

Spaces of Starvation: State and Province in the Henan Famine, 1942-43

1) The Chinese State in a Time of Famine

Some time in the second half of the fourth century BCE, a philosopher-advisor visited the palace at Kaifeng and remonstrated with King Hui of the state of Wei. He insisted to the king that famine deaths were a political matter rather than simply a natural phenomenon:

“When people drop dead from starvation by the wayside, you fail to realize that it is time for distribution. When people die you simply say ‘it is none of my doing. It is the fault of the harvest’. In what way is that different from killing a man by running him through, while saying all the time ‘it is none of my doing. It is the fault of the weapon’?... the people look hungry and in the outskirts of your cities people drop dead from starvation.”¹

Thus the moral warnings of Mencius helped ensure that the people’s access to food became one of the most important goals of Chinese statecraft. At various times, Chinese states developed complex systems to avoid and alleviate famine, though not always with success.²

More than two millennia after Mencius, another indignant intellectual visited the same region during a famine. The local journalist Li Rui (1911-1998) lacked Mencius’ access to the corridors of power, but could use the modern medium of the newspaper to excoriate the way in which China’s Nationalist government carried out its other aims, both old and new, while neglecting this most important of duties.

“Previously, the blood and sweat of these famine victims was poured out for the War of Resistance and for the state, but now they are starving to death... We speak of popularizing hygienic awareness, yet famine victims are gulping down white clay into their stomachs and just wait, unmoving, for their digestive systems to decompose and eject it; we explain motherly love to our

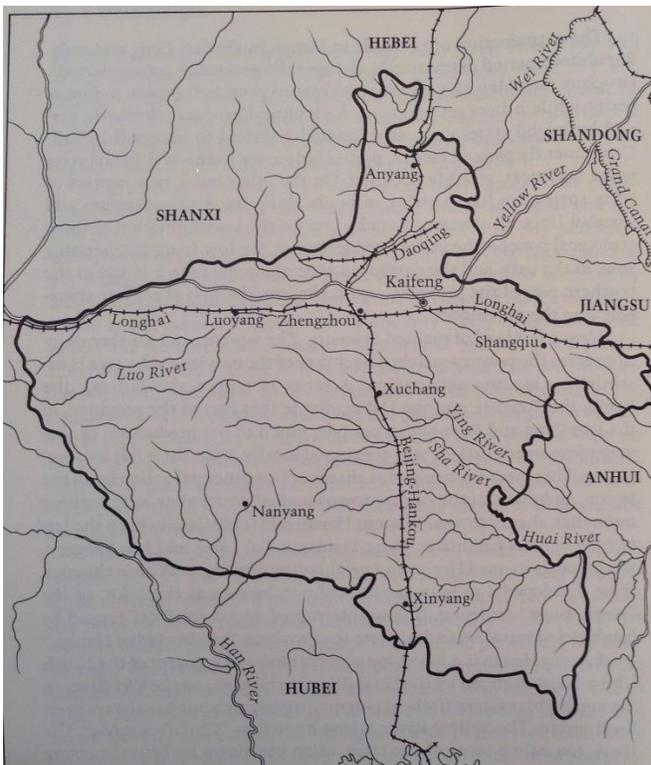
¹ *Mencius* 1A, para 3-4, adapted from D. C. Lau Translation, Penguin Classics revised edition (2003), pp. 6-7.

² See, for instance, Pierre-Etienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China* (1990); Lillian Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s-1990s* (2007).

children, but in the streets there is the tragic scene of mothers selling their sons; we organize corvée labor service, but the men picked for it today might be dead by tomorrow.”³

The “Great Henan Famine” of 1942-43 was at its peak.

Henan Province is a densely populated area of north-central China along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River.⁴ For most of recorded history, this region had been a cultural and political heartland of the Chinese world, but by the twentieth century a centuries-long environmental and economic decline – a decline at times only relative to other regions, at times dramatically absolute – had left the province rather peripheral even within north China. The arrival of the railroads in the first decade of the twentieth century had brought a limited prosperity to parts of the province – most notably the railroad junction town of Zhengzhou – without reversing the region’s peripheral position in North China.

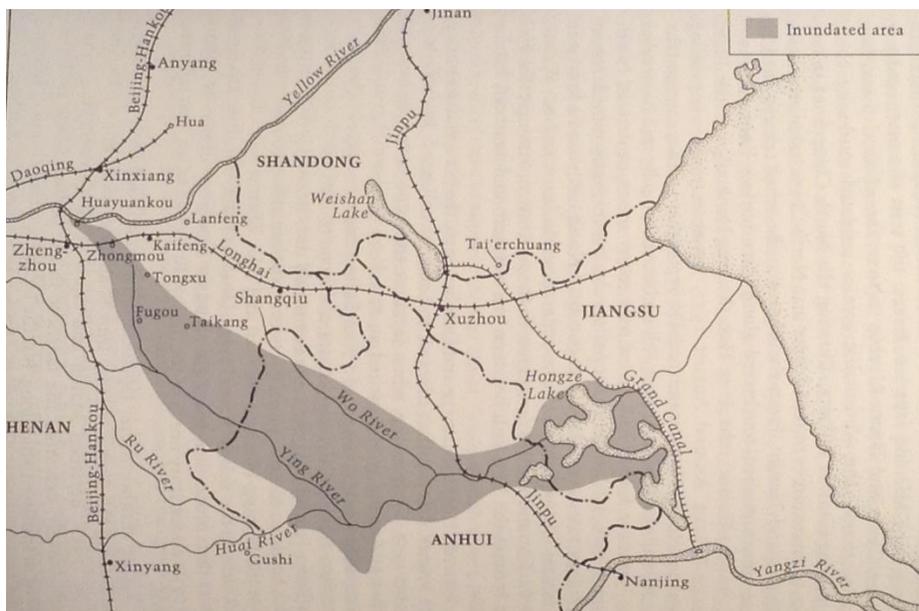


Republican Henan: from Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (1994), p. 16

³ *Qianfengbao*, 6 April 1943, reproduced in Song Zhixin (ed.), *1942: Henan Dajihuang* (revised and enlarged ed. 2012, hereafter HNDJH), p. 102.

⁴ At 167,000km² the area of Henan is about the same as Washington State; at some 94 million, the population of Henan is larger than all but thirteen countries in the world. The population of the province on the eve of war in 1937 was around 34 million.

Henan's railroads may have brought economic change, but in 1938 they brought war. Kaifeng fell to Japanese forces in early June, and the occupiers were expected swiftly to cover the 75 kilometers west to Zhengzhou.⁵ They were only prevented from doing so by Chiang Kai-shek's controversial decision to burst the Yellow River dikes north of Zhengzhou. The ensuing flood cut off the Japanese advance, but only at the cost of almost a million civilian lives across central China.⁶ In Henan, this Yellow River flood divided Japanese-occupied Kaifeng from Zhengzhou, which along with around three-fifths of the province remained in Nationalist (GMD) hands.



1938 Yellow River Flood: from Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses* (1994), p. 168

After the drama and tragedy of summer 1938, the attention of the world turned away from what the visiting American journalist Graham Peck called the “sagging war” in divided Henan.⁷ While the province was in one sense the frontline fulcrum of the whole continental conflict, by virtue of being a zone of uncertain control it was peripheral to the war economies of both the Japanese Empire and the Chinese Nationalist government in Chongqing. This was a neglected land, to be occupied and exploited

⁵ The *New York Times* reported “Chengchow’s Fall Is Expected Soon”. *New York Times*, 8 June 1938.

⁶ See, for instance, Diana Lary, “The Waters Covered the Earth: China’s War-Induced Natural Disasters”, in Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So (eds.), *War and State Terrorism: the United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century* (2004), pp. 143-170.

⁷ Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time* (2008 [1950]), p. 266.

where possible, but otherwise left to its own devices. To this strategic tension was added the long-run marginalization of Henan as a rural, “backward” region: its “peasant” inhabitants could be lionized when it was convenient for war propaganda purposes, but were otherwise not considered integral to the fate of the Nationalist state (which had already sacrificed them in their hundreds of thousands during the man-made Yellow River flood), and certainly not to the fate of the Japanese Empire.⁸ Both the Nationalist provincial government in Luoyang and the collaborationist authorities in occupied Kaifeng tried to build systems of production and extraction to support what Micah Muscolino has called the “military metabolism” of the large armies stationed in the province.⁹ The central part of Henan in particular bore both the problems of a frontline region and, since it received limited nutritional inputs from outside, the supply burdens of a rear area.

In 1942, this marginalization brought tragic consequences. That spring, the authorities on both sides of the frontline noted the low level of the wheat harvest, but continued as planned with the coercive requisitioning of crops to feed their military and civil establishments. They hoped that, as in previous years, the fall harvest of sorghum, millet and tubers would be sufficient to see farmers through the winter. Instead, the subsequent long summer drought brought the almost complete failure of these autumn crops. The result was that the winter of 1942-43 in Henan Province saw one of the worst famine crises of the whole global Second World War.¹⁰ With relief slow to arrive, around one and a half million people suffered starvation-related deaths and perhaps a further three million fled their homes.¹¹

⁸ On the label “peasant” in modern China, see Myron Cohen, “Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: the Case of the Chinese “Peasant”, in *Daedalus* Vol. 122, No. 2 (1993), pp. 151-170.

⁹ Micah Muscolino, *Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938-1950* (2014), passim, and esp. pp. 4-13.

¹⁰ In using the term “famine”, I follow Michael Watts’ broad definition of the term: “a societal crisis induced by the dissolution of the accustomed availability of, and access to, staple foods on a scale sufficient to cause starvation among a significant number of individuals”. Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (1983), pp. 17-18; quoted in Stephen Devereux, *Theories of Famine* (1993), p. 11.

¹¹ For many years, much higher estimates of the death toll were common currency, with 3 million the most oft-cited figure. See, for instance, Xia Mingfang, *Minguo Shiqi Ziran Zaihai Yu Xiangcun Shehui* (2000), p. 395. More recently, Anthony Garnaut has argued for a much lower death toll. See Anthony Garnaut, “A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942”, in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (Nov. 2013), pp. 2007-2045, esp. pp. 2032-2036. His figure of fewer than one million excess deaths seems to me too low, in part because it considers only population loss between 1942 and 1943. Taking instead the years 1941-43, population estimates (from the 1947 *Henan Tongji Yuekan* data) shows a much higher overall loss – some 15% rather than 5%.

Focusing here on Nationalist-held territory, this paper argues that we should understand the Henan famine as a distinctly political event. While some historians have downplayed the role of the Nationalist government, I show that its grain requisitioning was crucial in causing mass starvation.¹² Other scholars have recognized the importance of this state procurement, but suggest that the wartime state had little room for maneuver and few alternative sources of grain to feed the armies and aid civilians.¹³ Instead, while recognizing the logistical difficulties of bringing outside inputs to the province, I argue that had the state given greater priority to the developing shortage in Henan it could have overcome these barriers. When in spring 1943 the state *did* focus on relief for the region, it was able to provide nutritional inputs on a large scale, but for hundreds of thousands of Henanese, this help came too late.

With this state negligence, we find ourselves at the dark heart of the newly rehabilitated Nationalist war effort. But I do not seek to restore what Hans Van de Ven calls the “Stilwell-White” paradigm of Nationalist corruption, weakness and incompetence.¹⁴ The wartime GMD state, I suggest, was an embattled government struggling to continue a long war against a modern industrial power; but it was also a competent power, capable of mobilizing great resources in areas it prioritized. Indeed, in Henan it was precisely the GMD’s wartime state-building successes which were implicated in the inattention and skewed priorities of the Henan famine. Thus the Nationalists were effective at appropriating resources from the civilian population, but in Henan paid too little heed to the consequences; they constructed pioneering welfare systems for the urban few, but remained less effective at rural assistance than the late imperial state; they centralized the fiscal system, but left the provincial government too weak to manage

Admittedly, there is no way to disaggregate excess deaths, fertility loss and non-returning refugees in these figures, but following Garnaut’s own proportional estimates, I suggest a death toll of well over one million (not including fertility loss).

¹² The best survey of the war years concludes that “individuals could have behaved differently, but overall the result was inescapable”. Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II* (2013), p. 273; Anthony Garnaut also tends to downplay the role of the state, see Garnaut “A Quantitative Description,” esp. p. 2043.

¹³ Even Lloyd Eastman, no apologist for the Nationalist government, felt that during the Henan drought it was “either starve the troops or starve the peasants”, see Lloyd Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution* (1984), p. 78; Diana Lary tends to agree that little could be done to avert famine, see Lary “The Waters Covered the Earth”, pp. 124-126; Micah Muscolino’s multifactor environmental analysis is much more subtle, but is a little too ready to treat Henan as a *necessarily* closed system, see Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, pp. 108-111.

¹⁴ Referencing Joseph Stilwell’s contempt for Chiang Kai-shek and Theodore White’s growing condemnation of the regime. See Hans Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China* (2003). For an older defense of GMD policy, a text itself now of some historical interest, see Paul K. T. Shih (ed.), *Nationalist China During the Sino-Japanese War* (1977).

famine relief; they brought much of western China under closer central control, but neglected links to the frontline and guerilla areas of central and eastern regions; they provided unprecedented assistance for some war refugees, but placed a systemically low value on peasant lives. In these achievements, the Nationalist state broke new ground for the modern Chinese state in mobilizing resources and resisting foreign aggression; but in these failures, it abrogated what the journalist Li Rui called “their most elementary responsibility” of keeping civilians alive.¹⁵

2) Taxing Times: Drought and Requisitioning, January to October 1942

Although Sugata Bose once tried to argue to the contrary, raw Food Availability Decline (FAD) was an important element – quantitatively, if not politically, the most important element – in the Henan Famine.¹⁶ The province had enjoyed good harvests during the first years of the war, but in 1941 had suffered lower yields.¹⁷ In 1942, the luck ran out altogether. Probably in connection with the recurring 1939-1942 El Niño event, almost all of Henan was hit by a long drought from January to October 1942.¹⁸ Heavy winds also damaged the spring wheat crop, while in large areas late summer locusts devastated an already-withered autumn harvest.¹⁹ When added to wartime disruptions such as the loss of arable land and reduced labor inputs, the effect on production was devastating.²⁰ Following Xu Daofu’s raw data, my estimates of agricultural production in 1942 are a little more optimistic than some contemporary estimates, but hide a good deal of spatial variation which may be reflected in those gloomier reports:²¹

¹⁵ Li Rui, “‘Si Jiao’ De Xian Shang”, in *Qianfengbao*, 21 April 1943, reproduced in *Henan Wenshi Ziliao* (HNWSZL), Vol. 13 (March 1985), p. 28.

¹⁶ Sugata Bose, “Starvation Amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tongkin, 1942-45,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Oct. 1990), pp. 699-727. Rather than examine the provincial unit, Bose only looked at food availability in Nationalist-held China as a whole, and good crops in other provinces obscured Henan’s failed harvests.

¹⁷ For full figures, see Huang Zhenglin et al. (eds.), *Jindai Henan Jingji Shi* (2012), pp. 257-259.

¹⁸ On the effects of El Niño on North China rainfall, see Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁹ For further descriptions, see Zhang Tanghui, “1942-1943 Nian Henan Da Jihuang De Wenxue Yu Lishi Shuxie”, in *Pingdingshan Xueyuan Xuebao*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2010), pp. 67-72.

²⁰ To the end of 1942 the Nationalists had conscripted more men in Henan (nearly 1.2 million) than any other province. See Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism*, p. 255. In addition, an estimated 600,000 hectares of arable land had been taken out of use by the 1938 flood.

²¹ Xu Daofu, *Zhongguo Jindai Nongye Shengchan Ji Maoyi Tongji Ziliao* (1983), pp. 19-22. The ultimate source of Xu’s data is the Economic Research Unit of the China Farmers’ Bank (*Zhongguo Nongmin Yinhang Jingji Yanjiu Chu*)’s publication *Zhongnong Yuekan*. For rather lower estimates, see for instance the provincial official Zhang Zhonglu, who reckoned the wheat crop at between ten and twenty percent of normal, see Zhang Zhonglu “Guanyu Yijiusier Nian Henan Da Jihuang de Jianwen” in

Spring harvest (May): Wheat and barley – 63% of the 1938-41 average.

Fall harvest (Oct-Nov): Maize, sorghum and millet – 33% of the 1938-41 average

Sweet potatoes – 49% of the 1938-41 average

These figures underline the seriousness of Henan's FAD situation in 1942, even compared to other wartime famine situations.²² All the same, and without wishing to underestimate the hardship that would have ensued, there are good reasons why we would not expect this level of FAD in a single year, over a relatively limited geographical area, to cause mass starvation and social disruption on this scale. Even at the low end of estimates, the death tolls for the Henan famine are unprecedented for a relatively short drought in a single province. Other serious famines in North China followed several consecutive failed harvests, with most deaths in the second or even the third year.²³ In Henan, the two consecutive poor harvests of fall 1936 and spring 1937 had yielded a per capita 12-month food availability almost as poor as 1942, but while there were pockets of serious difficulty there was no widespread starvation.²⁴

Other factors also suggest that the death toll "should" have been lower. Unlike during the 1931 flood disasters in central China and in the Bengal famine in 1943, Henan in 1942-43 saw no major outbreak of epidemic disease to cause a spike in malnutrition-related deaths.²⁵ Nor did Henan have the large vulnerable classes of landless rural laborers or mono-croppers of cash goods which accounted for most of

Kaifeng Wenshi Ziliao, Vol. 5, pp. 60-61; provincial governor Li Peiji told the photojournalist Harrison Forman that the fall crop had been as low as a ten percent yield. See "Harrison Forman Diary, China, December 1942 - March 1943", p. 86 [Accessed online at UW Milwaukee Digital Collections, <http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/forman/id/50>]

²² Without wishing to wade into debates about FAD in Bengal, the main *aman* rice crop in Bengal in 1942 was calculated at 83% of the wartime average; admittedly, the loss of imports from Burma also contributed to declining food access in Bengal, but the overall decline was still less serious than Henan. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981), p. 52-53; for a useful discussion of this debate, see Cormac Ó Gráda, "'Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency': Revisiting the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44," in *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future* (2015), pp. 39-91.

²³ The 1928-30 famine also saw three very dry years (albeit probably rather less intense than Henan's 1942 drought); in 1919-20, a drought of longer duration and greater geographical extent than 1942 brought three consecutive failed harvests across much of North China, yet the death toll was less than half that of Henan in 1942-43; even in the man-made anni horribiles of 1958-61, most famine deaths were not until 1960.

²⁴ The 1936 fall harvest was much better than that of 1942 (some 80% of the 1933-35 average for millet, sorghum and maize and 57% for sweet potato), but the 1937 wheat harvest was rather worse (49.6% of the 1933-36 average). See Xu, *Tongji Ziliao*, pp. 20-22. On areas of dearth in 1937, see Su Xinliu, *Minguo Shiqi Henan Shui Han Zaihai Yu Xiangcun Shehui* (2004), pp. 39-40.

²⁵ On disease as a major factor in famine mortality, see Alex de Waal, "A Reassessment of Entitlement Theory in the Light of Recent Famines in Africa," in *Development and Change*, No. 21 (1990). Epidemiologically, Henan may have been fortunate that the worst months of food crises were in the winter and early spring months.

the dead in Bengal: most Henanese were grain-producing small owner-cultivators or sharecroppers, relatively well-equipped to survive an FAD situation in the medium-term.²⁶ Without wishing to essentialize North China as a “land of famine”,²⁷ the preceding century of subsistence crises had ensured that most rural households had a variety of tactics to survive lean periods of several months or longer. Widespread consumption of famine foods, ranging from sweet potato leaves and peanut shells to elm bark and vegetable roots, was used by contemporary observers to emphasize the severity of the crisis, but is also a sign of well-developed systems of resilience.²⁸

Without state requisitioning and other wartime disruptions, then, it seems likely that most families would have faced a serious but endurable dearth period while waiting for the excellent spring 1943 harvest. Unfortunately for the cultivators of Nationalist-held Henan, the drought of 1942 coincided with additional fiscal burdens which tipped a serious food shortage into the short, violent famine which gripped the province in the winter of 1942-43. In trying to meet the nutritional needs of soldiers and officials without fueling inflation, in June 1941 Chiang Kai-shek approved the policy of collecting land taxes not in cash, as they had been paid since the sixteenth century, but in payment of either rice or wheat.²⁹ Soon afterwards, when this in-kind policy did not raise as much as expected, the central government formalized and extended compulsory purchase systems (*zhenggou*) to make up the shortfall.³⁰

²⁶ The jute producers of east Bengal and fishing groups of the Ganges Delta were particularly vulnerable. See Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, esp. p. 70 and Bose, “Starvation Amidst Plenty”, p. 711. Unlike jute, some of Henan cash crops (peanuts and sesame) at least had a good calorific value (though jute leaves are edible). Ground-up peanut shells and jujube pits were also important famine foods in Henan. Some people even tried to eat cotton seed, albeit with disastrous results, see Mary Geneva Sayre, *Missionary Triumphs in Occupied China* (1945), p. 94.

²⁷ Note Walter H. Mallory, *China: Land of Famine* (1926).

²⁸ For markets in these foods, see esp. Li Rui, “‘Si Jiao’ De Xian Shang”, in *Qianfengbao*, 21 April 1943, HNWSZL, pp. 27-29.

²⁹ Nationalist newspapers were very clear in explaining the historical significance of the change. From Henan, see “Fa Kan Ci”, in “Tianfu Gai Zheng Shiwu Tekan”, a special supplement to *Henan Minbao*, 5 October 1941. Between half and two-third of these in-kind payments was for the army, with the rest split between stipends for civil servants and subsidized release on urban markets. See Arthur N. Young, *China’s Wartime Finance and Inflation, 1937-1945*, pp. 26-27.

³⁰ In theory the total volume of compulsory purchase and other levies could not exceed that of the land tax in kind, but this practice was not always followed, especially in frontline areas such as Henan. Cultivators were nominally paid for compulsory purchase grain, but by 1943 the government was only paying to the value of 25% of official grain prices (and market prices were in reality rather higher). In addition, most of these payments were in the form of virtually worthless government promissory notes rather than cash. See Young, *China’s Wartime Finance*, p. 389, note 8.

According to the head of the provincial grain management office, Henan's 1942 wheat procurement target (i.e., tax in kind plus compulsory purchase) was 300,000 metric tons.³¹ This would have accounted for a hefty, if not disastrous 13% of the wheat harvest in previous years (1938-41 average), but was fully 25% of this meager harvest. On top of that, frontline areas in particular were also subject to additional local levies (*tanpai*) to make up for the shortfalls of particular local governments or military units. It is difficult to estimate the volume of these usually unrecorded *tanpai*, which could be levies of beans, sorghum, straw or animals as well as wheat, but anecdotal evidence from the frontline suggests that they could be almost as serious to cultivators' food access as the tax and purchase system.³²

The provincial authorities are not necessarily to be blamed for commencing post-harvest wheat requisitioning in June 1942, even if the celebratory tone of their propaganda is hard to swallow in retrospect.³³ The wheat harvest was very poor, but seems to have been just sufficient to encourage them to proceed with requisitioning as planned: ignoring appeals from farmers' associations, they assumed that, as in previous years, a good fall harvest would provide nutrition to see cultivators through the winter.³⁴

The more serious failure of statecraft was the continuation of requisitioning throughout the summer months, even as the ongoing drought made the failure of the fall harvest more and more certain. With military supplies the dominant aim, this failure to switch gears ran through every level of government. County officials, knowing they would be assessed on their tax collection figures, pressed ahead with procurement.³⁵ At the provincial level, one senior official later recalled that governor Li Peiji spent the summer in denial, hoping for a miraculous recovery of the autumn crop.³⁶ Li did telegram Chongqing appealing for Henan to be exempt from its compulsory purchase assessment but, reluctant to reveal the

³¹ Cited in Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, p. 96. I have not yet checked the original in the National Library in Beijing. This was a marked increase on 1941, when only 210,000 tons was demanded from the Henan wheat harvest. Despite reform in 1929, the Chinese system of volume- and weight- measures of grain is confusing to even specialists, and I have here converted all measures to metric tons. I estimate that requisitioning in Henan was required to feed 500,000 troops and provide grain stipends for 250,000 civil officials and their dependents.

³² See for instance, "Harrison Forman Diary", pp. 23-25.

³³ See, for examples, *Henan Minbao*, 2 June 1942.

³⁴ For a discussion on this, see Xu Lianshan and Wang Zongmin (eds.), *Zhengzhou Kangzhan Jianshi* (2005), p. 43

³⁵ See Yang Quesu, "Guanyu 'Henan Haojie' De Hua" (1970), reproduced in HNDJH, pp. 303-308, p. 306.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

full extent of the disaster, did not press the point.³⁷ Instead, in August he sent officials into all parts of the province to both survey the extent of the food shortage *and* oversee grain procurement, which in twenty counties was only just beginning.³⁸ In a glimpse into his wishful thinking, Li told his officials that he “looked forward to both disaster relief and grain procurement proceeding without being mutually exclusive”.³⁹

As for the central government, while Chiang Kai-shek did eventually respond to Li Peiji’s telegram, assuring Li of his “great concern” for the situation in Henan, the political pressure from Chongqing was still to press on with procurement.⁴⁰ Soon afterwards Chiang cabled the province on the importance of tax collection – “this year’s requisitioning has a deep and vast connection to our great enterprise of resistance”;⁴¹ Lu Yuwen, head of the provincial grain management bureau (*Liangzhengju*) and the official responsible for requisitioning, was personally commended by Chiang for his efforts at collection in difficult circumstances.⁴² Even in September, when two officials from Chongqing finally visited to investigate the extent of the disaster, their report noted serious shortages but denied that requisitioning was a key factor, emphasizing the importance of military supplies.⁴³

Part of the problem was that the marginal position of Henan within the Nationalist war economy, left to feed the half-million or so troops on its soil without further inputs, was reflected in its marginal political position. Provincial official Zhang Zhonglu felt that “at the GMD center, there was nobody from Henan to speak out”.⁴⁴ Since Henan’s representatives in the People’s Political Council (*Guomin Canzheng Hui*) had

³⁷ On Li’s initial appeal, see *Henan Minbao*, 25 June 1942; on his subsequent inaction, see Yang Quesu, “Yi Minguo Sanshi Nian Henan De Yige Haojie”, in HNDJH, pp. 294-303, pp. 296-297. To be fair to Li Peiji, Yu Zhenzhou of the provincial grain office felt that it was only when Li saw the streams of refugees while traveling to Xi’an in October 1942 that he finally realized the extent of the disaster – although it is hard to be too sympathetic: it was, after all, Li’s job to know. See Yang, “Guanyu ‘Henan Haojie’ De Hua”, p. 305. For a man brought up in North China in the shadows of the Great Famine of 1876-79, these failures seem inexcusable. In his final report on famine relief, Li (born in southern Hebei in 1886) discusses hearing tales from the 1870s famine during his childhood. See *Henan Minbao*, 11 May 1943.

³⁸ See Lu Yuwen’s own report on ongoing requisitioning, *Henan Minbao*, 29 Aug 1942.

³⁹ *Henan Minbao*, 25 Aug 1942.

⁴⁰ *Henan Minbao*, 12 Aug 1942.

⁴¹ See notes from the provincial government meeting in *Henan Minbao*, 23 Aug 1942.

⁴² See Zhang Zhonglu, “Guanyu Yijiusier Nian”, p. 63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

been protesting since at least 1941 about the province's unreasonable burdens, this is not strictly true, but it is true that their appeals met with little response, and there were few senior politicians or erstwhile warlords from the region to defend its interests.⁴⁵ A delegation of local officials from the worst-hit frontline areas around Zhengzhou visited Chongqing in August 1942, and were met with sympathy but little by way of concrete assistance,⁴⁶ prompting Zhang Zhonglu to feel that the gatekeepers at the heart of the Nationalist regime were obstructing information: "they shifted the responsibility onto others... avoided mentioning the famine conditions and didn't dare report the real situation".⁴⁷

It was only when Chiang Kai-shek left Chongqing that the spatial and cognitive distance between the capital and the disaster zone seems to have dissipated. Visiting Shaanxi at the end of September, Chiang was able to hear first-hand reports from neighboring Henan and belatedly recognized that full collection of the grain quota was impossible. He reduced the official wheat requisitioning quota from 300,000 to 168,000 metric tons.⁴⁸ Chiang's decision did not bring an end to requisitioning – indeed, he urged renewed effort to meet this lower goal – and as winter approached, *tanpai* levies continued, including of important famine foods like straws and grasses (to feed military horses);⁴⁹ even at the height of famine in March 1943, under-supplied military units were still requisitioning grain from any households with remaining stores.⁵⁰ In the end, including local levies, I estimate that between one-fifth and one-seventh of 1942 provincial food production was requisitioned by the state, bringing average per-civilian calorie

⁴⁵ In particular, Xinxiang native Guo Zhongwei had been highlighting Henan's food insecurity as early as 1941, see Liu Haiyong, *Yizuo Cheng De Minguo Jiyi* (2014), pp. 96-103.

⁴⁶ *Henan Minbao*, 5 Aug 1942.

⁴⁷ Zhang Zhonglu, "Guanyu Yijiusier Nian", p. 63.

⁴⁸ For this and other relief statistics, see the essay "Ji Yu Shiliang Tongji" in *Henan Minbao*, 8 May 1943. Note that according to Zhang Zhonglu, the actual reduction was rather less: by a sleight of hand involving switching the volume units of collection, the newly-founded Ministry of Food pushed the collection target back above 200,000 metric tons, see Zhang Zhonglu, "Guanyu Yijiusier Nian", p. 63.

⁴⁹ "Harrison Forman Diary", pp. 82-83; and 105-109. In 1943, the total of wheat chaff, beans and millet straw requisitioned for military horses amounted to some 96,000 tons, a huge additional burden in a famine year. See "Henan Sheng Minzheng Ting Yijiusan Niandu Minzheng Tongji", HPA, M12-001-0005, pp. 131-140.

⁵⁰ Editorial in *Qianfengbao*, 10 March 1943, in HNDJH, pp. 217-219.

availability down from a very low 1000-1100 calories per day to the level of dangerous malnutrition at 800-940 daily calories per capita.⁵¹ In the worst-hit areas close to the frontline, things were even worse.⁵²

3) Winter Woes: Delayed Relief and Eventual Aid, November 1942 – June 1943

By fall 1942 it was clear that if Nationalist-held Henan did not receive grain inputs on a large scale, many of its civilians would not survive to see the spring harvest of 1943. But was it possible for the beleaguered Nationalist state to provide such inputs? With the exception of Sugata Bose, who rather blithely assumed that grain from elsewhere should have flowed seamlessly into the province,⁵³ historians of the famine have tended to downplay the relief effort, treating the province as an isolated, closed system.⁵⁴ There is something to be said for this view: surrounded on three sides by Japanese forces, the Nationalist official Yang Quesu described wartime Henan as an “isolated island” of GMD control.⁵⁵ In 1942, the closest grain surplus region (and the destination of so many refugee journeys⁵⁶) was the Wei River Valley, over 200 miles away in Shaanxi, connected only by the slender thread of the periodically blocked and bombarded Longhai railroad running west of Luoyang.⁵⁷ East of Luoyang, the railroad into the central part of the province was completely out of action. Within the province, poor roads and an almost total lack of motor transport made both state and private transport of grain extremely expensive; besides, the most vulnerable people had long since been priced out of food markets.⁵⁸

⁵¹ This figure is only intended as a very rough estimate based on total production of crops and total population. On the one hand it assumes perfect distribution, but on the other hand discounts the lower caloric needs of children.

⁵² Ernest Wampler, Henan coordinator for the aid agency United China Relief, was in no doubt that the frontline area around Zhengzhou was “some of the worst famine territory”, see Ernest Wampler, *China Suffers; or, my six years of work during the incident* (1945), p. 230. Almost every institution that was still operating in Zhengzhou – the Chamber of Commerce, the banks, the Red Swastika Society – seems to have issued an appeal for assistance. For one example from the Zhengzhou branch of the Central Bank of China, see “Zheng Di Hanzai Qingxing Xilie Shishuzi Xiang Ji Ju Bao”, Henan Provincial Archive (HPA), M54-001-0085.

⁵³ Bose, “Starvation Amidst Plenty”, p. 720

⁵⁴ Historians writing both in Chinese and in English have paid little attention to the relief effort. For one example, stressing the logistical barriers to assistance. See Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, pp. 108-111.

⁵⁵ Yang, “Yi Minguo Sanshi Nian Henan De Yige Haojie”, in HNDJH, p. 294.

⁵⁶ I do not discuss the refugee situation here; for a detailed first-hand account of flight from Luoyang, see Li Rui, “Wujin Chang De Siwang Xian”, in *Qianfengbao*, 19-20 Feb 1943, reproduced in HNWSZL, Vol. 13, pp. 46-49.

⁵⁷ Harrison Forman was one of several contemporary observers to make the comparison. “Harrison Forman Diary”, pp. 54-55.

⁵⁸ For examples of price differences over space as well as time, see “Henan Ge Zhuyao Xianzhen Wujia Zhishu Niankan”, extracted and summarized in Chen Chuanhai and Xu Youli (eds.), *Rijun Huo Yu Ziliao Xuanbian* (1986), p. 236. The journalist Li Rui estimated that for around 70% of people in and around Zhengzhou, grain prices had ceased to have any relevance at all. Li Rui, “‘Si Jiao’ De Xian Shang”, p. 30.

I suggest, however, that the isolation of the province and the slow arrival of relief was not so much a natural phenomenon as an outcome of multiple political decisions. For a start, the need for inputs was predictable. As early as July 1942, while the local authorities were still extracting grain, one local newspaper warned that in the absence of good rail links (unlike in the dearth of 1928-30), the central government would have to take action early to overcome these constraints – yet it was a further six months before grain arrived in the province in any appreciable quantities.⁵⁹ Even the transport constraints were partly of the government’s own making. The railroad east of Luoyang, running into the central part of the province, had been ripped up and the track used in the west for fear that the Japanese would use it in the event of an attack.⁶⁰ This kind of preemptive scorched-earth policy also hit the roads, with routes left in deliberately poor repair: understandable precautions against attack, perhaps, but still a question of political priority rather than geography, and one which should have caused the authorities to pay keener attention to Henan’s food security.⁶¹

Other logistical problems were also political rather than geographical. The Zhengzhou-based Canadian missionary Bill Simpson spent several weeks in Luoyang during spring 1943 trying to organize the transport of grain from Shaanxi to Zhengzhou. Simpson was frustrated by “inflation of currency, high rise of prices, long haulage distances, with very inadequate means of transportation”, but found the bureaucratic barriers worst of all.⁶² Neighboring provinces with grain surpluses were notoriously reluctant to allow transfers, with contemporary accounts variously accusing provincial authorities in Shaanxi, Hubei and Anhui of holding back shipments during the first months of 1943.⁶³ Unlike in famine-hit wartime India, restriction on the inter-provincial movement of grain was not a centrally-imposed policy,⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Editorial in *Qianfengbao*, 16 July 1942, in HNDJH, p. 154.

⁶⁰ See *Henan Sheng Zhi, Di Sanshiqi Juan, Tielu Jiaotong Zhi* (1991), p. 24.

⁶¹ For wartime road transport in Henan, see Huang et al., *Jindai Henan Jingji Shi* (2012), pp. 294-297.

⁶² Bill Simpson, 17 March 1943 letter to Canon Dixon, quoted in Erleen J. Christensen, *In War and Famine: Missionaries in China’s Honan Province in the 1940s* (2005), pp. 116-118. United China Relief had a similar experience. Hampered by bureaucratic barriers as well as poor transportation, Ernest Wampler eventually concluded that it would be better to use the grain to feed refugees arriving Shaanxi than to try to get it into Henan. See Wampler, *China Suffers*, p. 250.

⁶³ See, for instance, Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby, *Thunder Out Of China* (1946), p. 164; “Harrison Forman Diary”, p. 17; see also Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, p. 108.

⁶⁴ On this issue in the Bengal famine, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 77; Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, and the End of Empire* (2015), p. 111-112.

but as one editorial in Henan's *Qianfengbao* newspaper pointed out, noting the persistent fragmentation of the Nationalist state despite its growing wartime centralization: "even between countries it isn't like this, let alone under a single government – how can they can tolerate local governments passing problems onto their neighbors, dividing off regions, and restricting the transport of grain?"⁶⁵

An early shift in emphasis from taxation to relief in the summer (or even the fall) of 1942 would have made a significant difference to the number of starvation deaths in Henan. With sufficient political will and energy, and with farming households about to get a small boost in food access from the (failed) fall harvest, mass starvation-related deaths were not yet inevitable. In September, the independent-minded *Qianfengbao* newspaper urged the authorities to speed up the shift from grain extraction to grain assistance, noting that the lives of millions of people were still in the balance: "the measures being taken against the famine are not active enough, are inadequate, and the pace is not fast enough. Relieving disaster is like putting out a fire: if you are not active and hard-working, it will be extremely hard to escape the spread of a huge blaze." Editor Li Jingzhi proposed an immediate program to cut grain levies, bring in surplus grain from other provinces and organize the subsidized sale of grain (*pingtiao*) well below the spiking market price.⁶⁶

Instead, the remaining months of 1942 saw a fatal drift in the aid effort, with only piecemeal harnessing of state capacity for relief. While the central government may have been providing some extra grain for the military, units were still imposing levies on local populations.⁶⁷ The central government had promised large-scale cash transfers so the provincial authorities could organize grain relief for civilians, but the initial September offering of four million yuan was extremely limited; by December just ten million yuan had arrived: even perfectly distributed, this would only be enough to feed the three million people in need of urgent relief for just a couple of days.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Editorial in *Qianfengbao*, 27 March 1943, in HNDJH, p. 227.

⁶⁶ Editorial in *Qianfengbao*, 3 Sep. 1942, in HNDJH, p. 163.

⁶⁷ Zhang Gaofeng, "Yu Zai Shilu," in *Dagongbao*, 1 Feb 1943, in HNDJH, p. 78.

⁶⁸ *Henan Minbao*, 21 March 1943.

On the whole, the authorities implemented easier and cheaper measures but were slow to enact more difficult policies. As early as August 1942, the Ministry of Railways offered free passage between Luoyang and Xi'an for those looking to escape the province; hundreds of thousands of refugees, perhaps more than half a million, took advantage.⁶⁹ But it was much longer, well into 1943, before grain began to flow in the opposite direction in appreciable quantities. Even by March, the official provincial newspaper admitted that only about 2500 tons of grain had arrived on the railroad – less than two percent of what had been requisitioning and even nominally only enough to feed the starving for about three days.⁷⁰ Most Henanese had seen no relief at all. When the journalist Li Rui cycled to his home village, in the heart of the famine, he found utter social breakdown and no sign of either official or elite-led aid:

“going from one village to the next, for several *li* I didn't encounter anyone... in the village there was no crow of chickens, no bark of dogs, and in the open square there were no cows, sheep or any livestock to be seen. On the doorways, one house, two house, three houses... home after home was locked up, some blocked up with mud bricks; some others stood open, but most of them didn't even have a door. With nothing left to steal inside, the inhabitants had even torn off the doors to sell as firewood”.⁷¹

In some ways the most galling thing about the delayed relief effort for Henan is that when Chongqing finally prioritized aid for the province, just a couple of months before the spring wheat harvest of 1943, its successes showed that the Nationalist state could provide assistance on a large scale. Finally prioritizing civilian survival over military stores, the authorities launched an aid effort which both saved hundreds of thousands of lives and underlined the seriousness of earlier delays.⁷² The impetus for the shift in gear seems to have been sheer negative publicity. Shortly before Spring Festival 1943, one of China's leading

⁶⁹ Free passage to Shaanxi for refugees began in August 1942, see HNDJH, p. 10.

⁷⁰ *Henan Minbao*, 9 March 1943.

⁷¹ Li Rui, “Yutian Jueliang Ji”, in *Qianfengbao*, 16 April 1943, reproduced in HNWSZL, pp. 21-22. While there was some ad hoc local relief during the Henan famine (with varying degrees of official involvement), it seems to have been less effective than previous dearth periods due to the flight of elite families, the rampant inflation in food prices, and other wartime dislocations of social networks.

⁷² United China Relief coordinator Ernest Wampler judged that the GMD's response effective on a large-scale, but arrived simply too late. Wampler, *China Suffers*, p. 230.

newspapers broke the press silence in Chongqing on the disaster in Henan. Wang Yunsheng, editor of *Dagongbao*, used his editorial headline to urge the authorities to overcome the spatial and cognitive distance between the wartime capital and the disaster zone in Henan: “look at Chongqing, think of the Central Plains!”⁷³

The newspaper was suppressed for three days as punishment, but the publicity of *Dagongbao* galvanized the aid effort, which was given a further boost in March when Theodore White’s first-hand reports in *Time* magazine internationalized the scandal.⁷⁴ Despite notorious corruption at the provincial bank⁷⁵, cash transfers from the central government began to arrive in substantial quantities, reaching 80 million yuan by March and totaling 120 million yuan before the harvest.⁷⁶ These funds took some time to convert into grain for the needy, but were supplemented, perhaps even exceeded, by the sudden transfer of grains from military stores to civilian relief. This provision, part-donation and part-loan, was belatedly sanctioned by the central government in late March, and eventually totaled somewhere between 11,000 and 19,000 tons. Admittedly, this was only a tiny proportion of what had been requisitioned in the first place, but when combined with the civil relief effort, I estimate that the total aid in spring 1943 was nominally enough to keep the most desperate three million people alive for between three and five weeks; not long, perhaps, but for many starving Henanese a crucial bridge to the wheat harvest.⁷⁷ Of course, this relief was slow to arrive and imperfectly distributed, but by the time the journalist Li Rui arrived in hard-hit Zhengzhou he was impressed with the recently-opened porridge kitchens (*zhouchang*) dispensing relief.⁷⁸ The county as a whole had over seventy such institutions, most of which could feed a couple of hundred people.⁷⁹ At

⁷³ “Kan Chongqing, Nian Zhongyuan”, editorial in *Dagongbao*, 2 Feb 1943, reproduced in HNDJH, pp. 80-82.

⁷⁴ On the varying impact of local, national and international media, see Zhang, “Wenxue Yu Lishi Shuxie.”

⁷⁵ Banker Li Hanzhen was accused of embezzling millions from famine funds, but died before facing trial. See Liang Xin, “Li Hanzhen and the Henan Farmers’-Workers’ Bank”, in *Kaifeng Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol. 4, pp. 235-240.

⁷⁶ Zhang, “Guanyu Yijiusier Nian”, p. 140. The overall relief total was 200 million yuan, but this includes funds beyond the direct provision of grain, including resettlement of refugees in Shaanxi.

⁷⁷ See *Henan Minbao*, 8 May 1943. I calculate military aid at 19,000 metric tons, higher than Muscolino’s 11,000 tons, see *Ecology of War*, p. 111.

⁷⁸ Li Rui, “‘Si Jiao’ De Xian Shang”, p. 27.

⁷⁹ “Henan Sheng Minzheng Ting Yijiusisan Niandu Minzheng Tongji”, HPA, M12-001-0005, p. 120.

their peak just before the harvest, perhaps one million people were receiving free grain from these porridge stations, in addition to the provision of subsidized grain sold below market prices.⁸⁰

The eventual scale of the Nationalist relief effort in a sense serves only to throw light on its wider failings. As explained above, the underlying problem was Henan's marginality in the war effort. *Qianfengbao* editor Li Jingzhi recognized this, noting that what Henan required above all was to become of national significance, or as he put it in the depths of winter, with the aid effort stalled, "for the famine to be seen as a major question for the whole of China".⁸¹ Once conditions in Henan did, briefly, become a matter of national importance in spring 1943, the central state was able to provide serious grain provisions with a tiny proportion of its total expenditure – only around a third of one percent.⁸² Ironically, their relief plan was in essence that proposed back in September by Li Jingzhi – but six months too late. It is true that the belated government relief effort helped hundreds of thousands of people survive until the harvest. But for others, due not to malevolence but to sheer dismissive neglect of marginal lives, help came too late, or never arrived at all. The final irony of all is that greater priority for this frontline region might have made strategic as well as ethical sense. Nationalist control in Henan in April 1944 came to an ignominious end, their troops attacked and disarmed by resentful civilians as well as pushed back by Japanese forces; even after Japanese surrender, Nationalist rule in Henan never really recovered.⁸³

⁸⁰ Su, *Minguo Shiqi Henan Shui Han Zaihai Yu Xiangcun Shehui*, pp. 156-158. Su Xinliu urges caution on these county-by-county free relief figures, noting that by spring 1943 county heads were incentivized to exaggerate famine relief efforts, knowing that it would contribute to a positive performance review.

⁸¹ Editorial in *Qianfengbao*, 11 Dec 1942, in HNDJH, p. 189. Note that when Sichuan faced a food crisis in 1940 the central government, viewing it immediately as an existential threat to state stability, swiftly organized inputs from elsewhere. Zhang Zhonglu complained a little bitterly that Sichuan got "top place in the whole country" (*Quanguo Shouwei*), see Zhang Zhonglu, "Guanyu Yijiusier Nian", p. 67. I do not, of course, intend this as an anti-Sichuan point - indeed Sichuan's marginalization in the 1930s contributed to famines of its own, most notably in 1936-37.

⁸² Young (1965), budget figures on p. 12 and p. 333. For the state, it would surely have been cheaper to cut requisitioning and find alternative sources of military supply as soon as dearth became apparent in the spring of 1942.

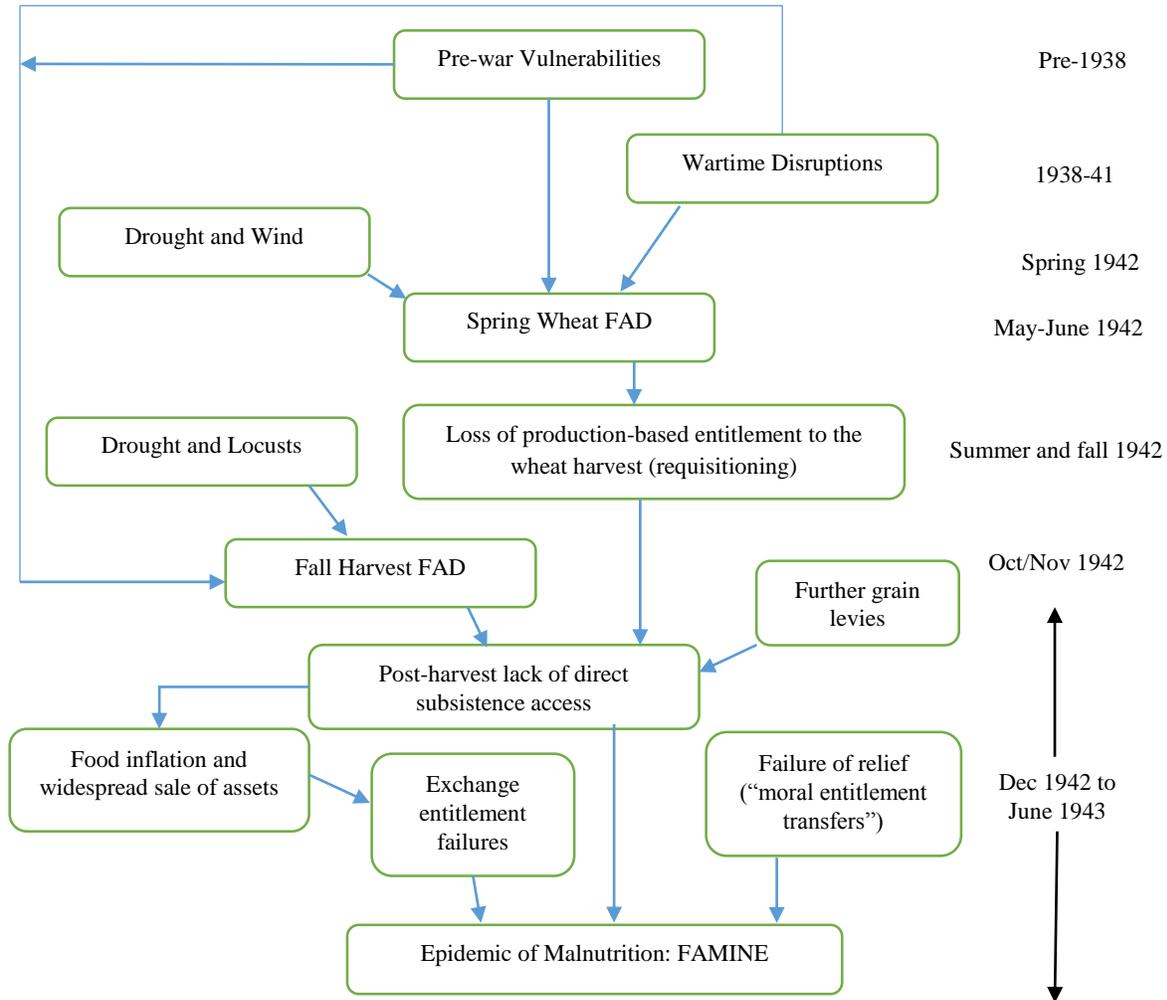
⁸³ On the Ichigo Offensive of April 1944, see Hara Takeshi, "The Ichigo Offensive", in Mark Peattie, Edward Drea and Hans Van de Ven (eds.), *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945* (2011), pp. 392-402.

4) The Henan Famine in Theory

Despite their scale – by death toll, the Henan in 1942-43 was probably only the third- or fourth-worst famine in China’s twentieth century – famines in China still have a rather limited place in theories of famine. What, then, do famine theories offer our understanding of events in Henan in 1942-43? And do those events have anything to offer for our understanding of famine processes? Bearing in mind Frances Stewart’s call for a stronger sense of time in famine theory, I offer the following processual model of the interactions which took wartime Henan from a system under strain to a society facing mass starvation.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Frances Stewart, “Poverty and Famines: Book Review,” in *Disasters*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1982), quoted in Devereux, *Theories of Famine*, pp. 79-80.

Processes of Famine Formation in Central and Western Henan



This model attempts to capture something of what Micah Muscolino (following Brett Walker) calls “hybrid causation”.⁸⁵ Without trying to isolate a single cause or even a dominant process, it incorporates the importance of pre-existing vulnerabilities, drought, requisitioning, inflation and the failure of timely relief. Three points in particular may be of some significance.

First, I suggest a new way to think about requisitioning within a broadly entitlement-based model.

Although his discussion is rather vague on the point, Amartya Sen’s term “direct entitlement failure” includes both a fall in yield and post-harvest loss (whether due to theft, requisitioning or destruction of

⁸⁵ Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, p. 88.

the stored crop).⁸⁶ This elision of the distinction between a reduced crop and its post-harvest fate is an important area of ambiguity in the entitlement framework. In the schema above, I use the alternative term “direct subsistence access” to draw attention to the question of how cultivating households command food after the harvest. More specifically, I refer to the ability of a cultivating household to retain grain for subsistence following the harvest, i.e., without entering market-based exchange entitlement situations.

The term “direct subsistence access” is a clumsy one, but draws attention to the survival path of sedentary, cultivating households. In part because of their prominent place in the most theorized famines, non-cultivating fisher peoples, laborers, pastoralists and craft workers have received rather more attention than ordinary farmers. Yet cultivating households – whether owner-cultivators, sharecroppers or collective farmers – accounted for the majority of famine victims in the twentieth century, and in many of those cases a post-harvest loss of access to minimal subsistence (whether in rent, state appropriation or wartime looting) was the key factor. This has led to a disconnect between the famine theories of the 1980s and 1990s and our understanding of processes in places like China, the Soviet Union and Vietnam, famines where war and/or requisitioning played a major role and where cultivators made up the majority of victims. Focusing on post-harvest rights to retention not only helps meet the common criticism that the entitlement model is vague on the importance of war and the state, but can also explain cultivator survival in famines such as Bengal 1943, Wollo 1972-74 and Bangladesh 1974.⁸⁷

Second, while Henan’s circumstances in 1942-43 were very different from Bengal, and could not be described as an inflation-*led* famine, exchange entitlement failure is a useful way of understanding why many people failed to command sufficient food to avoid starvation during the winter of 1942-43. Having

⁸⁶ For the distinction, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 93 and 101; see also p. 165, where direct entitlement is defined as “each food-grower’s output of food which he is entitled to consume directly” – which would seem to include requisitioning as well as bad weather in the failure of direct entitlement; note, though, that at times Sen seems to put things like looting, and perhaps even wartime requisitioning outside the entitlement framework altogether, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 49-51; see also Stephen Devereux, “Sen’s Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-critiques”, in *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2001), pp. 245-263, p. 259; Sen also uses the term “production-based entitlement”, which is similarly vague; I prefer “access” given that production does not necessarily lead to consumption (even in normal circumstances).

⁸⁷ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, Chs 6, 7 and 9. Cultivating households withdrawing grain from the market to ensure their own direct subsistence access seems to be a common phenomenon in such dearth situations, but can worsen the exchange entitlement situation for non-cultivating groups.

lost direct subsistence access in the harvest failures and requisitions of 1942, many, probably most, households were forced to tackle an increasingly hostile exchange entitlement environment. Grain prices in Henan actually rose faster than in any of Sen's famine studies⁸⁸ and the saleable assets of cultivators – land, animals, tools, labor and even children – duly plunged relative to their caloric exchange value. Even households wanting to follow the usual practice of selling their remaining wheat in exchange for a larger amount of coarse grains found that wheat was scarcely any more expensive than other foodstuffs: only calories mattered.⁸⁹ Interest rates also rose spectacularly.⁹⁰ Arable land was reported to be for sale at 5kg of grain per *mu*, a fraction of what the land would produce in a single year and hardly enough to keep an average-sized family fed for a week. When Li Rui visited the county seat at Sishui during the height of the famine, he stumbled across an incongruously busy impromptu market on a patch of wasteland. There, “the prices that things were being sold for were truly so low as to be astounding”: families selling prized furniture for a single day's worth of grain; whole sets of old books exchanged for half a *jin* of flour; other items had no market value at all.⁹¹

Third, I suggest that the Henan case is a useful example for trying to understand famine aid. Efforts to provide relief, whether in cash or in kind, have usually been something of an afterthought in famine theory – indeed, at times Amartya Sen seems to leave them out of his model altogether, describing charity as a “non-entitlement transfer”.⁹² In view of the importance of food relief in Chinese models of both state and elite behavior, I hope it is not too much of an imposition of the 1980s famine theory on older Chinese ethics to refer to relief as a “moral entitlement transfer”. Local officials and intellectuals campaigning for

⁸⁸ For example, wholesale prices in Calcutta (admittedly, not the epicenter of famine) rose less than 3 times from Dec 1942 to Aug 1943, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 54; in Zhengzhou, grain prices rose twenty-fold in the space of six months (while only rising by 28% in Chongqing). Compare Su, *Minguo Shiqi Henan Shui Han Zaihai Yu Xiangcun Shehui*, p. 51 on Zhengzhou and Young, *China's Wartime Finance*, p. 353 (June – Dec 1942 figures).

⁸⁹ In occupied territory, wheat even ended up slightly cheaper than millet. See *Xin Henan Ribao*, 22 Dec 1942.

⁹⁰ In one village in Sishui County, people borrowing grain a couple of months before the 1943 wheat harvest would have to pay back nine times the original loan (borrowing 1.5 *dou* and paying back 10.5 *dou* after the harvest) – but securing such a loan could be the difference between life and death. Li Rui, “Yutian Jueliang Ji”, p. 25.

⁹¹ Li Rui, “Jingren De Gudong Ji”, in *Qianfengbao*, 15 April 1942, reproduced in HNWSZL, Vol. 13, pp. 19-20. Su Xinliu makes the point that disaster situations can push people into more market activity than before, creating the false impression of prosperity. See Su, *Minguo Shiqi Henan Shui Han Zaihai Yu Xiangcun Shehui*, p. 49.

⁹² Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 3. Note that Sen's use of “entitlement” does include “transfer entitlement”, which is something like a moral claim to relief.

swift relief articulated a moral, historically-rooted claim to state help. While a moral identity as laboring “peasants” is too intangible strictly to be considered an exchange part of one’s “entitlement bundle”, it can be an important aspect of a person’s ability to command food in a famine situation. Like other kinds of entitlement, the “moral entitlement transfer” of relief is not evenly spread, and the who, when, how and where questions of its distribution can be a matter of life and death. In Henan in 1942-43, then, the critical question is why the moral claim for relief was not sufficiently powerful to win the priority of the central government until for many it was too late.

In drawing attention to this political and ethical failures of the state during the Henan famine, I do not intend to suggest that the Nationalist government was uniquely incompetent or malfeasant compared to other states in China or beyond. Like the Nationalists, the “self-strengthening” late Qing state prioritized its military survival over its relief responsibilities in North China to disastrous effect;⁹³ in the People’s Republic, state grain extraction caused a famine of far more devastating duration and proportion than 1942-43;⁹⁴ in Bengal, the authorities in Calcutta, Delhi and London were in different ways just as culpable as the Nationalist state;⁹⁵ and while it is true that most Second World War belligerents had a better record at protecting their own domestic populations from hunger than the Nationalists in Henan, they often did so by what Lizzie Collingham calls “exporting hunger” to their imperial subordinates.⁹⁶

With some exceptions, the responsibility of the state for the Henan famine, both of active requisitioning and inaction in providing relief, was of neglect rather than malevolence – the neglect and callous

⁹³ See Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears From Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (2008), esp. Ch. 1.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (2012).

⁹⁵ Unlike Henan, Bengal itself had not been invaded (although war panic was in the air). The combined weight of government in Calcutta, Delhi and London commanded considerably more resources and had more options than Chongqing. Government-licensed requisitioning in Bengal both reduced food availability and help fuel self-fulfilling rumors of rice inflation. See esp. Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 109-110. In both cases, the authorities procrastinated and seem to have had an unspoken desire to “unsee” the spatially distant famine.

⁹⁶ See Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (2012), *passim* and p. 263; witness the relatively successful food policies protecting civilians in Britain, Germany and Japan (the latter only to 1944-45) at the expense of hunger in India, occupied Europe (especially Ukraine) and occupied Asia.

indifference of an embattled state that in the years of war had become more concerned with the squeezing of resources from its own people than the preservation of their lives. This brings us to the tension in Nationalist state power: a power that was strong enough to cause a famine in Henan, but failed to alleviate it; a state that was in some ways becoming more ambitious and powerful, but which neglected one of the most important elements of Chinese governance. At the heart of this tension lies the crucial but under-theorized issue of prioritization in a state and society under strain, the banality not of evil but of negligence, where the lives of others are rendered not sub-human but of lesser importance, where the option of sacrificing rural people by flood or famine seems easier and more convenient than mobilizing limited resources to pursue a difficult alternative. Arguably, these issues of neglect and delay make the dynamics of the Henan famine more pertinent to our world today, with our multiple priorities and racialized hierarchies of newsworthiness, than the more colossal horrors of the twentieth century's very largest collectivization famines. In the crowded field of mid-twentieth century atrocities, the Henan famine is far from the moral abyss of the Holocaust, and still at some distance from Churchill's racist contempt and indifference towards starving Bengalis, but the Henan famine is in some ways all the more tragic and all the more comprehensible for being rooted in the more humdrum question of cheap lives and low priorities.