

The countryside was a world of noise before the famine. Hawkers filled the air with their chants, some using rattles to advertise their wares. The din of gongs, cymbals and firecrackers traditionally accompanied popular events, whether a burial or a wedding. Loudspeakers nailed to trees by street corners and village squares blasted out propaganda and revolutionary music. Passing trucks and buses, clouds of yellow dust billowing behind them, would have worked their horns incessantly. Boisterous conversations were yelled across fields, so loud that outsiders might mistake them for a bitter argument.

But after years of famine an eerie, unnatural silence descended upon the countryside. The few pigs that had not been confiscated had died of hunger and disease. Chickens and ducks had long since been slaughtered. There were no birds left in the trees, which had been stripped of their leaves and bark, their bare and bony spines standing stark against an empty sky. People were often famished beyond speech.

In this world plundered of every layer that might offer sustenance, down to bark and mud, corpses often ended up in shallow graves or simply by the roadside. A few people ate human flesh. This began in Yunnan, where the famine started in the summer of 1958. At first the carcasses of diseased livestock were unearthed, but as famine tightened its grip some people eventually dug up, boiled and ate human bodies.¹ Soon the practice appeared in every region decimated by starvation, even in a relatively prosperous province such as Guangdong. For example in Tanbin, Luoding, a commune where one in twenty villagers died in 1960, several children were eaten.²

Few archives offer more than an oblique reference to cannibalism, but some police reports are quite detailed. In a small village in Xili county, Gansu, villagers caught the whiff of boiling meat from the hut of a neighbour. They reported the man to the village secretary, who suspected that a sheep might have been stolen and proceeded to inspect the premises. He discovered flesh stored in vats, as well as a hair clip, ornaments and a scarf buried at the bottom of a pit. The artefacts were immediately identified as the belongings of a young girl who had vanished from the village days earlier. The man not only confessed to the murder, but also owned up to having unearthed and eaten the corpses of young children on two previous occasions. After the village had taken measures to protect the graves from desecration, he had turned to murder.³

Human flesh, like everything else, was traded on the black market. A farmer who bartered a pair of shoes for a kilo of meat at the Zhangye railway station found that the package contained a human nose and several ears. He decided to report the finding to the local Public Security Bureau.⁴ To escape detection, human flesh was sometimes mixed with dog meat when sold on the black market.⁵

From Frank Dikottir
"Mao's Great Famine" p 320-321

Fact

Chang and Halliday have accused Mao of confiscating Chinese harvests during the Great Leap Forward in order to export food in exchange for armaments, irrespective of the sufferings of the Chinese. They write of cases of cannibalism in Anhui and Gansu provinces, and a daily intake of 1200 calories in Chinese cities in 1960 (compared with 1300-1700 calories a day fed to prisoners in Auschwitz). Not all historians accept this, but conditions were clearly very bad.

Fact

A quarter to a fifth of all Tibetans (1 million) (see page 157) and a quarter of people in Anhui (8 million), Henan (7.8 million) and Sichuan (9 million) perished in the famine.

Todd & Waller
"Authoritarian &
Single Party
States" p 151