

## 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  
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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-47990-5 — The History of Famine Relief in China  
Yunte Deng  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108479905](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108479905)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781108801065

Originally published by the Commercial Press, Ltd. as *The History of Famine Relief in China* (ISBN: 9787100084468) in 2011 as part of the China Publishing Group China Library Series.

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First published 2020

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-47990-5 Hardback

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## 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 translation 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,  
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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> To Untā [Deng Yunte], *Shina kyuke shi* [A History of Famine Relief in China], trans. Kawasaki Masao (Tokyo: Seikatsu sha, 1939). The Commercial Press, the original publisher, made simple photolithographic reprints on Taiwan in 1970. date unknown, and 1978. The revised edition was published by Sanlian Shudian in Beijing in May 1958 and reprinted in 1961. The edition translated here is the 2011 reprint of the 1958 edition but by Commercial Press, Beijing. All editions maintain the name ‘Deng Yunte’. *Famine Relief* was also included in *Deng Tuo quanji* [Complete Works of Deng Tuo] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1.

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*.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> Li Wenhai and Xia Mingfang, *Zhongguo jindai shida zaihuang* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese Peasant Rebellions* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 95; Lillian Li, personal communication, March, 1982.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> For an English-language biography, see Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997).

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).<sup>5</sup> 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 policies 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

<sup>5</sup> Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China*, pp. 224 ff.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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