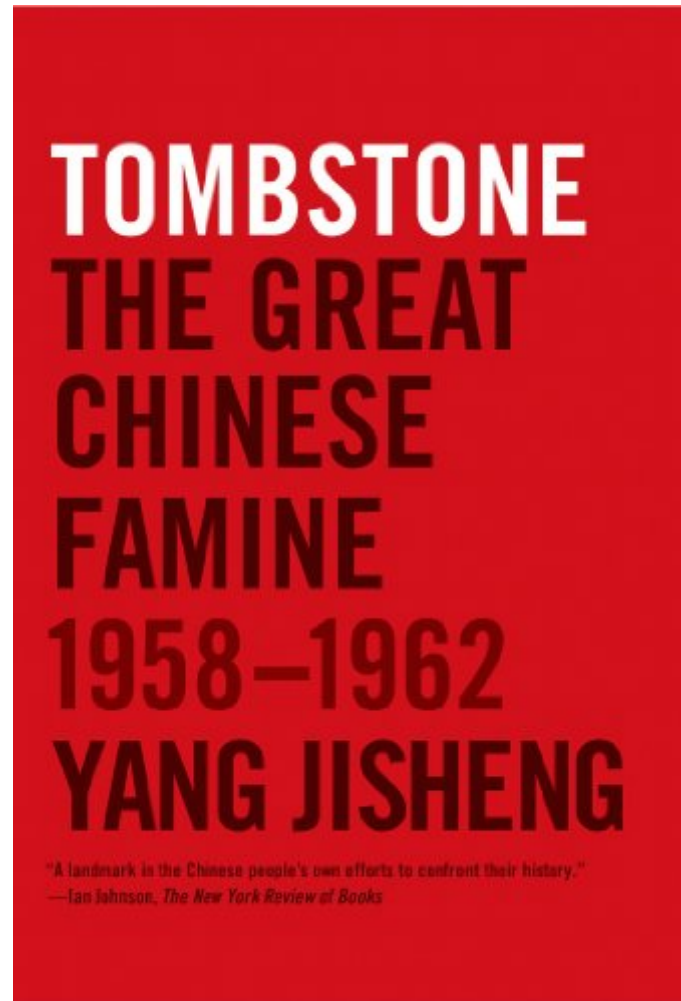


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Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962



Synopsis

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 lostâ "an enduring tombstone in memory of the deadâ "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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Customer Reviews

Recently I read a short review of this work in the New York times, and then to my surprise saw this 629 page book on the Chinese Famine of 1958-61 in my local bookstore. I thought, who would buy it? I did graduate study in Chinese History, speak Chinese, and lived in China in 1982. Now I am not in the China field. The topic is interesting to me, so I bought it and read it over the weekend. I was very pleasantly surprised. It's true that the writer's intention was to document the effects of the Great Leap Forward objectively, but I was also pleased that he was not afraid to draw conclusions and penetrate to the heart of the issue: Every major communist regime, the Soviet Union, the PRC, Cambodia, Vietnam, North Korea etc. caused mass starvation in the initial period when their zeal was high and they sought to get an iron grip on the population by controlling the food supply. The problem with these regimes is systemic; the suffering was not the result of "natural disasters" or "isolated abuses." Totalitarian systems have big problems pulling off mid-course corrections. They are not responsive to feedback until they go beyond the brink. In those systems everyone is a slave to their superiors and often they are also tyrants to those below them in the pecking order. The only way to prevent this from happening again is to educate the populace (stop calling them peasants) and gradually transition to openness and democracy. Other things that the writer brought out that I think people should realize:- Despite the depiction of the Communist movement as a "peasant movement," the regime caused great suffering among the farmers, killing more people than the Japanese invaders (1937-1945).

I read the original Chinese version, so this review is not about the translation quality of the book, but rather the content. And what a heavy content it is. This book is probably the most comprehensive body of work on the subject of the Great Chinese Famine to date. For those who has never heard of The Famine (and that makes for most people, since it is closely guarded by the CCP as part of their shameful history), it is a period from 1958-1962 where an estimated 36 million Chinese died of un-natural causes, all during peace time from ONE country. In comparison, the total number of civilian deaths in WWII from ALL combatant nations is estimated to be between 37 to 54 million. If you add in the number of reduced births (when people are starving they tend not to give birth), estimated at 40 million, then the total population reduction exceeds civilian war deaths in WWII. This book represents nearly two decades of meticulous research by the author, who was a reporter from the New China News Agency, with access to restricted documents and living survivors. He

conducted his research under the pretense of "researching farming policies in early years of PRC", and painstakingly pieced together birth/death statistics from multiple provinces heavily impacted by the famine. He also interviewed survivors, who gave live testimonies and names of the deceased and cause of death. The length of investigation, the thoroughness and above all, the author's dedication, is exemplary journalism rarely seen in today's world, let alone in China. The topic of The Great Famine is rarely talked about in China, and thoroughly hidden in history books as a period of "Great Difficulty".

Mao was determined to push the Soviets off their perch as leader of the world communist movement. Khrushchev boasted in May 1957 that the Russians would become the world's leading industrial and agricultural power within ten years. Mao sought a similar goal for China, over a much shorter period. Instead, his 'Great Leap Forward' generated the worst famine in history. An estimated 36 million Chinese starved to death during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The number killed exceed those killed by the hated Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 and even approached the overall mortality resulting from WWII. Author Yang Jisheng's credibility on the topic is excellent - he experienced the death of his father from starvation during this period (but didn't link the event to government failure until three decades later), and spent twenty years interviewing numerous survivors and studying local records while creating over 3,600 folders of information. He is also a Communist Party member, with inside knowledge of the system. The detailed level of his reporting creates unquestionable authority, but becomes hard to digest. Unfortunately, Yang doesn't speculate on how Mao's massive failures probably have led to China's government today being much more by consensus to avoid repeating these two disasters. The likely rationale for his avoiding this - elsewhere he states that staying away from commenting on current government leaders is essential to avoiding government reaction. The CCP had issued a March, 1953 resolution promoting the pooling of land for agricultural purposes. By the end of 1954, over 400,000 agricultural cooperatives had been established - often over the resistance of the peasants.

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