

Tombstone *The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*

BY YANG JISHENG AND EDWARD FRIEDMAN (EDITOR)

NEW YORK: FERRAR, STRAUS, GIROUX, 2012

656 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0374277932, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Clayton D. Brown

Between 1958 and 1962, an estimated thirty-six million Chinese died of starvation in what became history's worst famine. Normally, such epic tragedies would yield a vast body of historical works, memorials, interviews, memoirs, conferences, and documentaries. Yet this epochal event is largely ignored outside of China and, more appallingly, actively suppressed within China to this day. Recently, Chinese, foreign scholars, and journalists have worked to remedy this ignorance to some effect; and in that spirit, Yang Jisheng has erected what he presents as a literary tombstone—a memorial of words to represent what does not yet exist in concrete.

In general, the story Yang relates is not new to those familiar with modern Chinese history. After taking power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party achieved success with modest centralizing reforms and programs, but as Mao's vision for China became ever more ambitious, his goals outstripped reality. As indicated by the title, Yang focuses on the key years of 1958–1962, when the propaganda machine went into high gear and whipped the populace into a frenzy of support for the Great Leap Forward. With this campaign, the CCP intended to outproduce Great Britain—the mother of the Industrial Revolution—while simultaneously overtaking the Soviet Union to become leader of the emerging communist world. Production quotas for both industry and agriculture were raised to impossible heights, but in order to avoid criticisms, denunciations, and beatings, cadre reports were falsified. As a consequence, the leadership lulled themselves into delusions of spectacular achievement. When the state appropriated tax grain based on inflated figures, the farmers themselves were left with too little so that by the winter of 1960, they were starving in huge numbers. The entrenched totalitarian system exacerbated the famine by denying its existence, punishing those who tried to rectify it, preventing relief grain from reaching afflicted populations, and prohibiting migration or anything that would betray the deception of achievement. The epic scale of the disaster was officially blamed on bad weather and enemies like the Guomindang and the Soviets, but Yang's tombstone stands, as he explains, as a testament to “the system that brought about the Great Famine.”

In its broad strokes, *Tombstone* confirms what we already know about this event from previous works. The second volume of Harvard sinologist Roderick MacFarquhar's series, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, offered a seminal scholarly treatment of the Great Leap Forward back in 1983, and he along with Edward Friedman composed the introduction to Yang's book. In 1996, journalist Jasper Becker traveled China's countryside to collect local records and firsthand accounts of the famine for an exposé titled *Hungry Ghosts*, and more recently, in 2010, Frank Dikötter produced a synthesis in *Mao's Great Famine*. Like these foreign authors, Yang also provides a well-researched secondary account focused specifically on the Great Leap Forward, but he weaves something else into his story. At the same time that foreign scholars and journalists were researching the Great Famine, Chinese who had migrated abroad were able to offer an insider's perspective to a general readership through their broadly circulated firsthand accounts. In 1984, Liang Heng shared his story as a youth growing up in Mao's China in *Son of the Revolution*, and in the following decade, Jung Chang did the same

in *Wild Swans*, as did well-known dissident and human rights advocate Wei Jingsheng in his translated autobiography. Mao's physician, Li Zhishui, complemented such on-the-ground perspectives with his own invaluable behind-the-curtain account of the upper echelons in his 1994 book, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*. These Chinese memoirs are both engaging and informative, but in them the Great Famine is treated only briefly as part of a larger personal narrative, and in any case their experiences can only hint at the full effects of the famine. *Tombstone* accomplishes what none of the foregoing have done—it delivers a comprehensive study of the Great Leap Forward by a member of the Chinese Communist Party, who interweaves his own traumatic experiences into the historical account.

Yang is uniquely qualified to tell this story. The opening chapter of the book, titled “An Everlasting Tombstone,” offers the reader a harrowingly detailed description of a teenage schoolboy returning to his hometown, which he finds silent and eerily deserted. Arriving at home, he discovers his father lying in bed, languid and starved. After three days of desperate but ultimately futile attempts to revive him, the lone teen buries his father's emaciated body in an unmarked grave. From this experience comes the title of his book and the resolve that drives him to uncover why it happened, both for his father and the other millions of his countrymen with similarly tragic stories to tell.

For this, Yang is also well-positioned. In 1964, he joined the Chinese Communist Party and built a career as a respected journalist with the official state-sanctioned Xinhua News Agency. He recounts with objective clarity his own naiveté in those early years, but his father's senseless death continued to haunt him. During the Cultural Revolution, he came to recognize the contradictions between facts and the propaganda he was obliged to promote. As Yang puts it, “I felt a responsibility to restore historical truth for others who had been deceived.” On a mission now, he traveled throughout China in the decades that followed, conducting his official business while

Call for Manuscripts

ASIA Past and Present

New Research from AAS

The Association for Asian Studies is accepting manuscript proposals from AAS members for its scholarly book series—“Asia Past and Present: New Research from AAS.”

Launched in 2009 with two titles—“Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History” and “Tools of Culture: Japan's Cultural, Intellectual, Medical, and Technological Contacts in East Asia, 1000s to 1500s”—AAS has now published ten “Asia Past & Present” books, with several more titles in production.

AAS expects to publish 2–3 books a year, each of them fully refereed and selected on the basis of exemplary, original, and enduring scholarship. Submissions in all areas of Asian studies are welcome. In addition to monographs, translations, essay collections, and other forms of scholarly research will be considered. Authors must be current members of AAS. For further information please visit:

www.asian-studies.org/publications/APP.htm

surreptitiously consulting archives, conducting interviews, and collecting files, thousands of which he has stored with an anonymous friend in the countryside for safekeeping. Based on a combination of these primary sources, recently published accounts, and his own experiences, Yang has compiled the most comprehensive and richly layered account to date.

In that vein, *Tombstone* is not a casual or general read. At over 500 pages of text, *Tombstone* does not offer a concise overview of the Great Leap Forward (for that readers should consider my article from the winter 2012 edition of *Education About Asia*). While Yang's prose is clear and accessible, the subject is heavy, and the statistics can seem dense and even overwhelming. But with it, Yang accomplishes his primary purpose: to offer a comprehensive and detailed account of the causes and repercussions of the famine grounded in a variety of reliable sources that collectively make the famine undeniable.

The original Chinese-language version of *Tombstone* was published in Hong Kong in 2008 and has already undergone several editions, with the much-anticipated English translation appearing in print just last year. But because the same authority is still in power in China and hangs its legitimacy on Mao, the Great Famine remains a sensitive subject. Yang notes that even today, over forty years after the event, "No full account of the Great Famine has been published in mainland China." His straightforward indictment of Mao and the Communist Party unsurprisingly failed to change history. But the fact that Yang still lives and publishes in Beijing may indicate some degree of progress on that front and offers hope that his study and others may one day become available where it will do the most good.

Nobel Prize-winning author Elie Wiesel suggested that to forget a holocaust is to kill twice. The Nanjing Massacre Memorial and other similar monuments exist to prevent us from forgetting needless deaths and reenacting similar crimes. But as noted in Yang's study, more Chinese were killed by the Great Leap Forward than by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. In that sense, the greatest tragedy of Yang's book is that his account is available to everyone except those directly affected by the disaster. For this, he offers a plea and a warning to his compatriots: "Human memory is the ladder on which a country and a people advance. We must remember not only the good things, but also the bad; the bright spots, but also the darkness." This literary tombstone compels the Chinese—and every human being—to remember the Great Famine. ■

CLAYTON D. BROWN is an Assistant Professor of History and Asian Studies at Utah State University, where he teaches courses on Modern China, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, as well as Asian and World History.

Japan 1941 *Countdown to Infamy*

BY ERI HOTTA

NEW YORK: KNOPF, 2013

352 PAGES, ISBN 978-0307594013, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Peter K. Frost

Japan 1941 discusses why Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor even though many senior officials knew that their chances of winning the war were at best 50-50. While the author also discusses historical events such as Matthew C. Perry's 1853 visit to Japan, the rationale behind Japan's joining the Tripartite Pact with Italy and Germany in 1940, the per-

sonal experiences of "Soldier U," and the popular reaction to the seemingly endless war with China that—depending on your point of view—began in the 1931 invasion of Manchuria or the 1937 occupation of much of the rest of China, most of Hotta's book focuses on Japanese policy meetings and Japanese-American conversations that took place during the fateful 1941 year. A dateline and list of the principal Japanese characters are also included.

To put it another way, Hotta is particularly concerned with the quality of Japanese leadership and decision-making in the summer of 1941. She gives a good deal of background information on Prince Konoe Fumimaro, who was prime minister at several key moments in the prewar period; Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke; General Tōjō Hideki, who was prime minister at the time of the attack; and even the Showa emperor (Hirohito to Americans). Hotta makes clear that she regards Konoe as weak and vacillating. All too often, he would make belligerent speeches in public that masked his private doubts. Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke strikes the author as self-aggrandizing and wildly wrong in his notions that the Americans would reach a settlement with Japan rather than face a united Axis front. Her portrait of the emperor is on the whole sympathetic, suggesting that he desired peace but was counseled by his advisers not to involve the imperial throne in controversial political matters. Tellingly, Hotta illustrates how a pacifistic poem the emperor recites was interpreted differently by those who wanted war. "One cannot help wondering," she says, "what would have happened had the emperor been more explicit in his opposition to war?" (176).

Given this emphasis on the various Japanese policy conferences and flawed leaders, it is perhaps natural that Hotta discusses, but does not emphasize, such underlying factors as the relatively devastating economic effects of the Great Depression; the refusal of the Western Powers to recognize Japan's right to have colonies, although they had empires or dominated other polities; and the immigration restrictions and the trade barriers—including the August 1, 1941, oil embargo—that made Japan worry about whether it could get the raw materials it needed. Similarly, more stress might be given to Secretary of State Cordell Hull's stern note on November 26, 1941, demanding that the Japanese get out of China and French Indochina.¹ All this leads Hotta to conclude that while "there had been errors of judgment on both sides, the errors had been induced, amplified, and spun out of control largely by the erratic and inflexible fashion in which Japan had been carrying out its foreign policy over many months." (273). This undoubtedly explains why, borrowing Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous characterization of the Pearl Harbor attack, Hotta subtitles her book "Countdown to Infamy."

Overall, Hotta's work strikes me as wonderfully researched and well-written, yet perhaps too narrowly focused for those *EAA* readers who need an initial, more general study of the outbreak of the Pacific War. Indeed, it is precisely because I believe that there surely were "errors of judgment on both sides" that I try in my own teaching not only to criticize the Japanese leadership as Hotta so ably does, but also to put even more stress on the underlying factors that explain why, even today, a surprising number of Japanese do not believe that 1941 was a "countdown to infamy." ■

NOTE

1. Hull's note can be found in, among other places, Hans Trefousse, *What Happened at Pearl Harbor* (College and University Press, 1958).

PETER K. FROST is the Frederick L. Schuman Professor of International Relations Emeritus, Williams College, where he taught for thirty-seven years. He is currently Visiting Professor of International Studies at the Croft Institute at the University of Mississippi and an Associate Editor of *Education About Asia*.