

# Coping strategies and government response to the humanitarian crisis during the Maoist period: A case study of the Great Flood of 1975 in Henan province, China

Roser Alvarez-Klee, University of Barcelona  
[r.alvarez@ub.edu](mailto:r.alvarez@ub.edu)

Supervisor: Ramon Ramon

The most devastating famine in world history took place in China during the Great Leap Forward (GLF) (1958-62). This particular episode in Chinese history has been extensively studied since the 1980s. However, not much academic work has been published on the humanitarian crisis of 1975-77 in Henan province. The crisis developed after Typhoon Nina hit Zhumadian prefecture, causing the breakdown of 62 dams and unleashing the most catastrophic hydrological failure in world history. Recent research concluded that, between 1975 and 1977, the flood-disaster led to a total population loss of nearly 300,000 lives in Henan province (Alvarez-Klee, 2020). These estimates surpass the official figure given by the Chinese government today set at 26,000 fatalities as an immediate consequence of the flood.

This study focuses on the societal resilience to the crisis developed after the disaster, with the aim of delving into the explanatory factors of the hidden famine of 1975. Famine resilience should be analysed from the response of three main mechanisms that usually interact within a social group: *state*, *market*, and *civil society*. The effective response of these mechanisms may function as positive factors to alleviate crisis conditions. However, as seen in many episodes in history, the inefficiency of any of these mechanisms may also develop into extreme famine conditions and the perpetuation of low levels in the standards of living.<sup>1</sup> Derived from this assumption, *should we understand the famine of 1975 as a result of the breakdown in famine resilience?* Based on Soens' (2018) understanding of societal resilience, *famine resilience* is defined as 'the ability of societies, through the three coordination mechanisms (state, market, and civil society) and their interaction, to restrict the impact of food crisis to human lives and livelihoods, whether through absorption of the shock, adaption to new circumstances, or drastic transformation of social, political or economic structures' (Dijkman and van Leeuwen 2020). This study is based on the theoretical framework of Perroux (1960) and Boulding (1970), where the *state* denotes the actions taken by the national and local authorities to regulate the market or provide aid to the affected areas. The political structure in Maoist China was, to a certain extent, decentralized and yet ruled under a one-party-system. The transfer of reliable information between both government levels was essential to overcome harsh times and avoid crises such as the GLF famine. The *market* refers to the exchange mode of food and/or other commodities, as well as labour, land, and capital. Finally, *civil society* refers to the action of groups and communities responding to a crisis shock through interpersonal relationships, usually based on solidarity and trust. In other words, this mechanism entails the appliance of social capital to mitigate the risk of famine through sharing resources and costs for the common benefit of survival. This study enhances the mechanism by introducing the coping strategies of survivors, operating on famine resilience through a narrow relationship between individuals and the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> On famine-causation theory see Sen (1981); Ravallion (1997); Devereux (2020); De Waal (1990); Keen (1994); Rubin (2009).

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from the official sources: Henan gazetteers (1985) and chronicles (1949-1985), and Zhumadian prefecture gazetteers (1950-1985). Furthermore, the study relies on a survey conducted by the author in Zhumadian in 2017. The survey consists of 15 interviews with the survivors of the flood (aged 52 to 86 years old), including peasants, local government officials, and hydraulic engineers.

Findings indicate that the aid provided by the state as a response to the flood was the greatest given in Henan province during the Maoist period, as a response to a natural disaster. The participation of governmental authorities ranged from the national government to the provincial governments. Henan authorities and neighbouring local administrations contributed to the process of relief, though in different degrees. The immediate objectives of the relief process relied on the rescue of the population trapped in water, the assistance with food and health aid, and the provision of shelter and cloth to those who had lost everything in the flood. From a mid-term perspective, the state aimed to restore farmland, boost grain production, and rebuild damaged infrastructure (especially roads, railroads, houses, and hydrological constructions). Initial aid arrived five to eight days after Typhoon Nina hit the area and the transfer of provisions endured until July 1976 (only the allocation of construction materials remained until 1979). The supplies distributed in Zhumadian were acquired through two channels. One channel consisted of buying to different local governments through credit and paying the debt with the production surplus of the following years or with monetary relief funds given by the national government. The second channel consisted of free-aid supplies given mainly by the local governments. Most of the provisions acquired during this period were through the first channel: in total, the disaster relief supplies across the country were discounted by more than 300 million RMB.

Overall, the assistance provided to the affected prefecture between 1975 and 1979, summed 680,000 tones of grain (to which one third was delivered by the local governments), nearly 2 million pieces of cotton clothes and quilts, and 400 million RMB in relief funds (these funds were equally distributed to the District Finance Bureau for Disaster Relief in each county). Other types of supplies were facilitated such as vehicles, construction materials and coal, other types of foods and clothes, and medicines. Governments at all levels and the People's Liberation Army organized nearly 200 medical teams to the disaster-stricken areas to prevent and treat diseases, help restore medical institutions, allocate medicines and equipment, and provide free treatment to the victims. Nearly 3,000 medical staff was sent from Beijing, Shanxi, Hebei, and Hunan provinces. To boost agricultural production, the state provided nearly 5,500 tractors (46 per cent delivered by the local governments) and 94,000 tonnes of fertilizers (42 per cent delivered by the local governments). Also, Heilongjiang Provincial Construction Corps and several cities in Henan province sent mechanical farming teams to help sow wheat in the disaster areas. Over 9,000 cadres were sent to work on agricultural production. Finally, the national government transferred 800 million RMB in restoration funds of water conservancy projects.

Most studies analysing recent famines identify NGOs or similar agencies as the dominant actor in civil society. However, the food crisis developed after the flood of 1975 cannot be examined from this perspective. International Organizations were mainly absent during a great part of the Maoist period. Foreign community actors that had played a determinant role in famine resilience during the late-Qing Dynasty and the Republican era, such as Jesuit missionaries or the Red Cross, were either expelled from the country or controlled by the state (Ma 2002; Strong 2018).

Also, local civil society is difficult to categorize in Maoist China considering the concept is defined as 'social organizations formed voluntarily by individuals to protect or extend their interests or values and enjoy some degree of autonomy from the state' (White et al. 1996). From this perspective, the full control of the CCP in the economy and the social life hindered the development of these types of communities (Ma 2002). However, to a certain extent, provincial communes, brigades, and work-teams responded to the crisis' shock as groups that shared resources to reduce the risk of famine. Also individual and collective donations were given after the disaster, summing almost 70,000 RMB. Nearly 50 per cent of these donations were sent to Suiping County, one of the most affected areas within the prefecture. Some of these teams also gave shelter and fed the young children from the hard-hit areas.

Light-disaster community teams organized to support the severe disaster areas, based on "the principle of mutual assistance and mutual benefit". The objective of the teams was to provide supplies (farm tools and seeds, mats, food), build shelters, feed the livestock and help the hard-hit areas grow vegetables and wheat. For example, several brigades in Zhengyang, a light-disaster county, took the initiative to raise more than 9,700 livestock for the hard-hit areas of Pingyu and Xincui counties. The Yigong Brigade from the East-Coast Commune in Shangcai County, which was less affected by the flood, sent 40 animals, and 400 kg of wheat and corn to the Huochen Brigade, which was severely damaged. In neighbouring Hubei province, three work-teams from Dongfeng Commune in Daye County saved 1 kg of grain (in exchange for food stamps) and sent a total of 568 kg to the disaster area in Suiping County. In Liaoning province, the Disaster Relief Forces in Haicheng District saved grain and five cents per person per month to support the disaster areas. There is also evidence of individual and collective donations coming from different Chinese provinces, including grain, food stamps, and monetary contributions; some of them signed as 'Communist Party', 'People's Army', 'Love the People', 'Fighting Floods', and 'Sure Victory'.

Previous studies have shown that the state intervention during the GLF famine was inefficient and that both food availability and entitlement decline triggered the severity of the crisis (Lin and Yang 1998 and 2000; Meng et al. 2015). In the case of the 1975 disaster, there is evidence of a 24 per cent decline in grain production. However, as Rangaswami (1985) points out, famine is not a random incident, but a negative progression from a particular event. This study indicates that the governmental response in terms of relief funds, food and medical aid, and other supplies was greater than in any other harsh year in Maoist Henan. Contrary to the GLF crisis, the flood-affected areas started to receive aid almost immediately and persisted until 1976. Furthermore, civil society responded to the crisis through social capital aiming to mitigate the risk of famine. Therefore, two main questions arise from this analysis: First, *why in 1975 the inclination to famine resilience was greater than any other year since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949?* Second, *why the flood disaster developed into famine despite the great effort from the state and the civil society to prevent it?* To answer these questions we must focus on three main points: the political situation of the time, the dimensions of the disaster, and the state's capabilities to confront it.

When the 1975 flood occurred, the Maoist period was coming to an end. The tensions between the radical-left and the reformist were increasing and the recent foreign relations initiated with the West represented that the national dignity and the party were at stake. Having another failure such as the GLF would represent a sign of weakness to foreign eyes. Indeed, in October 1975, a WHO delegation visited the province to witness the modernization in the region. However, the visit remained in the north-central area of the province, never reaching the range of the disaster. To mitigate international and national criticism, not only the state rapidly assisted the disaster area, but also implemented an intensive educational campaign in the social spectrum. Furthermore, most adults in Henan and neighbouring provinces had suffered the great famines of 1942-43 and 1959-61. The memories of such recent crises were harsh for any survivor, and the CCP instrumentalized these recollections as a mechanism to instigate civil society.

The flood in 1975 was the greatest disaster registered in Henan's history, affecting an area of 12,000 km<sup>2</sup>, leaving three million families without a shelter, and destroying over 100 km of the Beijing-Guangzhou railroad, which was used daily for cargo shipments and food distribution. The railroad was blocked for nearly two months, preventing the rescue teams to reach a significant share of the population. Indeed, nearly one month after the disaster, 370 thousand people were still trapped in water and the rescue process did not end until September 26<sup>th</sup> of that year. Food and medicines were airdropped, but lack of modern technology impede to target exact locations and almost 60 per cent of the supplies landed in the water. This situation forced the population into survival strategies such as eating rotten food and dead animals for several days, which exacerbated the spread of intestinal and infectious diseases. Therefore, despite the extensive academic discussion in turn the degree of effectiveness of the market to respond to food shortages and the limitations of a regulated market system to prevent famine, we should emphasize that, in this case, the outstanding dimensions of the flood surpassed the financial and technological capabilities of the state to implement an

appropriate rescue plan and an effective distribution system of food and health resources.<sup>2</sup> Besides, nearly one year after the flood, neighbouring Hebei province suffered from a devastating earthquake that killed over 200 thousand people and destroyed a significant amount of infrastructure. At that point, most of the aid transferred to Henan province in 1976 was interrupted and sent to Tangshan city in Hebei. Such relocation of resources could have been prevented if the CCP had accepted the foreign aid offered immediately after the Tangshan earthquake. However, resilient to show weakness as a nation, the party declined international assistance. This factor slowed down the recovery of the affected areas in Zhumadian prefecture, where a significant share of the population did not go back to the pre-flood conditions until two to three years after the disaster had occurred. The humanitarian crisis that took place in Henan between 1975 and 1977 has its roots in the hydrological construction policies implemented during the 1950s and 1960s, which aggravated the consequences of a natural hazard that was already devastating in its nature. Had the constructions of the dams been effectively supervised before the disaster, the pronounced dimensions of the flood could have been prevented. Presumably, then, the mechanisms of state/market and civil society could have had functioned effectively as famine resilience.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion in turn markets and famine alleviation see Drèze and Sen (1989); Ó Gráda (2001); Ravallion (1997); Slavin (2014).

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