Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union*,

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Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union
Felix Wemheuer

After seeing the extent to which the famine remained one of the most terrible periods in the lives of peasants he interviewed in the Henan Province, a young German sinologist (born in 1977) carried out over a decade of research into the Great Leap Forward. This resulted in a number of works focusing on the famine, including the present comparison between the famine of 1959–1962 and that which hit the USSR. Such a comparison is relevant not only because of the similarities between the two revolutionary regimes, but also because more than 80% of the world’s famine victims in the twentieth century died in these two countries.

The structure is not the most satisfactory aspect of this good book. Excluding the third part (Chapters 5 to 7), which is dedicated to Ukraine and Tibet, the comparison between the Soviet and Chinese famines is covered essentially in the first part (Chapters 1 and 2). The second part, which covers only China, takes up and develops the themes introduced in the first part: Chapter 3 refers to Chapter 1 (conflicting reports between the state and peasants before the famine) and Chapter 4 refers to Chapter 2 (the way in which the famine was managed sacrificed the countryside in order to protect the cities). An epilogue details the lessons drawn from these catastrophes by the two regimes, which have not experienced further famines since 1962 in China’s case and 1947 in the USSR. A substantial conclusion summarises the main contributions of the book, in a similar way to how the last page (or a little more) of each chapter sums up the themes developed in that chapter. The reader pressed for time might therefore be tempted to limit himself to these mini-conclusions and the general conclusion.

In doing so, he would miss out on the objective intellectual reflection pursued throughout the book on what is a burning issue. While clearly demonstrating the main responsibility of the two regimes in causing the disasters, the author also underlines the enormous burden inherited by both agrarian empires. Russia, too, had been a “land of famine.” A peasant born in south Russia in 1890 and living until 1950 would have lived through the famines of 1891, 1921–1922, 1932–1933, and 1946–1947, the latter following a famine fomented by the Nazis during the Second World War. A Chinese peasant born in 1900 in Henan and dying at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution would similarly have experienced the famines of 1931, 1943, and 1959–1962 (pp. 32–33). The author could also have included the famine of 1920–1921, which struck the northern part of the province. Even during famine-free years, hunger was never far away and killed thousands of people, for example in 1950, 1951, 1955, and 1956, while tens or even hundreds of thousands of peasants fled regions hit by the “spring shortages” (chunhuang) every year (p. 86). The situation was therefore very strained throughout the first decade of the regime, and was nearly as tense in the Soviet Union during the civil war and the 1920s. This was the very difficult legacy that the two regimes managed, as best they could, before embarking (in 1929 and 1958) on modernisation drives that were excessively ambitious, impatient, and radical, and gave rise to famine. In terms of the periods prior to 1929 and 1958, Chapters 1 and 3 are indispensable when it comes to understanding the famine, which was brewing before it broke out: the “contribution” demanded from the peasantry in order to finance industrialisation set the scene for the crisis, and the politicisation of hunger (saying that there was a lack of grain was proof of ideological deviance) prevented the victims from complaining when the famine was at its height.

In terms of the food crisis itself, the mechanisms that made agricultural production fail have been exposed amply in many works. Wemheuer rightly draws attention to relations between the cities and countryside. The swift growth of the industrial workforce and the rapid influx of country folk into the cities suddenly made the provision of food to citizens holding an “iron rice bowl” much more delicate. As food shortages worsened, both Stalin and Mao gave absolute priority to this group, for food riots had to be avoided in the cities, where the regime felt vulnerable and wished to maintain stability. In the USSR, the cities were even split into three categories: Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, and a handful of other industrial cities had access to the grain harvested on a national level; 80 others were supplied in part by the central stores, but had to turn to their surrounding areas to make up gaps in their supplies; the remaining cities and towns had to rely solely on local harvests (p. 63). In order to protect themselves, the two regimes exacerbated the rural famine by requisitioning excessive quantities from the producers so as to reduce urban rationing as much as possible. Similarly, Wemheuer reasons and demonstrates that the Chinese famine was finally overcome less by concessions that were granted to the peasants than it was by the swift growth of the industrial workforce and the rapid influx of country folk into the cities suddenly made the provision of food to citizens holding an “iron rice bowl” much more delicate. As food shortages worsened, both Stalin and Mao gave absolute priority to this group, for food riots had to be avoided in the cities, where the regime felt vulnerable and wished to maintain stability. In the USSR, the cities were even split into three categories: Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, and a handful of other industrial cities had access to the grain harvested on a national level; 80 others were supplied in part by the central stores, but had to turn to their surrounding areas to make up gaps in their supplies; the remaining cities and towns had to rely solely on local harvests (p. 63). In order to protect themselves, the two regimes exacerbated the rural famine by requisitioning excessive quantities from the producers so as to reduce urban rationing as much as possible. Similarly, Wemheuer reasons and demonstrates that the Chinese famine was finally overcome less by concessions that were granted to the peasants than it was by

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How does one begin to understand Chinese law? How does one do justice to the complexity of the legal (re)construction process that has taken place since the late 1970s? Observers must navigate between the Scylla of teleological approaches that too easily assume trajectories towards ill-defined notions of rule of law and democratisation, and the Charybdis of historical determinism. They must do justice both to a continuing dominant view of law as an instrument of state power and the agency of lawyers, judges, academics, and activists inside and outside of the legal system who seek to develop and apply their own conceptions of professionalism and justice. They must explore the influences of socialism and foreign legal transplants, and the impact of autochthonous traditions and concepts. They must cater to the preconceptions of legal scholars, for whom the relative immaturity of China’s legal system is sometimes difficult to conceive, and those of China experts, who are often predisposed to seeing law as merely a continuation of politics and power and lacking autonomous existence.