

# Modern Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ASS>

Additional services for *Modern Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Grain, Local Politics, and the Making of Mao's Famine in Wuwei, 1958–1961

SHUJI CAO and BIN YANG

Modern Asian Studies / Volume 49 / Issue 06 / November 2015, pp 1675 - 1703

DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X14000717, Published online: 25 May 2015

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0026749X14000717](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0026749X14000717)

### How to cite this article:

SHUJI CAO and BIN YANG (2015). Grain, Local Politics, and the Making of Mao's Famine in Wuwei, 1958–1961. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49, pp 1675-1703  
doi:10.1017/S0026749X14000717

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

# *Grain, Local Politics, and the Making of Mao's Famine in Wuwei, 1958–1961\**

SHUJI CAO

*History Department, Shanghai Jiaotong University, China*  
Email: [claims11122@msn.com](mailto:claims11122@msn.com)

BIN YANG

*History Department, National University of Singapore, Singapore*  
Email: [hisyang@nus.edu.sg](mailto:hisyang@nus.edu.sg)

## Abstract

Mao's Great Famine in Wuwei County, Anhui Province, between the years of 1958 and 1960, resulted in the deaths of about 245,000 people, a quarter of the local population. By focusing on grain production and consumption, this article adopts a local perspective to examine the county's official archives and analyse the background, rationale, and processes of local authorities that led to one of the highest death rates in the country. A local perspective provides an empirical microanalysis of the Great Famine; illustrates the complexity of this catastrophe; argues for local factors such as factional struggles, central-local interactions, and the political atmosphere created by the series of pre-1958 campaigns as key to local variations of the disaster; and delivers national implications for viewing Mao's China. Official archives explored in this article reveal that an over-reporting of grain output might have resulted in the Great Famine, but did not necessarily lead to the massive death toll, and that local politics, particularly intra-party factional struggles, intertwined with central-local political interactions, were crucial for the terrible tragedy that ensued in Wuwei, and that the end of this famine resulted not from peasants' resistance, nor the change of radical polices to moderate ones, but from the decreased demand for grain caused by the massive number of deaths.

\* An earlier draft was presented at the Association for Asian Studies 2013 annual conference in San Diego. The authors are deeply indebted to many readers, including Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, Felix Wemheuer, Ralph Thaxton, Neil Diamant, Cheng Yinghong, and Liu Shigu, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments and suggestions.

## Introduction

China's Great Famine of 1958–1961 resulted in the deaths of over 30 million people. With a death rate of 18.4 per cent, Anhui province, which had one of the highest death rates in China, witnessed the death of six million people,<sup>1</sup> and Wuwei was one of the hardest hit counties in this province. According to an official gazetteer, the total population dip in Wuwei during this period, taking emigrants and new births into account, amounted to 245,000, a death rate of 25.8 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Such a colossal death rate raises a key question: aside from the standard national institutions, systems, policies, and campaigns that contributed to the tragedy, what were the specific roles of local elements, especially local authorities? In recent studies of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 and its aftermath, namely the Great Famine,<sup>3</sup> a great deal of attention has been paid to national policies, paramount leaders, and provincial variations which are seen as key factors behind the tragedy. Some scholars have begun to consider local factors,<sup>4</sup> echoing a recent scholarly trend in criticizing the one-size-fits-all

<sup>1</sup> Cao, Shuji (2005). *1959–1961 nian Zhongguo de renkou siwang jiqi yuanyin* (The Death in 1959–1961 China and its Reasons), *Zhongguo Renkou Kexue* (1), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Wuweixian Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (1993). *Wuwei Xianzhi* (Gazetteer of Wuwei County) (hereafter *Xianzhi*), Beijing: Shehuikexuewenxian Chubanshe, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Mueggler, Erik (2001). *The Age of the Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence and Place in Southwest China*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Cao, *1959–1961*, pp. 14–28; Yang, Jisheng (2008). *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi* (Tombstone: a Record on the Great Famine in 1960s China), 2 vols, 6th edition, Tiandi Tushu, Hong Kong; Dikötter, Frank (2010). *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962*, Walker and Co., New York; Wemheuer, Felix (2010). Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China, *The China Quarterly* 201, pp. 176–194; Manning, Kimberley Ens and Felix Wemheuer (eds) (2011). *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver and Toronto; Kung, James Kai-Sing and Shou, Chen (2011). The Tragedy of the Nomenclatura: Career Incentives and Political Radicalism During China's Great Leap Famine, *American Political Science Review* 105(1), pp. 27–45; Bramall, Chris (2011). Agency and Famine in China's Sichuan Province, 1958–1962, *The China Quarterly* 208, pp. 990–1008.

<sup>4</sup> For provincial and regional varieties during the Great Famine, see Domenach, Jean-Luc (trans. A. M. Berrett) (1995). *The Origins of the Great Leap Forward: The Case of One Chinese Province*, Westview, Boulder; Wemheuer, Dealing with Responsibility, pp. 176–194; Chen, Yixin (2011). 'Under the Same Maoist Sky: Accounting for the Death Rate Discrepancies in Anhui and Jiangxi' in Manning and Wemheuer, *Eating Bitterness*, pp. 197–225; Kung and Chen, *The Tragedy*, pp. 27–45; Bramall, Agency and Famine, pp. 990–1008. For an analysis of archives utilized in Great Famine studies, see Garnaut, Anthony (2013). Hard Facts and Half-truths: The New Archival History of China's Great Famine, *China Information* 27(2), pp. 223–246.

interpretation of the Chinese Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Mao's China in the 1950s became highly centralized, reaching its peak of centralizing power during the Great Leap Forward; nevertheless, its Communist system was never without hierarchal gaps, inner compromises, and local variations that have inspired these scholars to study the history from a local, grassroots perspective. Such initiatives have brought back local contexts; emphasized the significance, implications, and urgency of specific contexts; and challenged and balanced the top-down approach, macro-analyses, and elite-centric scholarship, thus rescuing Chinese history from national frameworks.<sup>6</sup> Following these initiatives, this article adopts a local perspective to examine the Great Famine in Wuwei County, Anhui Province; to provide an empirical microanalysis of local authorities and local variations; to confirm, revise or even challenge some general statements; and, it is hoped, to deliver some national implications. Two reasons account for the focus on Wuwei: the high death rate of about 25.8 per cent of the local population; and, more crucially, access to official archives.

Due to official regulations, in general, the government archives of Mao's China have not been declassified. Scholarly access to certain local archives continues to occur on an occasional basis, and comprehensive access seems unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future. It is by chance that the authors have been granted access to the government archives of Wuwei on which this article is primarily based. The so-called 'county party committee meeting records' (*Xianwei huiyi jilu*; 县委会议记录, hereafter *Jilu*) produced at various county-level meetings constitute the key sources for this research.<sup>7</sup> The sequence of these Wuwei County meetings consisted of those at county-level, at three-level (county, district, and commune), at four-level (county, district, commune, and brigade), and at five-level (the previous four plus the production team). All these meetings were held in the name of

<sup>5</sup> Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. (ed.) (2003). *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches*, Routledge, London and New York; Harford, Kathleen and Steve M. Goldstein (2003). 'Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution' in Wasserstrom (ed.), *Twentieth-Century China*, pp. 138–168; Schoppa, R. Keith (2003). 'Contours of Revolutionary Change in a Chinese County, 1900–1950' in Wasserstrom (ed.), *Twentieth-Century China*, pp. 103–137.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Jeremy and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds) (2008). *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Manning and Wemheuer (2011). 'Introduction' in Manning and Wemheuer, *Eating Bitterness*, pp. 9–11; Bramall, Agency and Famine.

<sup>7</sup> All the archives of Wuwei used in the article are provided by the History Department Library, Shanghai Jiaotong University, China.

the Chinese Communist Party, which had by-and-large taken over the administrative function in the county. Such a pattern corresponded with the national trend starting from the mid-1950s.

The meeting records are supplemented with another crucial archive, namely the *Self-Critique on My Mistakes* (*Guanyu Wo de Cuowu de Jiancha*; 关于我的错误的检查, hereafter *Jiancha*) by Yao Kuijia, first party secretary of Wuwei at this time. Yao had been recently appointed to Wuwei in 1957, the year of flooding in the county. Zeng Xisheng, first secretary of Anhui, was not satisfied with the county party secretary who was seen as incapable,<sup>8</sup> and appointed Yao to replace him. Yao, a veteran of the New Fourth Army, had been transferred from a military to an administrative position and was seen by Zeng as possessing a strong will, but, being an outsider, he had to work to establish his capabilities (that is, in delivering Wuwei's high grain quota) in order to impress provincial authorities and enhance his legitimacy. Because Zeng had previously been his leader in the New Fourth Army and was now his patron, Yao closely followed Zeng. When he took charge of Wuwei, Yao utilized political campaigns to remove or punish local cadres. As a result, a group of Wuwei-based county leaders was either moved out, or became politically cautious. This partially accounted for the fact that few cadres challenged Yao's abusive manner in the years that followed.

This article distinguishes itself by scrutinizing the production and distribution of grain in Wuwei, *the* essential issue in the Great Famine. By carefully reading available archives; posing problems; interpreting key figures of grain production, consumption, and state procurements; and by analysing the conditions surrounding low food rations, this article illustrates the rationale of county governance and local politics during the period. Local political factors include the continuous legacy of historical factional struggles, external and internal tensions, nepotism, central-local interactions, and the political atmosphere created by the series of pre-1958 campaigns, some specific while others are probably nationally indicative. Official archives explored in this article reveal that over-reporting of grain output might have resulted in the Great Famine, but not necessarily in the massive death toll, and that local politics, particularly factional struggles, intertwined with central-local political interactions, were crucial for the terrible

<sup>8</sup> Zhang, Kaifan (2004). *Zhang Kaifan Huiyilu* (Memoirs of Zhang Kaifan) (recorded and compiled by Song Lin, annotated by Song Lin and Liu Sixiang, and proofread by Ding Jizhe and Fang Yiqing), Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, Hefei, p. 330.

tragedy that took place in Wuwei, and that the end of this local famine resulted not from local peasants' resistance, nor from the change of radical polices to moderate ones, but from the decreased grain demand resulting from the mass deaths of peasants. Such a case occurring at the county politics and governance level echoes those at the provincial level, such as in the cases of Henan and Anhui.<sup>9</sup>

Natural or man-made disasters may create famine and famine may cause deaths, but not necessarily in massive numbers. Both benefiting by and suffering from the proximity of the Yangzi River, Wuwei was used to disasters—and famine in particular. In the summer of 1954, for instance, an unprecedented spate of flooding engulfed Wuwei, and about 282 people died from drowning or as a result of collapsing buildings, but there were no fatalities due to famine.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, in 1958 and 1959, with no flooding or drought to explain what happened, Wuwei witnessed an epidemic of deaths. Logically, an understanding of the supply and distribution of grain is crucial to make sense of the massive death rate, and that is why the article begins with an examination of grain output.

### Grain output in 1958

Grain constituted the key issue for the administration in Mao's China from its very beginning. The so-called 'unified purchase and sale' (*tonggou tongxiao*; 统购统销), a euphemism for the compulsory state purchase of grain from peasants, introduced in late 1953,<sup>11</sup> closed free grain markets at all levels and began to create hunger in many rural areas. To understand the grain shortage, which constituted the background of the Great Famine, it is necessary to analyse the grain output of Wuwei between the years 1958 and 1961 (see [Table 1.1](#)).

*Xianzhi* lists two figures for grain output for the year 1958: 700 million *jin* (306 *jin* per *mu*) and 620 million *jin* (271 *jin* per *mu*).<sup>12</sup> Taking into account other circumstantial evidence, such as a cadre's

<sup>9</sup> For the power struggles in leadership and the disastrous consequences in pre-1958 Henan, see Domenach, *The Origins*.

<sup>10</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, T. P. (1984). Stalinism, Famine and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurements During the Great Leap Forward, *Theory and Society* 13(3), pp. 339–377.

<sup>12</sup> *Xianzhi*, pp. 28 and 130.

TABLE 1.1  
*Population and grain output in Wuwei, 1953–1964.*

Year	Population	Acreage ( <i>mu</i> )	Average output ( <i>jin</i> ) per <i>mu</i>	Output ( <i>jin</i> )	Out-transfer ( <i>jin</i> )
1953	944,711	2,006,229	141	565,474,000	116,870,000
1954	937,550	1,835,419	45	165,772,000	-286,130,000
1955	940,004	2,285,019	209	953,624,000	166,330,000
1956	944,884	2,484,361	92	457,598,000	-40,730,000
1957	982,979	2,248,142	140	630,000,000	115,980,000
1958	950,056	2,215,455	158	620,000,000	201,950,000
1959	820,259	2,021,891	111	448,304,000	161,000,000
1960	662,557	2,043,695	98	400,000,000	11,8740,000
1961	686,219	1,898,312	108	410,000,000	76,420,000
1962	762,252	1,668,288	135	450,000,000	6,2190,000
1963	804,544	1,818,609	192	700,000,000	210,330,000
1964	780,625	1,730,887	152	526,956,000	112,720,000

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 28, 106, 130, 279 and 286.

Notes: 1. The term 'out-transfer' refers to the grain transferred out of Wuwei by the order of the state. Logically, '-' refers to the grain received by Wuwei. For example, the year 1954 witnessed the transfer of 286 million *jin* of grain into Wuwei, due to the flooding of the Yangzi. The same happened in 1956.

2. In 1950s China, the *jin-liang* 斤两 system for weight (1 *jin* = 16 *liang* = 500 grams) and the *mu* 亩 system for surface (1 *mu* = 0.0667 hectare = 0.1647 acre) were used, even in official statistics and reports, and are kept in our article for convenience of expression.

estimate of 200–300 *jin* per *mu* in 1958<sup>13</sup> and the average output of 280 *jin* per *mu* in 1957, the figure of 620 million *jin* seems relatively reliable and is used in this article. Nevertheless, even the former figure is far lower than the estimate reported by county leaders at the end of 1958.

In a meeting to estimate the grain output held on 28 November 1958, Lü Fenzhi, second party secretary of the county, set the tone for the meeting, 'Originally, we reported the output as 1,600,000,000 *jin*, but now our revised total is 1,500,000,000 *jin*.'<sup>14</sup> After going through several long reports and a lengthy discussion, Lü concluded by providing two estimates for grain output: 1,120 million *jin* (800 *jin* per *mu*) and 1,260 million *jin* (900 *jin* per *mu*).<sup>15</sup> The meeting ended with the decision to wait for the district reports. Reports were collected

<sup>13</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 7. The History Department Library at the Shanghai Jiaotong University has categorized this archive as '1-1-1-1958-096'.

<sup>14</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 7

TABLE 2.1  
*Grain output and distribution in Wuwei, 1957.*

Grain output ( <i>jin</i> )	Out-transfer ( <i>jin</i> )	Local consumption ( <i>jin</i> )	Local population
630,000,000	116,000,000	514,000,000	983,000

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 106, 130, 279 and 285.

that very afternoon and they amounted to a figure of 1,240 million. Lü confidently concluded that, 'The output is 1,240,000,000 *jin*', and then reminded the cadres, 'Now that we all are of the same mind (*sixiang yizhi*; 思想一致), we should no longer mention those other figures.'<sup>16</sup> It is therefore justifiable to conclude that the figure of 1,240,000,000 might have been double the actual output.

### State procurement and out-transfer grain

The state procurement quota was determined by the grain output for the specific year. On 21 November 1958, Yao Kuijia stated that none of the 31 communes of Wuwei had completed their share of the state procurement quota of 408,000,000 *jin*.<sup>17</sup> According to Yao, only 51 of the 95 rural towns and 137 of the 267 brigades were able to match their procurement quotas.<sup>18</sup> Over 310,000,000 *jin* of grain had been obtained from peasants, but the procurement was lagging far behind schedule and certainly revealed both the overestimation of output and the peasants' resistance.

Compared with state procurement, the out-transfer of grain posed an immediate and more severe threat to peasants, due to the fact that grain would be moved out of Wuwei rather than consumed locally. While the figures for grain output were seriously problematic, those for out-transfer were generally accurate and reliable. The year 1957 provides a clear background for understanding the famine years. Tables 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 illustrate grain distribution in 1957.

The figure of 514 *jin* per peasant (see Table 2.3) appears to be a sufficient amount for survival. However, this grain was not reserved

<sup>16</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 7. A three-level system (county-district-commune) was put into effect in rural China. In 1957, the 95 rural towns in Wuwei were reorganized into 31 people's communes. *Xianzhi*, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 7.

TABLE 2.2  
*Grain consumption in urban Wuwei, 1957.*

Urban population	Annual grain ration ( <i>jin</i> per capita)	Urban consumption ( <i>jin</i> )
100,000	600	60,000,000

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 26; *Xianzhi*, p. 106.

TABLE 2.3  
*Grain consumption in rural Wuwei, 1957.*

Rural population	Grain ration for peasants ( <i>jin</i> per capita)	Rural consumption ( <i>jin</i> )
883,000	514	454,000,000

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 106, 130, 279 and 286.

TABLE 2.4  
*Grain output, out-transfer, and local consumption in Wuwei, 1958 (jin).*

Grain output	Out-transfer	Local consumption
620,000,000	201,950,000	418,050,000

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 28 and 286.

purely for food. A considerable portion of the grain was reserved for seeds and fodder for livestock. In addition, the figure 514 refers to unhusked grain (*yuanliang*; 原粮, or *culiang*; 粗粮), which denotes wheat with bran or rice with a husk. Approximately 100 *jin* of unhusked grain was converted to 75 *jin* of refined grain (*chengpinliang*; 成品粮) and so the grain ration in 1957 was 386 *jin* of refined grain. Taking out the portion for seeds and livestock, each peasant was left with roughly one *jin* of refined grain per day. This ration, to be fair, was sufficient for subsistence in a rural society, but left nearly nothing for other economic activities. And it is rather optimistic to start this discussion with the year 1957, which had an exceptionally bountiful harvest.

An enormous challenge for grain procurement occurred in 1958. First of all, the grain output was believed to be exaggerated by double the actual figure and consequently, the out-transfer quota was increased to 202,000,000 *jin*.<sup>19</sup> As such, local peasants were left with 418,050,000 *jin* for their own consumption (see Table 2.4), almost 100,000,000 less than the 514,000,000 *jin* available in 1957 (see Table 2.1). Clearly, it was the peasants who were going to feel the impact of this.

<sup>19</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 286.

Were county leaders aware of the exaggeration? Circumstantial evidence suggests an affirmative answer. Even in the prosperous year of 1957, when the out-transfer quota was set up as 200,000,000 *jin*, Wuwei only managed to fulfil 116,000,000 *jin* of the quota. This indicates that county leaders understood Wuwei's actual capacity even when the county had an excellent harvest. When the Wuhu Regional Committee (*Wuhu Diwei*; 芜湖地委) requested 230,000,000 *jin* from Wuwei in 1958, Yao insisted on 200,000,000 instead<sup>20</sup> In 1955, when Wuwei witnessed an unprecedented harvest, which was never surpassed in the years under discussion, only 166,000,000 *jin* was out-transferred (see [Table 1.1](#)). Thus, the figure of 200,000,000 seems to have been the upper limit for Yao. If he believed in the reported grain output in 1958, another 34 million *jin* for out-transfer would not have been significant at all.

### Grain ration for peasants

The figure of 620,000,000 *jin* in 1958 was close to the actual output, and this is crucial in order to obtain an accurate figure of local grain consumption. To begin with, it is necessary to discuss the amount of state procurement. On 21 November, Yao claimed that 315,000,000 *jin* was stored in granaries;<sup>21</sup> on 27 November, another county leader stated that figure to be 350,000,000 *jin*.<sup>22</sup> In December, Yao claimed there was 385,000,000 *jin* of stored grain, an increase of a further 35 million *jin*.<sup>23</sup> However, this 35 million, as would be revealed in accounts by Yao in 1961, did not, in fact, exist.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the actual figure for the year 1958 was 350,000,000 *jin* stored in state granaries.

Of the 620,000,000, a total of 350,000,000 was said to be stored in granaries, leaving 270,000,000 for the peasants. Because urban residents in Wuwei were fed by state procurement, 270,000,000 *jin* would provide a ration of 238.2 *jin* of unhusked grain per peasant, or 0.65 *jin* per day per capita, too low a ration for subsistence. In the spring of 1959, the state sold 52 million *jin* to peasants who now theoretically had access to 322,000,000 *jin* (see [Table 3.1](#)).

<sup>20</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 28.

TABLE 3.1  
Peasant ration, spring 1959 (jin).

Grain left for peasants (a)	Grain resold to peasants (b)	Peasant population (c)	Yearly peasant ration (jin per capita) (d)*
270,000,000	52,000,000	850,000	379

$$* d = (a + b)/c$$

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 28 and 279.

TABLE 3.2  
Seed grain, 1958.

Acreage (mu)	Seed grain (jin per mu)	Seed grain in total (jin)
2,000,000	15	30,000,000

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1959-130, p. 4.

TABLE 3.3  
Grain under the control of Wuwei County Authority, 1958 (jin).

State procurement (a)*	Seed grain (b)	Out-transfer (c)	Grain sold to peasants (d)	Grain under the control of Wuwei (e)
350,000,000	15,000,000	202,000,000	52,000,000	81,000,000

$$* a = b + c + d + e$$

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 279 and 286.

As a result, each peasant was provided with a ration of 379 jin of unhusked grain (see Table 3.1) or 0.778 jin of refined grain per capita per day. During the Great Famine, the official ration was 12 liang (0.75 jin) each day for an adult. Later, ten liang per capita per day was regarded as the least amount that would sustain life. Taking fodder into consideration, the actual ration might have been slightly lower.

What about urban residents? The 350,000,000 jin of state-procured grain was supposed to cover out-transferred, urban consumption, and seed grain (see Table 3.2).

Supposing that half of the seed grain was sold to the state, the county would have had to return this 15 million jin to the peasants for planting the next crop, and 202,000,000 jin of out-transferred grain would be leaving Wuwei. In addition, 52 million jin of grain had been sold back to the peasants, as mentioned. Therefore, Wuwei County only controlled 81 million jin of grain for its own administration (see Table 3.3)

The 81 million jin of grain was mainly used to feed urban residents, who required nine million jin each month at the apex of the Great

Leap Forward when most people, including peasants, were mobilized for steel production, and five million each month at its lowest ebb when the mobilized population was dismissed back to their villages. It is safe to conclude that the 81 million *jīn* was sufficient to feed the urban population up to the next crop season.

The above calculation leads to the logical conclusion that even with 202,000,000 *jīn* of out-transferred grain, the county would theoretically still be able to feed both its urban and rural populations, although at substantially reduced rations, especially for peasants. A daily ration of around one *jīn* of unhusked grain per peasant would have caused widespread hunger or malnutrition, but by no means a massive death toll. This general statement, however, is based on the assumption of a rational grain support plan by timing and locality.

### **Defending the Great Leap Forward and the emergence of famine**

The end of 1958 witnessed a change in the political atmosphere, which aimed to constrain the Great Leap Forward's radical policies. From the first Zhengzhou Meeting in November 1958 to the beginning of the Lushan Conference in July 1959, when Mao Zedong realized that local cadres had over-reported grain production for 1958, he and the Chinese Communist Party Centre began to correct the tendency towards exaggeration. Mao stated that the predicted national grain output of 900 billion *jīn* for 1958 was an overestimate, and that a figure of 750 billion would be satisfactory.<sup>25</sup>

Zeng Xisheng, first party secretary of Anhui, attended the first Zhengzhou Meeting. A Long March cadre, Zeng was born in Hunan and in 1941 became a leader of Division Seven of the New Fourth Army based in central Anhui, which included Wuwei. Zeng was barely appointed to head the Northern Anhui District (*Wanbei*; 皖北) in early 1949<sup>26</sup> before he became first party secretary of Anhui in early 1952

<sup>25</sup> Bo, Yibo (1993). *Ruogan Zhongda Juece yu Shijian de Huigu* (My Review on Some Major Decisions and Events), Zhonggong Zhongyangdangxiao Chubanshe, Beijing, Vol. 2, p. 813.

<sup>26</sup> Peng Tao was originally assigned the post of party secretary of the Northern Anhui District, but he refused on the grounds that there were too many factions (*Shantou*; 山头) in Anhui. Peng recommended Zeng, who was relatively familiar with the local situation. This position set up the political platform for Zeng Xisheng in Anhui in the 1950s. Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, p. 314.

when the province was formally established. He was a loyal follower of Mao, and soon Anhui launched a cadre conference in order to address Mao's speeches. Although Mao criticized the tendency towards exaggeration, many 'leftist' provincial leaders such as Zeng read into this that Mao's real intention was to defend the Great Leap Forward. And at the provincial conference Zeng delivered an ambiguous talk. On the one hand, he stated that Mao had criticized the tendency towards exaggeration; on the other, he encouraged people to report their bumper harvests. Zeng went on to emphasize that it was wrong not to report the harvest, and this soon led to the anti-concealment movement. Whether or not the reported grain harvest in 1958 existed, turned out to be crucial in justifying the Great Leap Forward. Any lower figure was considered to undermine or even discredit the Great Leap Forward, making the grain output a highly politicized issue.

Back in Wuwei, Yao immediately held a meeting on 15 December 1958. He conveniently exploited Zeng's logic and linked the grain issue to a political standpoint. Yao warned cadres, 'Leaders' thinking should not be swayed; the achievements of 1958 should not be wiped out.' He criticized some cadres who had reported that the harvest of 1958 was not as good as that of 1957 and requested them to revise their thinking. Subsequently, he decided to launch the anti-concealment campaign to reinvestigate the grain output, not to correct the exaggeration, but instead to defend the glory of the Great Leap Forward. Yao defined this campaign as a military action and demanded that cadres should 'mobilise stored public grain' and wage a tit-for-tat struggle.<sup>27</sup>

When the meeting touched on the signs of an occurring famine, Yao's political enthusiasm suddenly took on a pessimistic tone. Faced with reports of little progress in procurement and increasing grain demands from villages, Yao had no choice but to turn to conveying Zeng Xisheng's directive. Among these directives, emphasis was placed on 'grain adjustment' and extracting grain that was imagined to be stored by peasants,<sup>28</sup> indicators that Yao would remain unresponsive regarding famine relief. Zhang Yun, a member of the secretariat, tactfully expressed his reservations by giving examples of the food shortage.<sup>29</sup> He was the first one to mention the famine devastating Wuwei. However, Zhang quickly realized the danger signs, even though the terms 'hunger' and 'famine' had not yet become

<sup>27</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, pp. 77-79.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, p. 78.

taboo in Wuwei.<sup>30</sup> He immediately drew peoples' attention to anti-concealment measures by describing two under-reported cases of early ripening rice. Lü Fenzhi followed Yao's line of argument closely and placed much pressure on cadres to ensure that there would be no complaints, no refugees, and no incidents. By 'incidents', he meant peasant uprisings to demand grain.<sup>31</sup> The implications of Lü's talk are that, by the end of 1958, there were already serious problems regarding grain supply and some massive protests had already occurred.

In contrast to the lack of famine relief, Wuwei showed immense determination to launch the anti-concealment movement. In another meeting (31 December 1958–1 January 1959), Yao delivered a lengthy speech. Denial of the Great Leap Forward, Yao emphasized, provided an opportunity for 'bad elements' to gain some ground.<sup>32</sup> The anti-concealment stance soon ran into problems as the famine began to grip the populace, and it began to be discussed in several subsequent meetings. On 14 January 1959, while Yao was absent, a meeting was called to discuss the grain supply.<sup>33</sup> Shi Huizhi provided estimates of grain in storage and demands in a few districts. A total of 9,391,700 *jin* of different kinds of grain in storage had been reported, including food substitutes (*daishipin*; 代食品); with a ration of 15 *liang* per capita per day, this could sustain this district for 36 days from 11 January to 27 February. Nevertheless, Shi concluded that this estimate was optimistic and that the supply could last 15 days at most. Xie Yongkang, the county head, followed up with a report of the area he oversaw. Of eleven communes, six faced grain shortages, while the other five had 'minor problems (*wenti buda*; 问题不大)'. In Shendian District, 11,540,000 *jin* of grain (excluding food substitutes) could support the population of 282,805 for 36 days (1.13 *jin* per capita per day). However, local variations in the district were huge. Some teams could manage for over 100 days, while another could only last for another two days. In other areas, extremely low rations such as four *liang* or even less than one *liang* per capita per day were described, and two dining halls had stopped providing food four days earlier.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For how terms such as 'hunger', 'famine', and 'death' were politicized, see Wemheuer, Felix (2011). 'The Grain Problem is an Ideological Problem: Discourses of Hunger in the 1957 Socialist Education Campaign' in Manning and Wemheuer, *Eating Bitterness*, pp. 107–129.

<sup>31</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1958-096, pp. 77–87.

<sup>32</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-130, pp. 1–7.

<sup>33</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-130, pp. 156–160.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Both reports by Shi and Xie vividly show that a widespread famine had gripped Wuwei, and their opinions differed only on the degree of its severity. Fruitless solutions such as collecting rice remnants in straw and extracting stored grain were proposed, as previously. A key solution proposed was to increase the ration from four to six *liang* in some areas, and the amount of grain relief was discussed. Xie stated that the Dongxiang area needed at least 20 million *jin*, and probably 40 million *jin*, while Zhang Yun thought that seven million *jin* would be sufficient. Lü Fenzhi added that the entire county lacked four million *jin*.<sup>35</sup> These controversial figures not only revealed cadres' different estimates, but also their political viewpoints. As the highest-ranking cadre at the meeting, Lü tried to control the direction of discussion. He mentioned the existence of some reactionary slogans, rumoured to include 'Down with Mao Zedong' and 'The Fall of the CCP Regime'. Upon hearing reports from the three districts, he avoided the relief issue but proposed a grain ration of 490 *jin* per capita per year, a meaningless figure when the famine was at its height. He also emphasized that it was important to educate people to use grain efficiently and to look for food substitutes. Finally, he touched on the bottom line of grain supply and proposed a ration of no less than ten *liang* of grain per capita per day.<sup>36</sup>

The meeting came to an agreement on a grain ration of between 10 *liang* (0.625 *jin*) and 14 *liang* (0.875 *jin*) of refined grain (excluding food substitutes) per capita per day.<sup>37</sup> In the traditional Chinese diet, 60–70 per cent of energy stems from carbohydrates derived from starch in cereals. As the primary crop in Wuwei, every 100 grams of rice produced 75 grams of starch and each gram of starch provided 4.1 calories. Therefore, 0.625 *jin* or 312.5 grams of rice could produce 961 calories. A Chinese adult man between the ages of 18 and 59 needs 1,561 calories per day and a woman, 1,253 calories, which averages out at 1,403 calories per capita per day. A total of 961 calories could therefore provide just 68.3 per cent of the sustenance needed by an adult.<sup>38</sup> In other words, on 0.625 *jin* of rice a day, an adult in Wuwei could barely survive. And the fact is that many communes or villages failed to provide even this low ration.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Zhongguo Yingyang Xuehui (ed.) (2001). *Zhongguo Jumin Shanshi Yingyangsu Cankao Sheruliang (janyaooben)* (A Reference of Chinese Dietary Intakes [Simplified Version]), Zhongguo Qinggongye Chubanshe, Beijing, p. 15.

On 17 January 1959, a meeting gathered all first secretaries of the People's Commune to launch the anti-concealment campaign. Lü convened the meeting and asked cadres to mobilize over 40,000 people to clean rice straw, explaining that the expectation was that more than 1.6 million *jin* of rice could be gathered in this way. The main method to 'mobilising societal-stored grain' (one of the campaign's euphemisms) was political 'thought work'. 'Wherever political work is well done, then more grains have been mobilized out,' Lü concluded. According to his estimate, 15 per cent of brigades were self sufficient, 70 per cent needed grain relief for two to three months, while the remaining 15 per cent had no grain left at all, and had to rely on broken rice fragments recovered from the rice straw.<sup>39</sup> Lü's statement indicates the scale and size of the famine, with 85 per cent of the brigades suffering from serious shortages. However, the main prong of the famine relief effort was to look for leftover rice in straw, partly because there was no grain supply available from the regional or provincial authorities.

Clearly, Wuwei witnessed a massive famine in the 1958–1959 transition and local leaders knew this to be the case. While they carefully avoided terms such as 'famine' or 'death', official archives have shown that they were aware of the spreading of the famine. Local cadres insisted that those who complained about the grain shortage and malnutrition were spreading lies, rumours, and gossip; denounced the statement that the public distribution of food was causing deaths; and even accused people who were suffering from dropsy (*fuzhong*; 浮肿) of stealing grain and eating too many rapeseed plants. Ironically, by denying the famine and deaths, they acknowledged the existence of both, echoing what was happening in other areas.<sup>40</sup> The cadres were motivated by sheer terror, as they were forced to adhere to campaign rhetoric in order to preserve their own political lives.

### Grain relief in February 1959

The last ten days of January 1959 passed under the shadow of the anti-concealment movement. For those who had been supplied with little or even no grain, these were the days when they were fighting for their lives. The following analysis will illustrate that, by this time, rural

<sup>39</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-130, p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> Wemheuer, 'The Grain Problem', pp. 107–129.

TABLE 4.1  
*Grain consumption by January 1959 (jin).*

Out-transfer	Urban consumption, July 1958–January 1959	Justified wastage	In total
119,000,000	71,000,000	1,500,000	191,500,000

*Source: Jilu, 1-1-1-1959-132, pp. 152-153.*

TABLE 4.2  
*Grain to be utilized by mid-June 1959 (jin).*

Out-transfer	Urban consumption	Seed grain	Rational storage	In total
81,000,000	20,000,000	10,000,000	20,000,000	131,000,000

*Source: Jilu, 1-1-1-1959-132, pp. 152-153.*

Wuwei was already without a grain supply (official statistics indicate 30,000 deaths in 1958 (see [Table 1.1](#)).

On 11 February, Yao announced that more than 8.43 million *jin* of grain had been gathered by the anti-concealment movement. Although he still thought the figure too low, Yao no longer mentioned the official grain estimate of 1,240,000,000 *jin* for 1958, and reported that Wuwei now stored 386,000,000 *jin* of grain. However, the figure of 35 million left over from 1957, as has been pointed out above, was fabricated.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, there was only 351,000,000 *jin* available for the county to utilize in early 1959.

What about the usage of the stored grain? According to Yao, 191,500,000 had already been consumed (see [Table 4.1](#)) and another 131,000,000 *jin* had yet to be utilized in the first half of 1959 (see [Table 4.2](#)). Thus, only 63,500,000 *jin* of grain was under the control of the authorities and was available for use for various purposes.

The large urban consumption figures between July 1958 and January 1959 (see [Table 4.1](#)) were presumably the result of the recruitment of labourers for steel production in the Great Leap Forward. Ten million *jin* per month was double the earlier urban grain supply of five million *jin*. With the end of the Great Leap Forward, urban consumption returned to its normal rate and the 20 million *jin* (see [Table 4.2](#)) of grain could last for four months (mid February–mid June), securing urban supply. [Table 4.3](#) shows the actual grain consumption and storage in Wuwei in mid-February 1959. This information was crucial

<sup>41</sup> *Jiancha*, 1-1-1-1963-322, p. 107.

TABLE 4.3  
*Actual grain consumption and storage in mid-February 1959 (jin)*

Grain procurement in 1958 (a)*	350,000,000
Out-transfer in 1958 (b)	200,000,000
Urban consumption (by mid-February 1959) (c)	71,000,000
Justified wastage (natural wear and tear) (d)	1,500,000
Seed grain (e)	10,000,000
Grain storage (by mid-February 1959) (f)	67,500,000

\*  $a = b + c + d + e + f$

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-132, pp. 152-154.

TABLE 4.4  
*Yao's optimistic plan for the period mid-February-mid-June 1959.*

Grain reported by People's Communes ( <i>jin</i> ) (a)	30,000,000
Grain storage in Wuwei granaries ( <i>jin</i> ) (b)	67,500,000
Grain in Wuwei ( <i>jin</i> ) (c)*	100,000,000
Rural population	855,000
Average relief to mid-June ( <i>jin</i> per capita)	117

\*  $c = a + b$

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-132, pp. 152-154.

because the grain available at that moment was supposed to feed people from Wuwei until mid-June.

Thus, by mid-February 1959, the Wuwei County government controlled only 67,500,000 *jin* of unhusked grain in its granaries, including 20 million *jin* in storage (partially for seed). If half of the 20 million *jin* could be utilized, the county would control 57.5 million *jin* for its rural famine relief. Yao was fairly optimistic about this figure. His calculation both maximized and exaggerated local capacity (see [Table 4.4](#)).

Yao also prepared for a worsening situation. He stated that even with the 60 million *jin* from the grain storage, only 75 per cent of the rural population could be supplied with around 100 *jin* per capita. Based on this utopian plan, the famine months would not result in a massive death toll. If all the 60 million *jin* were given to rural famine relief, each of the 855,000 peasants would receive 70.2 *jin* of unhusked rice (52.6 *jin* of refined rice) and could theoretically survive for two months (from mid-February to mid-April 1959). If peasants had another 50 *jin* of refined rice at home, they could support themselves for another two months (mid-April to mid-June 1959) until wheat became available. In this way, they could survive the famine. However, the key was whether or not peasants actually had the extra 50 *jin* per capita stored in their

TABLE 4.5  
*Real grain distribution and consumption in Wuwei, February 1959 (jin).*

Grain output, 1958 (a)	620,000,000
Grain procurement, 1958 (b)	350,000,000
Grain left to peasants, 1958 (c)*	270,000,000
Grain consumed by peasants (July 1958–January 1959) (d)**	243,000,000
Grain storage in rural Wuwei, February 1959 (e)***	27,000,000

\* c = a–b

\*\* Based on 490 *jin* of unhusked grain per capita per year.

\*\*\* e = c–d

Source: *Jilu*, 1–1–1–1959–132, pp. 152–154.

houses or dining halls. Table 4.5 shows that rural Wuwei was on the brink of having no grain at all.

The last 27 million *jin* of unhusked grain, reserved in the hands of peasants, was supposed to include seed grain for 200,000,000 *mu* of land. Each *mu* required 20 *jin* of seed grain, which would amount to 40 million *jin*. Even with the 10 million *jin* the county had already reserved for seed grain, this 27 million *jin* of unhusked grain could not meet the demand for seed grain. In other words, by mid-February 1959, there was nothing left of the 1958 grain output. Fortunately, 1957 was a very good harvest year, and it is reasonable to suppose that many peasants hoarded some grain, which could be reflected in the 30 million *jin* of grain reported by communes (see Table 4.4).

Now a basic understanding of the situation in Wuwei of mid-February 1959 can be arrived at. Because the figure of 30 million *jin* reported by communes was more or less correct, together with the 57.5 million controlled by Wuwei County, Wuwei had about 87 million *jin* in reserve and could provide 102 *jin* per peasant (0.93 *jin* of unhusked, or 0.70 *jin* of refined grain per day) for 110 days up to the end of May. This ration would not have staved off famine, but could have lessened its casualties.

It is highly possible that the critical situation in Wuwei had been reported to provincial authorities. In early February 1959, Zeng Qingmei, a provincial secretary, visited Wuwei and ordered the release of 52 million *jin* of grain from the province for famine relief. With this provincial grain relief, Yao continued to defend the Great Leap Forward, even in the face of efforts by the Chinese Communist Party Centre at the second Zhengzhou Conference held during the February–March transition to tone down the radical approach.

TABLE 5.1  
*Grain distribution, summer 1959 (jin).*

Summer grain output	Out-transfer	Seed grain	Grain left for local consumption	Grain ration to mid-July
47,716,000	10,000,000	8,000,000	29,716,000	35,000,000

Source: *Xianzhi*, p. 131; *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-140, pp. 121-126.

On 15 March, the county party committee held an expanded meeting to execute the second Zhengzhou Conference resolution.<sup>42</sup> The defence of the Great Leap Forward remained the goal, as almost every participant emphasized the great achievements of 1958. Wuwei stuck to Zeng Xisheng's stance and the anti-radical decision of the Zhengzhou Conference was not executed in Anhui or in Wuwei.

### The summer crisis and the arrival of Zhang Kaifan

When summer arrived, the crisis returned when procurement started after the wheat harvest in June. The summer harvest of 1959 saw an output of 47,716,000 *jin*,<sup>43</sup> which was sufficient to support peasants for another two months until early August when late rice crops would, ideally, bring relief. The grain ration would be just 35 *jin* of unhusked grain (28 *jin* of refined grain) up until mid-July, or 0.62 *jin* of refined grain per capita per day for the next 45 days, almost the lowest amount to sustain life (see Table 5.1).

State procurement and out-transfers, in fact, negated the calculation shown above. On 11 June, Yao announced a procurement quota of 50 million *jin*,<sup>44</sup> a figure that exceeded the entire summer output. Two weeks later, Yao realized the difficulty: less than 21 million *jin* had been stored in granaries, which accounted for only 41.7 per cent of Yao's target. So he prepared to realize 40 million *jin*, with a minimum of 30 million. Even with this minimum, another nine million had to be collected from peasants.<sup>45</sup>

To fulfil this procurement, Yao even disapproved of the *ten-liang* lifeline. He pointed out that the figure should not even be mentioned,

<sup>42</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-129, pp. 2-6.

<sup>43</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-140, pp. 121-126.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

as it might make procuring the nine million *jin* difficult, especially if it was advocated in Jianchagou and Gaogou, the two being key areas that produced wheat (the preferred grain for state procurement).<sup>46</sup> Life in non-wheat producing areas was assuredly harsher, as local grain rations depended on the government grain supply, which was not provided until the end of May. Thus, the entire month of June in the non-wheat areas, such as Shijian, faced an unprecedented crisis. Shijian was completely without food and witnessed widespread deaths starting from the end of May. Tan Buzhen, the commune party secretary, reported local deaths to the province, which annoyed Yao who decided to solve the ‘Tan problem in Shijian’.<sup>47</sup>

On 25 June, Yao felt a lot of pressure to discuss the procurement during the Standing Committee meeting. He had just received a phone call the day before from the Wuhu Regional Committee requesting that the quotas for grain procurement and out-transfers be fulfilled. Yao complained that the procurement had made little progress, the harvest of early rice would not come for another half month, and some communes had requested immediate relief. In some areas, the resale of grain for relief exceeded local procurement. He found himself stranded between his superiors and his subordinates, both demanding that he produce the needed grain.<sup>48</sup> ‘(Our) days are unbearable (*rizi buneng guo le*; 日子不能过了),’ Yao concluded.<sup>49</sup>

Yao’s complaints once again demonstrate the severity of the famine. Indeed, many cadres who were originally sent to squeeze grain from the peasants turned to ask for relief. By now, the county leadership had established an unequivocal profile of the famine. Yao described the low yield of wheat, indicated that peasants had been hiding this crop, and attempted to politicize the issue. However, by this time, his efforts lacked the ideological justification that had been very powerful back in 1958. The acknowledgement of a low grain output in 1959 simply could not be exploited, as it had nothing to do with the evaluation of the Great Leap Forward. Therefore, unlike in 1958, Yao found no strong political justification for his statement in the summer of 1959. Without this highly politicized weapon, it was difficult for him to manipulate both the system and his subordinates. By now he had become an exhausted captain of grain procurement who frequently

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-140, p. 123.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

complained about the impossibly high quota and unfair treatment by his boss. Without relief grain quotas from regional and provincial authorities, the situation in Wuwei was hopeless, and it explains why Yao was so eager to respond to Zhang Kaifan's proposed Wuwei tour.

On 4 July, Zhang Kaifan, a Wuwei-based revolutionary cadre and now a provincial secretary, paid a visit to Wuwei. Zhang was born in Wuwei, joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1928, organized a local rebellion in 1930, and became party secretary of Wuwei in 1931. He had spent a long time in Wuwei and was well respected and well connected.<sup>50</sup> In early 1959, Zhang began to recognize the signs of famine and reported them to Zeng Xisheng, but Zeng's response was that Zhang was just being trickled by local cadres and peasants.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, local acquaintances and relatives went to Zhang's provincial house and asked for help, which pushed him to pay a visit to Cao County and Wuwei.<sup>52</sup> What he found out was devastating. On 7 July, he delivered a talk to the Five-Level-Cadre conference in Wuwei. Zhang asked why there were so many people falling ill and repeatedly mentioned the prevalence of *fuzhong* (dropsy) and the numerous other side effects caused by hunger, especially in women.<sup>53</sup> He even detailed what he had experienced in Shijian, where peasants complained that their lives were worse than those of chickens, as 'a chicken has two handfuls of refined rice every day, while we each get just two handfuls of unhusked rice'.<sup>54</sup> He criticized local cadres for the decrease in rations. 'The county talks about one *jin* of unhusked grain, but a family ranging from the elderly to babies has no more than two *liang* per person (a day).'<sup>55</sup> Two *liang* a day constituted just one-fifth of the lowest ration needed to survive and this rate of sustenance might have been going on for over a month.

Due to the severity of the crisis, Zhang made the decision to open state granaries and release grain (*kaicang fangliang*; 开仓放粮), and one *jin* of unhusked grain per capita per day was guaranteed.<sup>56</sup> In addition, a promise was made of 40 *jin* of unhusked grain per month after the early rice crop harvest.<sup>57</sup> On 10 July, during a

<sup>50</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*; *Xianzhi*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>51</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, pp. 340–342.

<sup>52</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, pp. 344–445.

<sup>53</sup> *Xianzhi*, pp. 599–603.

<sup>54</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, p. 346.

<sup>55</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 600.

<sup>56</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 601.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

telephone conference, Yao reported that the situation had improved somewhat and the masses were satisfied.<sup>58</sup> It seemed as if the crisis would soon end, thanks to Zhang's courage. Yao himself immediately transformed from being a helpless leader into a capable, enthusiastic, and responsible fireman—as long as he was instructed to be so. However, he immediately changed his stance once the political atmosphere took a disastrous twist after the Lushan Conference.

### From Lushan to Wuwei

Hundreds of thousands of people could have been saved had Zhang Kaifan's directives continued. However, the Chinese Communist Party's Lushan Conference (2 July–16 August 1959) caused a huge upheaval in China, and this affected Anhui and Wuwei. On 14 July, Marshal Peng Dehuai wrote a private letter to Mao Zedong, cautiously reminding Mao of some problems around the Great Leap Forward. Mao interpreted this as a plot against him, and the Lushan Conference, originally expected to correct 'leftist' policies, quickly turned into a criticism of Peng's 'anti-Party clique' and policy adjustments shifted in the opposite direction. Zeng Xisheng, who was attending the Conference, detected the change in attitude and immediately ordered an investigation into Zhang Kaifan.<sup>59</sup> Zhang Kaifan's 'anti-Party clique' was soon exposed and on 4 August 1959, a provincial report on Zhang Kaifan was sent to Zeng Xisheng and Mao. On 10 August, Mao shared his lengthy comments on the report with the Conference: Zhang was singled out as a 'right-opportunist',<sup>60</sup> seen as Peng's provincial agent,<sup>61</sup> and was consequently removed from the Party. Yao quickly switched his stance<sup>62</sup> and various relief efforts in Wuwei were suspended and the anti-concealment movement was re-energized. Among county-level leaders, Shi Huizhi was labelled as Zhang Kaifan's local agent.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-140.

<sup>59</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, pp. 367–368.

<sup>60</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, pp. 371 and 377–378.

<sup>61</sup> Coincidentally, in December 1958, Peng Dehuai had paid a visit to Anhui, and Zhang accompanied him. The two shared similar opinions on many things. This episode might have been utilized to accuse Zhang of being Peng's local agent. Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, pp. 332–333.

<sup>62</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, p. 367.

<sup>63</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-141, p. 111.

On 24 September, Yao chaired a standing committee meeting, a local version of the Lushan Conference, to launch a strike against Shi. As the third party secretary in Wuwei, Shi had been assigned to the Zongfa Commune, where he witnessed a horrendous death toll and became 'panic stricken (*jinghuang*; 惊慌)'. He informed Yao about the situation, saying that the epidemic was extremely severe and that 'we in the county committee are supposed to be responsible (*women xianwei shi yao fu zeren*; 我们县委是要负责任)'. He had also reported to Zhang Kaifan when Zhang visited Wuwei. Xie Yongkang, in trying to clear himself, as he had been asked by Shi to handle the problem in Zongfa, confirmed that Shi had been panicked and failed to correctly analyse the local situation. Yao summed up Shi's condition as 'afraid to take responsibility and panicky'. Shi's mistakes were labelled as 'rightist' in this anti-rightist tendency campaign.<sup>64</sup>

The campaign also examined the actions of grassroots cadres. Those who had shown reservations or hesitation were sent to labour camps, where they were tortured. In his later self-criticism report, Yao acknowledged that various torture tactics had been used and these had caused deaths. People were threatened, scolded, tied, beaten, made to strip naked in winter, splashed with cold water, and tortured in many other locally created forms of humiliation and abuse. Yao himself participated in and witnessed some of these abuses.<sup>65</sup> In total, victims of this campaign in Wuwei amounted to 28,741.<sup>66</sup>

The anti-rightist tendency campaign pushed the famine into a deeper crisis. By the end of 1959, the famine was teetering on the brink of reaching epic proportions, but almost all the cadres had become politically alert and dared not cross the line. When he saw dead bodies along the road, Yao either simply ignored the scene, or just reported it to the appropriate commune.<sup>67</sup> In December 1959, upon hearing cases of cannibalism, Yao accused the reporting cadres of being 'confused (*hutu*; 糊涂)'; when another cadre reported dead bodies along the road, Yao called him a 'son of a bitch (*hundun*; 混蛋)', telling him not to be so surprised by the deaths of just a couple of people.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-141, pp. 111-116.

<sup>65</sup> *Jiancha*, 1-1-1-1963-322, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> *Xianzhi*, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> *Jiancha*, 1-1-1-1963-322, p. 98.

<sup>68</sup> Cannibalism was widely recorded in various official county and province gazetteers and people's recollections. See Becker, Jasper (1998). *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's*

TABLE 6.1  
*Grain output and distribution, autumn 1959 (jin).*

Autumn output	Out-transfer	Urban consumption	Seed grain*	Rural consumption
400,000,000	161,000,000	60,000,000	24,000,000	155,000,000

\* 15 jin per mu for the 160,000 mu.

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1961-247, pp. 28-29.

On 27 December, Yao chaired a county secretary conference. He summarized the famine by listing the numbers of people who had fled the county, and presented written reports of events, diseases, and epidemics; abandoned infants; individual deaths; thefts; and the killing of animals. He stated, 'We are not yet panicking and are still actively trying to do something.'<sup>69</sup> The following day, a small gathering was held among major county leaders, a cadre from the province, and the head of the Grain Bureau. On this occasion, Yao fairly frankly acknowledged the existence of a famine and asked the provincial cadre to report to the province.<sup>70</sup> These records further prove that the county leaders understood the disaster in Wuwei, including the practice of cannibalism.<sup>71</sup>

### Apex of famine: July 1959 to the end of 1960

The Lushan Conference, 'Zhang Kaifan's clique' in Anhui, and subsequent local campaigns in Wuwei allowed for no effort to be made for famine relief. The political atmosphere at all levels took the same direction and further spread a universal fear among local cadres. Non-action (*wuwei*; 无为) was adopted in Wuwei to deal with the famine. So the question is now: how did the famine develop over the following months and how did it end?

Beginning in 15 July 1959, Wuwei entered the busy season of the early rice harvest, followed by the planting of late rice. Table 6.1 shows a general profile of grain distribution from mid-July 1959.

*Secret Famine*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, pp. 211-219; Yang, *Mubei*; Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, pp. 320-323; *Jiancha*, 1-1-1-1963-322, p. 98.

<sup>69</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-141, p. 184.

<sup>70</sup> *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1959-141, p. 190.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

TABLE 6.2  
*Grain output and distribution, autumn 1960 (jin).*

Grain output	Out-transfer	Urban consumption and seed grain	Rural consumption
400,000,000	112,000,000	100,000,000	188,000,000

Source: *Jilu*, 1-1-1-1961-247, pp. 28-29.

TABLE 6.3  
*Peasant grain ration, autumn 1960 (jin).*

Grain for rural Wuwei	Rural population	Grain ration ( <i>jin</i> per capita per day)
188,000,000	560,000	0.69

Source: *Xianzhi*, pp. 106, 130, 279 and 286. 'Rural population' refers to this number at the end of 1960, which means that the number of actual consumers was somewhat higher. This, however, does not influence the calculation significantly.

With 155 million *jin* of grain available for rural Wuwei, where the rural population was now reduced from 850,000 to 800,000 because of deaths and the outflow of refugees, each peasant could have been provided with 194 *jin* of unhusked grain (145 *jin* of refined grain). The grain was supposed to support peasants from mid-July 1959 to the end of May 1960, a period of 315 days, which would have been an unprecedentedly low ration of 0.46 *jin* of refined grain per capita per day, much lower than the amount necessary to support life. It was under these circumstances that around 100,000 people perished in 1959 (see Table 1.1). Likewise, the grain supply in the autumn of 1960 can be analysed (see Table 6.2).

While the figure of 188 million in the autumn of 1960 was only slightly higher than the figure of 155 million in the autumn of 1959, the difference in supply lies in the fact that the rural population had decreased from 800,000 in 1959 to 560,000 by the end of 1960 (see Table 1.1). The year 1960 witnessed the death of about another 100,000 people (see Table 1.1). The massive number of deaths hence increased the grain ration available in 1960 for the survivors (see Table 6.3) and thus brought them through the famine.

In hindsight, the way in which the Wuwei disaster ended turned out to be another aspect of the tragedy. The famine did not end because of an increase in grain output or a rational grain supply, nor was it the result of relief efforts by the state. The famine ended because of the decrease in demand for grain brought about by the massive death toll.

## Reflections

This article has examined the grain output, consumption, and rations during the Great Famine years, and provided a local empirical case for, and a bottom-up approach, to the Great Famine and Mao's China. A few reflections are made in the following paragraphs.

First, while local cadres in Wuwei drastically exaggerated the grain output and thus increased the amount of out-transferred grain, an accurate estimate of the grain ration could have averted the massive death toll during the Great Famine in Wuwei.

Second, local leaders were aware of the famine and its numerous victims, even if they were not familiar with accurate figures. Some were frustrated by the hopeless situation and lived in great anxiety and terror. Although no famine reports submitted to regional or provincial authorities have been found in the Wuwei archives, circumstantial evidence leads to the conclusion that regional and provincial leaders were also aware of the disaster in Wuwei. In other words, Party leaders stood aside and watched the suffering and deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Their non-action essentially resulted from the lessons learned and terrors created in the various campaigns that took place in the 1950s, as many cadres had been punished in the pre-1958 political campaigns when they had expressed opinions different from the Party line or specific policies, or had challenged their bosses. Thus, the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, seen as part of the long process in the 1950s, has its social-political logic.

The making of the famine in Wuwei sheds considerable light on central-local government interactions. When Beijing made efforts to contain radical policies in the 1958–1959 transition, Anhui surprisingly continued with those policies and Wuwei followed close behind. Such institutional disobedience and discrepancy could only be interpreted by Zeng Xisheng's personal relationship with Mao. Zeng, being a loyal ally and the closest confidante of Mao's, was very certain of his own interpretation of Mao's real intentions. By the same token, during and after the Lushan Conference, Zeng immediately set out to execute Mao's will and attacked Zhang Kaifan. And the case of Zhang Kaifan in turn helped to legitimize the attack against Peng Dehuai and the nationwide 'anti-rightist tendency' campaign.

Nevertheless, the reasons for Zhang Kaifan's fall extended far beyond Zeng's loyalty to Mao and Anhui's adherence to central decisions. Local politics played a role and, quite possibly, a decisive

one. Zeng's decision echoed the outsider-insider fight that led to the first provincial purges in pre-1958 Henan and Zhejiang.<sup>72</sup> Pre-1958 Henan saw continuous tension and struggle between two groups, one represented by Pan Fusheng, first party secretary with a relatively junior revolutionary career and not a native of Henan, and the other by Wu Zhipu, a native of Henan and a New Fourth Army veteran based in Henan but appointed only governor and second party secretary, much to his disappointment. Facing power challenges, Pan subsequently made efforts to follow central politics closely to establish his authority, but was not so successful. After his first retreat in 1954 because of a 'health problem', Pan was eventually replaced by Wu in autumn 1957. Ironically, to enhance his legitimacy, Wu adopted a method similar to Pan's, which was 'to place his province square in the line of central policy and to make it a national model',<sup>73</sup> and this partially accounted for Henan being one of the most severely affected provinces during the Great Famine. The outsider-insider pattern has been found in Zhejiang too. During the anti-rightist campaign in Zhejiang, the southbound outsiders, represented by first party secretary, Jiang Hua, abused central policies to attack and remove his political competitor, Governor Sha Wenhan, who was supported by the insider group.

In his memoirs, Zhang Kaifan did not elaborate on his disagreements with Zeng Xisheng, but many passages indicate the existence of internal conflicts within the provincial party committee from the 1940s.<sup>74</sup> Zhang was native to Wuwei, was well educated, and a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party force in Wuwei while Zeng, an outsider, seemed to lack confidence and utilized political campaigns to establish and enhance his authority in Anhui. In 1957, three provincial leaders including Li Shinong (vice governor and provincial secretariat) were attacked and removed from the Party, because Li thought that the anti-rightist campaign in Anhui had gone too far. Li was born in Hebei, but in November 1937 he went to Wuwei as secretary of the Central Anhui Working Council of which Zhang Kiafan was a member. Both Zhang and Li arrived in Wuwei earlier than Zeng Xisheng and, probably more importantly, both Zhang and Li were leaders of local armed forces while Zeng, a division leader

<sup>72</sup> Domenach, *The Origins*; Forster, Keith (1997). 'Localism, Central Policy and the Provincial Purges of 1957–1958: The Case of Zhejiang' in Timothy Cheek and Tony Sach (eds), *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China*, M. E. Sharp, Armonk, pp. 191–233.

<sup>73</sup> Domenach, *The Origins*, p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, esp. pp. 21, 275, 314 and 340–374.

of the New Fourth Army, only reached Wuwei in spring 1941. The complicated revolutionary demography thus made the organization of leadership in Anhui a tough issue (as in Henan and Zhejiang). The removal of the two provincial leaders, Li Shinong and Zhang Kaifan, from the Party was an unusual penalty for high-ranking officials. The decision to remove Zhang's Party membership, according to Zhang's memoirs, was made by Zeng Xisheng himself.<sup>75</sup> These purges certainly facilitated the building of Zeng's unchallengeable position in Anhui.

The rise and dominance of Yao also indicates the insider-outsider pattern. Yao, an outsider in charge of Wuwei, was promoted by Zeng Xisheng, and thus closely followed him by delivering high quotas of grain. To realize his promise, he had to organize his power base in Wuwei by punishing, removing, recruiting, and rewarding local cadres. Such a case echoes those of Anhui and of Henan,<sup>76</sup> as well as of many other places where cadres learned to comply throughout the pre-1958 political campaigns.

As such, institutional and non-institutional (local versus outsider) organizations sometimes collaborated and at other times fought, while personal connections, that is, patron-client relationship, sometimes overcame institutional superiority. In other words, while central, provincial, regional, and county administrations all shared their responsibility for helping to create the famine in Wuwei, the role of local cares is far more significant than previously thought, as illustrated by Bramall in his study of Sichuan.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, the end of the famine in Wuwei deserves some attention.<sup>78</sup> Chinese official rhetoric has claimed that it was the moderate policies advocated by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping that ended the famine and saved the peasants. Such a point of view seems widespread and is generally believed.<sup>79</sup> Thaxton, however, argues that various types of individual and community resistance helped peasants in Da Fo village to survive and ended the famine.<sup>80</sup> Almost all kinds of everyday

<sup>75</sup> Zhang, *Zhang Kaifan*, p. 374.

<sup>76</sup> For the case of Henan, see Domenach, *The Origins*.

<sup>77</sup> Bramall, Agency and Famine.

<sup>78</sup> The authors are grateful to one anonymous reviewer for bringing up this issue.

<sup>79</sup> Jasper Becker seemingly accepts this statement. Becker, *Hungry Ghost*, pp. 235–247. The late maternal grandmother of Yang Bin occasionally mentioned, during his childhood in the early 1980s, how Liu Shaoqi saved lives by (advocating) the planting of Beijingsese crops (*zhong Beijing liang*: 种北京粮).

<sup>80</sup> Thaxton, Ralph A. (2008). *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 334–336.

resistance, including *chiqing* (eating the premature crops), are found in Wuwei, which certainly helped some individual peasants to survive. Nevertheless, what ended the famine was not the moderate policies of the early 1960s nor local resistance, but the decreased demand for grain as a result of the death toll of one-quarter of the local population.

In conclusion, the tendency to exaggerate crop yields in the Great Leap Forward period certainly had the potential to cause a famine, no matter how widespread or contained, but it would not necessarily have led to a massive number of deaths. What caused the victims of the Great Famine to die in vast number varied from location to location, due to many factors but, especially, to intra-party factional struggles, as the case of Wuwei has demonstrated.