

Document 10.10: Excerpts from the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee's Report on the North China Famine, 1922

The famine of 1920-21 has been a real one. Workers in Shandong [Province] report intense privation. In Zhanhua 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 Linyi County, where throughout the last six years there had been but one year of good crops, there were in the entire county, but a few pecks of grain and those had been imported. Even chaff had been brought in from other regions. From the province of Hebei, similar reports are made. In the district about Chengde one third of a population of 1,093,000 were in direct need and there were 31,286 deaths from hunger and cold. In Dingxian, the early 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 Handan 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 Yangzhaozhuang, 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 the timbers sold. The area about Xiaochang was very badly hit. In Zaojiang County investigation showed that undoubtedly 50% of the people would have starved and in Nangong 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
Hong Qin Zai (steamed balls of some wild herb)
Sawdust
Thistles
Leaf dust
Poisonous tree bean
*Gaoliang*¹ husks
Cotton seeds
Elm barks
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 thousands 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 Xiaochang District speaks of the numbers of formerly fine farms, with houses now rootless, 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 Lingxian, Shandong, 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 Linmingguan in Handan district, land worth formerly \$100.00 per *mou*, is now selling for \$3.00 to \$4.00 per *mou*. In stricken districts of Shandong, ground formerly worth 100,000 cash would not sell now for 20,000 cash with the wheat actually planted. Farm implements are un-saleable except when they are of wood and can be used as fuel.

¹ Sorghum, a type of grain

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 Jinan District speaks of “whole villages entirely deserted.” In Feixiang *Xian*² in the Handan District, 3,000 men left their homes, (in this *xian* 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 winter in the Dezhou District in Shandong mentions the numbers of homes plastered up from which the families have fled. Dezhou 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 Baodingfu, 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 Dingzhou, 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 Shanxi and Shaanxi, 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 Henan Province states that never in all that time has he seen such an unprecedented sale of children. In Shang Kwong near Handan, a town of some 250 people, 40 to 50 children were sold. In the district of Shuntefu, 25,443 children

² County

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 Qingzhou in Shandong 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 *xian* 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 equaling that of the earlier years.

Source: Peking United International Famine Relief Committee, *Report on the North China Famine*, 1922. Reprinted in Cheng, Pei-kai, Michael Lestz, and Jonathan D. Spence. *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999. 247–250.

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