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REVIEWS

The Chinese Great Leap Forward/Great Famine Database (1958-1962). Chief Editor Song Yongyi. Harvard University: Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies; Universities Service Centre for China Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013.

In the history of contemporary China, the years between 1957 and 1962 were marked by the episode of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, which witnessed revolutionary fanaticism, overzealous fever for a Utopian paradise, and the subsequent disasters of starvation and deaths. In 1957 Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward campaign, aiming to transform the People's Republic of China from an agrarian economy into a communist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. The campaign ended in the catastrophic Great Famine, resulting in tens of millions of deaths from starvation. It was one of the most horrific periods in China's long political, economic and social history. Not only did this episode plant the seeds of the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s, but it also led to a series of reforms in rural China after Mao's death that dismantled the people's communes that Mao had fervently advocated during the Great Leap Forward period. As Frank Dikotter, a well-known scholar on contemporary Chinese history, put it: "The pivotal event in the history of the People's Republic of China was the Great Leap Forward. Any attempt to understand what happened in communist China must start by placing it squarely at the very center of the entire Maoist Period."¹

Research in English on the episode of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine can be traced to the early 1960s, with Richard Baum's article "Red and Expert: the Politico-ideological foundations of China's Great Leap Forward."² Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scholars of China studies published a series of works on this topic, including Roderick MacFarquhar,³ Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun,⁴ Dali Yang⁵ and Jasper Becker,⁶ to name only a few. However, the Great Leap Forward has not received the kind of scholarly attention it deserves, to a great extent because of the lack of systematic data or even basic information about what actually happened during those years. In the past decade, this area has witnessed a great increase in research activities, as the Chinese government gradually opened access to its pre-1970s archival materials, especially local government archives. Even though access is still limited and censored, the opening up has for the first time offered the opportunity for scholars to examine these dramatic events in greater detail and with more systematic data. Among these recent studies, the

¹ Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), Xii.

² Richard Baum, "Red and Expert": the Politico-Ideological Foundations of China's Great Leap Forward, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 9.

³ Roderick Mac Farquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Vol. 3: *The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961-1966*.

⁴ Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politician and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward 1955-1959*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).

⁵ Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: state, Rural Society and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁶ Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* (London: J. Murray, 1996).

book by Chinese reporter Yang Jisheng 杨继绳, based on extensive archival research and oral history, has been translated into English.⁷ More recently, Frank Dikotter published his *Mao's Great Famine: the History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62*.

A significant development in research on the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine took place in 2013: the debut of the Database on the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, published by the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University. The availability of this database to researchers will undoubtedly have a profound impact on research activities in this area for generations to come.

This newly published database is the third major electronic database on contemporary China, following The Database of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, and The Database of the Chinese Anti-Rightist Campaign, 1957, both published by the Hong Kong Chinese University Press, and compiled and edited by the same group of scholars and librarians in the US and China. Presently, the fourth and final sub-dataset in this series, the Database of Political Campaigns in the People Republic of China, 1949-1956, is under development. These databases came into being as the result of the editors' heroic efforts to seek out, compile and make publicly available tens of thousands of original documents from past political events and campaigns in contemporary China. The significance of the entire series lies in its impact on scholarly research and its preservation of the historical record and national memory of the most dramatic and traumatic experiences in the history of contemporary China.

The database of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine is an invaluable and indispensable source for research on the political-economic campaign and its disastrous consequences. Following the same collecting criteria and structural design for the series, this database consists of over 7,000 original primary source documents. The database allows keyword search of the entire full-text database and provides browse and navigation properties (guided searches), including subject, date, author, organization and geographic place. The interface is friendly; search is fast and effective, and navigation easy and smooth.

I would like to call attention to some distinctive features of this database:

1. This database includes a large number of documents collected from various archival facilities in China. As is well known, access to the archives of the CCP documents has long been restricted. But a new archive law adopted in 1988 has greatly expanded the public's access to the vast volume of archival materials. A large proportion of this database is built on these newly opened materials from the party archives. Of the 7,000 primary sources in the collection, about 3,000 are internal documents from various CCP archival facilities. Other documents include once-classified internal publications, such as

⁷ Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: the Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

Internal Reference 内部参考 by Xinhua News Agency, which were written only for the eyes of the high-level officials.

This database provides researchers and the public with rare and valuable glimpses into this critical historical episode. For researchers who study contemporary China, one serious challenge is political uncertainty in access to information and research opportunities. Archives may be open at one time but then unexpectedly closed later; documents may be accessible at one time but become restricted later. In this context, this series of databases is especially valuable as a stable and accessible source of original documents and materials for researchers and students of contemporary China.

These archival documents are often first-hand and specific records of the events, especially those pertinent to local situations. For example, there are more than 30 archival materials from a number of archive facilities on Macheng county 麻城 of Hubei 湖北 in 1959, some of which are listed below:

湖北麻城县中一人民公社农村食堂管理的几点经验

湖北麻城县整顿巩固人民公社的情况与作法

中共湖北麻城县委全体会议记录

《湖北麻城县万人大会简报》

湖北麻城县红专公社一大队第一中队贯彻政策推动生产的几点经验;

湖北麻城县委调研组关于一个生产队各阶级阶层社员思想动态调查

中共麻城县委关于白果望花山第六生产队大批农民外逃事件和对有关人员的处分通报;

These local records and first-hand reports provide vivid stories of local practices and development during this episode. They are rich sources for case studies and micro analysis and comparative studies on topics such as relationships between the party/state at the top and the county/village government and local officials at the bottom in policy implementation processes.

2. Types and sources of the documents in the database are diverse and broad.

The types of the documents can be divided into five categories:

- I. Official directives and reports relevant to the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine.
- II. Remarks, speeches and writings by Mao Zedong, and other CCP political and government leaders.
- III. Local party archival materials pertinent to the investigation, reports, instructions, statistics, etc.
- IV. Records of grievances, resistance, riots and other related disturbances.
- V. Officials' self-criticisms, confessions, case records and other documents.

The types and sources of archival materials are diverse and broad. The documents cover official and local information from a variety of channels: directives from the Central Committee of CCP and state council and its various branches to provincial and local party committees and governments; speeches by Mao Zedong and top political leaders to the very bottom of county or village officials, or even ordinary citizens. The collection also includes official directives and reports by local authorities, individual dossiers and personal letters.

Besides official general reports and investigations from province, city, and county level on the issue, there are also letters of individual officials to report local situations and detailed narratives of specific incidents. Examples of some documents on Sichuan from the retrieved list:

四川盐边县田治元给西昌专署有关饿死人的信,1956

盐边县人民检察院关于检查务本区 1955 年和 1956 年有关粮食统购统销、救济、虐待方面饿死人情况的报告, 1957

关于四川金堂县人和人民公社干部严重违法乱纪的情况报告（摘要）, 1959

中共四川璧山县委关于抢救肿病的十二条紧急措施, 1960

中共四川省监委关于资中县群众生活和疾病、死亡情况的检查报告, 1960

梁岐山关于酉阳打死人问题向四川省委的汇报, 1961

四川省委民工委关于甘孜县大塘坝区人畜死亡情况简报, 1961

关于涪陵、武陵部分公社当前疾病调查情况简报, 1961

梁岐山关于涪陵地区当前疾病和死亡情况的报告, 1961

四川省委璧山工作组关于璧山县大兴公社疾病、死亡的情况简报 1962-1-19

中共涪陵地委关于当前肿病情况的简报, 1962, etc.

One archival document “Report at the meeting for commune Party secretaries of Chishui county of Guizhou Province on the grand total of necessary relief grain and unnatural deaths, April 22, 1960” 贵州省赤水县公社党委书记会上汇报需返销粮及非正常死亡累总表 recorded the number of unnatural deaths in this county in just a few months.

单位	返销需量	早稻		包谷		高粱		中粮	
		原报 (亩)	实有 (亩)	原报(亩)	实有(亩)	原报(亩)	实有(亩)	原报(亩)	实有(亩)
城市	2.5 万斤	3800	3300	4200	1400	1000	300		

复兴	15 万	21000	10000	40000	15000	1000	1200	3800	2100
大冈	18 万	5693	3363	38000	25000	5000	3511	4914	2661
旺隆	92874 万	5976	1500	45000	12294	3500	1181	1700	746
元厚	15 万	4000	850	40000	6700	-	-	-	723
土城	6 万	-	-	90000	30000	-	-	-	-
醒民	7.8 万	4900	2850	37500	8500	6500	1500	2751	1230
隆兴	36 万	6000	2200	130000	32000	25000	7000	7500	5600
合计	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

单位	共死	其中非正常死亡	计算时间	-
城关	300	230	60 年元月起	-
复兴	1760	1200	59 年 11 月起	原人口 29536 人，上调**，现有**
大冈	928	446	60 年元月起	-
旺隆	1882	791	59 年 10 月起	-
元厚	760	455	59 年 10 月起	-
土城	1880	1880	59 年 12 月起	-
醒民	967	430	59 年 12 月起	-
隆兴	1202	720	59 年 11 月起	-
合计	9679	6152		-

According to semi-official publications and unofficial estimates in recent publications, the number of “unnatural” deaths ranges from 15 million to 45 million. Although the database does not have systematic and comprehensive materials for every province, city and county on this topic, which probably can never be accomplished, the documents mentioned above and other related materials in the database do offer some rare glimpses into selected local scenes and episodes. For example, the database contains cases involving detailed descriptions of devastation, shocking stories of cannibalism, violence and abuses against ordinary peasants, and the death of entire families.

3. Time span and subject matters beyond the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine.

History consists of events that are often intertwined and interconnected, and should be studied in relation to one another. From this perspective, the entire series of History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements is especially valuable as an integrated database, which includes the databases on the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine, the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. Each individual database within the series also attempts to capture the entirety of the specific episode, its historical background, origin, and aftermath.

One of the strengths of the database of the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine is its effort to include documents that provide rich information on the historical background

of its origin, and on the government's responses and subsequent efforts to correct and adjust related policies. Therefore, the documents included in the collection extend beyond this episode. For example, most scholars and history books traditionally define the years of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine as from 1957 to 1962, even though in some provinces starvation and deaths went on into 1963. The documents included in this database started as early as June 1949 with the reports on the food riots (抢粮) in Ding county, Hebei. The latest documents were from 1985 "Circular by the CCP Jiangxi Provincial Committee Discipline Inspection Committee on issues related to the re-examination of the cases in the Great Leap Forward period". The collection includes many documents on the development and forceful implementation of the state monopoly of grain procurement and distribution (统购统销) in the early- and mid-1950s, which was one major contributing factor in the starvation and deaths in the rural areas.

The subject matters covered in this database are also broad and varied, including topics such as "Three Antis and Five Antis" 三反五反, Four Cleans movements 四清运动, People's commune, state monopoly of grain procurement and distribution, peasants' withdrawal from the commune, Anti-Rightist movement 反右运动, backyard furnace and steel production, industrialization, irrigation projects, communal kitchen, false crop production, disease and death, starvation and cannibalism, cadres and cadre policy, bureaucratism, border regions and ethnic minorities, foreign relations, international communist movement, disturbances, resistances and riots, Lushan conference 庐山会议, conference of 7000 persons 七千人大会, and many more. This expansive inclusion enables researchers to view this period of contemporary China through a broad and historical lens.

Given the political constraints on access in China, it is understandable that the materials in this collection are by no means systematic and comprehensive, and the coverage is not even: there is rich information on some topics or areas, but materials in other areas may be scarce and sporadic. As a matter of fact, it is hard to assess how comprehensive the database's coverage is because it's hard to assess how many and what primary materials are kept in archival facilities in China. There is a need for further investigation and assessment.

In conclusion, the database on the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine is an indispensable resource for the study of contemporary China. It is rich in terms of the range of materials covered, and has considerable depth of local sources for specific localities and events. The scope and geographical areas being covered are also broad. The database is developed with user-friendly interface and powerful full-text search feature, making it easy to navigate the multi-layered materials. We are grateful to the perseverance and tremendous efforts of those editors, librarians, and researchers who collected and compiled valuable materials for this database and made it publicly available.

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