Fighting Famine in North China

State, Market, and Environmental Decline,
1690s–1990s

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CHAPTER TEN

The "Land of Famine,"

1900–1949

in the southeast of China, particularly Beijing and Zhili, the Boxer Uprising of 1900, followed by the Allied occupation of the capital in 1901, and the flight of the court to Xian for two years, were cataclysmic. For the empire as a whole, these events signified a fundamental shift into political crisis and final dynastic decline. The revolution of 1911 toppled the Qing dynasty and with it the entire imperial system of government that had prevailed for two millennia. Destroying the old system, however, easier than establishing a new one. The new Republican government faltered in the face of weak leadership, contending military factions, and pervasive threat of further foreign domination of the government and the economy. Although the Nationalist Party, the Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek, brought a superficial end to the warlord struggles and established a new capital at Nanjing in 1928, its control over the nation was challenged and ultimately destroyed, not only by the surviving warlords but more seriously by Japanese military and economic penetration and, at the same time, by Communist insurgency. After eight years of war with Japan, from 1937–45, and four more years of civil war with the Communists, the Nationalists retreated to the island of Taiwan in 1949.

This half century was also marked by a succession of natural and man-made disasters resulting in famines. (See Table 10.1.) So frequent and geographically extensive were these crises that the view that China was the "Land of Famine," a term coined by Western relief workers, was shared by Chinese people as well. Throughout the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, every region of China experienced large-scale "famines"—crises of subsistence and security caused by both natural and political factors. In 1915 flooding in the Pearl River Basin in South China, submerged more than 10 million mu of fields, creating 6.5 million flood victims. In 1920 the great North China drought severely affected the entire north, causing high mortality. From 1928–30 an even more severe drought affected the northwest as well as the north, causing enormous suffering. In 1931, the great Yellow River flood included the Huai River Basin as well and affected eight provinces of central and eastern China. The Yellow River, known as "China's Sorrow," flooded in 1925, 1933, and again in 1935, but the greatest damage was done in 1938 when the Nationalist forces bombed the dikes at Anyang in order to block the advance of the Japanese army. The resulting shift of the riverbed of the Yellow River from north back to south caused great human dislocation and suffer-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Famine Type</th>
<th>Total Deaths (Million)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Food Famine</td>
<td>87.5</td>
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<td>1949</td>
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<td>Total: 96.6</td>
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**Table 1.1**

Major Droughts and Famine in China and Zhih-Hoede, 1820-1995

(Sources: Table 1.1 in [Zhih-Hoede, 1995])
ing, as well as loss of farmland and crops. This was the ultimate example of the combining of human calamity and natural disaster, or in the Chinese phrase, tianzai renhua. In 1942–43 an extensive drought famine in central China was made more horrible by the conditions of warfare. In their classic of wartime reporting, *Thunder Out of China*, Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby described graphically how millions starved in Henan Province in 1943 while tons of grain in neighboring provinces were blocked by opposing military factions, and meanwhile the Kuomintang ignored the tragedy.

Although all regions were affected by such disasters, it was North China that was the most constantly affected. In the Hai River Basin, the flood of 1921 was particularly threatening to Tianjin itself, while the great flood of 1917 affected 105 counties and attracted much attention. Shortly after this, all of North China, including Zhili, experienced a drought in 1920–21 of the same proportions and intensity as the 1876–79 drought. In 1924, another large flood struck the same area, affecting at least sixty counties and leaving more than 1 million people destitute. Following this, the 1928–30 drought, often referred to as the Northwest Drought, affected the southern portion of Zhili very harshly. In 1939 another great flood affected 116 counties in the Hai River Basin, and wreaked havoc in Tianjin.

Although the central government had few means to combat these disasters, there still was an organized response—in varying degrees—to these human tragedies. After 1900, both the foreign involvement and the Chinese voluntary efforts expanded while the formal government role decreased even more. The foreign role was legitimizing in the China International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC), which played an increasingly larger role in the 1920s. During the 1927–37 decade, however, the Nanjing government began to curtail the relative independence of the CIFRC and insisted on asserting greater Chinese authority.

These organized responses, however, could neither cure nor mask the fundamental deterioration in the order of "Heaven, Earth, and Man." Viewed from a traditional Chinese perspective, the continuation of natural and human disasters could be seen as a sign of the failure of a new dynasty to secure the Mandate of Heaven. Yet viewed from the present, one can see with greater clarity that these events of the first half of the twentieth century—or indeed the entire century from 1890–1950—were not merely part of a dynastic transition, but rather that they were evidence of a fundamental historical shift—the outlines of which were just being recognized. The scale and frequency of famines were greater, but more importantly, their political significance had been magnified through the lens of the newly emergent Chinese nationalism. "Natural" crises were increasingly seen as having direct political causes, as well as revealing deeper economic and social origins.

**1917 and Later Floods**

The 1917 floods were regarded as the worst in at least thirty years, and the devastation in and around Tianjin was particularly serious. Rains in July caused the Yongding River to sit up heavily, which in turn caused the Hai River to shoal up so that the water barely flowed. Finally the banks of the Yongding River broke and the surrounding countryside was submerged. In August a second set of downpours resulted in the flooding of southern rivers, including the breaching of the Nan Yanhe, which resulted in the flooding of the plain to the south and west of Tianjin. By September, the city of Tianjin itself was flooded, with seven inches of water along the west bank of the Hai River. Later the water rose to as much as 1.8 meters in some sections. Panic set in. "Junks of quite big size are now sailing on the main roads in the Japanese Settlement," reported the
Chapter Ten

Peking Daily News. "The country between the Grand Canal and Paotingfu [Baoding fu] is actually a lake," reported the North China Daily News. For a while it was thought that the flooding was caused by breaks in the Yellow River dikes at Kaifeng, and there was a widespread fear that the Yellow River might be shifting its course northward and threaten the city of Tianjin itself. 8

At its maximum extent, the flood affected 105 counties, including at least 40 that were severely affected. As many as 3.8 million people were estimated to be destitute, with 46 million mu (1.5 million sq. miles) of crops damaged. Torrential rain destroyed numerous houses, and thousands of refugees crowded into Tianjin. The city itself was estimated to have 400,000 people in need of assistance. 9 In late October, the American Red Cross reported that there were 55,000 homeless in the city, and 1 million altogether in the region. 10 During the winter the homeless in Tianjin reached 100,000. 11 An estimated 40-50,000 were unemployed. The Peking-Hankow railway suffered washouts in 600 places on the northern half of the line. Because of the vast plain between the railway and Tianjin, water remained on the ground, flowing very slowly if at all, and as the cold weather set in, whole villages including their houses were frozen under a sheet of ice. As the spring thaw approached, areas once again were soaked, and more houses collapsed. 12

Flooding was not simply the result of excess rainfall, but rather the vulnerability of the river to overflows because of the narrowing of the channels and the accumulation of silt. An earlier flood, in 1912, was at the time considered the most serious in many years, flooding the regions to the west and north of Tianjin. In late August, with 24 counties or districts reporting, 300,000 people were estimated to have suffered the destruction of their crops. 13 The recorded annual precipitation at Tianjin was 726 mm. But in 1917, the total rainfall was only 415 mm, far less than in 1912, and below the average annual rainfall of 499 mm for the period 1894-1922. 14 The rainfall at Beijing was also less than in other historic floods. In 1801, the estimated precipitation was 1,112 mm; but in 1912 only 732 mm fell, and in 1917, 782 mm. (See Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1.) Of 140 counties in the 1917 flood region, 41 were rated as heavily damaged, 63 as lightly damaged, 33 had no damage, and 10 did not report. In 1801 10 million people were in need of relief; in 1917, 5.8 million. 15

In the 1932 flood, considered the worst in a hundred years, only 681 mm was recorded at Beijing, but nearby areas recorded 1,137 mm. 16

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

To an unprecedented degree, the leadership of famine relief in 1917 was shared and its funding eclectic. In 1917, there was no emperor or traditional bureaucracy and even fewer official sources of funds than before. The natural crisis coincided with a turbulent series of political events at Beijing. The warlord government was challenged by an attempt at monarchist restoration. The warlords Feng Yuxiang and Duan Qirui thwarted the attempt, but other warlords forced their resignation. Coup followed coup. By October 1917, the new administration of President Xu Shichang had replaced all the earlier contenders. 17 Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the attention of the Beijing government was not fully focused on flood relief. Its choice of Xiong Xiling in late September 1917 to be director-general of flood relief and river conservancy was therefore wise; despite his checkered political career and his brief and unhappy tenure as premier in 1913-14, he was admirably suited for this new role in philanthropy and social work. 18

By the time of Xiong's appointment, the devastation from the flood was already acute. The Ministry of Finance had already appropriated 300,000 yuan (Chinese dollars), but the government could provide no more. Xiong's main responsibility was to raise funds and to coordinate the work of existing private charitable groups. His directorate was also to supervise the flood conser-
ary 16, 1918, shows that a total of 209,925 shi of grain (121,766 of red sorghum and 88,159 shi of corn) had been sold through the pinging method at seventy-two places, yielding total income of 588,892 yuan. Regulations stated that only two types of grain—sorghum and corn—were to be distributed. Red sorghum, usually for making gaoliang liquor, was used, but it was less nutritious than white sorghum. Previously sorghum for Tianjin came from Shandong or south Zhili, but in the 1920s Manchuria became a more important source. On June 26, 1919, in its final report, the directorate stated that a total of 858,655 yuan had been spent on grain purchases, plus transportation costs of 41,645 yuan, for 84,236 shi of grain. In addition, Tianjin grain merchants had arranged for the purchases of 804,000 yuan worth of grain from Anhui, and 210,000 shi of grain from Jilin. In 1917 alone, Tianjin grain merchants were responsible for purchasing from other provinces a total of 1.7 million yuan worth of food products, mostly grain. The cost of grain was supposed to be passed on to the county governments, each of which was to assess its need and depute officials to Tianjin or Baoding, where the government had collected most of the grain. While each county was to determine the fair selling price according to its local conditions, the price was not to be set so low as to discourage merchants. Rich households should be persuaded to sell their grain at the same price.

In addition to pinging, about 600 soup kitchens in 56 or more counties were set up at a total cost of 189,902 yuan. Direct charity also included the distribution of clothing and fuel and the establishment of shelters. The remission of taxes in 1917 to 110 counties, covering a total of 25,482,265 mu, was another measure that the authorities could easily extend, although it could not bring direct relief.

During the winter and spring, the directorate's focus shifted to the distribution of cash relief rather than grain. Through various other agencies, the directorate provided a total of 1,160,000 yuan for winter relief, while the Tianjin and Beijing branches of the Shuntian-Zhili Relief Bureau raised 370,023 yuan, for a total of 1,660,000 yuan. The bureau administered the distribution of relief by dividing the flood area into fourteen relief districts and rating each village according to the seriousness of its devastation. In principle, all households were also rated as in desperate need, or simply in need; the former would get 2 yuan per adult and 1 yuan per child, while the latter would get 1 yuan per adult and .5 yuan per child. This winter relief program, however, encountered many problems. The Zhili Relief Bureau apparently misrated many villages, permitting relief to be given to those who did not need it and denying relief to others desperately in need. As a result, the directorate raised 140,100 yuan more to be given to 4th and 5th degree villages, which were in fact as much in need as those of the 6th and 7th degree. The responsibility for administering the spring relief was transferred to the second organization, the Tianjin Shuntian-Zhili Charitable Relief Society, which raised about 200,000 yuan to supplement the 500,000 raised by the directorate.

The records of the spring relief distribution show how difficult it was to avoid malfeasance and corruption. Relief workers were cautioned against taking the word of local leaders regarding local conditions without conducting a separate investigation. The county magistrate was supposed to supervise the distribution of relief funds in conjunction with local organizations and leaders. It was forbidden to let village authorities make these decisions unilaterally. The rules for pinging also stipulated that grain should be sold directly to individual households, and not wholesale to village elders to resell. Yet at the same time local magistrates were not to be entirely trusted either; the authorities knew of their corruptibility, noting that not all magistrates regarded the welfare of the people as their first priority.

Despite the use of grain and limited usefulness, and that efforts to extend low-interest loans to such societies that had aid been also to set up charitable charitable sources in order to butt private sources in order to butt institution was widespread. Work relief was seen as a key to the flood reconstruction. It was designated as work relief by the flood victims and i work; women, the elderly, and well these plans were carried out by laborers by county.

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Despite the use of grain and cash distributions, there was the conviction that direct charity had limited usefulness, and that efforts should be directed toward increasing the purchasing power of the flood victims. Magistrates were urged to set up loan societies both in the county capitals and the countryside. They were to solicit funds from banks as well as local leaders and merchants in order to extend low-interest loans to help flood victims get back on their feet. At the end there were 309 such societies that had aided 44,000 flood victims with total capital of 316,213 yuan. Magistrates were also to set up charitable pawnshops. They were to raise the capital from local public and private sources in order to buy land from the flood victims, although it does not appear that this institution was widespread. If local funds were insufficient, the authorities could apply to the directorate for funds. On 12/14 the directorate issued a notice to all counties to follow the example of Baodi, where, after several meetings had failed to raise any funds, the magistrate set an example by donating 1,000 yuan, after which others followed with 20,000 yuan in contributions.

Work relief was seen as a way of providing income for the destitute and getting cheap labor for the flood reconstruction. It appears that several counties, such as Baodi, Ba, and Xianghe, were designated as work relief sites. The regulations prescribed the method for conducting investigations of flood victims and issuing coupons to the able-bodied that would enable them to find work; women, the elderly, and the disabled were to receive other types of relief. It is not clear how well these plans were carried out, or how extensively work relief was tried elsewhere. Cases of abuse of laborers by county officials were reported.

The most imaginative relief measures were directed toward reviving the cotton-weaving industry since the flood districts included the cotton-weaving centers of Ruyang, Gaoyang, Xian, and Shantung. The directorate estimated that there were 100,000 idle looms in the region that could support 800,000 people, assuming eight to a household. The directorate proposed the guarantee of loans to cotton merchants to revive the market, the distribution of cotton yarn to cotton-weaving counties, and the signing of contracts with Mitsui Trading Company for the guaranteed purchase of cotton yarn for distribution to weaving households. The chamber of commerce was exhorted to persuade the cloth merchants to buy as much cloth from the weavers as they normally would; the merchants would be advanced loans on easy terms. The emphasis on economic recovery of household industry forms a striking contrast to the Qing emphasis on restoring agricultural production and reflects the commercialization of some local economies in this region.

CHINESE AND FOREIGN ACTIVISM IN THE RURAL AREAS

In 1917, private initiatives flourished, and numerous Chinese as well as foreign groups, even individuals, raised money and rushed to the Zhili region to dispense relief. Many were based in Shanghai, including the Shanghai branch of the Shantung-Zhili Flood Charitable Relief Society, the Shanghai Red Cross, and the Shanghai Guanqentang (Hall for Spreading Benevolence). Others originated in Hong Kong and Japan. Social activists from the Shanghai area played a particularly large role, as they had in the 1876–79 North China drought.

Tang Zongyu and Tang Zongguo, two brothers from Wuxi, raised funds and distributed relief in Zhili, inspired by the example of their late father, Tang Tongqing, a Zen Buddhist believer, who had traveled to several provinces in his lifetime to dispense famine relief and had written some rules for famine relief. The sons also lived frugally and practiced charity. In Zhili they were drawn to the four of the most severely distressed counties Baodi, Ba, Wen'an, and Gu'an. Since a Shanghai silk merchant had already contributed a considerable sum to Baodi, the Tang brothers decided to concentrate on Ba and Wen'an counties; they heard that many at Ba County had died. They
gave out both money and garments, but soon they discovered that the destitute actually preferred grain. Ultimately they were able to purchase 9,000 shi of grain and also to distribute 29,400 shi. Their account reveals the eclectic nature of the relief effort and the apparently easy networking among different charitable organizations and agencies. The Tang brothers were in direct communication with the Shuntian-Zhili Relief Bureau and the Beijing-Zhili-Fengtian Charitable Society, but knowing that the relief effort's success would depend on private initiatives, they raised money among those whom they personally knew and also cooperated with Buddhist and Christian organizations, as well as the Guangrentang.

The impact of these various initiatives is difficult to measure. Wen'an was one of the worst regions. The entire county lay in a geographical depression, or *hu*. After the 1912 flood, it took three years for the water to drain off. In the 1917 flood, many families had fled, and homes and crops were destroyed. Christian missionaries estimated that in the summer of 1918 about 30 percent of the population had fled, and about 100,000 of the remaining population, mostly women and children, were in desperate need. The positive effect of Chinese and foreign relief efforts is recorded in the Wen'an local history, which names five organizations as particularly important in 1917: (1) the Shanghai Guangrentang contributed a great deal of money, and distributed tickets to the very poor to allow them to get some cash, clothes, cottons, and medicine. It also gave out flour and set up soup kitchens. (2) The North China Christian Flood Relief Committee donated a large amount of money; the American clergyman Lei-si-de (John Leighton Stuart) came to supervise the distribution. Foreigners and Chinese cooperated to run soup kitchens at thirteen locations, to repair the Thousand-Li Dike, and to fix the road to Beijing. They used labor relief and saved the lives of countless poor people. They set up hospitals and gave out seed. They donated a total of 36,000 foreign dollars and 80,000 shi of grain. This scale of money was rarely seen before. (3) The Shanghai Red Cross sent a deputy. (4) The Tianjin branch of the Shuntian-Zhili Relief Bureau also distributed a total of 37,000 yuan at Wen'an: 1 yuan for adults, and 50 cents for children, and double the amount for the very poor. (5) Shuntian-Zhili Charitable Society donated 30,000 yuan for Wen'an in 1918.

Xinhe County in Jizhou also suffered badly from the flood. Rains started 6/5, and the entire county was affected. Thirty-five thousand houses collapsed, and more than twenty people drowned. Emergency relief was distributed in cash from local charity granary funds. In the spring, the provincial government donated funds for labor relief. In addition villages were granted tax remissions, depending on the severity of their disaster. Because of the extensive relief, this crisis was considered to have been less devastating in its effect than the 1920 drought, when many died from epidemic disease as well as hunger. In 1917 there was still relative prosperity. People still had reserves and were willing to help each other, according to the local history.

In Ding County, the facts recorded by the American social scientist Sidney Gamble seem to indicate that the directives of the directorate were carried out faithfully. Crops were damaged in 335 out of 453 villages, of which 197 had no crops or less than 10 percent of the normal output. About 40 percent of the land suffered damage, with about 25 percent of the population reporting serious or very serious damage. Tax remissions were granted on a sliding scale. A few soup kitchens were set up, and *pingtiao* was practiced in a few districts. Cash distributions seemed to play a larger role. The local authorities sold off the grain reserves from local granaries and used the 3,727 yuan in proceeds, plus an additional 1,954 yuan in donations, to distribute cash to the poor. The emphasis on cash grants, rather than grain distribution, seems to suggest that the grain market was fully functional during the crisis.

Although not so severe in his worst area, the 1917 flood in the Yongding River region was still a major disaster. In Gu'an County, for instance, by 1912 the district of the repeated flooding, the *fudi*, from which their belongings within were all toppled, was from drowning, but from the north. Scattered local records bark. The price of grain reared in 1918; epidemic disease in the fall.
Although not so severe in human and social devastation as the 1876–79 drought or the one that was to follow in 1920, the 1917 flood was nevertheless extremely damaging. The low-lying districts in the Yongding River region, between Beijing and Tianjin, were practically in a chronic state of crisis. In Gu'an County, for example, the Yongding River had broken out of its dikes regularly since 1904. By 1912 the district was like a swamp, soggy, and people had nothing to eat. Because of the repeated flooding, the soil had accumulated to a height of five to six feet so that the district that used to be moderately fertile was now barren. In fact the level of the land within the zian city was lower than the surrounding countryside by five to six feet and was shaped like a cauldron or kettle, the bottom from which there was no way for the water to flow out. The yamen and other buildings within were all topped. Mortality estimates or figures were rarely cited. People did not die from drowning, but from the accumulated effects of hunger, disease, cold, migration, and so forth. Scattered local records for 1918 speak of daji, or starvation—or alternately, people eating tree bark. The price of grain reached 4 yuan per shi in some places. More significantly, in the fall of 1918, epidemic disease in some places claimed many lives. In Wen'an, in the ninth month, "innumerable" people died.

The homeless were of greatest concern. Shelters were set up by local authorities and also by gentry, merchants, or church groups. The record shows there were altogether 170 shelters in 62 counties. About 40,000 people were housed, at a total cost of 225,000 yuan. As in Qing times, a paramount concern of authorities was to try to keep people in their home localities and prevent them from roaming around. Many refugees fled to Tianjin by land or water from distances up to 200–500 li. The authorities feared that if they stayed on, they would become vagrants. The directorate advised that they be given free transport and stipends and sent home. But since some returned for another dole, the police were advised to take and issue picture identification to refugees and to keep a photographic record of them.

In this crisis, as in 1876–79 and other well-documented early twentieth-century disasters, a common act of desperation was the sale of young children or women. In 1876–79, Western observers reported the large-scale sales of northern Chinese women, even transporting them to the south. Most of the thousands of refugees that fled to Tianjin in that crisis were probably women and children. The Guangrentang sheltered them from not only hunger and disease but also from the danger of being kidnapped or sold. In 1917 there was only indirect evidence of the sale of women or children. On 1917/10/11 the directorate cabled all county magistrates to forbid the sales of young children. Many such cases have been reported, said the cable. Two other notices followed in November advising magistrates to set up orphanages for the care of children, and the military to guard them. There is no reference to infanticide, but evidence from other disasters suggests that this was a frequent but never acknowledged social practice.

CHINESE AND FOREIGN ACTIVISM IN TIANJIN

Far more than in previous crises, the 1917 flood was Tianjin-centered. Not only was it the geographic center of the flooding itself—the point at which the five key rivers converged—but also it was the center of the Chinese and foreign relief efforts. Despite the aid available in some rural areas, Tianjin offered tremendous advantages to those Zhili flood victims who could find refuge there. As it had developed as an industrial center, many migrants from the hinterland sought economic opportunity as factory workers and service laborers. Ninety-seven percent of the workers in the Santiaozi industrial district were from Hebei, mostly from Hejian Prefecture (especially Yangzao, Jiaobei, and Ningjin). In times of crisis, refugees swelled the population of the city. In
the winter of 1877–78, 100,000 people had been sheltered and fed in Tianjin. In 1917–18, the numbers may have been smaller, but they were still significant. Tianjin police estimated in September 1918 that 284,349 people had been destitute in Tianjin city, with another 66,679 in neighboring districts.

Although missionaries were active in the countryside, foreign relief efforts were more concentrated at Tianjin. The foreign residents had charitable impulses, but, with the presence of so many refugees, they were also motivated by fear for their own personal safety and health. In addition, the flood threatened their businesses and shipping. Foreign relief efforts included a few showcase examples, such as the American Red Cross Flood Relief Camp, which was open from November 13, 1917, to March 31, 1918. The camp, built in the German Concession, contained about a thousand huts designed by "Mr. Harry Hussey—of the well known architectural firm of Shatuck and Hussey of Chicago." It was run along the lines of a military camp, with inmates issued identification tags and ration cards and forced to submit to morning inspections, baths, and schools. Each person was medically examined upon entrance, his or her clothes sterilized and hair shaved or washed with kerosene oil. In all, the operators were proud that they had taken care of 4,800 homeless, destitute Chinese of the lowest and poorest order, already weakened by long exposure to flood and cold, and only one case of an infectious disease ever appeared in the camp. The Tientsin Christian Union operated another refugee camp consisting of 3,000 huts housing 7,000 refugees. Xiong's directorate financed the construction, but the Christian group assumed the responsibility for running the camp, where they maintained a high sanitary and medical standard. "Vaccination against smallpox and regular bathing are provided for and encouraged while the hoshes are cleaned daily. The proportion of sickness is extremely low. Women were kept busy making clothing and bedding and reed mats. Classes were established for adults as well as children.

Other cities held fund-raising events. In Beijing the Chinese power-elites of warlords and others did its part by sponsoring fairs and raffles. In Shanghai the Sino-foreign community sponsored a five-day "charity fair" in Mr. S. A. Hardoon's garden, which included a balloon ascension, a lantern parade, Chinese dramatics, acrobatics, bazaar entertainments, cinema shows, and pyrotechnic displays. However, "most of the evening was given over to feasting while watching the shows in the theaters." Not only the foreign community, but "Chinese from the tall northerner to the thin, short Cantonese, poor and rich, all were there contributing their share to help their needy brothers."

At Tianjin, civil society and social activism were evident in each subsequent crisis. In 1939, when there was a massive flood accompanied by fierce winds that devastated Tianjin and surrounding localities in Hebei, its effects were felt even in Shandong, Henan, and Shanxi. Within the city, the water reached some rooftops, and more than 100,000 people had to evacuate their houses. Sampans ferried passengers along the streets that had become waterways. Municipal authorities and civic organizations banded together to organize a large relief effort. Some grain inventories were available within the city, but as in the past, shipments of grain, especially corn, from Manchuria proved critical. Including thirty-nine cities, districts, and townships outside Tianjin, a total of 406,500 households, or 1,688,800 persons, received relief in this crisis.

The foreign concessions were directly affected and mounted their own relief efforts. In the Italian Concession, 5,000 refugees were sheltered in tents set up in the park, but there were an estimated 1,000–2,000 others who could not be accommodated and eked out a living in back alleys or on the streets. By late October, all the refugees were given allowances and sent away, presum-
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ably because there was no way to shelter so many people over the winter. Funds were raised from 
local residents, both Chinese and foreign. And as in almost all these relief campaigns, careful ac-
counts were maintained, and many photographs were taken of the refugees and the staff that 
looked after them, such as the sanitation brigade, the soup kitchen staff, and the barber. The fi-
nal report proudly enumerated the accomplishments of the relief effort, down to the last steamed 
 bun and each serving of gruel dispensed. Special attention was paid to sanitation and the preven-
tion of infectious disease. Donations from civic groups, including the Japanese, amounted to more 
than 1 million dollars, not including donations in kind. Ultimately only 885,000 yuan were spent, 
leaving a surplus of about 300,000 yuan—another source of pride.

RIVER CONSERVANCY: THE FOREIGN ROLE

It was in the area of river conservancy that foreign advisors made the most distinctive contribu-
tion, motivated by the protection of their own economic interests. The 1917 flood prompted the 
most sustained foreign involvement to date in river conservancy. Although the Chinese authorities 
had already spent 360,000 yuan on dike repairs by October 19, 1917, they knew that foreign 
assistance would be needed. At Tianjin foreigners had been active in conservancy problems since 
the turn of the century. In 1901 the Hai Ho (He) Conservancy Commission, a Sino-foreign 
avisory body under the Chinese government, had been formed, composed largely of foreign en-
genies and financed with customs and river revenue and a tonnage tax on all vessels using the har-
bor. It had made an excellent start in surveying the flood areas, although its jurisdiction did not 
extend beyond the Hai River. In 1912, after terrible floods, the commission made recommendations 
for relieving the pressure on the Hai River and its tributaries. Its focus was not just the im-
mediate Tianjin area but the entire basin, and recommendations included cutting other outlets to 
the ocean, the creation of canals that would facilitate drainage, reforestation, and construction of 
reservoirs upstream.

The 1917 flood, however, seemed to be a real wake-up call for the foreign diplomats and busi-
nessmen in Tianjin. They recognized that continual silting and flooding of the waterways around 
the port threatened their commercial interests, and thus they needed to take a wider view beyond 
the treaty port itself in order to keep the port navigable. Further, they recognized that interna-
tional cooperation was essential. “Tientsin has taken a very limited view of its responsibilities, and 
indeed of its own danger. . . There is only one solution of the flood problem, and that solution 
is full co-operation.” Another editorial noted that the advent of railways had made the foreign 
community more aware of the suffering in the interior because localities were easier to get to. “So 
the Chihli floods have come again. But this time with a difference. Where they have merely af-
fected the native before, they have this time very boldly and badly hit the foreigner.” Because of 
this, the Chinese population would benefit from steps the foreigners would take to guard the 
drivers. The fear that the city would be entirely flooded was the most compelling reason for ac-
tion. One foreigner referred to “the coming end of Tientsin.” There was also concern about disrup-
tion of the Peking-Hankow rail line. The French consultant engineer, G. Bouillard, conducted 
a survey and concluded that the only way to avoid future damage to the railroad was to adopt funda-
mental measures such as “reafforestation” and the building of storage basins.

E. Vanderwee, the consulting engineer for the National Conservancy Board and author of 
many reports on the Zhibi River problem, saw the Zhibi River crisis as a political and historical is-
issue, not an engineering one. “Human interference, the direct cause of the present conditions” was 
the subtitle of an essay written in 1917. He argued that the two main problems—the “silt evil” and
the inadequacy of outlets—both had their historic origins in the diversion of tributaries into the main rivers to protect the Grand Canal. For example, the diversion of Chao River into the Bei River in earlier centuries placed too much pressure on the latter, which in turn affected the Hei River. The Yongding River was the major problem. In order to prevent the river from bringing into the Grand Canal a large quantity of silt, it had been diverted to the then-existing swamps, which acted as storage basins until, in the course of centuries, they had filled up. At the same time, the riverbeds also became elevated because of the restricted outflow of water. "The result is that the Hun Ho [another name for the Yongding River] is now a menace to the entire country and its destruction is only surpassed by the Yellow River." 792

On October 12, 1917, a new Commission for the Improvement of the River System of Chihli (Zhili) was created by the Chinese government and the diplomatic body. Xiong Xiling was appointed president and its members consisted of foreigners and Chinese, with a generous representation of engineers. Its main functions were providing technical advice on river improvements and controlling expenditures of funds supplied by diplomatic agreement. River conservancy posed a type of challenge that appealed to the Western, particularly American, reformers. Engineers such as O. J. Todd traversed the countryside, surveying, measuring, and supervising work where possible. From 1917 until 1927, the commission conducted extensive surveys of the river system and undertook certain projects, including the "Cathedral Cutting," north of Tianjin, which straightened out one bend of the Bei River, removing a danger to one section of the city. 793 Together with the China International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC), established in 1921 to coordinate foreign relief efforts, it helped to build dikes along the Daqing and Ziya rivers and to sponsor local self-help projects, as well as the Shilu irrigation scheme, which was largely completed in 1917 and which helped to irrigate 70,000 mu along the Yongding River, west of Beijing. 794 Another successful project was at "West Lake" (Xi dian), about 30 miles east of Baoding fu, where extensive digging was undertaken at the cost of 300,000 yuan. In 1927 a successful harvest was achieved there, whereas in 1924 and 1925 the entire district had been covered with floodwater. A third success was the repair of a major break along the Thousand-Li Dike, which made farming possible within the Wen’an wa. 795

Dated September 3, 1923, Photograph 10.1 shows work on the diversion of the Bei River under the supervision of the Chihli River Commission. Notable is the combination of modern engineering technology with old-fashioned human labor.

More ambitious engineering projects were beyond the commission’s means. One major construction project recommended but never carried out by the CIFRC was the digging of a channel from the Grand Canal near Duli to the sea, which would provide a second outlet for the southern river systems. This project would have cost 6 million yuan and required 100–200,000 laborers. 796 Map 10.1 reproduces a CIFRC survey map, dated January 1926 and signed by O. J. Todd, showing a proposed flood channel at Duli (Tuliu). In its final report, the commission recommended not only a southern outlet for the Yongding River but also major improvements in northern and southern rivers, at a total estimated cost of 100 million yuan. As the commission disbanded, it acknowledged that not much net gain had been made, and in its current state the Yongding River would repeat the disaster of 1917. 797 The Hai River Commission reached the same conclusion, namely that unless the Yongding River were put under central government control, "provincialism" would offset any river conservancy attempts. 798 Despite its limitations, the Chihli River Commission had a good record. O. J. Todd commended its survey work and smaller projects, but larger projects had to be postposed for the future, “when China has a government,” he wrote. “The problems of the river are very busy for twenty years with construction and necessary work were eventually under suggesting the 1920s. Yet, just a few years later, in 1918, the Chinese government gave up control of the river systems and leaving more than 78,000 people dead, the problem of the river became more acute.”

The "Land of Famine," 1900–1949

The residents of the Bei River valley, which once bore the brunt of the great flood that extended all over North China, were hard hit by the drought that followed. The conditions were similar to those in 1876, and the same five provinces of Shannxi, Shanxi, Shandong, Henan, and Zhili were principally affected. The sections of Shanung and Honan and Chihli, north of the Yellow River and south of the line drawn between Peking and Tientsin were the worst. The total number of destitute was estimated to be 10 million; 8.8 million of them were in Zhili, the largest number of all provinces. The Zhili disasters were found in ninety-seven counties, whose combined population was 18.8 million.40

In the autumn of 1920, thirteen counties had 90–100 percent of their population in distress, thirty-

PHOTOGRAPH 10.1. Laborers at river site, 1922
SOURCE: Chihli River Commission, Reports.
two had 70–89 percent, eighteen had 40–69 percent, while nine had 20–39 percent in distress; the remaining 25 counties had under 20 percent, or the percentage was unclear.\(^{102}\) (See Map 10.2.)

**Sino-foreign Famine Relief**

The famine relief effort inspired both Chinese and international assistance of unprecedented proportions. Several foreign relief organizations formed an executive committee, supported by the diplomatic community, while several Chinese voluntary and semiofficial organizations combined to form the North China Famine Relief Society. The Chinese and foreign groups together formed the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee. Together with the North China International Famine Relief Committee of Tientsin, these groups coordinated activities in Zhili. The first had responsibility for western Zhili, and the Tientsin group for the eastern part of the province. Similar groups were established at Shanghai, Jinan, Kaifeng, and other cities. Each had its independent jurisdiction, but the overall coordination was given to the Peking group, which had a semiofficial status.\(^{103}\)

Fund-raising in the United States, Hong Kong, Canada, Britain, and other countries was enthusiastic, and donations for relief were substantial. In total 17.4 million Mex. dollars were raised by international committees. American donations of 6.5 million dollars provided the largest share. Another 4 million was raised through a loan based on a surtax on the Chinese Maritime Customs.\(^{104}\) There was a tremendous outpouring of generosity in the United States. Led by banker Thomas W. Lamont, appointed by President Woodrow Wilson, the China Famine Relief Fund mounted a vigorous nationwide fund-raising campaign, collecting more than 4 million dollars, which were transferred to the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee.\(^{105}\) Fund-raisers used slogan after slogan to nag the American conscience. "Famine relief is a sermon without words," their posters said. "Pick a Pal in China." "Give China a chance to live!" "15 Million starving—Every minute counts."\(^{106}\) In both the Chinese and Western communities in Beijing and Tientsin, there was also a "contagion of philanthropy." According to John Earl Baker, an American missionary, "it became the socially correct thing to donate bridge winnings to some relief fund, and one became sure of a moment in the spotlight by letting it be known that shortly one was 'going down to the famine area.'"\(^{107}\)

The 17.4 million raised through the international committees represented only one part of the total of 37.1 million dollars spent on relief. Another 2 million was raised by various missionary bodies—the American Presbyterian Church, Catholic Missions, and so on—and administered separately.\(^{108}\) Another 2.4 million was raised through the American Red Cross. The remainder came from Chinese Government Relief Bureau, the Ministry of Communications, and various Chinese voluntary groups, which donated 8 million. Since 44 percent of the international committees’ funds actually came from Chinese donations, the final report estimated that 60 percent of the total of 37 million in relief came from Chinese public and private sources. In addition, the government provided free transportation for relief and relief workers valued at an estimated 9 million dollars.

**Methods of Famine Relief**

Unlike 1917, when the emphasis was on economic recovery of households, in 1920–21, relief focused overwhelmingly on the distribution of grain, not money. Although grain distribution posed a more complicated challenge, the committee hoped that large quantities of imported grain would discourage speculators and keep prices down.\(^{109}\) There were ample supplies available from Manchuria that
could be transported by rail: the Pukow lines. The government organised, the Peiping committee supplied food and grain—mainly 
ground to Baoding, Shunde, Dam, availability of large grain supported a life-line, for Zhili.

The railways were seen as whole, the estimated mortality the estimated 9–13 million victims also helped.111 Even so, was not sufficient. How hard it is when the stations in Manchuria was an abundance of feed for transmission to the affected area.

Relief was administered through local Chinese committees aimed at. At the Committee, there were subcommittee and Beijing.112 Altogether during the five provinces,113

The first step in administration was to stratify abandoned, this was a difficult task, after spot-checking them. A relief model, the guidelines for restoring agricultural production enabled. Relief should be given in need, be able to get along on the basis of distributing the food, not benefiting till any were available. The inertial principle was effectual than to

This reflected a rather harsh reality, such small quantities that only the "truly destitute" by definition had just enough try life and were the outcasts. On the grounds however could completely destitute ever. Prefecture, the tickets were poor provided by the ma that all might have a part but efficient to maintain life u

MAP 10.2. Disaster areas in 1920 drought

SOURCE: Adapted from Berger, 1867–72, based on Report on Famine Conditions, November 15, 1920
(North China International Society for Famine Relief, Tientsin).
could be transported by rail: the Peking-Kalgan, Peking-Mukden, Peking-Hankow, and Tiensin-Pukow lines. The government paid the cost of freight. When the line to Manchuria became too congested, the Peking committee turned to the grain markets along the Peking-Kalgan line. Some supplies also came from northern Jiangsu and Anhui. The Peking Committee purchased altogether 53,152 tons of grain—mostly *geoliang,* but also some millet, corn, and beans—which were distributed to Baoding, Shunde, Daming, Zhending, Dingzhou, and elsewhere. As in the past, the easy availability of large grain supplies in Manchuria, and now Mongolia, was a precious resource, indeed a life-line, for Zhili.

The railways were seen as the main factor in limiting the loss of life. For North China as a whole, the estimated mortality was half a million victims, a terrible human toll, but far less than the estimated 9–13 million victims of the 1876–79 famine. A mild winter and effective relief measures also helped. Even so, some famine areas received nothing. "Yet the communications are not sufficient. How hard it is for some to understand how there should have been famine in China when the stations in Manchuria and other districts were filled with grain awaiting shipment. There was an abundance of food supplies to meet all the needs had the conditions been favourable for transmission to the affected districts and had there been money to make purchase."

Relief was administered through subcommittees of foreign and Chinese members, and channeled through local Chinese groups, either local leaders or Christian church members. International committees aimed at guarding against malfeasance supervised all stages. Under the Peking Committee, there were subcommittees for Baoding, Dingzhou, Zhending, Shunde, Daming, and Beijing. Altogether there were 537 foreign famine workers and 5,761 Chinese workers covering the five provinces.

The first step in administering relief was the direct investigation of households and their classification into the destitute and near destitute. Because so many households had split up or been abandoned, this was a difficult task. Lists already prepared by the magistrate were sometimes used after spot-checking them. Although investigation resembled the methods of the Qing famine relief model, the guidelines for relief distribution placed greater emphasis on saving lives rather than restoring agricultural production. The guiding principle was that

relief should be given in sufficient amount to sustain life until harvest time, when the people would be able to get along on their own resources. This policy was necessary owing to the prevalent practice of distributing the relief available to all the sufferers, no matter how little each one got, thus not benefiting [sic] any individual sufficiently to sustain life till the resources of the next harvest were available. The International Committees felt it was better to choose a few however, and help them effectively than to give any such small quantities as to be of no effectual help.

This reflected a rather harsh but practical triage mentality: there was no point in giving relief in such small quantities that the recipients would still die. In other words, relief should be given only to the "truly destitute," who often happened to be women and children. The "near destitute" by definition had just enough to pull through. "This group comprised the backbone of the country and were the ones who, if helped, would be of the greatest good in the country. Humanitarian grounds however compelled the passing by of this group and the giving of relief to those completely destitute even though they might be of less value to the community." In Daming Prefecture, the tickets were given to those families chosen by lot from among the list of the very poor provided by the magistrate. "The pressure of the Chinese to distribute the relief very thin so that all might have a part was very great, but we adhered to the principle that relief should be sufficient to maintain life until the harvest." In one town the beleaguered relief worker resorted to
benevolent deception by making a small speech before departing, "saying that the official had in-cluded all the poor, that as all could not be helped there were not tickets enough those who were lucky were chosen by chance (the idea of luck makes a great hit). A list of all those chosen for relief was posted in a public place—"this prevents the headman from doing something different, and also absolves him from the responsibility of choosing households." 118

Although in Baoding and Zhengding local organizations were used as grain distribution centers in the other areas, grain was distributed only at the prefectural city. On distribution days, thousands of people filled the roads, traveling three or four days to get their grain. Despite the crooks, these mass distributions were managed efficiently, according to the report. As a matter of policy, soup kitchens were discouraged. 119 Money was distributed only to nursing and expectant mothers, in emergencies, and in mountainous areas. Only half a million dollars was spent in cash relief.

The ration for grain relief was 20 catties of grain, usually guoliang, sometimes millet and corn for each person each month. This was a fairly generous allowance since the medical experts said that 8 ounces of millet (about half a catty) or of guoliang was sufficient as a daily ration. It is difficult to compare this standard with the Qing famine of 3 he of mi per day per adult, later reduced to 3 he. Technically the he or ke was a measure of volume, while the catty or jin was a measure of weight. The standard of 8 ounces per day may have been comparable to the Qing ration of 3 ke per day if there were about 180 lbs of mi per shi. It was consistent with the principle that the people destitute be aided "until they were able to procure a good harvest off their lands." 120 Distribution were made from February until May 1921. Altogether 2 million or more people were aided in the western Zhili region with 7.4 million monthly rations, averaging three to four months of relief for each person. 121

In the end, the international relief committees had a positive assessment of the work they had done. They estimated that their efforts, along with those of the Red Cross, had relieved a total of 7.7 million people. Of these, 2.7 million were from Zhili Province. 122 The Peking Committee praised the Chinese side of the relief effort. "It is probable that there has never been in the past such a large interest and support in relief work by the Chinese for their own people." It also commended the spirit of cooperation between Chinese and international groups, and the willingness of the Chinese authorities to entrust their funds to international administration. 123

NEGATIVE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

However successful the relief campaign was deemed by the foreign relief workers, it could only address one part of the suffering of the population. If, by its own calculation, 2.7 million were served by the relief organization, then there were another 6 million who did not receive this type of relief. By Peking Committee's own account, as well as the independent observations, this crisis was severe and long lasting. Local conditions varied widely, even in the heavily affected areas. One locality might survive because of good water supply, while a neighboring district might be "barren and destitute." But rural investigation showed that grave hardship was experienced widely. Around Shunde, one-third of the population of about 1 million were "in dire need and there were 31,886 deaths from hunger and cold." In Ding County during a three-week period in the winter, there were an average of 110 deaths a week in a district of half a million people. In Handan, 5 to 80 percent of residents were "destitute." 124 Local histories identify the crisis as a crop failure resulting in severe hunger, daizi; only occasionally do they mention death from hunger (which does not mean it did not occur), and there are no references to cannibalism, as there had been in 1876–79. 125
Famine foods included kung (chaff) mixed with wheat blades, flour made of ground leaves, fuller's earth, flower seeds, corn cobs, roots, sweet potato vines, elm bark, and so forth. "Some of this food was so unpalatable that children starved, refusing to eat it. Yet so common was dependence on this food that in many districts relief workers investigating thousands of homes, very rarely found any store of grain commonly used in food. It is very true that many millions of people were able to eke out their existence by the reliance on food such as the above." 128

Another measure of famine distress was large-scale migration. The Peking Committee's report estimated that at least a million people had left their villages, sometimes using the railroads to migrate to Mongolia, Manchuria, Shanxi, or Shaanxi. 127 The absence of men in villages was common and especially noticeable in areas of Hebei and Shandong from which migration to Manchuria was possible. This was part of a trend that had begun in the 1890s. Each year hundreds of thousands migrated from Shandong and Hebei in search of employment in Manchuria, thus providing an important escape for poor peasant families. Fleeing a specific disaster was one reason for migrating, but not so important as general economic hardship. 128 In 1876, 900,000 migrants fled to Manchuria, escaping the great drought, but the statistics for 1920 and 1921 do not show a great increase during the years immediately before and after; in each of these years about half a million migrated to Manchuria. 129 In 1927-29, when drought again struck North China, and 1939-42, when the Japanese war broke out, there were exceptionally large numbers. 130

The sale of women and children was "surprisingly extensive." 131 One relief worker said in twenty years in Henan he had never seen so many children sold. In Shunde fu, 23,000 children were sold. 132 Numbers of children sold equaled the number that had died. Some children were taken to big cities in other provinces, but Shijiazhuang in Zhill was one of the big centers. Girls and women were sold, even up to the age of forty; as wives, concubines, servants, or prostitutes. Boys were sold as adopted sons. Prices were 3 to 80 yuan, and in one case, 150 yuan. 133 The Peking Committee took a special interest in this issue, sending investigators to the countryside. Some attempts at relief or prevention were made, including paying students in a school 1 or 2 yuan monthly to make them economically valuable to their families. 134

Xinhe County was one of the thirteen counties reported as having 100 percent of its population destitute. 135 Its experience is exceptionally well described in its gazetteer. The year 1920 was simultaneously a natural and a human disaster. Many people died in an epidemic that broke out in the seventh month. Grain prices rose sharply; miller was 8,200 wen per dou; gandu was 4,100 wen; and cotton 680 wen per jin. Everyone panicked. In the ninth month, the local leaders established a relief-grain bureau. The province contributed a total of 26,414 yuan. A total of 12,000 yuan was borrowed to use for pingtiao sales twice. Beijing relief bureaus donated 300 yuan of cotton garments, and so forth. Grain was distributed three times, with rations of 4 sheng for adults and 3 sheng for children. 136 Unlike the 1917 flood when people still had reserves and were willing to help each other, in 1920 by contrast, people were not able to help each other. Banditry was widespread, and officials and police could not keep order. Families fled, some taking refuge in other places or seeking shelter in the county seat. The harvests of 1922 and 1923 were good, but it was hard to hire agricultural workers because so many had gone to the cities. In 1924 there was another flood, but it was not as serious and or as damaging as the crises of 1917 and 1920. In the following year, 1925, the wheat harvest was great. 137

Ying County, one of the less severely affected counties, had only 20 percent of its farmland affected by the drought (in 36 percent of its villages), but it also experienced crop loss from locusts that year. Twenty-five percent of the families were classified as very poor or poor. Aid came from

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Chapter Ten

various sources: the provincial government, local relief associations, the CIFRC, the American Board Mission, and the American Red Cross. In 1921 and 1922, these organizations helped to support the digging of about 460 wells in Ding County and 3,100 more in neighboring counties. The gazetteer of Wan County also recorded famine relief received from various sources, but did not comment on its efficaciousness. Relief was received in 1920 from the local government, from a temple, from the Shuntian-Zhili disaster relief committee, from the Zhili Charitable Society, and from a Confucian charity. In 1929-30, 3,000 yuan was received each year from the Hebei Civilian Affairs Bureau.139

CHINA INTERNATIONAL FAMINE RELIEF COMMISSION

An outcome of the generally successful international cooperation in famine relief was the formation of the China International Famine Relief Commission in September 1921.140 The commission became a permanent relief organization composed of the existing famine relief groups.141 Funded partly by an embarrassing surplus of 2 million dollars of unexpended funds, the CIFRC functioned for almost two decades as the key private voluntary organization for relief operations. Its directors and constituents were both Chinese and foreigners, and it had branches and projects in most of the provinces. The CIFRC saw itself not as an emergency relief group but as an organization dedicated to seeking a "permanent improvement" of conditions in China. It sought to define famine broadly, as a condition "where drought or flood has reduced any considerable portion of the respectable countryside to a diet of wholesome substitutes." Relief should be given in such conditions, even if there was no increase in the death rate. In addition, the CIFRC stressed that the principle of labor relief, rather than free relief, should be applied whenever possible. Beyond emergency relief, the prevention of famines, particularly through river control projects, was emphasized.142

The CIFRC devoted its greatest efforts to public works projects, particularly the building of roads, bridges, and dikes. John Baker had set a high standard of productivity in 1921, when he supervised the construction of 128 kilometers of mountain road in Shanxi Province in 16 days by 20,000 laborers. This two-lane paved road crossed five mountain ranges, ranging between 750 and 1,300 meters in height, and crossed twelve rivers.143 By 1936 the CIFRC had built a total of 3,200 kilometers of new roads in fourteen provinces, repaired 2,000 kilometers of old road, sunk 5,000 tube wells, dug three large irrigation canals, and built 1,600 kilometers of river embankment. The CIFRC also promoted social reform. The establishment of rural cooperatives of various types—primarily credit cooperatives—became a major thrust of its activities in the 1930s, and by 1936, some 26,000 cooperatives had been sponsored. Between 1932 and 1936, the CIFRC disbursed a total of about 50 million Chinese dollars, of which more than half went to such rural reconstruction projects, and about 22 million was spent on direct relief. More than half of the CIFRC funds came from the Chinese government or individual Chinese donors.144

Although famine relief work had become fully secularized, the overwhelming majority of Americans involved in it were missionaries, and there were close ties between church groups and famine relief organizations. Ninety-five out of 125 foreigners on CIFRC committees were missionaries.145 There were still some hard-core evangelical types who criticized missionary participation in famine relief work on the grounds that it drew attention away from spreading the Gospel, but most missionaries saw relief as charitable work, a "ministry of loving deeds," that must be performed, even if no evangelical gains resulted.146 More critically, missionaries saw that fundamental structural reform of the Chinese economy and society would facilitate the long-term prospects for Christianity in China. But to famine relief, such ideals were understood that faith-based public support for church missionary "famines" simply did not apply.

Whether their motives were in accordance with characteristics of the late 1920s large were invariably full of enthusiasm. Perhaps best exemplified in numerous flood control projects, the CIFRC was able to provide much-needed education inism to the public, in particular the elderly and children, who were the worst hit by the winter in this section. The outer sections of the province were forced to use life-saving measures, and the elderly were particularly vulnerable.

Grain prices were set at the cheapest price, and in 1937, when there was a chance of the worst flood in years, grain prices were set so low that it was impossible to buy grain at a price that covered the cost of transport. Many families had no choice but to buy from the relief agency. This was particularly true in the village buying of young women for 10-
for Christianity in China. To this end, they engaged in a wide range of secular activities in addition to famine relief, such as the building of hospitals, schools, and universities. Most missionaries also understood that famine relief campaigns were extremely useful in attracting the American public’s support for church work in China. Their critics, in turn, accused them of creating “missionary famines” simply to raise more funds for missionary work.

Whether their motives were religious or secular, Americans approached famine relief and reconstruction with characteristic energy and enthusiasm. Despite the grim conditions in China, Americans were invariably full of optimism. O. J. Todd, the chief engineer for the CIFRC from 1923 to 1935, perhaps best exemplified this “can-do” attitude. Known as the “River Tamer,” he supervised numerous flood control and road-building projects. He regarded the Chinese as hardworking and easy to teach; traditional Chinese methods, he felt, needed only the extra benefit that could be provided by Western technology and good leadership. So spectacular were his accomplishments, and so large his ego, that in the foreign community he was known as “Todd Almighty.”

The 1928–1930 North China Drought and National Crisis

In 1928–30 another devastating drought struck across northern and northwestern China, including Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, and Shandong. During the late 1920s dry conditions prevailed over North China, particularly in southern Shandong. In December 1927, a million-dollar campaign was authorized by CIFRC. About seventy counties with 4 million people were affected, it was estimated. Conditions described as “worst in years,” or “worst in 35 years.” Gentry and elders appealed to CIFRC for help. “The long line of pedestrians moving day after day from this to other sections speak louder than words of the impossibility of trying to pass through the winter in this section of Shantung and Shihli. Many thousands are now using cottonseed, while others are forced to use chaff, leaves, and weeds, mixed with a little grain, for food. . . . Even the middle class [that is, landowners] have been forced to go out to beg.”

Grain prices were said to be higher and conditions worse than in 1920–21. “Land is sold at a cheaper price, and in many cases a buyer cannot be found. Houses are being torn down in order to sell wood and buy grain. Girls are being sold for a few dollars, charitable institutions are filled to capacity, and can do no more. Roots of trees, wheat-sprouts, and chaff are the daily food of hundreds of thousands.” The following year the drought continued with scorching temperatures, and the disaster reached its height, with 117 out of 129 counties and an estimated 6 million people in Shandong affected. Grain prices in the spring in the Shandong-Zhili border area had risen two to four times the previous year. For example, gōngliang, which had been 2 yuan per 100 catties, had risen to 8 yuan, millet, from 3 to 10 yuan, and wheat from 3 to 7 yuan. Relief workers reported that in villages in this area, most existed on cotton seed and chaff. People were unable to sell land at any price. Many had gone out begging or left for Shansi or Manchuria. In one relatively large village of 100 families, at least 200 people had left. Children and even wives had been sold off to pay for traveling expenses. Or, in other cases, women, children, and elderly had been abandoned to fend for themselves; the able-bodied men had left. In yet other cases, entire families had left together.

As before, the specter of children and women being sold attracted Western concern. “The only thing they are able to sell is women and children.” Boys cost 10 yuan, girls 10–30 yuan, while young women brought in as much as 100 yuan or more. “Men from Shansi are living in each inn in the village buying them up.” In another market town, boys were sold for 4–10 yuan, girls and young women for 10–100 yuan. In another village children were being sold “constantly.” Some had
died. In another village, seven girls from ages six to eight had been sold in two days for 10-15 yuan each. In that village, “deaths by starvation” were common. A poignant tale was reported by a relief worker who gave bread to a dying man, who instead “tortured off to give it to his old mother.”

Although famine in Hebei was confined mainly to the southern portion, overall the 1928-30 North China drought was more geographically extensive than that of 1920-21. A total of 296 counties, with a population of 57,350,000, were affected. “Severe” (where there was “already high death rate”) prevailed in 129 counties with a population of 21,019,000. This included the majority of Shannxi, and part of Henan. “Severe” conditions (“all except indigent can survive”) were found in 84 counties, with a population of 17,197,000, scattered in Shanxi, Shandong, and Hebei. “Less severe” (“death rate will be high before harvest”) existed in 86 counties having a population of 19,137,000, in parts of Shannxi, Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong.156 The government classified famines into five grades, A to E. To be graded A, all six conditions—drought, flood, insects, hailstorm, military, banditry—had to be experienced by two-thirds of the counties for successive years. Hebei was classified into group C: at least one-third of the counties had experienced three conditions. Thus, Hebei was not as bad off as Shandong, Henan, and Chahar in Group B, or Shanxi, Gansu, Shannxi, and Suiyuan in Group A.157 By spring 1929, however, the Beijing-Tianjin area had experienced a good spring wheat crop. By fall, Hebei as a whole was off the famine list, although the Daming area still slightly affected.158

Although Hebei was relatively well off, the toll in Gansu, Shannxi, and Henan was very severe. In Gansu the estimated mortality was 2.5 to 3 million in an already sparsely populated province of only 6 million people.159 In Shannxi, out of a population of 13 million, an estimated 3 million died of hunger or disease during this three-year period; another 6 million fled the province.160 For the entire affected area, one estimate places the total mortality as high as 10 million. Although there is no hard data on the actual mortality, there is little doubt that the 1928-30 disaster was, on the whole, more severe than that of 1920-21. Conditions in the northwest have been described as “living hell.” Already pitifully poor peasants found grain prices to have risen five times their normal levels, and they resorted to the famine foods of desperation: tree leaves and bark, grasses and weed, and cottonseed. Those who had not fled sold their children if they could. As the very last resort, cannibalism was practiced.161 Vagrancy and banditry were widespread.162

These nightmarish conditions were directly related to the battles between Chiang Kai-shek and the warlords Feng Yu-xiang, Yan Xishan, and others, which prevented relief from reaching the most needy areas in Shannxi and Henan.163 Not only were militarists preoccupied with their military campaigns, but scarce grain supplies were used to feed soldiers first. Extensive opium cultivation, especially in Shannxi, Gansu, Rehe, and Suiyuan, took valuable land away from foodgrains.164 Of ninety-two counties in Hebei affected by famine in 1928, eighty experienced military activity at the same time.165 These and other political issues greatly interfered with Chinese and international efforts to mount a major famine relief campaign. Relief efforts, both Chinese and foreign, were more modest than before, and warfare and civil unrest made the delivery of relief, particularly inland, virtually impossible. Rail traffic from Manchuria in particular was seriously disrupted by warlord rivalries. Some warlords intervened on behalf of the grain shipments, but most did not.166 In the summer and winter of 1928, General Chiu Chin-lan arranged military escort for grain to be transported to Hebei to assist in relief of landlocked counties stricken by various forms of disaster, following the evacuation of Shandong-Zhili armies. Large quantities of grain were also sent to Shandong.167

Compared with 1920-21, the absolute level of resources available—both Chinese and foreign,
The "Land of Famine," 1920-1929

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-\[\text{public and private—was much lower. Between the summer of 1928 and spring of 1929, the Chinese government distributed 4.5 million yuan. Ultimately the Chinese government raised a total of 11 million yuan. Most distributions were made to northern and Manchurian provinces. Hebei got a relatively small amount. Two-thirds were derived from relief bond issues. Other sources of funding included overseas Chinese; a customs surcharge of 2.5 percent; and contributions made by government officials according to a sliding scale, for example, officials salaried at 400 yuan or more contributed one month's pay. The Ministries of Railways and Finance provided free transport for grain and materials.\(^{168}\) Although some of the formalities of traditional famine relief were still observed, such as county-by-county surveys, it is unlikely that much relief actually reached the needy.\(^{169}\) Private contributions were substantial, and many Chinese charitable groups aided the relief effort where possible.\(^{170}\) As in previous disasters, groups in Shanghai, as well as the Shanghai press, mobilized to raise famine relief funds, some using techniques of photojournalism and pamphleteering.\(^{171}\) Some Shanghai papers, however, held back because they felt that any contributions for famine relief to the northwest would only be used to support Feng Yuxiang's soldiers.\(^{172}\)

Negative publicity about military and political interference posed a problem for both Chinese and international fund-raising after 1920-21. The Western-language newspapers in China covered the continuing tragedies with bold headlines. "Flood Waters Creeping Over Shantung, 80 Square Miles, One Foot Deep Every Twenty-Four Hours; Losses Enormous," screamed one headline in 1925.\(^{173}\) On the same date, however, another newspaper wrote an editorial, "China's Sorrow and China's Shame," that asserted, "Not all of these calamities are beyond human control." There were "a few noble-minded Chinese," but "the main burden of organization and disbursement of relief has had to be shouldered by foreigners, for so indecorously corrupt are most of China's politicians and officials that few of them can be trusted with funds for the succour of the striken."\(^{174}\) The same editorial accused the Zhibi provincial governor of trying to sabotage the work of the river commission. The New York Times reporter Hallert Abend faulted the Nanjing government for failing to act in any effective way even though the famine had been predicted for months. The CIFRC was raising only 175,000 out of an estimated 20 million needed. In the face of grim reports from Gansu and Shaanxi, "Nanking is not only inactive but is logrolling and playing politics."\(^{175}\) Fund-raising posters and articles were still bold—"Famine: 10,000,000 Face Starvation in China. China's Night, America's Opportunity"—but they were less successful than in previous campaigns.\(^{176}\)

Famine and famine relief became increasingly politicized after the establishment of the Nanjing government in 1928. On the one hand, the government tried to impose its authority over foreign participation in famine relief. The CIFRC and other Sino-foreign organizations continued to function, but with the clear understanding that foreigners participated under Chinese supervision. On the other hand, some Americans were uneasy about the close association between their charitable efforts and the new government. In 1929 the American Red Cross attacked the CIFRC for maintaining its original objectives and becoming a permanent, all-purpose philanthropic organization. In its report, the Red Cross asserted that famine relief should be given only in disasters where the cause was unmistakably "natural," that is, a flood or drought, and not in cases where the cause was demonstrably "political." If China could count on foreign assistance under any circumstances, then a dangerous situation of dependency would develop. The Chinese government should assume full responsibility for the type of public works sponsored by the CIFRC, and it should not rely on foreign assistance.\(^{177}\)

The CIFRC's official response was that it was a Sino-foreign organization representing Chinese interests as well as foreign. Moreover, the criterion for the giving of relief should always be need,
Chapter Ten

and not politics. The basic causes of recent disasters were fundamentally "natural"; politics had merely exacerbated the situation. Privately, however, the CIFRC staff regarded the Red Cross report as an attack on the Nationalist government. 178 William Johnson, an American missionary active with the CIFRC, drafted a sharp rebuttal entitled "Politics and the Red Cross," in which he denounced the report as politically motivated. "The American Red Cross has lost its soul," he wrote. 179 More moderate members of the relief community suppressed the publication of Johnson's article fearing that negative publicity would interfere with fund-raising. 180 Indeed, there had already been considerable reluctance to launch a major fund-raising campaign for famine in northwestern China because the American public's interest was at a low ebb. The foreign relief organizations all recognized, however, that the American public would more readily contribute to disaster relief than to long-term development projects.

The great 1931 flood of the Yangzi River provided the Nationalist government with an opportunity to assert its control over disaster relief. Considered a hundred-year event, it was probably one of the most extensive floods in world history. The Yangzi, disaster-stricken all of central China and parts of the north and east, covering a territory of 85,000 square kilometers and resulting in damage of billions of dollars of property. At the same time other rivers, particularly the Huai River Basin, were also affected. Eight provinces were seriously impacted and others partially so. In the eight provinces of Anhui, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hainan, and Shandong, an estimated 60 percent of the 642 counties, about 30 percent of the fields, and 25 percent of the population of 214 million people were affected. Some 422,500 people died by drowning. The economic loss was valued at 2.3 billion yuan, about five times the size of the national government budget. 181

The National Flood Relief Commission asserted the government's sovereignty authority, but it also employed many foreigners. Its director-general was Sir John Hope Simpson, who had long experience with relief administration in India and Greece. John Earl Baker, Dwight W. Edwards, and several other Americans active in the CIFRC were also appointed to the commission as advisors to the Chinese government, and the chairman of the commission was T. V. Soong, minister of finance and brother-in-law of Chiang Kai-shek. The relief effort was greatly aided by the purchase of 450,000 tons of wheat and flour from the United States. Although the costs of shipment and other relief work were substantial, the commission received about $1.35 million dollars from foreign donations and raised the rest—a sum of 20 million dollars—through private Chinese contributions and a 10 percent customs surcharge. 182 This relief effort was remarkably successful on the whole, at least according to the authorities. No serious food shortage occurred, and the price of grain was kept low. Repairs to 7,000 kilometers of dikes were completed by June 30, 1932. The Nationalist government and its foreign supporters regarded these accomplishments as another sign of its political legitimacy. 183 Like the emperors of the past, the Nationalists celebrated their success in river control through the publication of a commemorative volume. 184

Nationalism played a role in famine relief elsewhere. One striking example was a massive relief effort in Shandong Province after the 1935 Yellow River flood. Under the unlikely leadership of the warlord governor Han Fuju, about 400,000 flood victims were sent out from the flood district in the western part of the province to counties in the east where they were provided with food and shelter over the winter. The entire operation was conducted according to the Socialist values espoused by the New Life Movement of the Nationalist government. Refugees were to obey orders, follow discipline, rise early, and be diligent. Not content with these general guidelines, Han Fuju ordered male refugees to cut off their queues (if they still had them) and women to unbind their bound feet (if they had them). Cleanliness and sanitation were stressed. Idleness was forbidden;
The Constitution of the United States grants the federal government the power to organize the national government into distinct departments, each with its own responsibilities. The President is the head of the executive branch, responsible for enforcing federal laws. Congress, composed of the Senate and the House of Representatives, is the legislative branch, responsible for making laws. The Supreme Court and lower federal courts constitute the judicial branch, charged with interpreting the laws. The federal government is also responsible for regulating commerce, protecting the nation's borders, and ensuring national security.
major floods in the period 1583–1840, that is, from the late Ming to the late Qing. But in the century from 1841 to 1949, it experienced nine major floods including the megaflood of 1931.

The human toll from largescale natural disasters in the first half of the twentieth century certainly exceeded that from any other period in the last few centuries. If the century 1850–1950 is taken as a whole, the case is overwhelming. In his recent study, Xia Mingfang attempts to identify this trend. Famine mortality in the second half of the Qing period he estimates at about 17 million, and in the Republican period, 21 million. His estimate for the entire Ming period is 12 million, and for the first half of the Qing period, 1.2 million. For the Republican period, the mortality from natural disasters was far in excess of mortality from internal warfare—including all the warlord battles and the 1946–50 civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists—which he estimates at 6 million. The mortality from the war against Japan was 35 million, which did certainly exceed the mortality from famine.

In the past, floods and droughts, even major ones, were regional in scope, even though they may have had dynastic significance. In the 1930s and beyond, the catastrophes were larger in scale and national in significance. The droughts of 1920–21 and 1928–30 were geographically extensive, affecting several provinces at once. The 1931 Yangzi and Huai flood was a hundred-year flood that affected eight provinces at the geographic center of the country and had a truly national character.

The shifting of Yellow River in 1938–47 affected 63 million people in three provinces. (See Table 10.1.) No region was spared major catastrophe in these decades. Because of newspapers and radio, knowledge of these events was widespread, at least in the cities. The examples of civic and nationalistic response show clearly that the public considered a crisis in any region to have national significance. And with increasing levels of international participation in famine relief, such crises, wherever they occurred, assumed even more of a national identity. Both assigning blame and providing relief became political.

Insofar as there was a growing Chinese public attention to famines, one can see that there were hints of new ideas about them, at least on the part of the urban educated elite. The very attention to the quantification of famine mortality and other social indicators marked a change from the past. The need for applying "scientific" methods to famine relief, under the influence of Western famine relief workers, manifested itself not only in documentation and quantification, but in attention to nutritional requirements, public health, and mass education, at least in fortunate areas such as the treaty ports or territories under the control of unusual warlords like Han Fuji. Thus, in addition to the easy and obvious blame attached to the political authorities, one can perceive a change in the way in which famines were viewed. Rather than accepting them as an inevitable part of the natural and political order, modern opinion saw famines as the outcome of deeper economic and social forces. Thus the outlines of a paradigm shift could be discerned in two ways: in the phenomenon of disasters themselves (their frequency, extent, and consequences), but also in the understanding of their causes. The conditions were worse, and new approaches and solutions seemed to be required.

This new view of famines was barely emerging in the 1930s. In his path-breaking book China: Land of Famine, published in 1926, Walter H. Mallory, the secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission, analyzed the various causes of famine. Mallory understood that in earlier periods of history the Chinese state had effectively used preventive measures such as public granaries and relief measures such as tax remissions, but that the new Republican government he found to be so weak that it had neglected key functions such as river control. Instead, banditry, militarism, excessive taxation, and opium traffic flourished in the absence of strong central author-
The "Land of Famine," 1909–1949

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ity. But Mallory did not think that political causes were solely responsible for the repeated
famines. He identified economic, natural, and social causes as well, devoting separate chapters to
each. Among economic factors he named rural poverty and indebtedness, population density, and
poor transportation. Among the natural factors, he pointed to deforestation, the pattern of rainfall,
and the instability of the rivers, paying special attention to the Zhili rivers. Among social is-
issues, he identified reasons for the population problem, which he blamed on social customs, such
as ancestor worship, the preference for sons, and the practice of early marriage. Moving into the
more subjective areas of Chinese "conservatism" and "waste" (including waste due to ceremonies
and feasts, waste due to overeating, waste of time), he began to sound more like the earlier gen-
eration of missionaries such as the acerbic and straight-talking Arthur Smith, author of books such
as Chinese Characteristics.

Just as Smith's negative characterizations of Chinese social attitudes were taken to heart by the
writer and social critic Lu Xun, so too Walter Mallory's epithet "Land of Famine" sent shock waves
among Chinese intellectuals and social scientists, who recognized its appropriateness and yet, at
the same time, were ashamed by it. When the young Deng Tuo (Deng Yente) hastily wrote
Zhongguo jishuang shi (The history of famine relief in China), which was published in 1937, he
invoked Mallory and other Western writers, as well as scores of traditional Chinese sources. Deng's
book was the first modern Chinese work on the problem of famines. Although he was already
a Marxist at the time, his approach to famine was rather eclectic, and he seemed to be searching
for solutions whether they were in Western books or in ancient Chinese essays. He
urged the application of "scientific" methods to the problem of famines, rather than accepting the
fatalistic attitude of the common people. Deng's history of famine relief was republished many
times, most recently in 1998, and drew attention to the problem of famine. He did not deny the
characterization of China as the "land of famine" [jishuang de Zhongguo].