THE HISTORY OF FAMINE RELIEF
IN CHINA

Deng Yunte was a respected academic and artist. He was also a propagandist and political commentator, before becoming one of the earliest victims of the Cultural Revolution. He committed suicide in 1966. This is the first English translation of his classic study of famine relief in Chinese history. Richly researched, Deng plots the history of famine from ancient times to the Republican period and explores the impact of famine relief in China with a focus on social and economic forces. This is a unique and revealing text, not only as a study of famine in China, but also as an example of historical scholarship from twentieth-century China.

DENG YUNTE (1912–1966), also known as Deng Tuo, was a founding editor of the People's Daily and its editor-in-chief from 1948 to 1958.
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THE HISTORY OF FAMINE RELIEF IN CHINA

DENG YUNTE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TIMOTHY CHEEK

University of British Columbia

TRANSLATED BY GAO JIANWU
CONTENTS

List of Tables page viii
Sigla and Translator’s General Notes xi
Introduction to the English Edition
Timothy Cheek xii
Author’s General Notes on the 1937 Print xvii
Author’s Foreword to the 1958 Reprint xviii

Introduction 1

PART I Disasters and Famines in China 5

1 Disasters and Famines in China: A Review of the Facts 7
Disasters and Famines in China: Historical Records 7
Disasters Recorded in Ancient Legends and in the History of the
Shang Dynasty 7
Disasters Recorded in the Western Zhou, Eastern Zhou, Qin and Han
Dynasties 12
Disasters Recorded in the Wei, Jin and the Southern and Northern
Dynasties 15
Disasters Recorded in the Sui, Tang and the Five Dynasties 19
Disasters Recorded in the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties,
the Jurchen Jin Dynasty and the Yuan Dynasty 23
Disasters Recorded in the Ming and Qing Dynasties 34
Disasters Recorded in the Republic of China 47

Disasters and Famines in China: Trends and Characteristics 54

2 Disasters and Famines in China: A Review of Causes 64
Natural Causes 64
The Role of Natural Conditions in Disasters and Famines 64
Climate Variability and Disasters 65
Geographical Conditions and Disasters 71
Social Causes 77
The Role of Social Factors in Disasters and Famines 77
Tyranny and Famines 80
Wars and Famines 91
Technological Backwardness and Famines 100
vi CONTENTS

3 Consequences of Famines and Disasters 113
   Social Unrest 113
   Population Migration and Mass Deaths 113
   Peasant Uprisings 126
   Wars between Nations, States and Ethnic Groups 149
   Economic Recession 151
      Drastic Reduction of the Labour Force and Desertion of Farm Fields 152
      Collapse of the National Economy 159

PART II Disaster and Famine Relief: A Review of Ideas 169

4 Praying to Deities to Disperse ‘Evils’ 171

5 Ideas for Reactive Relief 176
   Ideas for Relief during Disasters 176
      Giving Emergency Relief to Disaster Victims 176
      Regulating Grain Supply and Demand 181
      Carrying Out Rescue Operations 187
      Fighting Pests and Plagues 191
   Ideas for Post-Disaster Rehabilitation 198
      Relocating Disaster Refugees 199
      Tax/Corvée Exemption and Tax Relief through Instalment Agreements 203
      Granting Free Loans 209
      Practising Economy 212

6 Ideas for Disaster Prevention 217
   Ideas for Improving Social Conditions to Prevent Disasters 217
      Establishing Agriculture as the Fundamental Economic Sector 217
      Building Grain Reserves 221
   Ideas for Improving Natural Conditions to Prevent Disasters 225
      Construction of Flood-Control/Water-Conservation Projects 225
      Afforestation and Land Reclamation 235

PART III Implementation of Disaster and Famine Relief Policies in Chinese History 241

7 Sorcery as a Relief Measure: A Review of Records 243

8 Implementation of Reactive Relief Policies in Chinese History 255
   Implementation of Emergency Relief Policies 255
      Types of Emergency Relief Policies and Their Effectiveness 255
      Regulation of Grain Supply and Demand: Methods and Prerequisites 279
      Types of Rescue Operations and Their Effectiveness 292
      Types of Pest- and Plague-Control Policies and Their Effectiveness 315
CONTENTS

Implementation of Policies of Post-Disaster Rehabilitation 330
  Relocating Disaster Refugees 331
  Tax/Corvée Exemption, Tax Relief through Instalment Agreements 337
  and Clemency 337
  Carrying Out Agricultural Loan Relief Schemes 364
  Practising Economy 377

9 Implementation of Policies of Proactive Disaster Prevention 388

  Improvement of Social Conditions 388
    Agricultural Promotion Policies and Their Effectiveness 388
    Building Granary Systems 410

  Improvement of Natural Conditions 440
    Policies of Constructing Water-Conservancy Projects and Their
    Effectiveness 440
    Policies of Afforestation and Land Reclamation and Their
    Effectiveness 457

Afterword: Tuo Deng and His History of Famine Relief in China
  Wenhai Li and Mingfang Xia 471

Appendix I Chronicle of Events in the History of Famine Relief
  in China 477

Appendix II Chronology of Tuo Deng 510

Appendix III List of Terms 515

Bibliography 600

Index 618
TABLES

1 Century-specific frequency of disasters in China  page 56
2 Dynasty-specific frequency of disasters  58
3 Frequency of floods in eighteen Chinese provinces throughout the centuries (adapted from Chu 1925)  60
4 Distribution of droughts across eighteen Chinese provinces from the first to the nineteenth centuries (adapted from Chu 1925)  61
5 Rainfall data (in mm) at thirty-one observation points in China, 1900–10  67
6 Average annual rainfall data (in mm) at eighteen observation points  69
7 Income and expenditure of average farmer families  103
8 Proportion (%) of land rent in agricultural yields  109
9 Average income and expenditure of tenants in eleven counties in Zhejiang  110
10 Estimated mortality rates from major disasters in the Qing dynasty  125
11 Estimated mortality from major disasters, 1920–36  126
12 Area of cultivated farmlands, 1914–18  154
13 Changes in area of cultivated farmlands, 1914–28  154
14 Area of unreclaimed farmlands, 1914–18  155
15 Province-specific statistics on unreclaimed farmlands, 1929–30  156
16 Percentage of wasted farmlands in nineteen counties in Shaanxi after the 1931 flood  158
17 Percentage change of unreclaimed farmlands, 1914–30  158
18 Province-specific statistics on losses in agricultural yield in 1934  162
19 Yield of chief crops in the 1934 famine  163
20 Yield of chief summer crops in 1935  163
21 Losses in the yield of chief winter crops in twenty-one provinces in 1935  163

viii
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Imported rice from 1867 to 1935</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Dates of regular Yu ceremonies attended by Qing emperors from AD 1744 to AD 1819</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Distribution of the eighteen districts and the sixteen Engineering and Labour Relief Bureaus</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Institutions for disaster relief and rescue operations</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Statistics on governmental and non-governmental charitable institutions in eighteen provinces</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Number of beneficiaries of welfare institutions in eighteen provinces</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Stricken areas and tax exemption policies in the flood of the Yongding River in AD 1801</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Population-based minimum requirements of reserve grain</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Minor granaries throughout the dynasties</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>County-specific statistics on reserves in Jiangsu</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>County-specific information on the implementation of the reserve-grain scheme in Hubei</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>County-specific information on grain reserves in Hunan in 1933</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Count of counties in Anhui with/without granaries by 1934</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Count of counties in Anhui with different quantities of reserve grain by 1934</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Count of counties in Gansu with reserves of grain/money in 1934</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Count of counties in Shanxi with granaries and/or grain reserves</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Construction of granaries in counties of Henan by 1934</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>The counties’ reporting of the reserves in Henan by 1934</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Province-specific data on the grain reserves and relief funds before 1934</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Area of barren mountains, 1914–20</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SIGLA AND TRANSLATOR’S GENERAL NOTES

[EN] Editor’s note
[C] Chinese (source) (NB: English sources are unmarked)
[TN] Translator’s note
[MI] Publishing information is completely or partially missing either because the
author did not identify the source or the source document was unavailable to
the translator

The Chinese original did not contain any pagination information of the sources.
All the pagination information was supplemented by the translator.

All the supplementary information provided in the original text is enclosed in
parentheses; that provided by the translator, in square brackets.

Unless otherwise stated, the translator followed Hucker (1985) in the trans-
lation of all the official titles and other proper names in imperial China.
The Chinese original of proper names and other terms can be found in
Appendix III.
In the bibliography, both pinyin and the Chinese characters are provided.
INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

TIMOTHY CHEEK,
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

This history of famine relief in China remains one of the most comprehensive and respected chronicles of the topic since its initial publication in 1937. This long and detailed history was penned by a precocious young Marxist scholar in the inland city of Kaifeng on the eve of the full Japanese invasion of China in July of that year. It has been over seventy years since it was written; what makes it worth reprinting (as it has been several times) much less translating?

First and foremost, historians inside and outside of China have found this book to be a useful and reliable chronicle of the record of famines, their consequences, and government policies that is modern and scientific in its sensibilities – eschewing traditional Confucian ‘praise and blame’ historiography – while deeply engaged in the long and complex record of traditional Chinese historiography. While clearly Marxist in approach the book is remarkably free of political cant. The original edition of the book was published in July 1937 in Shanghai by the prestigious Commercial Press. It was translated into Japanese and published in Tokyo in 1939. It has since been republished several times – in the original version in Taiwan most recently in 1978 and in a slightly revised version in Beijing in May 1958 and again in the post-Mao period. The book is divided into three sections: facts of famine relief, ideas on famine relief, and government policy on famine relief, presented chronologically in each section over all the dynasties and the Republic. The general thesis is that famine is caused by bad government – poor administration, poor distribution, and poor planning – which undermines human control of natural conditions. Thus, famine is a social and not a natural problem.

Scholarly opinion in China is well represented by the ‘Afterword’ from the 2011 edition translated in this volume by two respected academic historians in China, Li Wenhai and Xia Mingfang, co-authors of the 1994 study, *Ten Great Famines in Modern China.* They conclude, ‘as the first thorough, comprehensive investigation into the conditions of famine relief in Chinese history, Deng’s study presented a balanced review of historical records, ideas, and policies not seen in any other work before its time.’ The author, given in the book as Deng Yunte (and now known as Deng Tuo), is likewise appreciated internationally. J. P. Harrison in his 1969 study of Chinese peasant rebellions notes that Deng sees peasant rebellions in Chinese history ‘more as products of natural disasters than of class struggle’ – a contrast with the Maoist historiography of that day. Professor Lillian Li, whose research includes famine in Chinese history, regards Deng’s book as the only major modern Chinese study on the topic, but faults him for his traditional ‘cut and paste’ style of stringing sources together and for his reliance on published, rather than archival, sources, which of course were not available to historians in the 1930s.

The author would agree with this criticism. In his Preface to the 1958 edition, Deng himself says that the book was ‘intended to be nothing but a resource book’. Yet, this is both the reason for the enduring value of this study of Chinese famine relief and not entirely true, for Deng offers a sober economic Marxist analysis. Deng seems to quote every conceivable Chinese history or chronicle and several Western texts. He writes in a clipped, condensed style, relying heavily on cut-and-paste quotations. This, of course, is the traditional Chinese ‘proof’ – ancient documents carry far more weight than the analyses of contemporary historians. None the less, Deng’s union of the classical Chinese historiographical approach with European (Marxist) economic systems analysis is a promising example of the sort of hybrid that emerged from the mixing of these two cultural streams. *Famine Relief* stands in marked contrast to the many formulaic histories written in the People’s Republic, especially during the Mao period.

The purpose of Deng’s *Famine Relief* is well within the bounds of traditional Chinese historiography. Like Sima Guang’s famous eleventh-century work, Deng’s book constitutes a ‘Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government’. However, Deng’s advice is for a modern government, not the Emperor. Like the Qing dynasty school of realistic statecraft (*jingshi*), Deng seeks solutions to famine relief, to foreign encroachment on China, and to the plight of an underemployed peasantry. What is new is his methods. Marxist historical

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2 Li Wenhai and Xia Mingfang, *Zhongguo jindai shida zaihuang* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1996).
materialism, in particular its emphasis on organized categories of economic systems and their relations, and its de-emphasis on the morality or venality of individual historical actors, provided new and useful answers for Deng to long-standing questions in Chinese historiography. Thus, Deng makes a systematic quantitative comparison of the apparent causes of famine and the success rate of previous governments’ relief programmes to prove that famine has social origins and solutions. The calls of Confucian historiography for this young scholar were answered by Marxist historical materialism. Nonetheless, the Marxist theory in *Famine Relief* differs from later orthodox Party-approved histories by its lack of emphasis on class struggle. Rather, in line with most Chinese writers during the 1930s, Deng focused upon social and economic forces as the key factors in history.

Second, the author turns out to be an interesting and important intellectual in twentieth-century China. Thus, this technical history of famine relief in China is also part of the story of Chinese intellectuals and the Chinese revolution – the inspirational beginning, the torturous years under Mao’s rule, and the tensions between professional independence and Party obligations today. The author, Deng Yunte, is better known as Deng Tuo 邓拓 (1912–66), founding editor of the *People’s Daily* and a noted Party intellectual who both served Mao (as the editor of the first edition of *Selected Works of Mao* in 1944) and fell afoul of the Chairman from the late 1950s, finally penning notable essays in *Evening Chats at Yanshan* and *Notes from a Three Family Village* (with the respected historian, Wu Han, and essayist, Liao Mosha) in the early 1960s that have widely been seen as a Chinese Marxist repost to the excesses of Mao’s rule. Deng’s life, in fact, traces the early commitment of erudite Chinese scholars to Marxism – in Deng’s case particularly to the historical materialism and economic focus of Engels, their increasingly troubled service to the Party in the 1950s and 60s, and the more cautious and self-protective service of scholars in China today. Service for Deng ended in tragedy, with his suicide under duress in the opening months of the Cultural Revolution in May 1966. The editors of this edition of *Famine Relief* are in part honouring their fallen scholarly comrade by bringing his book to an international audience and applying his standards of scholarship to it.

Yet, even under the constraints of high Maoism, Deng was able to make the case for his kind of Chinese Marxism – rational, informed, scholarly and admittedly elitist. Famously, Deng challenged Mao’s ‘peasant revolution’ populist history in an essay ostensibly set as a paean to Mao: ‘Mao Zedong Thought has Opened the Way for the Development of China’s Science of History’. Published in 1961, Deng used Mao’s writings from his more moderate Yan’an corpus to buttress Deng’s own views, which Mao by the time of the

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Great Leap Forward in 1958 no longer held. This same ‘waving the red flag to oppose the red flag’ (about which a frustrated Chairman himself frequently complained) has been adopted by other establishment intellectuals in China – then and now – reminding us that many songs can be sung in the key of Mao (or his successors). Indeed, in *Famine Relief*, Deng ends with a clarion call of China’s revolution, but we should note that even when that revision was added in 1958, Deng eschewed the radical peasant-only focus of the time: ‘The failures of the famine relief polices in the history of China are an inevitability given the limitations of the class society. Indeed, it will be impossible to make any true advance in the cause of famine relief until our people become masters of themselves.’

Finally, this book and the carefully prepared English edition presented here tells us something of import about scholarship in China today. It is a living example of the relationship between sound historiography and political commitments and shows that excellent scholarly work has occurred and can occur under authoritarian aegis – not always, and often at high cost – and thus as such many books coming out of socialist China are well worth our attention. The 1958 edition here is not entirely the same as the original 1937 edition. In the earlier edition, Deng eschewed overt political statements to avoid the censors of Kai-shek Chiang Nationalist government, though his underlying Marxist categories are clear enough. However, the 1958 revisions are minor and do not involve serious cuts or re-interpretations. Indeed, Deng sticks to his historical materialist focus (on relations of production, as well as level of production, for instance) and does not adopt the ‘peasant rebellion’ historiography popular in that year.

This edition provides Chinese characters for key names, terms and institutions, as well as precise page references for most of the hundreds of quotations – some several pages long – from classical Chinese sources. The meticulous efforts taken by the translator to annotate any points of confusion and to correct any typos or errors of fact stemming from the limitations of sources available to Deng in the 1930s will be of great service to research scholars but can be passed over by the comparative scholar not engaged in Chinese-language research with the confidence that this English text is probably the most reliable edition of Deng’s major historical work available today.

The translation is not only clear and accurate but also reflects scrupulous editing. This brings to the fore Deng’s lucid explanations and concise conclusions following these many quotations taken from literary Chinese texts. Deng organized the book rigorously around the three themes of facts, ideas, and policies about famine and famine relief and the subsections will guide readers to the topics of most interest to them. Thus, Deng’s ‘resource book’ becomes a

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reliable, informed, and critical guide to the traditional historical texts on famine relief across two millennia that would otherwise take a scholarly lifetime to collect, assess and translate. Deng emerges as a clear-thinking and straightforward commentator. And in fact, he is famous in China for the clarity of his erudite but engaging explanations of Chinese history and arts. We are well-served by the efforts of his Chinese colleagues and editors to have this useful, thoughtful and reliable history finally available in English.
AUTHOR'S GENERAL NOTES ON THE 1937 PRINT

The contents of this book were largely arranged according to the subjects, with the historical records within each chapter compiled chronologically. For the purpose of cross reference, I included a chronicle of events in the history of famine relief in China at the end of this book.

The book initially contained a conclusion in which I summarized the lessons from the implementation of the famine relief policies in history, but that part was omitted due to space limitations. The section ‘New Social Factors Contributing to Famines in Modern China’ in Chapter 2, Part I was also deleted for the same reason.

In the Appendix, I initially included a much longer chronicle of the disasters in the over 3,700 years of history since the Shang dynasty, but it was shortened in the published form.

This book does not provide a separate bibliography because the citations are too many and the information of the sources is already provided in the footnotes.

Deng Yunte
2 June 1937
AUTHOR’S FOREWORD TO THE 1958 REPRINT

I wrote this book before the Resistance War and had it published in classical Chinese by the Commercial Press.¹ I now have it reprinted in vernacular Chinese by Sanlian Shudian and look forward to comments, criticisms and suggestions from all my readers.

This project was originally a side product of my enquiries into the social and historical conditions of China. In my investigations into other subjects, from time to time I was shocked by the enormous number of famine records I found, and hence I decided to collect the records whenever I could. I initially planned to conduct a comprehensive study with all the materials I had collected, but before I could put the documents in order the Resistance War broke out. During the War, I lost most of my manuscripts alongside many primary and secondary documents; fortunately this ‘side product’ survived because it had been published early on.

This book is intended to be nothing but a resource book. After all, I was prevented by the circumstances from developing it into anything more than a compilation of historical documents, and the analysis I provided alongside the documents suffers from inadequacies in both quantity and quality.

I hope my book in its current form can adapt better to my readers’ practical needs. In the past, I heard complaints that the earlier version in the classical style was inaccessible. In response to these criticisms, I rewrote all my comments in vernacular Chinese while leaving the citations as they were. Apart from the change of style, the book remains largely the same.

I do intend to revise it thoroughly in the future by proofreading all the citations, supplementing up-to-date documents, reflecting over the lessons from history and elaborating some of the key arguments I made in the earlier version. This expanded project would no doubt take a considerable amount of time that I cannot possibly afford now. However, I will fulfil this commitment in the future to reciprocate the warm support from my comrades.

My sincere thanks go to all the comrades and friends who supported and helped this project.

Deng Yunte
7 August 1957

¹ This was the foreword to the reprint published by Sanlian Shudian in 1958. [EN]