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PROJECT

Coping Mechanisms and Food Insecurity: A Historical Approach to Health In Extremis

For my project on a social history of everyday health and food practices in twentieth-century China, I will use both archival materials and extensive oral history to begin to examine what has been an obvious lacuna in the study of health and illness in modern East Asia: how food customs and food practices intersect with state public health goals, as well as with cultural and religious practices of food preparation and consumption. The wide disparity of food cultures throughout China and the changing emphases on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and allopathic medicine with their very different approaches to food consumption and healing/illness all point to the centrality of this approach in examining basic questions of the culture of health in modern China. My project will shift focus from dry statistics to lived experience, most poignantly for women and children. As a case study, I will examine the Great Leap Forward famine (1958-1962) and the survival strategies of rural populations across different regions of China.

The massive mortality caused by famines during the Great Leap Forward and its aftermath has not gone unnoticed. Yet there is little information from the ground up on how rural populations in China coped with the famine - designated the worst man-made disaster in human history. Intentionally eliciting family knowledge and healing/nutritional practices, I will use the Chinese obsession with food talk, their remedies, and their recipes to explore and record vivid accounts of survival strategies and ordinary people's, in particularly rural villagers', responses to state policies and political indoctrination during those difficult years - still referred to by those survivors as the "years of bitterness". In the late 1950s and '60s, rural villagers in China were forced to sacrifice their homes/possessions to build socialist collectives. Today many of the survivors of the famine have been left without homes, health care, and sometimes food, despite an economic boom in the cities. My question is quite simple: to what extent does the devastation of the famine continue to structure everyday life in the countryside? How does the lived experience of coping with famine structure today's lived experience of social inequality?

Recommended Reading

Dikötter, Frank, Xun Zhou, and Lars Laamann. *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China*. London: Hurst; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Paperback, London: Hurst, 2016.

Zhou, Xun. *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958-1962: An Oral History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

-. *The People's Health: Health Intervention and Delivery in Mao's China, 1949-1983*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020.

Coping Mechanisms and Everyday Survival Tactics: The Great Leap Forward Famine, a Case Study

The massive mortality caused by the Great Leap Forward famine of 1958-1962 in China and its aftermath have not gone unnoticed. Readers are spoiled for choice among a number of studies that have provided useful analysis of the policy decisions, economic trends, and demographic consequences of the famine. Chinese and Western journalists have also documented tales of death and dying. Most these studies focus on how the one-party state failed to provide for, deprived, or stole from the hungry and dying. They afford little insight into life as experienced on the ground. The image they convey is of a strictly disciplined communist society in which errors at the top caused the entire machinery to grind to a halt. In contrast, the portrait that emerges from my and other researchers' extensive oral interviews (Thaxton 2008, Gao 2016) and from documents unearthed from party archives (Yang 2008, Dikötter 2010, Zhou 2011) is one of a society in delinquency, as individuals resorted to every means available to get by as well as they could. This is far removed from the stereotype of obedient and devoted comrades blindly following orders.

For my current study, I examine "matters of life and death" beyond the statistics by shifting the focus away from the debate on how many people died to the experience of living, of surviving. Analyzing oral interviews that others and I collected from survivors and mostly the grandchildren of survivors, I intend to show the complexity of lived practice, which weaves together social, political, and historical realities and provides a counterpoint to histories written on the basis of solely textual evidence.

As with all major modern famines, the Great Leap Forward famine in China consisted of a conflicting set of complex and fragmented stories. Rather than forcing these stories into a single narrative that professes to comprehend and explain the sheer scale of the tragedy, the multi-layered range of human behavior, the social chaos, and the instigating policies, my aim is to break through conventional theorizing and confront the reader directly with the moral compromises, the arbitrary and brutal choices that people made in their unceasing struggle to survive. The need for this seems evident, because the trauma of famine and survival has structured Chinese cultural memory and thus continues to structure everyday life in China today.