

THE GREAT LEAP FAMINE (1959–1961) IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE STUDIES



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Abstract: *This article presents a review of Chinese academic papers, one way or another related to the Great Leap Famine and published in recent years. The authors of these works do not examine the Great Leap Famine itself, abstracting from its causes, horrific details, and the number of victims, but rather use it as a specific experience that influenced the formation of human personality, including the personality of business leaders.*

Keywords: *Great Leap Forward, Great Famine, trauma studies, imprinting theory, upper echelons theory*

Introduction

The famine of 1959–1961 was a consequence of the Great Leap Forward policy. The catastrophic nature of this phenomenon was largely ignored for a long time. In China, discussion of the Great Leap Famine, to varying degrees, began in the 1980s, but only in the second half of the 1990s, some substantial academic publications appeared in China and abroad analyzing the causes of the famine, calculating the exact number of victims, and clarifying the reasons for the differences in mortality rates across provinces. In the past, the neutral term "three years of natural disasters" (三年自然灾害) was commonly used to describe the calamity of 1959–61; however, a designation emphasizing the social impact—"the Great Famine" (大饥荒)—gradually came into wider use.

A brief overview of research on the topic

At the time, two aspects were perhaps of greatest interest for researchers: the specific scale of the demographic consequences of the disaster and the reasons for regional differences in its severity. Estimates of demographic losses range from 16 to 60 million people. There has long been no disagreement about the main cause of the famine—it was the Great Leap Forward policy. The only issue is the degree of awareness and responsibility of Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders.

Significant differences in the situations across provinces have given rise to a number of hypotheses. Here are just a few: the higher the per capita grain production, the lower the mortality rate in the region; the more cities in a region, the higher the mortality rate in the countryside (due to the priority supply of cities); the degree of radicalism depended on the provincial leaders' need to strengthen and enhance their status; regions retained a "historical memory" of disasters experienced in the recent past, along with corresponding behavioral patterns, etc.

Specifics of the modern approach

In recent years, the focus of attention on the Great Leap Famine appears to have shifted somewhat. More than 60 years have passed since the event, and scholars are more likely to leave aside the most complex and frightening aspects and focus on more detached questions. A number of studies have emerged in the fields of psychology, economics, and management, focusing on neither the causes nor the specific demographic indicators of the famine. Drawing on methodological approaches from trauma studies, imprinting theory, and upper-echelon theory, researchers view the Great Leap Famine as a powerful traumatic event, a kind of natural experiment that resulted in the formation of a cohort of individuals who experienced a specific experience. Identifying this cohort allows scholars to analyze the impact of the experience of catastrophic famine on the strategic decisions affected individuals make in adulthood: risk tolerance, attitudes toward land, religious inclinations, and so on.

Trauma studies researchers analyze the impact of trauma on both individuals and society as a whole. The task of trauma analysts is to uncover and identify the linguistic, psychological, cultural, and social aspects of trauma and explain the impact of traumatic events on the individual and collective psyche. Actually, 20 years ago Suzanne Weigelin-Shvedzik [Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003] became the first to approach the Great Leap Famine from a trauma perspective. She noted that the generation that experienced trauma is reluctant to talk about it, while the next generation strives to incorporate this trauma into the historical narrative, into collective, communicative memory. In modern China, in recent years, an approach has emerged, among others, to the Great Famine as a traumatic event, without any connection to politics or ideology.

A number of Chinese researchers approach the Great Leap Famine within the framework of the Imprinting Theory and the Upper Echelons Theory. Imprinting is a key concept in organizational theory, the study of organizational behavior, describing how the past influences the present. Imprinting is typically defined as the process by which, during a short period of receptivity, an object or entity (e.g., an industry, organization, or individual) develops characteristics that reflect key

features of the environment, and these characteristics persist despite significant environmental changes in subsequent periods. Upper Echelons Theory argues that organizational performance depends in part on the managerial characteristics of top management. Research focuses on the influence of company leaders on their performance. A model of the influence of the characteristics of top management on the organization and performance of companies. People are the primary instrument for generating and implementing all organizational ideas and strategic decisions, so organizations, in a sense, reflect the personalities of the top managers who lead them. The upper echelons of power in companies (top managers) choose the company's field of activity and organize activities (business processes and administration), relying on their personal and professional background. The problem of diagnosing this "baggage" and predicting its impact on the objective results of the organization is of fundamental importance.

Luo Biliang and Hong Weijie [Luo Biliang, Hong Weijie 2021] conclude that peasant beliefs shaped by the memory of the Great Famine help explain the collapse of people's communes and the emergence and persistence of the family contract farming system. This idea is developed in numerous studies—it was precisely in the areas most affected by the famine that, during the period of the "adjustment" policy, something resembling a "family contract farming" spontaneously emerged. The authors surveyed approximately 3,000 farms and identified the concepts of "collective ownership" (集体所有), "family contract farming" (家庭承包), and "family management" (家庭经营). They reached the conclusions that the memory of the famine became an important factor in shaping peasants' beliefs regarding social institutions (forms of organization) that facilitated the choice of family farming and the subsequent protection of this choice. Peasants who experienced the Great Leap Famine clearly prefer the family farming system.

Based on data from a 2014 household survey in China, Wang Xiansheng and Guo Zhongxing [Wang Xiansheng, Guo Zhongxing, 2018] demonstrate that experiencing famine early in life shapes individual risk aversion and a reduced ability to cope with risks, as well as the need for a stronger sense of security, deepening "attachment to the land," which ultimately translates into farmers' reluctance to lease out their land. The more severe the famine in a given region, the lower the share of land leased. And people who personally experienced severe famine as children are even less willing to lease out their land. This study provides a new explanation for why the agricultural land transfer market in China is slow to develop.

Du Tianxiujia and Liang Yinhe [Du Tianxiujia, Liang Yinhe, 2018], having analyzed the data of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) for 2010-2013, come to the conclusion that as a result of the decline in people's trust in the government and in each other, the weakening of social interaction, the deterioration of health indicators, and the increased need for a sense of security among people who survived the “great famine,” the percentage of religious adherents is significantly higher than average.

The life experiences of business leaders are of practical interest to specialists in the fields of economics and management, and one of the significant aspects of this experience is the Great Leap Famine experienced in the early years; this traumatic event has a significant impact on strategic decision-making.

Xu Weibin et al. [Xu Weibin, Tang Qingzhou, Wang Suoling 2023] demonstrated that family business owners who experienced the Great Famine early in life are more prone to nepotism, but higher education and government employment moderate this relationship. The positive association between entrepreneurs' experiences during the Great Leap Famine and nepotism in family business management is more pronounced in regions with a poor legal environment and low social trust. Experiencing the Great Leap Famine resulted in a loss of security, increased sensitivity to threats. A scarcity mentality fosters a strong desire to preserve wealth and power. Cautious and conservative individuals are less sociable and less likely to trust strangers. They are willing to trust only close relatives, making them more likely to adopt a cronyism approach when choosing a corporate governance model. Higher education contributes to increased psychological security, allows for the accumulation of social capital, and increases trust in others. Experiences from working in party and government bodies work in the same direction: social capital, resource redistribution, and relationship building. A healthy legal environment provides a sense of security and guarantees the preservation of wealth and power without nepotism.

Two dissertations in economics, finance, and management defended in 2023, analyze the impact of a senior executive's experience of the Great Leap Famine on the risk tolerance of the company they lead. One of them [Yang Zhengrui 2023] demonstrates that the more severe the famine experienced by the company's chairman, the lower the risk tolerance of the company they lead, and this influence is stronger the greater the chairman's decision-making autonomy. The other [Jiang Jialin 2023] analyzes the relationship between early CEO experience and corporate social responsibility, the Great Leap Famine is also one of the factors examined (the other three being military service, exile to the countryside during the "educated youth movement," and activities during the early years of "reform and opening up").

Conclusions

In recent years, a number of studies have emerged in China that take a less politicized and ideological approach to the Great Famine. The authors do not seek to assign blame or uncover the famine's grim details, they refer to the Great Leap Famine as a "natural experiment," "traumatic event" that influenced the psychological characteristics, character, and behavior patterns of a significant number of people, as well as the corporate culture and business practices of companies run by people who had experienced it.

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