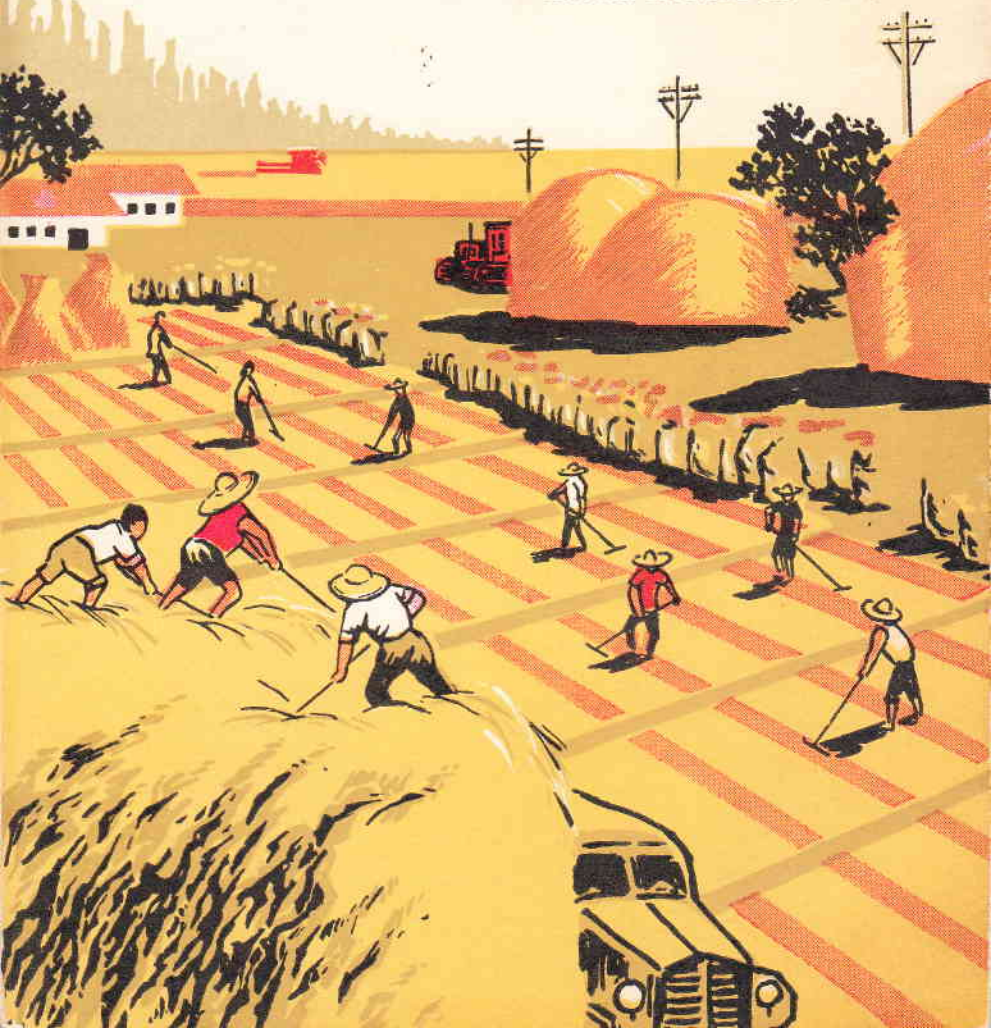
China's Fight for Grain

ANNA LOUISE STRONG



CHINA'S FIGHT FOR GRAIN

Three dates from a diary in late 1962

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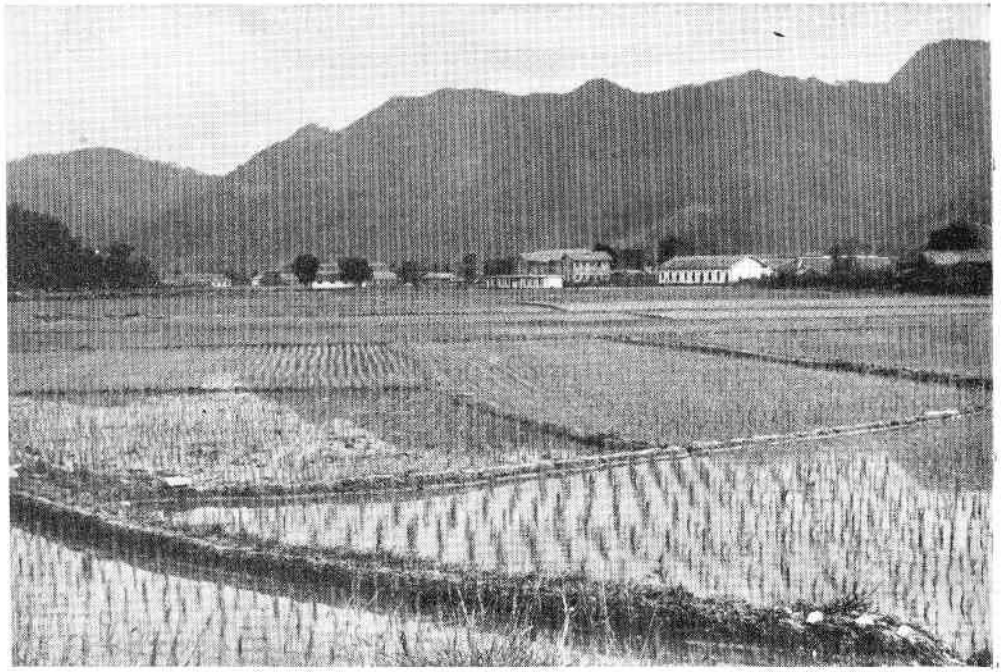
NEW WORLD PRESS
PEKING 1963

Printed in the People's Republic of China

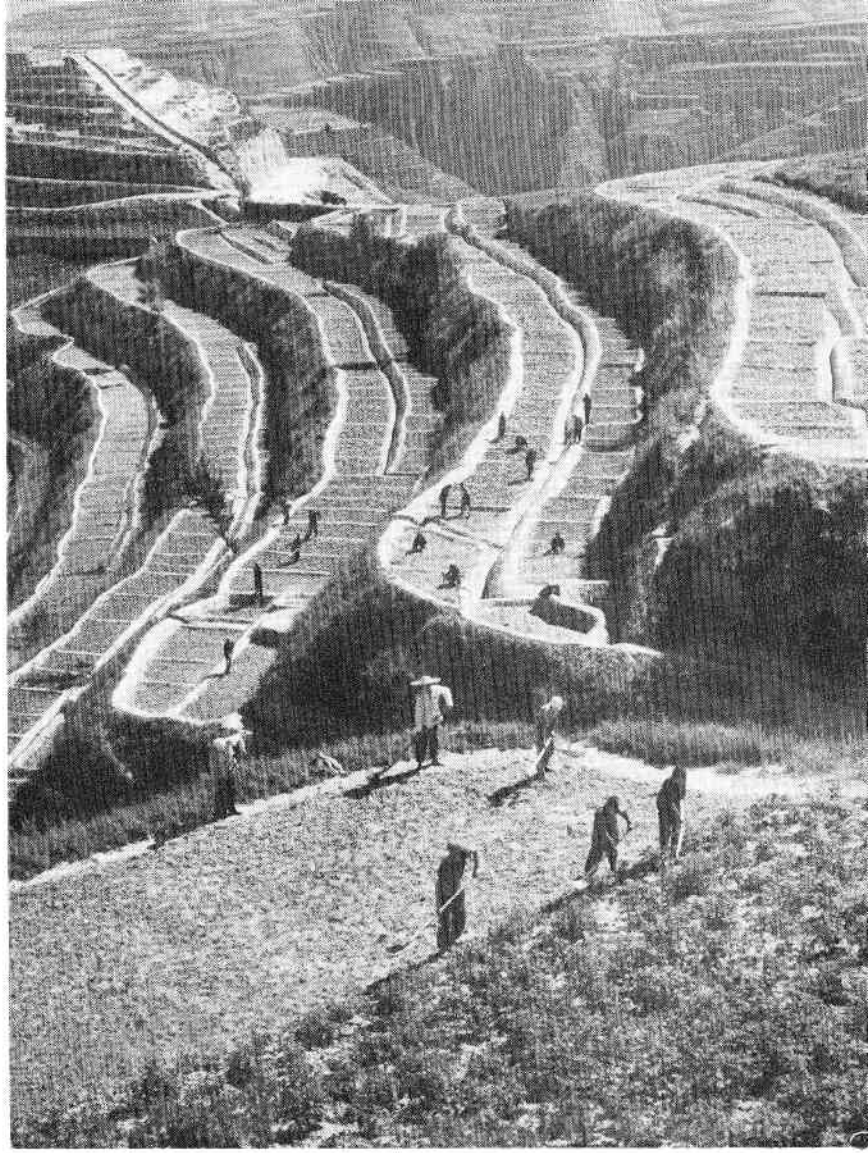
CHINA fought three years of natural disasters and consequent grain shortage by combined operations at three levels: the rationing of upwards of a hundred million people in the cities; the strengthening of the rural communes which comprise over half a billion people; and by nation-wide "adjustment" of industry to give immediate aid and permanent improvement to agriculture. I discuss them under three dates in 1962:

Oct. 15, Disasters Yield to Policies
Oct. 25, The Rationed Cities Raise Food
Nov. 15, The Communes Save the Country

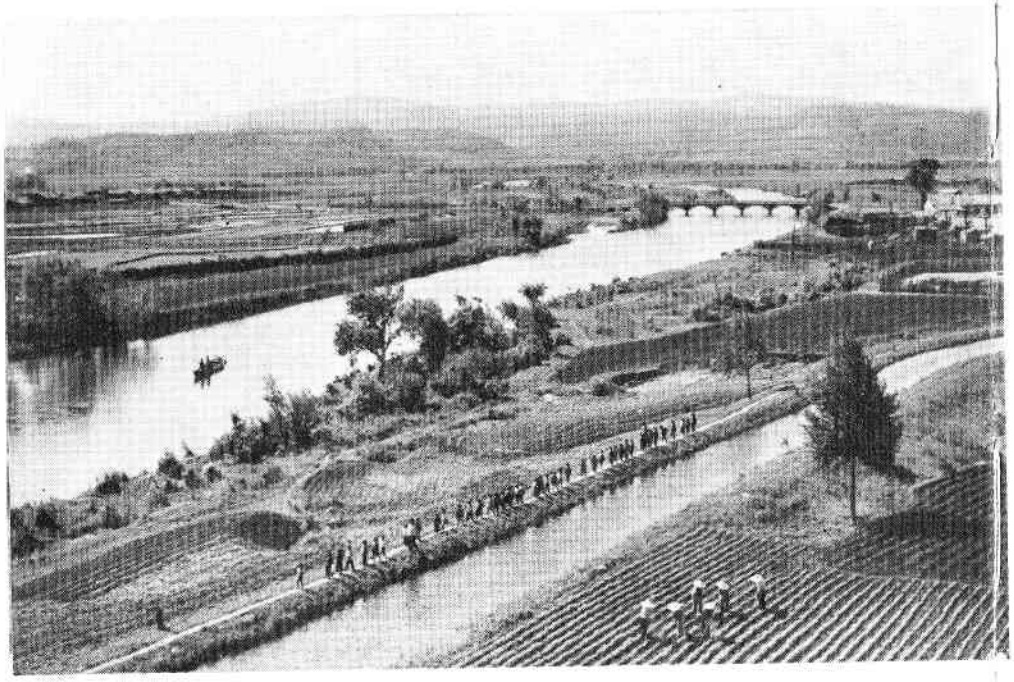
"Three pumps deliver water faster than 240 men could do," explains the commune chairman to the author



Kiangsi paddy fields need careful, infinite labor



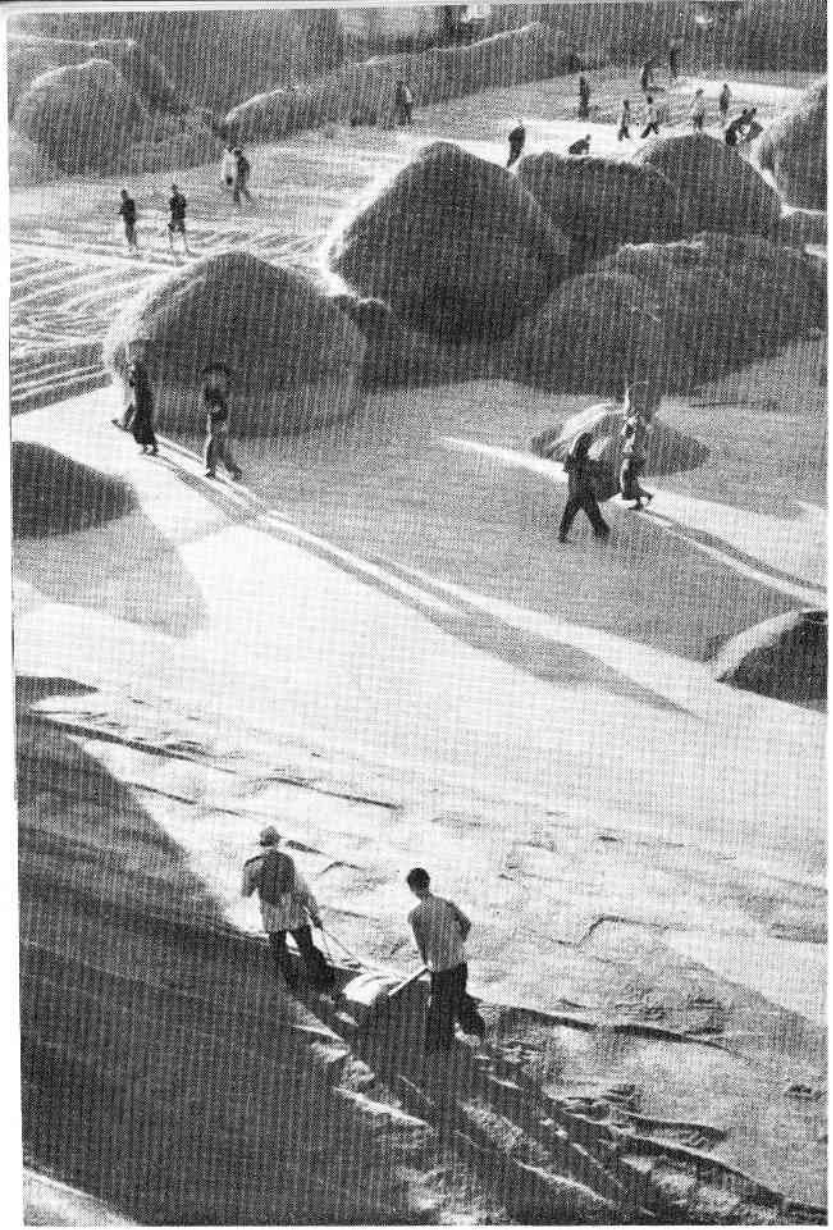
Kansu communes gain land by terracing hills



Irrigation canal dug by Wanpao Commune, Korean Autonomous Area, Northeast China

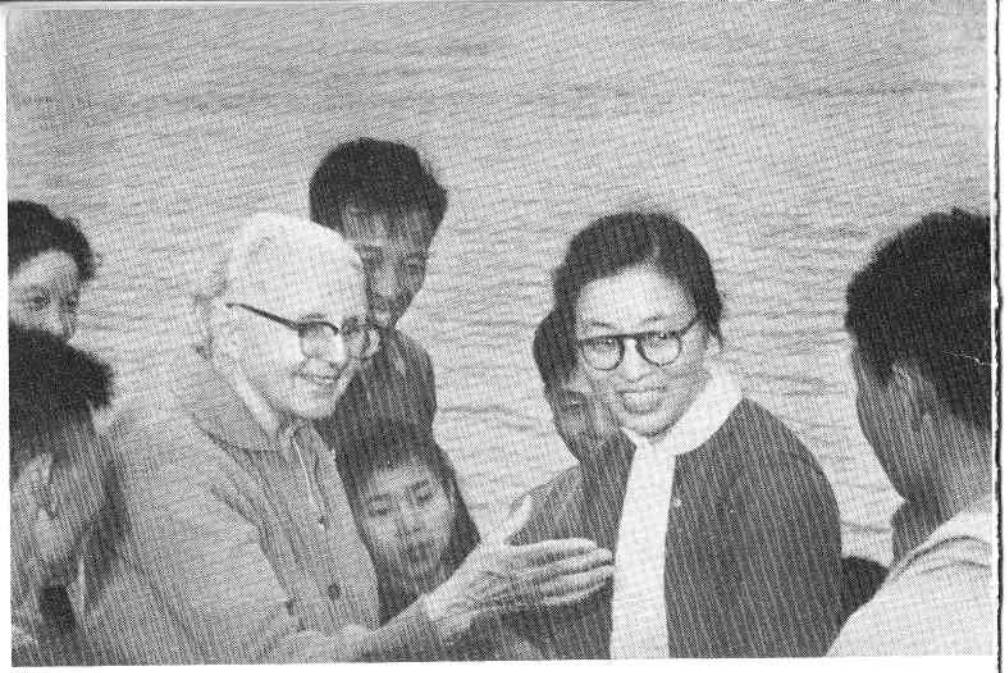
Evergreen Commune increases income by bumper crops of grapes

Members of Academy of Agricultural Sciences discuss crops with skilled rice grower



Sunning rice harvest in Kwangtung Province

Girls gather "green manure"; half the poorest soil in Kiangsi has been thus improved



Interviewing Sanshan Commune members, Kiangsi, as we visit their brigades and pumping stations by motor boat

1. DISASTERS YIELD TO POLICIES

Peking, Oct. 15, 1962. A good crop has been reaped on the North China plain which means that, at long last, GRAIN is in fair supply in all areas of China. Honan and Shantung were the last bad spots; now these have come across. Their June crop of winter wheat was poor for drought continued into the fourth spring. Summer rains brought good autumn crops of maize, sorghum, millet and sweet potatoes. Similar good news comes from other parts of the country.

The bonus of good weather in Honan is only the crown that is added to the steady advance of two years under the policy of "aid agriculture". The early rice in Kwangtung came in good for the second year despite torrential rains that twice broke the railway lines around Canton. The area around Peking has suffered the driest summer and early autumn for forty years, yet still the vegetables and fruit pour in to flood the city's markets. These are not favors of weather but victories of the electric-driven pumping systems that today give China 1,600,000 horse-power — twenty times as much as in 1957 — and these in turn are only one item in the work that China's industry is doing to

build agriculture into a sure foundation for China's next industrial advance.

Ironically, it is just at this moment that a French correspondent returns from a visit to Hongkong and tells how all the newsmen there grabbed him for "China news", and wanted just one thing: "When are they going to collapse?" Averill Harriman had told a Congressional Committee (AP, Sept. 10): "In 1959 China was going ahead so fast that I was gravely concerned. Since then China's food production failed and the communes collapsed." Whether the newshounds got it from Harriman or vice versa, they were awaiting the moment to enter, in the wake of American relief or some other form of occupation, to cover the demise of China. They will have to wait.

People living in China learn of the increased food by seeing the supplies increase and the prices drop in the "free markets" where peasants sell surplus; by letters from friends in many provinces; by seeing friends who last year were losing weight or even going to hospital for nutritional deficiencies and who now are well-fed and chipper; by trips, such as I have made, to eight provinces, and seeing crops for miles from car windows; and by steady additions to the ration, which began a year ago when soy beans were added and have now culminated in the two big ducks or chickens offered to every Peking family outside the ration, for a feast on National Day, October first. This is the concrete evidence that convinces the people.

The state of the country has now been officially reported for National Day by Chou En-lai, the *People's Daily* and the Communiqué of the Central Committee of the Party. These announce that the crop of 1962 is "somewhat higher than that of 1961, which in turn was higher than 1960", that "the most difficult period is over", and "the rural areas present a joyous and lively picture", but that "many difficulties remain", and for next year and perhaps many years the policy must still be "to readjust industry to the technical transformation of agriculture", to develop the national economy "with agriculture as foundation and industry as leading factor", and "continue to improve management, variety and quality of goods".

This sound but restrained program may not seem very thrilling for people who in 1958 dreamed that crops would keep "leaping" by huge percentages per year, with industry rising even faster. When Chou En-lai then adds that "the serious natural disasters for three consecutive years . . . and the mistakes in our own work have caused us difficulties", one wonders what "mistakes" he means. Are the communes now considered a "mistake"? Clearly not, for they are listed, along with the "big leap", among the "three red banners" which still guide the nation's advance. Most people even say: "The communes saved the country", for which there is considerable proof. Then what is meant by that cryptic phrase "agriculture as foundation and industry as leading

factor"? Is China renouncing the policy she took from the USSR which always said "Heavy industry first"?

If I should pick the big mistake from which grew many others, I would take those grain statistics of 1958 which had to be changed next year. I know how those figures came for I was travelling to farms and also demanding facts from the Ministries. The 1958 crop was truly terrific and nobody ever knew how big. Peasants who had formerly measured by buckets with an eye to taxes were guessing in a new dimension without scales or measures, with no danger of increased taxation and with desire to make a record.

At the same time they were organizing communes, "putting all China on ball-bearings" in three summer months by hand-hammering bearings out of iron and even making them from porcelain or acorns. They were going sixty million strong to make steel, and then seventy million strong to build reservoirs. In one great day Honan Province "shot a sputnik", which means that they worked from midnight to midnight and in those twenty-four hours claimed to have poured as much pig iron as is made in the USA in a normal day. In the midst of all this they "estimated" that harvest and then went off and left part of it in the fields. The statistical office in Peking couldn't believe the figures so they cut them according to their best judgment. Later the higher authorities had to cut them again.

The trouble with this was not that China "lost face" by confused statistics. I never found that Chinese

care more than Americans what foreigners think. The real trouble was that the Chinese believed their figures and acted on them for a year, at all levels. Communes sold grain lavishly to the state and some later found they hadn't kept enough to eat. The state in turn, at county, provincial and central levels, was convinced that the "big leap" and the communes were such "Big Magic" that fewer peasants could henceforth produce more grain. So every province, county and even commune happily built industry, feeling that grain and raw materials would easily come.

This was what more than tripled steel production in three years, from 5.35 million in 1957 to 18.45 million in 1960. In 1958 and 1959, the first two years of the Second Five-Year Plan, the "big leap" raised gross industrial output by 115 percent, though the Plan had only called for a rise of 100 percent in five years, by 1962. To achieve this, tens of millions of peasants poured from the farms into the cities to work in new industries or study in new technical schools, all of which were rapidly and lavishly built. Then in that same year of 1960 in which steel soared to 18.45 million tons, the worst natural disasters of the century struck the farms. And it became clear that agriculture could not feed this expanded city population with either grain for its workers or raw materials for its machines.

Even without the weather disasters, some readjustment was due. With every province and almost every county building steel mills, and even communes mak-

ing synthetic rubber from sweet potatoes, control was urgent from a central Plan. This control was already beginning. On March 30, 1960, Li Fu-chun, head of the State Planning Commission, reporting to the National People's Congress on the plan for 1960, noted that the output of industry was already three years ahead of schedule and stressed the need of "simultaneous development of agriculture" as the "foundation" of the economy. He did not, as some might have expected, propose new quantitative targets for industry or propose to begin a Third Five-Year Plan, but urged that industry "turn attention to putting agriculture on a modern base". One year of many natural disasters, 1959, had already shown the need of thus strengthening agriculture, but the worst disasters had not yet struck. Had the weather turned friendly, the adjustment of industry to agriculture would have come with comparative ease.

Some Western critics think China exaggerated or even "fabricated" the natural disasters. On the contrary, China began by belittling them and stressing the power of man to overcome them, as shown by some communes that "conquered" a flood or fought a 300-day drought with success. Such victories occurred. Reservoirs and irrigation systems dug by communes in the "big leap" did save communities from famine. But reservoirs last only as long as their sources and when drought followed drought, the great Yellow River sank so low that for eight months in 1960 the children waded across it. It was seen that the entire

Yellow River system has not enough water for all the farms in its basin in a dry spell of several years. New sources must be found either underground by pumping systems or by syphoning water from the Yangtze to the north, a task beyond China's present strength but already studied for the future.

The year 1960 was the worst year. Yung Lung-kwei of the Economics Research Institute told me that in that year 60 percent of all the cultivated land of China was hit by "disasters, either drought, flood, hurricane, high winds or pests", and 40 percent had been "seriously affected". In that year, he said, "natural disasters hit every province and region of China except Tibet and Sinkiang".

The *London Times,* Dec. 30, 1960, described the natural disasters as "worse possibly than China has experienced for a century" and added that the "succession of rainless days" on the northern plain was "longer than that which led to China's last major famine in Honan in 1943 when . . . an estimated two million died". Rewi Alley, who has watched China for thirty-five years as an engineer engaged in welfare, tells me that the blows dealt by nature in 1959-61 are rather to be compared with the years of 1926-29 when drought in six northwest provinces brought an estimated twenty million deaths.

This time, the strength of the nation was mobilized against the blows of nature. The worst food shortage was from autumn of 1960 to spring of 1961. The organized activities with which the city population and

the rural communes met the emergency will be given in later chapters. Meantime the Central Committee of the Party on January 14-18, turned attention to the paramount permanent need for increased and steady output of grain. Vice-Premier Po I-po, on behalf of industry, noted that the tremendous leap in industrial production in three years had "won time" and that the two remaining years of the Second Five-Year Plan should be devoted not to raising quantitative output in industry but to the "technical transformation of agriculture" and the "expansion of light industry to meet the people's daily needs".

With this new emphasis, many cherished plans for industry and for educational and cultural growth were temporarily sacrificed or, as they choose to put it, "adjusted" to the fight for food and the needs of the farms. The lives of people and the lives of communities were cherished. The nation-wide slogan became: "No one shall starve!" There were great hardships in many areas, but no wholesale casualties occurred such as had followed much smaller disasters in China's past decades. For there was no pulverizing of communities, no scattering of starving people, to beg and die along the roads. All communities, even when hungry, stood, fought and were given aid. So all community life, whether in cities or rural communes, has come from these disasters stronger than before.

What is meant by the phrase: "Agriculture is the foundation and industry the leading factor"? Does it

deny or evade the importance of heavy industry, or is it a temporary retreat? Neither of these; it affirms a relation between agriculture and industry that is paramount for our epoch, though its application varies with conditions from year to year. For years past and to come, industry, especially heavy industry, is the "leading factor", which transforms China's ancient society and backward agriculture into the socialist society and eventually the communist society that China seeks. Industry determines the way and form of change, whether this be tractors, pumps or nuclear power. But agriculture is always the foundation which industry remoulds but on which industry is built. If the foundation be shaky, industry cannot be built.

This has always been recognized in China. In the first years after Liberation the major investment was in irrigation for agriculture; then, when crops seemed sufficient, China turned to build heavy industry in her First and Second Five-Year Plans, and in 1958-60 industry "leaped ahead". But when disasters struck, it was found that all the irrigation done for agriculture was not enough, and the farms could not feed the industries. So most capital construction was halted except for the needs of agriculture, and most industrial production was either "cut back" or "adjusted" to agriculture's needs. And millions of peasants who had come to the cities for jobs or education were told: "Your jobs and schools are closing. You had better go back home and grow grain."

This was not a popular move. Retrenchment never is. But neither did it deserve the emotional adjectives given by a writer in the *Nation* who bewailed the cruelty of "tearing men from their homes and sending them to the ends of the land". Nobody was compelled to go, except as the ending of a job compels. Nobody was urged to leave unless he had a home in the village to go back to, and often his home was only a few miles away from his city job. If he agreed to go back, he was given aid with transport for household goods and family, and also "grain tickets" which entitled him for six months grain on his city ration from state supplies, that he might not be a burden on his village until he began to produce.

Meantime, industry and technical education, cut back in quantity, are expected to gain in quality in several ways. The words used are "readjust, consolidate, fill out and raise standards" and each of these terms is much discussed in every enterprise. They must "adjust" to the needs of the country and especially of agriculture; they must "consolidate" scattered and isolated and weak branches of industry. They must "fill out" the gaps, and they must raise quality.

All kinds of goods for agriculture have been increasing. I have already noted the tremendous increase in electric-driven pumps for irrigation and drainage. Four new plants are going up to make tractors. Bicycles are produced now at more than a million a year, and many are made of the especially strong kind that

peasants prefer, because they use them to pull loads. Prices on all such things are going down.

A second marked change is the growth in variety and quality. Conferences of scientists and technicians and engineers of all kinds occur often; recently there were four in one month in Peking. They are devoted to improving technique, to building the "know-how" in industrial plants and processes, so that these can expand fast when agriculture gives the grain and the raw materials.

So while total steel production may be less, China now boasts of producing between 9,000 and 10,000 kinds of rolled steel; while some coal mines may have closed, all those to which hydraulic mining is adapted are going over to this most modern method. Not all needed power-plants can yet be built, but China already has designed and built power-plants with complete units of several hundred thousand kilowatts. Thus, even in disasters and cutbacks, China presses ahead in technological advance both in industry and farming, towards the day when a sure foundation in agriculture will provide the base for another great advance.

Governor Shao of Kiangsi, a wise, weather-beaten old revolutionary who made the Long March and whom I last met in 1946 in Tsitsihar said to me, as we looked down on the many fine constructions in his capital, Nanchang, from the roof of the fine ten-storey hotel: " 'Man's will, not Heaven, decides', was a fine slogan in 1958. We still believe it. But until we create much

more mechanization, 'Heaven' has still a word to say about our crops".

The governor had done quite a bit in Kiangsi to make "man's will" prevail. The province had won fame by reclaiming red low-yielding soil through years of plowing into it "green manure" and had already improved half the poor soil of the province. He had also pioneered in building state reclamation farms to reclaim entire hill areas, an idea which may point the way to much land reclamation in China's under-populated hills. Then he had been caught by a flood that broke right in his face when three swollen rivers tore through an ancient city wall and poured their waters over seven counties at the very moment when the governor arrived to "investigate". He had taken helicopter to direct the closing of the breach by thousands of soldiers and peasants, and had rallied the city hotels to send bread by the 5,000 loaves to drop from helicopters to flood victims; and had communicated with the flooded communes by the county telephone exchange operating from a boat, so that much of the crop was saved and the rest replanted. But he knew that many old walls remain in China that will break under pressure, and that not all rivers are yet tamed.

He also knew the forces that will conquer. The "big leap" that began in 1958 transformed China. Not only because it nearly tripled in three years the output of industry and more than tripled the output of steel. Its greatest achievement was that it awoke to life a

new type of peasant, conscious of his power to bend nature to his will. The process proved more complex than at first he thought. But nobody who lived through that "big leap" forgets it. And everyone you ask will say: "The greatest thing we learned was the power that lies in the Chinese people. We also learned the need of clearer plans."

I asked a friend why the "big leap" is still listed as one of the "three red banners". Is it in memory of that historic "leap" of 1958-60, or in prophecy of the "big leap" yet to come? He looked at me in some surprise.

"Neither," he said, "and yet both. The 'big leap' is a process and we are in it still. It is a way of advancing by great drives of the people. After each drive there may be pauses for adjustment and filling in, but we think that, taken over ten, twenty or thirty years, China's progress will be in the nature of a 'big leap', perhaps the biggest leap the world has known."

2. THE RATIONED CITIES RAISE FOOD

Peking, Oct. 25, 1962. In asking how much food people get to eat in China, we consider two categories. The city people, well over a hundred million, get grain and other rationed foods from state supply and supplement it in ways we shall see below. The rural population, well over half a billion, raise their own food, deliver part to the state in taxes or by sale, and in severe disaster get state relief. We take up the cities in this article.

Cities by definition include all populated places of 2,000 or more, of whom half do not engage in agriculture; they thus include mining, industrial and county towns. Rations in cities have been in force since 1955, and are regarded not as limitation but as guarantee at low prices of commodities essential to life. Foods may also be bought "outside the ration" in the rural market, so-called "free market" where communes and individual peasants sell direct to consumers, but these prices vary and in times of scarcity tend to be high.

The grain ration puts a floor of security under the city population, guaranteeing basic subsistence at low cost. The grain ration of my secretary and her husband, both office workers, is a trifle less than a

pound a day for the woman and more than a pound for the man. This total of 60 pounds a month, their main staple, costs from $2.50 to $3.00 a month for the two of them, depending on whether they choose to buy the coarser grains or the finer, such as wheat flour and rice. The price of grain is fixed, any losses being absorbed by the state.

This fixed low cost of the grain needed for survival is very important to two young people whose joint salary comes to only $80 a month. Since their housing is also low in cost, being only $1.20 for one and a half rooms, including electricity and gas, they are able to work without worry, secure in both shelter and enough grain to survive. In times of general scarcity they may run into hardship, since the supplementary foods in the "free market" may sky-rocket, but they do not fear for actual subsistence because of the state-supplied grain.

The grain ration does not vary much from city to city. There are slight variations from climate, because in warmer areas people need less grain than in the colder north. In smaller towns the grain may be somewhat reduced, because these towns have yards and gardens where people can grow food. In the beach resort of Peitaiho, for instance, I found that the office workers and resort staff got about three pounds less of grain per month than people in Peking; they made up for it by growing corn, soy beans and sweet potatoes on all the waste lands above the beach, where they harvested potatoes by the hundred-pound sacks.

If rations between big cities like Peking and Shanghai do not much vary, they vary greatly between individuals. Each person's ration is fixed individually by age, sex, size, kind of work and climate of residence. The system was worked out under medical commissions and Chinese are proud of the fairness and fitness to individual needs. Any citizen who finds his grain ration inadequate can get it raised by a doctor's orders.

I shall not take up the entire ration system, of oil, cotton goods, meat, fish, sugar; it is too elaborate to cover here. I note only that milk goes by priority to babies, pregnant and nursing mothers and hospitals, and some delicate foods are reserved for the aged. My elderly friends get cooking oil made from maize, which is said to be more digestible than other cooking oil. I shall note here only the grain ration, which varies from somewhat less than a pound (uncooked weight) per day for a housewife or office worker to more than two pounds for a miner, longshoreman or acrobat. If any Westerner will take a pound of uncooked rice and cook it, he will find it more than he wants to eat in a day. My secretary's daily rice ration is more than I could eat in three days. This is because we Westerners have more of other foods.

The grain ration has been in force for years and become very flexible. Each family has its small ration book, with list of names, rations and residence. Children's names are entered at birth and their rations rise automatically on their birthdays until in adolescence they get more grain than goes to a sedentary

adult. The monthly tickets for grain and other rationed commodities arrive at the place of work or residence several days before the month to which they apply, but you can draw the grain a few days ahead. They are redeemable at the local store where the supply is guaranteed; you can buy for a day or the whole month as you wish. My secretary says that the only time she ever finds a queue is at the end of the month when people cashing their surplus tickets run into other people wanting to buy in advance.

The tickets accommodate themselves to their owners as easily as a personal check. Tickets on the local store can be exchanged for travel tickets or tickets in another city; the notices are cleared like a bank check so that the new city may have the proper supply. When my secretary volunteers for a week's physical labor on the farm, she draws extra tickets, depending on what kind of work she undertakes. When she enrolls her two children in the full time kindergarten, their rations go to the kindergarten, but, since they come home weekends, they bring tickets home each month, and on holidays they usually appear with a bonus of an extra pound of sugar and another pound of cookies, since children have a much bigger sugar ration than adults. This enables the mother to give the children tasty food at home, which is good for family morale.

Probably no people in the West except laboratory experts in nutrition or Hollywood dietitians are so aware of the daily relation of grain to human energy

as are today's Chinese. So when in 1960 the grain shortage became an emergency, everyone knew what was meant when they were asked to "regulate their grain to save waste". There was no edict or police order; word was passed through places of work and street committees and people discussed it in groups. Each person stated what he or she could save in grain each month without injury to health. Cuts were expected between one and two pounds per month per person, and anyone could calculate that such a saving would give the country a total of a million tons of grain right on the spot without the cost of buying it abroad. If any people refused to cut, they got no publicity, and their face and that of their organizations was thus saved. One heard, however, of people who cut too much — usually patriotic adolescents — and whose cut was "restored" by parents, physicians or the working group.

My secretary, for instance, cut her ration from 28 catties per month (32.8 lbs) to 26.5 catties (29.15 lbs); she told me the only change it made was that she became more careful not to leave any waste on her plate. A sixteen-year-old high school boy bragged that he cut from 42.9 lbs per month to 39.6 and that he did not get hungry because "we cut out sports".

"I like the sports' circle but if you have sports you need extra food or else you hurt your health."

I asked what the school would do for its sports' records and he replied: "We MAKE those guys eat plenty; we aren't so hard up as to lose our records.

But ordinary folks like me can keep our health on walks and setting-up exercises and save grain." After a few weeks patriotic sacrifice his ration was "restored" by the general order that children and adolescents should not be cut.

The city rations for the three scarcity years were thus planned to keep people with strict economy in normal health and normal work. On the whole, this succeeded. People everywhere suffered hardship and deprivation but this was not so much from the scanty grain ration — as noted above, it is more than a Westerner eats — but because the natural disasters affected also the supply of all supplementary foods and the price of these foods in the "free market", like eggs and vegetables and poultry — shot up in price or became unavailable.

The worst time was the winter of 1960-61 and this was especially bad in cities located in areas of disasters, among which were Tientsin and Kaifeng, where the surrounding areas suffered from long drought. Several people that I know in those cities lost as much as thirty pounds in weight and some even went to hospital for nutritional deficiencies, and were treated by the physician's order for special foods. That these troubles were generally attributed to lack of supplementary foods rather than to the grain ration, was shown by two friends from Tientsin, who visited me in late 1961 and told of the hardships of the previous winter which, they assured me, would not recur.

They based their optimism on the fact that "We're getting yellow beans now on the ration". It was only a pound of soy beans a month, in various forms such as bean curd, but it made a difference. There had been none in Tientsin the previous winter. Cases of malnutrition always lessened when spring vegetables came in.

Meantime the cities made their own fight for supplementary foods. It first appeared in a series of fads. Many friends grew "chlorella" in their homes in that hard winter; this is a green stuff like pond slime but is protein. One friend, a man whose name is known in international trade, joked in my study about his wife's habit of filling every dish in the house with "that green mess".

"It's what you'll eat when you travel to the moon", she retorted, and I understand space medicine confirms her.

In a public dining-room in Foshan, a city near Canton, the able woman manager told me she gave each of her patrons five to ten grams of "artificial meat essence" each day. This was a kind of yeast; everyone who studies nutrition knows that brewer's yeast is protein. This woman grew the yeast herself on the second floor above the dining-room; she collected the vegetable refuse like cabbage roots and leaves, added the grease from the pots and pans, boiled it and thus got a culture on which the yeast grew. The customers liked the "meaty taste" it gave to soups and vegetable mixtures; they felt better fed than usual.

Foshan raised its grain supply in another way. Having done its duty to the nation by cutting its grain demand by four percent, Foshan analyzed consumption and found that grain was used for paste, in making paper lanterns, one of the city's century old handicrafts. Foshan workers sought other sources for paste and developed a glue from grass. The grain thus saved was added to the city food ration.

These picturesque additions were small compared to the drive that began in spring to plant vegetables in every bit of available soil in or near the cities. Vegetables appeared in every alley-corner and along street curbs; these places were not very productive because of traffic hazard. Backyards were better. The Peace Committee grew a variety of vegetables: maize, soy, cabbage, in its compound. The Foreign Languages Press plowed up the basket-ball field in the recreation space in its housing area, and planted it to vegetables.

Every city organization also grew food in larger areas outside the city. The Peace Committee, in cooperation with other organizations, has a farm two hours away by bus, on land reclaimed in 1958, and now planted to fruit trees, vegetables and fodder for pigs and chickens. The farm is managed by resident workers but much of the work is done by volunteers from the city who give a week in spring and again in autumn. From this every employee of the Peace Committee draws some vegetables, fruit, eggs and about a

pound a month of pork; they take it in the public dining-room or at home as they choose.

Personally owned chickens and rabbits appeared all over Peking. As I write there are more than 50 hens laying eggs in various parts of the Peace Committee's compound; they are good layers, for any hens that failed to give 200 eggs in the year, went into the pot for some festival. One visitor who comes to my house keeps eight hens on his roof, and chops their food each evening after work. Another friend, a member of the National Congress, keeps five hens and gets an average three eggs daily for the family. He estimates that Peking has two million hens as personal property in city yards. People in other cities do the same. Shanghai people joke about keeping chickens on fire-escapes and balconies because their buildings are high; Peking residents retort that their chickens have intelligence enough to climb to the fourth floor for food if it isn't brought to them on time. Personal chickens thus become a theme of jokes in conversation. One should perhaps not quote the slander that other cities heap on Canton, when they say the Cantonese are so crowded that "they have to keep their chickens under the bed".

Feed for these chickens comes from the family garbage enriched by a bit of the extra grain ration. For as vegetables increased, people automatically ate less grain. The diet became better balanced. The grain ration, which they had set at a bare minimum, produced surplus, and this was fed to hens and

produced eggs. My secretary had no luck with hens and turned to rabbits which do not eat grain. This autumn she found herself with some surprise possessing thirty-three pounds grain surplus, in rice and wheat flour in her kitchen. She gave half to the public dining-room which gave her lunch tickets in return.

As the city population for three years developed supplementary foods of many kinds — vegetables, eggs, chickens, even pigs — the suburban communes began to overtake them, by a change that began in 1958-59. A conference on city planning, held by the major cities, decided that large cities should annex adjoining counties in order to plan their own food supply. Greater Peking today covers six counties, while Greater Shanghai covers ten. The cities help the suburban communes with electric power and sundry improvements, especially pumping systems for irrigation; the suburban communes thus increase the supply of vegetables and other food products, more profitable than raising grain.

Shanghai, as the biggest metropolis, is the prize example of how a city can raise food. Formerly a crowded center of seven and a half million people, mostly packed into slums, it launched its new city plan four years ago. This called for decentralization, to relieve the crowded center by a ring of "satellite cities" from eight to fifteen miles out, each devoted to a separate industry while the open land inside the

ring is given to recreation, health and the growing of food. The clearing of the slums and the growth of the new industrial cities is an important story with which we cannot here deal. We consider here the growth of the city's agriculture.

Shanghai today has reduced its downtown area to 6.3 million people, while the outer ring contains 4.2 million, a total of ten million and a half, of whom more than three million work in agriculture. These agricultural workers feed themselves entirely and also supply the city with 211,000 tons of grain, which of course is only a small part of the city's grain needs. The special contribution from the suburbs consists of the vegetables; these have grown more than fivefold in four years, from 270,000 tons in 1957 to 1,390,000 tons in 1961. In spring of 1962 when I last visited Shanghai, the vegetables were still increasing. More than a hundred regional markets were flooded with thirty-five kinds of vegetables, fresh and cheap. There was spinach, celery, onions at 2 cents a pound, cabbage of different kinds at 3 cents. These vegetables came at the rate of almost two pounds per person a day.

The fish supply of Shanghai was taken in hand in 1959 by the organization of the Shanghai Water Products Corporation, a municipal organization that owns its own docks, ships and cold storage warehouses. It works in cooperation with the fishermen of the Choushan Islands, a big archipelago off the coast near Shanghai, where fisher families in the past lived in hunger and uncertainty, without weather reports,

a prey to storms at sea and gangsters on shore. Today the Shanghai scout ships hunt the fish runs and give the news by radio to the fisher cooperatives. And when the fishing boats are loaded, if the run continues, the fishermen do not have to leave for a trip to Shanghai, but can unload direct into deep freeze on steamers of the Shanghai Water Products, where they are paid in cash, and can bank in a branch bank maintained on the steamer and buy city goods at a store on the steamer, without leaving the fishing grounds.

By these and other means Shanghai has raised its fish supply from 34,000 tons in 1957 to 146,000 in 1961, nearly a pound per week per capita for downtown Shanghai. "Even as late as 1954," the vice-mayor told me, "most workers in Shanghai had only a bit of salt fish or a piece of cabbage to flavor their rice; now they have a choice of vegetables and many kinds of fish."

The growth of the food supply is similar in other cities. In Peking as I write in late October 1962, 3,000 tons of vegetables a day pour in from the suburban communes, a pound and a half per capita for the four million residents of urban Peking. A hundred thousand tons are being stored for the winter, and the suburban communes will also be growing vegetables in twenty times as many hothouses as there were in 1949.

Two weeks ago I went to see what had happened to Evergreen Commune, the first commune I ever saw in 1958 four years ago this week. Its manager said that

every year of the four has had bad weather, drought every spring and drought or excessive rains every fall. But the 7,200 families of the commune have almost doubled their gross income from 7,390,000 yuan in 1957 to 13,620,000 in 1961. They did it by extra irrigation and extra pumps that changed their main crop from grain to vegetables.

Yesterday I walked down town on Peking's main shopping street and saw ten places selling fruit in two short blocks, two of them regular food stores and eight emergency side-walk stands to handle the fruit surplus that came this autumn from the millions of trees the citizens planted in 1958-59. This extra dividend from the "big leap" began with peaches in August and ends in late October with persimmons, selling at six cents a pound. On October 1 every family in Peking was offered a chance to buy two big birds for the holiday, either chickens or ducks. These come from the suburban communes, plus a bonus of pork from the amateur suburban farms.

The same has happened in all of China's cities. The city people themselves, on the hard base of rationed grain, created supplementary foods by individual and group efforts, until their efforts are buried now by the flood from the suburban communes. Out of the "big leap" and out of the scarcity years they gained the most varied diet they have ever known.

My secretary is eating her last six rabbits by giving dinners to relatives and friends. She says she will

not keep them through another winter now that she can easily buy chicken or duck.

Out at the Foreign Languages Press they have cleaned off the vegetables and rolled the ground hard again for basket-ball.

3. THE COMMUNES SAVE THE COUNTRY

Peking, Nov. 15, 1962. "The communes collapsed," said the Western press of the 1959-61 crop shortages. "The communes saved the country," say most Chinese. Let us first define the "commune".

People's communes are neither a devilish trap nor a magic for Utopia. They are a new form of organization that arose in China in 1958, a merger of farming cooperatives in about the area of a township for activities beyond the power of a single cooperative and beyond the scope of agriculture itself. The smaller cooperatives do not vanish; they remain as "production brigades" of the commune, carrying on their agriculture as before. But by electing representatives to the commune management, and contributing some of their surplus to the commune's "accumulation fund", they increase their ability to extend flood control and irrigation, to buy tractors, to establish small industries based on or contributing to agriculture. Their new characteristic is that they also become the government at the basic level, i.e. the township, and thus directly plan and build local roads, irrigation works, small industries, hospitals, schools and other welfare activities, and organize local home defense.

Such an organization, if efficiently managed, is a mechanism of flexibility and power both for the daily tasks of farming and for the wider community needs. Communes, of course, vary widely in efficiency and also in "luck" with weather. During the three scarcity years of 1959-61 the communes were brutally tested by drought, flood, hurricanes and pests with varying results. Good communes triumphed with amazing victories; even the poor communes kept communities together by serving as distributing centers for state relief. They thus prevented the worst feature of all past famines, the pulverizing of communities in which families fled to beg and die along the roads. The communes emerged with organization streamlined, and with some modifications in practise, which we shall note.

The more than half a billion people engaged in agriculture in China do not get "rations" from state supply. They raise their own food, turn over some 8.3 percent of their main crop to the state in taxes,* sell to the state any surplus at fixed prices and consume the rest.

*Taxes vary and are fixed to encourage production. The best communes I have visited were giving less than 8 percent of their gross product in taxes, because their crops increased but their taxes did not. For the general picture, I take figures given by Mao for 1956 in "Contradictions Among the People". He gave the grain output as 180 million metric tons, on which the taxes were 15 million, and the sales to the state 25 million tons, a total of 40 million handled by "state supply".

In weather disasters, they first try to meet these by their own efforts or by the help of adjacent communes or the county in several ingenious ways. In severe disaster they get state relief.

The first help the communes gave in the disasters was by the water conservation work they did in the two winters before the disasters struck, when some 75 million people turned out to dig irrigation canals, build reservoirs, strengthen dykes in a tremendous drive for water control greater than China had ever seen before. All over China these new constructions contained the first shock of drought or flood.

In Hopei Province, for example, the weather is normally too dry in winter and spring and too wet in midsummer and early fall. In 588 years of recorded weather, Hopei had 309 serious floods and 409 serious droughts, an average of more than one disaster a year. Yet its main river system, the Haiho, never had a reservoir before Liberation. After Liberation two big reservoirs were built prior to 1957. During the next four years, with the aid of the communes, Hopei built 39 big reservoirs and thousands of smaller ones. These protected over three million acres from drought, waterlogging and flood in the disaster years.

This is typical of what happened everywhere. On Oct. 30, 1960, the *Peking Review* reported of the worst disaster year: "more than half the country's cultivated area has been hit by drought, pests, flood or hurricane", but added: "the persistent efforts of the peasants, strengthened by the communes, confined the damage

to one third of the affected area, and even there, managed to wrest something from nature".

Tales of the way the communes fought drought or flood are endless. White Sands Commune sprang into fame in 1960 for its heroic fight against drought. Located in Honan in an abandoned bed of the Yellow River, half of its cultivated land is marshy, the other half sandy, making it vulnerable both to drought and flood. It was struck by 300 days of drought beginning in autumn of 1959. The winter wheat was sown in dry soil, got little snow or rain and, despite some irrigation, gave a crop 25 percent below normal. As summer advanced the drought grew worse. Streams and ponds dried up, and the second autumn crop was in peril.

White Sands mobilized to dig 600 wells, bought water-wheels and irrigated. But the water level sank in the wells and the crops again began to wither. Then White Sands built a syphon station on the Yellow River, installed big pumps, and dug a long irrigation canal. This irrigated 700 acres on which they got a crop 20 percent below normal. By various "side-occupations", handicraft and small industries, the members' total income was higher than the year before.

White Sands compares this record with what happened in 1942 when a three months drought entirely ruined the crops, and when 1,188 people died of hunger while 1,533 families went along the roads to beg and sell their children for food. In 1960 they worked excessively hard for a meager return in crops, but, due to the commune, they survived.

In provinces south of the Yangtze the disaster is usually a flood. I visited many communes which fought floods and hurricanes with success. On Hainan Island a big hurricane struck in 1959. The commune network reached every brigade with advance warning by phone — bringing in the fishing fleets by radio — and evacuated people and livestock to shelter before the storm struck. During the height of the hurricane, the strongest adults were out saving lives and livestock, draining fields after cloud-bursts. All able-bodied workers joined in as soon as they were able, and dug ditches to drain the inundated fields and raise the rice erect, for rice can be saved after a short immersion. Hainan got a 90 percent crop.

Similarly in the great East River flood in Kwangtung in spring of 1959, over two million acres of cultivated land was inundated and 370,000 "house-units" of 12 sq. meters each were destroyed. In earlier times the water would have remained on the land for more than a year; but the communes at once began repairing dykes and draining fields; within half a year they had a new crop planted on the drained land, and 100,000 house-units rebuilt.

One of the most spectacular tales I heard was that of Sun Commune in Kiangsi Province. In June of 1961 the water in three swollen rivers rose far beyond the flood mark, broke through an ancient wall of the county town where the rivers converged and poured over seven counties before the breach could be repaired. Sun Commune was first in the path of this flood. The commune secretary Li told me of it.

"We had a thousand men patrolling our four kilometers of dyke but the break came in the town above us. Suddenly we were a sea. People were rushing to trees and housetops or struggling in water, and houses were drifting away. Our people got rescued by boats or helicopters and camped on the railroad embankment. Our members began to work.

"We first sent people to help repair the breach in the county town above us, where the governor was directing 1,500 soldiers and 500 students in work as well as volunteers from nearby communes. When the breach was closed, we turned to our own fields. These were all inundated; in some the water ran off naturally and in others we dug drainage. Some fields were under water only a day and others ten days. As soon as a field was drained we cleaned the rice and raised it erect. More than half the rice was saved, and gave a 90 percent crop. The rest was ruined and we planted again at once. We did twelve replantings that year, not an acre of ours was without its crop."

Secretary Li said that help was received from nearby communes and counties. Four counties loaned five tractors. Adjacent communes loaned 1,500 baskets to carry dirt and supplied 55,000 pounds of seed and rice-sprouts for replanting. The province sent 1,500,000 pounds of grain, 600,000 feet of cotton cloth, 100 corduroy suits and quantities of timber, brick and

bamboo for rebuilding the twenty-two destroyed houses. They also sent $21,000 cash relief.

Was the help all free, I asked. "No," said Li, "the helicopters to save lives and the steamed bread they dropped and the medical relief and the cash relief were gifts. We paid for the grain, cotton goods and building materials from the commune's accumulation fund. We got it at 'equivalent exchange', i.e. at cost. We also got the seed and rice-sprouts at 'equivalent exchange'."

This introduces one of the methods of mutual aid by communes. Peasants caught by disaster do not expect relief for nothing. They know that other communes are also poor, and the government is not rich either. Everyone caught by a drought or a flood suffers. But he does not suffer the extra penalties of landlord profiteering in grain and exorbitant interest. Prices of necessities are fixed; grain changes hands between communes and between the state and the communes at a rate that is the same in both directions. They also exchange labor in the same way.

I found other examples of "equivalent exchange" in Chekiang Province, and also the form of help called "production for relief".

Fuyang Commune, two hours by road from Hangchow on a river bank, had four disasters in 1961: a flood in May, a 67-day drought in midsummer followed by rice-borers, and the worst hurricane in 68 years in autumn accompanied by flood. Despite all this, the commune got a crop 35 percent higher than the members got in 1957, the highest year before the commune was organized.

Old Chen, the commune manager, told me: "The chief reason was that in the spring of 1961 we got the high tension lines and electric pumps." Other members told me that the credit went not only to the pumps but to the way Old Chen "managed". He was a shrewd, kindly, experienced peasant and clearly popular.

Fuyang, I learned, is so far north that a double planting of rice is only possible by very fast work under good conditions. The early rice must be reaped and the late rice planted in the same ground in two to three weeks. Plenty of water and fertilizer must be given to the second planting. If there is drought at the time, you cannot plant the second rice. Fuyang had 67 days of midsummer drought, and while the new electric pumps made it possible for some brigades to do the second planting, the commune had not had funds or priorities enough to supply all brigades with electric pumps. Old Chen had to "manage", as a commune chief should.

"Three-in-One Brigade", so named because it combines three villages, had depended on gravity irrigation but the drought dropped the water level and the irrigation ceased. The brigade figured that they could only raise enough water from the river with the old-style water-wheels to plant 33 acres; they must leave 200 acres without the second crop of rice. Old Chen took up their difficulty with the commune management, and got three pumps for them, one on loan from the

commune's tea plantation and two on purchase. The commune secured priorities on the plea of "production for relief", and the brigade put up half the cost while the other half came from the commune's accumulation fund, to be repaid by the brigade next year. The three pumps shot water from the river into the irrigation system "faster than 240 men could do", said Chen. The extra crop came to 160 tons of rice, much more than enough to pay the entire cost of the pumps.

Not even Old Chen could get all the pumps the commune wanted in a single year. Three other brigades that needed water were supplied by "equivalent exchange". Eight stronger brigades sent 207 workers for seven or eight days, a total of 1,400 work-days, to help the three weaker brigades. They also sent 67 draught animals with water-wheels, plows, five Diesel pumps and three electric pumps. The recipient brigades paid all costs of the operation, the transport, the fodder for animals, the oil and electricity for the pumps. They will pay for the 1,400 work-days by giving an equal number of work-days to jobs the eight brigades want done.

Such is the self-respecting mutual aid between communes, known as "equivalent exchange". This is the first defense against disasters.

Disasters too great to be met by "production for relief" and "equivalent exchange", are helped by "state relief". This comes from the province, though a province, in need, can make arrangements with the central government for aid. The authorities in Chekiang Province told me that despite grave disasters in 1960 and 1961, Chekiang could handle all its own problems provided it could be relieved from the task of supplying grain to Shanghai. (The problem of supplying the cities was discussed in an earlier article.)

Kwangtung authorities told me that they had given over $40,000,000 in disaster relief in 1959-61, "in addition to the local help between communes and counties". Kwangtung is a strong province. It not only supplied this state relief through three years of heavy floods and hurricanes which each year inundated more than two million acres and washed away from 210,000 to 370,000 "house-units" of 12 sq. meters each, but also supplied Hongkong with 200,000 pigs and 10,000 tons of fish a year, and between 200,000 and 300,000 pounds a day of fresh vegetables. Kwangtung is large; even when two million acres are inundated, with navy and airforce called out to save the people, other areas in Kwangtung still produce two and three crops a year. The province does not fall behind.

The provincial secretary for agriculture told me that about 30 percent of the communes had steadily improved from year to year, either untouched by calamities or with strength to meet them; that fifty percent had "held their own" with ups and downs, but able to meet one bad year by the next good one, while 20 percent "lost ground" and "needed help". I have no general figures for China but Chekiang Province

estimated 35% good, 50% average, and 15% poor brigades.

A commune or a brigade does not "collapse" any more than does a township in the West. The county or province sends inspectors, analyzes the trouble, prosecutes corruption if discovered — and China is less than fifteen years from the feudal period so corruption is sometimes a cause — helps the people change any inefficient methods and also gives actual relief. Such "state relief" is not like the "rations" given in cities, designed to keep people fit for normal work throughout the year. It is emergency, supplementary relief to enable people to organize their own local resources and survive till the next crop. The amount varies with local conditions and the resources of the province; in cases I have known it ranged from half the normal full ration to three quarters. Even in "total disasters" there remain always some local resources on which the people can call.*

The most serious disaster of which I have personal knowledge, from the standpoint of food shortage, was a flood following a hurricane in Liaoning Province, which carried away the houses and 80 percent of the crops in a fairly large area. The housekeeper of a

*These supplementary relief rations were commonly used by all Western writers as if they were the normal ration throughout China. The 1,350 calories daily, on which *The NY Times* persists, is of course a ration on which China as a whole could not survive. It was never a general ration. But local areas, adding it to their local resources, survived through temporary periods between crops.

Peking friend came from this area, and went home to it for her vacation the following summer, in some worry lest her relatives might have starved. She found them all alive and in fair health though the winter had been one of hardship. The province sent "relief" to the amount of three fifths of a pound of grain per person per day, which is hardly more than half a normal adult ration. The province also sent building materials for houses, and supplies of clothing, and in spring extra grain for seed.

With this supplementary aid, the commune had been able to organize groups of fishermen who added considerable fish from Pohai Bay to the diet; they also had the meager twenty percent of their own harvest. They set up workshops to make what they called "carbohydrate cake", which seems to have been a ground mixture of corn-stalks, sorghum stalks, leaves and tender bark with edible roots and some grain added. It may have actually added nourishment beyond the grain content, but its main function seemed to be to keep the stomach full and still the hunger pangs. The people slept as much as possible, rising once a day for a full meal to do house and farmyard chores, and thus kept in fair condition on little food.

This is a routine known to all peasants in China. It is the way they survived crop shortages for centuries. They do not even call it "famine", but only "the gap between the brown and the green", i.e. the period from the brown harvest to the green vegetables of spring. The state relief and the commune organiza-

tion helped them through it with more resources than they had in the past.

Such gaps will occur for some time in China. Just now, at the end of 1962, the areas needing relief are few and small and the relief itself begins to approach the amount of a full ration. The aim is that no great difference shall exist between the living standard of city and country. But since the rural areas grow their own food, no precise equality exists or is sought. Today — at the end of 1962 — the most efficient communes — or the luckier ones — eat considerably more than the city ration; the less efficient ones, that need relief, eat less. But all fought the natural disasters and their own inefficiencies and pulled through.

The three years struggle tightened the commune organization by eliminating waste, correcting mistakes and increasing both local initiative and collective strength.

"Free food" disappeared; it was never recommended by any Party resolution; it flashed across the country as a peasant ideal which the peasants dropped because it led to waste; it is in part replaced by welfare funds for the needy. Public dining-rooms largely disappeared, but not entirely. They survive in schools, kindergartens, workshops and at times for field groups; they also survive wherever they had a management efficient enough to compete with the economies of the home. Many people like them, and organize them on a smaller scale. But most of them were too wasteful in food for the hard years.

"Private plots" for the individual family existed in the cooperatives and were discarded in the early days of the communes, sometimes by peasant initiative and sometimes by pressure of local leaders. They were never abolished by any central resolution. They were "reaffirmed" by favorable mention in "Red Flag", in summer of 1961, an action that indicated they were already widespread but controversial, needing some authoritative comment.

The most important change in the communes is that which makes the "production team" rather than the "brigade", the "accounting unit". If this sounds formal, we note that the "accounting unit" makes the farm plan, manages the labor and divides the harvest, and is practically the owner of the land and draught animals. What has happened is a transfer to the smaller unit — a team of some score or two families — of the responsibilities of ownership and control. This again is not by edict or resolution but by favorable mention in a 1962 New Year editorial, which indicates it as accepted method. In practise, I find the stronger communes still stick to the brigades.

The manager of Evergreen Commune in Peking suburbs told me: "We prefer the larger unit because we have tractors, electric pumping systems and many hothouses. Our ownership and operation is best handled in the larger unit. But nine tenths of China's farming is still by manual labor and draught animals; such peasants want to decide their plans and divide their

crop right in their villages. As mechanization advances, they also will think in terms of the larger 'brigade'."

These changes are in practise, not in substance. They are part of the constant adjustment of local initiative to wider organized strength. When I asked the Evergreen manager which unit — the team, the brigade or the commune, had the right to "give orders" for an irrigation canal, he looked at me quizzically as if suspecting some provocation.

Then he laughed: "Give orders? To a Chinese peasant? That's something you don't do if you hope to succeed. Whichever unit needs the irrigation, makes a plan and explains it to the peasants. If the plan is reasonable they get volunteers. If you don't get volunteers, you know the plan isn't reasonable. Peasants are shrewd in matters of livelihood."

* * *

If the communes "saved the country" through three years of disasters, it was because they first organized the peasants for irrigation and flood control, because in the hardest trials, the better communes were a light to their neighbors, and even the poor communes, as distributing centers of state relief, prevented the pulverizing of communities which is always the worst aspect of a real famine.

So communities survived, learned from mistakes, and came from the years of scarcity stronger, more confident than before.

If the greatest thing they learned from the "big leap" of 1958 was "the power that lies in the Chinese people", then the greatest thing they took from the scarcity years was the technique for using this power, through local initiatives connected through mutual aid and state aid in a network that reaches the ends of the land.

A prominent Asian economist said to a Chinese economist of my acquaintance that that informed opinion in Asia gained more respect for China from the way she handled the years of scarcity than even from the spectacular achievements of the "big leap". He also told why. "You had three years of disasters and crop losses yet you never begged for a dollar. What other nation can do that? And now you advance again on your own power."

Such was the judgment of a hard-headed businessman of Asia who had little love for socialism, but who judged the facts of life and the soundness of a nation by the history of many thousand years.

中国为粮食而战
安娜·路易斯·斯特朗著
*
新世界出版社出版
1963年2月
编号：（英）3050—474

00060
3—E—543p