

“Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron”

The North China Famine of 1876-1879

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1

“Report of R.J. Forrest, Esq., H.B.M. Consul at Tien-tsin, and Chairman of the Famine Relief Committee at Tien-tsin,” *China’s Millions* (November, 1879): 139; Peking United International Famine Relief Committee, *The North China Famine of 1920-1921, With Special Reference to the West Chili Area* (1922; repr., Taipei: Ch’eng-wen Publishing Company, 1971), 9; Susan Cotts Watkins and Jane Menken, “Famines in Historical Perspective,” *Population and Development Review* 11.4 (1985): 650.

2

The North China Famine is referred to in Chinese as the *Dingwu qihuang* 丁戊奇荒 (Incredible Famine of 1877-78), or simply *Guangxu sannian* 光緒三年 (the third year of the Guangxu emperor’s reign, which was 1877).

3

Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso Press, 2001), 6-7, 61-62. Estimates for population losses resulting from the drought-famines of the late 1870s range from nine-to-13 million people in China, six-to-10 million in India, and 500,000 to one million in Brazil.

4

“An Essay Discussing Henan qihuang tielei tu,” *Shenbao*, 15 March 1878, 1.

5

The Famine in China: Illustrations by a Native Artist with a Translation of the Chinese Text, trans. James Legge (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878), 12-13.

6

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. The *Shenbao* credited Xie Jiafu (also referred to as Xie Suizi) and Tian Zilin with designing and printing the collection. Xie and Tian were based in Suzhou, a wealthy city roughly 100 kilometers west of Shanghai. “*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*,” *shou juan* (Pictures reporting the disaster in the four provinces, opening volume), in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of disaster in the four provinces, opening volume), in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of accounts for relief contributions for Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and Zhili) (n.p., 1881).

7

The Famine in China (1878), 9-10.

8

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. In one of his letters-to-the-public published by the Shanghai relief bureau, Zheng Guanying, a reformer-entrepreneur from Guangdong who helped spearhead the relief campaign in Shanghai, mentions writing “inscriptions to draw tears from iron” himself, and receiving additional laments from his friends. Zheng Guanying ji, 1074.

9

The volume of illustrations titled *Si sheng gao zai tu qi* (Pictures reporting the disaster in four provinces) was the opening volume of a twelve-volume compilation titled *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of accounts for relief contributions for Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and Zhili), compiled in 1881. This compilation is held in the historical documents room of the Shanghai Library

10

The *Henan qihuang tieleitu* is not among the five sets of illustrations in the volume of illustrations. The first set, however, has the synonymous title *Yu ji tieleitu* (The Henan famine: Pictures to draw tears from iron). Only one of the 16 illustrations in the *Yu ji tieleitu* is identical to an illustration in the *Henan qihuang tieleitu*, but four other illustrations found in both works concern the same subject matter (people eating tree bark to survive, people selling their children, famine-related suicides, and cannibalism), share the same accompanying texts, and are similar though not identical in appearance.

11

The Jiangnan (literally "south of the Yangzi River") region includes much of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, and was the most prosperous and urbanized area of China during the late imperial period.

12

Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) 143-145. For more on the origins and motivations of the extra-governmental relief effort based in Jiangnan, see Zhu Hu, *Difangxing liudong ji qi chaoyue: wan Qing yizhen yu jindai Zhongguo de xinchen daixie* (The fluidity and transcendence of localism: Late-Qing charitable relief and the supercession of the old by the new in modern China) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2006).

13

For an introduction to the *Qingshiduo*, see Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, 55. The roughly 900 Qing-era poems in the *Qingshiduo* were compiled in 1869 by the Zhejiangese scholar Zhang Yingchang. The poems in sections (juan) fourteen and fifteen describe the suffering of people stricken by natural disasters, while those in section seventeen describe the sale of women and children and the plight of disaster refugees. The poems use emotional language and vivid imagery very similar to that used in Xie's famine illustrations a decade later. A short poem titled "Traveling through the Shanxi Famine" (*Jin ji xing*), for example, employed some of the exact same phrases found in both local gazetteer essays about the 1877 famine and in several of the Taohuawu illustrations. The poet mourned that Shanxi's plains had become "a thousand li of scorched earth," that the people were reduced to eating tree leaves and bark, and that officials grew rich off relief money while the common people starved. *Qingshiduo* (Anthology of poems from the Qing period), comp. Zhang Yingchang, 1869 preface. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), preface, 72-73, 443.

14

Zhu Hu, 85-86.

15

"*Shou juan Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*, 13a; *The Famine in China*, 22; *China's Millions* (September, 1878), 115. The content of the cannibalism illustration in both the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* and the *Yu ji tieleitu* is the same, and the accompanying text is identical. The illustrations, however, are slightly different in form. The illustration in the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* compilation that was translated into English and published in London, for instance, portrays seven living people, while the version in the *Yu ji tieleitu* only pictures six.

16

Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu, 23b-24a.

17

Jing Yuanshan, *Juyi chuji*, 2.41a – b.

18

Joanna Handlin Smith, "Chinese Philanthropy as Seen through a Case of Famine Relief in the 1640s," *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions*, eds. Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz, and Edward Queen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 133-168. For more on faith in Buddhism as an important motivation for elite participation in relief work, see Paul R. Katz, "'It is Difficult to be Indifferent to one's Roots: Taizhou Sojourners and Flood Relief during the 1920s," *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica* 54 (December 2006): 1-58; Andrea Janku, "Sowing Happiness: Spiritual Competition in Famine Relief Activities in Late Nineteenth-Century China," *Minsu Quyi*

143 (March 2004): 89-118.

19

"*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 2b-3a, in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*; Handlin Smith, 149.

20

For a detailed analysis of the connection that the Shenbao and leading relief organizers in the 1870s drew between famine relief work and the accumulation of merit, see Janku, "Sowing Happiness."

21

Quoted in Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-4.

22

Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund, *The Famine in China*, 34; "*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 19a. This illustration is the final one in both the *Henan qihuang tieleitū* and the *Yu ji tieleitū*, one of the five sets of disaster illustrations in the 1881 compilation. It is the only illustration that is exactly the same in both sets of *tieleitū*.

23

Xia Dongyuan, comp. *Zheng Guanying zhuan*, (Shanghai, Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1985), 277.

24

"*Shanghai chouzhen gongsuo quanmu Henan, Shanxi yizhen gong qi*," (A Public letter posted from the Shanghai Relief Managing Office, exhorting people to raise charitable relief for Henan and Shanxi), Zheng Guanying ji, ed. Xia Dongyuan (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1982), 1071. For further examples of Zheng Guanying's traditional ideas concerning rewards and retribution for good or bad deeds, see his volume *Jiuzai fubao* (The reward and retribution of disaster relief), which he compiled in 1878. Xie Jiafu wrote the preface for a second edition of the volume, which was printed in 1888.

25

For more information on Zheng Guanying, see Paul Cohen's *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China*, Yen-P'ing Hao's *The Comprador in Nineteenth Century China: Bridge Between East and West*, and Bryna Goodman's *Native Place, City, and Nation*. For a good introduction to Jing Yuanshan, see Mary Rankin's *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China*.

26

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 156; Janku, "Sowing Happiness," 100-10. Suzhou is about 100 kilometers west of Shanghai. For further discussion of and lengthy quotations from Xie Jiafu's unpublished diaries (held in the Suzhou Archives), see Zhu, chapters 1-3.

27

Beizhuan jibu, Min Erchang, comp., 1923. Reprint, *Qingdai zhuanji congkan* 123 (Taipei: Mingwen shuju, 1985), 506-513. Xie was back in Suzhou by the time the famine began, but he maintained close connections with merchant-philanthropists in nearby Shanghai.

28

Rudolf Wagner, "The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere," *The China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995): 426; Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh, ed. *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley: China Research Monograph, 1992), introduction.

29

Beizhuan jibu, 506-513.

30

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 108, 156; Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 162-67.

31

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 108-113, 133-134; *Beizhuan jibu*, 508-509.

32

Beizhuan jibu, 506-513.

33

"*Qingjiang dai shu zi qian ju*," *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*, vol. 7, part 8, 2-6.

34

Ibid.

35

"*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 29b-30a; 31b-32a.

36

Visual images of helpless women have also played an important role in representations of the Irish famine. A sobering illustration of the ragged "Widow O'Leary" and her two emaciated children has become the most ubiquitous visual emblem of Ireland's misery during the potato blight. Originally published by the *Illustrated London News* during the famine, today the image of the widow and the children she cannot feed graces the covers or inside jackets of numerous books on "Black '47." In the museum shop at Ireland's National Famine Museum in Strokestown, the haunting gaze of this suffering mother now stares at tourists from souvenir T-shirts, mugs, magnets, and even Frisbees.

37

"*Jihan jiaopo, xuanliang touhe*," (Driven by hunger and cold, they hang themselves from a beam or thrown themselves in a river) in "*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 12.

38

Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images," 8.

39

"*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 25b-26a.

40

Qingshiduo (Anthology of poems from the Qing period), 72-73, 443; Janku, "Sowing Happiness," 95-105. Janku states that the *Taohuawu* was famous for its New Year prints and drew on that expertise to design the famine illustrations.

41

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. The article made no mention of Yu Zhi's disaster illustrations printed in the 1850s and 1860s.

42

Shenbao, 15 March, 1878.

43

The Famine in China, 10.

44

China's Millions (October 1878), 134.

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