

**far
east**

Reporter

HOW THE CHINESE

are

CONQUERING

the

FOOD PROBLEM

LETTERS FROM CHINA

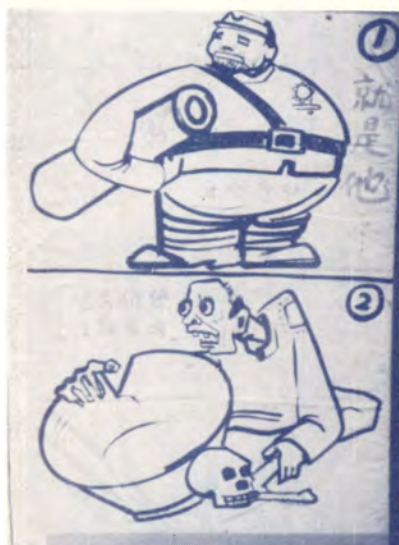
Compiled by Maud Russell

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PRE-LIBERATION (1949) POPULAR POSTERS
IN KUOMINTANG CHINA PROTESTING STARVATION
CAUSED BY MILITARISTS



“Beastly actions”



“That’s the man who is
keeping food from us”

“We beg for food—at the mouth of a cannon
with the militarist holding ‘the law’ against the people”



HOW THE CHINESE ARE CONQUERING THE FOOD PROBLEM

Introduction

FOOD is a human necessity. The raising and distribution of food is a major human activity which has so far, in all human societies, been accompanied by problems. Included in the causes of food problems have been natural calamities and the inadequacies and malfunctioning of the distributive system, resulting often in famines.

THE PEOPLE OF CHINA for centuries suffered famines. But in 1949 a new kind of society emerged in China, the socialistic people's China. In this new China the old terrifying and devastating famines have been eliminated.

But China still has food problems. Heroic effort is going into the work of eliminating, diminishing and recovery from the effects of natural calamities. Intense activity is being exerted to improve the productive and distributive processes and to increase the nutritive value of food.

FAR EAST REPORTER in an earlier issue "The Food Question in China" presented the "Background: Famine in Pre-1949 China," "Handling the Food Question: Post 1949 China," "Food and Population," "The 1960 Food Situation in China" and "China Buying and Selling Food on the World Market."

This issue of Far East Reporter gives excerpts from letters which have come in during the early months of 1961 from friends now resident in China. These unsolicited letters reveal the measures which the government and people of China are using to solve the whole food problem, not merely the crisis of 1959 and 1960.

Peking November 1960

It's a crisp sunny November morning in Peking. . . . In the commune fields just below our window they're bringing in a fine crop of celery and a dozen pedicabs are filing along the dirt road behind a big red Skoda bus—all loaded with cabbages. Farther off a tractor is plowing—a common sight enough here now for the kids almost to have lost interest in it; though they are intrigued by the well-borer which for the last few days (and nights) has been deepening the near-by well as part of the fight against a possible drought next year.

This year's weather has been the worst since the People's Republic was set up; and much of China's arable land has been affected by flood and drought. In the old days millions would have starved. Instead of that we're having very carefully planned distribution and everyone has enough.

Our own school farm, worked by staff and students, is coming along well. Two years ago it was a tract of alkaline waste-land, but since then we've dug a network of canals and flushed it. Last year we dug fish ponds and stocked them with thirty thousand fish and built hundreds of pig sties. And next year our students will be eating more meat and fish than ever before. Students and teachers go out to work on the farm for a month at a stretch, as part of the policy of combining education with productive labor.

Last term Isabel and her students put in their work time in the school chemical works, making coal tar for plastics. A few highly skilled full-time workers have the job of breaking in a new batch of unskilled intellectuals every month or so. There must be over a thousand semi-skilled industrial workers among our students and teachers now, including a

few inventors who have devised improved equipment to raise output.

This summer we went back to Ten Mile Inn, the mountain village 500 miles south of here, where we lived in 1947-48. The crops there looked so lush we could hardly believe they'd had 200 days of drought. Our main impression was of the energy and richness of country life, with farmers studying philosophy and, as they say, "rearranging the mountains and rivers." Young people no longer hanker after leaving the countryside for the towns. In fact they're the right hand of the Communist Party in pushing things ahead. Youngsters in their twenties hold key posts in the village and even help lead the whole commune. Most of them were primary schools kids when we were in the village before. Their own names at first meant nothing to us, but then we'd find we'd known their fathers as leadings lights in 1948.

DAVID and ISABEL CROOKS
Teachers in the Institute of
Foreign Languages in Peking

Peking December 29th 1960

The people of North China have parcelled out the grain shortage caused by two bad droughts, and no one will die, though often the older folks give more to the young ones than they should perhaps.

It has been superbly managed and the city folk made to feel that they are part and parcel of the whole land—not something that is exempt as in the old days.

Actually many of the young folks look better than they did before the anti-waste campaign started. There is now an effort to save on everything possible.

REWI ALLEY

Peking December 1960

I spent a whole day in a commune near Peitaiho. It is rather small and has a background of poverty. But they have done marvelous things, including turning a large tract of yellow, infertile soil into fertile black soil. This they did by washing, spreading with sand, and then digging up a layer of soil a metre down and putting it on top.

But what you would have marvelled at is the machine shops where they make farm implements. This commune has turned out sixty reapers for the harvesting this year and many small seed drills, cultivators and so on, and of course, countless hoes and hand tools. It only started after the establishment of the commune and has never had state capital. There are few skilled workers—with most of the initial ones coming from the local people's workshops. Most of the hammering was done by hand until the recent innovations campaign when they made three big steel hammers themselves; they are most unwieldy looking things but they work and save hours of labor.

Production this year has been driving ahead. Only in agriculture there were bad natural calamities; there is now a great drive on to mechanize, train and altogether lift all the processes to more advanced levels.

There is wheat growing around our house now and we have goats, ducks and pigs and chickens right in our yard."

ELSIE FAIRFAX CHOLMELEY

Shanghai January 26th 1961

Preparations for the Spring Festival are already in the air, though I think gastronomic feats will be somewhat res-

trained this year because of the very serious natural calamities last year—and the year before. Though there are certain shortages, yet in this carefully planned economy we know that the basic needs are being met and every one is cooperating to see that there is enough to go around. What a contrast to those former days when the millions starved and who really cared? Today everybody cares, while every effort is made to control nature and make her yield abundant harvests this year.

Have you heard that the development of Tsungming Island is the new barren land being added to the agricultural resource for feeding Shanghai? Ever since the first of the year students and faculty from our different colleges and universities are taking turns to cultivate this new area, build dykes, etc. and so expand the crop area for Shanghai's ten million.

I must give credit to the people's communes for the effective way in which last year's natural calamities were met and the role of the communes in looking after the needs of their own people; and it is now through the communes that the work of winter and spring planting and other measures to insure bumper harvests for 1961, barring natural calamities, will be achieved.

TALITHA GERLACH

Shanghai February 5th 1961

Almost every letter I receive from abroad these days expresses concern about the "famine" in China. Well, you and I know what it was like under the old regime when natural calamities hit the country. Then there was widespread famine even when the natural calamities were not

nearly as severe as those of the past two years. Absolutely no such conditions exist today for the Government, the Party and the people's communes and the whole people are concerned that no one shall suffer unduly and that no one shall starve.

I tried to do a bit of shopping for the Chinese New Year Festival (February 15) in our neighborhood shops today. It was just like Christmas rush at Macy's! Crowds of people everywhere; eager purchasers jammed the streets and shops despite the rain which made it very sloppy outside. I elbowed my way into two shops but gave up the struggle after that. The crowds were particularly dense in shops carrying candies, cookies, fancy cakes and the usual delicacies for the Chinese New Year. These things are rationed—some a smaller ration than last year, some at steeper prices—but everyone has a share and the people have money to buy.

TALITHA GERLACH

Peking February 27th 1961

Wish we could have some of your snow here. Still dry. But do you realize that China is doing an epic thing—showing the whole world what can be done with food conservation under the toughest conditions and bringing the people through.?

REWI ALLEY

Peking March 1961

We had no idea that an attack was being made on China in the disguised form of great concern for famine—until we got a letter from a well-meaning, well-to-do friend who reads a reactionary paper; there was a letter in the paper calling on

all friends of China to send parcels of food to their friends to keep them from starving. So she wrote she was sending us a parcel of two pounds of rice, promising to keep it up as long as we needed it. The sad thing about the little parcel of rice is that it is Indian rice—rice from a part of the world where people really starve.

If the newspaper had a genuine concern they would expose the shipping companies who have suddenly jacked up cargo rates in order to make big profits for themselves in transporting grain to China.

ISABEL CROOKS
Daughter of former
Canadian Missionary

Peking March 12th 1961

A few days ago we received a package, your two pounds of rice. It really is awfully good of you to have sent it and I know you've done so because you want to do something practical to show your friendship for China—and for us. So we're grateful. All the same I haven't the faintest idea what we're going to do with the rice.

The fact of the matter is that in China today there's a system of rationing something like the one we had in Britain during the war. And, as you know, that was a very good thing on the whole and worked well for the great majority of the people, even though there always were a few moaners and groaners and black market dealers. Still, that certainly didn't apply to most people. It's pretty much the same here now.

As you know, 1959 was a bad year as flood and drought went; and it was followed by the worst weather in a century

in 1960. So rationing was essential. From what we've seen and heard—and after a dozen years in China one sees and hears a fair amount—rationing has worked well.

A couple of my students accompanied us this morning on our Sunday walk along the river and I asked them how much grain they ate each month. One said 32 pounds and the other 35. As intellectuals they naturally eat less than men doing heavy manual work. Steel workers and coal miners, for instance, get $57\frac{1}{2}$ pounds a month. As to what kind of grain it is, that varies according to the place and the season.

Isabel and I and the boys have lunch in the big teachers and staff dining room every day (we have breakfast and supper at home) and there is always a choice of three types of cereal—maize, wheat and rice. Rice is most plentiful at the moment and you may have your whole ration in that if you wish, or in maize. You are only supposed to take a small portion in wheat, though. The picture will change after the wheat harvest (in early June, around here). At other times of the year the proportions of the different grains will switch around.

I don't know if you've ever tried eating as much as a pound of grain a day. It's not easy. I think that the only time I've ever come near it was when we went planting fruit trees in the Western Hills with our students. Then I ate like a horse for three weeks or so, but I doubt if even then I moved beyond the ranks of the intelligensia so far as grain eating went. As to competing with steel workers, I could never stand a chance.

Anyway, my personal eating habits, then or now, are not a matter of much social significance. What is important is, that in China today, despite the atrocious weather, thanks

to the rationing system, and especially to the communes and the enormous water conservancy jobs they have undertaken in the last couple of years, all the people have enough to eat. The farmers and their families—and that means eight out of ten Chinese—ate better and better every year after the People's Government was set up in 1949 up until 1958. Since then there has been more evening out between town and country, but the farmers still have maintained the level of 1957.

You saw enough of the corruption and inequality in the old days to know how many millions of tens of millions would have starved to death if the Kuomintang had been in power now. As it is, when I went for a hair-cut the other day (I still have a little hair left to cut) and asked the barber how he'd spent the lunar new year holidays he said it was the best he'd ever had. "There were over thirty kinds of things on the special holiday ration—meat, fish, bean noodles, nuts, wine, everything." And I know that true, from other sources.

I'm afraid you'll think I'm laboring this point. Perhaps I am, but we listen in the BBC regularly and the Voice of America now and then, so I know what a lot of rubbish there is on the air and, from your letter, in the press on the subject of food in China. Take it all with a grain of salt. It's just to discredit the communes.

DAVID CROOKS

In a letter to a British friend

Shanghai March 19th 1961

I was grateful that the Chinese Red Cross clearly informed the International Red Cross that there is no famine in China—for that is the absolute truth.

TALITHA GERLACH

Peking March 12th 1961

Writing in my study yesterday, five little heads kept appearing against the glass of my outer door, children of our compound daring me to chase them. And whenever I went to the door, they raced away with a shout and dash that spoke very well for their winter diet. Also, when one walks on Sunday in the streets and parks one is struck by the almost defiant health of the people, by the youngsters grabbing places in the giant stride in the playground, by the groups of young folk walking fast. . . .

Ancient Peking never knew the food supplies we have today. The milk wagon daily delivers yogurt, and twice weekly the vegetable wagons go about, stopping in alleys with quantities of leeks, scallions, bean sprouts and bean curd, all very fresh. People also grow leeks in parlors, and take a bit of vitamin C and a flavor for soup right at home.

Undoubtedly the winter is a hard one. One feels especially for those Overseas Chinese born in and accustomed to the diet of Canada or Australia, who came back patriotically to live like Chinese; they are prone to nutrition troubles, as they adjust to Chinese way of life. Foreigners outright are protected by special provisions. Chinese despite all difficulties this winter have a better diet than most of them enjoyed in even the best days of the Kuomintang.

Everybody grows food, one way or another. At the south tip of Hainan Island, from which I recently returned, the hostel for one hundred guests on a beach in a cocoonut grove had planted vegetables profusely between the trees, and the hostel personnel watered and weeded them afternoons; my interpreter at once volunteered to help, as did other youthful guests. Mrs. Chi Chao-ting grows a stuff called "Chlorella"

in her home and Mr. Chi teases her that every dish is so full of it that there is no space for food; thereupon she retorts that chlorella is a sure cure for malnutrition and "it's what you'll eat when you travel to the moon"; in this I think the scientists support her; at least my science fiction novels do. It is microscopic life that grows fast in water, probably like the scum that covers ponds. But the variety you get in any school or institution is solid protein plus some fat; Mrs. Chi said "There's quite a movement of people growing it."

In Fushan, out from Canton, a very nice woman in her thirties, running a dining room for four hundred people, told me she herself, as an illiterate worker's wife in the old society, could never afford meat or fish except at Spring Festival, when they went into debt to buy it; but she had "some meat, fish or lard every day in January" in her dining room.

ANNA LOUISE STRONG

***China's grain shortage—
a note to friends***

Peking March 10th, 1961

China's grain shortage has reached President Kennedy's press conference, and friends are writing to ask about the "famine," and two pound rice packages arrive from Britain for Peking residents, who are a bit embarrassed and amused. Take it easy! China was indeed hit by more natural calamities of drought and typhoons than in any year for a century—150,000,000 acres, more than half the crop area, was affected, some fifty to sixty millions acres seriously so. The grain crop did not come up to plan; it fell below 1958 and 1959 but was higher than 1957 or any previous year.

Grain needs have grown, both for food and for industry. So China is importing grain from Canada and Australia by the million tons. Foreign grain however whether in two pound gifts or million ton purchases, cannot be decisive for China; the country is big. A million tons from Canada is a mighty amount in foreign currency and transport costs, but it is only three pounds per capita for China, just three days food. But if every person in China saves a single pound a month in grain consumption, this makes four million TONS in the year, delivered right on the spot. Salvation for China must be found within.

It is being found, and the key-note is normalcy, modified by special attention to strengthening agriculture and distribution, and meantime economizing food and finding new foods. This is being done by such unified action of the people, scientists and government, as few nations could attain.

The great irrigation drives of the past three winters, in which in 1959-60 sent 75,000,000 peasants from the farms to the

irrigation work, are discontinued this winter for three reasons. The workers need rest after three years hard drive. The fields, which too often were sown by women and weaker men when the stronger men did not return from the irrigation jobs on time, need attention from the strongest, experienced peasants. The change of 75,000,000 people from hard irrigation labor to lighter winter duties on farms saves food, for men on irrigation jobs need an extra pound of grain per day, while at home they can cut winter labor to six hours or even to four hours, and consequently eat less. No cuts are made with children's food.

Normal activities continue. Steel and coal output rise. Educational and cultural activities flourish, with song and dance troupes from Cuba and Vietnam touring the provinces, and the world ping-pong championship just now featured in Peking.

China does not even cancel her commitments for grain export to small countries like Cuba, Albania, Guinea, Ceylon; she will not pass on her troubles to small friendly nations when she can more than cover them by purchases from Canada.

Some larger food exports to socialist nations have been "postponed" by friendly consent, with China keeping a substantial crop of soy beans, more potent against malnutrition than either rice or wheat.

The luxury canned goods and fine biscuits that went to the South Seas markets have been diverted to China's own cities . . . and cause the queues which foreign critics miscall "bread-lines." There are no real bread lines; people cut their grain consumption by an average of a pound a month, by staples on tickets and without queues and meet the change either by more careful cooking, or by growing vegetables, raising chickens, or taking more rest.

The natural calamities will cost China quite a bit of foreign currency, and some lessened speed. The end is not yet, for drought still rules the northern winter wheat fields, mitigated only by two small snowfalls the past winter. But the word goes: "Nobody will die of hunger. Nobody will even be hungry enough to affect normal life and work." This is an aim, not a guarantee, but seems likely to be pretty well fulfilled.

China will emerge from this difficulty with strengthened economy, a healthy population and more self-education in the science of nutrition than any other people I know.

Where else can every citizen tell you his personal "normal grain needs" by the month, and every school adolescent tell you how much more grain he needs if he goes in for "heavy sports"? Every food wrinkle of Hollywood experts, from yeast culture to vitamins in rice husks and growing chlorella "the food you will eat when you travel to the moon" is commonplace now with everyday Chines.

Addendum to FAR EAST REPORTER: How The Chinese Are
Conquering The Food Problem

Peking March 26th 1961

I have had quite a lot of letters expressing concern about the food situation here last year. Most of them were a reflection of people being misled by tremendous amounts of propoganda, which indeed we ourselves have heard regularly over Voice of America and BBC.

My sister-in-law wanted to send me food parcels. Considering we eat 26 pounds a month, it wouldn't go far to solve the problem, if there were one.

The truth is that there were indeed very serious and widespread calamities last year, following on a bad year in 1959. But the 1960 harvest was as big as the 1957 harvest, and the 1957 harvest was the biggest in Chinese history up to that time. Of course it wasn't as big as the 1958 harvest and it fell below the plan for 1959. It was for this reason that the government immediately took steps to avoid difficulties.

Everyone was told exactly what the situation was and asked to economize, and where possible to cut their rations. But after people had said what they thought they could cut (in our household, for instance, we said we could cut 5 pounds a month) their proposal was discussed in their work unit and if it was thought they were cutting too much (which was quite often the case) they were told to increase it again. I can't say I noticed the cut in our household.

But if everyone cut one pound that means 600,000,000 pounds a month saving. So you can see from this that, although we are importing what seems like huge amounts of wheat, the problem is really to be solved internally.

The thing is that the shortage was spread out over every one in both cities and countryside, so there was no such thing as hungry refugees going in search of food, no panic of people trying to corner or buy up grain stocks. AND, not a single person died from starvation, and there was not even any serious under-nourishment.

The so-called ration is an amount assessed by yourself; in other words there is no uniform ration. I get 26 pounds of rice a month, but some one else in my office gets 38; Mai Mai, our daughter, gets 24 (though in fact she eats more than I do - she has a perfectly enormous appetite). I probably eat less than my 26 pounds. Di-Di, our son, eats in his nursery, all three meals, and also consumes huge quantities, I'm told.

Now the ration has already been increased, especially in the countryside where spring cultivation is under way. What calamities have done is to make everybody very conscious about the problem of producing food.

The vegetable planting on every piece of spare land in the city this year has assumed a new quality and proportion. We used to have a patch of ground out back of our house where we grew flowers and tomatoes. But this year we are going to cultivate on the public plots, which is much more efficient; last year we had trouble with rabbits and chickens nibbling at our plants; this year, if the land is collectively cultivated, every one will see that the plants are protected some way or other. What was a basket ball court in our yard when you were here in 1959 is now a wheat field; all the yard is apportioned out among the various offices. It looks fine to see things coming up everywhere. And we've had rain this spring, so the prospects this year are much better so far.

Elsie Fairfax Cholmeley

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Conclusion

These letters reveal that the pre-Liberation starvation terror no longer exists in China. What famine meant to the people in the old days is indicated in part on the accompanying popular posters which were current in the latter days of the Kuomintang regime—protests against “guns in place of food,” “unemployment,” “starvation,” “police suppression” of “protests” and “petitions.”

Today in China “though there are shortages, yet in this carefully planned economy” with “the very carefully planned distribution” and “the grain shortage parcelled out, superbly managed” “the basic needs are being met and every one is cooperating to see there there is enough to go around”—even “the old folks who give more to the young than they should, perhaps.”

“Gastronomic feats” may be “somewhat restrained” for the 1961 Spring Festival, but the shops were jammed with “crowds particularly dense in shops carrying candies, cookies, fancy cakes and the usual delicacies for the Chinese New Year.”

No more starvation—now nor in the future. Wells are being sunk, alkalie and waste land made fertile and useful; fish ponds are being added to the farm lands; milk and its products are now a part of the Chinese diet; waste is unsocial; implements for increasing labor power are invented; all the population is gaining in appreciation of the basic social process of food supply—with urban people participating in rural activities or raising food around their city homes, thus creating an understanding by and a powerful unity of all the people.

The China of The Future

As Rewi Alley writes: "Yes, there are some difficult spots, of course. But people are really getting down to dealing with this problem, and there is no question that China will come through this particular struggle greater than before."

And as Anna Louise Strong writes: "China will emerge from this difficulty with strengthened economy, a healthy population, and more self-education in the science of nutrition than any other people I know."

PRE-LIBERATION (1949) POPULAR POSTERS IN
KUOMINTANG CHINA PROTESTING POLICE
SUPPRESSION AS THE PEOPLE RESIST AND
PETITION AGAINST STARVATION



“What the American Trade Agreement (with Kuomintang
China) does to the people”



“Our teachers”

“Police suppression—Rice bowls broken by militarists—
Protests—Petitions”



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