



Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962

By Yang Jisheng

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Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962 By Yang Jisheng

The much-anticipated definitive account of China's Great Famine

An estimated thirty-six million Chinese men, women, and children starved to death during China's Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and early '60s. One of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century, the famine is poorly understood, and in China is still euphemistically referred to as "the three years of natural disaster."

As a journalist with privileged access to official and unofficial sources, Yang Jisheng spent twenty years piecing together the events that led to mass nationwide starvation, including the death of his own father. Finding no natural causes, Yang attributes responsibility for the deaths to China's totalitarian system and the refusal of officials at every level to value human life over ideology and self-interest.

Tombstone is a testament to inhumanity and occasional heroism that pits collective memory against the historical amnesia imposed by those in power. Stunning in scale and arresting in its detailed account of the staggering human cost of this tragedy, *Tombstone* is written both as a memorial to the lives lost?an enduring tombstone in memory of the dead?and in hopeful anticipation of the final demise of the totalitarian system. Ian Johnson, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, called the Chinese edition of *Tombstone* "groundbreaking . . . One of the most important books to come out of China in recent years."

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Editorial Review

From Bookforum

Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962 is methodical and factual, and it amounts to a devastatingly clear account of Mao and his era. In the me of building Communist utopia overnight, farmworkers were diverted to labor on industry and infrastructure; agricultural work was collectivized and thrown into disorder; high-ranking bureaucrats imposed useless and destructive pseudoscientific farming methods on the countryside. Local officials, vying to demonstrate the greatest commitment to progress, reported fraudulent crop yields, and the government requisitioned its due share of the non-existent bumper crops. Even with such shocking stories driving the narrative, the true horror of *Tombstone* is that it's not sensational. It is, rather, a meticulous accumulation of evidence and fact. —Tom Scocca

Review

“The best English-language account . . . [*Tombstone*] combines thorough statistical analysis with detailed archival research and heart-rending oral histories.” ?*Matthew C. Klein, Bloomberg*

“Without a doubt the definitive account--for now and probably for a long time . . . One of the most important books--not just China books--of our time.” ?*Arthur Waldron, The New Criterion*

“A vital testimony of a largely buried era.” ?*Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, The Independent*

“Yang's discreet and well-judged pursuit of his project over more than a decade is a quietly heroic achievement.” ?*Roger Garside, China Rights Forum*

“*Tombstone* easily supersedes all previous chronicles of the famine, and is one of the best insider accounts of the Party's inner workings during this period, offering an unrivalled picture of socioeconomic engineering within a rigid ideological framework . . . meticulously researched.” ?*Pankaj Mishra, The New Yorker*

“Eye-opening . . . boldly unsparing.” ?*Jonathan Mirsky, The New York Times Book Review*

“Beautifully written and fluidly translated, *Tombstone* deserves to reach as many readers as possible.” ?*Samuel Moyn, The Nation*

“[An] epic account . . . *Tombstone* is a landmark in the Chinese people's own efforts to confront their history.” ?*Ian Johnson, The New York Review of Books*

“The toll is astounding, and this book is important for many reasons--difficult to stomach, but important all the same.” ?*Kirkus Review*

“Mao's Great Famine of the late 1950s continues to boggle the mind. No one book or even set of books could encompass the tens of millions of lives needlessly and intentionally destroyed or explain the paranoid megalomania of China's leaders at the time. As with the Holocaust, every serious new account both renews our witness of the murdered dead and extends our understanding. Zhou Xun here selects, translates, and annotates 121 internal reports from local officials to their bosses. They form a frank, grisly, and specific portrait of hysteria defeating common sense. Zhou's University of Hong Kong colleague, Frank Dikötter, extricated some of these documents from newly opened (and now again closed) archives in local headquarters across China for his *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe*

1958–1962, but Zhou's book stands on its own. A useful introduction, headnotes to each chapter, a chronology, and explanatory notes frame the documents. VERDICT Accessible and appealing to assiduous readers with knowledge of Mao's China; especially useful to specialists.” ?*Charles W. Hayford, Evanston, IL*

“A book of great importance.” ?*Jung Chang, author of Wild Swans and co-author of Mao: The Unknown Story*

“A truly necessary book.” ?*Anne Applebaum, author of Gulag: A History*

“In 1989 hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Chinese died in the June Fourth massacre in Beijing, and within hours hundreds of millions of people around the world had seen images of it on their television screens. In the late 1950s, also in Communist China, roughly the inverse happened: thirty million or more died while the world, then and now, has hardly noticed. If the cause of the Great Famine had been a natural disaster, this double standard might be more understandable. But the causes, as Yang Jisheng shows in meticulous detail, were political. How can the world not look now?” ?*Perry Link, Chancellorial Chair for Innovative Teaching, Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages, University of California, Riverside*

“Hard-hitting. . . It's a harrowing read, illuminating a historic watershed that's still too little known in the West.” ?*Publishers' Weekly*

“Groundbreaking...The most authoritative account of the Great Famine...One of the most important books to come out of China in recent years.” ?*Ian Johnson, The New York Review of Books*

“The most stellar example of retrospective writing on the Mao period from any Chinese pen or computer.” ?*Perry Link, Chancellorial Chair for Innovative Teaching, Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages, University of California, Riverside*

“The first proper history of China's Great Famine.” ?*Anne Applebaum, The Washington Post*

“A monumental work comparable to Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize-winning work *The Gulag Archipelago*.” ?*Xu Youyu, Chinese Academy of Social Science*

About the Author

Yang Jisheng was born in 1940, joined the Communist Party in 1964, and worked for the Xinhua News Agency from January 1968 until his retirement in 2001. He is now a deputy editor at Yanhuang Chunqiu (Chronicles of History), an official journal that regularly skirts censorship with articles on controversial political topics. A leading liberal voice, he published the Chinese version of *Tombstone* in Hong Kong in May 2008. Eight editions have been issued since then. Yang Jisheng lives in Beijing with his wife and two children.

Translator Bio:

Stacy Mosher learned Chinese in Hong Kong, where she lived for nearly 18 years. A long-time journalist, Mosher currently works as an editor and translator in Brooklyn.

Guo Jian is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Originally trained in Chinese language and literature, Guo was on the Chinese faculty of Beijing Normal University until he came to the United States to study for his PhD in English in the mid-1980's.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joann Hamilton:

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Joyce Williams:

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