



Great Chinese Famine | Revolution, Civil War, Facts & Republic of China

Great Chinese Famine

The Great Chinese Famine caused the deaths of 20 to 45 million people in just three years! To understand the cause of the great Chinese Famine, we must consider the historical context in which this event transpired. So, let us start at the beginning and work our way up to the incident.

The Wuchang Uprising gave rise to the **Xinhai Revolution** of 1911, and just like that, the days of the dynasties were over. General Yuan Shikai was inaugurated as the provisional president of the Republic of [China](#) in March 1912. But these were not easy years, as the financial entanglements of the Chinese landed them in a deficit of two million pounds of silver within three years.

Great Chinese Famine Facts (三年大饥荒)



During the Great Leap Forward, a workers' delegation marched through the province of Gansu.

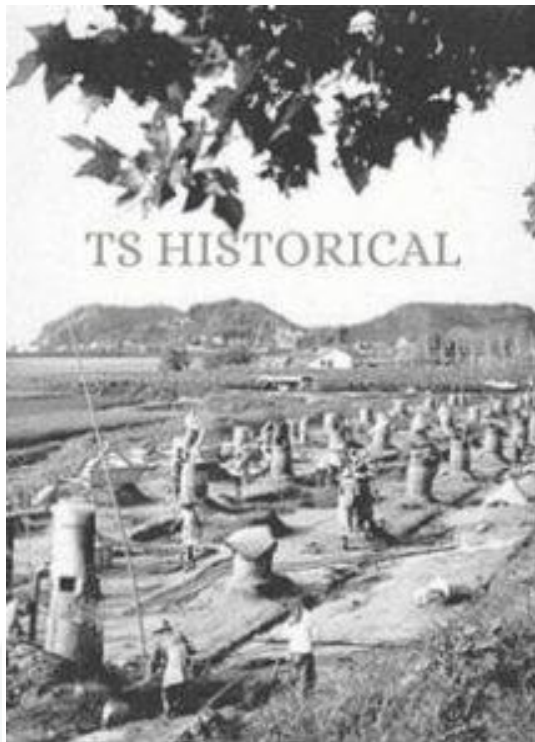


Country:	People's Republic of China
Location:	Half of the country. Death rates were highest in Anhui (18% dead), Chongqing (15%), Sichuan (13%), Guizhou (11%), and Hunan (8%).
Period:	1959–1961
Total Deaths:	20–45 million
Observations:	It is regarded as China's worst disaster. Droughts, floods, the Great Leap Forward, people's communes, and other policies all contributed to this.
Consequences:	Termination of the Great Leap Forward campaign



Second Revolution (Republic of China)

In the summer of 1913, there was a second revolution when seven southern provinces rebelled. At this point, China was a land of internal squabbles and political and economic instability. At the end of [World War I](#), according to the Treaty of Versailles, [Japan](#) was allowed to keep the concessions they had in the annexed German regions of China, which the Chinese found astonishing.



This prompted a reunification effort in China to put their house in order, and the KMT or Kuomintang and CCP, the Communist Party of China, formed the First United Front. They wanted to reunify China in three phases: 1) reunion of China by force, 2) politically based education in the new government, and 3) introduction of democracy. But the united front would not last for long.



Chinese Civil War



Japanese control area of China

The Nanjung Decade that followed was full of bloodshed and violence, and communists were ousted and killed in the Shanghai massacre. The White Terror followed soon after that, lasting for several years, in which over 300,000 people were killed.

The Communists who were still left in China mostly moved into the rural districts where the Kuomintang was not present. Diplomatic efforts to build relations with the rest of the world were developed and continued after the Nanjing decade. Banking reforms were established, and public health facilities were upgraded and created.

The legal and penal system was brought up to the standards exercised by other countries. In addition to these efforts, legislation against narcotics use and distribution was passed and enforced, and the manufacturing of agricultural machinery was increased. With the Second Sino-Japanese War amid the larger [World War II](#), instability loomed large once again.

Second United Front

In this tenuous situation, another merger took place involving the Communist and National forces, known as the Second United Front. The estimates of the Chinese killed or wounded in the **Second Sino-Japanese War** and **World War II** are staggering.



Between fifteen and twenty million died, and millions were wounded. There were about 95 million refugees.

The Second United Front in China, which had fought against Japan, was a precarious union between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party. There was a tacit agreement that these two opposing political groups would suspend their differences during the two wars, but as soon as World War II concluded, tensions arose once more. The two sides scrambled for power, but the Communists were able to take control of Northern China.

The military engagements continued as the Communists wanted to take charge of the entire country. To finance the military expeditions, money was printed in hordes. That inevitably led to inflation, and the value of the currency plummeted. People saw their savings wiped out, and no help from the government was forthcoming. Price and wage controls were put into place to slow inflation, but it was too late for that. Finally, the disputes ended in a ceasefire. Things quickly got out of hand again.

History of the People's Republic of China

In 1949, Mao Zedong announced that the new government of China was the People's Republic of China. It was under Mao's government that the Great Chinese Famine reared its ugly head. When Mao came into power, China was in a dire economic position, and after years of internal political issues, he had to find common ground. He came into office and swept through the country like a cyclone. He promoted himself as a hero to the workers and the underclass.



The society he envisioned was a society of the common man, speaking with one voice and thinking with one mind. He killed many of those whom he considered wealthy capitalists, as their existence and interference with affairs would not create the society he dreamed of.

Mao believed that people from the cities needed to understand how the common man lived, so he sent people, often those who had just graduated high school, to farms to be educated by the peasants about providing food for an entire country. This was called the Down to the Countryside Movement, which took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mao believed in a planned economy.

Great Leap Forward

In 1958, he launched a program called the Great Leap Forward. It aimed to transform China from an agrarian economy into a communist society. Grain distribution and the fruit of harvests were nationalized, requiring the growers to work in communes and huge commercialized farms.

The objective was to create large amounts of food while decreasing the human labor necessary to produce it. Harvests were sent to the government for equal distribution amongst the people. Certain quotas were expected, so a family might be left with very little if their harvest was less than they had hoped for. Because the mechanization of huge farms lagged, farmers often couldn't meet their quotas.



Food distribution efforts were unsuccessful, as there was a lack of organization, which led to half-empty grocery store shelves. By 1962, it was clear that the Great Leap Forward program was a dismal failure.

In 1981, the CCP officially stated that the famine resulted from the mistakes made in the Great Leap Forward and the Sino-Soviet Split. The Sino-Soviet Split occurred between Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong over a few years, culminating in 1961.

Mao was a staunch Marxist-Leninist and believed in the succession of revolutions leading to the creation of an ideal society under the leadership of one person and his vision. He felt that Khrushchev was too “revisionist” in his thinking, often softening – or even altering – his viewpoint in response to an international event or persuasion by another country.

Mao objected to the intrusion of the Soviets into Chinese society, as it was too reminiscent of the vassal state structure. Mao believed that the Chinese and the Russians were two different peoples, and he believed that China had to arrange its society in such a way as to benefit the Chinese people.

The idealistic pursuits of Mao backfired, as the prohibition of private farm ownership worsened the famine in many regions. However, it is not fair to paint the entire incident with a broad stroke because, in some areas, the collectivist ideas helped alleviate the situation.

Since the agricultural economy was centrally planned and production quotas were allotted to communes, the state appropriated the produce and directed it where it deemed necessary. However, this was an ill-thought plan because it was not always possible to realize the needs of different regions accurately.

Mao’s ideas for a collectivist venture extended to the private lives of citizens as well. To foster a collective spirit, people would eat and drink at their designated communal places – usually kitchens or cafeterias. Yang Jisheng, who wrote his book, *Tombstone*, on the topic of the Great Chinese Famine (which remains a controversial topic in his homeland), writes,



“In Xinyang, people starved at the doors of the grain warehouses. As they died, they shouted, “Communist Party, Chairman Mao, save us.” If the granaries of Henan and Hebei had been opened, no one need have died. As people were dying in large numbers around them, officials did not think to save them. Their only concern was how to fulfill the delivery of grain.”

The low production can be attributed to two agricultural techniques that the Chinese relied on: deep plowing and close cropping. The technique of deep plowing implied that the most fertile soil lay in the depths of the earth. It was claimed that farmers would encourage strong root growth by plowing deeper. While the technique fostered good results in some cases, it also brought bad results in others.

The idea behind close cropping or close planting, which was later discredited, implied that crops of a similar species would not compete with each other. However, they most certainly did in natural cycles, which led to lower yields.

The yields were further affected by implementing the “Four Pests Program.” This program sought to eliminate pests like the Eurasian tree sparrow, which ate fruit and seeds. However, that sparrow also consumes insects. When the avian population diminished, locusts descended upon the fields and consumed the foliage, killing the crops. Another issue was that the Chinese had grown distrustful of foreign powers.

The Japanese were granted the Chinese territories it had annexed during WW1; then the promise of neutrality during the Second World War, which they had to break in the face of the Second Sino-Japanese War; and the Sino-Soviet Split that occurred in the late 50s and early 60s, all contributed to this aura of hostility towards foreigners. Therefore, while international figures showed that grain yield was declining, the Chinese refused to believe it.

The CCP had an illusion of superabundance, partly due to newfound pride under Mao’s rule and partly due to excessive pressure on their workers, who falsely reported higher gains. Chairman Mao refused to accept international help and released incorrect data, adding to the depth of the crisis.



The decline in production can also be attributed to the increased industrialization of the country. As the Chinese focused on iron and steel production, they allocated millions of peasants working on farms to factories to increase industrial yields. The move towards modernization meant that people had started moving to cities in large numbers.

This phenomenon has been witnessed in many countries. When countries move from agrarian to urban lifestyles, their agricultural communities suffer. However, its impact has rarely been as vivid as this, resulting in an unprecedented loss of life – estimated to be somewhere between 20 to 45 million.

On the other hand, one must realize that China had not been a highly prosperous land in the first half of the 20th century. If anything, it was a tumultuous and unstable place. People were dying left and right, whether it was from uprisings, wars, or famines. But, this time, there was only one party to blame for these deaths. The CCP covered its faults, and records were kept secret to avoid another upheaval.

Cultural Revolution

In 1966, Mao instituted the Cultural Revolution. He was convinced that anti-communist elements and capitalism were undermining the welfare of the common man – or what was called the proletariat. Anti-communist elements had to be eliminated, whether they were members of the bourgeoisie or capitalists. Context is important.

Mao was willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of people to ensure a better life for future generations. Movements like the Great Leap Forward grew out of a distrust of both external and internal elements.

In a rare moment of relative peace in China, he wanted to increase their economic status. These authoritarian ideas might sound naïve to someone looking in from the outside, but in China, Mao is still revered in many circles. To some, the **Great Chinese Famine** remains but a blotch in the history of China's economic rise towards becoming a superpower. To others, it serves as a reminder of political forces pursuing their ends at the means of the average man.



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