

New data are rapidly discrediting the Chinese "achievement" in overcoming malnutrition

Hunger in China: The Failure of a System?

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Why have many economists missed the fact of persistent malnutrition, hunger, and famine in the People's Republic of China? The fault is certainly not in their expertise (remarkably sophisticated in application, given the dubious nature of the data available) but in their interpretive comments and conclusions, which often seem gratuitous, deriving neither from estimates of per capita grain consumption nor from any visible basis in fact. The 1978 congressional report, *Chinese Economy Post-Mao*, is illustrative. In their contributed article on Chinese agriculture two specialists assert that "because of the Government's assurance of cheap basic rations, virtually the entire Chinese population is assured of minimum subsistence in even the worst crop years. In this respect, consumption can be said to have greatly improved over the past...." Yet, earlier in the article the authors had stated: "Grain production per capita has been just at the subsistence level for centuries and it remains there today. Chinese agriculture has been vulnerable to frequent natural disasters and fluctuations in output, *which in the past have often led to localized famine* [italics ours]. Unequal distribution of production and agricultural income persist despite the efforts of the government to reduce these inequalities in the countryside."

The authors assume the fact of guaranteed minimal subsistence; they do not demonstrate it. Since average per capita grain consumption implies a range, the population that falls into the lower range—in China this means millions of people—must live below the level of minimal subsistence. The authors have no difficulty applying such elementary statistics to centuries of Chinese history. After 1949, however, mathematics yields to magic and nonexistent food is rationed in the abstract to Chinese consumers.

If the same conditions now obtain in China that led to "localized famine" in the past, is it not possible that there have been famines since 1949?

This possibility deserves, at the very least, investigation. The increased volume of direct information from

China and the extraordinary candor of the official media, especially within the last year, provide many new clues to the real condition of Chinese agriculture and the peasants' livelihood. Indeed, past and present are often illuminated at once. For example, the *People's Daily* (*PD*) of November 26, 1978, undermines the myth of "improved" consumption "over the past" for much of the Huang T'u Plateau, an area covering 200,000 square kilometers across six northwestern provinces. "What is particularly noteworthy," the *PD* article states, "is that in many areas the production level and living standard of the masses to the present are lower than those of pre-liberation days or the time of the war of resistance against Japan." The reason: serious erosion caused by the destruction of forest and pasture land, in order to expand grain production. Climatic change resulted. "[The] desert encroached southward, rainfall decreased, weather became unpredictable. The frost season became variable; it became extremely difficult to choose the right crops and varieties for planting. In the region...production conditions had [once] been fairly good; construction measures [dikes, etc.] had required little effort. Since the massive losses of water and land, it so happens that, whenever there is a rainstorm, land and dikes are washed away and irreparably lost. Basic construction on the farm land has to be undertaken every year and collapses every year, so that reconstruction is perennial, requiring enormous investment of labor and capital with little result."

In 57 per cent of the counties in the Huang T'u Plateau, it is revealed, the peasants' average annual income is less than 50 yuan. In Kuyuan County of Ninghsia Province, where individual grain production fell from about 820 catties in 1949 to 380 catties in 1977, the annual income is only 29 yuan!

According to a New China News Agency (NCNA) report of March 20, 1979, land in the loess soil (*huang t'u*) region is still being "blindly reclaimed" and farmed to very low yields. "The poorer one becomes, the more land one reclaims, and the more land one reclaims, the poorer one becomes," concludes NCNA.

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What happens when such an impoverished area suffers prolonged drought? The official Chinese media reveal that the drought of 1977-78 persisted into early 1979 in fourteen provinces. The

evidence of reports from December, 1978, through January and February, 1979, is that one of these provinces, Inner Mongolia, which lies within the Huang T'u Plateau, was in the throes of famine last winter. The reports refer repeatedly to "considerable problems with livelihood" (a euphemism for hunger) in "disaster-afflicted areas" and the need for "relief work" and assistance toward "self-support" (an indication that relief is meager). According to a monitored broadcast from Inner Mongolia (January 26, 1979), the regional party committee states flatly: "It has been 30 years since our People's Republic was founded, but the grain problem still remains unresolved." On February 23, 1979, the words of the first party secretary were broadcast: "The present adversities are an overall exposure of past problems. For this reason we should attach importance to adversity relief work....Leading comrades in adversity-afflicted areas should visit commune members' households and show concern for them instead of reviewing how the work is done from their offices...." A broadcast of January 23, 1979, reported that a "comfort group" of high-ranking cadre members was dispatched to disaster areas in Inner Mongolia, in order to "express sympathy" for some communes and brigades. The sending of a comfort group is a clear sign of major disaster. Although such a group administers token relief to the afflicted population—in this case "some grain, meat, cotton cloth and coal"—its main purpose is to raise morale—on this occasion, to encourage people "to solve difficulties with their own efforts."

Inner Mongolia was not the only region in distress. Hupei Provincial Radio on December 10, 1978, reported disaster in Tungshan County, because of "severe drought." According to this report, "arrangements now made insure that the peasants' rations, while slightly lower than last year, are adequate for their needs." However, on March 3, 1979, three months later, the *Hupei Daily* acknowledged that "at present, the masses in a small number of drought-afflicted areas have encountered some difficulties with their livelihood [i.e., are lacking food]."

For some reason the usual euphemisms were dispensed with in a March 3, 1979, Yunnan broadcast about the continuing drought in that province. A line quoted from an "urgent circular" recently issued by the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee read: "It is necessary to pay attention to the possible occurrence of spring famine and summer famine in some areas." The once grain-rich province of Szechuan was struck by the massive drought of 1977-78, even as it was recovering from the famine of 1976—a famine acknowledged by the writer Han Suyin during a September, 1977, interview with Teng Hsiao-p'ing. A *Ming Pao Daily* (Hong Kong) feature article of January 19, 1979, includes the following paragraph on Szechuan: "In 1976 there was harvest failure in Szechuan and the peasants had not enough food with which to moisten their mouths. A great number of girls were sold to Heilungkiang for a sale price of only 200 catties worth of national grain coupons. These coupons could be mailed back to Szechuan to support the livelihood of the girls' parents. Northern Heilungkiang is a place of employment for

ex-convicts who have completed their prison terms. Many of them are single and so these girls became their wives...."

In the May, 1979, issue of the Peking-connected Hong Kong monthly *Tung Hsiang*, similar details appeared on the recent "unprecedented famine" in Szechuan: "In Chengtu City [Szechuan] beggars asking food were everywhere visible. The selling of sons or daughters occasionally took place. A friend who went to Chengtu at the time told me [*Tung Hsiang* correspondent Ying Tzu] that he personally saw a woman trying to sell her own son for a few tens of grain coupons. He said that it may have been an isolated case, since under the present social system in China no one wants to buy a child to take home. However, some goodhearted people gave the woman a few grain coupons anyway. It was said that in the villages there were peasants who sold their own daughters as wives to people outside the province. During the Cultural Revolution [1966-76] the incidence of buying and selling of brides rose abnormally. In most provinces of China, when a man wanted to marry, he had to present many marriage gifts to the girl's family. Young village men of inferior financial status, therefore, could not afford to marry. [However], with the advent of famine in Szechuan, some girls left their home areas to wed men who could not otherwise have afforded marriage. Marriage gifts [then] were reduced to about 100 catties' worth of grain coupons. The girls' parents got the coupons, while the girls themselves could anticipate more or less regular meals outside the province. At the time this practice was prevalent, it is said, bride-peddlers appeared, who specialized in taking Szechuan girls outside the province to find husbands. They would then charge a sum of money to the man's side."

1 tael = 1.76 ounces in current market system

1 catty = 1.1 pounds

1 tan = 100 catties

1 mou = about 1/6 acre

1 yuan (JMP) = US\$.66 1/2: currently

The credibility of such reports is enhanced by the following excerpt from an interview with K'ang K'e-ch'ing, chairwoman of the National Women's Union, which appeared in the *PD*, December 27, 1978: "Over the last decade or more...not only has our nation's economy come to the brink of collapse, but social morality was also greatly corrupted, to such an extent that there was restoration of the buying and selling of brides or [of such practice] in disguise....In our country...there is a great difference between the city and countryside...between well-to-do villages and relatively poor villages....In places where production levels and living standards are low, the buying and selling of brides or [this practice in disguise] are not easy to eliminate completely...."

Evidently, Szechuan has also not forgotten the famine during the "three years of difficulties" following the Great Leap Forward of 1958—a period to which some

China scholars apply their own euphemism, "food shortages." In the *PD* of February 25, 1979, a reporter for the newspaper related his recent visit to currently thriving Shihfang County in Szechuan, where he interviewed a county secretary, "Old Chou," on local agricultural history. Old Chou recalled the aftermath of the Great Leap: "It was really a nightmare, with hunger, serious diseases, unnatural deaths...." The reporter commented: "He was still a bit frightened when he was talking about the period of the three years of difficulties."

It should be noted that the full story of the "three years of difficulties" is still untold. Interestingly, a vignette from this period appeared in the January, 1979, issue of *Tung Hsiang* which, along with a similar new Hong Kong monthly *Cheng Ming*, is described in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* as seeming "to have excellent access to information about the Chinese political scene and the confidence to publish it." The vignette turns up in a series of interviews by its correspondent with several young people in Peking. One of those interviewed, a young man of twenty-six, traced his first "awakening" to Chinese realities to the end of 1968, when he joined a production brigade in Anhui Province: "Well, the first day in the village I had the opportunity to take a 'moving lesson in class education,'" he began, sarcastically. "The production team organized a 'recall-past-bitterness meeting' for us with old poor peasants. One poor peasant, after talking about the bitter old days under the Japanese, went on to say, 'Later on for quite a while, life was also very hard. Day in and day out you were so hungry that you felt your chest was about to touch your back! But we had to keep on working. Half the people left the village to escape famine [*t'ao huang*] and many of those who didn't flee starved to death. My daughter was among them. If she were alive today, she would be 14 now. In those days, we weren't allowed one single grain at home; we were only allowed to go to the mess hall to swallow down two bowls of congee....' I was a little puzzled as I heard him: how come there were 'mess halls' before liberation? Then I suddenly realized he was recalling the 'bitterness' of the Great Leap Forward days! We had sung the song 'Long Live Three Red Flags' since we were children. Now this first real lesson in the village taught me that everything in that song was a big lie!..."

It would seem just possible on the basis of this sampling of most recent data that the horror of "localized famine" may not have been banished from the People's Republic of China, but only from the writings of most foreign sinologists.

An impoverished peasantry has no defense against natural disaster. The internal Chinese press now frankly and repeatedly acknowledges this impoverishment. For example, a *PD* editorial of January 28, 1979, states, with implicit reference to the years following 1958: "...the interests of the peasants were infringed upon and no attention was paid to their material well-being; demanding hands stretched into production teams from all sides, the foundation of agriculture was undermined all around and the burden on the peasants was constantly increasing. Thus, the countryside has been impoverished and in

some places the peasants lead a very hard life...."

Teng Hsiao-p'ing's economic theorist, Hu Ch'iao-mu, asserted (*PD*, October 6, 1978) that this "hard life" is experienced by peasants generally, "except in some better areas." A Chinese taxi driver put it a little differently to a correspondent of Agence France-Presse (AFP) in Peking (December 27, 1978): "...Here in the capital things are all right, but in the countryside it's awful. The peasants are getting poorer and poorer...."

It is even more important now to consider seriously *all* the data on hand, because of recent disclosures of statistical falsification in China, which undermine further the reliability of the figures upon which foreign estimates of Chinese agricultural production and consumption are based.

One manner of falsification, involving the practice of using so-called "helping-out land" (*pang mang t'ien*), is acknowledged by the State Bureau of Statistics to be a "general condition" (*PD*, January 5, 1979). In the same issue of the newspaper three letters appear, illustrating and criticizing this "trick" method of calculating local grain production. One of these letters, from Hopei Province, explains clearly the practice of *pang mang t'ien*: "...Grain production...means grain cultivation per *mou*, but some units do not calculate this way. According to our investigation, some counties, communes, and teams even include within the production total grain cultivated on river banks, land under trees, hilly lands, odd patches of land, newly opened virgin land, and even on private plots belonging to commune members. When it is time to calculate grain production per *mou*, they simply leave out [of the calculations] the above-mentioned lands and divide only by the number of *mou* reported in the past. In this way, [calculated] grain production per *mou* naturally surpasses the actual production per *mou*...."

The damage done by the use of *pang mang t'ien* both to production statistics and state planning is obvious. In one production brigade in Kiangsu Province the difference in per *mou* wheat output in 1978, for example, amounted to 280 catties (*PD*, January 13, 1979).

A second method of statistical falsification is deliberately to exaggerate output. For example, on March 7, 1979, NCNA disclosed that in 1973 Hsiyang County, Shansi Province, had thus falsely reported an excess of 70 million catties of grain. In 1976, according to the *PD* of January 20, 1979, total grain production in Hsiao County, Anhui Province, was likewise inflated from 620 million catties to 820 million catties.

Is it merely coincidence that the aforementioned Peking youth interviewed in the January, 1979, issue of *Tung Hsiang* commented: "...The rural cadres [in Anhui] behaved like emperors, throwing their weight around and riding on the heads of the peasants. For their personal gain, they took away *k'ou liang* [the individual grain allotment] from commune members in order to bolster production figures of fictitious bumper harvests, leaving the peasants starving...."

Consider also in this context the words of a *PD* editorial of January 28, 1979: "...[Some people in high places]...for the sake of their individual records and positions, falsify or exaggerate work reports, make

excessive grain purchases from the peasants and cause serious difficulties in people's livelihood...." It would be sad irony, indeed, if the inflated statistics that some foreign scholars utilize as proof of China's "achievement" in solving the food grain problem have, on the contrary, actually aggravated hunger for the Chinese.

It should not be imagined that exposure of statistical fraudulence means instant rectification. A long essay in the *PD*, April 20, 1979, disclosed that in many places statistics continue to "serve politics" and "do not reflect economic reality." Uniform statistical procedures and criteria are still lacking, and each region and department follows its own rules. A letter to the *PD*, May 7, 1979, said of statistical tables: "30 per cent is statistics, 70 per cent—guesswork."

A *PD* article of January 12, 1979, noted that state supervisors are always inclined to overestimate the harvest, while local units try to underestimate it. Usually, the former win out. It is no easy matter to deceive the "above," a clever, literate peasant from Kwangtung Province explained to us in great detail during an interview in 1973. The commune-level cadre members who were generally sent into the production teams to estimate the yield were experienced and extremely accurate. The ways in which a few production teams sometimes managed petty deception—referred to in his county as *man ch'an szu fen* (cheat about production and privately divide up)—involved, instead, collusion or various tricks in the actual weighing out of the *k'ou liang*. Thus, the unhusked rice might be weighed in "yard" catties (*ma chin*), used in Hong Kong, instead of in "market" catties (*shih chin*), which equal .8 "yard" catties; or an extra weight might be sneaked onto the simple balance scale.

The same peasant's impression that both the grain tax (*kung liang*) and the amount of "surplus" grain (*yü liang*) compulsorily sold to the state at a low fixed price increased according to the harvest has recently been substantiated. A major article in *Kuang Ming Daily*, December 30, 1978, disclosed that, although, according to policy, the amount of grain delivered in tax and sale should be pre-fixed for five years, "what the peasants experience is different. If output grows, the amount to be delivered to the State grows also." Small wonder that some disgruntled villagers in the Kwangtung peasant's commune referred to the Party as the "big landlord."

Other recent disclosures may also significantly affect current estimates of actual food consumption. A number of articles in the *PD* elaborate upon a problem reminiscent of chronic difficulties in the Soviet Union: the loss or spoilage of large quantities of certain food products because of inadequate storage, processing, and transport. Lack of refrigeration—another ramification of China's continuing electric power crisis—is an especially serious deficiency.

In the huge province of Szechuan, for example, with a population of about 100 million, "refrigeration capacity is only about 50,000 [metric] tons. None of the local retail stores has a single electric refrigerator....[Although] Szechuan breeds a lot of fish...because of lack of refrigeration...last year the purchase of fresh fish [by

purchasing agents] in the entire province amounted to only 3% of the entire purchase of [supplemental?] food products. In the Ah Pa cattle range, there are many cattle and sheep. However, as a result of insufficient refrigeration equipment, the livestock cannot be slaughtered in the fall, when they are fattened. Slaughter has to await winter, when the temperature falls—by which time the livestock has lost much of its flesh and fat. In this way meat products from cattle and sheep are reduced by 15-20%....In the last three years, Ah Pa and two other autonomous areas suffered an annual loss of beef and lamb amounting to 2,000 tons, equivalent to twice the amount of meat sales in Chengtu City this year..." (*PD*, November 2, 1978). In the area of Chou Shan Island (Chekiang Province) only 20 per cent of the approximately one thousand motorized fishing boats have refrigeration. As a result, large quantities of fish rot before they even reach port. "In summer and winter, fresh fish spoils within an hour or two and thus must be dumped back into the sea" (*PD*, January 2, 1979).

Insufficient transport and the distance of processing plants from production sites also cause a disparity between food produced and food consumed. The *PD* of December 15, 1978, reports annual fruit production in the country as almost 100 million *tan*. "During every fall harvest season, fruit piles up like mountains in many areas. However, the processing facilities for canning fruit and juice are all in the cities....Thus great quantities of fruit that cannot be transported in time to the city are left to rot. Every year the fruit thus wasted amounts to 10% of the total purchase...."

It would appear, then, that one must be even less certain than before, on the basis of statistical data alone, about the daily caloric consumption of the Chinese populace, and especially of the peasantry. In the earlier mentioned congressional report, an expert on "human energetics" in China estimates for the year 1974 an "average daily per capita consumption" of "no less than 2,090 kcal and as much as 2,225 kcal." In view, however, of the hard labor indulged in by "at least half" the rural population, this estimate "would imply a slight national food energy deficit of about 5 percent." "Such a deficit," he adds, "would not be a sign of nationwide chronic malnutrition; rather it would indicate the existence of regional disparities—the areas where the people are consuming more than their essential energetic balance requirements and the regions where caloric intake is, at best, sufficient to cover the basic metabolic and work needs but where recurrent food shortages are not compatible with vigorous and healthy life...." (It is tortuous business to concede even regional malnutrition without mentioning the word.)

And what if the peasantry, whose need for food energy may be greatest, are in fact getting the least? The desperate peasants who demonstrated in Peking during the winter of 1979 demanded food, clothing, and equality. Yet these were not the people currently noticed by many travelers to Chinese cities, destitute beggars in flight from disaster (*t'ao huang*), who haunt small eateries, where they snatch leftovers from plates. One of last winter's demonstra-

tors, an elderly peasant from Kiangsu Province, told AFP in Peking (January 14, 1979): "We don't have enough to eat....We only have one pound [probably one catty] of rice per person a day or a pound of *mant'ou* (rolls), not enough vegetables and sometimes a little pork."

The mention of insufficient vegetables is evidently not an exaggeration. "Commune members even have trouble getting enough vegetables to eat," the PD of November 30, 1978, stated, linking such scarcity with the continued proscription of private plots in many areas. "[Can]...reducing commune members to the state of having no vegetables to eat...be called socialism?" (It is not clear from the Kiangsu peasant's words, as translated by AFP, whether the daily catty of rice was husked [*mi*] or unhusked [*kutzu*]. Generally, peasants' rations are weighed as *kutzu*. The loss in husking, according to peasants we have interviewed, is 30-40 per cent.)

The Kiangsu peasant explained such food scarcity simply: "There are far too many of us on too little land." It is worth noting that, according to an NCNA report from Nanking (December 15, 1978), Kiangsu reaped "an all-round bumper harvest" in 1978 "despite...a serious drought rarely seen in history...." On the other hand the report indicates that a decrease of agricultural production in 1977 had made it necessary for the central authorities to authorize distribution of "2 billion catties of grain and 90 million yuan to subsidize the people's living." (Does this explain the *mant'ou*?)

A ration of 30 catties of rice per month, with little supplemental food, plainly seemed inadequate to the peasant demonstrator in Peking—as it did to Communist Party Deputy Chairman Li Hsien-nien, who reportedly stated as much at a Politburo conference three months later (*Ming Pao Daily*, Hong Kong, June 14, 1979). Yet in some areas of China such a ration is an ideal mean to be achieved. An NCNA report of March 18, 1979, reveals that in Min County, Kansu Province, the average peasant receives "only about 200 catties of food grain [a year] on the average," or 16.7 catties per month; whereas he "should get 360 catties of food grain."

Min County is typical of areas that are unsuitable for grain production and would benefit from development of other crops (in this case medicinal herbs), if the food grain shortage could be made up by the state. The problem—a major obstacle in practice to the equitable food distribution imagined by some foreign economists—is lack of transport. It is "difficult to transport this amount of food grain to Min County." In drought-ridden Anhui Province, as indicated in a January 20, 1979, NCNA report, the provincial party authorities have instructed that "we should do all we can to insure the masses' basic need (8 taels of grain per person daily)." This implies that many peasants in Anhui still aspire to receive even 24 catties of food grain a month. Is such a ration "sufficient to cover the basic metabolic and work needs" of a field laborer?

During the summer of 1977 in Hong Kong we interviewed a recent legal emigrant from Yunnan, a city student who had been assigned to work on a state farm. At each meal she received 4 taels of rice, topped with

either sweet potatoes or "hollow hearts" (*k'ung hsin ts'ai*—a vegetable). (The pork ration was 3 small pieces a month per person.) She and her co-workers usually lunched at 12 noon. By 3 P.M. "we were so hungry that we would dig up some cassava to eat from the fields. We couldn't buy biscuits, because our State farm was in a mountainous area. The only way to fill your stomach was to eat cassava." Cassava can be poisonous uncooked. Nevertheless, our respondent found it possible to eat the "core" raw, if it was "milky-white" in color.

A peasant from Kwangtung Province, whom we interviewed in the winter of 1973-74, received a monthly *k'ou liang* of 30 catties of unhusked rice "at best," 15-17 catties "at worst," within the preceding few years. His oil ration was 2 catties a year. He had some pork or fowl during a few important Chinese festivals; otherwise rarely. The mainstay of his diet was rice porridge, with either sweet potatoes or cooked lettuce (a vegetable grown on his private plot). Because of the lack of meat and fat, he pointed out, the *quantity* of "staple food" was never enough: "I could eat almost 10 catties of sweet potatoes at one meal!" "Actually, in our place eating sweet potatoes was considered quite terrible," a woman from another Kwangtung commune told us in 1973, "because you can't get full. You soon get hungry again after hard work." Her *k'ou liang* was, on the average, about 30 catties of unhusked rice a month.

The bookkeeper of a production team in Chekiang Province, interviewed in 1973, said that in a "normal year, when there was no famine or crop loss," an able-bodied adult peasant got about 360 catties of unhusked rice a year, an average of 30 catties monthly. He considered it not enough to sustain a man. "You had to buy on the black market or eat wild plants." (Private plots in his production team were small—a half *fen* per person [10 *fen* = 1 *mou*].) The black market price for rice in Chekiang at that time was 1 yuan for 3 catties or 33 yuan per *tan*. (The state price for surplus grain was 9.80 yuan per *tan*.)

A meticulous peasant from Fukien gave us the precise breakdown for his *k'ou liang* during 1970 and 1971. In 1970 for each month of the summer season (July 15 to November 15) his allotment was 35 catties; during the winter season (November 15 to July 15) it was 20 catties per month. In 1971 the monthly allotment was 28 catties during the summer season; 18 catties during the winter season.

The allotment was not entirely in unhusked rice, he pointed out. "Some sweet potatoes were mixed in," at a ratio of 6 catties of sweet potatoes to 1 catty of unhusked rice. The maximal *k'ou liang* in his production team was usually 35 catties, "but the *most I ever* got in any year was 45 catties, still not enough! Forty-five catties of *rice [mi]* would do, yes, but not 45 catties of unhusked rice [*kutzu*]."

His basic diet was rice porridge with sweet potatoes. "I had to make the rice ration last 30 days," he said, "so for lunch I made the meal liquidy—one-fourth rice and three-fourths sweet potatoes." He supplemented his diet with vegetables from his private plot, which measured 4 *fen*. Occasionally, he had a lick of fermented bean or fish paste with his meal or some tiny black river "clams."

Where do such peasants fall on the statistical range? Undoubtedly, there are the “few better areas” mentioned by Hu Ch’iao-mu. For example, a refugee who fled Kwangtung Province in 1977 mentioned a “famous” commune near Chiangmen; 98 kilometers from Canton, where the *k’ou liang* was normally 80 catties of unhusked rice. On the other hand in 1976 the same refugee discovered in a detention house in Shaokuan (northern Kwangtung), where he was confined after an unsuccessful escape attempt, peasant beggars from Szechuan and Hupei. In Szechuan, he learned, hungry peasants were eating leaves of papaya and plantain. Legal emigrants from Hunan Province in 1978 described a well-to-do suburban commune, where—despite the previous policies of the “Gang of Four”—peasants engaged in sideline trades, concentrated on nonstaple produce for urban sale, and actually bought their grain rations in state shops.

Some peasants from the Foochow area in Fukien, poor as they were, compared themselves favorably with peasants of northern Kiangsu and Shantung—and especially with Anhui peasants, whom they often saw begging in their province. “When I was with the People’s Liberation Army [in the late Sixties] in Amoy [Fukien Province],” the bookkeeper from Chekiang said, “most of the beggars were from Anhui. Many people starved to death in Anhui, I heard.”

The situation in Anhui appears to have changed little over the years. On May 31, 1979, AFP reported from Peking that “a fairly high number of peasants from...Anhui had arrived in the Kiangsu [provincial] capital [of Nanking], armed with permits enabling them to beg, because of the difficulties being undergone in their province following an exceptionally severe drought last year.” This dispatch is unusual in alluding to a practice previously described only by Chinese emigrants—periodic begging expeditions with the written permission of the commune authorities. (See, for example, “The Other China”—Hunger: Part II, *Worldview*, June, 1976.)

The Teng Hsiao-p’ing regime is commendably looking straight at the misery of Chinese peasant life. “Grain is insufficient and 100 million people throughout the country do not have enough food,” Li Hsien-nien reportedly stated in April, 1979. (*Cheng Ming*, which follows the Teng line in Hong Kong, referred in its May, 1979, issue to “200 million peasants...in a state of semistarvation” during the cultural revolutionary decade.) Teng’s men have also made it clear that the peasants’ impoverishment was intensified by exploitation under the commune system.

In 1972 an uneducated peasant-speculator from Fukien told us, “The whole thing [the commune system] was just a better way for the government to get [the peasants’] rice.” The March, 1979, issue of *Cheng Ming* makes the same point more elaborately: “The organizational form of integrating politics and economics means concentrating the Party, governmental and financial powers in the countryside in the [party] secretary of the people’s commune. It was in essence a new trick for exercising feudal patriarchal rule....”

Less sensationally the *PD* on January 24, 1979, deplored the “premature” transition to communism and called for an end to “indiscriminate requisition” and the “harassment of the peasants.” The internal media fall short of the startling conclusion expressed in *Cheng Ming*: “It is imperative that political power be separated from the people’s commune....The organizational form of the people’s commune is detrimental to speeding up the realization of agricultural modernization and it has become a conspicuous obstacle.” Instead, the central authorities seem for the moment to be trying to have their cake and eat it, too. While retaining the hierarchical three-tier structure of the commune (commune, production brigade, production team), they grant the “right of self-determination” to the basic unit, the production team.

Unfortunately, the inherent contradictions of the new policy have created a dilemma for local leadership, which may temporarily, at least, disorganize agricultural production. It is not only that the local cadres, chastened by past political experience, dare not go “Right,” thinking the “Left” may return—or, as they say in Inner Mongolia, are “still afraid of the wolf in front and the tiger behind”; they are hard put in practice to distinguish between “correct orders” and “blind commandism”—to determine where party leadership ends and “self-determination” begins. Nor have “the masses” been helpful. For example, on April 14, 1979, Shensi Radio reported that “some places have stressed democracy and freedom in isolation from the legal system [?] and discipline. Certain people have failed to obey correct orders and have even beaten up the cadres.”

Other people, indeed, go further. The Canton *Nanfeng Daily* of March 1, 1979, admonishes that “it is necessary to get rid of the one-sided viewpoint” that, “as soon as respecting the production teams’ right of self-determination is mentioned, it is unnecessary to have Party leadership.” In such unsettling circumstances Party Central nevertheless expects the local cadres—whose chief qualification for leadership, in many cases, has been blind obedience to the “above”—to show initiative and flexibility in applying ambiguous guidelines to the local scene. Small wonder that many cadres have “let things go their own way without taking any action” (*Hunan Daily*, March 27, 1979).

The result has been a breakdown of authority in many communes. During March and April, 1979, the internal media reported actual or threatened disintegration of production teams within nine provinces across China. In some places peasants have subdivided the land among individual households. This spontaneous popular move to disband the production teams is strong evidence of peasants’ disaffection from the commune system and of its failure to satisfy their basic needs. The Chinese countryside at present is in troubled transition. The media voices are resolutely optimistic about increasing agricultural production, while admitting that progress “cannot be rapidly realized for the time being.” But recently promulgated draconian measures for population reduction—exerting pressure toward a “one-child family”—suggest that the central authorities have begun to take a dim view of the future. VV