

as what you get in France. If you get seasick, don't worry because no one dies from seasickness. . . .

Hesen
Montargis, March 8, 1920

13.6 AND 13.7 THE NORTH CHINA FAMINE, 1920-1921

In 1920 and 1921 a famine devastated the agricultural economy of the entire north China plain, virtually the same area that had been struck by the massive drought and famine of 1876-1879 and little had been done since then to correct the underlying problems that had aggravated the social effects of the long dry spell of those years. Denuded hills, twisters of loessial dust, wrecked irrigation works, and rutted and impassable roads still bore testimony in 1920 to the patterns of overpopulation, land overuse, and governmental neglect that had help wreck the economy of the region forty years before.

In 1920 as in 1876, the crisis was precipitated by lack of rainfall before the fall harvest. In the already densely inhabited agricultural counties of the famine zone, where population often exceeded 1200 persons per square mile, almost all peasants were entirely dependent on the grain crop for their livelihood. Deprived of grain, they were driven to take the few desperate steps that were available to peasants when a crop failed: they bartered the valuable wooden parts of their houses or their livestock for food; they took loans at interest rates of 3-5% per month; and, when no other recourse was available, they sold their land at ruinous rates to still well-to-do families and land speculators. As natural conditions grew desperate in Zhili (Hebei), Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and part of Shandong, social and economic ills easily visible even in ordinary times were accentuated. The excerpts that follow were published originally in the report of the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee. During the north China famine, the Famine Relief Committee took direct charge over relief efforts in west Zhili (Hebei) and played a coordinating role in much of the rest of the disaster area. In 1920, many fewer lives were lost than in the 1876-1879 famine, but as the first excerpt on the "Severity of the Famine" shows, millions of peasants were nonetheless left starving and destitute. The second document, part of a guide for relief workers prepared by the famous educator Henry Fenn, warns of the pitfalls awaiting famine workers seeking to distribute free relief rice in the famished villages of north China. In this terrible landscape of destruction with its armies, destitute sufferers there were also, those who found devious means of manipulating the crisis for personal gain, as it is

possible to see if we read between the lines of Fenn's guide. Natural disasters in troubled times made the countryside a social tinder-box that could be set aflame by the slightest spark.

13.6 *Report on the North China Famine, 1922*

SEVERITY OF FAMINE

Much must be taken into consideration in discussing famine conditions in China. In the Western world, famine means something unusual—a most rare calamity. In semi-arid North China, it is a state more or less chronic. Thus in certain districts, like those about Tingchow or Shuntefu in Chihli, famine is almost a permanent condition and times of the most intense suffering are different from normal only in degree. There are no seven fat kine⁴—rather only seven lean kine and then seven a little more lean. The casual observer, going into such a district, is apt to say, "Oh, but this is almost the ordinary state." And so the report goes out that there is not famine and that we are but feeding beggars. On the other hand, someone not realizing the great resistance of the Chinese to hardship may go into the same district and jump to the conclusion that half the population is going to die, and propaganda for relief is started fully as undependable as the former report that there is no famine at all. Again one county may be fertile and prosperous owing to water supply, while its next neighbour is barren and destitute. For instance, a worker from the Shaho Chiao District states that there were no cases of severe privation in the immediate district but investigation of the outlying towns showed the people to be without any food other than bark and leaves. Thus no county can be taken as a clue to conditions in a province, nor even one or two villages as a standard of conditions in a county.

There is however no doubt that the famine of 1920-21 has been a real one. Workers in Shantung report intense privation. In Chanhwa County, 50 percent of the people in 250 villages were absolutely destitute. In Yucheng, the young crops died close to the earth in the fields which were as dry as the roads, and the starving poor were known to go out and dig up the wheat sprouts, still in the ground, in the fields of the more prosperous neighbors. In Lin Yi County, where throughout the last six years there had been but one year of good crops, there had been but one year of good crops, there were in the entire county, but a few pecks of grain and those been imported. Even chaff had been brought in from other regions. From the province of Zhili, similar reports are made. In the district about Shentefu 1/3 of a population of 1,093,000 were in direct need and there were 31,286 deaths from hunger and cold. In Tinghsien, the early

4. Plural of "cow" (archaic).

summer harvest was 30% of what it should have been. In a period of three weeks, last winter, investigation showed an average of 110 deaths a week, steadily increasing, in a district of half a million people. Workers throughout the Hantan District report a percentage of destitute varying from 5% in a few lightly stricken sections to 80%. In this district, a fair sample of suffering is the town of Yang Chao Chuang, of whose 100 homes, sixty contained no food except straw and leaves. There had been at least 100 farm animals and there were then but five. One fifth of the mud houses had the roofs torn off and all timbers sold. The area about Siao Chang was very badly hit. In Tsaochiang County investigation showed that undoubtedly 50% of the people would have starved and in Nankung County 75% but for the prompt arrival of relief.

There are many safe ways of determining the severity of a famine. One is by investigation of food supplies in a house to house canvass. Such an investigation throughout the entire famine area showed the following bill of fare for all the famine sufferers:—

Kang, mixed wheat blades
Flour made of ground leaves
Fuller's earth
Flower seeds
Poplar buds
Corn cobs
Hung Chin Tsai (steamed balls of some wild herb)
Sawdust
Thistles
Leaf dust
Poisonous tree bean
Kaoliang husks
Cotton seeds
Elm bark
Bean cakes (very unpalatable)
Peanut hulls
Sweet potato vines, ground (considered a great delicacy)
Roots
Stone ground up into flour to piece out the ground leaves.

Some of this food was so unpalatable that children starved, refusing to eat it. Yet so common was dependence on this food that in many districts the relief workers investigating thousand of homes, very rarely found any store of grain commonly used in food. It is very true, that many millions of people were able to eke out their existence by the reliance on food such as above.

Another test was the economic crippling of the people. Almost every worker reporting from Siao Chang District speaks of the numbers of formerly fine farms, with houses now roofless, the straw in the mud thatch having been used as fuel, every bit of timber either sold or burned, no stocks of fuel in the courtyards, the absence of all animals. In Ling Hsien, Shantung, 138 houses in 24 villages had been completely torn down. The decrease of land values among an agricultural people, shows how disheartened they have become by the long failure of crops. Near Lin Ming Kuan in Hantan District, land worth formerly \$100.00 per mou, is now selling for \$3.00 to \$4.00 per mou. In stricken districts of Shantung, ground formerly worth 100,000 cash would not sell now for 20,000 cash with the wheat actually planted. Farm implements are unsalable except when they are of wood and can be used as fuel.

A further test was the large migration of people from affected districts. Many workers remark the absence of younger men in the villages. They have all gone away to find work in new places or perhaps even to beg in the large cities. One worker in the Tsinan District speaks of "whole villages entirely deserted." In Feihsiang Hsien in the Hautan District, 3,000 men left their homes, (in this hsien also 5,000 children were sold.) From Shang Kwong in the same district, all the younger people had gone, both men and women. Almost every writer in the Tchow District in Shantung mentions the numbers of homes plastered up from which the families have fled. Tchow itself was crowded with refugees. About the stations where grain was being unloaded the frantic people would crowd so close to the cars in the hope that a little grain would be spilled, that many accidents and deaths were caused. All day, people in rags huddled in the streets scraping up the dust of the road in search of a grain of food. In Paotingfu, great hardship was caused among the poor whose friends came to stay with them and among the rickshaw coolies because the influx of men meant more competition and a decrease of income. In Tingchow, refugees slept in the streets by the score and every worker mentions seeing deaths by starvation among these people.

There must have been at least a million people who thus left their homes and went to other parts. They journeyed up and down the railroads, going as far as Mongolia, and the North district of Manchuria. They poured through the passes into the Provinces of Shansi and Shensi, an already affected area in the hope of finding means of livelihood. To a lesser degree they went South to the rice growing regions. One other strange fact is that people under such circumstances migrated to the cold North rather than to the warm South.

Another test of the severity of the famine was the number of children sold. One worker who has been twenty years in Honan Province states that never in all that time has he seen such an unprecedented sale of children. In Shang Kwong near Hantan, a town of some 250 people, 40 to 50 children were sold. In the district of Shuntefu, 25,443 children were sold. Children were sold into

various positions—sometimes as servants, sometimes as concubines or into the cities as prostitutes, sometimes to be secondary wives. One father in Chingehow in Shantung sold his son for 150 catties of corn, but in this case, the child was to be the son and heir of a rich man so the father could be well pleased. It is to be remembered that these famine sufferers are not beggars but sturdy, self-respecting industrious farmer folk, who think highly of their children and would only part with them in case of the greatest suffering.

Finally the intensity can be shown by the death rate. There are no reliable statistics on this matter and any statement is merely a guess. One of the most conservative committees in their estimate of destitute report a death rate of 100 a day in each Hsien of their district before a large measure of relief went in. A low estimate of the loss of life due to starvation would be half a million people. This was kept down by the wonderful ability of the Chinese people to adapt themselves to starvation conditions and live on things no other nation would deem fit for use as food, by the mild winter which cut down the deaths from cold, and by the lack of large epidemics of typhus due to the policy of keeping people in their homes, instead of concentrating them in camps. But the largest factor is undoubtedly the action of the relief committees and Government in taking measures to alleviate conditions. Had it not been for this, there would have been a higher death rate, probably equalling that of the earlier years.

13.7 Henry C. Fenn: "Notes on Field Work in the Distribution of Grain Tickets in Shunde Fu"

I. Personal Investigation Method.

1. Travel preferably in pairs.
2. On arrival at a village find one of these:
 - a. Ts'un Cheng—the village chief
 - b. Ts'un Fu—the vice-chief
 - c. Ti Fang—the sheriff
3. Ask him to lead you to the desperately needy homes only.
4. Inspect hastily, noting the following:
 - a. Do the people keep animals?
 - b. Do the rolls of bedding correspond to the number of mouths the family claims?
 - c. Are there any locked doors? A lot of hurried concealment took place when you entered the village.
 - d. Look for the dog's bowl and see what he eats.
 - e. Did the guide bring you to this house of his own accord or because someone called to him in passing?
 - f. Is there more than one family in the court? If so, do they seem to be parts of one family broken up for the occasion?
 - g. Are there signs of flour on

the sifter which probably hangs on the wall in the central room?

- h. Look in the "kwoa" and see what the people eat.
- i. The man is probably out—may be just outside the court listening. His wife will tell you she is a widow.
- j. Don't let anyone talk unless spoken to.
- k. Is the house regularly inhabited or fixed up?
 1. A genuine house is not likely to be very clean, a fake is newly swept.
 2. In a genuine house, the pegs from which door curtains hang have dust on top.
 3. In a genuine house there is a "kwoa" and signs of recent fire.
4. A genuine house smells as though it were inhabited. A fake is cold and clammy.
5. Have extra buildings been torn down and their timbers sold or burned?
 - a. Invitations to eat. Accept food and you accept an obligation. Don't accept anything but tea.
 - b. Paying the slightest attention to a pleader. You will be mobbed.
 - c. Accepting anything on hearsay. Go and see for yourself.
 - d. Changing your mind. Once you have written a ticket don't change it. You will be mobbed by applicants.