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A Study of Unnatural Deaths During the Difficult Three Year Period in China, 1959–1961

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ABSTRACT: The popular view that the number of unnatural deaths in China during the Difficult Three Year Period (1959–1961) amounted to some 30 million is false, as shown by careful analysis. Taking the average death toll from 1955 to 1957 as the base number, and combining this with unreported deaths from 1953 to 1964 and subsequent corrections, it may be estimated that approximately four to five million people suffered unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period. These deaths had a complex series of causes. Starvation-caused deaths were the primary type, followed by weak disaster relief, and then by mistakes of local government in disaster relief. While the millions of unnatural deaths represent a lesson that needs to be reflected upon, the efforts which the Chinese government undertook to deal with the famine, as well as the results achieved, should not be forgotten.

I. INTRODUCTION

HOW MANY PEOPLE SUFFERED UNNATURAL DEATHS in China during the Difficult Three Year Period, 1959–1961, and the real causes of these deaths, have long been controversial questions that have attracted much attention in academia, in both China and abroad. The issue deserves systematic investigation, given that it has often been used to invoke historical nihilism — a tendency to repudiate the history of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese Revolution — and has led to questioning of the governing of the CPC, and even of its very legitimacy.

Using a range of sources and methods, domestic and foreign scholars have come to very different conclusions, with figures varying from

hundreds of thousands to tens of millions. Estimates by foreign scholars include the 26.8 million noted in a text by Ansley J. Coale (quoted in C. Li, 1997),¹ 8 million in L. R. Brown (1984, 255), 27 million in G. Calot (quoted in Kane, 1993, 100), 30 million in Ashton, Hill, Piazza and Zeitz (to 1984), and 30 million in Judith Banister (1987, 85). Other figures include 20–30 million in John King Fairbank (1989, 275), 10–20 million in Maurice Meisner (1992, 282), and 45 million in Frank Dikotter (quoted in Babb, 2011). It has even been estimated that the death toll reached 40.9 million in 1960 alone (Kane, 1993, 99–101).

Compared to foreign scholars, Chinese researchers have reached even more disparate conclusions. Scholars who count more than 30 million unnatural deaths include Lin Yifu with a figure of 30 million (1994, 17), Lin Yunhui with 30 million (2009), Li Chengrui with 30.297 million (2012), Cao Shuji with 32.5 million (2005), Yang Jisheng with 36 million (2009, 464), Mao Yushi with 36.34 million (2011), and Jin Hui with 40 million (1993). Those who have put the number of unnatural deaths at between 10 and 30 million include Li Minrong with a figure of 12.43 million (Li and Wan, 2013), Ge Jianxiong with 15.3 million (Ge, Hou, and Zhang, 1999, 121), Jiang Zhenghua with 17 million (Jiang and Li, 1988), Peng Xizhe with 23 million (1987), Li Ruojian with 15.3 million to 24.7 million (1998), and Cong Jin with 27 million (1989, 272). Estimates below 10 million include those of Yao Qiyuan and Song Xiaoli with a figure of 8.12 million (2011), Wang Xiaoning with 3–10 million (2013), Yang Songli with 3.5–4 million (2013, 317), and Sun Jingxian with 2.5 million (2013). Others, such as Chen Bihong and Zhang Hongzhi (quoted in Li and Shang, 2007) contend that the number of unnatural deaths did not amount to 30 million, 20 million, 10 million or even 1 million, and that the figure of 30 million for deaths from starvation is a complete fabrication based on nothing but rumors. Even though scholars cannot reach agreement on this issue, the view that the number of unnatural deaths was around 30 million remains dominant.

Some scholars come up with the figure of 30 million simply by referring in one-sided fashion to the statistical data for year-end population compiled by the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China (PRC). That is to say, their conclusion is based

1 The year range for nonlinear unnatural deaths in Ansley Coale is from 1958 to 1963. Li Chengrui (1997) argues at one point that Coale's research suffers from defects. Based on this research, Li maintains, the number of unnatural deaths should be put at 21.58 million rather than 26.8 million.

simply on the information displayed in Table 4 (p. 178), which puts the annual increase in registered population before 1960 at around 10 million, while the combined figures for 1960 and 1961 show a decrease in registered population of 13.48 million (National Bureau of Statistics 1983, 103). Also, Chapter 2 of *The Communist Party of the PRC*, published in 2011, states clearly that the total national population in 1960 was 10 million less than in the previous year (Party History Research Center of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2011, 563). Although this figure does not indicate the exact number of unnatural deaths during that period, it has been used as an important reference for the argument that the number of unnatural deaths was in the region of 30 million (C. Li, 2014). There are also scholars within China who spare no effort to prove that the correct figure for unnatural deaths was 30 million, thus helping to reinforce this view. Consequently, this figure — which in reality is merely an opinion — seems to have become accepted as fact without further discussion. As stated above, however, not everyone shares this view. Patnaik (2015) regards the assertion that the number of starvation deaths was 30 million as a huge lie. He also analyses the causes behind the falsehood. Recently, Chinese scholars² have also put forward strong arguments for rejecting the figure of 30 million unnatural deaths.

II. INVESTIGATION OF THE NUMBER OF UNNATURAL DEATHS DURING THE DIFFICULT THREE-YEAR PERIOD

2.1. *Review of Concepts Related to Unnatural Deaths, and Estimates of the Data*

2.1.1. *Definition and Reviews of the Concepts.* In the field of forensic pathology, unnatural deaths are those caused by external factors,

2 Sun Jingxian (2011) provides the first systematic analysis and explanation for the contradiction, seen in the *China Statistics Yearbook* prior to 1982, between the registered population increase and the natural population increase. Sun takes into account large-scale population movement, unreported movement, and makes a subsequent correction. This provides a new perspective for studies on the issue of unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period, and represents a milestone of great significance. Yang Songlin's 2013 book *The Truth Should Be Told — On the Deaths from Starvation of 30 Million People* contains powerful arguments for rejecting the figure of 30 million unnatural deaths, and represents the latest development in studies on this topic. Yao Qiyuan and Song Xiaoli (2011), Li Mingrong and Wan Kefeng (2013) and Wang Xiaoning (2013) have all put forward strong arguments against the figure of 30 million unnatural deaths.

including fire, drowning and other natural disasters, or deaths caused by work related injuries, medical accidents, traffic accidents, suicides, murders and other artificial factors. Natural deaths by contrast are those caused by internal health problems, such as diseases or aging. Unnatural deaths are not supposed to include those caused by starvation or famine, but most research on the unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period takes these two causes of death into account.

In discussing unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period, scholars both in China and abroad have considered the following additional concepts: the death toll; the population loss from famine; the shortfall in the number of births that results from famine; deaths from starvation; and other deaths caused by the famine. In compiling their estimates, some scholars cover only population loss; this can be as great as tens of millions, and is often misunderstood as the number of unnatural deaths or starvation deaths. It is therefore necessary to sort out the relationships among these concepts.

The death toll — that is, the deaths in each year of the Difficult Three Year Period — includes both natural and unnatural deaths. The population loss resulting from the famine includes deaths caused by the famine, the associated shortfall in births, and the results of emigration. The shortfall in the number of births refers to the number of people who would have been born except for the famine. The view of some scholars that the unnatural death toll during the Difficult Three Years should be equated with the death toll from starvation is not correct (Yang, 2013, 23). However, it is acceptable to interpret the unnatural death toll as the deaths caused by the famine, because the deaths caused by the famine includes both the death toll from starvation and deaths caused by famine-related diseases (National Bureau of Statistics and Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1996, 267).

2.1.2. *Estimated Figures.*

1) *Estimate of the Death Toll.* The relationship between the death rate, the year-start population and the year-end population as calculated by the National Bureau of Statistics can be used to estimate the death toll during each year of the Difficult Three Year Period. The formula used is: Annual death toll = (year-start population + year-end population) × death rate for that year/2. Based on the figures in Table 1, the total death toll during the Difficult Three Year Period was 36.08 million.

TABLE 1
Death Toll from 1955 to 1965

Year	Death Rate (per 1,000)	Year-start population (10,000s)	Year-end population (10,000s)	Mid-year population (10,000s)	Death Toll (10,000s)
1955	12.28	60266	61465	60866	747
1956	11.40	61465	62828	62147	708
1957	10.80	62828	64653	63741	688
1958	11.98	64653	65994	65324	783
1959	14.59	65994	67207	66601	972
1960	25.43	67207	66207	66707	1696
1961	14.24	66207	65859	66033	940
1962	10.02	65859	67295	66577	667
1963	10.04	67295	69172	68234	685
1964	11.50	69172	70499	69836	803
1965	9.50	70499	72538	71519	679

Note: Annual death toll = (year-start population + year-end population) × death rate for that year / 2.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (1983).

2) *Estimate of the Shortfall in Births.* Various scholars assign blame for the shortfall in births during the Difficult Three Year Period to the policies and systems of the time, and even to the intentions of the politicians then in charge. This represents a very biased approach. If any country at any time were to suffer from serious famine, epidemics, riots and wars, the birth rate would decrease due to lack of nutrients and the general instability of life. During the Difficult Three Year Period, grain production per capita was only 200 kilograms for three years in a row. Under such circumstances any system, with any policy and with any set of politicians in charge, would have had difficulty preventing the birth rate from decreasing. Birth and death, however, cannot be equated. During the Difficult Three Year Period many families avoided bearing children because of the hard living conditions, then resumed bearing children after the period ended. Many people in the relevant age group avoided marriage during the period concerned and for the reasons indicated, but immediately afterwards got married and began bearing children; the result was a peak in the birthrate (R. Li, 1998). This phenomenon is known as compensatory births, and after the Difficult Three Year Period these births probably

continued until 1965 or even later. As shown in Table 2, there were approximately 23.15 million fewer births in the years from 1959 to 1961. If compensatory births are taken into account, this figure is dramatically reduced. Consequently, using the shortfall in births to assign blame to the system, to its policies, and to the politicians in charge at the time clearly does not add up. Worse still, some scholars equate the shortfall in births with unnatural deaths or even with deaths from starvation. That is absolutely ridiculous.

3) *Estimate of Unnatural Deaths.* Unnatural deaths = total death toll – natural deaths. Two methods can be used to estimate the number of unnatural deaths. First, as shown in Table 1, the total death toll during the Difficult Three Year Period (36.08 million) minus the total death toll during the normal years, that is, 21.43 million deaths from 1955 to 1957, yields a figure for unnatural deaths of 14.65 million. Second, as shown in Table 3, if the average death rate from 1955 to 1957 is used as the normal death rate, then the estimated number of unnatural deaths from 1959 to 1961 comes to 13.17 million. To judge from the population data published by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of unnatural deaths was far lower than 30 million, no matter which method is used. Of course, these figures are not robust enough to refute the figure of 30 million unnatural deaths, since if we judge

TABLE 2
Estimate of the Shortfall in Births Caused by the Famine (1959–1961)

Year	Birth rate (per 1,000)	Birth rate increase/decrease (per 1,000)	Increase/decrease in births (10,000s)
1955–1957	32.84	—	—
1958	29.22	-3.62	-236
1959	24.78	-8.06	-537
1960	20.86	-11.98	-799
1961	18.02	-14.82	-979
1962	37.01	4.17	278
1963	43.37	10.53	719
1964	39.14	6.3	440
1965	37.88	5.04	363

Notes: 1. The birth rate increase/decrease refers to one-tenth of a percentage point of the average birth rate from 1955 to 1957, proportional to the changes in the birth rate. 2. Birth increase/decrease = mid-year population × the birth rate increase/decrease.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (1983)

TABLE 3
Estimate of Unnatural Deaths (1959–1961)

Year	Death Rate (per 1,000)	Excessive Death Rate (per 1000)	Unnatural Deaths (10,000s)
1955–1957	11.49	—	—
1958	11.98	0.49	32
1959	14.59	3.10	206
1960	25.43	13.94	930
1961	14.24	2.75	181

Note. The average death rate from 1955 to 1957 is taken as the base number. The excess death rate for each year = death rate for each year – the average death rate from 1955 to 1957. Unnatural deaths = mid-year population (see Table 1) × excess death rate.

Source. National Bureau of Statistics (1983)

from the decrease of year-end birth registrations during the Difficult Three Year Period as published by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number is supposedly over 30 million.

2.2. *Explanation and Re-Evaluation of the Differences in the Number of Unnatural Deaths*

2.2.1. *Explanation of the Differences in the Number of Unnatural Deaths.*

The differences in the estimates for unnatural deaths stated above cannot simply be ascribed to misrepresentation by the authorities. The National Bureau of Statistics data provides the most authoritative source; consequently, no research on unnatural deaths during this period can evade these differences and contradictions.

In demographic terms, the basic formula for calculating the number of unnatural deaths is: unnatural deaths = total death toll – natural deaths. Should the number of natural deaths remain the same, there is a positive correlation between unnatural deaths and the total death toll. The total death toll for the year, in turn, = total births for the year — (the year-end population of the year – the year-end population of the previous year), and should (the year-end population for the year – the year-end population for the previous year) remain the same, there is a positive correlation between the total death toll for the year and total births during the year. Data from a sampling survey of women and their marriages and child-bearing conducted by China's State Family Planning Commission show that actual births from 1953

TABLE 4
Population Increase in China from 1954 to 1961

Year	Year-end registered population (10,000)	Natural growth rate (per 1,000)	Natural population increase (10,000)	Increase in registered population (10,000)	Net Migration (10,000)
1954	60266	—	—	—	—
1955	61465	20.32	1237	1199	-38
1956	62828	20.50	1274	1363	89
1957	64653	23.23	1481	1825	344
1958	65994	17.24	1126	1341	215
1959	67207	10.19	679	1213	534
1960	66207	-4.57	-305	-1000	-695
1961	65859	3.78	250	-348	-598

Note. Increase in registered population = year-end registered population – year-start population (last year-end population); natural growth rate = birth rate – death rate; natural population increase = mid-year population × natural growth rate (mid-year population = (year-start population + year-end population)/2); net migration = increase in registered population – natural growth.

Source. National Bureau of Statistics (1983)

to 1964 were 50 million more than the relevant population statistics published by the authorities; consequently, some scholars outside China, such as Coale, Banister and Galot (quoted in C. Li, 1997), suggest that there were large numbers of unreported (unregistered) births between 1953 and 1964, and that the birth rate should accordingly be adjusted upwards. If the number of births is greater than the official data allows, the same must be true of the number of deaths. The above-noted scholars argue that there were large numbers of unreported (unregistered) deaths during this period, and come up with an estimated death rate approximately twice the figure published by the Chinese authorities.

Under the social circumstances of the time, however, the number of unreported births must have been very few, since during the period of the planned economy not having one's birth registered basically meant losing everything in one's life. Consequently, this speculation that large numbers of births went unreported does not accord with the actual situation.

Recently, Sun Jingxian and Yang Songlin have tried to explain these discrepancies by connecting the demographic data collected

from various sources with the social reality during the period under study. Their conclusions are much more convincing. Sun Jingxian suggests that the large decrease in registered births at the beginning of the 1960s was a result of non-reporting, double-reporting, or false reporting, and also of later corrections to these figures during a period when households were migrating in large numbers. Specifically, during the large-scale population shift from rural to urban areas between 1956 and 1959, some 11.44 million people double-reported their household registers, after which the duplications were cancelled sometime between 1960 and 1964. Then, when large numbers of people moved from urban to rural areas between 1960 and 1964, a total of 15.1 million people were without household registration. These two groups combined amounted to a reduction in registered household population of 26.54 million. This explains why registered household population decreased at an unnatural rate during this period, with the decline having nothing to do with deaths. The decline in year-end registered household population is therefore largely illusory; see also Yang (2013, 222–40). Consequently, the idea that 10 million or more people suffered unnatural deaths in China during this period is hardly convincing (Sun, 2011).

If the death toll is approached on the basis of the year-end registered household population and the increase in registered household population, great deviations inevitably result, whether for China or other countries. For example, if this method were used to calculate the death toll during the Great Depression in the United States, the figure for unnatural deaths during the 1930s would reach 67–170 million, which is quite absurd.³ A confidential CIA report of April 4th, 1961 devoted to the “great Chinese famine,” subsequently released to the public, stated clearly that there was in fact no great famine, but that in some provinces and regions people suffered from malnutrition, and that the Great Leap Forward led to population migration.⁴ This document provides strong evidence to refute the view that there were 30 million deaths from starvation or 30 million unnatural deaths. If

3 “The Death Toll from Starvation During the American Depression of the 1930s was 70 million to 200 million.” Tianya Forum. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1021381-1.shtml>. For original data, see the website of the US Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/national/totals/pre-1980/tables/popclockest.txt>

4 “Documents Declassified by CIA Authorities Deny 30 Million Deaths from Starvation.” <http://www.wyzxwk.com/Article/lishi/2014/10/330586.html>. For original text see http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001098172.pdf

tens of millions of people had been dying from unnatural causes in China during those years, that fact would not have escaped the CIA, which has always paid special attention to collecting detailed information on China.

2.2.2. *Re-Estimating the Number of Unnatural Deaths*

What would be an accurate estimate for the number of unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period? Coming up with an answer requires more rigorous methods. Given the figure of 36.08 million for the total death toll provided by the *China Statistics Yearbook*, a proper estimate can be made of the number of unnatural deaths, so long as the number of natural deaths is certain and the formula $\text{unnatural deaths} = \text{total mortality} - \text{natural deaths}$ is in place. The key methods are as follows:

Method 1. As set out in the previous paragraphs, if the total death toll of 21.43 million from 1955 to 1957 is taken as the base number for natural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period, then it can be calculated that the number of unnatural deaths was 14.64 million.

Method 2. If the average annual death toll of 7.14 million from 1955 to 1957 and the death toll of 6.67 million (see Table 1) in 1962 are used to work out the base numbers for linear deaths, then it can be calculated that these base numbers in the three years from 1959 to 1961 were 6.96 million, 6.87 million and 6.78 million respectively. In this way, it can be ascertained that the number of natural deaths during the Three Year Period was 20.61 million, while that of unnatural deaths was 15.47 million.⁵

Method 3. Using the average death toll of 7.14 million from 1955 to 1957 and of 7.18 million from 1962 to 1964 as the base numbers for calculating the linear increase from 1956 (the middle point of the three years leading up to the Difficult Three Year Period) to 1963 (the middle point of the three years following the Difficult Three Year Period), we can obtain the base points for linear deaths from 1959 to 1961, which would be 7.158 million, 7.164 million and 7.17 million, respectively. Natural deaths during the period then numbered 21.49 million, while unnatural deaths were 14.59 million.

5 Average death toll of 7.14 million from 1955–1957 – death toll of 6.67 million in 1962 = 470,000. With the death toll of 7.14 million in 1957 as the starting point, and a linear decline at an annual rate of 94,000 until 1962, the base point can be obtained for linear deaths from 1959 to 1961.

Nevertheless, scholars in China and abroad have identified a problem: it took only eight years for the death rate to drop from 2% at the beginning of the new China to 1.08%, which seems quite unbelievable. Certain scholars such as Yao Qiyuan, Song Xiaoli, Yang Songlin and Wang Zhaoguang, after investigating the death rates of other countries, especially in Asia, suggest that it usually took 20 to 30 years for death rates in those countries to fall from 2% to 1%. It is therefore suspected that there may have been large numbers of unreported deaths in the years immediately after the founding of the new China. Various scholars point out that such unreported deaths were inevitable in rural areas, and this has been confirmed by the national Census. The strongest proof is provided by the official population sampling survey of 1957, which concluded that the death rate was 0.859% in the cities and 1.343% in the counties (Yang, 1996, 1615); calculated on this basis, the death toll for the year was 8.35 million, with a death rate of 1.31%.⁶ This figure differs widely from the official data, which report a death toll of 6.88 million and a death rate of 1.08%. It can further be estimated that the rate of unreported deaths was $1.31\% / 1.08\% - 1 = 21.3\%$, which amounts to 1.47 million. Supposing that the death rate experienced a linear decline from 1952⁷ to 1957, the death toll and unreported deaths for each year from 1953 to 1957 can be calculated according to the related data as shown in Table 5.

In total, the number of unreported deaths from 1953 to 1957 was approximately 6.8 million, and there were undoubtedly more during the years until the second national census in 1964. However, no unreported deaths were revealed by the second national census. What happened to this section of the population, which in reality no longer existed? Yang Songlin concludes that the reporting of the millions of unreported deaths was completed during the implementation from 1958 to 1961 of the *Regulations on Household Registers*, a

6 The total population of China in 1957 was 646.53 million, with 69.02 million urban and 577.51 million rural. According to the survey, the death rate was 8.59‰ and 13.43‰ in cities and counties respectively, which means that the death toll was 590,000 in the cities, 7.76 million in the counties, and 8.35 million nationwide. Divided by the mid-year population of 637.41 million, this yields a death rate for the year of 1.31%.

7 The death toll and death rate for 1952 are both estimated figures, and are not based on registrations. In 1953 China's first-ever census took place, and at the same time the Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted dynamic research through a sampling survey that covered 30.18 million people nationwide. According to this research, China's birth rate was 3.7%, the death rate was 1.7%, and the natural growth rate was 2% (Lu and Zhai, 2009, 53). These results are consistent with the data in the *China Statistics Yearbook*.

TABLE 5
Estimate of the Death Toll and Unreported Deaths from 1952 to 1957

Year	Yearbook death rate (per 1,000)	Sampling death rate (per 1,000)	Rate of unreported deaths (per 1,000)	Yearbook death toll (10,000)	Sampling death toll (10,000)	Unreported deaths (10,000)
1952	17.00	17.00	0.00	967	967.0	0.0
1953	14.00	16.22	15.86	814	940.6	127.6
1954	13.18	15.44	17.15	785	914.2	129.2
1955	12.28	14.66	19.38	747	887.8	140.8
1956	11.40	13.88	21.75	708	841.4	133.4
1957	10.80	13.10	21.30	688	835.0	147.0
1953–1957 in total	—	—	—	3742	4419	678

Source: Yang (2013, 198)

rather complicated process. The *Regulations* began to be implemented in 1958, when the focus was on publicizing the measures, and when reporting on the missing deaths could not possibly have yet taken place. To the contrary, as shown by the linear decline in Table 5, there would be more than one million unreported deaths in 1958. The year 1959 was a special period, when the *Regulations on Household Registers* were actually implemented. However, regional differences during the implementation led to a small number — approximately 200,000 — of unreported deaths (Yang, 2013, 305) on the one hand, and a small number of corrections on the other. From 1960 to 1961 the household registration system was established and the task of correcting unreported deaths was completed; consequently, further unreported deaths were unlikely. In sum, cumulative unreported deaths from 1953 to 1959 amounted approximately to eight million,⁸ with the process of correction completed between 1959 and 1961. The total death toll from 1959 to 1961 is thus 36.28 million, which is the sum of the 36.08 million deaths recorded in the household registers (see Table 1) and

8 Specifically, $800 = 680 + 100 + 20$. This accords quite closely with the statement by Jiang Zhenghua (1988) that the inspection prior to the second national census discovered around eight million people who did not cancel their household registers as they should have done. Even though there were very few unreported deaths in 1962 and 1963, after the *Regulations* had come into effect, Yang Songlin still finds 300,000 missing deaths during these two years, 100,000 in 1962 and 200,000 in 1963. The adjusted death toll for 1962 was thus 6.77 million, and that for 1963 was 7.05 million. The present study supports this view.

the 200,000 unreported deaths during 1959. Since the process of correcting for the eight million unreported deaths was carried out during this period, the actual death toll for these three years should be 28.28 million (Yang, 2013, 299–371). Applying the formula unnatural deaths = death toll – natural deaths, and using the definite number for the actual deaths during the period (28.28 million), the number of unnatural deaths can be calculated provided that natural deaths during the period can be reasonably determined. Specific calculating methods are as follows:

Method 1. After adjustment for the missing deaths, the total death toll from 1955 to 1957 of 25.64 million (see Table 5) is taken as the base number. The number of unnatural deaths is then 2.64 million.

Method 2. The average death toll of 8.55 million from 1955 to 1957 and the death toll of 6.77 million (see Table 1) in 1962, both after the adjustment for missing deaths, are taken as the base numbers for linear deaths. With linear decline occurring from 1957 to 1962, the base numbers for linear deaths in the three years from 1959 to 1961 are 7.838 million, 7.482 million and 7.126 million respectively. The number of natural deaths during the period under discussion would then be 22.45 million, and the figure for unnatural deaths 5.83 million.

Method 3. The average death toll from 1955 to 1957 of 8.55 million after adjustment for missing deaths and the average death toll from 1962 to 1964 of 7.18 million are taken as the base numbers for linear deaths. With the linear decline from 1956 (the mid-point of the three years before the period under discussion) to 1963 (the mid-point of the three years following), the base numbers for linear deaths in the three years from 1959 to 1961 are 7.962 million, 7.766 million and 7.57 million respectively. The natural deaths during the period under discussion then amount to 23.30 million, with 4.98 million unnatural deaths.

Method 4. The average death toll from 1955 to 1957 of 8.55 million after adjustment for missing deaths and the average death toll from 1964 to 1966 of 7.36 million are taken as the base numbers for linear deaths. With the linear decline from 1956 (the mid-point of the three years before the period under discussion) to 1963 (the mid-point of the three years following the period under discussion), the base numbers for linear deaths in the three years from 1959 to 1961 are 8.15 million, 8.02 million and 7.89 million respectively. The natural deaths during the period then amount to 24.06 million, with 4.22 million unnatural deaths.

Since the *Regulations on Household Registers* came into full effect between 1959 and 1961, a significant difference can be expected to exist between the number of natural deaths during these three years and the death toll for the three years from 1955 to 1957 after adjustment for unreported deaths. Thus, method 1 may be inaccurate to some degree. Method 2 may also be inaccurate given the earlier deaths of people over the age of 60 during the Difficult Three Year Period, a factor which led to a notable decline in the death toll during 1962 and 1963, when these deaths would have been expected to occur. By comparison, methods 3 and 4 are somewhat more credible. If these methods are applied, unnatural deaths during the Difficult Three Year Period appear to have numbered between four and five million. This figure should certainly not be referred to as the number of starvation-related deaths or of deaths caused directly by starvation, because it also includes other types of unnatural deaths.

III. MEASURES ENACTED BY THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT AND THEIR EFFECTS

In recent times the number of unnatural deaths has been greatly exaggerated, as a way of condemning a supposed lack of action by the Chinese Communist Party and government and of attacking the socialist system in China (Wang, 2014). We would argue that this cannot pass the test of history and facts. Historically, China has experienced frequent famines with large numbers of deaths from starvation, to the point where Deng Yunte (1984, 1) laments in *A History of Famine Relief in China* that rarely has a nation suffered from so many famines. The former U. S. ambassador to China John Leighton Stuart (quoted in Jiang and Lü, 2006) noted that in each year before 1949 an average of between three and seven million people in China died of starvation, and it was estimated that during the era of the Republic of China the total number of people who died of starvation exceeded 200 million.

While the average annual death rate during the Difficult Three Year Period was 1.809%, the death rate every year during the era of the Republic of China was as high as 2.5–3.3%. Even the lowest death rate under the Republic of China was about 0.7% higher than that during the Difficult Three Year Period. Even in 1960, when the famine was most severe with a death rate of 2.543%, the situation would have

been considered “normal” during the years before 1949 (Wang, 2014). The reason why the Difficult Three Year Period did not witness deaths from starvation at the rate of millions or even tens of millions per year as happened under the Republic of China lies in the improved living conditions and extended average life span of the people after the founding of the new China. Even so, the unnatural deaths would not have been successfully controlled had the Chinese Communist Party and government not moved to counter the nationwide natural disasters. The Party and government did indeed put large-scale disaster relief measures into practice.

3.1. *Measures by the Chinese Government to Solve the Problem*

1) *Informing the public of the reality and acknowledging the mistakes.* The regionally unbalanced impacts of the famine left many urban residents and some rural residents unaware of its severity and in terms of food storage, unprepared for the hard times. In these circumstances, the Party and government acted swiftly to inform cadres at various levels and the people throughout the country of the severity of the famine through a series of urgent documents issued from the second half of 1960. On February 13, 1961, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) published a resolution demanding that Party committees at various levels carry out another all-party and all-national political mobilization to impress on the population the great difficulties brought about by the two-year famine (Shang, 2014). At the end of the same year, the CCCPC published its “Urgent Letter of Instructions on the Current Policy Issues Concerning the People’s Communes in the Countryside,” while organizing a large number of cadres to go to rural areas, to pass on the information to the local cadres and people, to correct the mistakes, and together, to turn the difficult situation around (Gao, 2013). On a variety of occasions after the famine occurred, leaders of the CPC and central government also explicitly acknowledged the mistakes in their work. For example, in the “Urgent Instructions on Strongly Tightening up Social Purchasing Power and Explaining the Current Economic Situation among the People” (CCCPC, 1959), the CCCPC acknowledged that problems had indeed been encountered in its current work; that these had resulted mainly from lack of experience (since there were no historical precedents from which lessons could be learned); and that some

of the steps taken had been too ambitious.⁹ In his “Summary of the Decade” (Mao, 1960), Mao Zedong twice noted mistakes made by the CPC, and acknowledged that he himself had made many mistakes, some of them together with other people who were involved. Various foreign scholars claim that due to the complex causes of this great famine, the CPC and the government did not sufficiently understand the nature of the problem, and failed to make necessary changes to state policies (Drèze and Sen, 2006). But this view is obviously biased.

2) *Urgent grain deployment and grain imports.* In 1960, when the famine was at its most severe, the CCCPC sent out a series of instructions for urgent grain allocation and transportation. A special headquarters of the CCCPC for the deployment of grain, cotton and cooking oil was established, directed by Li Xiannian. This headquarters employed every possible means, including military vehicles and imported cars, for grain transportation. The collective efforts for grain allocation and transportation achieved definite results. In 1960 alone, 4.53 billion kilograms of grain were allocated from 11 rice production regions in South China. However, as many grain-producing provinces themselves had so little grain to spare — 3.64 billion kilograms out of the above-mentioned 4.53 billion kilograms of grain were taken from local stock — the grain reallocation was far from ideal. Faced with this situation, the government decided without hesitation to import grain from other countries to alleviate the crisis. In 1961, China imported a total of 5.8097 million tons of grain through such channels as direct imports from Canada, Australia, France, Argentina, Germany, Italy, etc., third party purchases from the United States, and borrowing from the Soviet Union. This was an increase by a factor of 30–35 over grain imports in the preceding years.

A series of measures was taken to ensure that food imports went ahead, including making provisions for extended payment, reducing imports of industrial equipment, earning foreign exchange through the export of agricultural, industrial and mining products, and selling large amounts of gold and silver. In addition, the CPC and the Chinese government, despite huge political pressure, halted the grain-for-debt exports to the Soviet Union and other East European countries. The claims that the Chinese government continued to increase its holdings

9 “Urgent Instructions on Strongly Tightening up Social Purchasing Power and Explaining the Current Economic Situation among the People,” published on Xinhua Net, http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-01/10/content_2440039.htm

of gold and to export grain for industrialization while ignoring the living conditions of the people during the Difficult Three Year Period thus collapse (Shang, 2009a).

3) *Active adjustment of agricultural policies.* First, the practice of grain requisition and purchase by the state was reduced. Due to fabricated reports on grain production caused by the “wind of embellishment and falsification” among local officials and the increase in grain demand during the Great Leap Forward¹⁰ movement, excessive requisition by purchase had occurred. Grain expropriated by purchase as a proportion of total grain production in the three years from 1959 to 1961 came to 39.7%, 35.6% and 27.4% respectively, with an average of 34.2%, which is still higher than the average of 25.3% in the three years from 1955 to 1957 (National Bureau of Statistics, 1983, 393).

Despite the enhanced effort by the government to get grain back to needy areas in the countryside, the net requisition rate — total grain requisition minus grain sold back to rural areas — was still higher than usual. In these circumstances, the state began to reduce grain requisition by purchase, and proposed that when the goal was set for requisitioning agricultural produce, farmers should be allowed to keep enough for their own consumption, with a reasonable additional amount when production increased (CCCPC, 1961). Second, the grain price was increased. In January 1961 the CCCPC approved and published the “Report on Raising the Grain Price” presented by the team on grain pricing headed by Chen Yun. It was decided that from the summer of 1961 the price was to be raised by an average of 20%, which together with the 5% increase in the national average grain price already granted in 1960 for the major grain producing regions, resulted in a total increase of 25%. Farmers’ income from the sale of agricultural produce would thus increase by around RMB 6.5 to 7.5 billion (Shang, 2009b). Third, adjustments were made to the agricultural tax, both in 1960 and in 1961, lowering it from 19.4 billion kilograms in 1958 to 10.75 billion kilograms in 1961. In 1961, the actual tax collected for use in feeding the famine-stricken regions was substantially reduced. Fourth, further steps were taken to ensure

10 The “Great Leap Forward,” along with the movement to establish people’s communes, was a social experiment in socialist construction. While making great achievements, it neglected the objective laws of economic development, with exaggerated effect of subjective will and effort, so that high objectives, blind directions, proneness to boasting and exaggeration, and absolute egalitarianism prevailed, leading to seriously unbalanced national economy.

the return of grain to needy areas in the countryside. Some 54.665 billion kilograms in total were re-sold to the rural areas from 1959 to 1961, with an annual average of 18.22 billion kilograms, which is 34.4% of the average grain requisition by purchase during these three years. By contrast, during the years from 1955 to 1957 a total of 45.48 billion kilograms of grain was sold to the rural areas, with an annual average of 15.16 billion kilograms, which is 31.5% of the average grain requisition by purchase. In terms of both absolute amount and percentage, grain sent back to the rural areas during the Difficult Three Year Period was clearly greater than in 1955–1957.

4) *Steps to reduce the urban population.* In the mid-to-late 1950s large numbers of rural people streamed into the cities to meet the increased demand for labor caused by the industrialization that had been stimulated by the Great Leap Forward movement. In 1958 alone the number of urban workers grew by 21 million. In 1960 the employed population in cities and towns reached 50.44 million, a historical record and twice the number in 1957 (Fan and Shi, 2013). The sudden population increase in the cities and towns aggravated the tense situation with food supply, adding fuel to the flames of the already existing disaster. In these circumstances, the state in 1960 began adjusting its policies. For example, the “Instructions of the CCCPC on the Readjustment of Centralized Grain Supply and the Lowering of the Grain Food Quota in Cities,” passed on September 14, 1960, required that three million city residents should be moved to rural areas each year. Subsequently, the CCCPC intensified its efforts to reduce the population in cities and towns. The “Nine Measures on the Reduction of the Urban Population and Food Sales in Cities and Towns,” approved by the CCCPC on June 16, 1961, specifically required that the population in cities and towns should decline by 20 million within three years, with a reduction of ten million in the course of 1961. Between January 1961 and June 1963 the number of urban employees nationwide fell by 15.57 million. The total urban population declined by 26 million, and the total number of commodity grain consumers was reduced by 28 million. Correspondingly, grain sales in the cities dropped, with non-agriculture-related sales in cities and towns reduced from 31.5 billion kilograms in 1960 to 23.5 billion kilograms in 1962 (Shang, 2009b).

5) *“Making savings for the famine” and “pumpkins and vegetables as grain substitutes.”* During the Difficult Three Year Period, the state

established a strict quota system. With grain scarce, the method of “equalizing poverty” was used to guarantee basic supply and to minimize the impact of the famine. In the “Instructions on the Mobilization of the Whole Party for the Full Development of Agriculture and a Large Increase in Grain Supplies” issued by the Party and government on August 10, 1960, it was stressed that grain should be used properly and sparingly, and that the standards for edible grain and for other consumption should be lowered. In the “Instructions on Lowering the Food Quota in Rural and Urban Areas” issued by the CCCPC on September 7, 1960, standards were specified for edible grain in various rural and urban areas. On September 23, 1960, the CCCPC issued a further instruction that lowered the amount of edible oil available each month to urban residents in municipal cities, provincial cities and towns. In the meantime, a strict state order required all village and rural cadres to adhere to the food standard applying in their areas, and cadres at the prefecture level and above, including those in the central governmental departments, were also compelled to lower their consumption standard. Special supplies for cadres “via the back door” were strictly forbidden.

But even with urgent measures to lower the standard, there were still areas in which consumption remained below the minimum level. Confronted with this situation, the central and local governments placed great hopes on the method of “pumpkins and other vegetables as grain substitutes.” All possible efforts were solicited to produce pumpkins and other vegetables, as well as substitute foods and other alternatives. On November 14, the CCCPC issued its “Urgent Instructions on Immediately Mounting a Campaign for the Large-Scale Collection and Production of Substitute Foods,” and formed the “Leading Team on Pumpkins and Vegetables as Substitutes,” under the direction of Zhou Enlai, to implement the task of using pumpkins and other vegetables to take the place of grain. But in 1960 when the famine was at its most severe, large areas of the countryside had long since run out of pumpkins and other vegetables to substitute for grain. The main task of the leading team became developing alternative foods, such as artificial protein, artificial meat, chlorella, artificial meatballs, fern roots, tree bark, wild plants and mushrooms, plant stems, and wild fruits. In order to overcome the difficulties, the central government also promoted large-scale grain saving movements nationwide. One of the methods employed was to increase the end weight of food

through special treatment in preparation and cooking, such as the food increment method for corn, sorghum and rice in A'cheng county in Heilongjiang province; the advanced cooking method in Shachuan county in Shanghai province; and the food increment method in Henan Province.

During the Difficult Three Year Period the state also expended large amounts of money and materials carrying out famine relief in the heavily stricken areas. Spending on relief funds was increased, the basic food supply for disaster victims was guaranteed, large teams of medical care workers were sent to provide medical aid in the disaster-stricken areas, and so forth. With mobilization and direction from the CPC and the state, the entire nation fought together against droughts, floods, locust plagues and other natural disasters, using a variety of production and self-rescue activities.

3.2. The Effects of the Measures Taken by the Chinese Government

As shown in Table 3, the death rates during the Difficult Three Year Period were 1.459% (1959), 2.543% (1960), and 1.424% (1961), respectively. In 1961, when the disaster-stricken area was even wider, the death rate fell significantly, showing clearly the positive role played by government measures in correcting the mistakes, alleviating the disaster, and turning the difficult situation around. Revealing the facts and acknowledging its mistakes, the government informed the nation of the severity of the famine, so that people could participate more consciously in the disaster relief activities. Using this approach allowed the CPC and the Chinese government to maintain their authority and support among the people, ensuring that disaster relief activities could be carried out in proper fashion. In 1961 and 1962 the national grain storage increased by 0.85 billion kilograms, reversing the continuous decline witnessed during previous years. The measures adopted to build up reserves and to grow substitute foods inspired the creativity, activity, and tenacious spirit of the people in confronting and overcoming the difficulties. The various production and self-rescue activities increased the food supply, improved living conditions, and enhanced the ability to fight against disasters and famine, while alleviating the burden on the state and ensuring that disaster relief would be provided to regions where the famine was most severe (Shang, 2011). The

measures taken by the Chinese government to deal with the famine were unquestionably vigorous and effective.

While it is true that the disaster relief work registered great achievements during the Difficult Three Year Period, there were still many regions where unnatural deaths took place, and this requires reflection. At the decision-making level, the “Movement Against Right-Wing Deviation” undertaken in 1959 was a mistake, destroying the principle of democratic centralism and encouraging the “wind of embellishment and falsification” (Shang, 2009b). This situation not only led to misjudgments by the central government in its approach to grain production, but also made various local governments and cadres fearful of reporting the real situation, thus delaying the disaster relief effort. Certain local officials fabricated reports of production, which led directly to an excessive rate of grain requisition by purchase; leaving farmers with a serious lack of grain for their own use; this resulted finally in unnatural deaths in these areas. In the meantime, local officials deliberately blocked information and concealed the disaster, making it difficult for the central government to carry out proper disaster relief activities (see Jia and Xu, 2012). In some areas, the movement against concealment of harvested grain and its secret distribution was implemented mistakenly during the first half of 1960, when the grain supply was at its most scarce. This had the effect of preventing timely disaster relief. Communication breakdowns did indeed have a negative influence on disaster relief activities. Due to the time differences involved in large purchases and sales, and the limitations of state storage facilities, the centralized purchase and supply system lacked the flexibility to respond in timely fashion. This led in some areas to grain frequently entering and leaving the allocation system, drastically increasing the cost of disaster relief and to some extent reducing its effectiveness (Fan and Meng, 2005).

IV. ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS ON THE MAIN CAUSES OF UNNATURAL DEATHS

The most direct cause of the famine was the long and extreme food shortage, but the reasons behind this shortage have been the topic of debate. The existing literature shows the debate revolving mainly around natural, systemic and human factors.

4.1. *Natural Factors*

Until the 1980s, official documents agreed that the cause of the great famine was natural disasters. But in the “Resolutions on Several Historical Issues of the Communist Party of China since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” adopted in 1981, the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward and of the Movement Against Right-Wing Deviation were listed as the major causes of the heavy losses suffered by the people and the state between 1959 and 1961. This was despite the fact that “natural disasters” were still cited as an important cause (CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, 1985, 24). Some scholars, such as Jing Hui (1993) and Wang Luowei (quoted in D. Chen, 2004), argue that the large number of unnatural deaths during this period was absolutely due to human actions rather than to nature. Li Ruojian (2000), Chen Donglin (2004), and Yang Songlin (2013, 333) criticize and argue against this conclusion from various points of view. They suggest that serious natural disasters occurred between 1959 and 1961, and that as causes of the famine, these natural disasters should not be ignored. Foreign researchers including C. K. Macdonald (1988, 45), Roderick MacFarquhar (1989, 448–449), Maurice Meisner (1992, 122) and Thomas P. Bernstein (2006) agree with this view. According to their analysis, the leading causes of unnatural deaths were natural disasters and bureaucracy.

4.2. *Systemic Factors*

1) *The loss of the right to withdraw from the commune.* Lin Yifu argues that the main cause of the large number of unnatural deaths was the loss in the autumn of 1958 of farmers’ exit rights, which caused grain production to fall dramatically and agricultural productivity to stagnate (Lin, 1990). The effect on agricultural productivity of the loss of exit rights is still being debated in academia. Kung (1993) raises strong doubts about Lin’s reasoning, arguing that even if it succeeds in explaining the fall in productivity it cannot explain why the large-scale famine exploded in 1959 and ended in 1962, given that the grain supply per capita was higher in 1959 than in 1962. Consequently, the crisis from 1959 to 1961 had no direct connection to reduced productivity, and the loss of the farmers’ exit rights can only be counted as a supplementary factor (Fan and Meng, 2005).

2) *Establishment of the public canteen system.* Yang Dali (1996) cites the theory of the tragedy of the commons in Western economics to analyze the main causes of the famine, and suggests that the public canteen and supply system brought about increased grain consumption, thus constituting an important systemic factor that led to the famine. Wen Guanzhong and Zhang Xin (1997) further maintain that since grain acquisition had very little effect on the famine, the public canteen system and the consequent unlimited consumption represented the major cause of the famine (if not the only one). However, the public canteen system was never fully implemented, and there is a lack of strong case studies to support this argument. Moreover, only 22% of the canteens allowed unrestricted supply, while in the rest supply was limited. Even the unlimited supply was permitted only to the major laborers in each household, and only during the busy season (Chen, 2011).

3) *Failure of the planned economy.* Li and Yang (2005) consider that the decline in grain production during the Difficult Three Year Period was caused basically by failure of the planned economy. This view is also flawed. The planned economy had existed since the founding of the new China, and continued to operate until the reform and opening up. Why, then, did the disaster occur in the years from 1959 to 1961? The idea of a so-called failure of planned economy is rooted more in ideological hostility stemming from liberal (or neoliberal) capitalism than in data on agricultural production in the 30 years before 1978.

4) *The industry-oriented system.* Foreign scholars, including Jonathan D. Spence (2001, 789–90), June Grasso (2003) and Roderick MacFarquhar (1989, 467), conclude that the industry-oriented system in force at the time caused great damage to the development of agriculture, reduced the active involvement of farmers in production, led to shortages of rural labor power and in the wake of a large decline in grain production finally resulted in famine. After the founding of the new China, the “scissors effect” that resulted from the industry-oriented system did indeed have an adverse impact on the development of agriculture. The industry-oriented system, however, had been in effect for a lengthy period since the founding of the new China; why, then, did the famine occur precisely during the Difficult Three Year Period? The famine might have resulted from a combination of the industry-oriented system and serious natural disasters, but as already mentioned, reduced grain production does not necessarily

lead to famine. The argument that the famine resulted from the industry-oriented system is therefore unconvincing.

5) *The city-oriented system of grain supply.* Another consequence of the industry-oriented system was a drastic increase in the urban population, which placed stress on food supplies. Lin Yifu and Yang Tao (2000) argue that the entitlement of urban residents to a certain amount of food was legally protected, while farmers only received the right to what was left after the grain requisition by purchase. During the Difficult Three Year Period, this difference led to farmers losing their entitlement to food, and consequently precipitated the famine. Xin Yi and Ge Ling (2008) and Zang Jinfeng (2010) also maintain that the city-oriented grain supply system, while managing to guarantee food supplies in urban areas, worsened starvation in the countryside. While this research may be persuasive to some extent, it does not take into account the reselling of grain to the rural areas, which increased greatly during the Difficult Three Year Period.

6) *The high rate of grain requisition by purchase.* Closely related to the city-oriented grain supply system was the centralized grain purchase and supply system, which has come under particular criticism. Bernstein (1984), Gong Qisheng (2005), John King Fairbank (1989, 281, 283), Penny Kane (1993, 160), Roderick MacFarquhar (1989, 468), and M. L. Lilian (quoted in Song and Ding, 2009, 546) contend that the heavy rates of grain collection during the Difficult Three Year Period were responsible for serious food shortages in rural areas and ultimately led to the famine. It is indeed possible that intensive grain collection caused some farmers to lose the right to dispose of their grain, and consequently to lose their entitlement to food as well, but it is not appropriate to attribute the famine mainly to this particular state policy. Apart from the fact that grain was resold to the countryside, many other phenomena demand explanation. For example, the same heavy grain requisition was followed by large numbers of unnatural deaths in some regions but not others. In addition, the rate of grain requisition was lowered during the first few years after the famine, but unnatural deaths still occurred in some regions (Xu, 2011).

4.3. *Human Factors*

1) *The responsibility of Mao Zedong.* Some scholars maintain that the causes of the famine lay simply with the Great Leap Forward and the

creation of the People's Communes, pointing directly to Mao Zedong as the source of the error; for example, Jasper Becker (1997, 238), Maurice Meisner (1992, 123), Vaclav Smil (1999) and Chen Kuide (quoted in Song and Ding, 2009, 245). The causes of this demographic disaster, however, were complex. The Great Leap Forward and People's Communes were not the major ones. Many important decisions were not made by Mao Zedong alone, but represented collective decisions of the CCCPC. Moreover, it was Liu Shaoqi, as the president, and Deng Xiaoping, as the general secretary of the CCCPC, who were taking the leading role in management of state affairs, while Mao Zedong had already retired to a secondary position, and repeatedly criticized the unreasonably high economic targets and feverish mentality at the time. In summarizing the lessons of the Great Leap Forward, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that it was a mistake made by the CCCPC, and was not the responsibility of any single person (Deng, 1994). It is thus not convincing to attribute the disaster to Mao Zedong alone.

2) *The responsibility of the leadership of the CCCPC.* Some scholars, including Bernstein (1984), Smil (1999) and Yang Dali (1996), think it inappropriate to assign all the blame to Mao Zedong, and argue that other CCCPC leaders should also share in the responsibility. Zhou Enlai, for example, also contributed by refusing to use reserves of stored grain for famine relief; by exporting grain in order to increase holdings of gold; and by preventing people from fleeing the famine-stricken regions (Wang, 2014). As research by Shang Changfeng (2009b) and Wang Xiaoning (2014) has demonstrated, there are no reliable sources for these charges. In any case, it is not wise to look for the cause of the famine solely in the CCCPC leadership. As mentioned earlier, some local cadres blocked information and delayed and hindered disaster relief actions by the central government, resulting in unnatural deaths. It would be too much to ask the central government to accept responsibility for their mistakes.

3) *The responsibilities of local governments.* A number of scholars have carried out more intensive studies and analyses of the roles played by local governments and officials in the disaster. For example, Yang Dali (quoted in Song and Ding, 2009, 415) and M. L. Lilian (quoted in Song and Ding, 2009, 552) analyze the roles of provincial cadres in the disaster from various angles, going on to suggest that it was these cadres who determined the extent to which radical policies were implemented in their provinces, and who should be held responsible

for the starvation that occurred there. Based on the situations in the provinces where the famine was most serious, including Anhui, Henan, Shandong, Sichuan and Gansu, this conclusion seems reasonable, but it would be problematic to suppose that the radical behavior resulted in every case from the individual personalities and beliefs of the provincial cadres involved. More important is the fact that this type of research fails to explain systematically the varying degrees of radical behavior displayed in different parts of the country (S. Chen, 2011). Zhou Feizhou (2003) argues that the main cause of the famine was a failure by local governments to swiftly implement disaster relief measures. The question of what efforts local governments made to enact disaster relief should be treated objectively. During the Difficult Three Year Period, some local governments held back information about the disaster and delayed disaster relief, and these bodies ought to be held responsible for the unnatural deaths in their local areas. Most of the local governments, however, did participate actively in carrying out the disaster relief measures. The results of disaster relief actions carried out by certain local governments were undoubtedly less than ideal, and this can be attributed to individual failings as well as to the political and economic system of the time. It is therefore inappropriate to place all the blame on local government. Specific issues should be analyzed according to specific circumstances. Some local cadres may have understated production levels and retained foodstuffs so as to protect local interests (Xu, 2011).

4.4. *Other Factors*

Maurice Meisner (1992, 123) and John King Fairbank (1989, 282) conclude that the political atmosphere during the Great Leap Forward, together with the Movement Against Right-Wing Deviations, made up one of the main causes. Ashton, Hill, Pizaaz, and Zeitz (1984), Maurice Meisner (1992, 122–23) and Penny Kane (1993, 160) also analyze the international aspects of the famine, especially the influence on the famine of the worsened relationship between China and the Soviet Union. It is true that these factors contributed to the famine to some degree, but the exact extent would be difficult to measure. Li Liangyu (2015) points to the “ultra-leftist” ideas and policies of the Great Leap Forward and People’s Communes as the main reason for

the great starvation in Jiangsu province. This conclusion, however convincing it might appear, is based on a single case study and cannot be used as a generalization. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2006) attribute the famine to a shortage of information resulting from the lack of adversarial politics and an open press, maintaining that the reason why famine did not occur in India was because of that country's freedom and democracy, especially its freedom of the press. This explanation has obvious weaknesses. Open reporting of the famine would have been desirable, but the famine was not necessarily connected with the absence of such reports. With no famine occurring, the death rate in India in 1960 was 2.4%, which is almost identical to the death rate of 2.543% in China during the same year when the famine was supposed to have been at its most severe. The death rate in India was regarded as completely normal, and no one seemed to show any surprise at the figure (Patnaik, 2015). The only explanation for this double criterion is that India has been "an inseparable part of international capitalism" and the high death rate in a "democratic country" should certainly be treated differently from that in socialist China.

The reasons behind the famine were complex, and include natural, economic, political and human factors; moreover, the impact of each single factor varied at different times or regions. Therefore, we must stick to the principle and method of specific analysis for each concrete issue. This, of course, does not prevent us from giving a broad picture of the famine and its consequences. In general, we argue that the unnatural deaths during this famine were mainly starvation-led deaths, with other types as secondary; the major cause was weak disaster relief ability, with mistakes by local government as secondary. Other factors, such as "transition to communism under poor conditions," "proneness to boasting and exaggeration," "unreasonably high targets," "blind directions," "big dining hall," and "bad cadres," exacerbated the spread of the disaster, thus demand serious consideration, though such reflections should not function as the basis for denying the contribution of the CPC and Chinese government to the disaster relief during the Difficult Three Year Period. Some of the literature today only presents selected facts, exaggerates the scale of the famine and policy mistakes, and raises the issue to the level of principle and struggle between two lines, the real intention of which is nothing but a total repudiation of the first 30 years of the

new China, and then of the efficiency and the very legitimacy of the Communist Party of China.

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