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The Anatomy of Hunger

'In those years, starvation became a sort of mental manacle, depriving us of our freedom to think.'

Han Weitian

Starvation can be one of the most prolonged and humiliating forms of death. Its immediate effect is rapid weight loss as the body consumes reserves of fat and then muscle tissue. On a diet of 1,600 calories a day, equivalent to a pound of cereals, the body will lose a quarter of its weight in two to three months. This, the first stage of starvation, is familiar from news pictures. Adults often have emaciated bodies and concave stomachs while the bellies of children are distended by the gases created by bacteria growing in the stomach and intestine. In tropical countries and especially among refugees living in camps, famine victims in this state are often carried away by disease before they reach the stage of terminal starvation.

However, in China the famine was different. The vast majority of people remained in their own homes. Standards of public health continued to be vigorously enforced. Even in the depths of the famine, people in villages or labour camps were inspected to see if they were obeying the sanitation regulations zealously laid down during the Great Leap Forward.

As the famine intensified, a large part of the population reached the second stage of starvation. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it thus: 'Activity will be reduced and general lethargy will occur. If there is a further reduction in food intake, further weight loss will occur and the death rate will rise.'

Psychologically the mind is dominated by a desire for food. Other emotions are dulled. Moral standards are lowered and in extreme conditions murder and cannibalism may occur.'

In this second stage, the body stops shrinking and begins to swell. In medieval Europe, this was called the 'dropsy'. It is now known as oedema (or edema), defined in the Encyclopaedia as 'a swelling due to the effusion of watery fluid into the intercellular spaces of connective tissues'. A lack of protein means that fluid escapes from the blood into the tissues which, when punctured, 'secrete a thin incoagulable fluid'.

During the height of the famine, various sources suggest that around 10 per cent of the urban population and 10 to 30 per cent of the rural population suffered from oedema. In Fengyang, a report claimed that 37.8 per cent of the population was sick, largely from oedema. It is a condition easily detected. It is present if, when a finger is pressed against the skin, the skin preserves the indentation rather than reverting to its unmarked state. In Changsha, Hunan province, one writer recalls that 'Many of the old people and almost all the children I knew had the "water swelling disease", dropsy. Our bodies puffed up and wouldn't recede... When acquaintances met, they squeezed each other's legs to see how swollen they were, and examined each other's skin to see if they were yellow. It was a game for me to poke Nai Nai's cheek and leave a hole that would fill up only very slowly like dough.' Even in Beijing, which as the capital received the highest priority in the supply of food, oedema was present. One doctor who worked there reckoned that it affected 10 per cent of the population. A health survey conducted in 1961 estimated that the same proportion of Heilongjiang's population likewise had oedema.

Since officially there was no famine in China, only bumper harvests, doctors were forbidden to tell patients that they were starving. The usual Chinese terms for malnutrition and lack of food are yinyang bu liang and quefa yin yang. Instead, the government resorted to euphemisms. Doctors were told to talk about fictitious diseases such as fuzhong bing or shuizhong bing, that is swollen sickness or water illness. Oedema is, however, a symptom not a disease. At the same time, it was forbidden to record a death as due to starvation. Even in the prison camps this could not be done, and in some places all medical terms
were dispensed with and oedema was simply referred to as 'Number Two Disease'.

Emmanuel John Hevi, an African student studying medicine in Beijing during the famine, records how his teachers claimed that the Chinese are physiologically different from the rest of humanity. His American-trained biology professor gave a lecture on the metabolism and explained that 'because proteins, fats and carbohydrates are inter-convertible during human metabolic processes, the people of China do not suffer any nutritional loss in consequence of their diet's deficiency in fats and proteins'. As Hevi comments, 'She was not telling us what she knew to be a fact but rather what she had been ordered to tell us as a political necessity... Faced with a shortage of protein and fats, the Party declares that these things are no longer necessary but are luxuries which the Chinese people can well do without.'

Fortunately, one authoritative medical description of the reality behind such nonsense has been written by Dr Benjamin Lee who now works in the Department of Pediatrics at the Louisiana State University Medical Center. In 1958 he was sentenced as a rightist and spent the next four years on the Sino-Russian border in Heilongjiang province at the Lake Xingkai state farm. There he took notes of the effects of the famine on over 5,000 prisoners. Although Dr Lee only recorded what happened to camp inmates, his description applies equally well to millions of others outside the camps:

An inmate would become malnourished within a few weeks of arrival. Usually, the first sign of severe malnutrition in a prisoner was incontinence. However little water he had drunk, the victim would find himself having to urinate one or even two pints of colourless fluid a night. Prisoners had to get up at one- to three-hour intervals and, even more humiliating in crowded cells, they would often pee in their pants before they made it to a pot or the latrines. Some gripped their penis to try and stop themselves.

Equally degrading was the way in which the starving lost control over their bowels, developing acute diarrhoea. Their stools would become milky and jelly-like, and often bloody. Terminal cases excreted reddish brown watery faeces in large quantities. Food would pass through the intestines within an hour, often without undergoing any change. Victims would also suffer from severe flatulence and at night they would sweat so severely that their bedclothes would become drenched.

The outside of the body would also change. In a third of the inmates, big patches of brown skin appeared, especially at the elbows, the spine, the feet and thighs. Some long-term prisoners found the skin inside their cheeks drying up and turning green. The skin would also fissure, creating crevasses in the hands and feet which became infected. The skin became particularly painful at the fingertips and the sides of the nails. Often the first sign of malnutrition was the appearance of fine parallel yellowish lines which appeared on the fingernails. The upper nail would flatten out and become thin and brittle, while the lower part turned thick and soft like dirty rubber. Sometimes the nails bled, causing intolerable pain. As they weakened, prisoners found that they could no longer make fine movements with their fingers and the tendons around the wrists became inflamed.

Starvation also changed the body in other ways. Large joints, like the shoulder, moved with a dull clanging noise. Joints thickened and became enlarged. Even the cartilage at the end of the nose thickened so that the bridge of the nose widened into a crest. Much the same thing happened to the sternum. Other parts also swelled in strange ways. In some prisoners, the parotid glands under the neck and in front of the ears grew to the size of a hamburger. Others complained of swellings behind the knees, or at lymph nodes in the groin or under the arms. Veins in the eyeballs hardened and became inflamed. Fissures in the teeth appeared. In some cases, the chest collapsed and became compressed like a child's rib-cage to half or even a third of its normal extent.

Most inmates suffered from a terrible hacking cough. One former inmate said that this condition became worse at night when he would cough continuously, unable to catch his breath: 'My chest cavity seemed to have been packed with dynamite – explosion after explosion would erupt from within me.' Many famine victims also fell into a high fever with severe headaches and cramps. High blood pressure, hypertension and
bradycardia, when the heart beats very slowly, became common, while broken bones did not heal but swelled up dangerously.

Dr Lee could always tell when a prisoner was going to die. He would lose his appetite, the skin around his swollen body would turn translucent and his face would become corpse-like. However, the actual manner of death varied. Some would suddenly drop dead of heart failure while out walking or after dinner. Others died in a general convulsion. A few would begin to spit massive amounts of blood from their lungs as if they had severe pneumonia; or they would show signs of suffering from severe jaundice because their liver had failed. Often, death was heralded by violent diarrhoea after which the patient would collapse in a coma. When the authorities began to replace real food with food substitutes, many prisoners also died from perforation of the intestine.

Dr Lee’s observations are borne out by others who survived the camps. Harry Wu noted that ‘The heart does not stop beating from lack of nourishment. Depending on your overall health, you can survive for a week, even two, with no food or water at all. In such a depleted state, it is other things that kill you. Sometimes you catch cold, your lungs fill with fluid, finally you stop breathing. Sometimes bacteria in the food cause continuous diarrhoea that leads to death. Sometimes infection from a wound becomes fatal. The cause of death is always in your file as pleurisy or food poisoning or injury, never as starvation.’

Dr Tensing Choedak, while in the Jiuzhen prison camp in the Tanger Desert, Gansu, observed that in the first stage of starvation ‘one and all resembled living skeletons. Ribs, hips and shin bones protruded, chests were concave, eyes bulged, teeth were loose, black hair turned russet, then beige and then fell out.’ Prisoners’ eyes also weakened and they lost the ability to see properly at night. This stage was followed by oedema, and inmates like Harry Wu quickly learned what would happen next: ‘For the first time I saw a person with one leg swollen and the other thin as a stick. I began to recognise the symptoms of oedema. First someone’s foot would swell so that he could not wear his shoe. Slowly the swelling moved up through the ankle, the calf, the knee, the thigh. When it reached the stomach and made breathing difficult, a person died quickly.’

A professor of English, Wu Ningkun, describes in A Single Tear his feelings of horror as he realizes his own body is changing: ‘I was the first to come down with a serious case of oedema. I became emaciated, my ankles swelled and my legs got so weak that I often fell while walking to the fields for forced labour. I did not know what I looked like as there were no mirrors around but I could tell from the ghastly looks of the other inmates that I must have been quite a sight.’

Children came down with the same symptoms even in the cities. In A Mother’s Ordeal, Chi An, who was then a small girl in Shenyang, the provincial capital of Liaoning province, describes what happened to her family:

With the exception of the baby, all of us swelled up and turned a whiteish yellow, like pale turnips. We had so much fluid under our skin that if we cut ourselves, we no longer bled. Instead of blood, little beads of faintly pink liquid would ooze out. A scab never formed, and even the smallest scrape took a long time to heal.

In Ningxia province far to the west, prisoners believed that once the swelling reached the head, a person was doomed: ‘The person soon resembled a balloon that had been filled full of air – the eyes would swell so that they became small slits; light couldn’t penetrate them and one could not see out. But simple, straightforward oedema could still not be described as a death mask. If the skin on the part that was swelling began to split and a yellow glandular fluid oozed out, then death was not far away.’

All remarked that in the final stage a person would develop this ‘mask’ which signalled that death must follow in a day or two. In Grass Soup, Zhang Xianliang describes this phenomenon vividly:

Needless to say, men with such death masks were emaciated. In addition, the skin of their faces and entire bodies turned a dull, dark colour; their hair looked dried-out and scorched; the mucus of their eyes increased but the eyes themselves became exceedingly, strangely bright. They emitted a ‘thief’s glare’, a kind of
shifted, scared yet crafty, debilitated but also poisonous light. No one felt afraid when they saw it though, for they knew that their own eyes were not much different.

A similar description comes in Red in Tooth and Claw, in which Han Weitian recalls, 'If you saw us, you would find each face starved into a pale mask, without flesh or life. Such faces were little different from those of the departed. No matter its shape, the face of the starvation victim is covered by only a fragile layer of skin. The eyes are hardly eyes but rather the pits of nuts fitted into sockets of bone. Such eyes shed no light.'

Strangely enough, people appeared to get better just before the end. Harry Wu was surprised by this when he watched the death of his friend Ma, a peasant arrested for stealing grain to feed his family. 'I had watched the swelling travel up Ma's body. His skin stretched so tight it became bright and smooth like glass. During his last days he seemed to experience increased energy and cheerfulness. His thin pale face regained some rosy colour. I later recognised those changes as typical of the last days of oedema. "The last redness of the setting sun" we said.'

Although all these descriptions of oedema come from writings about prison camps, peasants in villages in Anhui and Henan and just outside Beijing gave me identical descriptions. One man who grew up in Fengtai, a suburb of Beijing, recalled that as a child he knew that those people around him with heads swollen from oedema were certain to die within weeks.

Incredibly, some people did come back from the dead. When I was in a village in Anhui, a woman pointed to a man working outside, saying that he had literally returned from death. As a boy of about 9 during the famine, his family had given him up for dead but then someone forced some nourishing soup down his throat and he recovered. In some instances, even prisoners taken away for burial recovered. This happened to the Tibetan Ama Adhe, as she relates in A Strange Liberation:

My condition deteriorated, until finally I couldn’t even walk. I would just sit there, maybe saying mantras. And one night I felt that my nose was getting very cold... I thought maybe it is my turn to die of starvation... the next morning I heard rushing water like a waterfall or a stream. And when I looked up, I saw that I had been thrown into the wooden cage that they built to hold the dead bodies. I realised where I was and I felt so sad, and I made a final prayer to His Holiness and the triple gem. Then the workers came round to carry away these corpses, and when they saw me they yelled out, ‘Hey, this one has her eyes open!’ And I was carried back to my cell.

Han Weitian was actually taken to the morgue in his labour camp: 'There were times when I sensed I was at last parting from the world. It was not a sense of pain, but only a feeling of yielding. The ache of hunger induced a feeling of suffocation so keen that one day I suddenly lost consciousness. I was later told that after I had passed out they found I had stopped breathing and was stiff and cold.' A friend of his who was the camp doctor came to hear of what had happened and went to examine him in the morgue. Han had already been lying there for half an hour when the doctor arrived. At first, the doctor failed to detect any sign of life but then, using a stethoscope, he heard faint breathing and brought Han to a fireside where he administered an injection and fed him some thin lukewarm gruel. Miraculously, Han recovered. Dr Lee, too, managed to save several patients on the point of death by injecting them with thiamine, a form of vitamin B1.

Living on the verge of death produced a strange state of mind, as Han Weitian recalls:

In those years, starvation became a sort of mental manacle, depriving us of our freedom to think. We could not for a moment forget its threat. It seemed to be continuously putrefying the air and making it difficult to breathe... it is strange that hunger can cause so much pain in your body. It seems like a vice pinching all your bones which feel dislocated for lack of flesh and sinews. Your head, hands, feet, even your belly and bowels are no longer where they normally are. You are tempted to cry out loud but haven’t the strength. When experiencing extreme hunger, one can barely utter an audible sound.

In Grass Soup, Zhang Xianliang remembers the feeling of suffocation:
This problem was not a result of some illness of the central respiratory system nor was it caused by injury to the head or lung disease. The fatigue of my body simply led to an exhaustion of my lungs as if they were too worn out to work. I often did forget to breathe and found that I would suddenly be dizzy, with pricks of light behind my eyes. Darkness would rise up before me as I fell over. Later I became accustomed to remembering to take in oxygen.

The final moment of death was often peaceful. The Tibetan Tenpa Soepa remarked: ‘Dying from hunger can actually be an easy way to die. Not very painful. People would be sitting, and then fall over and die. No moans of agony.’ Dr Chodek also noticed how calm the final moments were. People lay immobile on the kang and then ‘their breath became softer and more shallow until, at the last moment, bubbles of saliva slipped over their lips and they died.’

Many were not so fortunate and died painfully from the food substitutes which were introduced in 1960 and 1961. At times 80 per cent of the food served to prisoners was made up of substitutes. Such substances split the digestive tract or the sphincter. Outside the prisons people died in the same way. Like the prisoners, the peasants ate tree bark, corn cobs, the chaff from soybeans, sorghum, wheat and other grains, ground-up roots and corn stalks. They also ate large amounts of grasses and weeds and anything else they could find which looked edible. This was all collected and thrown into the pot—the grass soup of Zhang’s book. Tenpa Soepa, who like many others survived by eating wild grass, noticed that ‘if you looked in the toilet it didn’t look like a human being’s toilet. All the stools were green from the grass and undigested leaves.’

Some prisoners were even fed sawdust and wood pulp. Jean Pasqualini describes in *Prisoner of Mao* what happened in the Lake Xingkai camp in Heilongjiang in 1960. Dark brown sheets of the stuff arrived at the kitchens:

We prisoners had the honour of being the guinea pigs for the various ersatzes the scientific community came up with. The warder describing the new nutritional policy told us that paper pulp was guaranteed harmless and though it contained no nutritive value, it would make our *wo’tou* fatter and give us the satisfying impression of bulk. The new flour mix would be no more than thirty per cent powdered paper pulp. It will go through your digestive tracts easily, he said with assurance. We know exactly how you will feel.

The experiment led to mass constipation and a number of deaths among older and weaker prisoners. The wood pulp was abandoned although the government also tried out another variety of food substitute on the prisoners—marsh-water plankton.

They skimmed the slimy, green stuff off the swammy ponds around the camp and mixed it in with the mush either straight or dried and powdered, since it tasted too horrible to eat unaccompanied. Again we all fell sick and some of the weaker ones died. That particular plankton, they discovered after a few autopsies, was practically unassimilative for the human body. End of plankton experiment. At length our daily ersatz became ground corn cobs, mixed in with the *wo’tou* flour. Afterwards it was adopted as the standard food supplement for the country at large.

In the countryside people also ate the straw of their huts, the cotton in their coats or mattresses, tree leaves and blossoms, and the feathers of ducks and chickens. Prisoners recounted how they chewed their shoes and boots, belts, coats and anything else made of leather. In Lanzhou, people actually raided the local tanneries for leather to eat.

The worst substitute of all derived from an ancient and mistaken belief that eating compounds of earth and weeds would fill up one’s stomach and provide enormous endurance. This soil was known as ‘Buddha’s soil’ or ‘Guanyin soil’, Guanyin being the goddess of mercy. In Gansu, peasants boiled the soil before eating it. One doctor recalls how he went to a Gansu village where the entire population, 800 in all, had died after eating Guanyin soil. When the medical team dissected some of the corpses, they found the soil had blocked up the intestine and it could not be digested or excreted. Another doctor, working elsewhere in China, believes such a practice was common:
People mixed it [the Guanyin soil] with corn flour and the bread made of this mixture was edible and, more important, very filling. As the news spread, tens of thousands of people copied this invention. But once in the stomach, the soil dried out all the moisture in the colon and the patients could not defecate for days. I had to open up their stomachs. I did this operation on about fourteen people every day. Many people never made it to the hospital and others died on the operating table. I had a note typed out and took it to the street committees in the district around the hospital. I saw people dropping dead with my own eyes. Nobody was interested in what I had to tell them. All they thought about was food.\textsuperscript{14}

Those in the cities were driven to forage for food like the survivors of some apocalyptic disaster. In \textit{Son of the Revolution}, Liang Heng describes his childhood in Changsha, Hunan: ‘I grew accustomed to going with my sisters to the Martyr’s Park to pull up a kind of edible wild grass that could be made into a paste with broken grains of rice and steamed and eaten as “bittercakes”’. Gradually, even this became scarce and we had to walk miles to distant suburbs to find any.\textsuperscript{15} Far to the north in Shenyang, Chi An made pancakes out of leaves picked from the poplars which lined the streets. The leaves were soaked overnight to remove tannic acid, then dipped in flour and browned in a wok without oil.

The smell of these leaf pancakes frying made my mouth water, but they didn’t taste nearly as good as they looked. Despite the soaking, the poplar leaves retained an acid bite that made my salivary glands scream in protest. The worst part was the constipation they brought on. A day after Mother added them to our diet, we stopped having bowel movements. For a week after that, we felt increasingly bloated and crampy. Finally mother told us we would have to dig the hard little balls of faeces out with our fingers. My brother and I were too hungry to mind very much, though; we continued to devour the pancakes without protest.\textsuperscript{16}

In the desperate search for food many died from eating poisonous mushrooms, berries or leaves. A doctor who worked in one city hospital said that the emergency department was filled with people who had eaten poisonous wild vegetables.

Alcoholics, unable to satisfy their addiction, also died from drinking methanol, industrial alcohol and any number of other substitutes. To stop people from eating seeds after they were sown, the leaders of some communes and labour camps had the seeds dipped in poison. Sometimes scavenging children died from eating them.\textsuperscript{17}

Overeating could also kill. When better food became available at harvest time or after 1962, people ate more than their enfeebled digestive systems could cope with. Han Weiitan has estimated that 2,000 fellow prisoners died from ‘gourmandizing’ in his camp in Qinghai. Prisoners there tried to build up their health by eating in a single sitting up to eighteen loaves of a black bread made out of pea powder. Then they returned to their heavy work: ‘They more often than not ended up with stomach-aches. Some of these greedy eaters simply died in the field from violent stomach-aches. Such victims howled with pain while holding their swollen bellies.’ One interviewee in Sichuan, who had been sent as a rightist to Ya’an, a poor region in the mountains west of Chengdu, recalls how many peasants died of overeating at the Spring Festival in 1962. On this rare occasion the peasants could fill their bellies with dumplings made of wheat and beans but their digestive systems broke down, often with fatal results. Even a medical team sent to treat famine victims in Gansu killed many patients by giving them too much food.

Since no one was permitted to acknowledge the reality of the famine, medical efforts to deal with the crisis were doomed to failure. Even in the hospitals in major cities, doctors were provided with few resources. Since they themselves were often starving, they could not stand up to the strain. At times as many as a third of the staff of one Beijing hospital were off sick. The one remedy available to doctors was to recommend a special diet for their patients. Those who contracted tuberculosis, which was very common, were given extra coupons to buy two ounces of sugar a month as well as milk and pig’s liver.

Prolonged starvation left lasting effects on its victims. Many children developed rickets. A few became mentally retarded. Most found themselves to be shorter and smaller than normal when they matured. Several interviewees who had been young children during the famine claimed that they were six inches
shorter than they would otherwise have been. Very few women were able to have children during the famine. A large proportion stopped menstruating because of the lack of protein in their diet. Some students sent down to the countryside said that they stopped menstruating for as long as five years. Women who did give birth often died because they did not stop bleeding. Mothers who survived found that they could not produce enough milk to feed their babies. Statistics from Fengyang in Anhui also reveal that many women suffered from prolapse of the uterus, the collapse of the womb. Those female peasants who were forced to work in the paddy fields also contracted infections from spending long periods up to their waists in water.

Even when in early 1961 medical teams were sent to some of the worst-affected areas in the countryside, the fiction about the famine was maintained. One doctor who spent three months on a relief mission in Gansu recalls that the Party organized a meeting on their return at which they were warned not to talk of the deaths they had witnessed. A Party official insisted that not a single death had occurred and that to deny this would constitute treason.\textsuperscript{18}

14

Cannibalism

'I take a look at history: it is not a record of time but on each page are confusedly written the characters “benevolence, righteousness, and morals”. Desperately unsleeping, I carefully look over it again and again for half the night, and at last find between the lines that it is full of the same words – “cannibalism!”'

Lu Xun, \textit{Diary of a Madman}, 1918

\textbf{When, 2,000 years ago,} the Han dynasty was established amidst enormous upheaval, it was recorded that nearly half the people in the empire died of starvation. This prompted the founding emperor Gao Zu to issue an official edict in 205 BC authorizing people to sell or eat their children if necessary. Over two millennia later his words were still being obeyed in Anhui. There, peasants practised a tradition of sowing their children with those of their neighbours to alleviate their hunger and to avoid consuming their own offspring. Villagers in Anhui described this practice in a phrase of classical Chinese – \textit{i tsu erh shih}, or \textit{yi zi er shi} in the modern pinyin spelling – that dates back still further.\textsuperscript{1} Nothing better demonstrates the remarkable continuity of Chinese culture than the fact that this phrase was first employed 2,500 years ago. In May 594 BC, the Chu army besieged the Song capital. Eventually its starving inhabitants sorrowfully recorded that ‘in the city, we are exchanging our children and eating them, and splitting up their bones for fuel’.

During the famine of the Great Leap Forward, peasants killed
and ate their children in many parts of China. In *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang recounts the story told by a senior Party official about an incident in Sichuan:

One day a peasant burst into his room and threw himself on the floor, screaming that he had committed a terrible crime and begging to be punished. Eventually it came out that he had killed his own baby and eaten it. Hunger had been like an uncontrollable force driving him to take up the knife. With tears rolling down his cheeks, the official ordered the peasant to be arrested. Later he was shot as a warning to baby killers.

At the other end of the country, in Liaoning province, the Shenyang provincial Party newspapers also reported cases of cannibalism. In *A Mother's Ordeal*, a classmate of Chi An, whose story it tells, records what happened in her own hamlet:

A peasant woman, unable to stand the incessant crying for food of her two-year-old daughter, and perhaps thinking to end her suffering, had strangled her. She had given the girl's body to her husband, asking him to bury it. Instead, out of his mind with hunger, he had put the body into the cooking pot with what little food they had foraged. He had forced his wife to eat a bowl of the resulting stew. His wife, in a fit of remorse, had reported her husband's crime to the authorities. The fact that she voluntarily came forward to confess made no difference. Although there was no law against cannibalism in the criminal code of the People's Republic, the Ministry of Public Security treated such cases, which were all too common, with the utmost severity. Both husband and wife were arrested and summarily executed.²

In interviews, peasants readily acknowledged that they had witnessed cannibalism at first hand. 'It was nothing exceptional,' a local official told me in Anhui, while in Sichuan the former head of a village production team said he thought it had happened 'in every county and most villages'. Official Party documents bear this out. In one county in southern Henan, Gushi, the authorities recorded 200 cases of cannibalism in a population of 900,000 at the start of the famine. In Anhui's Fengyang county, with 335,000 people in 1958, the Party noted 63 cases of cannibalism in one commune alone. Interviewees also spoke of cannibalism occurring in Shaanxi, Ningxia and Hebei provinces. Former inmates of labour camps personally witnessed cases of cannibalism in camps in Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and Heilongjiang. In the Qinghai prison camps, prisoners regularly cut the flesh off corpses and sold or ate it. Outside the camps, it was the same. A Tibetan peasant from Tongren county in Qinghai remembers that among the youths from Henan who were settled there, one girl killed an 8-year-old child and ate the corpse with three others. All four were arrested. In another case, a Tibetan family was caught eating the flesh from a child's corpse.

There are enough reports from different parts of the country to make it clear that the practice of cannibalism was not restricted to any one region, class or nationality. Peasants not only ate the flesh of the dead, they also sold it, and they killed and ate children, both their own and those of others. Given the dimensions of the famine, it is quite conceivable that cannibalism was practised on a scale unprecedented in the history of the twentieth century. Moreover, it took place with the knowledge of a government which is still in power and which wields considerable influence over world affairs. This startling fact is all the more plausible when one looks at the documented history of cannibalism in China and other parts of the world.

In the West, cannibalism is considered the ultimate taboo, the worst act of savagery, but it is far from unknown. Greek literature and the records of ancient Egypt frequently mention famine-related cannibalism. In Western Europe it often occurred during famines and the wartime sieges of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this century, two major incidents of recorded cannibalism in the West stand out: those in the Nazi concentration camps and in the Ukraine.

At the trial of the Treblinka concentration camp commandant after the Second World War, a former British internee testified that while clearing away dead bodies, he and his staff noted that a piece of flesh was missing from as many as one in ten cadavers:

I noticed on many occasions a very strange wound at the back of the thigh of many of the dead. First of all I dismissed it as a gunshot
wound at close quarters but after seeing a few more I asked a friend and he told me that many of the prisoners were cutting chunks out of the bodies to eat. On my next visit to the mortuary I actually saw a prisoner whip out a knife, cut a portion of the leg of a dead body, and put it quickly into his mouth.\textsuperscript{3}

The cannibalism which occurred during the Ukrainian famine of 1932–3 has closer parallels with China during the Great Leap Forward. Faced with an almost identical set of circumstances, Ukrainian peasants behaved much as the Chinese were to do nearly thirty years later. The Italian Consul in the then capital of Kharkov wrote in June 1933 to his embassy in Moscow that ‘at present some 300 cases of cannibalism have been brought before a tribunal in Kharkov. Doctors of my acquaintance have noticed human flesh on sale at the market place.’\textsuperscript{14}

An eyewitness who testified in an inquiry into the famine held by the US Congress in 1988 said that ‘if a person was selling meat, the police would immediately seize the meat to check if it was human or dog meat. There were people who had no qualms about cutting off a piece of flesh from a dead body which they would sell in order to get money for bread.’ Cannibalism was so common that the secret police, the OGPU, issued instructions on how to deal with it. In May 1933 the Vice-Commissar of the OGPU and the chief procurator of the Ukraine told their subordinates:

The present criminal code does not cover punishment of persons guilty of cannibalism, therefore all cases of those accused of cannibalism must immediately be transferred to the local branches of the OGPU. If cannibalism was preceded by murder, covered by article 142 of the Penal Code, these cases should be withdrawn from the courts and from the prosecution divisions of the People’s Commissariat of Justice system and transferred for judgement to the Collegium of the OGPU in Moscow.\textsuperscript{5}

The Italian Consul reported a number of cases in which parents were arrested for infanticide and subsequently went mad:

Very frequent is the phenomenon of hallucination in which people see their children only as animals, kill them and eat them. Later, some, having recuperated with proper food, do not remember wanting to eat their children and deny even being able to think of such a thing. The phenomenon in question is the result of lack of vitamins and would prove to be a very interesting study, alas one which is banned even from consideration from a scientific point of view.\textsuperscript{6}

Such terrible thoughts were prompted by a famine in which over 5 million died. Yet the Ukraine has some of the richest agricultural land in the world and famine there, although not unknown, was rare. By contrast, famine was such a regular occurrence throughout Chinese history that there existed a sort of ‘famine culture’ passed down through the generations. As many observers quoted in Chapter 1 pointed out, people knew what sort of wild vegetation could be eaten, what should be sold first to raise money and which members of a family should be sacrificed before others. Anhui peasants even believed that they knew how to detect cannibalism – those who ate human flesh smelt strange and their eyes and skin turned red.

The consumption of human flesh in China was not, however, limited to times of famine. Indeed one authority on the subject has concluded that cannibalism holds a unique place in Chinese culture and that the Chinese ‘have admired the practice of cannibalism for centuries’. The American academic Kay Ray Chong has found numerous references to the practice in Chinese historical records and literature as well as in medical texts. In Cannibalism in China, published in 1990, Chong looked at cannibalism under two main headings: ‘survival’ cannibalism which took place as a last resort; and ‘learned’ cannibalism undertaken for other reasons. It is the latter which sets the Chinese apart. They are, he writes, ‘quite unique in the sense [that] there are so many examples of learned cannibalism throughout their history’. In many periods of Chinese history, human flesh was considered a delicacy. In ancient times, cooks prepared exotic dishes of human flesh for jaded upper-class palates. Enough accounts of the various methods used to cook human flesh have been preserved for Chong to devote a whole
chapter to them. For example, a Yan dynasty writer, Dao
Qingyi, recommends children's meat as the best-twisting food and pro-
poses that children's meat, 'fowl-legged sheep' and considers women's
meat even more delicious than mutton.

Cooking methods are described in detail. For example, when one of the main characters, Wu Sheng, visits a wine shop,
the walls are full of women's skins stretched tight and nailed
to the roof, and upon the beams of the roof there hung several legs
of men.

Human flesh was regarded as part food, part medicine. In
1578, Li Shizhen published a medical reference book (Bencao
Gangmu, or materia medica) which listed thirty-five different parts of
men, women, and children. The flesh of children was especially
coveted because they were thought to boost sexual stamina. In
time, this practice became so common that it eventually deposed
women's flesh. During the Ming dynasty, powerful emperors tried
to reign their sexual potency by eating young men's brains. During the last Chinese
dynasty, the Qing, numerous Westerners accused the Chinese
belief that drinking human blood would increase a
woman's sexual appetite. Whenever a public execution took place,
the public was encouraged to eat the flesh of the executed. As late as
the nineteenth century, it was not unusual for Chinese executioners to
dip their legs into a pot of human blood, and drink the blood in a
reverent toast. The practice was also extensively common in times of war. Not only was the last

Throughout Chinese history, cannibalism was also ex-
tremely common in times of war. Not only was it the last
children being allowed to participate in the feast. During the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists in the 1940s, there are also recorded instances when prisoners were killed and eaten in revenge.

Under Communist rule, cannibalism to obtain revenge continued, notably during the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi province in the far south of China. According to official documents obtained by the Chinese writer Zheng Yi, in some schools students killed their principals in the school courtyard and then cooked and ate their bodies to celebrate a triumph over ‘counter-revolutionaries’. Government-run cafeterias in the province are said to have displayed bodies dangling on meat hooks and to have served human flesh to employees. One document relates that ‘There are many varieties of cannibalism and among them are these: killing someone and making a big dinner of it, slicing off the meat and having a big party, dividing up the flesh so each person takes a large chunk home to boil, roasting the liver and eating it for its medicinal properties, and so on.’

The documents obtained by Zheng Yi suggest that at least 137 people, and probably hundreds more, were eaten in Guangxi. The cannibalism was organized by local Communist Party officials and people took part to prove their revolutionary ardour. In one case, the first person to strip the body of a school principal was the former girlfriend of the principal’s son. She wanted to show that she had no sympathy with him and was just as ‘red’ as anyone else. Harry Wu, in Laogai: The Chinese Gulag, records a similar incident while he was at the Wang Zhuang coal-mine in Shanxi. A prisoner called Yang Baoyin was summarily executed by firing squad for writing the words ‘Overthrow Chairman Mao’ and his brains were eaten by a Public Security cadre.

In Cannibalism in China, Chong concludes that cannibalism probably occurred on a massive scale in times of great convulsions. There is every reason to believe that this also holds true for the Great Leap Forward, a dark and secret legacy of China’s ancient culture which few inside or outside China wish to confront. This chapter began with an extract from a short story by one of the most famous twentieth-century Chinese writers, Lu Xun. Since it is written in the style of Nietzsche, western readers assume it is allegorical, but Chinese readers would surely read it as a tirade against the unchanging realities of life in China.