

Mr. Teng proclaims the maxim "Truth from facts." Now even Peking is more candid about the unhappy facts.

Hunger in China: The "Norm of Truth"

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Item 1: *New York Times*, December 31, 1978: Craig Claiborne, marveling over his recent gourmet experiences in the People's Republic of China, writes that he asked "an acquaintance long associated with so-called left-wing causes" "how to account for the excellence of Chinese cuisine in the present socialist atmosphere?" She replied: "In a proud socialist country such as China and Vietnam, food is as crucial and emotional a part of the culture as is their ancient art or their imperial palaces. To invite people to share their cuisine...and to serve it to them correctly, is to teach foreigners much about the Chinese soul."

Item 2: Peking, December 9, 1978. Agence France-Presse reports the appearance of a poster on "Democracy Wall" at the Hsitan Street intersection addressed to the "ladies and gentlemen of the Peking City Government." The poster "vehemently accused socialist society of failing to feed its citizens" and contained the following lines: "Tens of thousands of people do not have the wherewithal to clothe themselves or eat. What has happened to your communist humanitarianism?...M-----f--- your 'socialist, communist' society....Go to the devil, you who only fatten yourselves on the people's blood and tears....the people want bread [literally: flour pancakes] to appease their hunger...."

Item 3: *Die Welt* (Hamburg, West Germany), December 21, 1978; excerpt from the translation of a wall poster that appeared earlier that month in Peking:

"[Mao Tse-tung] had...hundreds of millions [of Chinese dollars] earned through the sweat and blood of the Chinese people. Who can deny this? And this was at a time when Chinese were building socialism and had not enough to eat.... Whoever does not believe the wall newspaper here should go to the Peking Railroad Station and ask people from the provinces whether there are beggars there. I don't think that it makes these beggars especially happy when rice is exported abroad to friends of a so-called Third World. But does anyone care what these beggars think?"

"It is a disgrace that in our People's Republic only those who have power eat well...."

Item 4: *Hsing Tao Daily* (Hong Kong), December 7, 1978. A December 6 Agence France-Presse wire from Peking reports the appearance of a wall poster containing the following lines: "While there were still people begging food in the streets in some regions of our country, the dictator of this country gave away our money to the dictators of Vietnam and Albania. If the beggars in the streets of our country had known this, they would definitely not have been happy about it."

Item 5: *Ming Pao Daily* (Hong Kong), September 8, 1978. An article describes the recent impressions of a Chinese visitor to Chengchow City in Honan Province. The visitor noted "exceptionally many" beggars in Chengchow, "especially at the Chengchow railroad station." He found the local cadres "not evasive about this unpresentable phenomenon," nor did they "try to cover up." His "cadre-guide" on a sightseeing tour explained that lack of snow all winter "on the largest wheat-producing north and central plains" and a rare summer heat wave in the north had "greatly affected" the summer and fall harvests. Hence the sudden increase of (peasant) beggars.

The visitor also reported the construction of a new "luxury" tourist hotel in the Chengchow area for the exclusive use of foreigners and overseas Chinese on sightseeing tours. The hotel "has a theatre, dance hall, and shopping center."

Item 6: *Ming Pao Daily* (Hong Kong), December 8, 1978. A first-person article by a local visitor to Peking last summer notes changes in the street scene, compared with the year before—particularly the presence of many shabbily dressed rustics from outside Peking, with "very sad, gaunt, oily and sweaty faces." Some appeared to be "shoppers." Always toting bundles and baskets, they seemed "to join any queue they saw, in order to buy something," but mainly cookies and candies. Others were said to be people wrongly accused during the Cultural Revolution, who had come to Peking to petition the authorities for a reversal of the case against them. People in Peking called them visitors "to the above." "Having no food coupons, they could only go to

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smaller eateries to ask coupons from some kind old ladies, in order to buy some food. Whenever they saw any leftovers on a plate, they would take it and lick it clean. At the approach of a waiter, they had to hurry off. Waiters always told them summarily to beat it."

Item 7: *Quadrant* (Sydney, Australia), November, 1978; excerpt from "Everyday Life in the People's Republic," by Claudie and Jacques Broyelle: "As soon as one goes beyond the outskirts of the capital [Peking], one discovers an entirely different China. Beggars are common, and even foreigners (if they keep their eyes open) may witness remarkable sights, such as people in rags who wait patiently in restaurants for customers to leave their table, in the hope of salvaging the leftovers."

Item 8: Peking, December 31, 1978. Agence France-Presse transmits a Western-eyewitness report that a woman was shot and wounded by police in Shanghai the previous day, during attempts to disperse a demonstration by workers of a silk-weaving factory. "The factory hands were protesting against the wages, which, the lower-paid workers said, were 'too low to allow them to eat enough to satisfy their hunger.'"

The intention of the preceding itemization is not to make Mr. Claiborne or any other tourist in China feel guilty about consuming "an elegant cold egg-custard tart with a meltingly good pastry base" or, for that matter, the "veritable triumph" of "a shark's fin preparation with a pigeon egg in the center." Not at all. Mr. Claiborne and other Americans have paid for their dining pleasure with very good dollars, which—though they may not directly drop food into hungry mouths—will certainly help import foreign technology into Chinese factories, thereby increasing production and the possibility that benefits will trickle downward—eventually.

The myth that China has solved the problem of feeding itself has recently been dealt several fatal blows, but it survives nonetheless, like a skeleton wearing a rosy mask and wrapped in the newsprint of yesteryear's illusions. Anyone still beguiled by this phantom should consider the following admission in the Chinese press: "The problem of food is the most fundamental problem of the economy, particularly in our country, where the production force is backward. The problem of feeding hundreds of millions of people has not yet been resolved" (*Kuang Ming Daily*, May 22, 1978).

More precise admissions have followed since, reflecting the new regime's emphasis on an objective "norm of truth," based on the realities. In a lengthy article published in the *People's Daily*, October 6, 1978, Hu Ch'iao-mu, the theorist behind Teng Hsiao-p'ing's economic policy, states that "except in some better areas, the peasants have a hard life throughout the year. Although production may increase, their income may increase little or not at all. In some areas, incomes have actually declined with the increase of production." So much for the popular Western theory that Chinese peasants have incentive to work harder toward communal production because they share in the resultant increase.

But the testimony of peasant refugees has long contradicted this theory, as we have noted before ("The Other China—How Do We Know China?..." *Worldview*, July-August, 1976).

Hu Ch'iao-mu's most telling statement, however, is that "average per capita grain production in 1977 was the same as in 1955—that is, the growth in grain production was only about equal to population growth plus the increase in grain requirements for industry." As *China News Analysis* has noted (November 10, 1978), this suggests that average per capita grain consumption was even less in 1977 than in 1955—a hard year of agricultural transition to collectivism, for which no economic miracles were claimed. The assessment of no growth in per capita grain production for varying periods between 1950 and 1973 has previously been made by several Western economists, whose findings provided the basis for our earlier conclusion that "at best, China appears to have been running very hard in order to stand still" ("The Other China—Hunger: Part II," *Worldview*, June, 1976). Unfortunately, some of these economists seemed unwilling to believe the bleak truth that filtered through their statistical tables—not to speak of those "top experts" who rashly manipulated nebulous data in their eagerness to declare China "almost unique in Asia as a land free of widespread hunger, malnutrition and famine."

The fact is that all three conditions—hunger, malnutrition, and famine—have prevailed in China throughout this decade and were aggravated by Maoist economic policies and the disruptions of the continuing Cultural Revolution. Confirmation of famine in one especially chaotic area, Szechuan—traditionally rich in grain—comes from an unlikely source. On September 29, 1977, Han Suyin, the well-known writer and Mao idolator, told Teng Hsiao-p'ing during a personal interview (*Der Spiegel*, November 21, 1977): "In 1976 famine reigned in Szechuan [a province with around a hundred million people]. The harvest was bad; the public order collapsed. In Chungking workers and students milled through the streets and smashed public buses. Neither meat nor clothing was to be had." (The ordinarily loquacious Miss Han somehow failed to report this startling situation to the world at the time she learned of it.) On September 27, 1978, the New China News Agency (NCNA) finally disclosed—in a context of present self-congratulatory recovery from disaster—that 600,000 tons of grain had been shipped into Szechuan during 1976 to alleviate the "appalling difficulties" in that province. (It should be noted that 1976 was a year for which Peking claimed an over-all "bumper harvest," as it had for every year consecutively since 1963.)

Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, ardent French Maoists who went to live and work for a few years in the People's Republic and returned thoroughly sobered, have recounted a story making the rounds in China, purporting to describe a return visit by Teng Hsiao-p'ing to his native Szechuan soon after his first rehabilitation. "At one stage, scheduled to deliver an official speech, he instead provided his audience with an unprecedented spectacle—that of one of the top leaders of the Party openly weeping, overcome with emotion. 'I knew that

Szechuan had suffered much,' said Teng, 'but only now do I realize the extent of the misery, ruin and destruction which you have experienced. I beg the people of Szechuan to forgive me for having been unable to alleviate their suffering' " (*Quadrant*, November, 1978).

For the last two years China has suffered widespread drought of unusual persistence and severity. On November 3, 1978, NCNA reported that in the late summer and early autumn of that year the "intensity and scope" of the drought in the Huai River Basin and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River "exceeded those of 1934, 1959, and 1966." In Hupei, Kiangsi, and Kiangsu provinces along the Yangtze the drought was "the worst in over 50 years," and in Anhwei "the worst in 120 years." "Hon-an, Shansi, and Shensi [provinces] in the Yellow and Huai river basins also suffered the severest dry spells in decades....Sweltering summer heat...aggravated the drought." (Thus the words of the anonymous cadre-guide quoted in the *Ming Pao Daily* article of September 8 are confirmed.)

Nevertheless, the same NCNA report and a subsequent *People's Daily* editorial of November 21, 1978, anticipated that the estimated total grain output for 1978 would exceed that of 1977—"no easy achievement," but also not a very reassuring one, if one recalls that China's grain imports in 1977 reached a near-record level.

The editorial also includes the following remarkably candid statements: "This year, good and bad harvests are very unevenly distributed throughout the country. This adds to the difficulties in grain procurement [by the state]....It is believed that this year those areas with relatively good harvests will bear the collective interests of the State in mind and sell more surplus grain to the State to help its efforts in supporting calamity-affected areas. The Party committees at all levels must strengthen ideological and political work and make the heroic struggle of the people in disaster-affected areas and their plight known to the people throughout the country, especially to the masses in areas blessed with bumper crops...[our italics]. At present, our grain situation is not very satisfactory....As things now stand, we must strictly follow the guidelines for planned and economical grain consumption and resolutely tighten controls on irrational [unplanned?] grain sales...."

Anyone familiar with the euphemistic language of the Chinese press—in which "relatively good" means fairly bad and "planned and economical grain consumption" means belt-tightening in near-famine conditions—recognizes immediately that the situation described in the editorial is grave. What is unusual is the attention drawn in a national newspaper to disaster and the "plight" of hungry people. In the recent past, news of current natural disasters has generally been confined to the local media, and—as numerous Chinese emigrants have reported—people in stricken areas have been cautioned, "for the sake of protecting the country's prestige," not to reveal actual conditions to outsiders, even within the country. In the past also the government has provided



only limited disaster relief, if at all, and has repeatedly stressed the need for "self-relief"—a phrase that means little more in practice than "do whatever you can"—with often pitiful consequences.

But the most significant problem suggested by the editorial involves the distribution of food grain. A constant corollary of the Western myth that China has solved its food problem is that China has developed an efficient, rational system for the equitable distribution of food. The practice of food distribution, however, as described by all Chinese emigrants we have interviewed over the last ten years, has been consistently at odds with this assumption. Distribution has proceeded, rather, through a complex system of inequalities, not all of them planned; and any local "evening out" has taken place through illegal or extralegal means, often tolerated by the authorities with the proverbial "one eye shut." Food supply has varied greatly, not only from province to province, but from one production team to another in the same commune. "Central" alone has had the power to authorize transfer of food from a rich area to a poor



Chinese peasants in Peking, January 14, 1979, shouting for more food and an end to oppression. (Religious News Service Photo)

one. It is mistakenly taken for granted by some foreign economists that Central has automatically deployed this power to ensure every Chinese the "minimal subsistence" so neatly demonstrated by their statistical charts.

In fact, if there is any "law" governing food distribution in China, it is that the more remote the area from major urban centers, the less certain its guarantee of food supply. Moreover, when necessity forces hard decisions, political considerations take priority: The "open" or "international" cities like Peking and Shanghai must be supplied at all costs. Sometimes Peter is robbed to pay Paul. A graphic example concerns Hunan Province in south-central China. Recent legal emigrants from a large city in Hunan report that the food situation there was not "tight" following the Cultural Revolution—until the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in October, 1976. Immediately thereafter shortages were felt, particularly of pork. Suddenly, "trucks came from Shanghai and Peking to 'haul out' the pigs." Previously pork had sold for 80¢

JMP per "catty" in that city, and the relatively few who could afford it were able to buy as much as they wished on a 1-catty coupon (1 catty = 1.1 lbs.). Larger meat sales had been encouraged, in fact, because lack of municipal refrigeration meant that any leftover supply would rot. (China suffers from serious, chronic power shortage.)

People in Hunan speculated that the Gang of Four must have depleted stockpiles in a last attempt to maintain the prosperity of the major cities, particularly their stronghold, Shanghai—a case of "slapping one's own face to look fat." Food supply in Shanghai had deteriorated steadily in the Seventies; pork rationing began for the first time in July, 1976. Recent residents of Shanghai attribute the city's predicament at the time to a slackening of food production in nearby agricultural areas because of chaos and economic demoralization and to sabotage of Shanghai by the political enemies of the Gang of Four, notably the powerful regional military commander, Hsü Shih-yu.

At the very time in 1976 that Hunan seemed relatively well off and self-sufficient, neighboring Szechuan was experiencing famine and the far northeast was hard-pinned. Because the ration of edible oil per person in the three Manchurian provinces has for several years been at most 3 taels monthly (1 tael = 1.1 ozs.), people there to this day refer mockingly to Ch'en Hsi-lien, formerly commander of the Shenyang Troops and first party secretary of Liaoning, as Ch'en San-liang (Ch'en Three-taels).

The favored status of cities in the food distribution scheme generates further inequalities. The effect on the immediately surrounding countryside is positive; a special zone of economic activity is created to the mutual benefit of city worker and suburban peasant. The worker, whose ration of "staple" food (grain) is guaranteed, seeks to buy as much "supplemental" food (pork, fish, eggs, vegetables, etc.) as he can afford. Many suburban peasants therefore stress the communal cultivation of vegetables, pond fish, or livestock for urban consumption, in addition to selling the produce of their private plots on the free market. The value of the 10 work points earned daily by an able-bodied peasant in the suburbs of the aforementioned city in Hunan Province can be more than \$1 JMP (\$1 JMP—People's Currency—now equals US \$.63). By contrast, the value of 10 daily work points in more remote agricultural areas can fall as low as 8¢ JMP. This does not mean that all peasants near large cities are prosperous. An article in the *People's Daily* of December 20, 1978, revealed that the average earnings of a peasant in T'ung County near Peking are only \$7 JMP a month, about one-seventh of a mid-level urban worker's wage. Yet agricultural conditions in the rest of China are mainly inferior to those in T'ung County. In several northwest provinces it is indicated, for example, that a peasant's average monthly earnings are less than \$4 JMP in 57 per cent of the counties.

On January 20, 1979, the *People's Daily* confirmed a similarly dismal picture in Anhwei Province. After "thirty years of carrying out socialism," according to one county party secretary, "there are many people in the villages who have not enough to eat or enough cloth-

ing to keep them warm." Several county leaders blamed the arbitrary political pressures of the last twenty years for the "paralysis" in agricultural production. "Nominally, I am supposed to be mainly engaged in agriculture," said the party secretary of Ch'ing Yang County. "In reality, 70 to 80 per cent of my time has been spent on political movements, on purging people and being purged." Other county leaders revealed that the practice of reporting grossly inflated figures on agricultural production continued and even worsened after the Great Leap Forward (launched by Mao in 1958). For example, "in 1976 total grain production in Hsiao County was 620 million catties, but in the report it was inflated to 820 million catties." Such practices meant that "commune members would not have enough [left] to eat" (since the state procured grain on the basis of the falsely reported production). Those guilty of such fabrication were, however, "publicly commended" while the cadres in their production units "opened up [private] little kitchens"—that is, arranged to secure special food supplies for themselves.

It should be noted that shortages in the city normally refer to an insufficient supply of "supplemental" foods, but in the countryside "staple" food itself is never enough. The field laborer, who rarely catches a whiff of pork or fowl, goes hungry even on a grain ration that may be more than the average city dweller can swallow. Striking proof of this is revealed by a practice observed late in 1977 in Tsinan, capital of Shantung Province. Peasants from afar would come up to workers' dormitories and call out, "Anyone want to swap rice?" What did they mean? One must know that in Tsinan, out of every 100 catties of rationed grain a month, 20 catties consisted of inferior grains and the rest could include as much as 60 catties of flour. The peasants outside the dormitories were seeking to exchange 1 catty of good-quality rice for 2 to 2.4 catties of the inferior grains, in order better to fill their stomachs.

In Hunan the swap is even more extraordinary. City residents are allotted an inferior variety of rice, *hsien mi*, which always consists, moreover, of a mixture of fresh and "old" stored rice, some of it of several years' "vintage." Peasants, however, receive fresh high-quality rice, *ta mi*, which is good-tasting, but swells much less in volume upon cooking than the inferior rice. Peasants therefore can be seen hanging about state grain shops in the city, shouldering baskets on carrying poles, waiting to barter *ta mi* for an equivalent weight of *hsien mi*, which cooks up into larger quantity and is thus more "filling"!

It is encouraging that the present regime has openly begun to draw attention—within China, at least—to the plight of destitute peasants and to the need for better grain distribution. This new

candor is echoed by internal radio, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). For example, according to a Chekiang broadcast of March 16, 1978, the provincial authorities called for "Party committees at all levels" to "get a clear picture at the grassroots level" and directed that grain be "sent to grain-deficient areas without delay," especially to help those "hit hard by natural disasters." At the same time, FBIS reports continue to alternate tales of "bumper harvests despite the drought" (alas for the norm of truth!) with ominous references to "a drifting away of the labor force" and to "fear" and "passive pessimism" among the "cadres and masses"—transparently signifying hopelessness in the face of famine.

The question is how much can be done in the present crisis. The Teng regime must contend with major calamity in conditions of wretched backwardness and the material and psychological damage bequeathed by two decades of erratic Maoist rule. Even if food were now sufficient, roads and transport would be inadequate to the task of distributing it. Although priority is necessarily given to agriculture in many important respects, such as the apportionment of electric power, the competing crisis in industry generates counterdemands. Foreign Trade Minister Li Ch'iang, in a talk to Hong Kong businessmen on December 15, 1978, for example, mentioned that "40 to 50% of our railway facilities are devoted to the transportation of coal." Similarly in foreign trade the urgent need for importing Western technology competes with the equally urgent need to procure wheat in sufficient quantity to prevent widespread starvation.

A *People's Daily* editorial of December 4, 1978, further declares that, for the sake of modernization, exports will have to be expanded, despite internal shortages. "[T]here is no other way but to squeeze ourselves a bit. Particularly in the case of those commodities which are not essential to the people's livelihood [does China have any?], we must make a determined effort to cut domestic consumption and make them available for export....The present 'squeeze' and 'pinch' are precisely for the sake of a 'more abundant' and 'better' future" (quotation marks in the original as translated by FBIS).

Food is scarcely a nonessential commodity, of course, but one can only wonder to what extent the quest for pie in the sky will affect the present realities of coping with hunger below. One's mind wanders somehow uneasily to the new luxury hotels planned for the tourist route, providing Coca Cola and "adventures in eating" for a stream of foreign sightseers who will be happy or dissatisfied, according to their humor, and will on their return more often than not inform any compatriot willing to listen: "...but, at least, there are no beggars in China."