of what has become a burgeoning field of scholarly research into the causes of the Great Leap famine.

The role of the weather has declined steadily in scholarship, but a number of works have continued to insist that it at least be formally confronted and not summarily dismissed. Y. Y. Kueh provided the most systematic analysis of the effects of weather on agricultural yields in China during a sixty-year span including the Great Leap era. He concludes that poor weather conditions did negatively impact yields during the Great Leap, but further argues that policy errors, especially the reduction of cultivated land and excessive state procurement, were an “equally and potentially more important factor” leading to the famine: “even without bad

³⁷ Chinese Communist Party, “Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China,” in *Resolution on CPC History* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), 28-29.

weather, the peasants could not possibly have survived.”³⁸ Building on Kueh's analysis, along with meteorological research by Chinese scholars, Cormac Ó Gráda concluded that patterns of drought mapped convincingly onto patterns of harvest shortfalls.³⁹ It is perhaps not surprising that Chris Bramall, one of the Western economists most sympathetic to Mao-era collectivism, has also insisted on serious treatment of the weather hypothesis, though his analysis resulted in the conclusion that weather did not play a significant role.⁴⁰ For Li Minqi, a far more committed Leftist, the weather continues to be an important factor under-acknowledged by mainstream scholarship—and while he recognizes political causes, he assigns these not to Mao but to Liu Shaoqi and other revisionists.⁴¹

Interestingly, it is from one of the most passionately anti-communist scholars that we hear an argument on the weather most inspired by Marxist dialectics: Frank Dikötter asks us to remember that human and natural factors are “intertwined,” and so the effects of weather on agriculture are greatly dependent on how humans have altered the landscape. In the case of 1950s China, Dikötter argues, grandiose state projects undertaken with the kind of shoddy workmanship one expects from forced labor produced dams ready to collapse under inclement weather. Ironically, however, Dikötter's argument ultimately rests more on ideological than political causes—more on a Maoist than a strictly Marxist explanation. He follows Judith Shapiro's analysis in suggesting that it was the belief that humans were separate from, and in Shapiro's terms were at “war” with, nature that “lay at the root of environmental degradation in

38 Y. Y. Kueh, *Agricultural Instability in China, 1931-1991: Weather, Technology, and Institutions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 207.

39 Cormac Ó Gráda, “The Ripple that Drowns? Twentieth Century Famines in China and India as Economic History,” *Economic History Review* 61.S1 (2008): 5–37.

40 Chris Bramall, “Agency and Famine in China’s Sichuan Province, 1958–1962,” *The China Quarterly* 208 (2011): 990-1008, esp. 994.

41 Li Minqi, *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World-Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 42-44.

China at the time.”⁴² Felix Wemheuer, meanwhile, makes a similar point about the dialectical relationship between politics and weather, but does so in the broader context of famine in nineteenth- and twentieth-century China, and moreover cites Mike Davis's important environmental history of “late Victorian” famines as they related to political economy, in particular to the ramifications of imperialism and capitalism.⁴³

Scholars have increasingly eschewed weather-based analyses and have placed far greater emphasis on political and social factors. The question of who bears the most personal responsibility has been of consistent concern to scholars. Consensus seems to be growing that top leaders knew about the unfolding crisis and made conscious decisions to continue the Great Leap policies in the face of disaster; meanwhile, some scholars have further suggested that the degree to which localities suffered was closely related to the behavior of local leaders.⁴⁴ While Mao himself has come in for his share of criticism, people have been eager to avoid being seen as simplistically pinning the blame on a single person—a “great man of history” interpretation whose widespread and longlasting unpopularity among scholars is another of Marx's important academic legacies.⁴⁵

Instead of assigning personal blame, many scholars have highlighted problems said to be intrinsic to the political economy of state socialism itself. If Marx used the Irish potato famine to explain the problems inherent in capitalism, these scholars have sought in the Great Leap famine

42 Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker, 2010), Chapter 21, especially 178. Here it is worth remembering the material limitations facing Mao-era China and the magnitude of the task of modernizing the economy. This, more than any anti-nature ideology, should help us understand the drive to plunder natural resources.

43 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 27; see also 193. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001).

44 For this argument, see especially Bramall, “Agency and Famine.”

45 In his review of Yang Jisheng's *Mubei* (Tombstone), Frank Dikötter criticizes Yang for pinning the blame on Mao personally, rather than offering a structural or systemic explanation, a charge Yang adamantly refuted (see <http://insideoutchina.blogspot.ie/2011/12/yang-rebuts-Dikötter-on-famine-research.html>). Interestingly, Ó Gráda's assessment is precisely the opposite: “While Dikötter and Zhou blame the famine on Mao Zedong personally, for Yang—who is no apologist for Mao—it proves that ‘a system without a corrective mechanism is the most dangerous of all systems.’” Ó Gráda, “Great Leap, Great Famine: A Review Essay,” 333.

evidence as to problems allegedly inherent in state socialism. Some political scientists and economists have specifically identified incentive problems and a kind of “tragedy of the commons” as root causes of the famine. The tragedy of the commons, a theory popularized in 1968 by ecologist Garrett Hardin, emerges from a Malthusian concern about the realities facing communities with limited resources; it suggests that given a system of collective ownership, people will ruin resources held in common as they seek to satisfy their individual needs at the expense of the larger social good.⁴⁶ For political scientist Dali Yang, the communal dining halls represented just such “a tragedy of the commons in a world of scarcity”; he argues that when offered unlimited access to food, peasants ate more than the system could accommodate, leading to shortages in the following seasons.⁴⁷ Justin Yifu Lin has disputed the role of the dining commons but similarly adopts an explanation rooted in the behavior of individuals. Using game theory (which has taken the tragedy of the commons as a central example), he suggests that when Great Leap policy eliminated the right of peasants to withdraw from agricultural collectives, what had been a “repeated game” became a “one-time game,” eroding the “self-enforcing contract” and thus causing agricultural productivity to collapse.⁴⁸ For Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, the fault lies even more explicitly in “central planning” itself, as the “impatient central planner, believing in the magic power of collectivization,” diverted too many resources from agriculture (including nutritional resources for agricultural laborers) and so precipitated a decline in agricultural production.⁴⁹ And for Xin Yi, the very egalitarianism of the Great Leap’s promise

46 Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162.3859 (1968): 1243-48. For a Marxist critique, see John Vandermeer, “Ecological Determinism,” in Ann Arbor Science for the People Editorial Collective, ed., *Biology as a Social Weapon* (Minneapolis: Burgess Pub. Co., 1977): 108-22.

47 Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 55.

48 Justin Yifu Lin, “Collectivization and China’s Agricultural Crisis in 1959-1961,” *Journal of Political Economy* 98. 6 (1990): 1228-52.

49 Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, “The Great Leap Forward: Anatomy of a Central Planning Disaster,” *Journal of Political Economy* 113.4 (2005), 840-77. On 842-43.

represented “contempt for basic human values” and so “destroyed the driving force behind society and undermined the social order.”⁵⁰ Implicit in all of these interpretations is a belief in the necessity of market economics. If Karl Marx were alive to offer a critique, he would likely see in these theories a reflection of the “orthodox economy” in which they were generated, just as he saw the ideology of capitalism to have informed the theories of Malthus and Darwin. And indeed, the influence of both these figures is very much at play in the analyses just discussed.

In the work of Frank Dikötter, the Great Leap famine serves still more explicitly as evidence of the inviolability of markets and, moreover, the essential brutality of collectivism. Godfather of neoliberalism Friedrich Hayek provides the critical piece of wisdom: as Dikötter paraphrases Hayek, “once you start stripping away every kind of freedom—the freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, *freedom to trade*—once you replace it by a one-party dictate, there can only be one road, and that is the road to serfdom.” And for Dikötter, “the Great Leap Forward illustrates that better than anything else in twentieth-century history.”⁵¹ Perhaps the boldest argument in Dikötter's widely read book *Mao's Great Famine* is that collectivism could not work without the imposition of state terrorism of the most brutal kind: peasants died not just because the socialist economy produced food shortages, but because their leaders beat them to death in a futile attempt to circumvent the inevitable incentive problems associated with collectivization.⁵²

However, it is not just proponents of capitalism and devotees of Hayek who have emphasized the significance of markets in the Great Leap famine. The authors of several village studies (here, Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden's *Chinese Village, Socialist State* and Ralph

50 Xin Yi, “On the Distribution System,” 142.

51 Frank Dikötter as interviewed on *The Alex Jones Show*, 23 Sept. 2010, archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9zASJEIusk> (emphasis added). See also <http://www.frankDikotter.com/interviews/interviews-5.html>.

52 Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*.

Thaxton's *Catastrophe and Contention* stand as premier examples) have drawn inspiration from James C. Scott in highlighting the disruptions caused to rural society by state socialism. Markets play an important role in these studies, but in a more abstract sense than that in Dikötter's work. For these scholars, what was at stake was less “the free market” and more the actual rural markets that served as both social spaces and economic networks for peasant households. The disruption of these markets not only represented an assault on rural society, but also eroded the family and community survival strategies that had protected rural people against the worst consequences of food shortages in the past. Excessive grain procurement thus came on top of a ruined rural landscape, where the most important traditional safeguards had been broken. In these accounts, the dining commons play an important role, but in a different way than in Dali Yang's analysis: the problem was not overconsumption leading to a “tragedy of the commons,” but rather the wrecking of an existing, robust system founded on the kind of “moral economy” that Scott has argued underlies most peasant societies.⁵³ Although the language employed is sometimes quite similar to that used by Dikötter, from a political perspective these works do not naturalize capitalism so much as “traditional” society.

The authors of these village studies tend to share Dikötter's perspective that the economic process of collectivization was inextricable from the political violence that accompanied it. However, it should also be possible to argue that the political violence of the 1950s is reason *not* to equate the famine with collectivization per se; such an argument would depend on the notion that collectivization can occur without systemic state violence and persecution. Felix Wemheuer, for one, has been cautious not to use the Great Leap famine as evidence against all collectivist efforts: “Collectivization did not necessarily produce famine, but it contributed to the starvation

⁵³ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

of millions when it was implemented in a very radical way.”⁵⁴ Here, what is important is the specific implementation of Great Leap collectivization—the speed with which it was attempted and, more importantly, the political persecution that not only resulted in many deaths but also prevented local leaders from making sound decisions about grain procurements and distribution. The famine thus would not provide evidence against agricultural collectivism as a form of economic organization, but only against authoritarian forms of governance. A related argument is put forward by economist Zhun Xu, who holds that “stratification” (political and economic inequalities), rather than egalitarianism, was responsible for any failures of Mao-era collectivization.⁵⁵ Jeremy Brown's work also helps shift the focus away from discrediting socialism per se. In highlighting the urban bias of Mao-era economic policy—showing how leaders systematically shifted resources to shelter urban people while villagers died—Brown avoids attacking socialist collectivism and instead condemns the PRC state for failing to live up to its own promises of an equitable society.⁵⁶

Whether or not it is understood as part and parcel of a collectivist economy, totalitarianism represents the chief culprit in an increasing number of scholarly treatments of the famine. The work of Amartya Sen, who argued so influentially that democracy is the most important factor in preventing famines, has been clearly influential in this respect. Sen combines Marx's central insight as to the political character of famine with a special focus on the contrasts between democratic and totalitarian forms of government, an angle that today enjoys broad appeal across the political spectrum.⁵⁷ Much current scholarship on the Great Leap famine,

54 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 248.

55 Zhun Xu, “The Political Economy of Agrarian Change in the People’s Republic of China,” Ph.D. Diss. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2012.

56 Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao’s China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Others have highlighted this urban bias, but none so fully and compellingly as Brown.

57 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999)

representing a wide range of political positions, seems to follow Sen, as baldly summarized in Ralph Thaxton conclusion that “Mao's anti-democratic politics” constituted the “primary cause” of the famine.⁵⁸

On the other hand, Felix Wemheuer has noted that one-party dictatorships have been able to pull themselves out of famine, and he credits the PRC state for its ability, after 1962, to “prevent deadly famines.”⁵⁹ Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, both Wemheuer and Ó Gráda have called for a broader view of the famine, placing it in a longer historical context. Without discounting the distinctive features and unprecedented scale of the Great Leap famine, they insist on recognizing the ways in which it was in fact consistent with earlier patterns of famine, especially since the nineteenth century. They take Dikötter in particular to task for ignoring earlier famines and failing to recognize the material constraints Mao's regime faced; Wemheuer goes as far as to flag these gaps as evidence of Dikötter's political bias against the socialist state.⁶⁰ While neither scholar lets Mao or his authoritarian regime off the hook, in their accounts the famine is not simply an indictment of state socialism. For Wemheuer, the Great Leap famine, along with the Soviet famine of the early 1930s, “should be understood as deadly escalations of the general conflict between the state and the peasantry over agricultural surpluses.”⁶¹ For his part, Ó Gráda emphasizes the “backwardness” of the Chinese economy in the 1950s. This isn't necessarily in Mao's favor, since as he points out, “to engage in radical economic experimentation in such an extremely backward economy was to risk disaster.”⁶²

58 Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention*, 334. Thaxton directly engages with Sen on 27n8 and 155. For other examples of engagement with Sen, see Bramall, “Agency and Famine,” 992n4; Justin Yifu Lin and Dennis Tao Yang, “Food Availability, Entitlements and the Chinese Famine of 1959-61,” *The Economic Journal* 110 (2000): 136-58. Felix Wemheuer engages critically with Sen in his *Famine Politics* (150-53), concluding that “Sen's theses are accurate but [too] general” to provide sufficient insight into the Chinese case.

59 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 22, 252.

60 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 28; Ó Gráda, “Great Leap into Famine,” 192-93.

61 Wemheuer, *Famine Politics*, 243.

62 Ó Gráda, “The Ripple,” 10.

However, over all, Ó Gráda seeks to provide “more room... for the supply side factors stressed by Malthus,” by offering “more historical context... drawing attention to China’s relative poverty and the overlap between high excess mortality regions and those previously vulnerable to famine.” With such an analysis, he argues, “The famine remains an outlier, but to an extent fits a pattern established by the mid-nineteenth century.”⁶³

The growing abundance of scholarship on the Great Leap famine reflects the twists, and the ironies, of history in the production of knowledge about scarcity. Marx’s analysis of the Irish potato famine as a problem of capitalism, rather than a Malthusian population crisis, represents an important historical predecessor for the work of scholars across the political spectrum today, many of whom have taken a similar position in refuting claims about the “natural” causes of the Great Leap famine and instead pinning the blame firmly on the political economy of state socialism. But Malthusian understandings of scarcity and population dynamics are also alive here—in the work of game theorists interested in determining how people make choices in resource-constrained situations, and in the work of historians and social scientists seeking a larger historical perspective than merely the specific travesties of any one form of political economy. And the kind of ideological analysis that Mao favored, in which incorrect ideas (rather than material scarcity or unjust economic structures) lay at the root of development problems, also crops up here and there—not just in the official interpretations of the PRC state, but also in the writings of critics of Maoism, who see Mao’s ideology of the separation of humans and nature as the root cause of environmental degradation in Mao-era China.

Politics and ideology can act in vulgar ways to bias perception. Political and ideological commitments certainly prevented Mao-era officials from acknowledging the man-made causes of the Great Leap famine, even though Marxist materialism should have pushed them to do so.

63 Ó Gráda, “The Ripple,” 32.

Meanwhile, political and ideological commitments have arguably limited the subtlety with which some scholars, on both the right and the left, interpret the significance of the Great Leap famine_ and advance understandings of the meaning of scarcity.

But politics and ideology will always play a role in our discussions, because scarcity is a conceptual, rather than a natural, category. The quantity of grain can be measured, but whether or not that quantity constitutes scarcity requires theorizing, which necessarily involves a set of understandings about political relationships and the role of ideas in shaping human action. Awareness of the contexts in which we are doing that theorizing, and of the influence of our intellectual forebears, should help us approach the task more critically, and therefore more subtly and more robustly.

Figure 1. Jin Meisheng, *Cailü guafei chanliang duo* [The vegetables are green, the cucumbers are plump, the harvest is abundant] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1959), archived on <http://chinese posters.net/gallery/e11-992.php>.

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