‘Kitchen Knowledge’, Desperate Foods, and Ritual Healing in Everyday Survival Strategies during the Great Famine in China, 1958–62

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Abstract

Famine is a social and economic crisis that is commonly accompanied by widespread of malnutrition, starvation, epidemic disease, and increased mortality. This paper focuses on the period of the Great Leap Famine in China between 1958 and 1962. Based on newly-collected oral interviews and archival evidence, it gives voices to ordinary villagers from different parts of China—from various counties in one of China’s biggest and most populated Sichuan province in the southwest to Shandong in the east and Hunan in central China and examines their experiences and their survival strategies in times of hunger, illness, and death. It shows that an integral part of everyday famine culture, particularly in rural China, which was worst hit, concerns the kitchen knowledge and practice of healing and nutrition. Many traditional recipes that were used in previous times were rediscovered and used as everyday hunger-coping techniques. Some are dated back to the Ming dynasty—a few were recorded in *Materia Medica for Famine Relief* (*Qiu Huang bencao* 救荒本草, c. 1406). Using the methodology of oral history set against the historical background of traditional materia medica, this paper elicits how ordinary people in rural China devised complex and plural strategies to cope with fundamental biological crises.

Keywords

Great Leap Forward Famine, Chinese famine foods, survival strategies, cannibalism

Introduction

The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) was Mao’s dream for leading China into a Communist Utopia. After the CCP consolidated its power in the early 1950s, it rapidly began enforcing collectivization in the countryside. Despite the bloodshed and catastrophic results of Joseph Stalin’s collectivization in 1928–32 in the Soviet Union, which led to the devastating Ukraine famine in 1932–3, Mao wanted a fully socialist agricultural system established throughout China, and he wanted it fast. At provincial and local levels, a number of cadres embraced it with unprecedented enthusiasm. The pace of collectivization in China was astonishing. By 1956, virtually all agricultural households

in rural China had been organised into collectives. Although the initial stage of collectivization in 1955–6 in the Chinese countryside did not end up in bloodshed like in the Soviet Union, dissatisfaction and unrest spread amongst the peasant population. Faced with these warning signs, Mao showed no hesitation. He wanted to go further, to launch the ‘Great Leap Forward’. Two campaigns: the ‘Anti-Rightist Campaign’ and the rural ‘Socialist Education Campaign’ was his tactic to silence any opposition voices within or beyond the Party. A few months later, in the spring of 1958 the full force of the Great Leap Forward was unleashed. It emphasised industrial development at the expense of agriculture, which led to a devastating famine throughout China.

Famine in the Chinese countryside broke out as early as spring 1958, and it was to last another three years. The top leadership in Beijing was well aware of the problems, but it simply turned a blind eye to them. At the same time, anyone who spoke the truth was purged as a rightist. In August 1958, an enlarged Politburo Conference at Beidaihe passed a ‘Resolution on the Establishment of People’s Communes in the Rural Areas’ to speed up the process of radical collectivization in the countryside. It was accompanied by the rise and spread of radical ‘egalitarianism’, which consisted in ‘levelling of incomes among constituent units of a commune and indiscriminate requisition of manpower and resources’. A majority of peasants lost their private property as a result. This phenomenon became known as the ‘Wind of Communism’. By the winter of 1959—the Year of the Pig, which is usually regarded as a year of fertility and prosperity—chronic scarcity was felt everywhere in China’s vast land. Very few places were spared from devastation. Entire villages were wiped out; whole families perished; large swathes of countryside fell silent.

While famine may be a natural phenomenon, the Great Famine in China was largely a man-made disaster with countless individuals being deliberately starved or beaten to death. It also led to the mass destruction of agriculture, industry, trade, and every aspect of human life, leaving large parts of the Chinese countryside scarred forever by man-made environmental disasters.

As famine escalated, anything edible was consumed, from wild herbs and tree trunks to earth, insects, snakes, rats, decomposing animals, and even human flesh. One of the greatest butchering of wild animals in history took place during this time. Even the giant panda, praised as China’s ‘national treasure’, was not spared.¹ Grazing on raw food growing in the fields was common. While the famine claimed millions of lives, many were killed or became sick by eating toxic herbs, plants, or poisonous and indigestible foods.

¹ See Richard Spencer, ‘Eats, shoots and lives’, *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, 18 December 2004, p. 21.

White clay, also known as ‘immortal earth’, could magically relieve the sensation of hunger, but it also caused severe constipation, contributing to yet more deaths.

Having seen that radical collectivization did not work and that the government was failing to deliver adequate famine relief, many villagers turned to the heavens and local gods for help. They developed new strategies, such as ritual healing and steam baths. These ‘new’ strategies were partly relying on the traditional practices and beliefs dated back to the Ming dynasty. They were generated, reproduced, and given new social meanings.

While collecting oral interviews in rural China for my social history project about the Great Leap Forward famine in Mao’s China—the worst famine in history with an estimated 45 million deaths,² it became clear to me that very few scholars have explored how ordinary people coped with hunger, illness, and bereavement during the radical collectivisation of the 1950s and 1960s. With the recent exceptions of Frank Dikötter’s award-winning book *Mao’s Great Famine*—the first in the English language to use a wealth of archival evidence from across China to capture how and why decisions that led to the famine were taken at the top and how these decisions affected the lives of ordinary people. Also Ralph Thaxton’s compelling book *Catastrophe and Contentment in Rural China*³ which is based on some 400 interviews conducted in Henan. This book sheds new light on how seemingly powerless villagers formed resistance to the corruption and coercion of collectivization, and on how their hidden and contentious acts, both individual and concerted, allowed them to survive and escape the iron grip of the Communist leadership’s authoritarian rule. Apart from these two books, the majority of the existing literature in English focuses mainly on party policies and state initiatives, and offers little insight into life on the ground. Among Chinese language publications, special mention should be made of Gao Wangling’s work on peasant resistance during the Famine years.⁴ Based on a mixture of oral interviews and local archives, Gao’s *Acts of Peasant Resistance in China during the People’s*

² In his 2010 book *Mao’s Great Famine*, historian Frank Dikötter uses a whole range of archives to come up with an estimate of at least 45 million premature deaths. See Dikötter 2010. A few years prior to the publication of Dikötter’s book, Cao Shuji, a Chinese scholar based in Shanghai, pioneered the study of using official local histories published after 1979 by county or city Party committees, and has produced the figure of 32.5 million premature deaths in his widely quoted Chinese-language book *The Great Famine: China’s Population in 1959–1961*. See Cao Shuji 2005. Others, such as Judith Banister, the chief of the China branch at the US Census Bureau, put the death figure at 30 million. She based her studies on Chinese government statistic data. See Banister 1987.

³ Thaxton 2008.

⁴ Gao Wangling 2006.

Commune shows that peasants in various parts of China did not always passively obey government orders. Many of them actively resisted collectivization. To survive the famine, they stole and hoarded food; they suppressed production figures; they learned to slack off work requirements; they secretly kept private plots of land; and so on. Gao's study opened up a whole new way of looking at the famine. Both Gao's and Thaxton's book, however, dealt with only particular villages (or a fictional village in Thaxton's case) in north China.

The archival and oral history methodologies

Between 2006 and 2010, I travelled across rural China from Sichuan to Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Hebei, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong, and Guangxi. In those four years, I also read as much material in the provincial party archives as I could and interviewed more than 200 famine survivors. These survivors represent a wide spectrum of ages, gender, backgrounds, and social positions: from ordinary peasants to former grass-roots cadres. The interviews I collected show an integral part of everyday famine culture, particularly in rural China where it was worst hit, that concerns what I term 'kitchen knowledge' and the practice of healing and nutrition. There exists a vast quantity of data on the maintenance of health and the prevention and treatment of illness that does not relate to professional medicine or state intervention through public healthcare. Understanding the contemporary use of traditional recipes and techniques against a background of personal stories as well as historical medical texts, such as the *Materia Medica for Famine Relief* can shed light on how ordinary people survived the famine and coped with hunger, illness, and loss on such a large scale. How did ordinary people mediate traditional practices in their everyday life to survive? What were ordinary rural Chinese attitudes towards health, hygiene, illness, and healing during such a time of crisis?

By examining ordinary villagers' everyday experiences and how survivors remember this famine, we can get a better sense of what happened on the ground as well as answers to these questions. In many ways, the tales of survival are more gruelling and more painful than those about death. To many survivors of the Great Famine, survival meant to cope daily with little hope that the famine would soon end and the question of how long they could continue to stay alive.

In this paper, I shift the focus from statistics that estimate the dead to accounts that highlight the experiences of the living. The central questions are

how individuals and community mediated traditional practices with or without public health advice. What and how did they eat in order to stave off hunger and to survive?

As an oral and social historian, I try to give voice to ordinary people who lived through the famine. Most of them are illiterate peasants, and none of them have had a public voice in the history of the Great Famine of Maoist China, or in any kind of historical account. The people who speak through these interviews are not household names.⁵ They come from all over China, and present all spectrums of age, background, and social positions: from ordinary peasants to child survivors and medical students. Some are mothers who watched their children dying in the famine but could do nothing, while others grew up as orphans after having lost their parents. None of them are heroes or saints, and many of them stole food in order to survive. They have not led remarkable lives, but it is their ordinary life stories, in most cases full of misery and pain, and also their will to survive that I find compelling and worth telling. A history of famine is as much about survival as it is about starvation, destruction, and death. The human will to struggle on under extreme conditions and the ingenuity to cope with crisis are reflections of human strength.

In this paper, I have also included a number of documents from provincial Party archives in Shandong, Hunan, and Sichuan. I give priority to these three provinces because they were among the worst hit by the famine. Not only this, these provinces present a measure of geographical and political diversity: all three underwent similar and yet very diverse experiences during the time of the famine. Furthermore, these are the provinces from where many of the informants included in this paper came. These reports are compiled by local cadres at the time of the famine. Although they have little to do with the 'kitchen knowledge' of ordinary people, juxtaposing to survivors' accounts, they give readers a fuller sense of what was going on at the time in different places as they not only tell of revivals of ritual healing and cannibalism of dead corpses, they also provide readers with the necessary background information and statistics often missing in the oral interviews.

Surviving: coping with hunger

Month followed month in 1959, the famine worsened inexorably, exacerbated by intense violence in the communes, endless political campaigns, and, after the Lushan Plenum in August 1959, a redoubled effort at propelling the

⁵ I have consent from the interviewees for their interviews to be used in this article.

Great Leap Forward. By the winter of that year, chronic scarcity was felt in many parts of China. Very few places were spared from devastation. Villages were wiped out and whole families perished. Large swathes of countryside fell silent. To ease the desperate hunger and stay alive, villagers resorted to consuming anything they could find. A number of the interviews and archival documents demonstrate that villagers were consuming food substitutes and adapting traditional recipes and hunger-coping techniques used in previous times. We can find some of the techniques people used or substances people ate recorded already in the Ming *Materia Medica for Famine Relief, Collection of Wild Vegetables* (*Yecao bolu* 野菜博录, c. 1622), and in other Ming records on famine foods. These include eating wild herbs, tree trunks, and earth. This shows that in rural context, much of the traditional practices since the Ming time were kept alive in every day ‘kitchen knowledge’. Ordinary people mediated and continue to mediate traditional practices in food crises in their everyday life.

The following accounts were taken from Shandong province in the east and Sichuan province in China’s far southwest, two of the most important agricultural provinces in China. Both provinces were among the worst hit by the famine. Furthermore, these two provinces present a measure of geographical and political diversity. They underwent similar and yet very diverse experiences during the time of the famine. Known as China’s fruit and vegetable basket, Shandong suffered badly during the famine due to the extreme left policy that Shu Tong, Shandong province’s Party Secretary, advocated at the time.

In parts of Shandong, not far from its provincial capital Jinan, famine broke out as early as spring 1958. A government report from one village shows that famine had taken 600 lives in less than six months. Villagers were forced to sell everything they had, including their children. They consumed over 50 different types of food substitutes during the time of the famine, including leaves from the scholar tree and castor-oil plant, grass for feeding pigs, young stems from the Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus*), wheat husks, sorghum flowers, grass seeds, coarse chaff, corn husks, peanut skins, bean leaves, potato sprouts, elm bark, and water melon rinds.⁶

In the far southwest, the situation was equally bleak. Li Jingquan was Sichuan province’s Party Secretary at the time. Famous for his harsh personality and radical leadership style who often compared himself to former warlords, Li was an ardent supporter of the Great Leap Forward. Between 1958 and

⁶ ‘A report by the Jinan Municipal Investigation Team on the outbreak of famine and deaths in Gaoguanzhai township in Zhangqiu county’, 29 January 1959. From Shandong Provincial Party Committee archive, file A001-02-776, pp. 67–8.

1962, Sichuan, the reputed ‘Land of Abundance’, achieved some of the highest death figures in the country: an estimate of 12 million people were wiped out in Sichuan alone.⁷ In parts of Sichuan the death rate reached 50% in 1961. In a report dated 27 January 1961, the government official Yang Wanxuan, who was sent to investigate the famine problem in eastern Sichuan’s Shizhu county, wrote the following:

After spending one week in Shizhu county, I confirm the problem here was very severe and shocking. The number of deaths was enormous. According to the police investigation, the total population in 1958 was more than 346,000. In 1959 and 1960 the death rate reached 63,792. [...] According to several further investigations, in some communes the number of deaths had reached 40%. For instance, in Shuitian commune, the death rate was 40.5%, while in Qiaotou commune the death rate was 39%. The lowest death rate was around 10%. [...] In a number of the most problematic administrative districts, the average death rate was between 50 to 60%. In Dahe commune, for instance, the death rate in the Number 3 administrative district was as high as 66.4% and in Qiaotou commune’s Wafang administrative district, the death rate was 58.2%. The most severe case was Xianfeng administrative district in Donghua commune. The Banzhulin collective canteen used to have 9 families, a total of 37 people, but now only 3 families, comprising 7 people, are still alive.

I have heard very shocking things. For instance, in Shuitian commune because the number of deaths had grown very high, the commune simply dug a big hole and threw more than 40 dead bodies into it. The corpses were left there unattended. Two kilometers from the county town in Dengjian commune, over 60 dead bodies were buried by the river embankment. More than 20 were left exposed, attracting a few scavenging dogs that tried to pull the bodies away. No one seemed to care.

There have also been at least five incidents of people eating dead human flesh and we heard that in Dahe commune there were even incidents of living people being devoured by others. In Qiaotou commune’s Nanmu administrative district nursery there used to be more than 70 children, but now there are only 20 left. The dead children were carried out in bamboo baskets, one basket after another.⁸

Chef Yan, a cook at a small street restaurant outside of Sichuan’s provincial capital Chengdu, is originally from Ziyang county in central Sichuan. In his village, a huge number of people starved to death during the famine. He lost his father, and his mother suffered severe oedema as a result of the famine. He and his sisters tried to survive on their own. Even to this day he still has a vivid

⁷ See Liao Bokang 2005, p. 170.

⁸ Report by comrade Yang Wanxuan on the situation in [Sichuan province] Shizhu county and the current work arrangement, 27 January 1961. From Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, file JC 1-2606, pp. 63–4.

memory of a whole repertoire of things he and fellow villagers consumed in order to stave off hunger and to survive the famine:

In 1958 I was about 10, and I was still in the school. From the school we had to walk a long way to the collective canteen. The canteen was so far away, and quite often I did not go. Instead my family pickled some radish. At meal time we soaked them in hot water, and drank the water. What else did we eat? We also ate wild celeries and banana stalks. We used to peel the outer part of the stalk, and chew up the heart—just like one would chew up sugar cane. We also ate cakes made of pea stalks. We first milled the stalk into flour. We would then sieve the flour and use them to make cakes. One person could only get one cake. [Laugh]

At the time, there were seven of us in the family. For all seven of us we only got a small bowl of food from the canteen: one person had only one serving spoonful of food, which consisted of mostly liquid. I was only a young boy then. The food we received was not enough to fill my stomach, so with other children of my age, we went up to the hill to collect some rape stalks. We took the stalks home, and blanched them. Afterwards we would squeeze out the excess water and cook them in a pan. We would cook them until they turned into a thick stew. We ate that to ward off the hunger.

We also ate insects such as crickets. When I caught a cricket, I just put it straight into my mouth. Just like that, I ate it alive. We also ate little worms. The worms live in the earth. After ploughing, they emerged on the surface. We would light a fire and cook them over the fire. Some people also ate toad, but I did not eat it. I was frightened of it. Even now I am still frightened of it.

I did eat snake, however. My father was still alive then. Once he cooked a snake and I ate some. The snake bones were so hard, I could not chew them. I only remember the soup was very white. It was so greasy that even now I could still feel the grease when I touch the things I wore at the time. I could not wash away the greasy feeling. My wife teases me sometimes about this. She says I am suffering now because I was too fond of food and so I ate anything.

I also ate water celery, a wild vegetable that grows on the edge of farming fields. I would eat them either pickled or cooked. The worst thing that we ate were cakes made of ‘immortal earth’. It was some kind of white clay. It came in pure white colour, and people used it to make porcelain. They called it ‘immortal earth’. It had a sandy texture. Since we were so hungry in those days, people would mix the white clay with some water to make pancakes. We used to fill our stomach with that. One old lady was severely constipated after eating it. She had to use her fingers to scoop out the hard stool. We also ate ramie leaves. They were used to make shoes. But during the time of the famine, we chopped them up finely and made pancakes to feed ourselves. [...] That was in 1959, the most difficult time.⁹

Amongst the food stuffs Chef Yan and villagers in his home area ingested, the practice of eating snake and earth, in particular, can be found in previous

⁹ Interview with Chef Yan, Zhongxing chang in Huayang county, Sichuan province, April 2007.

times. In southern China, the practice of eating snake dates back to at least the fourteenth century. The Portuguese Franciscan monk, Friar Odoric, records the practice in Canton in the 1320s: ‘There be monstrous great serpents likewise, which are taken by the inhabitants and eaten. A solemn feast among them with serpents is thought nothing of’.¹⁰ In the sixteenth-century *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目), the author Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–93) also recommended using snake to treat skin disease. The practice was said to be dated back to the Tang dynasty (618–907).

Earth eating is also not new. The type of earth commonly consumed in China is bentonite. It has a high calcium content with a sticky consistency and is ideal for making pottery. In Africa, as well as in Medieval Europe, it has been and was common for pregnant women to consume bentonite, or a similar type of clay, due to its high calcium content. While earth-eating or geophagy may be universal, in China it has unique historical, cultural, and religious meanings. The practice is thought to have originated from Daoist traditions, as part of the diet for ‘immortality’, thus the type of earth consumed is commonly known as ‘Boddhisattva Guanyin earth’ (*guanyin tu* 观音土) or ‘immortals’ rice’ (*xianmi* 仙米). However, ordinary people discovered it as a means to survive hunger at the time when keeping alive was more of an issue than the pursuit of immortality. Back in the Ming, in his journal on the 1628 famine in Shannxi, the government official Ma Maocai 馬懋才 (17th century), a native of Yan’an recorded that local people resorted to earth-eating to overcome their hunger: ‘People dug up earth [or stone] in the mountain to eat. The earth is cold and smells damp (*xing* 腥). One needs to eat very little to feel full, but a few days later their stomachs begin to swell and flop, and death follows soon after’.¹¹

During the time of the Great Leap Famine, villagers in Sichuan, as well as in other parts of the country, rediscovered that earth-eating could combat hunger. In eastern Sichuan, the provincial government investigation team reported that earth-eating had become prevalent in Qu county and had caused a number of health hazards, including constipation. Qu county used to be a major granary for nearby regions, and it produced some of the best-quality pork and tangerines in the province. But the ‘Wind of Communism’ had swept the region almost bare. For many months in 1961, more than 10,000 local villagers had to endure eating earth to fill their empty stomachs. They dug up more than 400 cubic meters of earth. Due to the large crowds and limited space, villagers often had to line up under the scorching sun. Some villagers had to travel from far away, so they arrived the night before and slept

¹⁰ Odoric of Pordenone and Paolo Chiesa 2002, p. 122.

¹¹ Ma Maocai 1984, p. 42.

in the old temple on top of the mountain. Some old ladies even burned incense and paper money during the dig and bowed down to kowtow to the earth [gods].¹²

Earth-eating often led to severe constipation, which in turn sometimes caused death. In one commune in Qu county, more than 240 people were reported to have suffered stomach pain and constipation after eating earth, among them three people suffered from liver problems, 19 people suffered oedema, and six villagers died as a result. In southern Sichuan's Jingyan county, Luo Guihua, a poor peasant woman in her 70s suffering ill health, remembers how famine eventually took the life of her grandparents as a consequence of eating earth:

At the time my grandmother was still alive. Her situation was even worse. My mother and grandmother did not get on with each other, plus my grandmother was blind, and my grandfather was a cripple, so I had to endure the starvation myself, and save some food for them. We were given food coupons during that time, and to get food one had to have coupons [...] I tried not to eat up my portion so I could bring some food to my grandparents. Because my mother had a bad temper, I had to do it secretly. [...]

Occasionally, we were given rotten sweet potato from the state granary; we soaked them in the water several times, and then left them to dry. Once dried, we milled them into flour, and made cakes out of them. Those cakes had no taste. They tasted neither sweet nor bitter. [...]

How could we fill our stomachs? Sometimes we had to resort to eating earth. It was called immortal grain. Many people dug them up from underneath the wall, and pressed them into cakes. We ate anything we could find, and some things we ate were really crude and rough. People often suffered constipation. For instance, after eating the [earth], my grandparents became constipated. Each time they had to use their fingers to scoop out their stool. At the time, we also had no money to buy medicine, and eventually my grandparents died. Just like that, they died of starvation and constipation. There was nothing to eat, nor was there anything to wear. When my grandparents died, we could not even afford a coffin, we buried their bodies with some straw. Life was that miserable.¹³

During the period of the Great Famine in China, survival often meant enduring extremely cruel, inhumane, and degrading conditions. People did what they had to in order to survive, from stealing and killing to eating human flesh. While cannibalism may be seen as a disturbing, savage, and taboo practice under normal circumstances, for those whose lives were surrounded by raging violence, horror, and death, consuming human flesh did not seem so extraordinary. Terror and starvation stripped people of the very last remnants

¹² 'Report regarding villagers in parts of Qu county digging 'immortal earth' to eat, due to life's hardship and lack of famine relief, 31 August 1961'. From the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee Archive, file JC 1-2620, pp. 177–8.

¹³ An interview with Lu Guihua, Zhaojue, Liangshan, May 2007.

of their human dignity. To survive such horrendous conditions, they had to resort to any possible means. While local cadres openly stole from state granaries and slaughtered communal calves for personal consumption, ordinary peasants robbed trucks carrying grain and other food items. In the more extreme cases, after only eating wild grass for more than many months, people began to consume human flesh, as corpses became the only available edible material. In the beginning, the government tried to dismiss cases of cannibalism as rumours, but from the end of 1959 as the famine worsened and the level of violence in the countryside reached a frenzy, it was no longer possible to deny that people in many parts of the country had resorted to eating human flesh. The worst cases of cannibalism were found in Gansu and in eastern Sichuan, not far from Chongqing. At one point, some 50 cases of people eating flesh from corpses were reported in Gansu's Linxia municipal, and in Sichuan's Shizhu county, cannibalism had become a widespread practice.¹⁴

Situated on the upper reaches of the Yellow River, bordering the Tibetan plateau and Gobi desert in the northwest of China, Linxia was a major historical crossroads between China and Central Asia. The region had always been culturally diverse; the current population comprises 22 different ethnic groups. Although the Hui, or Chinese Muslims, form the predominant group and Islam is the major religion, Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, and Catholicism have also taken root there. In 1955, the region was chosen as the principal site for some of China's biggest hydropower dams, and two years later, in 1957, it was also designated one of China's first two Hui autonomous regions. As part of the process, local villagers were resettled and persuaded to join farming collectives. The Communist government, as Jing Jun has demonstrated, showed little concern for how or even whether the resettled villagers could cope with the breakup of their communities and lost livelihood.¹⁵ In 1958, these collectives were forcibly merged into the People's Communes and all private properties were confiscated. The construction of the Yanguoxia and Liujiaxia dams commenced in 1958, but villagers were given no prior warning as to what this would entail. Suddenly, one day they were driven from their homes. They watched as their houses were demolished and their villages,

¹⁴ 'A study on cases of cannibalism in Linxia Municipality', by Linxia branch of Government Solicitude Group, 3 March 1961. From Gansu Provincial Party Committee archive, file 91-4-898, pp. 80–7. 'Regarding humans eating corpses and killing children for consumption', a report by comrade Wang Deming from the Provincial Party Committee Investigation Team Shizhu branch, 27 January 1961. From Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, file JC1-2608, pp. 89–90. 'The problem of humans eating human flesh', by the Provincial Party Committee Investigation Team Shizhu branch, 9 February 9 1961. From Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, file JC1-2608, pp. 95–7.

¹⁵ Jing Jun 1996, pp. 71–3.

farmland, trees, and ancestral tombs, as well as mosques and temples, were obliterated by engineered flooding. A few villagers tried to resist, but the militia badly beat them.

Meanwhile, a devastating famine broke out in the region, killing nearly half a million people between 1959 and 1960.¹⁶ Everything living or growing was consumed. Villagers even ate lime plaster torn from the walls of buildings in attempts to dull their desperate hunger. After every goose, dog, and cat had been killed and consumed, and the trees had been stripped bare of their bark and leaves,¹⁷ all that was left to eat were the bodies of the famine's victims. Given the choice between dying or eating human flesh, a number of villagers chose the latter. While often the acts of cannibalism were carried out on the corpses of the dead, murder also occurred to provide a source of sustenance.

In the far southwest in Sichuan's Shizhu county, the People's Commune not only robbed villagers of the very last reserves they had, the villagers were also punished if they were caught consuming food substitutes. Anyone found cooking wild fruit or grass was beaten up and had their pots and pans smashed to pieces. In some communes, the death rate reached 25.86% between 1959 and early 1961, the Provincial Party Committee's investigation team discovered 18 villagers in Qiaotou district's Wawu brigade had consumed dead bodies. An old lady named Luo Wenxiu was the first to start consuming human flesh. It took place on 20 December 1960. After an entire family of seven had died, Luo dug up the body of the three-year-old girl Ma Fahui. She sliced up the girl's flesh and spiced it with chili peppers before steaming and eating it. According to the investigation team, consuming human flesh to stave off hunger was by no means unique in the area.¹⁸

Again eating human flesh in times of famine was not a modern phenomenon. As early as in the seventh century, there were records of cannibalism during the time of the famine and war.¹⁹ Ma Maocai's account of the famine in Shaanxi during the late Ming recorded that children and single travellers were often abducted and killed. Their bones were used as fuel for cooking, and their flesh were cooked up and consumed. But a few days later, those who had consumed human flesh became ill: their faces turned red, and their bodies

¹⁶ Linxia Huzu Zizhizhou Zhi 1993, pp. 53–5.

¹⁷ 'A summary report from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party General Office regarding food shortages and riots throughout 16 provinces and autonomous regions, as well as proposed measures to resolve the problem by local Party Committees', 25 April 25 1958. From Hunan Provincial Party Committee archive, file 141-1-1055, pp. 66–9.

¹⁸ 'The problem of humans eating human flesh', by the Provincial Party Committee Investigation Team Shizhu branch, 9 February 1961. From Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, file JC1-2608, pp. 95–7.

¹⁹ Zhang Zhou 1997, pp. 1–2, 4.

overheated. As result, people died one by one, and the whole area smelled foul.²⁰ Similarly, cases of villagers poisoned after consuming human bodies also occurred during the Great Famine period. In one village in Shizhu county, for example, according to a government investigating team's report, a number of villagers were poisoned by consuming dead corpses: 'As the corpses were highly toxic, after eating them, 13 people suffered from a swollen body, which also turned a yellow colour, and they all eventually died'.²¹

Illness and death

During the Great Famine, illness and death as the consequence of eating poisonous food substitutes was common throughout the country. After failing to deliver famine relief, in November 1960 the central government in Beijing launched a nationwide movement of collecting and manufacturing food substitutes and alternative foods. The result was another disaster. Within a month, outbreaks of food poisoning had quickly spread across the whole of China, alarming the central government. While famine claimed millions of lives, many were killed or became sick by eating poisonous herbs or plants.²² On 25 December, the State Council in Beijing had to make an emergency announcement warning local governments:

According to local reports, recently there have been outbreaks of food poisoning caused by eating food substitutes. On December 16, the Bureau of Grain in Fujian province made a telephone report to the Central Bureau of Grain. The report shows that since the end of November, 6,591 people from 43 counties in that province have been suffering from food poisoning and 294 people have died as a result. 2,071 people have been reported suffering from food poisoning after eating cassava and 286 died as a result. A telephone report by the Bureau of Grain in Shaanxi, dated December 15, stated that in Lounan county's Xinjian commune's Xinmin district, 58 people suffered food poisoning after eating flour made of wild hemp flowers. The symptoms include total paralysis as well as nervous disorders.²³

Mama Huang is over 70 years old, a peasant woman living in a small village in the western Sichuan plains. She lost both her son and her husband during

²⁰ Ma Maocai 1984, p. 42.

²¹ 'The problem of humans eating human flesh', by the Provincial Party Committee Investigation Team Shizhu branch, 9 February 1961. From Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, file JC1-2608, p. 95.

²² See Zhou Xun 2012, pp. 5, 44–58.

²³ 'State Council's emergency announcement to prevent incidents of food poison during the movement of collecting and manufacturing food substitutes', 25 December 1960. From the Sichuan Province Warfare Committee Archive, file JC 202-8, pp. 1–2.

the famine. She recalls how villagers tried to combat hunger by eating anything they could get hold of. Many of the things they consumed were poisonous and a number of villagers also died as result:

To start with, at each meal each person only got to eat a small piece of sweet potato, the size of a finger. We had to add some cabbage or mustard greens to fill our stomachs. The cabbages were from the field, and they were quite big. We never threw away any outer leaves. We washed them whole in the river, including the outer leaves that had already turned yellow and the tough parts down the bottom. No matter how old and how tough, we cleaned it just as well. Then we chopped it up, cooked it, and ate it to fill our stomachs.

[...]

Some people grazed on raw peas and broad beans. They also stole wheat, and ate it raw. The family opposite us had a child whose stomach swelled up after eating raw peas. He couldn't digest such things as a child. I remember he used to eat raw peas with shells on, while running around with barely any clothes. Sometimes people also roasted wheat and peas. They put peas and wheat inside a stove, roasted them, and ate them like that. They roasted them with shells on. They pushed them into the stove, and then used a shovel to get them out. Then they sieved the peas and wheat to get the ashes out. They ate them like that.

[...]

A number people collapsed because they ate castor beans. When there was nothing to eat, they ate roasted castor beans: they tasted delicious. But after eating them, people became ill. They fainted and collapsed all over the place, one after another. That was caused by eating castor beans. The beans made people lose balance, so they fell about on the floor. Their vision became blurred: the sky became murky and the earth turned dark. They began to lose consciousness. People also ate *juanzi* berry. These are white-coloured little berries that grow wild in the countryside. *Juanzi* berries are also tasty, but they make people sick as well. People lost consciousness after eating them and collapsed all over the place. [...]

When people couldn't stand the hunger any longer, they also went to the local market to buy black taro to make black bean curd.²⁴ They cooked it up and ate bowl after bowl of that stuff. Afterwards they became sick. In less than half a day, dead bodies were lying around all over the place. Later, the commune opened an oedema clinic. If somebody became sick, he was sent to the clinic, and given some congee to eat. Chaff was also used to make pills and cakes. That was regarded as good food. Chaff pills, congee, or vegetables were considered good food.²⁵

²⁴ The common term for black taro is devil's tongue or the konjac plant. It grows in India, China, Japan, and Korea. In China, Japan, and Korea, the jelly made of the root of konjac or devil's tongue is still widely consumed as 'healthier' food. The root is highly toxic if not treated properly.

²⁵ Interview with Mama Huang, Huang longxi market town, Sichuan, September 2006.

Overwhelmed by the number of famine victims across the country, the already exhausted healthcare system finally collapsed, contributing to further deaths. Illnesses such as oedema, the massive accumulation of fluid in the body and limbs, caused by starvation and eating poisonous food substitutes, became endemic. In 1961, in Hunan province, Mao's native land, an estimated 46,466 people died of oedema within 46 days.²⁶ In Sichuan, 450,000 people were reported to be suffering from oedema in 1960 and the first part of 1961. Many people were affected by various forms of mental illness.²⁷ Women developed amenorrhoea and the birth rate dropped dramatically.²⁸ Entire villages were wiped out, families perished, and the countryside was filled with an eerie silence haunted by hungry ghosts. Several million children became orphans and parents watched as their children vanished overnight.

Mrs B is a peasant woman from western Sichuan. At the time of the famine, she and her daughter both suffered severe oedema but they were denied any medical care:

We ate almost everything we managed to find. My body became swollen, and so did my face and eyes. My legs swelled to this big. Because of starvation, my oldest daughter's body also became swollen. In her case, it was really bad. Her face was so puffed up that she could barely open her eyes. People told me to take her to see a doctor. Where could I go? My older sister was living in Chengdu, she told me to take my daughter to a hospital there. I told her that I had no money.²⁹

Further south in Luo Guozhen's village in Hongya county, Sichuan province, starvation, illness, and death were commonplace. The village, situated close to the Sichuan-Tibet border, is very picturesque, surrounded by high mountains blanketed with evergreen trees. The vast, lush forest not only sustains more than 400 species of wildlife, but also provides the surrounding area with rich natural resources. Today the area is also famous for its high-quality dairy products, and a large part of the land has now been converted into organic farms. But back in 1959, hardly anything grew here. Most women were barren, and almost no children were born. Luo is now in his late 70s. He still remembers 50 years ago on the time of the famine with great pain:

²⁶ A report by Hunan Province Bureau of Civil Affairs regarding disease prevention work, 1961. From Hunan Province Bureau of Civil Affairs archive, file 167-1-1016, p. 186.

²⁷ '[Sichuan Province] Bureau of Health and Hygiene's special summery report on treating edema', January 1960–October 1961. From Sichuan Province Bureau of Health and Hygiene archive, file JC 133-219, pp. 15, 37, 48, 106.

²⁸ 'Request for additional medical relief funds for the year 1961 to treat edema and gynaecological problems', June 1961. From Sichuan Province Warfare Committee archive, file JC 202-19, p. 109.

²⁹ An interview with Mrs B in Huang Longxi market town, Sichuan, September 2006.

Many people suffered from oedema. It was caused by malnutrition, lack of food, and starvation. Their bodies swelled up, and their skin became very tight, smooth, almost shinning, and transparent. If one pushed a needle into the skin, liquid would burst out. [...] My father was in his fifties then, and he was a strong worker. But because there was no food, he starved to death.

[...] At the time, there was only one traditional medicine doctor working at a clinic at the nearby market town. When people went to see him, he would tell them: 'If you can find some squash or pumpkin, cook them up together with some maize flour. Get that down you and you might be able to live'. That's all. Otherwise there was nothing. [In those days] people were at the mercy of the cadres. A cadre's words were worth gold. It was considered amazing luck if they happened to let you have some food. Otherwise you might end up with nothing.

There were seven big production brigades in our area. During that year, not one woman gave birth to a child. Why? Because people had nothing to eat. Most people were so poor and hungry, and their health was in a terrible state. No wonder women could not bear children. Many women suffered from amenorrhoea, and infertility was widespread. Infertility was linked to amenorrhoea. It was caused by malnutrition. Men also had a very low sperm count. [...] Villagers looked sallow and emaciated. They could barely walk steadily, and most of them were having a hard time keeping themselves alive. How could they bear children? [...]

So many people starved to death at the time—it's horrifying. It was so painful. Even now, when I think of that time, I still feel a great *pain*.³⁰

To ease the crisis, local cadres encouraged villagers and medical personnel to develop rudimentary healing techniques. For example, the local cadre Zhang Sizhou from Jianyang county in Sichuan discovered by accident that a chicken was cured from a serious infectious disease through hot steam treatment. Inferring that he could treat villagers suffering from oedema as result of malnutrition, he ordered communal hot steam baths, only to find out that while it did not cure inflammation, it did bring on menstruation for those suffering from amenorrhoea. The news excited Li Jingquan, the provincial party boss. He sent a team of doctors and medical students to Jianyang to evaluate Zhang's steam treatment, hoping to promote it to the rest of the province.

Zhou Zhaoxi was a fourth-year medical student at Sichuan medical university at the time, and a member of the medical team. He remembers the trip to Jianyang:

On the second day, we visited the steam treatment clinic in the commune. The clinic was set up in a local village. It was a straw hut consisting of a few rooms. There was a waiting room, which was a slightly bigger room, with a few benches inside. The room was crowded with villagers waiting to be treated. They were all adult, including both men and women. The room where the treatment took place was very small, only a few square meters in size. There was a hole in the ground

³⁰ An interview with Luo Guozhen, Hongya County, Sichuan, April 2007.

used as the stove. A huge iron wok sat on the stove, full of herbal medicines. On top of the wok was a big wooden steamer. When we entered the steam room, it was filled with steam and the pungent smell of herbal medicine. The patient climbed on to the steamer and sat in there for a few minutes, until his entire body became sweaty. Once he came out of the steam room, he was given a bowl of water sweetened with molasses to drink. After resting for a few minutes, the patient left. After a few treatments, symptoms of oedema disappeared. [...] but after a few days, those symptoms reappeared.

Our professor who was in charge of the team warned us not to treat any villagers with western medicine, for it could be considered a serious political error. Not long after, more doctors and students from our university were sent to this commune. The intention was to establish a branch school here to help set up steam treatment centre in every village. [...] By the time we left, steam treatment centres were not only all over this commune, but also throughout Jianyang and the rest of Sichuan. Steam treatment became a panacea for any kind illnesses. Even Sichuan medical university hospital built a beautiful steam centre. Films on the treatment were also being made [...] and in Shanghai a steam treatment showroom was built for visitors from all over the country. [...]

But steam treatment could not stop the spread of oedema, and the number of deaths continued to increase. Some medical experts questioned the effectiveness of this treatment, [...] and gradually it disappeared into nothing.³¹

In parts of the country, such as Hunan in central China, villagers turned to religious healers, who were officially banned under the Communist government. Shaodong county in central Hunan had 56 townships at the time, and villagers from 32 townships were found regularly attending religious ceremonies. Sometimes, several hundred people attended these ceremonies, but on average at least 50 villagers turned up on a regular basis. In Laiyang county's Yunqing township, every village had a shrine, each family set up an altar, and the incense was always burning. In Laiyang, doctors' fees were too high for the villagers, so people turned to Buddhist monks and Daoist priests for healing.³² In Changde county's Laihuaping township, some 200 people turned up at a local religious healing ceremony one night. The local cadre tried to stop the ceremony and smashed statues of local gods. Villagers got angry and demanded the statues of the gods be re-installed. In Niutouhu county town's Ma'anshan village, several hundred villagers, including many young people and party members, turned up at a local healing ceremony every first and fifteenth day of the month [of the lunar calendar].³³

³¹ Interview with Zhou Zhaoxi in Chengdu, Sichuan province, 10 September 2007.

³² Regarding rural affairs, by Hunan Provincial Party Committee, 1957. From Hunan Provincial Party Committee archive, file 141-1-835, pp. 27–8.

³³ Regarding rural affairs, by Hunan Provincial Party Committee, 1957. From Hunan Provincial Party Committee archive, file 141-1-835, p. 44.

Conclusion

As Moshe Lewin has argued in the case of the Soviet Union, the home-centred rural culture and the nether world of magic and sorcery, of demons and ‘outcast souls’ inhabited by the denizens of the countryside, were essential strategies that enabled the Soviet peasantry to survive the collectivisation in the Stalinist era.³⁴ The same can be said for China. A few examples in this paper show that popular beliefs and traditional practices were essential for survival in times of forced collectivisation, political indoctrination, and resource-stripping in Mao’s China. The Communist government’s concerted effort to eliminate religion as well as popular beliefs and practices could not remove their importance as essential strategies for survival. In a time of traumatic social, political, and economic changes, popular beliefs and practices provided ordinary peasants with a sense of agency and hope, as well as a source for healing.

As the Great Leap Famine worsened, and the government failed to deliver any adequate famine relief and healthcare, villagers stole and cheated to stay live. Some even sold their children in exchange for a bowl of rice. Many turned more and more to religious and traditional healers, and developed or ‘rediscovered’ a variety of strategies for coping with hunger—from eating earth and worms to decomposing animals and human flesh. Out of desperation, the danger of food poisoning seemed not to be part of people’s awareness or avoidance patterns, such as eating rotten flesh, which after being malnourished might have finally caused death.

While most survivors consider themselves lucky to have survived the famine, they often find the experience of survival extremely painful. More than 50 years after the famine, many survivors still struggle to try to cope with the swift changes in this new era of economic boom as well as the painful past of surviving the worst famine in human history. Religion and popular beliefs as well as basic household kitchen knowledge continued to provide solace and are often the only hope and consolation for many survivors. Their shared remedies and recipes, which they used to sustain hunger and to survive famine, provide a non-threatening context to elicit and explore what are often painful memories. By matching the old recipes for famine survival to new modern applications we get a better understanding of continuity and change in the history Chinese emergency nutrition. Furthermore, this personalised kitchen knowledge is technical evidence of how ordinary people devised complex and plural strategies to cope with the fundamental biological crises that had been

³⁴ Lewin 1985.

brought on by the worst and state-manufactured Great Famine of the twentieth century.

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