Tombstone

By Yang Jisheng and Edward Friedman (Editor)
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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 outran the 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 overthrowing 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 lullled 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...
Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy

BY ERI HOTTA

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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 personal 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 Yosuke; General Tōjo 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 Yosuke 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. 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).

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