

---

# THE SLOW, THE QUICK AND THE DEAD: ENVIRONMENT, POLITICS AND TEMPORALITY IN THE HENAN FAMINE, 1942–43

---

MARK BAKER  
Balliol College,  
University of Oxford

## Abstract

This article argues that famines have rapid as well as slow temporalities. Using newspapers, contemporary eyewitness accounts and subsequent memoirs, it uncovers the mixed temporalities of causation and experience in the 1942–43 famine in Henan Province, north-central China. It begins by exploring how the slow elements of famine played out in Henan: endemic poverty and malnutrition, years of war in the province, and the drawn-out experience of drought and starvation in 1942–43. More importantly, though, it then demonstrates that it was *rapid* processes that tipped much of Henan into what one observer called a ‘blitz famine’: hailstorms, price spikes and the violence of military requisitioning. The experience of famine, too, had fast temporalities, including snap decisions about flight, individual or collective acts of violence, and the sudden bodily collapse that often followed the slow process of starvation. But if all famines have mixed temporalities, this article closes by showing that these elements of time are not politically neutral. Comparing 1942–43 with Henan’s other major twentieth-century famines (1920–21, 1928–30 and 1958–61), I argue that the growing role of the state in causing famine led to faster temporalities of disaster.

Keywords: China, Henan Province, famine, violence, disaster, temporality, Second World War, drought

## Introduction

On the face of it, famines are the quintessential slow disasters, firmly in the ‘gradual’ category of disaster typologies.<sup>1</sup> The inability of people to obtain sufficient food for survival results in the slow emergence of starvation, culminating in social breakdown

---

1 For a categorisation of disasters by time, see Allen H. Barton, ‘Disaster and Collective Stress’, in *What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions*, ed. Ronald Perry and E. L. Quarantelli (La Vergne, TN: International Research Committee on Disaster, 2005), 125–52, esp. 129.

and widespread malnutrition-related deaths. Behind most famines lie even slower social and environmental processes, which result in chronic food insecurity and vulnerability to hazards—long temporalities that were once neglected by disaster researchers but which are beginning to command more attention.<sup>2</sup>

The famine which struck the north-central Chinese province of Henan in 1942–43 seems to fit this image of a slow disaster. Following drought in the spring and summer of 1942, food production in this war-torn province fell by around half compared with previous years.<sup>3</sup> Between the calamitous autumn harvest of 1942 and the much-improved spring harvest of 1943, millions of people in Henan faced what the visiting American journalist Theodore White called ‘the slow, winter-long agony of starvation’. Across Nationalist, Japanese and Communist-held territory in this divided province, around 1 million people suffered starvation-related deaths and perhaps a further 3 million fled their homes.<sup>4</sup>

Taking an even longer temporal view, the horrors of 1942–43 were just one part of a long four decades of endemic and epidemic malnutrition in Henan. Many inhabitants of the province faced a decades-long struggle to obtain sufficient nutrition, against a backdrop of rising population, dependence on unreliable seasonal rainfall, and the centuries-long processes of soil erosion and loss of fertility on much of the North China Plain. According to Xia Mingfang’s calculations on disasters across the century before the founding of the People’s Republic, Henan was *the* most disaster-hit province in all of China. In both 1920–21 and 1928–30, Henan suffered drought–famines, and in 1959–61 was one of the worst-affected provinces in the appalling famine following China’s Great Leap Forward. The provincial death toll for these four famines is hard to estimate with any precision, but amounts to a total of at least 5 million (not including fertility loss). In the intervals between these four epidemics of malnutrition, Henan suffered periodic localised starvation events as well as the inadequate diets, high infant mortality and annual pre-harvest dearth that indicate endemic malnutrition and food insecurity.<sup>5</sup>

2 For recent appeals for longer and more flexible disaster temporalities, see Steve Matthewman, *Disasters, Risks and Revelation: Making Sense of Our Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Eric Hsu, ‘Must Disasters Be Rapidly Occurring? The Case for an Extended Temporal Typology of Disasters’, *Time and Society* (May 2017): 1–18.

3 Amounting to 48.5 per cent of the 1938–41 average (by weight). See Xu Daofu 許道夫, *Zhongguo jindai nongye shengchan ji maoyi tongji ziliao* 中国近代农业生产及贸易统计资料 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1983), 19–22. This is following Anthony Garnaut’s assumption that the fall harvest amounted to 60 per cent of annual production by weight. See Anthony Garnaut, ‘A Quantitative Description of the Henan Famine of 1942’, *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 2007–45, 2022–3.

4 Theodore White, ‘The Desperate Urgency of Flight’, *Time* 40, no. 17 (October 1942). This death toll is a slightly more pessimistic reading of Garnaut’s estimate of a little less than 1 million. Garnaut, ‘A Quantitative Description’, 2032–6. This estimate is much lower than the commonly referenced figure of 3 million. See, for instance, Song Zhixin 宋致新, *1942: Henan dajihuang 1942: 河南大饥荒* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2012), 2–3.

5 Xia Mingfang 夏明方, *Minguo shiqi ziran zaihai yu xiangcun shehui* 民国时期自然灾害与乡村社会 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 383. For more on long-term vulnerability and local disaster, see Su Xinliu 蘇新留, *Minguo shiqi Henan shui han zaihai yu xiangcun shehui* 民国时期河南水旱灾害与乡村社会 (Zhengzhou: Huanghe shuili chubanshe, 2004).

Yet this article uses the example of 1942–43 to suggest that some aspects of Henan’s famines—in both causation and experience—operated on a much faster temporal scale. Ernest Wampler, provincial field supervisor for United States–based United China Relief, was struck by the sheer speed of famine in 1942–43: ‘old, experienced relief workers, representing both the government and the church, hardly got started until the need was so stupendous that some felt nothing could be done to cope with it’.<sup>6</sup> As well as the slow-developing drought, the famine was also caused by more abrupt changes to the ability of residents to obtain and retain food: locusts, hail and wind, as well as price spikes and the sometimes violent requisitioning demands and grain seizures of both Chinese Nationalist and occupying Japanese forces.

So were Henan’s twentieth-century famines ‘quick’ or ‘slow’ disasters? The answer, of course, is both: famines, just as other disasters, are best understood in the multiple temporal modes called for by Eric Hsu.<sup>7</sup> Just as Christopher Courtney (in this issue) explores the longer temporalities of urban fires—emblematic ‘fast’ disasters—so this article challenges readers to think differently about famine by showing the rapid temporalities of the 1942–43 disaster. It begins by uncovering slow and quick rhythms of disaster in a range of sources new to the growing body of English-language work on the famine, including dispatches from the affected region by the journalist Li Rui 李蕤, the unpublished diary of the photojournalist Harrison Forman, and scattered sources from the little-understood experience of famine in Japanese-occupied territory.<sup>8</sup>

After discussing both ‘slow’ and ‘quick’ aspects of the 1942–43 famine, this article proposes two ways of moving beyond simply identifying mixed temporalities towards analysing the implications of such a perspective: first, that disasters are best understood using what William Sewell calls an ‘eventful’ or ‘lumpy’ conception of time rather than the smooth sense of process that often underpins disaster sociology.<sup>9</sup> Second, that it is often the ‘fast’ elements of famine that are the most destructive. This was particularly true in relation to the role of the state in Henan’s famines. Over the course of four twentieth-century famines, increasing state culpability led to the growing severity and ever-faster temporality of these starvation epidemics.

6 Ernest Wampler, *China Suffers: Or, My Six Years of Work During the Incident* (Elgin, IL.: Brethren Publishing, 1945), 229.

7 Hsu, ‘Must Disasters be Rapidly Occurring?’, esp. 12.

8 For recent secondary work in English, see Garnaut, ‘Quantitative Description’; Micah Muscolino, *The Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. Chap. 3; Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, ‘Saving the Nation, Starving the People? The Henan Famine of 1942–43’, in *1943: China at the Crossroads*, ed. Joseph Esherick and Matthew Combs (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2015), 323–65. Li Rui’s reports from the famine zone were published in the local Henan newspaper *Qianfengbao* 前鋒報, and reproduced as ‘Wujin chang de siwang xian’ 无尽长的死亡线, *Henan Wenshi Ziliao* 河南文史资料, 13 (March 1985), 1–55. Harrison Forman’s 1943 diary is held at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and is available online at [collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/forman/id/50](http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/forman/id/50).

9 See, in particular, William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

## Slow temporality in causation and experience

In discussing ‘slow’ aspects of famine, I refer to elements of causation and experience which emerge over months, years and decades. Indeed, as Xia Mingfang points out, the environmental and sociopolitical changes leading to Henan’s famine vulnerability in the twentieth century date back centuries. Beginning in the early twelfth century, the centre of gravity of the Chinese state and economy shifted away from these ‘Central Plains’ (*Zhongyuan*). Successive Yellow River floods brought environmental instability, political peripheralisation and damage to hydraulic networks. Over the course of the late imperial period, the intensively cultivated North China Plain suffered a fitful but appreciable centuries-long decline in land-to-labour ratios.<sup>10</sup>

Henan’s vulnerability to famine became starkly apparent following the drought that struck north-central China in the 1870s. Lack of rainfall over three years (1876–78) combined with the decades-long decline in state aid apparatus to cause the starvation-related deaths of perhaps 2 million people in Henan and up to 13 million in total across North China.<sup>11</sup> But after a relative respite of two generations, worse was to come in the twentieth century. With four famines in as many decades, it is tempting to see the whole half-century from 1920 to the early 1960s as one long, slow disaster in Henan, a province described by one visitor as a ‘wide, wheat plain where famine, flood, drought, banditry, and poverty are the constant companions of the people’.<sup>12</sup>

The ‘slow’ causation of the 1942–43 famine operated on a timescale of months and years as well as decades and centuries. As Micah Muscolino has shown, Henan’s ecology and economy had been devastated by the effects of Japanese invasion, with the long war of attrition since 1938 in this front-line province draining energy from its metabolic systems. The years-long loss of grain, farmland, labour and equipment for military purposes had exacerbated underlying food insecurity.<sup>13</sup> Delegates from unoccupied and occupied Henan had lodged protests in the limited representative institutions in Nationalist Chongqing and occupied Beijing respectively, arguing that the long war was placing unsustainable burdens on Henan’s society and

10 Xia, *Minguo shiqi ziran zaihai*, 5. For the beginning of this story, see Christian Lamouroux, ‘From the Yellow River to the Huai: New Representations of a River Network and the Hydraulic Crisis of 1128’, in *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*, ed. Mark Elvin and Liu Ts’ui-jung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 545–84; for later difficulties, see also Randall Dodgen, *Controlling the Dragon: Confucian Engineers and the Yellow River in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001) and, for a slightly different part of the North China Plain, see Lillian Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s–1990s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). For a comparable discussion of long-run famine causes in a different setting, see James Warren’s article in this issue.

11 On the 1876–79 famine, see Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008). The estimate of 2 million deaths in Henan is from Su, *Minguo shiqi Henan shui han zaihai*, 115.

12 Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), 374.

13 See Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, esp. 87–90, 95–101.



environment.<sup>14</sup> There was little assistance from outside the province, leaving Henan facing a disproportionate burden: ‘as everyone knows,’ wrote Li Rui, ‘Henan ranks first in military recruitment, compulsory grain purchase and land tax in kind’, with the battered rural sector struggling to provide for Nationalist armies numbering over 700,000 men.<sup>15</sup> Across the front line in the two-fifths of the province under occupation, combined Japanese and collaborationist forces (numbering somewhat over 100,000 troops) were fed by coercive compulsory purchase systems in tightly occupied areas and sporadic grain raids in zones of semi-occupation.<sup>16</sup>

These years-long effects of war were exacerbated in the spring and summer of 1942 by a months-long drought. In association with the tail end of the 1939–42 El Niño event, little or no rainfall fell in more than 90 per cent of Henan’s counties between the lunar New Year of 1942 (in mid-February) and late October.<sup>17</sup> Such a shortfall would hardly register in the scale of long Australian droughts explored by Rebecca Jones in this issue, but in Henan the failure of the vital spring and summer rains devastated two successive harvests. Data from the Farmers’ Bank of China suggest that, per unit of sown area, yields for the spring wheat harvest were at just 60 per cent of the average of previous years (1938–41). At just 33.7 per cent of the 1938–41 average, the autumn harvest—maize, sorghum, maize, beans, tubers—was even worse.<sup>18</sup>

Henan’s drought of 1942 connects the slow causality of famine with the long, drawn-out experience of famine victims. As Paul Cohen notes of another dry spell on the North China Plain, ‘the suffering occasioned by drought is not sudden and dramatic ... but slow-moving, incremental, and of indeterminate duration’.<sup>19</sup> With the gradual emergence of the summer drought, hopes for the autumn crops faded. Henan’s residents were left trapped, in Li Rui’s memorable phrase, ‘like ants in cauldron’.<sup>20</sup> It is hard to reconstruct the experience of those who were starving, but Li’s reports give us a glimpse of famine in his ancestral village in Sishui County. Time seemed to slow down: ‘there was a complete dearth of food in the house ... as time stretched out, my belly started rumbling, and the longer it went on the harder

14 For appeals in Chongqing prior to the famine see Song, *1942: Henan dajihuang*, 8; on occupied territory, see Zeng Yeying 曾業英, ‘Riwei tongzhixia de Huabei nongcun jingji’ 日伪统治下的华北农村经济, *Jindaishi Yanjiu* 近代史研究, no. 3 (1998): 84–144, 135.

15 *Qianfengbao* 前鋒報, 6 April 1943. The figure of more than 700,000 men under arms comes from the famine memoir of the Guomindang official Yang Qesu 楊卻俗, ‘Guanyu “Henan Haojie” De Hua’ 關於《河南浩劫》的話, *Chunqiu* 春秋 12, no. 4 (April 1970), reproduced in Song, *1942: Henan dajihuang*, 307.

16 On occupation grain policy, see Zeng, ‘Riwei tongzhixia de Huabei’, esp. 108–25, and Odoric Y. W. Wou, ‘Food Shortages and Japanese Grain Extraction in Henan’, in *China at War: Regions of China, 1937–1945*, ed. Stephen MacKinnon, Diana Lary and Ezra Vogel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 174–206.

17 Xia *Minguo shiqi ziran zaihai*, 371–84; for more on the effects of El Niño in North China, see Muscolino, *Ecology of War*, 92–3.

18 See Xu, *Zhongguo jindai nongye*, 19–22.

19 Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 72–3.

20 *Qianfengbao*, 20 February 1943.

it became to deal with'. Li's extended family had experienced a gradual slide down the calorific scale of food, and by the time he arrived in late March or early April they had not seen any 'real' food for over a week. His aunt offered him her best remaining supplies, but 'Heaven knows what kind of food it was: elm bark, grain chaff, the leaves of bean plants dried in the sun last year, and some lily roots that they'd recently pulled up. I tried to eat several mouthfuls, but in truth I just couldn't swallow it'. Many such foodstuffs (particularly bark) would cause digestive problems for famine victims for years to come, part of the long tail of the biological effects of disaster.<sup>21</sup>

Famine victims in Henan during the long winter of 1942–43 faced a series of anxious waits. In Theodore White's accounts from the famine zone, the most important wait was for the ripening of the promising-looking spring wheat, which would be ready to harvest from late May or early June. Even before that, as Harrison Forman notes, there was an anxious wait for the growth of spring grasses and leaves, famine survival foods that would come in profusion a month or so before the harvest.<sup>22</sup> Other famine survival strategies also involved the slow passage of time. As Li Rui describes it, many families gradually sold everything they had over a period of months—tools, furniture, firewood—until there was nothing left with any exchange value for food. At the busy bazaar on the edge of Sishui, such families slowly realised that they had been marginalised from the market: 'it's not only that there's nobody to buy their things, people don't even look at them, but still they sit there in a disciplined manner at the market for days'.<sup>23</sup>

Those who fled the famine zone also faced a slow experience of flight. It is true that the Longhai railway, running westwards from Luoyang out of the famine zone, accelerated the escape of some famine victims. But the operation of the railway was fitful and subject to enemy interference, leaving tens of thousands of people stranded, waiting for weeks on open ground outside the Luoyang station.<sup>24</sup> Descriptions of flight along Henan's roads leave the impression not of speed but of slow, plodding movement; when movement slowed down still further, or became erratic, bodily collapse was not far off. On the road outside Luoyang, Li Rui encountered a woman who was 'staggering along, swaying from side to side, taking small slow steps, walking for a bit, then stopping, then walking, then stopping; sometimes veering to the right of the road, and sometimes veering to the left'.<sup>25</sup>

21 *Qianfengbao*, 16 April 1943. For a recent discussion of the lasting biological effects of disaster, note Christopher Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China: The 1931 Yangzi River Flood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. 232–3.

22 Theodore White, 'Until the Harvest is Reaped', *Time* 41, no. 12 (March 1943); Forman, *Diary*, 42 (unpaginated; numbers refer to the pdf file at [collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/forman/id/50](http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/forman/id/50)).

23 *Qianfengbao*, 15 April 1943.

24 *Qianfengbao*, 19 February 1943.

25 *Qianfengbao*, 8 April 1943.

But for some famine victims, the waiting of the 1942–43 winter was not so much a wait for the spring harvest as a wait for death. The relative (if not total) absence of epidemics during the 1942–43 winter may have helped limit the death toll, but made the final decline of famine victims a more protracted affair than in many disease-hit famine zones around the world. The Methodist missionary Edwin Ashcraft told of a trip to the countryside around Zhengzhou in January 1943: ‘in many homes we came across people already unconscious and whose lives were ebbing out, due to starvation’.<sup>26</sup> Fear of a long, agonizing death from starvation was pervasive among Henan residents: ‘When I dream,’ one farmer told the *Dagongbao* newspaper, ‘I do not think of cooked food, for it really is better to die early’.<sup>27</sup>

## A blitz famine? Fast temporality in causation and experience

But was the 1942–43 famine only a slow disaster? Does the famine look different if we think of its temporality—in terms of both causation and experience—not in terms of years and months, but weeks, days, hours and even split seconds? What stands out in first-hand accounts from 1942–43 is not so much the drawn-out elements of the famine as its *speed*. The missionary Ernest Wampler certainly thought so, as he watched much of Henan tip over into famine over a few short weeks in the summer of 1942: ‘the famine came on very suddenly, and was really a famine blitz’.<sup>28</sup> Li Rui’s imagery from the famine zone in spring 1943 carries a similar sense of speed: ‘a serious famine is like a hurricane that crosses oceans and disturbs everything, it transforms the regular course of life. The flames of starvation burn up the good essence of humanity. It really is a terrible thing!’<sup>29</sup>

On closer inspection, this sense of speed in our sources is not so surprising. The complex factors causing famine in Henan included rapid elements as well as the slow emergence of drought: state requisitioning, grain raids and price rises all occurred in much shorter time frames. Even the environmental causes of famine could be fast-acting. The winter wheat plants of 1942 had appeared fairly promising, only to be damaged in many areas by unusually strong spring gales and/or hailstorms.<sup>30</sup> When Zhang Li 张厉, sent by the Nationalist central government to investigate conditions in Henan, asked the provincial governor Li Peiji 李培基 why he had promised

26 Quoted in Erleen Christensen, *In War and Famine: Missionaries in China's Honan Province in the 1940s* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2005), 112.

27 *Dagongbao* 大公报, 1 February 1943, also reproduced in Song, 1942: *Henan dajihuang*, 78. On the relationship between famine and disease, see esp. Alex De Waal, ‘A Re-assessment of Entitlement Theory in the Light of the Recent Famines in Africa’, *Development and Change* 21, no. 3 (1990): 469–90, esp. 478–83.

28 Wampler, *China Suffers*, 229.

29 Li Rui, ‘Zaicun fengjingxian’ 灾村風景線 (April 1943), reproduced in *Henan Wenshi Ziliao* 河南文史资料 13 (March 1985): 36–40.

30 *Henan Minbao* 河南民報, 25 June 1942.

Chongqing a decent harvest, Li replied, ‘at first the wheat harvest looked good ... who knew that there could be such a wind as to damage it in a single night.’<sup>31</sup> It was a similarly swift story in late summer 1942, when in some areas locusts attacked autumn crops already withered by drought: ‘half an hour after they alighted the crops had been eaten to the ground’, noted the missionary Mary Geneva Sayre from occupied Qi County.<sup>32</sup> On the Nationalist side, one provincial official caustically remarked that ‘all the weaponry of Germany and the Soviets couldn’t defeat Henan’s locusts’.<sup>33</sup> The autumn brought a final speedy threat: in much of western Henan, the buckwheat crop—the last hope for many residents—was devastated by a sudden frost just before the harvest.<sup>34</sup>

If environmental factors could act as swift, exogenous forces damaging the ability of residents to access food, the same was also true of state requisitioning. Whether by tax in kind, compulsory purchase or outright grain raiding, Nationalist and occupation–collaborationist authorities alike entered villages and removed grain stores in a matter of hours. In Nationalist-held territory, the 1941 shift in the land tax from cash payment to collection in kind mandated county and sub-county grain officials to enter villages and seize part of the harvest. On top of that, the Nationalist authorities imposed heavy compulsory purchase orders; in some cases, it was said, households had to sell assets just to meet state demands.<sup>35</sup> Over the summer of 1942, even as the long drought shrivelled the autumn crops, at least a sixth—and perhaps much more—of the disaster-hit wheat harvest was extracted from the village economy. Across Henan as a whole, this was a months-long process, but was experienced by each village as a rapid, exogenous removal of grain.<sup>36</sup> As provincial official Zhang Zhonglu 張仲魯 later recalled in his memoirs of the famine, speed was of the essence in meeting military requirements and satisfying central

31 Yang, ‘Guanyu “Henan Haojie”’, 307.

32 Mary Geneva Sayre, *Missionary Triumphs in Occupied China* (Winona Lake, IN: The Women’s Missionary Society of The Free Methodist Church, 1945), 93.

33 Yang, ‘Guanyu “Henan Haojie”’, 306.

34 *Dagongbao*, 1 February 1943. In the interests of balance, we should note that brief events could also be favourable. The sudden arrival of a little rain to break the drought over a few days in late October 1942 was vital, saving some of the last part of the fall harvest—the sweet potato crop—and enabling planting of the spring wheat. See Xu, *Zhongguo jindai nongye*, 22. On the crucial planting for the following spring, see also Jiang Pei 江沛, ‘Aiming siye tongzaili: 1942–1943 nian de Henan hanzai shulun’ 哀鸣四野痛灾黎: 1942–1943 年的河南旱灾述论, *Henan daxue xuebao* 河南大学学报 54, no. 3 (May 2014): 45.

35 See Forman, *Diary*, 36. Cultivators were paid for compulsory purchase grain, but in practice the authorities were paying only 25 per cent of official grain prices (and market prices were in reality rather higher). See Arthur Young, *China’s Wartime Finance and Inflation, 1937–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 389, doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674434875.

36 It is hard to know how much was eventually collected: officially, 3.74 million *shidan* 市擔 (3.12 million *shidan* 市石 by volume) of wheat was requisitioned by land tax and compulsory purchase. See Henan sheng zhengfu tongjichu 河南省政府統計處, ed., *Henan sheng tongji nianjian: minguo sanshiwu nian* 河南省統計年鑑: 民國三十五年 (Kaifeng, 1947), 142–4. Estimates of the wheat harvest vary, but would have amounted to about a sixth of the crop. With the additional of local levies, total requisitioning was almost certainly rather more than this, although Garnaut’s suggestion that the Nationalist authorities took half the wheat crop seems too high: see Garnaut, ‘Quantitative Description’, 2025.

government targets, with governor Li Peiji pushing for faster tax collection.<sup>37</sup> While overseen by the civil administrators, another Nationalist official later remembered that in some places local defence militias (*ziweituan* 自衛團) were also involved in collection, and there is some suggestion that pressure from military units was applied in recalcitrant villages.<sup>38</sup> In many areas sporadic exactions continued, even after the completion of the main requisitioning payments and the advent of some tax relief in September. Particularly in counties close to the front line, residents were subject to further periodic levies (*tanpai* 攤派), facing rapid-fire demands for straw, grasses, animal feed, firewood—vital resources for famine survival—even at the height of the famine in spring 1943.<sup>39</sup>

In occupied or semi-occupied territory, the seizure of grain was even faster and more sudden. In theory, the collaborationist civil authorities operated a regularised system of grain purchase and distribution; in practice, as Odoric Wou and Zeng Yeying have shown, grain policy had in large part become little more than military raids from urban strongpoints into rural areas.<sup>40</sup> In Qi County, Sayre witnessed the Japanese garrison seize a walled town just before the harvest as a launch pad for sudden grain raids in the surrounding villages. Although local residents developed a variety of tactics to conceal grain, they could lose their access to food in a matter of minutes.<sup>41</sup> This rapid-fire seizure of grain was part of a wider shift in occupation policy to short-term goals, focusing on the immediate seizure of resources rather than the fostering of productive capacity. As the Henan collaborationist Xing Hansan 刑漢三 later put it, while in earlier years local people had been ‘raising chickens’ (*yangji* 養雞) and occupiers ‘taking the eggs’ (*quluan* 取卵), with the advent of the Pacific War by 1942 the occupation was simply ‘eating the eggs and starving the chickens’ in the interests of its own short-term survival.<sup>42</sup>

As well as fast weather events and grain requisitioning, the third prong of rapid famine causality in Henan was the dramatic price increases of 1942–43. This is not, of course, to suggest—as Sugata Bose once erroneously claimed—that the Henan famine was *simply* an inflation-led exchange entitlement famine on the lines identified by Amartya Sen.<sup>43</sup> But it was rapid price rises that ensured that many

37 Zhang Zhonglu 張仲魯, ‘Guanyu yijiusi’er nian Henan dajihuang de jianwen’ 关于一九四二年河南大饥荒的见闻, *Kaifeng Wenshi Ziliao* 开封文史资料 5 (1986): 294–9.

38 Yang Quesu 楊卻俗, ‘Yi Minguo sanshinian Henan de yici haojie’ 憶民國三十年河南的一次浩劫, *Chunqiu* 春秋 12, no. 2 (February 1970), reproduced in Song, 1942: *Henan dajihuang*, 297; see also Chen Chuanhai 陳傳海 and Xu Youli 徐有禮, eds, *Henan xiandai shi* 河南现代史 (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 1992), 249–51.

39 *Qianfengbao*, 10 March 1943. Song, 1942: *Henan dajihuang*, 217–19; Forman, 42 and 53–5. For further detail on the 1943 *tanpai* levies, see also ‘Henansheng minzhengting yijiusisan niandu minzheng tongji’ 河南省民政廳一九四三年度民政統計, M12-001-0005, 131–9. Henan Provincial Archive.

40 See Wou, ‘Food Shortages’; Zeng, ‘Riwei tongzhixia de Huabei’, esp. 108–25.

41 Sayre, *Missionary Triumphs*, 111.

42 Xing Hansan 刑漢三, *Riwei tongzhi Henan jianwenlu* 日伪统治河南见闻录 (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 1986), 183.

43 Sugata Bose, ‘Starvation Amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tongkin, 1942–45’, *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (1990), 699–727, doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00010556.

residents—having already lost their direct, production-based entitlement—faced what Sen describes, in his brief discussion of famine time, as ‘sudden collapse of the command of a group over food’.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, food prices in Henan if anything rose faster than the inflation of Sen’s exchange entitlement studies. At the heart of the famine zone in Zhengzhou, grain prices saw a 20-fold increase.<sup>45</sup> In Japanese-occupied territory, the price of millet rose by some 250 per cent in less than four months, but both skilled and unskilled wages remained unchanged.<sup>46</sup>

It is impossible to calculate the relative importance of raw shortages, grain speculation or increased demand in causing these extraordinarily rapid price increases. What is clear is that many residents of Henan fell quickly below exchange entitlement thresholds. With many residents selling landholdings for food, the value of land in terms of grain fell to one-twentieth or one-thirtieth of its pre-famine level.<sup>47</sup> Li Rui saw this worsening exchange entitlement in action during his visit to Sishui, where ‘the prices that things were being sold for were truly so low as to be astounding’: families selling prized furniture and women selling dowry goods to feed their children for just a single day; whole sets of old books being exchanged for half a *jin* (250 g) of flour. Some items that would once have been desirable had no market value at all.<sup>48</sup>

The ‘triple whammy’ of weather, requisitioning and price spikes could plunge individual households into serious dearth in the space of a few weeks. But it was not only famine *causation* that included fast temporalities; the *experience* of starvation and adaptation also featured rapid processes and short-term events. This fast temporality of experience operated in several dimensions. First, households and individuals faced snap decisions: whether to sell property, flee the village, kill livestock, and sell or give away children.<sup>49</sup> Such decisions may have involved a longer

44 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 41–2.

45 Su Xinliu reports a 20-fold increase in the latter half of 1942. See Su, , 51. Of course, inflation was an issue across Nationalist-held territory, but food prices in Chongqing rose by only 28 per cent over almost the same period (June–December 1942). Young, *China’s Wartime Finance*, 353. More detailed price information from Zhengzhou suggests the 20-fold increase on the pre-famine wheat price in fact took about 10 months, and was not reached until the latter stages of famine in April 1943. See ‘Gedi jingji shikuang: Zhengzhou’ 各地經濟實況: 鄭州, *Jingji Huibao* 經濟匯報, no. 4 (1943), 91. By contrast, wholesale prices in Calcutta (not, admittedly, the epicentre of famine) rose less than three times from December 1942 to August 1943. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 54.

46 Comparing the price and wages indexes (‘Benshi wujia diaocha’ 本市物價調查) in the collaborationist *Xin Henan Ribao* 新河南日報, 7 October 1942 (reporting the last 10 days of September) and 22 December 1942 (reporting the middle 10 days of December). The wheat price is in fact unchanged in these price indices, but this probably reflects official efforts at price control rather than actual market prices.

47 See Zhang Guangsi 張光嗣, ‘Zhang Guangsi guanyu Henan sheng hanzai qingkuang ji jiuzai qingxing de diaocha baogao’ 張光嗣關於河南省旱災情況及救災情形的調查報告, reproduced in *Zhonghua mingyoshi dang’an ziliao huibian* 中華民國史檔案資料匯編, ed. Zhongguo dier lishi dang’anguan 中國第二歷史檔案館 5.2.14 (經濟 no. 8), no. 64 in overall series (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1994), 561.

48 *Qianfengbao*, 15 April 1943.

49 On killing animals, see *Qianfengbao*, 6 April 1943. On suicides, cannibalism and other violence, see Li Rui’s report on the basis of information from the authorities in Zhengzhou: *Qianfengbao*, 21 April 1943.



preparation, but the event itself marked a sharp rupture in the famine experience. Taking flight as an example, in most cases the more mobile members of the household left after the October 1942 planting of the winter wheat, returning just before the harvest.<sup>50</sup> Although in poorer parts of the province there was an existing annual pattern of mobility for survival during the winter dearth, the 1942–43 winter saw this movement performed earlier and on a much larger and distant scale than usual.<sup>51</sup> Famine destinations included the provinces of Hubei, Shanxi or, for those stuck in occupied territory, Jiangsu, but the most common route of flight was the Longhai railway west into Shaanxi. Almost a million people experienced the hope and frustration of the wartime Longhai line, its sporadic temporality that involved long periods of waiting followed by sudden bursts of movement.<sup>52</sup>

A second dimension of speed in the famine experience was rapid moments of violence. This could be against humans or property, with numerous reports of small-scale acts to seize food. In the absence of large-scale acts of collective resistance—not that we should expect such things in situations of mass starvation—these petty acts of theft were often directed against other famine victims, for whom the result could be death.<sup>53</sup> As with so many famines in China, contemporary reports of cannibalism are common but hard to substantiate. Cases where famine victims ate those who were already dead are rather better attested than the rumours of murder for cannibalistic purposes.<sup>54</sup> More common, judging by the numerous government reports Li Rui found in Zhengzhou, were swift acts of violence against the self, with a spate of suicides sweeping the region during the 1942–43 winter.<sup>55</sup>

As Li Rui discovered, the famine period also saw rapid acts of violence against the local ecosystems. People had stripped trees of bark and killed animals and insects wherever they could be found. When in spring 1943 Li saw local people moving across the countryside with baskets, they walked slowly to conserve energy but were swiftly (at least in ecological time) pursuing anything of calorific value:

on the trees that had already been stripped bare last autumn, as soon as the first shoots of leaves appear, they are immediately cut off by people. Willow leaves, poplar leaves, apricot leaves, pear tree leaves, jasmine leaves, they were all resources hunted by people. There was not a single tree that had any trace of spring left on it.

50 Forman, *Diary*, 21.

51 *Xinhua Ribao* 新華日報, 22 February 1943.

52 Some 800,000 people had fled to Shaanxi by April 1943. See *Xinhua Ribao* 新華日報, 9 April 1943. For Li Rui's description of Luoyang station during the famine, see *Qianfengbao*, 19 February 1943.

53 Forman, *Diary*, 31–2, 39; *Qianfengbao*, 10 April 1943. On the absence of large-scale rebellion in famine, note, inter alia, Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 55–6.

54 On reports of cannibalism, see Forman, *Diary*, 38; *Qianfengbao*, 21 April 1943.

55 *Qianfengbao*, 21 April 1943.

There was also a sense of speed in the consumption of certain grains—including other people's crops—before they were fully ripe and, in the case of beans, simply eating the plants out of desperation long before the crop was ready.<sup>56</sup>

Though starvation was a slow biological process, death itself could come quickly. When disease came—and there were localised cholera outbreaks in the famine zone—it could kill weakened bodies in a matter of hours; even for those unaffected by epidemics, starvation could end in a sudden bodily collapse and loss of consciousness.<sup>57</sup> The woman staggering slowly along the road out of Luoyang caused Li Rui to reflect on this abrupt collapse: 'who can say if in a few minutes or in a few seconds she will fall down and never get up again'.<sup>58</sup> For the most desperate, the quicker death came the better, whether for themselves or family members—witness Li Rui's story of a woman from Luokou market town wishing the end of suffering for her adolescent son, cursing 'die soon, why haven't you died quickly?'.<sup>59</sup>

Taken in the aggregate, these mounting deaths created an impression of accelerating famine severity. In Zhengzhou, the local committee of United China Relief told Harrison Forman that '700–800 die daily' in the county; in the city alone, Li Rui was told in April, more than 1,000 people had died in the space of two weeks.<sup>60</sup> But once spring grasses appeared in profusion from early May, Henan's epidemic of starvation did have—compared to some disasters—a rapid end. By mid-May, Governor Li Peiji could declare that 'the famine aid work is now in its last five minutes', with food prices falling sharply on both sides of the front line. Though not as bountiful as originally hoped, the 1943 wheat harvest enabled the vast majority of Henan residents to obtain sufficient nutrition for survival—even if they were advised to increase their intake only gradually.<sup>61</sup>

These quicker temporalities help us to rethink the 1942–43 disaster—and, perhaps, famines as a whole—in two ways. First, famine can emerge more quickly than its usual categorisation as a 'slow-onset' disaster might suggest. Particularly against a backdrop of chronic food insecurity, a sudden change in circumstances can rapidly tip communities into famine situations. The importance of 'fast' factors is underlined by two examples of drought in Henan. In 1936–37, drought brought

56 Li, 'Zaicun fengjingxian', 137–9. On the practice of eating unripe crops as a famine survival strategy, see Ralph Thaxton, 'How the Great Leap Forward Famine Ended in Rural China: "Administrative Intervention" versus Peasant Resistance', in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 251–71, esp. 259–68.

57 Wampler, *China Suffers*, 249.

58 *Qianfengbao*, 8 April 1943.

59 *Qianfengbao*, 14 April 1943.

60 Forman, *Diary*, 43; *Qianfengbao*, 6 April 1943.

61 Li Peiji, 'Jiuzai gongzuo zhi zong jiantao' 救災工作之總檢討, reproduced in *Henan Minbao*, 11 May 1943. Wheat prices in Zhengzhou fell to less than a quarter of their peak by early June, after a few weeks of harvest. See 'Gedi jingji shikuang: Zhengzhou' 各地經濟實況: 鄭州, *Jingji Huibao*, no. 6 (1943): 83. Wholesale grain prices in occupied Kaifeng also dropped back before the end of May. See *Xin Henan Ribao*, 26 May 1943. On advice on raising food intake, see *Henan Minbao*, 6 May 1943.

two consecutive failed harvests and produced a decline in per-capita 12-month food availability comparable to 1942–43, but while there were pockets of serious difficulty, the province avoided mass starvation. By contrast, in the summer of 1942 the twin ‘fast’ elements of military requisitioning and price rises turned weather-induced scarcity into widespread famine in the space of a few weeks.<sup>62</sup>

Second, a focus on the ‘slow’ aspects of famine processes tends to shift attention away from the political aspects of famine. We should be suspicious of straightforward stories of slow, natural causation and biological experience, not least because this is the kind of story that the Republican authorities told about 1942–43—and, indeed, that the People’s Republic has tried to tell about 1959–61.<sup>63</sup>

Third, these fast temporalities help us to think of famine as an *acceleration* and/or a *deepening* of existing processes. In the chronic poverty of much of the province, the pre-harvest dearth and its associated price rises were an annual phenomenon; but in the winter of 1942–43 arrived much more quickly and hit higher social strata than in previous years. In a similar way, rural Henan saw annual struggles over the crop between producer, landlord, state and merchant; this competition happened in a more rapid and intense way following the poor wheat harvest of spring 1942. This sense of *acceleration* can therefore help us separate famines (understood as epidemics of starvation) from endemic circumstances of malnutrition and its associated mortality. In other words, famines are not only quantitatively different from chronic food insecurity, they are also phenomena with a very different temporal rhythm.<sup>64</sup>

## Twin temporalities: Henan famines and the role of the state

But this sense of speed does not obviate the slow aspects of famine causation and experience. Taken together, how can we use these dual perspectives on famine, the slow and the quick? Are they just different temporal lenses, little more than interchangeable heuristic devices? Or does this heterogenous temporality tell us something about ‘disaster time’ in general, and famine in particular? In these closing

62 The 1936 fall harvest was much better than that of 1942 (some 80 per cent of the 1933–35 average for millet, sorghum and maize, and 57 per cent for sweet potato), but the 1937 wheat harvest was rather worse (49.6 per cent of the 1933–36 average). Xu, *Zhongguo jindai nongye*, 20–2. On areas of dearth in 1937, see Su, *Minguo shiqi Henan shui han zaihai*, 39–40.

63 The Nationalist official press was on the whole quiet on the famine, but for a statement emphasising ‘natural’ disaster, see *Zhongyang Ribao* 中央日報, 4 February 1943.

64 For a useful discussion of these distinctions, see Stephen Devereux, *Distinguishing Between Chronic and Transitory Food Insecurity in Emergency Needs Assessment* (Rome: World Food Programme, Emergency Needs Assessment Branch, January 2006), [www.livestock-emergency.net/userfiles/file/assessment-review/Institute-Development-Studies-2006.pdf](http://www.livestock-emergency.net/userfiles/file/assessment-review/Institute-Development-Studies-2006.pdf), accessed 29 May 2018.

observations, I propose two answers to these questions: the first, an historian's observation on 'famine time'; and the second, a more particular, political way of understanding temporal trends in Henan's modern famines.

The first proposal is to use these mixed temporalities to build a more complex—and more realistic—conception of 'disaster time'. As Mike Michael recently pointed out, social-scientific explorations of disaster have tended to assume smooth, mono-temporal processes.<sup>65</sup> Yet where Michael seems altogether to reject the temporal analytic in favour of a more flexible 'topological' framework, a careful historical approach is able to incorporate a heterogeneous understanding of time. As William Sewell points out, where social scientists often take a view of time that is all too seamless, 'historians ... assume that time is heterogenous'—in other words, that things happen and are experienced at multiple, different speeds.<sup>66</sup>

This seems especially true in the case of famine, where periods of waiting, immobility and apparent stasis are interspersed with moments of rapid change, movement and energy—mixed temporalities that may help explain the severity of famine's psychological consequences.<sup>67</sup> As we have seen, Henan's months-long famine was interspersed with what Sewell calls the 'lumpy' or 'eventful' accelerations of heterogenous time: moments of rapid exchange, violence or loss. Rather than the search for a root analytic or process that seems to stalk much scholarly work on famine, this sense of mixed historical temporalities can help us to unpick the layers of experience and of time that make up the famine event. To paraphrase Sewell's discussion of capitalism, this is not to say that famines have no underlying logics or processes of their own, but that these proceed in a messy, fitful, mixed temporality.<sup>68</sup>

This solution may bring us closer to historical 'disaster time', but does not on its own help us draw explanatory or interpretive patterns—witness Michael's injunction to think about 'the sort of politics to which these [temporalities] point'.<sup>69</sup> Nor, given that all disasters—from Courtney's urban fires in this issue to the '500-year earthquake' Anthony Oliver-Smith identified in Peru—operate on multiple temporal scales, does it reveal much that is specific to the dynamics of Henan's twentieth-century famines.<sup>70</sup> The second solution, then, connects the temporalities

65 Mike Michael, 'Afterword: On the Topologies and Temporalities of Disaster', *The Sociological Review* 62, Special Issue 1 (2014): 236–45.

66 Sewell, *Logics of History*, 9.

67 For a brief exploration of the psychological effects of the 1942–43 famine, see Li Huawen 李華文, 'Fengdian yu wenming: kangzhan shiqi de zaimin xintai tanxi—yi 1942–1943 nian Henan dazaihuang wei zhongxin de kaocha' 疯颠与文明: 抗战时期的灾民心态探析——以1942–1943年河南大灾荒为中心考察, *Henan keji daxue xuebao* 河南科技大学学报 34, no. 4 (August 2016): 19–26.

68 William H. Sewell, 'The Temporalities of Capitalism', *Socio-Economic Review*, no. 6 (2008): 517–37, doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwn007.

69 Michael, 'Afterword', 240.

70 Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Peru's Five Hundred Year Earthquake: Vulnerability to Hazard in Historical Context', in *Disaster, Development and Environment*, ed. Ann Varley (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 31–48; for a recent discussion of Oliver-Smith's work, see Matthewman, *Disasters, Risks and Revelation*, 142–5.

of famine to their politics by proposing the following: the greater the role of the state in famine causation, the more significant the ‘fast’ elements of temporality. Each of Henan’s four twentieth-century famines (1920–21, 1928–30, 1942–43, 1959–61) contained elements of chronic, gradual and sudden temporalities, but with each successive disaster the authorities were more culpable and faster processes more significant.<sup>71</sup>

The long drought of 1920 brought two consecutive failed harvests and famine conditions to much of Henan during the 1920–21 winter. But although the drought was in some ways similar to 1942–43, the ‘fast’ elements of the later disaster—rapid weather events, price spikes and seizure of grain—were altogether less in evidence. As for the role of the state, although state-led famine relief was less efficient than at the height of China’s late imperial granary system, local ‘warlord’ authorities did help facilitate the impressive private aid effort. The death toll in Henan is unclear, but across North China as a whole, famine-related mortality was estimated at 500,000, less than half that of Henan in 1942–43.<sup>72</sup>

Local authorities were rather more culpable in the famine of 1928–30. Slow meteorological factors were of course present—indeed, almost all of Henan’s counties were hit by low rainfall in three successive years—but it was fast-action depredations of war and banditry that damaged the operation of markets, civilian access to grain and efforts at famine relief.<sup>73</sup> Feng Yuxiang’s administration of Henan (beginning in June 1927) lacked the governing penetration to extract resources as intensively as the Nationalist state had during the 1942 drought, but heavy grain levies pushed parts of western Henan from mere dearth to outright famine. Conflict between Feng and the Nanjing Government during 1929–30 worsened the disruption. Although Li Yucai has recently shown that Feng organised some limited famine aid, his short-term strategic decisions in blocking and seizing relief resources and sabotaging railway lines exacerbated a slow, drought-induced shortage and helped create a devastating famine that brought premature death to millions across western Henan and especially Shaanxi and Gansu.<sup>74</sup>

71 On the three-fold typology of chronic, gradual and sudden temporalities, see Barton, ‘Disaster and Collective Stress’, 129.

72 See Pierre Fuller, ‘North China Famine Revisited: Unsung Native Relief in the Warlord Era, 1920–1921’, *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2013): 820–50, esp. 821 for discussion of the death toll.

73 For reporting of the drought by year, see Su, *Minguo shiqi Henan shui han zaihai*, 28–9.

74 See Zhang Xiaobo 張小波, ‘1928–1930 nian Henan hanhuang yu zhengju guanxi tanjiu’ 1928–1930 年河南旱荒与政局关系探究, *Luoyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 洛阳师范学院学报 35, no. 3 (2016); for a slightly more favourable view of Feng Yuxiang’s role, see Li Yucai 李玉才, ‘Feng Yuxiang yu minguo nianjian Yu Shan Gan dazhenzai’ 冯玉祥与民国年间豫陕甘大赈灾, *Zhongguo nongshi* 中国农史, no. 1 (2006). There is little in English on the 1928–30 famine, but note Andrea Janku, ‘From Natural to National Disaster: The Chinese Famine of 1928–1930’, in *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion and Politics*, ed. Andrea Janku, Gerrit Schenk and Frank Mauelshagen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 227–60.

As we have seen, elements of fast famine causality and the culpability of Henan's competing authorities were still more serious in 1942–43. But these trends of faster famine temporalities and more active state culpability only reached their peak during the catastrophic Great Leap Forward Famine of 1959–61. In both cases, famine was rooted in the desynchronisation of time, in the mobilisation of an impoverished 'advanced organic' agrarian economy for the short-term exigencies of modern state crises. In the wartime famine, rural producers were forced to feed a modern industrial war; in the Great Leap Forward, the Maoist regime tried to use the agrarian economy to fuel modern industrial growth. In each case, the disjunctions of time and power relations brought an epidemic of malnutrition and death to the civilians of rural Henan.<sup>75</sup>

Speed lay at the heart of the Great Leap. While theorists of modernity have consistently pointed to acceleration at the heart of capitalism, it was a fast Communism that drove the Great Leap, pushing for the immediate transformation of rural society and the rapid creation of an industrial system.<sup>76</sup> The root of acute food insecurity in 1959–61 lay not in the protracted experience of drought but in collectivisation and state requisitioning, an active, offensive violence that was both deeper and faster than the reactive, defensive Nationalist requisitioning during the 1942–43 famine. Victims of the Great Leap Famine still endured protracted periods of slow waiting and suffering, but the underlying fast causation of this violent famine led to sudden local nutritional crises, which, taken together, killed at least 2 million and perhaps up to 3 million people across the province.<sup>77</sup> This logic of fast famine reached its endpoint in the now famous Xinyang 'Incident' in the south of the province, where the acceleration of extreme hunger, grain struggle and violence led to the deaths of a million residents in the space of a few short weeks in late 1959 and early 1960.<sup>78</sup> The trend of growing state causation and quickening disaster in Henan's twentieth-century famines had reached its zenith.

75 For a discussion of temporal desynchronisation (used in a slightly different sense), see Hartmut Rosa, 'Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society', *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 3–33, doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00309.

76 For a critical perspective on acceleration as something more than time-space compression, see Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, 'Introduction', in *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, ed. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 1–29; on acceleration and modernity more general, note the useful survey in Filip Vostal, 'Thematizing Speed: Between Critical Theory and Cultural Analysis', *European Journal of Social Theory* 17, no. 1 (2014): 95–114, doi.org/10.1177/1368431013505014.

77 On the Great Leap Forward Famine in Henan, see Felix Wemheuer, *Steinmudeln: Ländliche Erinnerungen und staatliche Vergangenheitsbewältigung der „Großen-Sprung“-Hungersnot in der chinesischen Provinz Henan* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007); Anthony Garnaut, 'The Geography of the Great Leap Famine', *Modern China* 40, no. 3 (2014): 315–48, doi.org/10.1177/0097700413507425. On the provincial death toll, see Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 83–4 and 394–6; see also Wemheuer, *Steinmudeln*, 1.

78 For more on the Xinyang Incident, see Yang, *Tombstone*, 23–86; on the timing of events and efforts to expose them, see Jia Yanmin 賈艷敏 and Xu Tao 許濤, '“Dayuejin” shiqi Henan dajihuang de baolu guocheng' '大跃进'时期河南大饥荒的暴露过程, *Jiangsu daxue xuebao* 江苏大学学报 14, no. 3 (May 2012): 61–7.



The mixed temporalities of Henan's modern famines were not, therefore, simply a random conjunction of the quick and the slow. Nor was the succession of famines in Henan between the 1920s and the 1960s simply a cycle, a recurrent playing out of chronic environmental vulnerability. Instead, a political logic of faster famines ran from the slow drought–famine of a chaotic warlord government (1920–21) and the faster desperate late warlord politics of 1928–30, down to the 1942–43 urgencies of national sacrifice and the deadly breakneck collectivisation of the Great Leap. In continuing requisitioning for so long and on a nationwide scale, the Great Leap Forward Famine marks a qualitative and quantitative shift, but along an existing trajectory of faster, state-driven famine.

## Acknowledgements

Funding for this research was provided by the Council on East Asian Studies and the MacMillan Center at Yale University, and the Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Program in China Studies. The author also wishes to thank Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, Yiwen Li, Nicholas Santascoy, Faizah Zakaria and the editors of this issue.

