



Introduction

In this study, I investigated the history of famine relief in China. This subject is more elusive than one would presume. Scholars in this field have contradicted each other in the use of terms, and previous investigations have been far from systematic. It is therefore necessary to begin my enquiry by clarifying in the first place what ‘famine’ and ‘famine relief’ mean respectively.

Ancient Chinese literature offered a varied nomenclature of famine. For instance, the *Guliang Commentary for Spring and Autumn Annals* defined famine as follows,

If all the five grains fail, there is mass starvation (大饥). If one grain fails, there is a food shortage (歉); if two grains fail, there is starvation (饥); if three grains fail, there is a famine (饑); if four grains fail, there is widespread destitution (康); if all five grains fail, there is utter devastation (大侵).

(Guliang, 2016, pp. 607–8)

Similarly, in *Mozi*:

The failure of one grain is called a food shortage (饑);¹ the failure of two grains is a drought (旱); the failure of three grains is a calamity (凶); the failure of four grains is starvation (饑); the failure of all the five grains is widespread starvation (饥饑).

(Mo, 2007, p. 28)

The ‘mass starvation’, and ‘utter devastation’ in *Guliang Commentary* and ‘widespread starvation’ in *Mozi* all refer to great famines.

The next question is: What are the ‘five grains’? Here scholars have reached no consensus. For instance, an early reference is made in *Zhou Li* that the soil in Bingzhou provided favourable conditions for growing ‘five grains’ (Anonymous, 1999c, p. 873). According to Xuan Zheng’s note, the ‘five grains’ here are broomcorn (黍), foxtail millet (稷), beans (菽), wheat (麦) and rice (稻) (ibid., p. 873). However, another version has it that the ‘five grains’ are broomcorn(黍), foxtail millet (稷), hemp (麻), wheat (麦) and soybeans (豆). To further complicate the question, ancient Chinese literature also contains many other references such as the ‘six grains’, ‘eight grains’, ‘nine grains’ and

¹ Here Mozi and Guliang are using the same word (饑) to indicate different degrees of damage, so the same word is translated differently. [TN]

even ‘a hundred grains’, and explanations diverge widely as to what each of these references means. However, suffice it to conclude that the ‘five grains’ refer to whatever served as Chinese staple food, which is not to be understood narrowly.

Controversy aside, the above quoted definitions in *Guliang Commentary* and *Mozi* do largely reveal ancient Chinese ideas of famine. In this regard, average modern scholastic definitions may not necessarily do better. For example, Walter H. Mallory, secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission, describes famine as ‘occasional severe food shortage resulting from some unusual catastrophe’ (Mallory, 1928, p. 107).² Compared with its predecessors offered by Chi Guliang and Mozi over 2,000 years before, this definition is hardly more enlightening, for it is more an intuitive judgment based on superficial phenomena than a complete examination of the facts.

A truly scientific definition of famine, then, should not stop short with an examination of superficial phenomena, but be based on a general exhaustive survey of facts. As ample historical evidence reveals, ‘famine’ as we call it generally takes place when the damage natural disasters cause exceeds human capacity for resilience; in a class society, famine is essentially the state of material damage and devastation resulting from human beings’ failure to control natural conditions, a failure rooted in the rupture of social relations. This somewhat crude definition, I believe, is largely consistent with historical facts, and will probably remain well-grounded, until the social system is changed fundamentally and human beings usher in an entirely new era.

Having clarified the meaning of ‘famine’, we are now clear on the meaning of ‘famine relief’. The latter concept refers to all protective activities people undertake to prevent or remedy the damage to material conditions caused by disasters. A history of famine relief in China, therefore, should take the following as its objective and purpose: first, to record all the specific thoughts in Chinese dynasties about the relationship between man and nature, and the policies adopted to prevent or remedy the damage resulting from the rupture of this relationship; second, to draw lessons from past experience. Such a history should not only chronicle past facts of famines and famine relief policies, but also record and analyse the nature and evolving pattern of the social and economic structure in the dynasties, and the extent to which the nature and pattern thereof have a bearing on famines. Put another way, the history of famine relief should not only reveal facts about this social plague and probe for its general source, but also analyse the specific causes of the problem and explore proper cures through an

² Deng’s original text did not include a page number for this translated quotation, and this is the closest line the translator found in Mallory’s book. However, note that this quote should not be taken as Mallory’s own view as Deng claimed, but as a representation of popular belief. [TN]

INTRODUCTION

3

explication of the commonalities and differences of famines in various historical periods. Many topics related to this subject will undoubtedly be open to discussion.

In modern studies of Chinese history, a survey of the history of famine relief in China occupies an important place. Generally speaking, famine relief endeavours may serve as a measure of human control over nature and an index to the progress of human civilization. In the Chinese context, the historical study of famine relief is of special significance, as famine has stalked this great nation and cannot be avoided for a fairly long time to come.