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## ***Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958-1962,*** **Yang Jisheng, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, 629 pp.**

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**Reviewed by Ernesto Verdeja**

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Mao Zedong's attempt to rapidly modernize China in the late fifties and early sixties stands as one of the greatest human-made catastrophes in history. In the span of less than four years, China's leaders sought to transform the economy through the massive relocation of resources and people. Mao believed that the traditional agricultural economy based on small privately owned plots tilled by peasants was regressive, and held back the revolutionary potential of significant economic and thus political advancement. He collectivized farming, forced the creation of backyard furnaces to increase steel production and seized food from peasants to feed the cities. This so-called "Great Leap Forward" led to economic collapse, mass starvation, political terror and millions of deaths.

Yang Jisheng's book, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958-1962*, is an impressive and humane work of scholarship that significantly deepens our knowledge of the Great Leap Forward. The title comes from the author's desire to erect a tombstone for the 36 million who died in the famine and for the totalitarian system that caused their deaths. Most poignantly, the book is meant to serve as a tombstone for the author's father, Yang Xiushen, who died from starvation during those terrible years.

Yang's book was published in Chinese in 2008 in two volumes, totaling 1,200 pages. That work was republished eight times in two years, and is now finally available in English in an abridged version (though still quite hefty at over 600 pages), ably translated by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian. *Tombstone* has been reviewed widely in the English press and is the recipient of the 2013 Raphael Lemkin Award given by the Institute for the Study of Genocide, for best book on genocide and mass atrocities. The attention it has received is well deserved.

The book's strengths come from access to a wide array of sources that have only recently been made available, and only sporadically. Yang was a high-ranking journalist who traveled widely in China and over several years was able to access dozens of archives across the country, many with secret government reports on the consequences of the famine and state repression. Although the general contours of the killings and famine have been well known for a long time, Yang has marshaled a wide array of provincial and municipal sources to show how the famine unfolded over time and across regions. This gives us a significantly more nuanced view of this catastrophe than earlier studies, which tended to look at macro level processes and had relatively little access to regional archives. His book is tightly argued and clear, and will become a reference work on this terrible crime.

*Tombstone* begins with a general sketch of the famine and then moves on to analyze how the famine developed regionally. The final chapters of the book return to the overall causal model and present the author's evidence for his findings. Yang identifies two main clusters of causes for the mass deaths: institutional and ideological. The institutional causes the author presents are a standard "regime type" explanation familiar to political scientists: Yang argues that the totalitarian state under Mao's absolute rule prevented the emergence of checks and balances on centralized control, and the state became a conduit of Mao's violent fantasies of radical utopia. Specifically, power was concentrated at the top, with Mao – "China's Last Emperor," in Yang's terms (483) – the supreme authority and prime author of policy. The state enjoyed a monopoly over economic resources and enormous coercive capacity to achieve Mao's goals. A strong centralized planning economy, where the basic means of survival (food, shelter) were controlled and distributed by the state, ensured that autonomous civil society would not develop and that power would remain based in the highest echelons of the Communist Party.

State control was further enhanced by totalitarian ideological control, or a "unified propaganda mechanism" (492) that sought to shape not only citizens' behavior but also their thoughts. Yang focuses on the propaganda directive known as the General Line, which called on the masses and the Communist Party to "go all out, aim high, and build socialism with greater, faster, better and more economical results" (87). His discussion of the ways in which Great Line propaganda and state terror worked hand in hand during the

famine are some of the most chilling passages in the book, and captures the madness of twentieth century totalitarianism.

Institutional and ideological factors are the main causes of the famine, but it did not unfold uniformly across China. Yang identifies Henan province as the “epicenter of the disaster”. Located south of Beijing and west of Shanghai, Henan’s residents faced the full brunt of state power. Local and state officials redirected grain and other foodstuffs away from already impoverished rural areas to the cities, and enforced policies of food acquisition through murder and terror. Anti-hoarding campaigns regularly resulted in mass beatings and executions, as any sign of resistance to government policy, however feeble, was perceived as a threat to state power and communist self-sufficiency. Starvation became rampant; one commune “had not a single living elm tree, all had been stripped bare of their leaves and bark by starving peasants” (37).

Yang meticulously chronicles how some areas were hit harder than others. Some provinces, such as Anhui, Sichuan, Guizhou and Henan suffered extremely high rates of “unnatural deaths” (that is, direct killing or death through starvation). Other provinces, such as Zhejiang and Shanxi, had lower death rates (though certainly high in comparison to other peacetime societies). Yang attributes the variation in death rates to two main factors. The first factor concerns the relative influence of Maoism on provincial authorities. Officials who were ardent Maoists tended to be zealous in the implementation of food policies, and these officials in turn were promoted to positions of greater authority. This was clearly the case in the provinces that suffered high levels of direct killings and starvation. Second, the famine was especially widespread where provincial food procurement quotas were high and sales of grains to rural areas were low. In Sichuan and Anhui, for instance, high expectations of food production for city consumption led to mass starvation, as there was little food left to distribute among the rural population. These two factors – zealous government officials and impossible procurement quotas – provide an explanation of why some areas were strongly impacted upon, while others were less so.

The numbers of deaths are horrific. Yang estimates that about 36 million people died during the famine, higher than earlier estimates of 28 to 30 million put forth by researchers such as Roderick Macfarquhar, Douglas Fairbank and Denis Twitchett, but lower than historian Frank Dikötter’s recent estimate of 45 million in *Mao’s Great Famine* (2010). Yang adds, “because starvation also caused a drop in the birth rate, there was also an estimated shortfall of 40 million births during those days” (13).

Yang’s book is not without faults. The general theoretical argument about totalitarianism could use greater elaboration, though as new sources and archives are opened it will be refined and possibly contested. In particular, some of it reads like earlier historical works on Nazi totalitarianism, which rarely provided a good sense of the complex ways in which ordinary people navigated state terror and instead painted repression with a broad brush. Yang’s work isn’t reductive in that way, but future historians will need to fill in the gaps. These shortcomings are understandable: a strong theoretical argument requires strong empirics, and people like Yang are still assembling the fine-grain evidence on the case of China.

Yang is not the first scholar to reinterpret the famine: Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2006) reached a similar conclusion to *Tombstone*, and Dikötter drew on some of the same sources as Yang to trace the ways in which local and national food policy interacted to result in mass starvation. Yang and Dikötter are at the forefront of a new wave of scholarship aimed at generating moral reflection and debate about the terrible legacy of Maoism through careful and meticulous research. Furthermore, they have advanced scholarship on the Great Leap Forward; whereas some earlier works treated the famine as a natural catastrophe exacerbated by policy mistakes, Yang, Dikötter and other researchers such as Zhou Xun have provided overwhelming proof of the distinctly volitional and intentional dimensions of the famine.

*Tombstone* is particularly impressive because it draws on such a wide range of sources, and state authorities have already taken notice of the threat it represents to the official interpretation of the Mao years. Indeed, pro-government apologist works have begun to appear, most notably *Someone Will Always Tell the Truth: Concerning the Death of Thirty Million by Starvation*, by Yang Songlin, who puts the number of deaths at 3.5 - 4 million and directly criticizes Yang Jisheng for undermining state legitimacy with the publication of *Tombstone*.

In some ways, *Tombstone* is similar to Robert Conquest’s early path-breaking works on the Soviet famines in the Ukraine, which raised the bar on research about Stalinism. In that case, we had to wait for the dissolution of the Soviet Union to access hidden archives. We are still far from that situation for China, but Yang’s book similarly raises the bar for research on the Great Leap Forward. It is also a moving testament to that terrible period in China’s history.