

# Revisiting the Causes of China's Great Leap Famine after 50 Years: Loss and Recovery of the Right to Free Exit from Communal Dining Halls<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: Using the materials that become available only recently and the method of historical logic, this article reveals how the rise, dissolution, reconsolidation under political pressure, and final sudden disbandment of the communal dining halls, which were characteristic of the deprivation of household plots and sideline production and compulsory collectivization of farmers' all food rationing, are the main cause of the start, exacerbation and end of the Great Leap Famine. This paper demonstrates the central importance of the free exit right lost and regained from communal dining halls in explaining the rise and the end of this unprecedented famine.

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# Revisiting the Causes of China's Great Leap Famine after 50 Years:

## Loss and Recovery of the Right to Free Exit from Communal Dining Halls

### I INTRODUCTION

About 50 years ago, China encountered a famine of unprecedented magnitude in its history as well as in world history. However, the very causes of this famine are still clouded with myths. The Chinese government has not fully declassified the files directly related to the famine, and the victims of this tragedy either died quietly in remote areas without having left much in the way of written records or physical evidence such as tapes, photos or large graveyards, or, being mostly poor and illiterate peasants, they remain voiceless. The mysterious nature of this tragedy is made even more confusing by the eventful nature of 1958. In this year, pushed by Mao under the slogan of the Great Leap Forward, the people's commune movement peaked in the late summer and early autumn and immediately resulted in two serious consequences: the drastic decline of total factor productivity (TFP) in the agricultural sector (Wen, 1993), and the worst famine in human history.<sup>2</sup>

Lin (1990) in his seminal paper argued that it was the deprivation of the right to free withdrawal from the commune system that resulted in the drop of TFP in China's agricultural sector. Lin's hypothesis might be useful in explaining the agricultural productivity crisis, but it certainly can not directly explain the causes of the Great Leap Famine (GLF). As we know, Chinese peasants did not regain the right to exit from the commune system until the early 1980s when the commune system was officially replaced by the household responsibility system nationwide. During the whole period from 1958 to 1978, TFP was never restored to the pre-1958 level. However, while the food supply was meager, there was no wide-spread hunger throughout these 20 years. Therefore, we must turn to hypotheses other than Lin's to explain this unprecedented famine.

The Chinese government has labeled the great famine as a "three-year natural disaster" or a "three-year economic difficulty." However, more and more studies in the past fifty years have testified that the GLF was not a natural disaster but was man-made. The hypotheses documented in prior studies included urban bias policy (excessive grain procurement), inadequate government relief, policy favoring regions with insufficient food production, political radicalism, and the communal dining system.<sup>3</sup> However, most of these hypotheses fail to answer the following question: How could this famine suddenly have broken out in some regions in the wake of a better than usual harvest, measured by rural food consumption per capita in 1958 and 1959 more than that of the preceding years (see Table 1); and how could the famine suddenly have ended in

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<sup>2</sup> There is no consensus on how many people died of hunger during the Great Leap Famine. The estimates based on the population census in 1953, 1964, 1982 and the one-per-thousand fertility survey in 1982 are most reliable. Jiang Zhenghua and Li Nan (1986, 1987, 1989) estimated that 17 million people were lost during the worst three years of the famine. Coale (1984) calculated that 27 million people died abnormally from 1958-1963. Ashton etc. (1984) estimated that 30 million people were lost for famine from 1958 to 1962. The ex-president of the State Bureau of Statistics of China, Li Chengrui (1997), after revising Coale's estimates, reduced the population loss to 22 million. In summary, the estimated population loss in the Great Leap Famine ranges from 17 million to 30 million, and it is viewed as the worst famine in human history.

<sup>3</sup> Yang D.T (2008) made a comprehensive survey on the hypotheses contained in literature written in English on the causes of great famine.

the second half year of 1961, a time when the rural food consumption per capita was at its lowest level since the famine broke out three years earlier? It seems that hypotheses such as the food availability decline (FAD), urban bias, and inadequate government relief cannot explain the puzzle, since the indicator of rural food consumption has considered the grain output and procurement, as well as the grain rural resales. Moreover, after 1962, when the communal dining halls were no longer part of Mao's radical social experiments, there was no famine in China. Even when Mao's political radicalism increased and finally peaked in the ten-year catastrophe of the *Cultural Revolution* there was no famine, so political radicalism is unlikely to have been the main cause of the GLF. In sharp contrast, the rise, retreat, reconsolidation, and final sudden dissolution of the communal dining hall system, characterized by the denial of private plots, the illegalization of household sideline production, and the compulsory collectivization of all farmers' food rations, exactly coincided with the start, exacerbation and abrupt end of the GLF.

Table 1 is about here

Our central hypothesis is: while recognizing that the famine was aggravated by multiple factors, it is mainly the rise of the compulsory communal dining hall system, its consolidation, and its abrupt dismantlement that explain how the famine was triggered, worsened and ended.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section II reviews the existing hypotheses and shows the need to revisit the causes of the great famine. Section III analyzes how the food wastage in the communal dining halls triggered the famine in the end of 1958, using the three provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu as examples. Section IV shows how the communal dining hall system, characterized by the trio of deprivation of private plots, illegalization of household sideline production, and the compulsive collectivization of all farmers' food rations (for brevity hereafter, trio of characteristics) intensified the famine through the channels of production, distribution and consumption. Section V examines the causality between the rights regained by peasants to free exit from the communal dining hall system and the sudden end of the famine. The mechanism of how the communal dining hall system and its dismantlement first triggered, worsened and then ended the famine will be presented in section VI. Section VII presents an empirical study to test our hypothesis using provincial data from 1958 to 1962. Section VIII emphasizes the lesson learned from this famine and why it is most important to prevent tragedies such as famines in human society by giving individuals the rights to free options and limiting the government's abuse of power.

## II LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined above, the existing hypotheses on the causes of great famine includes FAD, urban bias policy, inadequate government relief, policy favoring regions with insufficient food production, political radicalism, and communal dining hall system. We examine these in detail below.

### A. FAD

In official documents, the Chinese government has referred to the GLF as a "three-year natural disaster" or a "three-year economic difficulty." For instance, the National Day editorial of the

*People's Daily* in 1960 declared for the first time that "New China has suffered from the greatest natural disaster since its establishment."<sup>4</sup> *The Communiqué of the Ninth Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, publicized in January, 1961, once again attributed the drastic fall of agricultural production and the difficulty of people's lives to a "serious natural disaster," and this became the official explanation for the occurrence of the great famine. Even the "*Resolution on Certain Historical Issues of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*," issued in June 1981, which is a most important document in the history of the Communist Party of China (CPC), still ascribed the "three-year economic difficulty" to "natural disaster and soviet's breach of contract", though it admitted the negative role of the Great Leap Forward and the anti-rightist movement. This ungrounded excuse even influenced the judgments of some scholars. For example, Yao (1999) took bad weather and the continuing decline in the sown area of grain crops, and the consequent drop of grain output from 1959 to 1961, as the primary causes of famine. Other studies also regarded FAD as one cause of the great famine.<sup>5</sup>

According to official data, the national grain output did continuously decrease from 1959 to 1961. However, the decline of food availability was not sufficient to have caused the great famine. As Figure 1 shows, 13.73 million ha. were affected by natural disaster in 1959, while 15.23 million ha. were affect in the non-famine period of 1956, 14.98 million ha. in 1957, 16.67 million ha. in 1962, and 20.02 million ha. in 1963. As these data show, the number of hectares affected by natural disaster was larger in many non-famine years than in 1959, at the height of the famine. The national grain output per capita in 1959 was 255 kg, higher than the levels in 1961, 1962 and 1963 (224 kg, 238 kg and 246 kg respectively) by 13.8 percent, 6.7 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively. The flaw of the weather hypothesis becomes obvious when we compare the per capita grain output in 1959 with that in the second part of 1961. Why would the famine have broken out when the per capita grain output was relatively high, and why would the famine have ended when the per capita grain output was relatively low? Clearly, the decline in grain output caused by natural disaster was not significant enough to be the main cause of this famine.

Figure 1 about here

The Chinese government has also attributed the "three-year economic difficulty" to the Soviet Union's breach of contract. This claim, however, is incorrect according to the historical record. The Soviet Union did not break the 1957 contract on national defense by refusing to provide the sample and technical references for the production of the atomic bomb until June 1959, at which point the great famine had already been going on for at least half a year. The Soviet's agreement to provide China with 600 experts in science and technology was voided in July 1960, by which time the famine had been spreading throughout the country for more than one year. In any case, this agreement had nothing to do with agricultural production. Therefore, the so-called "Soviet's breach of contract" cannot be the origin of the great famine. The truth is that when the Soviets learned of the situation in China, they actually offered to provide China with 1 million tons of wheat and 0.5 million tons of sucrose to help mitigate the impact of famine. China only accepted

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<sup>4</sup> "Celebrate Our Great National Day", *People's Daily*, Oct., 1 1960.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Lin and Yang, 2000; Kung and Lin, 2003; Fan and Meng, 2006, 2007.

the latter offer.<sup>6</sup>

## B. Urban Bias Policy

The hypothesis on urban bias policy focuses on excessive grain procurement. However, famine occurs only when such a policy cuts down grain consumption per capita to a level below subsistence. Hence, we must first examine the actual grain consumption per capita by peasants during the famine period before we can judge whether high grain procurement was indeed one of the important causes of the great famine.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the following arguments are questionable.

Bernstein (1984) argues that China transferred too much of its resources from rural areas to the industrial sector and to urban areas to accelerate industrialization and urbanization. This was done by significantly increasing grain procurement through agricultural collectivization, and he claims that this consequently resulted in the great famine.

Walker (1984), who investigates the procurement system and food consumption in rural China during the Great Leap Forward, argues that excessive procurement in the Great Leap Forward was the main cause of the famine.

Lin and Yang (1998, 2000) assert that under the policy of unified purchasing and marketing (*tonggou tongxiao*), the legal guarantee of food supply received by urban residents constituted a compulsive burden to peasants. Hence, they argue, the urban bias in food distribution policy was the main cause of the great famine when grain output declined. They use rural population share as a proxy for urban bias and create an empirical study by using panel data of 28-provinces for the period from 1954 to 1965. They find that urban bias policy played a more significant role than FAD in explaining regional variety in the death rate, although both factors were significant.

Kung and Lin (2003) argue further that the urban bias policy, measured by both the rural population share and the net grain procurement rate, had a very important effect on famine.

We find that this hypothesis cannot explain why some regions with normal grain consumption levels suffered massive abnormal death at the end of 1958. For example, Sichuan, a land often called a paradise on earth, was historically the biggest exporter of grain to the central government and to other provinces. However, as table 2 reveals, the death rate in Sichuan province rose to 25.17‰ in 1958, a 109 percent increase over that of 1957. The grain possession per capita in rural Sichuan increased from 212.3 kg in 1957 to 235.5 kg in 1958 as a result of the increase in grain output and in rural resales despite the modest increase in grain procurement.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the hypothesis of high procurement cannot explain why Sichuan's death rate in 1958 doubled when grain possession per capita in rural Sichuan actually grew. Similarly, the grain possession per capita in rural Gansu increased from 174 kg in 1957 to 189 kg in 1958, while the death rate rose

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<sup>6</sup> Yang, 2008, pp. 588-596.

<sup>7</sup> The grain procurement as percentage of output increased from 24.6% in 1957 to 29.4% in 1958, 39.7% in 1959, 35.6% in 1960 and 27.4% in 1961 respectively. As can be seen, the procurement amount and rate increased modestly in 1958, but reached the highest level in 1959. See *China Statistics Yearbook* of 1984, p.370.

<sup>9</sup> Rural grain per capita = (grain output - grain procurement + grain resold in rural areas)/ rural year-average population. This term is defined in this way unless otherwise specified. The (trade) grain procurement increased from 4.98 million ton in 1957 to 5.38 million ton in 1958, increasing by 8 percent. However, the net procurement rate decreased to 24.7% in 1958 from 25.3% in 1957 because the grain output and grain resold to rural areas rose. See Planning Office of Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983: p.172, p.390.

from 11.33% to 21.11 %<sup>10</sup>, a fact that cannot be explained by the high procurement hypothesis.  
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Table 2 is about here

If one argues that excessive grain procurement triggered famine through reduced grain consumption per capita in rural China, then the same hypothesis obviously cannot explain the sudden end of the famine. Rural grain consumption in 1961 was only 154 kg, reaching the lowest level since 1949, but the famine ended abruptly in the second half of 1961(see Table 1 and the analysis in section VI).

### C. Inadequate Government Relief

Sen (1983), after comparing post-independence India and China, argues that the lack of free news media and political opposition left the Chinese government unchallenged in taking effective measures to deal with the famine. Lardy (1987) studied the government's relief during the great famine, and found that the goods traded among regions was limited and that traditional rural trade was disrupted because the markets were widely closed due to the belief in local self-sufficiency and the tendency to exaggerate local output. He found that the peasants in food deficient areas could hardly get food from the market, and that there was a lack of adequate government relief.

Zhou (2003) investigated the food distribution of the eleven provinces with the highest death rates and found that most provinces did react to the famine. On one hand, each province increased the amount of food resold to rural areas, but such food relief was very limited due to the tendency to over-report local output and to the anti-right opportunism movement. On the other hand, six provinces were still exporting a substantial amount of food at the peak of famine.<sup>12</sup> His finding shows that although most provinces resold more food to peasants in response to the famine, they didn't turn to the central government and other provinces for help, and thus missed the best timing for most effective relief effort.

The hypothesis of inadequate government relief is supported by historical evidence that became available only recently. Grain reserves in granaries were controlled by various levels of government during the great famine. The failure to deliver the grain to the starving public significantly worsened the famine.<sup>13</sup> However, it should be pointed out that this hypothesis

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<sup>10</sup> The data of grain comes from the Trade and Price Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1984: p27; the data of death rate comes from the General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> The case of Yunnan province is an exception, and the Great Leap Forward policy and the decline in grain output may have partly contributed to its famine. The grain output of Yuannan province reached its peak top in 1956, and continuously decreased in 1957 and 1958, to representing only 97% and 90% to that of 1956. The rural grain possession per capita of Yunnan province in 1958 was 227 kg, representing only 96% of that of 1957 level, although it was still significantly higher than 154kg, the level of 1961 when the while nation came out of the famine. The data on grain comes from the Planning Office of Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983: pp.394-395, and the data on the death rate comes from the General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.829.

<sup>12</sup> The six provinces were Anhui, Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Gansu.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in April of 1960, when the spring famine was most serious, the state grain reserve was 20.175 billion kg, which could feed 140 million persons for one year, according to the ration standard at that time. (Yang, 2008, p.753) Why did government at various levels not provide relief for peasants? First, the government in some places didn't believe that rural areas were suffering from food shortages. For example, the government in many rural areas launched a movement of anti-hiding and anti-distributing grain in secret among peasants during the famine period, indicating that the government believed that there was surplus grain intercepted by peasants. Second, the grass-roots cadres would not take the initiative to provide grain to peasants to avoid political risks,

mainly focuses on why the famine worsened. As with the hypothesis of urban bias, this hypothesis cannot explain how the famine could have ended when rural grain consumption per capita reached its lowest level (See Table 1). Actually, Chinese peasants have traditionally overcome famine by saving food and by self-relief through production, as well as by leaving famine-stricken areas. As will be explained in detail in section IV, the destruction of the three traditional mechanisms for Chinese peasants under the communal dining system were the most important causes of the great famine.

#### D. Food Deficient Area Bias

Fan and Meng (2006, 2007) argue that the hypothesis of urban bias cannot explain the variation in death rate across rural areas within provinces, though it can explain the differences in death rates between urban and rural areas during the famine. They contend that by distinguishing food deficient areas from food surplus areas, one can better explain the variation in death rates within rural areas. Under the system of unified purchasing and marketing, urban residents had priority access to food, followed by peasants in food deficient areas. Peasants living in the food surplus areas had the lowest priority. The last group, therefore, was most prone to famine when the grain output declined. Fan and Meng conduct an empirical study by using provincial data from 1954 to 1966 and county-level data of Jiangsu province from 1954 to 1966.

Factually, the grain ration received by the peasants living in food deficient areas was lower than that of the peasants living in grain production regions in normal times.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, grain resold in rural areas did not effectively relieve the famine in food deficient regions because the government at all levels tried to cover up the truth about the famine. In addition, the availability of grain in general was simply too limited during the famine period, as evidenced by the fact that the per capita amount of grain resold annually in rural areas from 1959 to 1961 was only 56.9 kg, which is less than the 63.9 kg resold in 1954 when the Yangtse River areas were flooded.<sup>15</sup> Considering the significant increase of the population affected by natural disaster during this period, the grain per capita resold in rural areas should have been much lower. The total amount of grain resold in rural areas from July 1960 to June 1961 was only 18.1 million tons, which was much lower than 20.97 million tons sold from July 1957 to June 1958.<sup>16</sup> In an empirical study using panel data from 28 provinces for the period 1953 to 1966, Liu (2010) did not find any evidence supporting the hypothesis of food deficient areas bias, as measured by the share of grain resold in rural areas of a province to its total grain output. Lardy (1987) even argues for the opposite by saying that the peasants living in cash crop areas were the main victims of the famine because the grain trade among regions was limited during The Great Leap Forward.

#### E. Political Radicalism

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even if they knew the truth of famine. Third, the grain reserves were mainly used for urban residents and for export, so the survival of peasants was of only secondary importance in the minds of decision makers.

<sup>14</sup> It was stipulated in the 20th article of “The Interim Measures on the Unified Purchasing and Unified Marketing of Grain in Rural Areas”, publicized and executed on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1955, that the standards for grain ration and feed grain allowed to general households with insufficient grain ration but living in grain producing regions, or in natural disaster stricken regions, or non-farming household in rural areas, should be lower than that of the local households with surplus grain or that of the local households with insufficient grain food in normal time, while, according to the state’s plan, the standard grain ration and feed grain of the households that produced cash crops would not be lower than that of the local households with surplus grain.

<sup>15</sup> See Planning Office of Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983: pp.510-511.

<sup>16</sup> Yang, 2008, p.752.

The existing studies of this school approach the role of political radicalism in the famine from several angles. Yang (1996) put forward the notion that the cadres in lower ranks showed their loyalty to the central authorities by obeying and carrying out orders from the above and by implementing policies or institutions favored by the central authorities. Yang and Su (1998) find that the regions with lower proportions of Party member in the total population tended to be more radical, and thus had higher participation ratios in the communal dining halls and carried out the policy more radically, which caused the famine to be more severe.

The problem with this argument is as follows. Political radicalism actually became more and more extreme, and peaked in the last ten years of the twenty-seven years of Mao Zedong's tenure as top leader. However, we find that political radicalism led to famine only when it advocated the communal dining hall system. In other words, the explanatory power of political radicalism is equivalent to that of the hypothesis of communal dining system, whereas the political radicalism without the communal dining hall system as its important component has no explanatory power relative to the famine.

Lin and Yang (1998) emphasized that the leaders in politically radical provinces contributed large amounts of grain to the central government to show their loyalty to the Great Leap Forward movement. Kung and Lin (2003) argue that Mao sent a group of "southbound cadres" (*Nanxia Ganbu*) or senior officials with a tough political stance to ensure policy compliance in the "newly liberated areas." Hence, the leaders in newly liberated areas were prone to implementing radical policies more enthusiastically than their counterparts in the north. The leaders in several southern provinces often turned to extreme measures to excessively mobilize the masses in a variety of energy-consuming activities such as producing steel from backyard furnaces and constructing large scale irrigation projects, which, given the poor food supply, led to famine caused by caloric deficiencies and malnutrition, and induced diseases such as edema. Yang D.T (2008) claimed that the health problems triggered by the energy-consuming activities and the export of a large amount of grain may be the important contributors to why the death rate in Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu rose sharply in 1958.

However, the evidence from Sichuan and Gansu do not support this hypothesis. As table 2 indicates, grain per capita in rural areas of Sichuan and Gansu in 1958 actually increased by 10.9 percent and 8.6 percent respectively compared with that of 1957, even if we take into consideration grain exports among provinces.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, grain exports could not have triggered the famine in Sichuan and Gansu in 1958. Now let's take a look at the health consequence of the energy-consuming activities asserted by Kung and Lin. We find that Sichuan was not the most radical in terms of the wide-spread movement of constructing irrigation projects and backyard steel production during the Great Leap Forward. Using the year-over-year change in provincial iron and steel output as a measure of political radicalism, we find that the national output increased by 49.5 percent from 1957 to 1958, Sichuan's figure was a modest 34 percent. Meanwhile, the output of Guangdong and Hubei, two newly liberated provinces, grew by 15 times and 60 percent respectively.<sup>18</sup> In terms of cubic meters of earth and stone per capita finished by rural laborers, for Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu, the figures were 61 M<sup>3</sup>, 94 M<sup>3</sup> and

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<sup>17</sup> Actually, the grain exported from provinces to the central government came from procured grain, so the argument emphasizing grain export is the same as excessive grain procurement.

<sup>18</sup> See General Department of State Statistics Bureau, 1990, p.18, p.572, p.630, p.707. Wang Renzhong, a well-known Mao's close follower, was the top leader of Hubei province during the same period as the other well-known left-leaning provincial leaders such as Li Jingchuan, Zeng Xisheng, Ke Qingshi, Wu Zhipu and Shu Tong.



288 M<sup>3</sup> respectively, very modest compared with Henan's 447 M<sup>3</sup>, Hebei's 453 M<sup>3</sup>, Shandong's 620 M<sup>3</sup> and Anhui's 431M<sup>3</sup>, respectively. Actually, the figures for Sichuan and Yunnan were even lower than the national level of 231 M<sup>3</sup>, indicating that the burden of energy-consuming activity in Sichuan and Yunnan was far below the national average. Hence, the hypothesis of political radicalism outside the communal dining hall system cannot explain why the death rates in those areas more radical in steel production and irrigation projects didn't rise sharply in 1958 as occurred in Sichuan and Yunnan.

#### F. Communal Dining System

Chang and Wen (1997, 1998) use the role of the communal dining system to explain the causes of the famine. The famine first started in the winter of 1958 in some areas after a good harvest in the fall of that year, so they argue that hypotheses such as a fall in grain production, an increase in grain exports, excessive procurement, and population growth cannot have been the triggering factors of the famine. The food wastage or overconsumption caused by the policy of providing a free and unlimited food supply triggered the famine; the egalitarian distribution policy of communal dining halls deprived the peasants of any incentive to work and led to a sharp reduction in grain supply starting in 1959. In addition, the communal dining system provided the rural cadres with unchecked access to corruption and power abuse, which made the famine worse. Chang and Wen find that the excess deaths were closely related to the dining hall participation rates of various provinces by the end of 1959. The fact that the dissolution of communal dining halls and the sudden end of the famine happened simultaneously further buttresses the hypothesis that the famine was mainly due to the communal dining system.

Kung and Lin (2003) provide an empirical study incorporating three political variables (mess hall participation rates, Party membership density, and time of liberation) based on carefully constructed model by using provincial data from 1958 to 1961. Their estimates confirm the relationship between policy decisions, excessive labor mobilization, and death rates. However, their results show that communal dining did not affect death rates negatively for the following reasons. First, food was not provided free of charge and in unrestricted quantity as the political slogan stated, but was generally rationed to the peasants in the mass dining halls. Moreover, according to Kung and Lin, the official evidence also suggests that communal dining was already becoming unpopular with the peasants as early as in the spring of 1959, and many dining halls were in fact allowed to operate on a seasonal rather than a year-round basis. In many instances, the peasants were actually allowed to prepare and cook food at home. Thirdly, when the government tried to reconsolidate the communal dining system in 1960, the sharply reduced output by then could no longer allow peasants to have the extra grain to waste. However, we will show in Section III and IV that the above three arguments are not well-grounded.

#### G. Exit rights and the communal dining system—A Re-examination

The communal dining system progressed through four stages. The system was first established almost overnight in rural China in the autumn of 1958. It was de facto suspended after some rural areas encountered serious food shortages starting in the early spring of 1959, then restored and consolidated after the Lushan Conference in the summer of 1959, and finally dismantled after June of 1961. The damage caused by the communal dining halls was not only through food wastage in its early stage, but also through deprivation of peasants' rights to produce and

consume food on their own. Under this system, the peasants could not escape from the famine-stricken regions because various levels of government prohibited peasants from running away from famine, while the food was completely controlled by the communal dining halls. As a consequence, the peasants did not have any food to support them while traveling to the nearest city, and they had to obey the cadres and stay where they were.

Ideally, one should assess the joint significance of the set of proposed causes of this famine through a multivariate econometric model using panel data. However, because of the many institutional and policy changes that resulted from Mao's whimsical interventions, many variables cannot be quantified, or their data are still classified. This makes the study of famine very difficult.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, Yang's book (2008) entitled "Tombstones (*Mubei*)" has been published recently. His book reveals for the first time many facts and data unknown before and makes it possible for us to reconstruct a vivid picture of the famine at micro and macro levels. The book helps us to see better what really happened in rural as well as in urban areas, the suffering of the ordinary peasants as well as the true faces of the top decision makers during the famine and the situations at the level of provinces, counties, townships and villages, all the way to production teams and individuals. Undoubtedly the book greatly enriches our understanding of the causes of, and especially the effects of the communal dining system on the famine. Based on the newly available historical materials contained in Yang's book, and for the reasons given below, we define in this paper the different phases the communal dining system by its trio of characteristics: the deprivation of private plots, the abolishment of household sideline production, and the compulsory collectivization of peasants' total grain rations. For brevity, in what follows, we refer to the communal dining halls thus defined as the communal dining. This article aims to prove that it is not a pure accident that the ups and downs of the communal dining overlapped completely with the start, aggravation and end of the famine. On the contrary, the former was the inherent cause of the later.

### III How Communal Dining Triggered Famine

There is controversy as to exactly when the famine started.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu were the first provinces that witnessed the famine, as the death rates in 1958 increased by 108 percent, 33 percent, and 86 percent respectively, over those of 1957 in these three provinces. This section will analyze how communal dining triggered the famine as early as 1958, and will highlight the effects of communal dining on the famine.

#### A. Compulsory Collectivization of Grain Rations through Communal Dining

Traditionally, Chinese peasants had formed groups to assist one another during busy seasons.

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<sup>19</sup> As Johnson(1998) states, it is an impossible task to assess the joint and independant impacts of the various factors on the famine unless we can get enough data and construct and implement a complicated model.

<sup>20</sup> Chang and Wen (1997) argue that the famine took place in some regions at the end of 1958, and then spread to more regions at the beginning of 1959. Kung and Lin (2003) suggest that the rise in the overall death rate in 1958 was caused by the sharp growth of the death rates of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu province, so famine only occurred in a few regions in 1958 and spread to the rest of China in 1959. One difficulty in determining whether the deaths took place at the beginning or in the end of the year lie in the fact that the statistical data on death rates were collected only on an annual basis. This is why the Lushan Conference, which was held in the beginning of July, 1959, is so important to help establish the fact that food shortage and famine had become serious enough by the spring of 1959. Mao's initial intention was to use this conference to soften some of his radical policies of the Great Leap Forward.

One type of group “cooking in turn for all the members of the group and dining together”, was practiced during the period of mutual-aid groups in new China. Occasional dining halls, set only for busy seasons came forth in some regions after the cooperatives were organized, and some lasted after the busy season and eventually turned into year-round dining halls. It has been shown that before the people’s commune was established, rural dining halls were built spontaneously by the farmers to save time and raise productivity. They were based on peasants’ free will, and were thus fundamentally different from compulsory communal dining under the people’s commune.<sup>21</sup>

The slogan “free meals for all members,” promoted by some communes in the summer and autumn of 1958, made communal dining immediately appealing to some poor peasants. This popularity created the false impression that all peasants supported communal dining. This dining system was pushed to the whole countryside together with the people’s commune system in the autumn of 1958. The *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CPC, in its editorial on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, 1958 emphasized the significance of setting up communal dining as “an important component of the people’s commune movement, and the critical key to its consolidation”.<sup>22</sup> Being elevated to such an important place by the Party’s mouthpiece meant that communal dining received sufficient attention and priority to be promoted throughout the whole country. Within two months, 3.4-million communal dining halls were established, with a participation rate of 90 percent among the rural population by the end of 1958.<sup>23</sup>

The slogan “free meals for all members” also made the peasants less able to resist the system when the compulsive collectivization of their grain rations was imposed under the communal dining. The peasants no longer received grain rations after the autumn harvest of 1958.<sup>24</sup> All the grain harvested went directly into the warehouses of the communal dining system. The commune cadres took houses, chairs, tables, and kitchen wares from peasants’ families directly and without compensation in the name of operating the dining halls. The peasants’ woks were often destroyed and melted in backyard furnaces. In many regions, peasants were even not allowed to cook in their own kitchens.<sup>25</sup> Later when the food shortage worsened, the government even launched a campaign against underreporting food output and against distributing food in secret (*fan manchan sifen yundong*)<sup>26</sup>. The commune cadres and militiamen were sent to patrol villages. If they spotted smoke rising from the chimney of someone’s house, they could raid the home and take away food if they found any, on the ground that all food must be kept by the communal dining hall, and no one should cook at home.<sup>27</sup> The attitude toward communal dining was regarded as an indicator of loyalty to socialism. Those who refused to join the dining system would be viewed as supporting capitalism, and could be put under enormous political pressure such as being labeled and attacked verbally by neighbors, or being criticized and humiliated in

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<sup>21</sup> Luo pinghan, 2001,pp.1-3.

<sup>22</sup> One slogan that became popular after the people’s communes were established in 1958 was: “communism was the heaven, people’s commune was the bridge, and communal dining was the heart”. As is shown in this slogan, communal dining was regarded as playing a central role in the commune system. Wu Wenjun, 2002,p.94.

<sup>23</sup> Luo Pinghan, 2001, p.36.

<sup>24</sup> Luo pinghan, 2001, p.81.

<sup>25</sup> Dang Guoying, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Hu Yaobang’s report in early 1959 on Leinan County of Guangdong province made Mao believe that there was no food shortage in rural China. Instead, it was popular in rural China that the cadres of production brigade and team under-reported the grain output and kept it as grain ration secretly. Therefore, Mao launched a movement to fight with such phenomenon and required to resolve the problem without any delay. See An Important File Instructed by Central Committee of CPC, Feb., 22<sup>nd</sup> 1959. The Selected File of Mao Zedong since the Foundation of New China, Vol. VIII, Central Literature Press, 1993, p.53.

<sup>27</sup> Wen, Guangzhong James, 2009.

public debates and exposed by big-character posters. Consequently, most peasants were coerced to join the communal dining.<sup>28</sup>

### B. How Communal Dining Wasted Food

The primary harm caused by compulsory dining was rampant food wastage. First, absolute egalitarianism was adopted within the communal dining system. Worried about the security of their saved grain stocks from previous years, peasants hastily consumed them.<sup>29</sup> Some commune members killed chickens, ducks and fish late at night, so as to cook and eat them secretly.<sup>30</sup> Those who secretly hid grain at the beginning of the commune movement, later became scared when militia started to raid peasants' homes, and discarded the grain in the fields late at night to avoid being exposed and then punished by cadres.<sup>31</sup> Some peasants in Tongwei county of Gansu province, who harvested crops from the private plots and slaughtered all the sheep and pigs in a hurry in the early stages of communal dining, said: "Let's consume all the food before the collectives come to possess it."<sup>32</sup> In addition, once food became collectively owned, it received much less care. Much food was lost or damaged in the process of being harvested and stored.

Secondly, communal dining encouraged enormous waste in food consumption. The two main types of income, in cash and in kind, were institutionalized at the early stage of the commune system. Wages were based on one's labor contribution, and rationing was based on one's needs.<sup>33</sup> The latter meant free meals and became the economic foundation of the communal dining.<sup>34</sup> Factually, various income groups in rural society had very different opinions of the free food supply system. However, once the so-called merits of communal dining were publicized by the media, especially after Mao promoted the free supply of food in the summer of 1958<sup>35</sup>, it quickly spread to the rest of rural China. Peng Dehuai criticized the phenomenon of "open your stomach and eat as much as you can" in a letter to Mao at the Lushan Conference in July of 1959.<sup>36</sup> The letter pointed out that in some rural areas the amount of grain consumed by peasants in a period of three-months amounted to what usually sufficed for six months.<sup>37</sup> Some dining

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<sup>28</sup> Luo Pinghan, 2001,p.15. Li Ruojian (2004,p.77) pointed out that the promotion of the communal dining was something that "the top authorities expected but didn't stipulate definitely". However, Mao made a big fanfare about the merits of communal dining and generated enthusiasm among the poor peasants who could hardly feed themselves, even after 1949.

<sup>29</sup> Chang and Wen, 1997: p.20.

<sup>30</sup> Peasants were forced to yield their houses to communal dining. Peasants in the Zhaoxin production team of Tengxian county in Shandong province reportedly killed over 200 sheep and 3000 chicken during November of 1958; Peasants in Longshandian village consumed 10 sheep and 2500 chickens within 3 days. Luo Pinghan, 2001: p.82, pp.85-86.

<sup>31</sup> Dang Guoying, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.144.

<sup>33</sup> This type of income distribution was also called combination of Gongzizhi (wage system) and Gongjizhi (the supply system). The former was based on the work contribution by a commune member over a year (often measured by work points) and the latter was based on the need for necessities of a member and his dependents, but independent of his real contribution to the harvest.

<sup>34</sup> Luo Pinghan, 2001: p.49.

<sup>35</sup> Mao raised the question "how shall we handle the surplus grain?" when visiting to Xushui county of Hebei province on August 4, 1958, after he learned that this county harvested 600 million kg of grain in the summer and autumn seasons with an average yield of 1000 kg per mu. See *People's Daily*, August 6, 1958. One month later, Mao visited Shucha commune of Shucheng county of Anhui province and said that a "free food supply system should be feasible in other communes with similar conditions now that it is feasible in one commune" when he learned that the free food supply system had been implemented in this commune. Luo pinghan, 2001: p.60, p.69.

<sup>36</sup> Peng Dehuai, 1981: p.286.

<sup>37</sup> Peng, 1987: p.664.

halls even exhausted three-month grain ration within only half a month.<sup>38</sup> Jiang Weiqing, the top leader of Jiangsu province reported to Mao on the three faults of communal dining in the winter of 1960, one of which was that communal dining exhausted what was supposedly a one-year supply within half a year.<sup>39</sup>

Food wastage in the communal dining system was rampant, although its severity and duration varied across regions. According to an estimate prepared by the high-ranking economist Xue Muqiao, who was in charge of the state statistics bureau and planning committee at that time, in the first year of the commune movement (1958), the overconsumption of grain among China's rural population amounted to about 17.5 million tons,<sup>44</sup> equivalent to 11% of the total grain supply for the rural population.<sup>45</sup> Traditionally, peasants had had to plan their yearly grain consumption carefully based on the harvest, and frequently had turned to substitute foods such as vegetables and forage for survival.<sup>47</sup> Wastage and overconsumption must have caused premature exhaustion of the grain stock before the next harvest was ready, resulting in famine in some areas in the winter of 1958 and the spring of 1959.<sup>48</sup> After all, in 1958 the grain output grew by only 2.6% over that of 1957, while communal dining halls wasted at least 11% of the total food grain supply available to the peasants. This undoubtedly led to a serious food shortage and famine.

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<sup>38</sup> Zhao Fasheng, 1988: p.109.

<sup>39</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.681-682. For more details, please see the description of Note 31 in Chang and Wen(1997).

<sup>44</sup> Xue Muqiao,1984: p.90. Twelve years later Xue Muqiao(1996,p.265) reemphasized the food wastage of the communal dining halls: "The issue discussed most frequently by peasants at that time was communal dining halls. Communal dining was advocated in the winter of 1958, the free food supply system and the advocacy of 'open your stomach and eat as much as you can' resulted in the one-year grain ration being exhausted within half a year. The peasants couldn't receive any grain ration and had to survive by eating vegetables and weeds with inadequate grain stock".

<sup>45</sup> The grain supply for rural population in 1958 amounted to 158.3 million tons. Chang and Wen, 1997: p.33, note 76.

<sup>47</sup> Peng (1987, p.664) pointed out that even in 1987, there were 40 million peasants living at subsistence levels who were still trying to solve the problem of getting enough to eat.

<sup>48</sup> Chang and Wen, 1997: p.20.

### C. The Case of Famine in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu

Why did famine first break out in Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu? Our hypothesis is that the effect of communal dining on famine in any given province depended on a series of factors such as the grain supply available within the province and how radically the province pushed to increase the communal dining participation rate. Other regions didn't suffer from famine until the spring of 1959 because food wastage in these regions was less severe than in Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu provinces.<sup>49</sup> Let's see if the three provinces, especially Sichuan province, implemented communal dining more radically than the other provinces.

The peasants retained exit rights up to the start of the compulsive communization movement in 1958, although there were reports of compulsory participation before then. (Lin, 1990) Therefore, the participation rate of the advanced cooperatives in 1956 to some extent reflected peasants' own will. This is different from the case of the commune movement when 99% of peasants were forced to become commune members by the fall of 1958. A logical inference is that a region with higher participation rate in the advanced cooperatives in 1956 would face less resistance in escalating enrollment in communes and this would result in less radical means, and vice versa.

As Table 4 shows, the participation rate in advanced cooperatives in 1956 was 62.6% for the whole country. The provinces with the highest participation rates were Hebei with 99.4%, Heilongjiang with 98.7%, and Henan with 97.2%, excluding the three municipalities directly under the administration of the central government. However, only 7.4% of peasants participated in advanced cooperatives in Sichuan province, the province with the biggest agricultural output in China, and 69.3% of peasants chose to remain in the elementary cooperatives with smaller economic accounting units.<sup>50</sup> One can see that the peasants in Sichuan resisted the advanced cooperatives more strongly than those in the other provinces. However, by 1958 95% of peasants in Sichuan had been forced to join the communal dining halls when the whole province was communized. That is to say, Sichuan province acted more radically in pushing for communization and communal dining.

Table 4 is about here

Some communal dining halls were dismissed after the central committee of CPC took a series of measures to rectify the errors of The Great Leap Forward during the spring and early summer of 1959, before the Lushan Conference. Unfortunately, after the Lushan Conference, attitude towards the communal dining system became a major indicator of one's support for socialism in its struggle against capitalism after Mao severely criticized Peng Dehuai. The communal dining was restored in many regions, although the participation rate in most areas decreased slightly as peasants learned some lessons from what they experienced in the previous period. The participation rate in the whole country decreased from 90% in 1958 to 72.6% at the end of 1959, Hebei from 94% to 74.4%, Shandong from 82% to 35.5%, Henan from 98% to 97.8%. In sharp contrast, the rate in Sichuan increased from 95% in 1958 to 96.7% in 1959, revealing that

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<sup>49</sup> Yang and Su (1998: p.14) pointed out that the famine had spread to some areas of at least 10 provinces in the spring of 1959.

<sup>50</sup> The collectivization movement of new China included four modes with increasing scale: mutual-aid group with 12.2 households per group in 1956,, elementary cooperative with 44.5 households per cooperative in 1956, advanced cooperative with 198.9 households per cooperatives in 1956 and people's commune with 5000 households per commune in 1958. See Lin, 1990, p.1232.

Sichuan province acted most radically in promoting the communes and the communal dining system.

The participation rates of advanced cooperatives in Yunnan and Gansu in 1956 were 51.6% and 34.5% respectively, lower than the national average. The participation rate in communal dining halls in Yunnan in 1958 was 72.0%, but increased to 96.5% after the Lushan conference in the summer of 1959. This fact shows that Yunnan province intensified communal dining system after 1958. What is worse, the grain supply for the Yunnan rural population in 1958 decreased 7.6% compared to that of 1957.<sup>51</sup> Communal dining was introduced around rural Gansu province in 1958.<sup>52</sup> The grain supply for rural areas in Gansu province was insufficient as it was well below the national average level, although it grew by 7.6% in 1958 over that of 1957.<sup>53</sup> Severe food wastage in dining halls would consequentially trigger the famine in Gansu province in 1958, when the grain supply for rural areas was insufficient.

In summary, it was radical policy, with communal dining as its main component, that triggered the famine in Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu in 1958.

#### IV How Communal Dining Intensified Famine

Communal dining was on the retreat in rural China during the spring and early summer of 1959 when the Central Committee of the CPC took measures to soften the radical policies of The Great Leap Forward.<sup>54</sup> However, the Lushan Conference in the summer 1959 fueled a surge of the anti-right opportunist movement, and those cadres as well as the people against communal dining were labeled as “right opportunists” and suffered severe penalties. Chinese peasants were driven back to communal dining during the period from the conclusion of the Lushan Conference until June 1961. After then, peasants were finally allowed to exit from communal dining by the Central Committee of the CPC.

In what follows, we show how communal dining lowered productivity, encouraged cadres’ corruption, and facilitated their abusive power. Furthermore, there were not any food sources other than from communal dining halls, and the traditional famine-escaping mechanism was also destroyed by communal dining. All these negative consequences of communal dining greatly worsened the famine.

##### A. Communal Dining Lowered Agricultural Productivity

The distribution system under the communes was supposed to have two parts: free food supply according to one’s need (*gongjizhi*) and wage distribution according to one’s labor contribution

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<sup>51</sup> The grain supply for the rural population in Yunnan province in 1957 was 237.6 kg per capita and 227.4 kg per capita in 1958. See Planning Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, 1983: pp.394-395.

<sup>52</sup> The communal dining system was generalized in rural areas of Gansu province within three month from August to October of 1958. For example, only 51.8% peasants in Xili County took part in communal dining on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1958, but by August 22, 1958, 11 days later, 84.5% of peasants had joined the system. (Zhao Jishi, 2008) Tongwei County in Gansu province established 2,759 communal dining halls within one month in 1958, and all peasants were forced to dine there. See Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.144.

<sup>53</sup> The grain supply for the rural population in Gansu province in 1958 was 189 kg per capita, still lower than the national average level of 248 kg per capita, and ranking **20<sup>th</sup> of the 25 provinces**. The supply in 1957 was only 176.2 kg per capita, ranking next to last. It can be seen that the grain supply for Gansu’s peasants was among the lowest in the whole country. See Planning Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, 1983: pp.343, 400-401.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, at the end of June of 1959, there were only 49,004 communal dining halls, a decreased of 83.6% from the prior year, while 1.64-million households took part in communal dining halls, representing 19.65% of peasants, a decreased of 80% from the prior year. Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.670.

(gongzizhi).<sup>55</sup> Factually, because of the low productivity of most communes, the work points earned by peasants were mostly used to pay for necessities such as food rations. There was not much left for cash wages. Therefore, the wage proportion was so low that many communes could not continue to deliver on this promise after one or two tries at the initial stage of communization.<sup>56</sup> What peasants got from the communes was mainly grain rations, which unfortunately were compulsively collectivized and tightly controlled under the communal dining system. Free food supply resulted in severe food wastage during the early stage of communization, so that the dining halls stipulated ration standards for various groups in later periods. However, each commune member within a certain group received the same ration regardless of whether he/she worked fast or slow, well or not. Egalitarian distribution greatly demoralized the peasants' enthusiasm for production.<sup>57</sup>

The Central Rural Work Department, worried by the free food supply as the dominant form of income distribution and the resultant egalitarianism, in its *Report of the National Conference on Rural Work* of January 14, 1959 instructed that the share of free supply and that of wages should be equal in communes' distributions. However, the cash income received by commune members as a share in their income only accounted for at most one quarter of their total income from communes.<sup>58</sup>

Communal dining was rapidly promoted around rural China as having many advantages including saving grain, labor force and firewood according to the government's media.<sup>59</sup> However, the system factually lowered productivity drastically, as Hu Qiaomu reported to Mao on April 1961 after he investigated Shaoshan Commune in Hunan province:

"The problems of communal dining halls were most prominent because they not only reduced peasants' work points and incomes due to absolutely egalitarian distribution, but they also triggered many inconveniences in people's lives. First, kitchen chores such as cutting firewood, planting vegetables, and cooking exhausted the special labor force, which represented one-third to one-half of the total labor force. This sharply reduced the work points from agricultural production and reduced enthusiasm for production. Second, communal dining didn't benefit household sideline production such as raising pigs, and consequently reduced the manure as fertilizer and the income from agriculture and household sideline production. Third, communal dining halls, which burned large amounts of big firewood as fuel, not only destroyed forests, but also reduced the availability of ash fertilizers because big firewood produces less ash. Fourth,

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<sup>55</sup> *The Draft Chapter of Qi Liying People's Commune* and *The Trial Regulation of Za Yashan People's Commune* in Henan Province both assert that the distribution system in people's communes should include both free supply and cash wage. These two chapters were reprinted by the central media such as *Newsletter on Rural Work* and *Red Flag* and became the model for the whole country. (Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: pp.485-493)

<sup>56</sup> From the beginning of communization to November 1958 in Xinxiang district of Henan province, there were 152 communes that had distributed wages only once, 34 communes that had distributed wages two times, 19 communes that distributed three times, which in total amounted to 7.1 million Yuan, or 2 yuan per capita. (Luo Pinghan, 2001: p.64)

<sup>57</sup> This phenomenon occurred in the people's commune of Xinhui County of Guangdong province after the wage was distributed for the first time. According to the *Xinhua News Agency's* report by Yang Wenquan on January 18<sup>th</sup> 1959, the phenomenon of "four 'many' and four 'few' " occurred after the first wage distribution: too many came to dine, but too few went to field; too many pretended to be ill, but too few really needed to take medicine; too many became lazier, but too few remained industrious; too many were reading newspapers, but too few were working. Similar phenomena occurred in other communes. Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: p.523.

<sup>58</sup> See Planning Office of Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983: pp.510-511.

<sup>59</sup> Xiang Shan, Ten Advantages of Communal Dining Halls, *People's Daily*, August 18' 1958. Rural Work Department of Nanyang Committee of CPC, The Experience to Successively Build Communal Dining Halls, *People's Daily*, October 29<sup>th</sup> 1958. Li Youju, A letter From Xinyang District of Henan Province, *Red Flag*, Volume 7 of 1958. These political propaganda became the proof to magnify the advantages of communal dining .



under the free food supply system in the communal dining halls, the supplementary labor forces who were previously engaged in production, stopped working. Fifth, many commune members felt that eating in the dining halls was not truly free, as the grain and the other food could hardly respond to changing demand in a flexible way under the communal dining system, and disputes grew between commune members and staff members of communal dining halls. Sixth, the grassroots cadres had to spend more energy managing dining halls than in production.”<sup>60</sup>

The egalitarian distribution policy in the communal dining halls drastically discouraged peasants’ enthusiasm for production, which can be seen from the change in grain production between 1957 and 1959. As Table 2 shows, the areas suffering from natural disaster amounted to 14.88 million ha. in 1957. This number was 13.73 million ha. in 1959, a 8.3% reduction from 1957. These figures indicate that in terms of percentage of areas suffering from natural disaster, the total sown area in 1957 was very close to that of 1959. However, the grain output per rural citizen amounted to 361 kg in 1957, 13.9% more than the 317 kg per rural citizen in 1959, despite the fact that more cultivated land was suffering from natural disaster in 1957. We conclude that the negative effect of the egalitarian distribution of income was another significant cause of the decline in grain production during the great famine, in addition to the diversion of resource from agriculture to the irrigation and steel production programs.<sup>61</sup>

Table 2 is about here

#### B. Communal Dining Reduced Rations Available to Peasants and Facilitated Corruption

The rural grass-roots cadres were trusted to manage the peasants’ grain rations which were concentrated in the communal dining warehouses. When the food shortage deepened and peasants suffered from starvation, cadres with low moral standards found it convenient to sponge and take more than their share, and the wind of corruption spread around rural China. For instance, the corruption among cadres played an important role in the excessive death rate in rural Xinyang of Henan province during the great famine.<sup>62</sup> There were three kinds of kitchens in the cadres’ dining halls in the Huaidian people’s commune of Guangshan County: a special kitchen for the Party secretaries with meat, fish, eggs and fried peanut kernels at every meal; a secondary kitchen for committee members, and a general kitchen for ordinary cadres. One commune member on the Qiandian team of the Yangbo brigade in Huaibin County said: “we suffer from edema because of starvation, while the cadres gain weight because of overeating.” Food in the communal dining halls became more and more meager as time elapsed. For example, a 250 gram sweet potato and one bowl of soup made of sweet potato leaves was the meal for each adult peasant per day, and half that for children in early October, 1959; a 200 gram sweet potato and a couples of leaves per capita per day from October 21 to November 25; only

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<sup>60</sup> Several Important Files Transmitted by Central Committee of CPC with Mao Zedong’s Instruction: Investigation Materials on the Problem of Communal Dining Halls by Hu Qiaomu, Document Research Office of Central Committee of CPC, Selection of Important Literatures Since the Founding of People’s Republic of China (Volume 14), Central Literature Press (Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1997)

<sup>61</sup> Li and Yang (2005) demonstrated that the diversion of resources from agriculture was responsible for 33 percent of the decline in grain output for the period between 1958 and 1961.

<sup>62</sup> The Henan province committee of the CPC reported in November 1960 that: “According to the statistics in October 1960, deaths in Xinyang district amounted to 549,171 people during the period from the previous winter to the spring, representing 6.54% of the total population of 8.4 million. Among the 4,473 production brigades, there were 520 where the death rates were over 20%, and the death rates in some brigades were over 50%.” The data in this paragraph were quoted from Yang Jisheng (2008: pp.50-54).

vegetables were available from November 26 to early December, one bowl for an adult and a half bowl for a child. Only one meal of vegetables was supplied during five days in early December. Thereafter, there was nothing available for members for five days. According to the report of the Work Group on the Xinyang Incident on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1960, the death rates of commune members were higher than those of cadres and their families. For instance, the death rate of the cadres in the Wanwei brigade and team was only 8.8%, while that of commune members was 26.7%; the death rate of the cadres in the Zuowei brigade was only 11.8%, while that of commune members was 15.24%. As the investigative team of the Henan committee of the CPC reported on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1960, the death rate of the Hebei brigade of Huangchuan county reached 24.9%, though only two cadres, who were reported to be decent -- not sponging or taking more than their share -- died during the famine, out of 60 cadres in the whole team. There was no case of death or even dropsy for the cadres in the 23 brigades. It was found later that the brigade's cadres took a lot of food including over 1500 kg of beef and pork, over 300 ducks, 75 kg of fish, 15 head of sheep, 285 kg of sesame oil, and over 2500 kg of grain.

Mao didn't respond to the evils of communal dining by taking actions to dismantle the system, but rather attributed the evils to the incompleteness of the revolution in those areas.<sup>63</sup> Factually, five tendencies were rampant among rural cadres during the great famine: a tendency to communizing everything, a tendency to exaggerate grain output, a tendency to force others to follow, a tendency to issue arbitrary orders on production, and a tendency to seek one's own privilege. The last was so serious that, when transmitting "*The Regulation on the Participation in Communal Dining Halls by Cadres*" issued by the Hebei province committee of the CPC in March 7<sup>th</sup> 1960, the Central Committee of the CPC requested that all secretaries in rural branch committees of the CPC and all cadres in brigades and teams should take part in communal dining and be forbidden to cook by themselves other than in some special cases such as being sick; that all cadres participating in dining halls should dine according to the same ration quota as the common members and should be forbidden to dine in the special kitchens; that all cadres at various levels dispatched to rural areas should dine in the dining halls.<sup>64</sup> This revealed how relentlessly the cadres pursued their privilege at that time. However, the above-mentioned regulation did not provide any practical measures to monitor and punish such behavior and the cadres' privilege never stopped because the collectivization of grain rations by the communal dining halls institutionally facilitated the cadres' corruption.

### C. The Cadres Manipulated the Peasants' Lives by Controlling Grain Rations

As the food shortage worsened, rural cadres soon replaced free and unlimited food supply with food rationing according to each individual's quota. In order to force peasants to stay in communal dining, communes often followed a policy of "only issuing the quota to households but keeping grain itself in the dining halls."<sup>65</sup> This gave cadres the power to control food

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<sup>63</sup> Mao talked about Xinyang Incident on October 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of 1960. He said that there were many landlords and kulaks, counterrevolutionaries and bad elements that usurped the leadership and did evil. He still thought that two-thirds of the areas were in a good situation, though one-third were not. Among the latter there were three causes: first, the survival of feudalism of landlords slipped into our cadres teams; second, our own cadres became morally degenerated; third, serious bureaucracy was widespread in rural areas. Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.68.

<sup>64</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.674.

<sup>65</sup> The sixth article of The Instruction on the Summer Harvest's Distribution of People's Commune by Central Committee of the CPC ( Abbreviate as The Instruction in the following for simplification) in May 26th 1959, before Lushan Conference, suggested that "communes should seriously consolidate the dining halls" and stipulated the basic principle that "the commune should try to build communal dining halls at its best level and

distribution among peasants, and led to rampant power abuses such as depriving peasants of dining rights.<sup>66</sup> One cadre named Li Shuren in Jiangsu province reported the phenomenon of how rural cadres deducted peasants' grain rations, layer upon layer, as follows:<sup>67</sup>

“The cadres at all levels tried their best to deduct the peasants' grain, even if the quota was very low to start with. Taking the situation of Wangxing commune of Huaiyin City for example, there were the following methods to deduct from peasants' grain rations. First, the collectives detained grain for expedient reasons at various levels. The grain quota distributed by the commune per capita per day in the Yanhe brigade was 217.4 g, and the total quota amounted to 53.257 tons. However, 5000 kg of grain were detained from the production team's quota by the brigade for expedient reasons, so that the grain ration per capita per day for team members decreased to 198.6 g. Additional grain was also detained from individuals' quotas by the production team for expedient reasons. Second, the grain distribution was not set according to actual output but by the contracted target output. The grain quota per capita per day in the Lianghuai brigade was 250 g according to the expected output of poi before the poi's output from the twelve teams in the brigade was weighed. Therefore, the grain quota of the production teams in December included 49.9 tons of contracted output of poi (equal to 9,980 kg grain). However, the actual output of poi was only 31.9 tons. The deficiency amounted to 18 tons (equal to 3,500 kg grain).”

A similar phenomenon happened in relatively more fertile Zhejiang province. Nanhu commune in Anji county detained 17.7 tons grains from the quotas of eleven production brigades, and 2.400 kg of grain was detained further by Yuzhuang production brigades from the teams' quotas.<sup>68</sup> The grain deduction by cadres at various-levels was so rampant in Jiangsu and Zhejiang where the famine was not so serious, that the abuse of power by rural cadres in the other regions heavily stricken by famine must have been more severe.

Moreover, the abuse of power by cadres included heavy fines, deprivation of meals, physical punishment, hanging and beating, being sent to labor camps, raiding homes and confiscating property. Among these sorts of penalties, deprivation of meals occurred most frequently.<sup>69</sup> For example, sixty-four of seventy households experienced meal deprivation among the No. 6 production team in the Liuyi brigade of Changjiang commune, Xuyong county, Sichuan province. Some members in the team complained that in the following cases peasants would be deprived of meals: those who could not arrive at dining halls in time, those who were sick and couldn't work, and those who could not hand in a potherb. However, three special groups were exempted from

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based on voluntary bases”, and “the grain ration should be distributed to households”. However, peasants' free wills were often deprived by the cadres at all levels and through all kinds of measures. The principle that “the grain itself should be distributed to households” changed to “only the quota of grain should be issued to households,” so that the grain was still controlled by production brigades. According to Yang Jisheng's investigation on twelve provinces, this latter practice was generally followed around rural China, because once the grain was distributed to households, the peasants would not dine in dining halls which quickly would have led to the collapse of the dining system. (Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.670) As expected, on March 18th, 1960, seven months after Lushan Conference, upon finishing the investigation on the practice of eight provinces' communal dining systems, the General Office of central committee of the CPC compared two distribution methods of “the quota to households while grain goes to the dining halls” v.s. “grain to households and transfer it to dining halls upon joining”, and claimed that the first method was more effective to control the grain and to consolidate the communal dining system, while the latter would cause tremendous troubles. Consequently, it required that the other regions must settle this problem firmly and progressively by executing the measures that “the quota to households while grain goes to the dining halls” adopted by the six provinces (Henan, Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Shanghai, and Anhui) without exception. See Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: p.601.

<sup>66</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.132.

<sup>67</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.345.

<sup>68</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.425-426.

<sup>69</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.196-197.

deprivation of meals: the cadres, the cadres' families, and the cadres' relatives. According to an investigation of 22 communes in 6 districts in Gulan county in Sichuan province, from January to June of 1960, there were 76 cases peasants being penalized in ways that caused serious consequences. Sixteen peasants died after being hung and beaten, 6 became disabled, 7 suffered from grievous bodily injured, and 7 died of starvation resulting from meal deprivation, in addition to numerous incidents of suicide. One commissioner named He in the branch committee of the CPC of the Xiaowu brigade of Shaping commune in Jiangbei county, prohibited peasants with dropsy from taking food in the dining halls and caused several deaths when he was in charge of Changhe district. Seven members of Feng Yinshan's family died from meal deprivation because the four laborers of the family were unable to work due to dropsy. When the radical policies of the Great Leap Forward were reviewed in 1961, it was revealed that there had been 1,920 cadres (34% of the total number of cadres) at the team leader level and above who had broken the law and violated the discipline in the previous two years; the number of people suffering from physical punishment amounted to 28,026, of which 15,001 peasants (12.5% of the total rural population) suffered from meal deprivation; 441 peasants died as the result of physical punishment and meal deprivation, and 383 peasants became disabled.<sup>70</sup>

It can be seen that the use of punishments such as meal deprivation was not rare under the communal dining system, but was used very frequently in rural China during the great famine, and that this drastically demoralized peasants, and destroyed their bodies and minds.

#### D. Compulsive Communal Dining Inevitably Prohibited Private Plots and Household Sideline Production

As mentioned before as the trio of characteristics, the rise and abandonment of communal dining was closely correlated to the other two characteristics: the prohibition and recovery of the right to private plots, and that of household sideline production. The reason is very simple. First, household poultry and pig raising and production from private plots were an extension of the family kitchen. Once family kitchens were prohibited and replaced by communal dining halls, family kitchens, poultry and pig raising, and private plots would become logically redundant. Second, for practical purposes, the grassroots cadres found out that it was necessary to prohibit private plots and household sideline production in order to force peasants to participate in dining halls after the communal dining system lost its support from peasants. In their view, the best way to compulsively promote participation rates in communal dining halls was to totally and thoroughly control all food sources of peasants. The rectifying measures of the central government taken before Lushan Conference had dismissed many dining halls, and private plots and household sideline production recovered to a certain degree.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, the radical measures taken after Lushan Conference eliminated all the possibilities that might have enabled peasants to escape the famine.

Mao commented at the Beidaihe Conference on August 19<sup>th</sup> 1958 that private plots should be

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<sup>70</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.246-247.

<sup>71</sup> *The Order from the Central Committee of CPC on Distributing Private Plots to Develop Livestock Breeding* on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1959 suggested that commune member should be provided with private plots whose area shouldn't exceed 5% of the owned land areas per capita. *The Order from CPC Central Committee on the Problems Including Private Poultry and Livestock Breeding, Private Plots* issued on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1959 insisted that private plots should be recovered and all the products from private plots should be controlled by commune members and be free from agriculture taxes and state procurement, but sale, rent and private transfer of private plots was prohibited. Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: p.568.

taken away after the establishment of communal dining halls, and that privately owned properties such as chickens, ducks and the small trees around houses should be eliminated in the near future.<sup>72</sup> Such comments not only spurred the peasants to kill their poultry and livestock in a rush, but also served as an instruction to be acted upon for cadres at all levels. Li Jingquan, the top leader of Sichuan province, speaking to Sichuan's cadres to convey the spirit of the Lushan Conference after Mao reinforced the significance of communal dining, stated that: "since the communal dining halls have been established, household pig raising has become difficult, and therefore, pig raising should be handed over to the communal dining halls, and hereafter private plots shall also become unnecessary."<sup>73</sup> *The Report on the Current Situation of Rural Communal Dining Halls*, delivered by the Guizhou province committee of the CPC to the central committee of the CPC on February 24<sup>th</sup> 1960, argued that: "private plots must be handed over to dining halls before the dining halls can be run well". Thereafter, the central committee of the CPC issued instructions on this issue twice, on February 26<sup>th</sup> and March 6<sup>th</sup>, to require that "all the other provinces must practice accordingly without exception." Hence, the prohibition on private plots and household sideline production was regarded as an inevitable step from both the central committee and the grassroots cadres to defend the communal dining halls. In places where this prohibition was strictly followed the peasants lost the possibility of obtaining food from outside the dining halls.

Liu Shaoqi reported to Mao after he investigated Ningxiang county of Hunan province in April 1961 that: "the situation of the Tianhua brigade is better than the others, but the output of both grain and household sideline production are lower than that of 1957, so the living condition of commune members is much worse than that in 1957. The reason is that in the past peasants owned private plots and reclaimed land so that each family could harvest thousands of sweet potatoes, taro, and beans from the fields. All could be used to feed pigs, chickens and ducks. They provided peasants with meat, cooking oil and eggs. The peasants also could sell some of them. However, all these non-staple foods are now gone, and commune members were only supplied with rations of rice and pickled vegetables. They felt that food was insufficient."<sup>74</sup> The peasants in the Tianhua brigade believed the food rations were insufficient even though they were provided with rice and pickled vegetables. Imagine how miserable the peasants would have been in places where the food shortage was even more severe.

#### E. The Right to Run away from Famine Was Deprived by the Communal Dining

Historically, Chinese peasants could run away from famines caused by natural disasters.<sup>75</sup> However, communal dining was propagated as a system for greatly improving peasants' lives at the same time the famine overran rural China. All media were ordered not to report the truth concerning the wide-spread famine. Moreover, for unexplainable motives such as to conceal their shame, to cover up for failure, and to take ungrounded credit etc., local governments preferred to confine peasants to die locally rather than allow them run away for survival. The State Council

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<sup>72</sup> Luo Pinghan, 2001: p.55.

<sup>73</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.208.

<sup>74</sup> *A Letter from Comrade Liu Shaoqi to Comrade Mao Zedong* on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1961, Guangxi Province Archives File 29 Volume 47. See Wu Wenjun, 2002: p.101.

<sup>75</sup> *Fengyang flower-drum*, a widely known folk song in China, revealed how Anhui's peasants ran away from famine by begging: Historically, Fengyang was a good place. However, nine out of ten years saw disaster since Emperor Zhu (Ming Dynasty) took power. The wealthy families sold cows and sheep, and the ordinary families sold their children. Those females without children to sell wandered all over the world with waist drums. (Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.230)

issued a series of orders to prevent peasants from “entering urban areas blindly” from 1953 to 1957, and finally established household registration with a dual urban-rural system in January 1958. Consequently, peasants could not enter cities and towns without approval.<sup>76</sup> This urban-rural household registration system became the legal ground for governments at all levels to forbid peasants from running away from famine during the Great Leap Forward. The cadres in some radical areas took the policy to extremes by not only prohibiting peasants from entering cities, but also forbidding peasants to leave their native villages without approval. Escapees would be seriously punished by cadres once found and repatriated.<sup>77</sup>

What made the situation even more hopeless, even for the few peasants who managed to leave their native villages, was the fact that in urban areas food was supplied only to those who had food coupons and in rural areas all the food was compulsively gathered in the warehouses of the communal dining halls. Wang Jialai, a member and representative of the Kaocheng brigade of Fucheng commune, Fengyang county, spoke at the enlarged meeting of the Fengyang county committee of the CPC for five-level cadres, which was held in January of 1961: “There were originally 5,000 persons in our brigade, but only 3,200 persons now survive. The death toll during the Japanese intrusion was not so high because we could run away when the Japanese came, but we couldn’t go anywhere now because dissuading stations spread everywhere, and we could get nothing to eat without food coupons even if we could leave. Therefore, we could only wait to die of starvation at home.”<sup>78</sup>

The policy in Sichuan province was more radical. *The Urgent Circular on Controlling and Clearing the Outflow Population* issued by the Jintang county committee of the CPC in Sichuan province to all districts, communes, and brigades stipulated that: “Families with outflow population should write letters to call their members back within a certain period, otherwise the food quotas of the outflow population will be discontinued.” The purpose of fleeing for many

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<sup>76</sup> Premier Zhou Enlai signed and issued “*The Order on Dissuading Peasants from Entering Cities*” on April 17<sup>th</sup> 1953, and the household registration system took shape. Premier Zhou signed and issued “*The Order of State Council on Preventing Peasants from Running away from rural areas blindly*” on December 30<sup>th</sup> of 1956. It warned that peasants without relatives in a city cannot enter the city, otherwise they would be repatriated by the government. “*The Complementary Order of State Council on Preventing Rural Population from Outflowing Blindly*” signed by Premier Zhou on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1957 dissuaded peasants from passing the main traffic centers and railway stations and from entering cities. “*The Order on Prohibiting Rural Population From Outflowing Blindly*” issued by the central committee of CPC and the State Council on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1957 indicated that the government would no longer be tolerant of the peasants’ outflow and that measures to block peasants from entering cities would be upgraded. *The Rules of Household Registration of People’s Republic of China* passed by the standing committee of National People’s Congress on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1958 meant that the household registration system had been established formally.

<sup>77</sup> In the Xinyang Incident, the members of the standing committee of each county of CPC made a division of labor among themselves to be responsible for prohibiting famine victims from leaving their local villages in order to prevent the leakage of the news about the famine. The four gates in the county town were guarded with armed militias, barriers were set up along the vital communication lines and roads, and soldiers were sent to patrol along the county border. Bus stations were guarded with policemen, and long-distance buses were required to be driven by captains who were CPC members. All communes dispatched militias to set up barriers at the exits of villages as the order of the county government. Once someone was found to be preparing to leave, his/her personal possessions would be confiscated, and he/she would even be tortured with clothes removed. Xinyang was closed to two railway stations in the north and south. The two directors of the bureau of public security ordered that railway stations be guarded so that peasants could only wait to die at home. Xinyang governments called the outflowing peasants as “fleeing criminals”, who would be thrown into prison to be reformed through forced labor. Several hundred detention centers were established, and 190,000 outflowing peasants were blocked and detained without anything to eat. Hunger, torture and mistreatment lead to a high death toll in these detention centers. Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.58.

<sup>78</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.241. Before the food coupon system was abolished nationwide in the early 1990s, urban people had to use food coupons to purchase food in urban areas, but such food coupons were a privilege of urban residents. Rural people would have no access to food even if they were lucky enough to get into urban areas.

peasants was to save the grain quotas for their families, so it was a fatal shock to the outflow peasants to learn that they would lose their grain quotas if they did not return to their native villages. Longsheng commune brought the circular into full play by forcing families to write letters every day to call back their outflow family members, and the grain rations of the peasants would be detained on any day they failed to do so.<sup>79</sup> The communal dining system tightly confined commune members to local villages by punishing those who were related to escapees by blood or marriage. The cadres in those areas under more radical policies even prohibited peasants from collecting edible wild herbs to appease their hunger when the dining halls ran out of food;<sup>80</sup> or they were required to turn in potherbs if they were allowed to gather them.<sup>81</sup> The historical mechanism of fleeing from famines that had existed for thousands of years for Chinese peasants was totally destroyed by the communal dining system, and the farmers could do nothing but wait for death.

#### F. Communal Dining was Strengthened rather than Relaxed after Lunshan Conference

Some have argued erroneously that the communal dining halls stopped playing any role in the famine soon after they ran out of food, and existed only in name but not in reality during the rest of the great famine period.<sup>82</sup> Factually, some communal dining halls were indeed dismissed when the food stock was exhausted, but most of them were compulsively restored once the food supply became available after the summer or autumn harvest. Such compulsive restoration was driven by deeply-rooted political causes. Facing the rise and fall of communal dining in November 1958, Mao asserted such fluctuation was “just temporary and in limited areas.”<sup>83</sup> When some dining halls were dismissed after the rectification of the Great Leap Forward during the first half year of 1959, Mao commented on the report of the working group of the Xiangtan Prefecture Committee in Hunan province of the CPC on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1959 that, “most halls would come back after some of them broke down.”<sup>84</sup> Mao required that governments at all levels make serious efforts to consolidate the dining halls for two times. Such calls caused a new upsurge to promote the communal dining halls.<sup>85</sup>

According to the State Statistics Bureau, as late as in January, 1960, 400 million peasants, representing 72.6% of the total rural population, were compelled to stay in 3.919 million communal dining halls in rural China. Moreover, the participation rates in provinces that were heavily famine-stricken such as Sichuan, Henan, Anhui, Yunnan, and Guizhou still exceeded 90%.<sup>86</sup> The momentary excitement generated by the promise of free food initially attracted 90% of the peasants to join communal dining halls. They could not have anticipated the fatal evils that would ensue by the end of 1958 and early 1959.<sup>87</sup> However, 72.6% of the rural population

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<sup>79</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.200.

<sup>80</sup> Lu Xianwen, the secretary of Xinyang committee of CPC replied as follows when questioned by Li Jian from the supervisory commissions of the CPC in April 1960, “The causes of famine included the over-reporting of grain output and communal dining. The peasants may survive if they are allowed to collect vegetables to eat.” Wang Renzhong, the first secretary of Hubei province and the second secretary of Middle-South Bureau of the CPC said about the Xinyang Incident that, “The local government detained the grain ration despite the fact that peasants were dying of hunger, the cadres didn’t allow peasants to cook at home and collect vegetable or flee from famine despite the fact that the dining halls had exhausted all food. Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.65,p.72.

<sup>81</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.22-23.

<sup>82</sup> Kung and Lin,2003.

<sup>83</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.667.

<sup>84</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.671.

<sup>85</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.675.

<sup>86</sup> An Instruction of Central Committee of CPC on Strengthening the Leadership of Communal Dining Halls, March 18<sup>th</sup> 1960. Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: p.602.

<sup>87</sup> Hu Daiguang (1958) summarized three kinds of attitudes to communal dining according to the experience of

was forced to remain in communal dining halls by the end of 1959, by which time the peasants had suffered considerable harm. It can be seen that people's commune didn't relax but, rather, intensified compulsory participation in communal dining halls after Lushan conference.

The communal dining halls often closed temporarily and left peasants in desperate foodless situations when the dining halls exhausted all their food storage while the new harvest was not ready. The dining halls re-opened whenever a new harvest became ready to collect. The reason that peasants still came back to these poorly managed dining halls was simple and obvious-- in many areas the new harvest would only go directly to the warehouses of the communal dining halls. Under this circumstance, no food would be distributed directly to peasants. This cycle of closing and re-opening dining halls across the nation intensified rather than reduced the harm of food shortage and famine to the peasants.

#### V The Right to Exit the Communal Dining Halls Ended the Famine

The famine ended rapidly in the second half of 1961 in all provinces except for Sichuan. This can be seen from the sharp decline in rural grain resales in that period.<sup>88</sup> As Figure 2 shows, rural grain resales experienced seasonal fluctuations during the period of the famine.<sup>89</sup> Rural resales were 19.7 % lower in the first half of 1961 than in the first half of 1958, while they were 27.5% lower in the second half of 1961 than in the second half of 1958, a difference of 7.8 percentage points. Rural resales depended on sown areas of cash crops and on the severity of natural disaster. The sown areas of cash crops in 1961 dropped by 35.5% and 32.3% respectively, relative to 1957 and 1958, representing a difference of 3.2 percentage points.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the decline in sown areas of cash crops can only explain part of the drop in rural grain resales. The grain output of 1961 was still lower than that of 1958 and 1959,<sup>91</sup> and the central government had by then realized the severity of the famine and had implemented a series of adjustment policies. Therefore, the drop in rural grain resales was not a result of the output decline or of the government's policy of reducing grain relief, but evidence that the famine was rapidly ending in the second half of that year. Of the series of policy adjustments in 1961, the three decisive reversals in ending the famine were the dismissal of the communal dining system, recovery of private plots and legalization of household sideline production.

Figure 2 is about here

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Si Jiqing vegetables production cooperatives in Beijing: the poor peasants, lower-middle peasants, the singles, the family with many children but lack of laborers, women, particularly young and middle-aged women, those families with insufficient food, all positively supported the communal dining. The well-to-do middle peasants, those families with extra income, and lazy peasants were against the system. The other one third took a wait-and-see attitude, to their participation.

<sup>88</sup> The national death rate was 14.24‰ in 1961, slightly lower than 1959's 14.59‰, but higher than 1958's 11.98‰. The main reason the death rate of 1961 was higher than that of 1958 was that the famine in several radical provinces such as Sichuan, Guizhou and Hunan was more serious in 1961 than in 1958. The excessive death rates of Sichuan, Guizhou and Hunan in 1958 were 14.7‰, 1.3‰, 0.7‰, and grew to 18.9‰, 10.6‰, 6.5‰ respectively in 1961. Chang and Wen, 1997: p.24.

<sup>89</sup> As figure 2 reveals, rural grain resales peaked during the spring shortage period in April and May, and hit bottom by the end of the year. The fluctuations in rural grain resales show a camel's hump shape. State Statistics Bureau, 1980: pp.112-114.

<sup>90</sup> State Statistics Bureau, 1980: pp.112-114.

<sup>91</sup> The national grain output amounted to 147.5 billion kg in 1961, and the grain levels from 1958 to 1960 were 200 billion kg, 170 billion kg and 143.5 billion kg respectively. State Statistics Bureau, 1980: p.47.



#### A. The Dissolution of Communal Dining Immediately Raised Consumption Efficiency

The dismissal of communal dining meant that peasants could immediately regain control of their grain rations, which had been compulsively collectivized. Consequently, the peasants regained the right to cook in their own kitchens and to consume food in their homes with their family members, which surely raised their efficiency in consuming grain rations and thus their capacity to resist famine. In the winter of 1960, Wu Wansheng, the secretary of Dongcheng commune of Weixian county in Zhangjiakou city of Hebei province, held a secret meeting with brigade cadres to resolve the famine. They decided to distribute 5 kg of grain per capita from the communal grain reserves to all commune members, and 7.5 kg for those brigades that succeeded in having increased their grain output. More importantly, it was decided that “the commune members do not need to hand such grain back to the communal dining halls and can consume it at home”. A few months later, in early 1961, Hu Kaiming, the secretary of Zhangjiakou City committee of CPC, argued that peasants could not avoid hunger even if the grain ration increased. He dismissed communal dining in Zhangjiakou city ahead of other regions, disregarding the great political risk, after succeeding in persuading the Hebei provincial committee of the CPC to raise the grain ration per day per capita from 125 g to 187.5 g.<sup>92</sup> It is clear that some of the more enlightened cadres knew deeply the harm that communal dining was causing. They understood very well that the peasants could not escape the miseries of famine as long as the policy that “the quota goes to households but the grain itself goes to dining halls” remained in place, even as the grain ration increased. The communal dining system had to be dismantled before the famine could be ended.

Even in provinces such as Jiangxi, which experienced least severe famine,<sup>93</sup> the dissolution of communal dining halls played a significant role in bringing the famine to an end. According to an investigation of Zhangjiazhou village of Xiaogang commune of Fengcheng county in Jiangxi province in 1961, the peasants’ grain ration decreased by at least 9.79% as a result of exploitation at each level in the communal dining halls.<sup>94</sup> Communal dining in Xiaogang commune was dismissed in the spring of 1961,<sup>95</sup> and most peasants reflected that preparing food at one’s own home enabled them to have 10% to 20% more food than if they had to take meals at communal dining halls. A commune member named Yang Guimei said that, “despite the fact that we are allocated the same amount of grain ration in communal dining halls, we have not had a meal with rice for over two months since the spring festival; however, now we can have one meal with rice and two meals with porridge everyday by cooking at home after dismissing communal dining halls.”<sup>96</sup> One can reason logically that the dissolution of communal dining would have played a larger role in provinces that were more severely afflicted by famine than Jiangxi province.

Throughout the country, the increased efficiency in consumption resulting from dissolution of the communal dining halls helped Chinese peasants alleviated the famine even at a time when overall per capita food consumption declined to its lowest level (Table 1). Food consumption per capita in rural areas in 1961 was only 154 kg, the lowest level since 1949. This figure is 16%

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<sup>92</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.494-497.

<sup>93</sup> The cumulative death rate from 1958 to 1961 in Jiangxi province was -1.7%. The death rate of Jiangxi province in 1960 was 16.06‰, when the famine became most severe, representing 141.6% of 1958’s 11.34‰. Chang and Wen, 1997: p.26.

<sup>94</sup> Long Yuwen, 1988. quoted from Huang Daoxia, 1992: p.586.

<sup>95</sup> The spring planting in the rice regions of southern China start after the Chinese spring festival or from March to April in the solar calendar.

<sup>96</sup> Long Yuwen, 1988: quoted from Huang Daoxia, 1992: p.586.

lower than that of 1959, and 1.5% lower than that of 1960, the year during which the famine deepened. However, most regions came out of the famine quickly in the second half of 1961. Food consumption per capita in rural areas in 1962 was only 161 kg, still lower by 12.3% than that of 1959; the famine had ended totally in the other regions except for Sichuan province, where communal dining remained and the abnormally high death rate was still substantive in 1962.<sup>97</sup>

#### B. Private Plots and Household Sideline Production Provided Timely Supplementary Food

The relaxation of control and the final dissolution of the communal dining halls inevitably led to the recovery of private plots and legalization of household sideline production, since these prohibitions had only been needed under a compulsory communal dining system. *The Work Rules of Rural People's Commune (Draft)* adopted in March 1961 still stipulated that the free supply system (*gongjizhi*) be practiced partially, and that the communal dining halls were to be preserved while permitting peasants to restore their private plots and household sideline production. Peasants were now allowed to own products and both the income generated by private plots and household sideline production and the agricultural products from these two sources were to be exempt from state tax and unified procurement. This policy allowed them to consume food produced from their private plots without deductions from their income distributions or from grain rations from the commune. *The Revised Draft of Work Rules of Rural People's Commune* (hereafter *Revised Draft*) in June 1961 emphasized that “whether or not to continue the communal dining halls *totally* depends on the peasants’ will”, and that the commune members’ grain rations should be distributed directly to households without exception. It also stipulated that the percentage of the areas of private plots to total sown areas should be increased from 5% to 7%. It formally returned to Chinese peasants the right to exit freely from communal dining. When peasants learned that this right had been returned to them, they responded immediately, and this resulted in a sweeping and rapid abandonment of communal dining nationwide. The dissolution of communal dining and the recovery of family kitchens justified the return to peasants of their private plots and allowed them to engage in household sideline production again. These changes broke the shackles imposed on the Chinese peasants, and greatly stimulated their willingness to work hard. Consequently, the quantity of grain and other types of food that were produced from private plots increased.

For example, in Jilin province, private plots and household sideline production were resumed in 1961. The output from private plots served as supplementary food given that the grain from the collective was insufficient. The output of private plots and small wastelands reached at least 150 kg per capita, and on average 250 kg per capita in the fifth team of the Shuangma brigade of Yushu county. Nineteen households out of total 25 cultivated various acreages of wasteland in the sixth team of Xiajia Puzi brigade, ranging from half mu to three and half mu<sup>98</sup>; some households planted as many as 7 mu with output as many as 7 piculs.<sup>99</sup> According to Liu Shaoqi’s investigation in Ningxiang county of Hunan province, the private plots also provided timely supplementary food to peasants even in those areas where the population density was

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<sup>97</sup> The national death rate in 1959 was 14.59%, and 10.02% in 1962. State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.2. The excessive death of Sichuan province in 1962 can be seen from Yang Jisheng’s (2008: pp.185-187) description.

<sup>98</sup> Mu is a Chinese unit to measure areas, 15 mu is equal to 1 hectare.

<sup>99</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.310. Picul is a unit of weight in China, 1 picul is equal to 50 kg.

rather high,<sup>100</sup> thus facilitating a rapid end to the famine.<sup>101</sup>

### C. Comparison between Sichuan and Anhui

In parts of rural areas people started to leave communal dining as early as the winter of 1960, as the instance of Zhangjiakou showed. But it was only after the promulgation of the *Revised Draft* by the central committee of CPC that communal dining was dismissed formally across the whole country after mid-1961, except for Sichuan.<sup>102</sup> We can better understand the vital role of dissolving the communal dining halls in ending the famine by comparing the two cases of Sichuan and Anhui provinces.

As figure 3 shows, Sichuan and Anhui were the regions most severely stricken by famine. Taking the average annual death rate from 1955 to 1957 as the normal death rate, the excessive death rate<sup>103</sup> from 1958 to 1961 was 20.3‰ for the nation, 113.5‰ for Sichuan and 58.9‰ for Anhui. The death rates in Sichuan and Anhui provinces peaked at 53.97‰ and 68.58‰, respectively, in 1960. The rate in Sichuan province declined to 29.42‰ in 1961 and 14.62‰ in 1962, but was still higher by 140% and 21.1% than that of 1957. On the contrary, the death rate in Anhui province decreased sharply to 8.11‰ in 1961 and 8.23‰ respectively in 1962; both rates are lower than 9.1‰, of 1957. We can see that the abnormal death toll was still high in Sichuan in 1962, while the famine had already ended in Anhui in 1961. Why did the timing of the end of the famine differ so sharply in these two provinces, both of which were severely stricken by famine?

Figure 3 is about here

During the latter stages of the famine, Zeng Xisheng, the top leader of Anhui province, changed his attitude towards communal dining more quickly than Li Jingquan, the first secretary of Sichuan province, although both were radical supporters of Mao's Great Leap policy.

Anhui was one of the regions most severely stricken by famine in 1960. Zeng Xisheng hoped to resolve the problem as soon as possible before the outside world learned about Anhui's situation. Just after the New Year's Day, 1961, he put forward a policy that recognized the failure of the rural communal dining halls and instructed that these dining halls be dismantled to let peasants cook at home. Anhui acted to dismiss communal dining before the *Revised Draft* was adopted in June 1961, and even before the *Draft* was adopted in March 1961. The dissolution of communal dining and the simultaneously recovery of private plots and household sideline production greatly inspired peasants' enthusiasm to produce. Actually, some production teams in Anhui had dismissed communal dining and returned private plots to peasants as early as in 1960. Zhang Zuoyin, the vice governor of Anhui, reported to Zeng Xisheng in February 1961 that, a 73-year

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<sup>100</sup> See note 75 above.

<sup>101</sup> Fan Ziyang (2008: p.295) put forward that the dissolution of communal dining and the recovery of family consumption would had positive effect on agriculture production later, and grain output did grow, but only after 1964. However, the stimulating effect had practiced in 1961 judging from the situation of Jilin province, the output in collective land declined, while the grain which could be disposed directly by peasants and grew from private plots and sideline production increased. The situation in Jilin was representative in the whole country.

<sup>102</sup> After hearing the investigation reports of the central leaders such as Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhude and his secretaries such as Tian Jiaying and Hu Qiaomu in March and April of 1961, Mao Zedong had to give up the idea of building communal dining halls, which was reflected in the change of attitude of the *Work Rules of Rural People's Commune* on communal dining system between March and June of 1961.

<sup>103</sup> Excessive death rate = the actual death rate in one year - the normal death rate for reference.

old peasant named Liu Qinglan in Miaoguang brigade, Chulan commune of Suxian county, together with his hectic son, reclaimed wasteland with no cattle or plough, but one shovel. They harvested 1650 kg grain, sold 900 kg to the state and turned in 60 yuan to the commune after retaining their own grain ration and seeds for the following year. This case inspired Zeng Xisheng, after receiving Mao's approval, to decide to go further in promoting the practice of "contracting output quotas on a household basis,"<sup>104</sup> in addition to dismissing communal dining and resuming private plots. As a result, the contracted areas in the name of "responsibility farmland" amounted to 84.4% of the total sown areas in Anhui by the middle of October, 1961.<sup>105</sup>

On the contrary, Li Jingquan not only resisted the rectification of the Great Leap in the first half year of 1959 by insisting on establishing communal dining halls and withdrawing private plots, but also continued to show special favor for communal dining even as the CPC central committee changed its attitude in the first half of 1961. *The Urgent Instruction* issued by the central committee of CPC on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1959 created the following regulations: At least 80% of pigs should be returned to production teams and households from brigades and communes, private plots should be returned to peasants, and the total acreage of this category should be at least 5% of the total cultivated land in each locality.<sup>106</sup> In contrast, the Sichuan provincial committee of CPC determined that: pigs should be raised by production teams only. For this purpose, a certain amount of land should be allocated to teams in order to produce feed, and private plots should not be returned to households. *The Urgent Instruction* stipulated that communal dining halls be built on the principle that "the grain ration should be distributed directly to households according to their population size, and the surplus food saved by those peasants participating in the communal dining halls should be kept by themselves." However, the Sichuan provincial committee of CPC interpreted this as: the communal dining system should be continued, the grain ration and what is saved should be kept by the communal dining halls and shouldn't be distributed to individuals directly. Factually, Sichuan province didn't return private plots and live pigs to individual households throughout the famine period. Li Jingquan's belief that he was faithfully following Mao's real intention by defending communal dining became even stronger after Mao praised Sichuan for consolidating communal dining while many other provinces were wavering on this issue at Lushan conference on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1959.<sup>107</sup>

*The Draft* adopted in March 1961 had made it permissible for commune members' grain rations to be distributed directly to individual households, and encouraged private plots and household sideline production. In the spring of 1961, Mao sent many central government leaders and his secretaries to rural areas to investigate rural issues. Appeals came from across the country to dismiss the communal dining. However, Li Jingquan falsified this fact in a letter to Mao from Neijiang, Sichuan on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1961. He wrote that, according to his investigation, in 25% of communal dining halls most members objected to dismissing the dining halls, and in 75% of communal dining halls half of the members were opposed to dismissing the dining halls. In this report, Li Jingquan insisted on keeping the communal dining halls. He used the report as a guideline in rural Sichuan, and had it printed and distributed to the prefecture and district

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<sup>104</sup> This system was the forerunner of the later household responsibility system adopted gradually throughout China after 1978.

<sup>105</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.294-295.

<sup>106</sup> Huang Daoxia etc., 1992: p.568.

<sup>107</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.175-176.

committees of CPC.<sup>108</sup> Sichuan province insisted that “communal dining halls should be built successfully as the heart of the people’s commune.” Consequently, there was a long delay in ending the famine in Sichuan.<sup>109</sup> It wasn’t until 1962 that the Sichuan committee of CPC finally yielded and allowed peasants to exit from communal dining, and the death rate declined accordingly.<sup>110</sup>

Therefore, it is not a pure coincidence that Anhui dismissed communal dining in early 1961 and the famine ended in the same year, while Sichuan delayed the dismissal of communal dining for one year and the end of the famine in Sichuan was also delayed by one year.

## VI A Brief Summary on the Mechanism of Communal Dining System on Famine

As proven above, the communal dining system with the trio of characteristics, i.e., the prohibition of private plots, illegalization of household sideline production, and compulsive collectivization of peasants’ total grain rations, was the most significant cause of the GLF. Figure 4 simulates the sequencing of how the implementation of the communal dining and its dismantlement triggered, intensified and ended the famine. The vertical axis measures daily per capita grain intake and the horizontal axis measures time. Notice that the whole country came out of the famine in 1961 when the intake of grain per capita per day based on the official data in 1961 reached its lowest level, this level is shown as a horizontal dotted line here, and can be viewed as the minimum subsistence standard, below which one would surely be stricken by famine. The thick dark line indicates the bona fide daily grain consumption by a typical peasant throughout the famine period. It lies significantly higher than the dotted horizontal line for a short period of time in late 1958, and then falls below the latter throughout the middle of 1961, indicating the occurrence of famine. The dash line suggests the nominal daily grain intake based on the official data, and lies most of the time above the dotted horizontal line. Only during the second half of the year 1961 this line overlaps with the horizontal dotted line, indicating that had Mao not pushed for the commune system, the famine would not have happened.

Figure 4 is about here

In normal years the grain ration in the communal dining halls was just enough for peasants in most regions to muddle through until the next harvest on a level slightly above the minimum subsistence standard. Introduction of the free food system in the autumn and winter of 1958 in rural communal dining halls raised peasants’ real consumption. Sometimes consumption was limited only by biological factors, such as the size of one’s stomach. It is clear that communal dining led many peasants to consume much more than they would have had if they retained control of their own grain. This led to considerable food wastage, which consequently triggered the food shortage and famine in some provinces in the winter of 1958, and in others in the spring of 1959. However, the famine wasn’t severe in its early stages and many areas were abandoning communal dining by the spring of 1959. Unfortunately, after the Lushan Conference, communal dining was revived under the pressure from Mao. This led to the corruption of rural cadres, and

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<sup>108</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.686-687.

<sup>109</sup> Zhang Xiaoli etc., 1989: p.10. Factually, there were large numbers of abnormal death reports in Sichuan province in 1962. Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.185-187.

<sup>110</sup> Wen Guangzhong, 2009.

led to their abuse of power as the food shortage developed. Consequently, peasants' real consumption became not only lower than nominal, but also lower than the minimum subsistence standard, and this resulted in famine. The other two characteristics of the dining system, i.e., the prohibition of private plots and household sideline production completely cut off channels for self relief through production by peasants. Moreover, the traditional mechanism in rural China of running away from famine-stricken areas became impossible under the myth of communal dining. All these evil consequences of communal dining intensified the famine by further cutting down the real food consumption. The whole country was allowed to dismiss communal dining late in the spring of 1961, when peasants were again permitted to prepare and consume their grain rations at home, and accordingly, efficiency in food consumption increased sharply. Furthermore, the recovery of private plots and household sideline production provided peasants with supplementary food in a timely manner. The dissolution of communal dining raised the level of peasants' real consumption to a level that was at least not lower than the minimum subsistence standard. This explains how the famine could have ended in rural China just as rural grain consumption per capita hit its lowest level since 1958, when logically, one might have expected further deterioration in the food supply and the elongation of the famine.

In summary, without taking communal dining into consideration, we can neither understand why the great famine broke out when rural grain consumption per capita was at its highest level, nor can we explain why the great famine ended abruptly when rural grain consumption per capita was at its lowest level.

## VII A Simple Empirical Study

We argue above that the rights lost and regained by Chinese peasants to exit from communal dining played an important role in triggering, intensifying and ending the Chinese great famine. In what follows, we present an empirical study using a panel data of 25 provinces from 1958 to 1962 to further testify the effects of various factors related to the famine.

### A. Data and Model

As Figure 5 shows, the deaths during the famine period mainly occurred among rural population, and the excessive death rate of the rural population depended on three main factors: food availability per capita after procurement and rural resale, political radicalism in forms other than the commune dining system such as energy consuming projects, and the communal dining system. Therefore, the estimation model is as follows:

$$\ln dr_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln g_{it} + \beta_2 \ln hi_{it} + \beta_3 \ln cdh_{it} + \alpha_i + \mu_{it} \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes each province,  $t$  indexes each year,  $dr$  stands for the death rate, and  $g$  refers to grain availability per capita in rural areas, which is equal to grain output after deducting procurement and adding rural resales. It is difficult to measure the communal dining system and political radicalism in forms other than the commune dining system such as high energy consuming projects. Kung and Lin (2003) incorporate three political variables: timing of liberation, party membership density at the end of 1959, and mess hall participation rate at the end of 1959. However, because there is only one year of data for these three variables they

cannot capture provincial policy changes during the GLF.<sup>111</sup> We must incorporate new time-varying variables to measure dynamic political radicalism, since it varied not only across provinces, but also changed through time in certain region.

Figure 5 is about here

High energy consuming projects during The Great Leap Forward included massive irrigation projects, and steel & iron production, but the data on provincial irrigation areas and steel output is incomplete. The Great Leap Forward was essentially a mass movement to carry out the so-called catching-up strategy by giving priority to the development of heavy industry, with steel production as its core.<sup>112</sup> The increased emphasis on steel and iron production during The Great Leap Forward increased the percentage of industrial and agricultural output originating in heavy industry. Hence, we use this percentage, *hi*, as a proxy for political radicalism. As Figure 6 reveals, steel production and the above-mentioned percentage had the same trends at the national level. Especially during The Great Leap Forward, both variables increased rapidly throughout 1958, hit their maximum values in 1960 and began to decline in 1961. It can be inferred that the above defined percentage reveals the political radicalism in the form of high energy consuming projects.

Figure 6 is about here

The decline in household sideline production was highly correlated with the communal dining system. As Figure 7 shows, the standing stock of pigs, the main livestock in rural China, declined sharply during the great famine. It is known that the size of the standing stock of pigs depends on three factors: livestock epidemics, the quantity of feed grain, and whether livestock are raised collectively or privately. We employ the standing stock of pigs, *cdh*, as a proxy for the extent of enrolment in the communal dining system for the following reasons. First, there were no official reports on massive epidemics except for human dropsy due to malnutrition during the great famine, so the first factor can be seen as unchanged. Second, data on feed grain are not available, but our model controls for grain per capita available to the rural population which is used as our proxy for feed grain, since the proportion of feed grain to food grain available for rural population was a stable part of total grain retention in rural areas.<sup>113</sup> Third, the sharp drop of the standing stock of pigs was mainly caused by the change in policy on household sideline production. Before the communal dining halls were implemented, individual households were allowed to raise pigs in their backyards. However, after the establishment of the dining halls, pig

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<sup>111</sup> As part C in section V analyzed, Zeng Xisheng's attitude change to Great Leap Forward in the early 1961 did help Anhui end famine much earlier than Sichuan.

<sup>112</sup> For example, the slogan at that time was "taking steel production as the central task". Bo Yibo, 1997: p.679.

<sup>113</sup> Collective retention, according to official file, included public capital funds for reservation and reproduction expansion, and public welfare fund for the development of education, health care, culture and other welfare business of communes.(Huang Daoxia, 1992, pp.485-493.) , During the period of the Great Leap Forward, collective retention increased sharply both in scale and percentage.(Liu, 2010a, p.1124) However, the main composition of collective retention was physical goods such as grain, rather than cash.(Huang etc.,1992,p.527) According to official statistics, the collective retention of grain included seed, feed grain, grain storage and other accumulations. Taking Mianyang district of Sichuan province, for example, the percentage of collective grain retention to total grain distribution decreased from 20.5% in 1961 to 17.5% and 13.4% respectively in 1962 and 1963, and the percentage of foodstuff dropped from 4.6% to 3.4% and 2.2% too.(Liu,2010b, p.1182) Therefore, the percentage of feed grain at least did not decline during the Great Leap Famine.

raising and other sideline production was collectivized. The move to communize private property scared peasants, and in a rush they slaughtered and consumed many of their pigs during the early part of the communal dining period. The remaining pigs were compulsively collectivized and sent to collective pig farms by the communal dining halls, since peasants' grain rations and private plots were compulsorily collectivized too. Under this new system, private pigs were turned into public property. A large number of pigs died due to lack of careful care, even though some commune members were specifically assigned to look after the pigs.<sup>114</sup> In sharp contrast, the standing stock of pigs rose quickly after the communal dining halls were dismissed, the private plots and household sideline production recovered, and peasants were allowed to raise pigs in their courtyards again.

Figure 7 is about here

Yang D.T (2010) argued that the peasants would inevitably slaughter their livestock to feed themselves when the famine was threatening their very lives. Hence, the standing stock of pigs would be negatively correlated with the death rate not because the susceptibility of all private properties to communization scared peasants to kill livestock, but because of peasants' motivation to survive during the famine. Though it cannot be ruled out that in some cases peasants killed livestock to feed themselves, it could not have been a common occurrence because the pigs, as well-guarded collective property, were beyond the reach of most peasants during The GLF. For example, in Xinyang, a swine herder named Songhe in the Liyao brigade of Zha Yashan commune, Suiping county, was punished by being paraded through the street and then hung up and beaten to death for stealing and eating a dead sow. An old farmer in Hanlou brigade was also paraded through the street by force and then hung up and beaten to death after he was found to have stolen and killed one sheep out of hunger.<sup>115</sup> Similar cases were so well-known that ordinary peasants dared not stay their hunger by killing livestock. Livestock's right to live, including that of pigs, was viewed as more important than that of the starving peasants. Therefore, the standing stock of pigs decreased sharply in the early stage of communal dining halls because of peasants' massive slaughter before the pigs were collectivized, and it dropped further after pigs were handed over by forced to the communal dining halls as public property.

Factually, the official files demonstrate that communal dining resulted in a decrease in the standing stock of pigs. For example, the CPC Jilin provincial committee admitted in one file that communal dining made it difficult for commune members to raise pigs because individual peasants, not cooking at home, had no refuse to feed the hogs.<sup>116</sup> Zhou Xiaozhou, the primary secretary of Hunan province, suggested at the Lushan Conference that communal dining was not beneficial for pig-raising.<sup>117</sup> One of the evils of communal dining was, as Hu Qiaomu stated after

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<sup>114</sup> For example, the communal dining halls built massive pig farms in rural Anhui in the autumn of 1958. The Bengbu city committee of CPC decreed in the spring of 1960 that fifteen pig farms with a size of 10,000 heads each should be built in five communes in the suburbs, that each brigade should built one pig farm with a size of 1,000 heads, and that each team should built one pig farm with a size of 100 heads in addition to some chicken farms and duck farms. Hence, the local cadres at all levels forced peasants to turn in their livestock and poultry such as pig, sheep, chicken and ducks, and compelled peasants to move and dismantle their houses to build pig farms. Consequently, the collectivized livestock died massively, and some were killed and sold by cadres secretly. Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.279-281.

<sup>115</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.55-56.

<sup>116</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: pp.322-323.

<sup>117</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.671.



investigating the Shaoshan commune of Hunan province, that “it is unfavorable for household sideline production such as pig raising”.<sup>118</sup>

As Figure 7 shows, the national standing stock of pigs continually dropped in 1958, and reached its lowest level in 1961 at 75.52 million head, a 48.2% drop relative to that of 1957. The standing stock of pigs started to rise in 1962, and the level in 1964 exceeded that of 1957. To sum up, the standing stock of pigs can accurately reveal the effect of communal dining on famine between 1958 and 1962, after controlling the other radical policies.

To compare with the empirical findings of Kung and Lin (2003), model (2) incorporates the effect of grain procurement and rural resales. The variables  $hi$  and  $cdh$  in model (2) are the same as in model (1),  $g'$  represents grain output per capita,  $netpr$  refers to net grain procurement rate, and  $ruralp$  measures rural-to-urban population ratio. The statistical description of each variable can be found in Table 4 .

$$\ln dr_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln g'_{it} + \beta_2 \ln hi_{it} + \beta_3 \ln cdh_{it} + \beta_4 \ln netpr_{it} + \beta_5 \ln ruralp + \alpha_i + \mu_{it} \quad (2)$$

Table 5 is about here

#### B. Estimation Results

We consider the role of the provincial time-invariant characteristics using both random effects and fixed effects estimation. A Hausman test is used to determine which model is appropriate. Our estimates are shown in Table 5, which demonstrates that the communal dining system is the main cause of the great famine.

Table 6 is about here

Equations (1), (2) and (3) in Table 5 test the effects of political radicalism in the form of energy consuming projects and communal dining by controlling available grain per capita in rural areas. Equation (1) shows that the effect of political radicalism on famine ( $hi$ ) is not significant, while the available grain per capita in rural areas ( $g$ ) plays a significant role in the famine. According to this estimate, when  $g$  decreases by 10%, the provincial death rate is estimated to increase by 4.2%. As equation (2) indicates, the elasticity of  $g$  on the provincial death rate drops sharply when communal dining is incorporated into the model. It reveals that when  $g$  decreases by 10%, the provincial death rate is estimated to grow by 0.24%, while a 10% decrease in the standing stock of pigs is estimated to increase the provincial death rate by 6.42%. Equation (3) shows that  $g$  doesn't have a significant effect on famine after we incorporate both political radicalism and communal dining. The estimated coefficient on political radicalism is not statistically significant though it is positive. Communal dining significantly intensifies famine: when the standing stock of pigs decreases by 10%, the provincial death rate is estimated to grow by 6.5%.

We get the same result after incorporating various factors including output per capita ( $g'$ ), political radicalism, communal dining and urban bias policy in equation (4). When the standing stock of pigs drops by 10%, the provincial death rate is estimated to grow by 6.12%; An increase

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<sup>118</sup> Several Important Files Transmitted by Central Committee of CPC with Mao Zedong's Instruction: Investigation Materials on the Problem of Communal Dining Halls by Hu Qiaomu, Document Research Office of Central Committee of CPC, Selection of Important Literatures Since the Founding of People's Republic of China (Volume 14), Central Literature Press (Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1997).

in the net procurement ratio of 10%, is estimated to cause the provincial death rate to grow by 2.4%. After controlling for available grain per capita in rural areas, the change of the standing stock of pigs mainly depends on the radical reach of the provincial communal dining system. Hence, the elasticity of communal dining on famine is 2.5 times of the effect of grain procurement on famine.

As Kung and Lin (2003) and Li and Yang (2005) state, massive amounts of rural labor were compulsively diverted from agricultural production to irrigation projects and steel and iron production during Great Leap Forward.<sup>119</sup> It is true that many rural laborers died due to long-term intensive work and inadequate grain rations. One unexplained question is: In our models, why doesn't political radicalism have a significant effect on the famine? Actually, communal dining also contributed to the excessive deaths triggered by high energy consuming projects. The rural grain rations for diverted labor working on irrigation projects and steel and iron production came from the same pool of grain that was under the direct control of the communes, after the procurement, seed, and public accumulation deductions from the harvest. The dining halls on the worksites were established on principles similar to communal dining halls. The free supply system and the slogan "open your stomach and eat as much as you can" led to massive food wastage in 1958 in irrigation projects and steel & iron production.<sup>120</sup> Later, the cadres' abuse of power and various kinds of penalties such as deprivation of dining for peasants on worksites intensified the famine, when rural grain rations became inadequate.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, the damaging effects of the communal dining system soon spread to the worksites of irrigation projects and steel production as well.

#### VIII Conclusion: The Importance of Exit Rights from the Communal Dining Halls

We aim to emphasize in this article that after the communes had been established in 1958, Chinese peasants lost not only the right to exit from the communes, which resulted in lower

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<sup>119</sup> It was estimated that the number of rural laborers diverted for irrigation projects amounted to 100 million at its highest level in January 1958 (Bo Yibo, 1997:p.681), representing 51.8% of the total rural labor of 1957. (State Statistics Bureau, 1980: p.5)

<sup>120</sup> For instance, 1.2 million laborers were mobilized to produce steel and iron in Xinyang prefecture in 1958, representing 30% of its total labor force. In Shangcheng county, over half a million laborers were pushed to produce ball bearing, and two million were forced to build irrigation projects. All these laborers consumed additional grain, and therefore reduced production teams' grain retention. As many as 5400 laborers were diverted to produce steel and iron in Hongqi commune of Mianzhu county of Sichuan province in 1958, and each laborer consumed 22.5-kg rice per month. Overall, these laborers consumed 0.33 million-kg rice within five months. During the Great Leap Forward period, especially in 1958, the tactic of large troop formation was often used to tackle big projects. The normal two meals per day provided by the communal dining halls was increased to three per day at these worksites, and one extra meal was provided to those laborers who worked at night, so laborers consumed an average of 28.5 kg rice per month. Hongqi commune consumed extra an 80 million kg grain within two months under the slogan of "opening your stomach to eat as much as you can". The extra amount of grain consumed was equivalent to this commune's two month grain ration in a normal year. Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.36, p.177.

<sup>121</sup> The situation in Fengyang county of Anhui is representative. Fengyang built a lot of irrigation projects from the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, including electric irrigation stations. The laborers at the worksite of the electric irrigation station were frequently forced to work overtime with heavy workloads. Worse still, the laborers' grain rations were reduced by the cadres by as much as 60 thousand kg. The regulations of the worksite included: 1) that the peasants' grain rations were allocated strictly according to their work points, which meant that those who worked more could eat more, and those who didn't work would eat nothing; 2) The percentage of cooks, odd-job men, and patients shouldn't exceed 10% of the total labor force; and 3) The grain rations of the peasants who left for home without headquarters' approval would be totally or partly deducted. For this reason, some died on the way home. (Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.249) It can be seen that the peasants' grain rations were tightly controlled by the communal dining halls on worksites.

agricultural productivity and nationwide food shortage for over twenty years, but also the right to exit from communal dining, and that this led to the most unprecedented famine in human history. People's communes promoted militarization of organizations, regimentation of actions, and collectivization of livelihoods, while communal dining made compulsive the collectivization of grain rations by the State, and finally destroyed the "family"<sup>122</sup>, the last stronghold of individual freedom to have been preserved. Chinese peasants were driven onto the road to serfdom and forced to bear the fatal consequences of the State's catching-up strategy and its goal of rushing to communism.

If the right to exit from communes that Chinese peasants lost meant only the deprivation of decision-making power over production, communal dining took collectivism to an extreme by depriving one of a grain ration, a most basic human right required for survival. Being deprived of the right to exit from communal dining, Chinese peasants descended into a hopeless institutional abyss. Communal dining took away peasants' free wills by controlling their stomachs through controlled ladles, so that dictatorship could be imposed on them easily.<sup>123</sup> The resultant famine caused much more harm and far-reaching consequences than the low agricultural productivity that resulted from the denial of exit rights from communes as suggested by Lin (1990).<sup>124</sup> We revisit the causes of the great famine for two compelling reasons. First, we believe that finding the truth of this tragic famine on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary is the best way to mourn the tens of millions of peasants who were forced to join the murderous dining halls and finally became ghosts of hunger. Second, we believe that the most relevant lesson drawn from this tragedy for resolving the soaring "Three Agrarian Issues" in China is to respect farmers' free will by allowing them to exit from the current system of compulsive collective land ownership.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State of the USA from January 1953 to April 1959, criticized the Chinese People's Commune in November 1958, by saying that the People's Commune totally denied human's individuality and personality, so that commune members lost not only their only remaining property, but also their families. Dulles argued that such a dictatorial system would inevitably result in self-ruin.(Xinhua News Agency, Dulles' Speech on the Chamber of Commerce of Seattle, *Cankao Ziliao*, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958.) Mao despised Dulles' criticism on the People's commune and regarded it as his fear to the Chinese Great Leap Forward.(Selected Works of Zedong Mao Since New China, Vol.7, Beijing, Central Party Literature Press, 1992, p.605.) Unfortunately, the great famine which mainly resulted from the communal dining, demonstrated Dulles was right in his prediction.

<sup>123</sup> Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.679.

<sup>124</sup> Chen and Zhou (2007) found that the great famine caused serious health and economic consequences for survivors, especially for those in their early childhood during the famine. Their estimates show that on average, in the absence of the famine, individuals of the 1959 birth cohort would have otherwise grown 3.03 cm taller in adulthood. The famine also greatly impacted the labor supply and earnings of those who were exposed to the famine during their early childhood.

<sup>125</sup> "Three Agrarian Issues or San Nong problem" refer to peasants income, rural reconstruction, and agricultural production in China.

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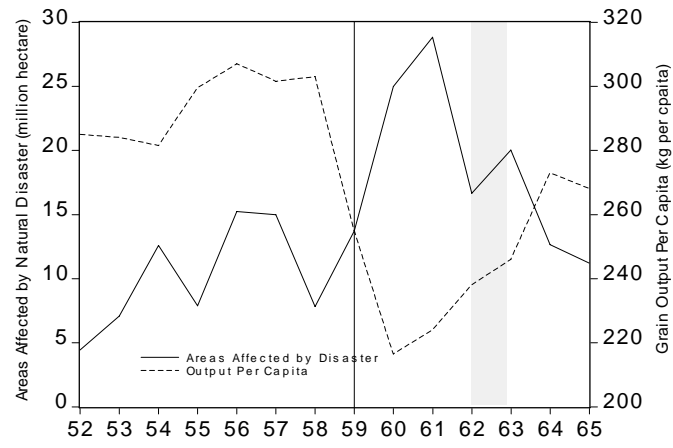


Fig. 1 Areas Affected by Natural Disaster and Grain Output in China from 1952 to 1965  
 Source: State Statistics Bureau, 2000; State Statistics Bureau, 1980: p.2.

Table 1 Death Rate and Grain Consumption from 1953 to 1966

Year	Death Rate (‰)	Grain Consumption(trade grain, in kg per capita per year)		
		Nation	Urban	Rural
1953	14.00	197	242	190
1954	13.18	196	236	190
1955	12.28	198	214	196
1956	11.40	204	200	205
1957	10.80	203	196	204
1958	11.98	198	186	201
1959	14.59	187	201	183
1960	25.43	164	193	156
1961	14.24	159	179	154
1962	10.02	165	184	161
1963	10.04	165	190	160
1964	11.50	182	200	178
1965	9.50	183	211	177
1966	8.83	190	206	186

Source: Price Department of State Statistics Bureau, 1984: p.27.



Table 2 The death rate and grain possession per peasant in Sichuan and Gansu

	Sichuan		Gansu	
	Death Rate (%) †	Grain Possession Per Peasant (kg/per capita)‡	Death Rate (%) †	Grain Possession Per Peasant (kg/per capita)‡
1957	12.07	212.3	11.33	174
1958	25.17	235.5	21.11	189

Source: † from General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.690, p.829. ‡ from Planning Office of Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983, pp.390-391, pp.400-401.

Table 3 Provincial Participation Rate of Advanced Agriculture Cooperatives and Communal Dining halls

Eastern Regions			Middle Regions				Western Regions				
Region\Year	1956 <sup>①</sup>	1958 <sup>②</sup>	1959 <sup>③</sup>	Region\Year	1956 <sup>①</sup>	1958 <sup>②</sup>	1959 <sup>③</sup>	Region\Year	1956 <sup>①</sup>	1958 <sup>②</sup>	1959 <sup>③</sup>
Beijing	99.6	NA	87.4	Shanxi	97.9	85.6	70.6	Guangxi	62.2	NA	81
Hebei	99.4	94.0	74.4	Neimengu	77.5	NA	16.7	Sichuan	7.4	95.0	96.7
Liaoning	91.8	NA	23.0	Jilin	95.7	NA	29.4	Guizhou	27.9	NA	92.6
Sanghai	90.9	NA	94.5	Heilongjiang	98.7	NA	26.5	Yunnan	51.6	72.9	96.5
Jiangsu	78.9	97.0	56.0	Anhui	80.7	72.8	90.5	Shananxi	65.2	94.2	60.8
Zhejiang	60.0	NA	81.6	Jiangxi	62.2	NA	61	Gansu	34.5	100	47.7
Fujian	62.2	NA	67.2	Henan	97.2	98.0	97.8	Qinghai	9.2	90.0	29.9
Shandong	67.2	82.0	35.5	Hubei	69	NA	68.2	Ningxia	NA	75.2*	52.9
Guangdong	44.1	NA	77.6	Hunan	13.8	NA	97.6	Xinjiang	42.1	NA	85.1
Nation	62.6	90.0	72.6								

Note: The data in 1956 refers to provincial participation rate of advanced agriculture cooperatives. All data are in percentages.

Source: ①Shi Jiangtang etc., 1959: p.1019. ② Fan Ziyang etc., 2008: p.302 ; \* Huang Daoxia etc., 1992 : p.510. ③ Chang and Wen, 1997: pp.24-26

Table 4 Agriculture Production in 1957 and 1959

Year	Areas Affected by Natural Disaster (1000 ha.)	Percentage of Areas Affected by Natural Disaster to Sown Areas (%)	Grain Output Per Peasants (kg per capita)	Grain Output Per Mu (kg per mu)
1957	14980	9.53	361	195
1959	13730	9.64	317	195

Source: General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 2000; State Statistics Bureau, 1980: p.5, p.47, p.49.

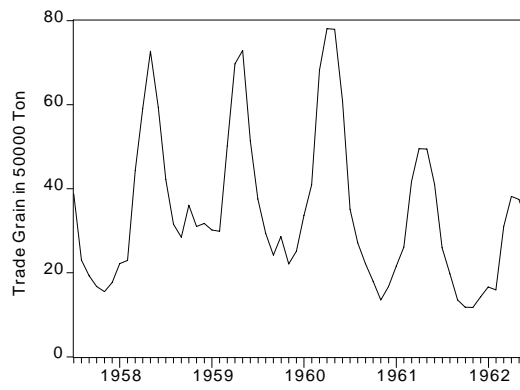


Fig. 2 Monthly Rural Resales During the Great Famine in China from July 1957 to June 1962  
Source: Yang Jisheng, 2008: p.857.

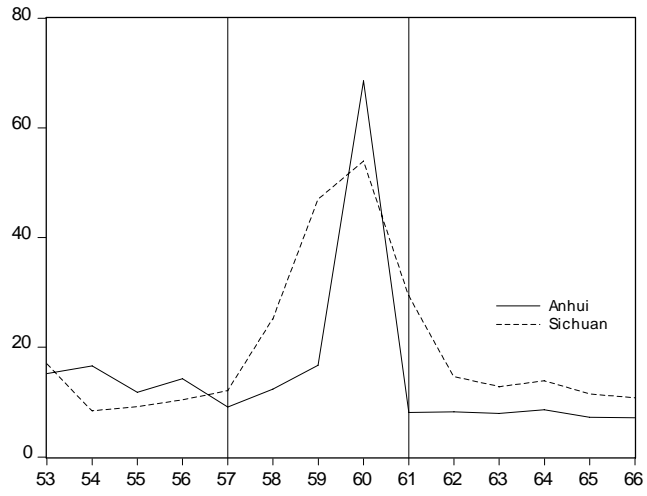


Fig. 3 Death Rates of Sichuan and Anhui Province from 1953 to 1966 (in ‰)

Source: General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.405, p.690.

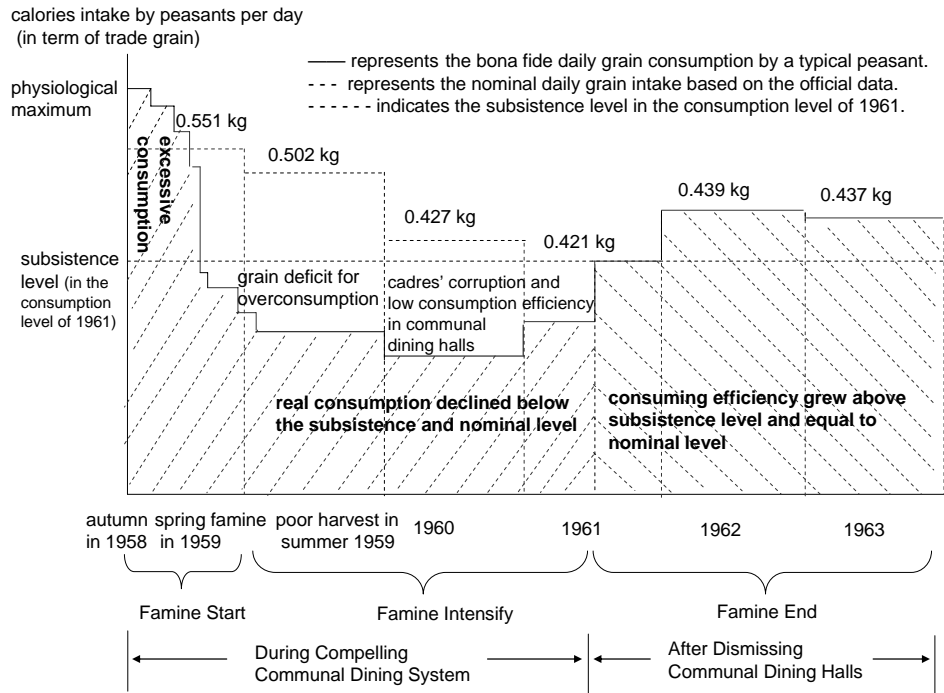


Figure 4: Mechanism of Communal Dining on Famine

Note: The vertical axis represented caloric intake by peasants per day in terms of trade grain, and the horizontal axis refers to time span. The numbers above the horizontal dotted line refer to the nominal consumption per day, the grain consumption in each year in table 1 were divided by 365; the shade areas represent the real consumption per day. Figure 4 takes the consumption level in 1961 as the lowest subsistence level because the famine ended in the second half year of 1961. The blank below subsistence level and above shade areas shows the severe degree, causes and duration of great famine.

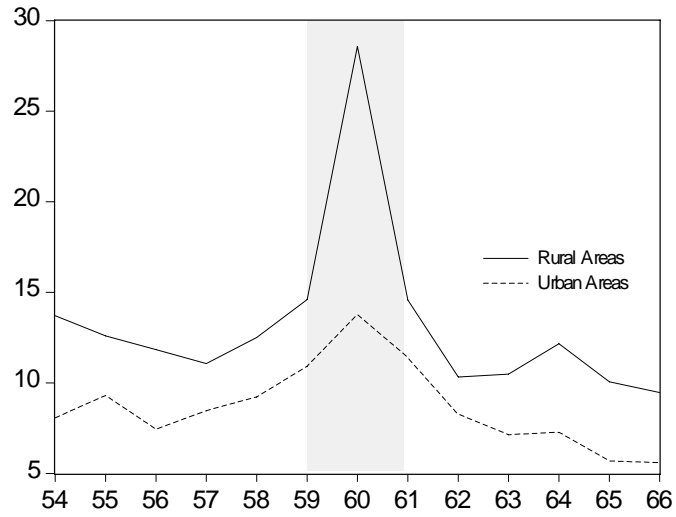


Fig. 5 The Death Rates in Rural Areas and Urban Areas in China form 1954 to 1966 (in ‰)  
 Source: State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.80.

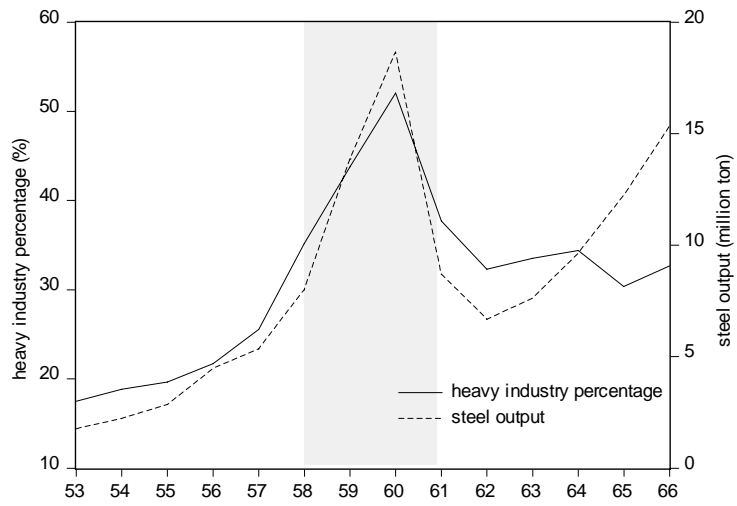


Fig. 6: Heavy Industry and Steel Output

Source: General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.10, p.18.



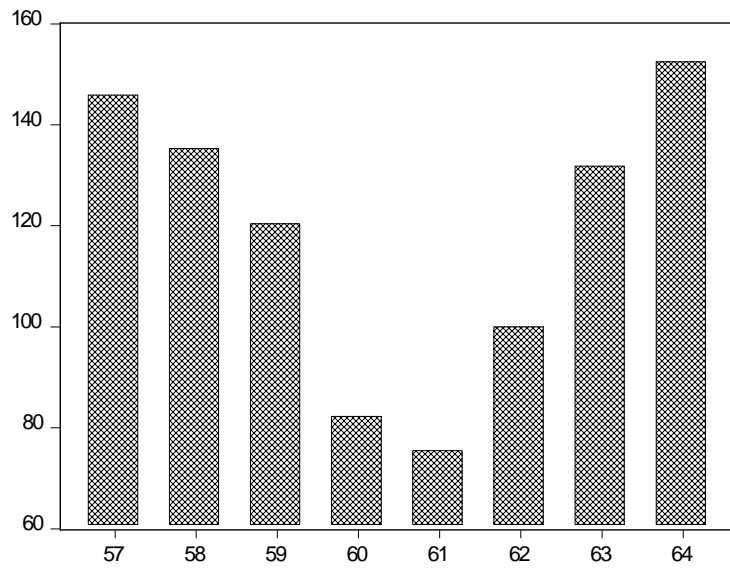


Fig. 7 Year-End Standing Stocking of Hogs from 1957 to 1964 (in million head)  
Source: General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1990: p.13.

Table 5 Statistical Description of Variables

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
dr	125	15.24	9.76	5.35	68.58
g	125	203.59	52.02	123.95	419.79
g'	125	235.46	58.13	140.41	480.72
cdh	125	383.91	347.17	10.75	2600.00
netpr	125	23.13	10.33	5.38	59.60
ruralp	125	80.80	9.41	35.88	92.53
hip	125	33.09	14.62	10.64	73.88

Source: State Statistics Bureau, 1990; Planning Office of The Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fishery, 1983; General Office of State Statistics Bureau, 1999.

Table 6 Estimation Results

Independent /Dependent Variable	Indr		Indr	
	(1)RE	(2)FE	(3)FE	(4)FE
lng	-0.42** (0.18)	-0.024* (0.23)	-0.033 (0.24)	
lng'				0.144 (0.36)
lnhi	-0.067 (0.12)		0.119 (0.20)	0.220 (0.20)
lncdh		-0.643* (0.12)	-0.650* (0.13)	-0.612* (0.13)
lnnetpr(lag)				0.240** (0.10)
lnruralp				0.268 (0.30)
Year <sub>1959</sub>	0.167*** (0.09)	0.159*** (0.08)	0.124 (0.11)	0.110 (0.10)
Year <sub>1960</sub>	0.473* (0.11)	0.286* (0.10)	0.225 (0.14)	0.150 (0.16)
Year <sub>1961</sub>	-0.049 (0.10)	-0.252** (0.10)	-0.275* (0.11)	-0.238*** (0.13)
Year <sub>1962</sub>	-0.305* (0.08)	-0.334* (0.08)	-0.327* (0.08)	-0.261** (0.11)
Constant	4.961* (1.03)	6.309* (1.34)	6.012* (1.44)	2.578 (2.68)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.41	0.63	0.63	0.66
Hausman P Value	0.99	0	0	0.01
Observation	125	125	125	125

Note: \* Statistically significant at the 1 per cent level.

\*\* Statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.

\*\*\* Statistically significant at the 10 per cent level.

Figures in parenthesis are standard errors.