

Famine

East Asia

Famine has occupied a central place in China in the modern era, spanning three political regimes, and was present in Tokugawa Japan as well. While the nineteenth century was a period that witnessed the highest incidence of famines, the most severe catastrophe occurred in twentieth-century China under an authoritarian (Maoist) regime—the “Great Leap” Famine of 1958 – 1961—where a maximum of 30 million people were estimated to have died in excess of the normal mortality rate. Table 1 summarizes the major famines that occurred in different parts of East Asia for the three centuries since the 1700s.

Country	Incidence	Excess Death (Million)	Population	As a % of total population	Nature of Disaster
Japan	1782–1787 (Temmei Famine)	0.2–0.9	26,010,600 (est. 1780)	0.77–3.46	Drought, flood, cold wind, and the eruption of various volcanoes
	1832/33–1836/39 (Tempo Famine)	“Worse than the Temmei famine in 1782”	27,063,907 (est. 1834)	—	Flood and cold weather
North Korea	1997–1999	0.2–3.5	25,904,124 (est. 1996)	0.77–13.51	“Unprecedented floods” in 1995–1996
China	1877–1878	9.5–13	308,803,939	3.08–4.21	Drought across north China plains
	1892–1894	1	335,134,795	0.30	Drought
	1920–1921	0.5	456,200,000	0.11	Drought
	1928–1929	3	446,649,832	0.67	Drought
	1938	1	479,084,651	0.21	Levee breach of Yellow River
	1958–1961	16.5–30	659,940,000	2.50–4.55	Drought and floods in different parts of the country

Table 1 Famine in East Asia: 1700–2000

Underlying Causes. The underlying cause(s) of famines has been the subject of an intense debate. The conventional view sees famines as largely the result of a sudden decline in food availability (FAD), which in turn is caused primarily by natural disasters such as droughts and floods. For instance, the Temmei Famine of 1782–1787 in Tokugawa Japan occurred after a decade-long continuous drought, disastrous floods, and the eruption of various volcanoes. The great North China famine of 1877 – 1878 was similarly triggered by a prolonged drought in the area. Recently, it has been suggested that this particular famine (and others in this period) was probably the result of El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a great circular fluctuation in ocean temperature and air pressure in the equatorial Pacific with a significant impact on normal rainfall patterns over much of the globe.

The effect of the vicissitudes of the climate is not random, however; “endowment” has likely played an important role in determining how well an area can cope with an exogenous shock. Specifically, areas that receive the least amount of rainfall tend also to experience the greatest variability. In turn, inadequate water and its unreliability permit only a single-crop culture, which provides no buffer in times of weather adversity. It is thus not surprising that the greatest famine in China in the nineteenth century occurred in the north, as rainfall in this region is concentrated in mostly July and August (North Korea shares similar climatic characteristics).

While natural calamities are typically what triggers famines, their severity is determined by factors that go beyond nature. Two factors appear especially germane in this regard. The first has to do with high or basically unaffordable food prices, whereas the second factor is a government’s ability (and willingness) to provide relief. In contrast to conventional wisdom, which sees high food prices in famine times as basically the consequence of food shortages (or FAD), a Nobel Laureate economist, Amartya Sen, contends that unaffordable food prices are in fact the result of the speculative, hoarding

behavior of merchants in (“imperfectly integrated”) markets that fail to attract food supplies from outside, even where prices in the affected locales have remained high, owing to problems of transportation and other bottlenecks.

But famine severity is also determined by the effectiveness of state response or, specifically, government relief action. Famines tend to be more severe where the government fails to intervene effectively either in delivering the needed food to the famine victims or in stabilizing food prices, or both. But the reasons for this “government failure” vary from one instance to another. In Tokugawa Japan, the highly “secluded” administrative structure of the *bakufu* (shogunate) provided little incentives for individual daimyo (warlords) to dispatch food from their fiefs to help their neighbors in need. But even in the more encouraging instance of a unified Qing China, in which the regime did have the benign intentions of providing famine relief, primarily through disbursements from local granaries, declining fiscal and organizational capability over time—the nineteenth century in particular—had eventually forced it to rely increasingly on the local gentry for relief action. Their effectiveness, however, failed to compare with state provisions especially in instances where famines involved vast geographical areas and lasted for long periods of time.

The importance of government action or response in famine situation has eventually led to the development of a theory that purports to provide a tighter link between politics and famine. Contrasting India’s success since independence in averting famines with China’s Great Leap catastrophe, Sen develops the grand hypothesis that famines are unlikely to occur under democracies. His thesis is premised on the reasoning that electoral pressure or accountability would prevent a democratically elected government from concealing a famine the way the Communist regime in China did in its heady days of utopian communism. Moreover, an independent and free press, which is unlikely to exist under an authoritarian regime, will vigilantly disseminate information about any impending food crisis so that any precariously famished condition would be quickly dealt with by a concerned government.

The fact that two of the largest famines in the twentieth century occurred under an authoritarian regime—the Soviet Union in the 1930s and China in the late 1950s (and more recently North Korea)—provides prima facie vindications of the powerfully provocative claim of the existence of an underlying relationship between regime type (politics) and famine incidence. There are a couple of qualifications to such a “grand theory,” however. The first is that the complex nature of famine occurrence renders a single theory of famines untenable; more often than not major famines have had multiple causes. In the case of China’s Great Leap famine, for instance, recent research has shown that excess death in this major catastrophe was the outcome of a number of factors. First, weather and the misallocation of resources from agriculture to nonagricultural pursuits (most notably irrigation and steel campaigns in the countryside) had adversely impacted food availability, a factor that unambiguously affected excess deaths. The excessive procurement of grain—which reflects as much a systematically biased policy against the rural populace as “misinformation”—was also a culprit. Not the least, casualties were notably more severe in provinces where their leaders had engaged the rural people excessively in the extremely undercapitalized (and thus energy-consuming) tasks of steel production and irrigation works. In contrast, the institution of communal mess-hall dining did not have a significant impact, perhaps because unrestricted consumption may not have been universally practiced or was short-lived. All these serve to demonstrate that a grand theory of famine may inhibit rather than facilitate the empirical inquiry into the varying causes of individual famines.

The recent North Korean famine represents another case in point. Unlike the Soviet and Chinese incidence, it did not occur at the time of agricultural collectivization but forty years after it—a time when food self-sufficiency had long been achieved. Also, the economy was already predominantly urban and industrial and with a well-functioning public distribution system developed when the deadly famine occurred. This unexpected, curious famine in North Korea, it has been argued, was not the result either of an ill-intended dictator

or foolish planning mistakes (the authoritarian nature of its regime notwithstanding), but instead a combination of natural calamities (unprecedented floods) and an abrupt withdrawal of trade subsidies from, especially, the Soviet Union, which inadvertently afflicted an agriculture heavily dependent on imported oil for inputs (chemical fertilizers, for instance).

The other qualification pertains to the consequence of major catastrophes. Specifically, can governments—regardless of regime type—learn from past mistakes, to the extent that they would put an end to such fatal blunders by, for instance, designing a tacit “political contract” of sorts? The answer appears to lie in the positive, if history is to provide a reliable guide. Postindependence governments of India seem to have learned from the colonial blunders that precipitated the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. Likewise, and despite the continuing absence of a democracy, the Chinese adopted the safeguarding practice of rationing a fixed quantity of food grains to rural people based on minimum caloric requirements, regardless of actual work contributions in a team-based production organization (c. 1962 – 1979). Moreover, even after the Chinese eventually decollectivized their agriculture in order to provide greater material incentives to the peasantry, around the early 1980s, members of the village community are adequately protected by an institutional arrangement that guarantees villagers an equal entitlement to land use and income rights.

The extent to which famines have had repercussions for social and regime stability also varies between countries and regimes. While peasant uprisings had occurred in both China and Japan, evidence suggests that famines in Qing China likely had a more discernable impact on the society and polity than in Tokugawa Japan. In nineteenth-century China in particular, the local gentry were forced to compete with a segment of the society (the “Triads,” an organized crime network) that sought to wreak havoc on the Chinese society and whose rise could be linked intimately to the perennial precarious subsistence of the peasantry. While famines were clearly not responsible for the fall of the Qing dynasty, they did reinforce the regime’s declining “govern-ability.” On the other hand, despite the extreme severity of

the Great Leap famine, the Communist regime, with its legitimacy bolstered by a series of important economic reforms, survived into the twenty-first century.

[See also *Great Leap Forward and Natural Disasters, subentry on Asia.*]

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