

Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China

Felix Wemheuer

ABSTRACT In the aftermath of the famine in 1962, Mao Zedong took formal responsibility for the failure of the Great Leap Forward in the name of the central government. Thousands of local cadres were made scapegoats and were legally punished. This article focuses on the question of how the different levels of the Chinese state, such as the central government, the province and the county, have dealt with the question of responsibility for the famine. The official explanation for the failure of the Great Leap will be compared to unofficial memories of intellectuals, local cadres and villagers. The case study of Henan province shows that local cadres are highly dissatisfied with the official evaluation of responsibility. Villagers bring suffering, starvation and terror into the discourse, but these memories are constructed in a way to preserve village harmony. This article explains why these different discourses about responsibility of the famine are unlinked against the background of the “dual society”; the separation between urban and rural China. Finally, it will be shown that the Communist Party was unable to convince parts of society and the Party to accept the official interpretation.

Your dogs and swine eat the food of men, and you do not make any restrictive arrangements. There are people dying from famine and you do not issue the stores of your granaries for them. When people die, you say “It is not owing to me, it is owing to the year.” In which way does this differ from stabbing a man and killing him and saying – “It was not I; it was the weapon?” Let your Majesty cease to lay the blame on the year, and instantly from all the nation the people will come to you. Mencius¹

In the world view of imperial China, natural disaster and famine have been seen as indicators of the fate of a dynasty. According to traditional Confucian values, the ruler should not ignore his responsibility for nourishing the people

1 James Legge (ed.), *The Chinese Classics, Vol. 2, The Works of Mencius* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970) p. 132.

and organizing famine aid in a case of a natural disaster.² After the foundation of “New China,” between 15 and 40 million people starved to death in the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward in the years between 1959 and 1961.³ Despite the fact that this famine represents the greatest human and economic catastrophe in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Communist Party of China (CCP) and its leader Mao Zedong managed to stay in power. How could the peasants and the Party members live on after such a human disaster and the total failure of government policy? This article focuses on how the different levels of the state and society, including the central government, the province, the county and villages, dealt with the famine and handled the question of responsibility.⁴

The aim of this article is not to explain *who* is responsible for the famine,⁵ but to understand in which ways the Chinese state and society have handled this question and reflect it in contemporary memories.⁶ In this context, I treat memories as a social construction according to the needs of a group in the present.⁷ Maurice Halbwachs introduced the term collective memory: different social groups such as classes, religious communities or families have their own collective memories, which are connected to special places where the group lives. If the

2 Jennifer Eileen Downs, “Famine policy and discourses on famine in Ming China 1368–1644,” unpublished PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1995), p. 42. see also Pierre-Etienne Will, R. Bin Wong and James Lee, *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650–1850* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1991).

3 The number of people who died as a result of the famine remains a controversial issue. Based on Chinese population statistics that were published in the early 1980s, scholars estimate different figures. Peng Xizhe calculated 23 million deaths in 14 provinces (Peng Xizhe, “Demographic consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China’s provinces,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1987), p. 649). Ansley Coale came to the conclusion that 16.5 million people died, and Basil Ashton counted 30 million deaths and 30 missing births (Basil Ashton and Kenneth Hill, “Famine in China, 1958–1961,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1984), p. 614). Jasper Becker estimated 43 to 46 million casualties on the basis of an internal investigation of the Chinese government (Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts – China’s Secret Famine* (London: Murray 1996), p. 272).

4 This article is an outcome of my dissertation. Felix Wemheuer, *Steinnudeln: Ländliche Erinnerungen und staatliche Vergangenheitsbewältigung der „Großen Sprung“ - Hungersnot in der chinesischen Provinz Henan (Stone Noodles: Rural and Official Memories of the Great Leap Famine in the Chinese Province Henan)* (Vienna: Peter Lang, 2007).

5 Western academics have already debated the question of who developed and promoted the idea of the Great Leap Forward in the central leadership. On this point see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 2 – The Great Leap Forward 1958–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Fredrick Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China’s Road to Disaster – Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward 1955–1959* (London: Sharpe, 1999); David Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy and Leadership in China – The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Alfred L. Chan, *Mao’s Crusade – Politics and Implementations in China’s Great Leap Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Thomas Bernstein, “Mao Zedong and the famine of 1959–1960: a study of wilfulness,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 186 (2006), pp. 421–45.

6 Regarding memories see Erik Mueggler, “Spectral chains: remembering the Great Leap Forward famine in a Yi community,” and Kimberley Manning “Communes, canteens, and creches: the gendered politics of remembering the Great Leap Forward,” in Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang (eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution – The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories – History, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 100.

7 Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen (The Social Frames of Memory)* (Frankfurt (M): Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 360.

group splits or these places are destroyed, there is no longer a basis to reconstruct collective memories.⁸

First, this article describes how the central state and the official historiography of the Party have dealt with the famine. Official memories were created by high-ranking Party historians who were loyal to the interpretation given by the central government.⁹ Second, it shows how intellectuals, local cadres and journalists use the gaps in the official canon to present their own views of the past. Despite the censorship, unofficial memories are published in historical magazines and books as long as the interpretations do not challenge the official interpretation directly. Against this background, memories in the PRC could be divided between official and unofficial. As Ruby Watson has pointed out in her studies about Eastern Europe, the socialist states failed to convince society of their interpretations of the past. An alternative “underground memory” always existed.¹⁰

Third, this article analyses the official history of Henan province¹¹ and shows how the provincial leadership handled the question of responsibility. In 1958, Henan became a model province of the Great Leap for the whole of China. Since Henan was the site of the most radical implementation of the Great Leap policies, the famine was more severe here than most other regions. Henan was the location of an episode of mass starvation in the notorious “Xinyang Incident” (*Xinyang shijian* 信阳事件), which in turn became the catalyst for the central government to stop the famine.¹² In this context, I explore the ways in which three counties in Henan and its historians dealt with the famine. The article then turns to the memories of peasants and local cadres in three villages based on a case study of three counties in Henan where I conducted oral history interviews with cadres and peasants in 2005. Given that peasants normally do not write their memoirs, oral history is a way to discover how people at the grass roots level of society remember the past and how they answer the question of responsibility. Finally, the article concludes by answering questions about the reasons for missing links between different discourses relating to responsibility.

The Central State: Explanation within the Soviet Tradition

In late 1960, the Party leadership was no longer able to ignore the famine. To justify the new policies, the central government had to give an explanation

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *Stätten der Verkündigungen im Heiligen Land (The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land)* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), p. 166.

9 Regarding party history in China see Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Party historiography,” in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Using the Past to Serve the Present – Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

10 Rubie S. Watson (ed.), *Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism* (Houston: School of American Research Press, 1994), p. 4.

11 Regarding the Great Leap Forward in Henan see Jean-Luc Domenach, *The Origins of the Great Leap Forward – The Case of One Province* (Oxford: Westminster Press, 1995). This book focuses on the politics in Henan from 1949 to 1958 and not on the famine.

12 Interview with a Party historian from Henan, 5 August 2005 (Zhengzhou).

for what went wrong during the Great Leap Forward. It had to decide whether or not officials of the central, provincial or local leadership should be replaced. The explanation for the failure of the Great Leap was linked to the question of responsibility, although assessing responsibility was, as shown below, a highly political and problematic exercise. Given the visibility of the famine and the long-standing linkage between state legitimacy and ability to provide sustenance for the population, assessing responsibility was critical for the legitimacy of the CCP, both for Party members and the population at large.

Between late 1960 and 1961, the Party made great efforts to fight the famine. The Chinese government imported grain to feed starving peasants, public dining halls were abolished and private plots reintroduced. The first important discussion on the question of the responsibility for the failure of the Great Leap took place at the so-called 7,000 cadres meeting in 1962.

To analyse the question of how the central leadership handled the question of responsibility for the famine, this article compares three documents which play a central role in the official historiography in China: first, the speech that Chinese president Liu Shaoqi gave at the 7,000 cadres conference in January 1962; second, the “Resolution for Party history since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China,” promulgated by the central leadership in 1981 as a new canon on post-1949 history; and third, the two 1993 volumes *Reflections on Certain Major Decisions and Events* by the retired central leader Bo Yibo which could be read as an official comment on the canon.¹³ Despite the fact that Bo Yibo is a veteran cadre and not a Party historian, his interpretation is often cited in official and unofficial books about the history of the PRC from 1949 to 1965.

In all three documents, the main problem is not the famine itself, which is attributed to the failure of economic construction, “leftist” mistakes and the split in the Party at the Lushan conference. The documents focus on the mistakes and shortcomings of Party policies, not on the scale of human suffering in the villages. The explanation provided by the central government was within the framework of orthodox Marxism-Leninism. The three documents mention very similar reasons for the failure of the Great Leap Forward: leftist mistakes, the lack of experience with socialist construction and the weather as an external force.

Within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist Party historiography, established in the 1938 Soviet *Short Course of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, the history of the Party was written as a struggle of the correct line of the centre against rightist and leftist tendencies.¹⁴ In Liu Shaoqi’s speech, the Resolution and Bo Yibo’s book, the Great Leap was presented as

13 Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shijian de huigu (Reflections on Certain Major Decisions and Events)* (Beijing: Zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1993).

14 For a more detailed comparison with the Soviet Union see Felix Wemheuer, “Regime changes of memories: creating official history of the Ukrainian and Chinese famine under state socialism and after the Cold War,” *Kritika Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2009), pp. 31–59.

a leftist mistake which the central government committed as a result of over-enthusiasm. As a result, the history of leftist mistakes was written as a tragedy of good intentions.¹⁵ Crimes which caused millions of deaths could be de-emphasized as mistakes. Both the theoretical explanation and the language had been borrowed from the Soviet tradition. In a speech in 1980 regarding Party history, Deng Xiaoping said that Mao Zedong, along with other leading comrades from the central leadership such as Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and himself, had become a “hot head” (*tounao fare* 头脑发热) during the high tide of the Great Leap.¹⁶ The Resolution explained that facing victory the comrades from the central government and the lower ranks became arrogant and self-satisfied (*shengli mianqian zizhang le jiaoao ziman qingxu* 胜利面前滋长了骄傲自满情绪).¹⁷ These were almost the same words which were used in the Chinese translation of the *Short Course* to explain the over-enthusiasm (*chengjiu er tounao fare* 成就而头脑发热) of local cadres during the collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union in 1929.¹⁸

In this famous internal speech in 1962, Liu Shaoqi quoted a peasant from Hunan who said that the catastrophe was 70 per cent man-made and 30 per cent caused by nature. Liu acknowledged only that this evaluation was true in some regions of China.¹⁹ In 1981, when the central committee established the new canon, they did not go so far. The Resolution mentioned leftism first, then the weather and the retreat of the Soviet experts. Another interesting fact is that in his speech Liu did not even mention the retreat of the Soviet experts as a reason for the failure of the Great Leap. In sum, the external forces like the climate and the policy of the Soviet Union played a greater role in the Resolution of 1981 than in the internal explanation in the aftermath of the famine in 1962. Like leftism, the lack of experience in socialist construction was a justification which was often used in the Soviet Union. Liu Shaoqi presented the failure of Great Leap as a “study fee” (*xuefei* 学费).²⁰

At the 7,000 cadres conference in 1962, Mao Zedong acknowledged formal responsibility for the leftist mistakes in the name of the Central Committee²¹; in particular he cited the steel campaign, the “backyard furnace,” and unfeasibly

15 See William A. Joseph, “A tragedy of good intentions – post-Mao views of the Great Leap Forward,” *Modern China*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1986), pp. 419–57.

16 Deng Xiaoping: “Dui qi cao ‘guanyu jianguo yilai de ruogan lizhi wenti de jueyi’ de yijian” (“Draft the suggestions for ‘Resolution on some questions concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC’”), in *Deng Xiaoping wenxian*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 296.

17 “Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi” (“Resolution on some questions concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC”) *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 1 July 1981.

18 *Liangong (bu) dangshi jianming jiaocheng* (*Short Course in History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1975), p. 339.

19 Liu Shaoqi, “Zai kuoda de zhongyang gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua” (“Speech on the expanded working conference of the Central Committee”), in *Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi: Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenjian xuanbian* (*A Collection of Important Documents after the Foundation of the State*) (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 15, p. 88.

20 *Ibid.* p. 23.

21 Bo Yibo, *Reflections on Certain Major Decisions and Events*, Vol. 2, p. 27.

high planning targets and grain procurement quotas.²² Mao took responsibility for these policies as the chairman of the CCP. In his speech about Party history in 1980, Deng Xiaoping again assigned responsibility for the errors of the Great Leap to the central leadership.²³ The same explanation was given in the Resolution of 1981 and in the book by Bo Yibo. In addition to the acknowledgement of formal responsibility, direct responsibility was heaped on local cadres for violation of Party rules and crimes against the masses. Liu Shaoqi attacked them for using a Kuomintang work style.²⁴ Using local cadres as scapegoats was a long-practised tradition in both the Soviet and Chinese tradition. In China, this tradition goes back to the myth of the good emperor who wants the best for the people and evil local officials who are driven by selfish motives. Thousands of local cadres were sent to prison. Additionally, villagers were criticized for their ideology of “peasant egalitarianism” (*nongmin juegui pingjunzhuyi* 农民绝对平均主义) by Bo Yibo which was seen as a reason for the radicalization of the Great Leap in 1958 and the “wind of communism.”²⁵ This theory was used by Stalin in the early 1930s when he blamed the rural workers for bringing ideas of peasant egalitarianism into the factories.²⁶

To summarize, the central government assumed responsibility for the famine only indirectly and formally. The Party historiography excluded the suffering and starvation of the peasants from their discourses. Peasants were not accorded the status of victims.

Memories of Intellectuals and the Question of Responsibility

In this context, I raise the question of whether intellectuals in China have challenged the official interpretation of responsibility. In contrast to the peasants, in the PRC intellectuals have access to public space and they publish their memoirs of the Great Leap in books and historical magazines.²⁷

In 2001, I interviewed eight urban intellectuals who were sent to the countryside in 1958 in order to support the Great Leap. In the context of this qualitative case study, I held oral history interviews with retired teachers of the Agriculture University and People’s University in Beijing. These intellectuals shared the official interpretation of the leftist tragedy of good intentions.²⁸ For example, Liu

22 Feng Xianzhi and Jin Chongji, *Mao Zedong zhuan 1949–1976 (A Biography of Mao Zedong)* (Beijing: Zhongyangwenxian chubanshe, 2003), Vol. 2, p. 1181.

23 Deng Xiaoping, “Draft the suggestions,” p. 296.

24 Lui Shaoqi, “Speech on the expanded working conference,” p. 39.

25 Bo Yibo, *Reflections on Certain Major Decisions and Events*, Vol. 2, p. 1284.

26 Stalin, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 13, p. 105.

27 For example Ge Jinwei, “Fudan daxue de ‘Dayuejin’ guihua” (“The planning of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ at Fudan University”), and Wei Junyi, “‘Hou re’ de niandai, hou re de xin” (“Hot time, hot heart”) in Zhang Zhanbin, Liu Jiehui and Zhang Guohua (eds.), “*Dayuejin*” he sannian kunnan shiqi de Zhongguo (*The “Great Leap Forward” and China in the Period of Three Years of Difficulties*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe, 2001), and Liu Lian, “Xushui ‘dayuejin’ qinshiji” (“The ‘Great Leap Forward’ in Xushui – experienced history”), *Bainian Chao*, No. 7 (1999), pp. 53–59.

28 Felix Wemheuer, *Chinas Großer Sprung nach vorne (1958–1961) Von der kommunistischen Offensive in die Hungersnot - Intellektuelle erinnern sich (China’s Great Leap Forward 1958–1961: From the Communist Offensive to the Famine – Intellectuals Remember)* (Münster: LitVerlag, 2004).

Lian, a female teacher at the Agricultural University, was sent with hundreds of colleagues to the model county Xushui in Hebei province. In her memoirs and the interview, Liu Lian presents over-enthusiastic local cadres who reported false production figures, and ignorant peasants who divided the cloth of the co-operative store “to each according to his needs” during the high tide of egalitarianism. In contrast to the local people, she realized at once that the steel campaign and the deep ploughing were disastrously destructive. According to her memoirs, she protested against the smashing of a water wheel for the steel campaign:

As the wok of the last family was destroyed, it was still not enough to meet the production goals in a [cadre’s] notebook. He moved his head, came back and wanted to smash the waterwheel of the production team. I couldn’t stand this and stood in his way: “The waterwheel is an important production means and is needed for irrigation.” With cold eyes he looked at me: “Would you like to take over my position as a cadre and look how it is?” For a moment I did not know what to say. He moved back to the cadres of the production team standing next to him and commanded: “Smash it!” After the three waterwheels were destroyed, the necessary figure was reached.²⁹

Liu Lian’s story is interesting within the context of responsibility. Local cadres seem to have no choice, because they are responsible for the fulfilment of the steel quota and not for its disastrous results in the villages. Liu Lian presents herself as a good Marxist-Leninist who tried to prevent the catastrophic results of the policies of the Great Leap in the name of the Party. In her story, she reminded the local cadres of their responsibility for the villagers and their economic resources. However, Liu Lian became silent under the political pressure in the end. In the campaign against Peng Dehuai and “right-wing opportunists,” her husband, the famous Party historian He Ganzhi, was singled out to be struggled against. In this argumentation, the intellectuals had no other choice than to hope for a policy change from above.

Other intellectuals saw themselves as naïve children who blindly trusted Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. They hoped under this leadership the Chinese nation would overcome times of difficulties.³⁰ Wei Junyi who, in 1958, had been sent to the Zhangjiakou region in Hebei province, writes in his memoirs that he did not understand anything at all, after he saw the campaigns of the Great Leap with his own eyes. In the article “Hot time, hot heart,” he compares himself with a naïve child who is beaten by his mother again and again, but still loves her.³¹ Casting himself in the role of dependent and ignorant child, he avoids any responsibility.

In the memoirs and oral history interviews of many intellectuals about the Great Leap, the famine and suffering of the peasants is not an important topic. They remember the villagers as a faceless mass who blindly executed the

29 Liu Lian, “The ‘Great Leap Forward’ in Xushui,” p. 57.

30 Interview with Zhang Chengguang, May 2002 (Beijing), interview with Zhang Zhiguo, 5 August 2005 (Zhengzhou).

31 Wei Junyi, “Hot time, hot heart,” p. 143.

orders of the Party.³² In contrast to “rightists,” the urban intellectuals who were sent to the countryside to support the Great Leap had privileges in the state supply system and most of them left the villages in 1959 before the famine broke out in earnest. Their greatest fear was to be labelled “right-wing opportunists.” Knowledge of the latest *People’s Daily* article and the correct Party line was more important for their survival than was access to food. Since intellectuals have been left out of official accounts of responsibility, they can avoid challenging official historiography when they present their versions of either dependency or attempting to speak truth to power. The turning point in their biographies was not the famine but the Cultural Revolution, when most of them lost their privileged status. It is thus not surprising that the Cultural Revolution looms much larger as a topic in the memoirs of intellectuals, and that there is much less attention paid to the Great Leap.

Local Cadres and their Discourses of Suffering, Starvation and Terror

Since the late 1990s, a small number of local cadres have published their memoirs of the Great Leap Forward in historical magazines or in volumes on post-1949 history. They are already retired and some of them are using the last years of their lives to tell their own version of the famine. In contrast to intellectuals, they address the question of suffering, starvation and the terror of the villagers. Wang Ding, the Party secretary of Huangjiang county in Guangxi province, was removed from office in 1957. He remembers the policy of terror of his successor in detail. After the false report of a bumper harvest, the cadres started a campaign to collect the “hidden grain” from the peasants. As a result, a famine broke out in the spring of 1959. The new Party secretary ordered the execution of every person who tried to steal grain from the full grain stores.³³ In order to prevent a mass exodus to Guizhou province, peasants were tortured and beaten to death. Wang Ding tells the reader nothing about his own position during the famine and does not even mention the role of the central or the provincial government. The retired cadre describes his successor as someone who was willing to climb over mountains of corpses to build up socialism. As in the official version, Wang presents local cadres as the major culprits, but he describes their “mistakes” in detail. Unlike other memoirs, Wang here mentions the full name of this main culprit, Zeng Yang. In 1961, Zeng Yang was expelled from the CCP and sentenced to five years in prison.³⁴

In contrast to the official Party historiography, Wang Ding broaches the issues of starvation, terror and suffering in detail. He also answers the question of responsibility within the official framework. As a local cadre, he presents another

32 Felix Wemheuer, *Chinas Großer Sprung nach vorne*, p. 93.

33 Wang Ding, “Yige da weiqing’ de muhou” (“The background of a great Sputnik”), in Zhang, Liu and Zhang, *The “Great Leap Forward” and China in the Period of Three Years of Difficulties*, p. 58.

34 *Ibid.* p. 59.

county official as the main culprit for particular crimes. Wang himself is the good guy in his story, because he was removed from office in 1957 for supporting the household responsibility system (*baochan daohu* 包产到户).

Liang Zhiyuan's memoirs are another example of an impressive description of starvation and terror.³⁵ He held the position of vice-director of the bureau of the People's Congress of Bo county in Anhui province. According to him, the famine in Bo county was caused by false reports and unfeasibly high planning targets and grain procurement quotas. Liang remembers how the cadres used hunger as a weapon to control the peasants. The Party committee established check points with armed militia at every bus station and crossroads to prevent the villagers from escaping. Despite this control, over 40,000 peasants managed to flee to Henan province in the winter of 1959. In 1960 the county Party committee gave Liang the job of investigating the starvation in the production brigades. He found that over 25 per cent of the members of the investigated brigade had starved to death.³⁶ In contrast to Wang Ding, Liang does not mention the names of the culprits but uses XX. This is a conventional form in Chinese documents when someone wants to make a case and present a model of wrongdoing, but not make a formal accusation against an individual. In the end of his article, Liang raises the question why so many people starved in Bo county when, at the same time, neighbouring counties suffering from drought were still able to support themselves.

Wang argues that the "quality" (*suzhi* 素质) of the cadres from Bo was bad and they committed serious mistakes during the implementation of policies from above.³⁷ Once again, local cadres have to play the role of scapegoats for particular actions even in the narrative of their colleagues. "Quality" has been a term in official rhetoric since the 1980s. The term is often used by the government to emphasize the need for an improvement of moral values and education. In the view of Liang, the Great Leap and the People's Commune movement were great mistakes for which "we" were punished with great economic loss and the hunger of the masses. This means that the central government was responsible for the wrong "grand strategy." However, Liang says in the end that China will become a rich, strong and democratic country under the leadership of the theory of Deng Xiaoping and the "three represents" of Jiang Zemin. It is unclear whether he really shows his loyalty to the central government or just uses that formal phrase to satisfy the censors.

To sum up, in contrast to the memories of intellectuals, the peasants were not a faceless mass in the memoirs of local cadres, but the suffering victims who

35 Liang Zhiyuan, "'Dayuejin' zai Anhui Bo xian" ("The 'Great Leap Forward' in Bo county in Anhui"), *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao*, No. 75 (2000), pp. 5–31.

36 *Ibid.* p. 29.

37 For the discourse on "suzhi" see Rachel Murphy, "Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: 'population quality' discourse, demographic translation and primary education," *The China Quarterly*, No. 177 (2004), pp. 1–20, and Andy Kipnis, "Suzhi: a keyword approach," *The China Quarterly*, No. 186 (2006), pp. 295–313.

struggled for survival. They describe the terror and the human suffering of the peasants in detail.

Henan Province: Avoiding Local Responsibility

In the context of the Great Leap Forward, Henan is a very interesting case, because in 1958 the province was praised by the Party press as a model for the whole of China. The first people's commune was established in Suiping county in Henan. In 1960, Henan was hit by one of the most serious famines in the country. In the PRC, the history of a province has to be written within the framework of national history. There are no Party resolutions for provincial history. Local historians write their publications according to the canon of the central government. There was significant variation in death rates in different areas of China, but the official interpretation remains silent on why this was so. This begs a serious question, for provinces like Henan and Xinyang in particular, which had such high death rates that the starvation there prompted a change in central government policy. While the natural population increase of China fell to -4.57 (/1,000) in 1960, Henan lost 25.58 (/1,000) of its population. The mortality rate of Henan in 1960 was higher than the national average (26.3 compared to 25.4 per 1,000 population), but less than in provinces such as Anhui, Guizhou or Qinghai.³⁸ According to official figures the famine caused two million deaths in Henan.³⁹ Cao Shuji mentions 2,939,000 "irregular deaths" based on the statistics of the county gazettes of Henan.⁴⁰ Even at the county level in Henan, the extent of the death rates varied very strikingly.⁴¹

The official provincial historiography continues to avoid the question of responsibility for the Henan famine today. For example, the *Gazettes of Henan Province* (*shengzhi* 省志), over 40 volumes, are written within the framework of national Chinese history and the Party Resolution of 1981. Hundreds of pages of statistics show the local conditions, but the authors do not compare these facts and statistics with the national level. The reader has no way of knowing that the death and birth rates of Henan show many more irregularities than in most other provinces, and of course the question of *who* is responsible for these irregularities does not come up at all.

The same is true of county gazettes (*xianzhi* 县志). In China, the county is a bastion of the state bureaucracy and an important level for the implementation of central policies in the villages. Every county has to write its own history within the framework of the official canon. In the gazettes of the counties where I

38 Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China – State, Rural Society and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Forward* (Stanford: University Press of California, 1996), p. 38.

39 Zhang Linnan, "Guanyu fan Pan, Yang, Wang shijian" ("On the Anti-Pan, Yang, Wang incident"), in Zhonggong Henan shengwei dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui (ed.), *Fengyu chunqiu – Pan Fusheng shiwen jinian ji* (*Wind and Rain, Spring and Autumn – Poetry and Articles in the Memory of Pan Fusheng*) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 323.

40 Cao Shuji, *Dajihuang – 1959–1961 nian de Zhongguo renkou* (*The Great Famine – The Population of China from 1959 to 1961*) (Hong Kong: Dangdai guoji chubanshe gongsi, 2005), p. 264.

41 Wemheuer, *Steinmudeln*, pp. 151–57.

conducted oral history interviews (Xin'an,⁴² Yiyang⁴³ and Runan⁴⁴), only a few pages were written about the Great Leap Forward. The central government orders the committees for local history to describe the “mistakes” after 1949 very briefly and without great detail.⁴⁵ Even the death rates given in the county gazettes are much lower than the internal statistics published by the provincial government.⁴⁶ The official national historiography and the formal responsibility that is attributed to the central government provide a framework to prevent provincial and county historians from raising the question as to who is primarily responsible for the great extent of the famine in Henan.

In addition to the problem of how to explain the high death rates, the provincial government and their historians in Henan had to decide how to evaluate the power struggle between the inner Party factions of Pan Fusheng (潘复生, 1908–80), the first Party secretary of the province, and Wu Zhipu (吴芝圃, 1906–67), the second secretary. The province was established by a unification of Henan and Pingyuan provinces in 1954, and the Party was divided in two factions: the old Henan faction was led by Wu Zhi and the Pingyuan faction by Pan Fusheng.⁴⁷ Pan Fusheng, as first Party secretary of Henan, was labelled as a “rightist” for his moderate agrarian policies in 1958. The violent campaign against him and his followers in the autumn of 1958 left deep wounds within the Party. His successor Wu Zhipu implemented the Great Leap Forward very radically. At that time, Mao Zedong and the central government in Beijing supported the faction of Wu Zhipu. The Henanese radicalism resulted in a catastrophe. In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward in 1962, the central government tried to avoid a split by enforcing a compromise: Pan Fusheng was rehabilitated, but Wu Zhipu was not officially criticized.⁴⁸ Pan and Wu were transferred out of Henan and a new leadership was put in place.

One option for the Party historians could have been to present Wu Zhipu as a fanatical leftist who was responsible for the famine in Henan and Pan Fusheng as the realistic and moderate agent of the real spirit of the Party. Such an option was not possible in Henan, however, because of contradictions between the old “Henan” faction and the “Pingyuan” faction in the Party which still existed after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, Pan Fusheng could not be portrayed as the honest model cadre, because he supported the ultra-left

42 Xin'an difangshi zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (ed.), *Xin'an xianzhi* (*Gazette of Xin'an County*) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989).

43 Yiyang xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (ed.), *Yiyang xianzhi* (*Gazette of Yiyang County*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1996).

44 Henansheng Runan xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (ed.), *Runan xianzhi* (*Gazette of Runan County*) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997).

45 Vivian Wagner, “Erinnerungsverwaltung: die politische Instrumentalisierung von Staatsarchiven in der VR China” (“The administration of memories: political instrumentalization of the state archives in the PRC”), unpublished dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2003, p. 471.

46 Henansheng tongjiju (ed.), *Henan sheng renkou tongji ziliao huibian 1949–88* (*Collection of Population Statistics of Henan Province 1949–88*) (Zhengzhou: 1989), pp. 556–617.

47 Interview with a Party historian from Henan, 5 August 2005 (Zhengzhou).

48 *Wind and Rain, Spring and Autumn*, p. 290.

during the Cultural Revolution when he was a leader of Heilongjiang province. As a result, in provincial Party historiography, both leaders were portrayed as good Marxist-Leninists and revolutionaries and the Provincial Committee for Party History published memory volumes on them.⁴⁹ In the volume about Wu Zhipu, his responsibility for the campaigns against Pan and thousands of other Party cadres is not even mentioned. This solution might be very unsatisfying for the cadres who were victimized by the leadership of Wu Zhipu in 1958, but it helped to avoid discussing the responsibility of the provincial leadership.

Local Cadres and the Responsibility for the “Xinyang Incident”

In addition to the evaluation of factionalism, the Party historians had also to come to terms with the so-called “Xinyang Incident” and the question of responsibility. “Incident” is the official label for mass starvation which took place in Xinyang district in the south of Henan between the spring of 1959 and the winter of 1960. One historian who had access to the provincial archive said that over two million peasants starved and were beaten to death in this area.⁵⁰ The district had only ten million inhabitants before the outbreak of the famine. Like Henan province, Xinyang became famous as a model in China in 1958. After false reports of a record harvest, the state even purchased the peasants’ grain rations and seed grain.⁵¹ The local government, which was supported by Wu Zhipu, blockaded the region in an attempt to prevent anyone from leaving. In 1961 the central government sent the PLA to dismiss the Xinyang leadership. After the dismissal of Lu Xianwen as the leader of the Xinyang region in late 1960, thousands of local cadres were arrested and punished for the Xinyang Incident. However, the new leadership did not accuse them of leftist tendencies, but attacked them for the restoration of landlord rule.⁵² The new leaders ordered “extra tuition in the democratic revolution” (*minzhu geming buke* 民主革命补课). Mao Zedong supported this interpretation,⁵³ because he could not believe that the crimes of the Xinyang Incident were committed by people who had implemented recent Party policies correctly. This label had catastrophic ramifications for the punished cadres because they were not rehabilitated. The Red Guards even struggled against Lu Xianwen as a rightist during the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁴

49 *Ibid.*; Zhonggong Henan shengwei dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui (ed.), *Jinian Wu Zhipu wenji* (Collected Works in Memory of Wu Zhipu) (Beijing: Zhongyang dangshi chubanshe, 1995).

50 Interview with a Party historian from Henan, 5 August 2005 (Zhengzhou).

51 Hu Tiyun and Hou Zhiying, *Dangdai Henan jianshi 1949–1998* (Short History of Modern Henan 1949–1998) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1999), p. 136.

52 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia nongye weiyuanhui bangongting (ed.), “Zhonggong zhongyang dui Xinyang diwei guanyu zhengfeng zhengshe yundong he shengchang jiuzai gongzuo qingkuang de baogao de pizhi,” *Nongye jitihua zhongyao wenjian huibian* (A Collection of Important Documents Regarding the Collectivization of Agriculture) (Beijing: Zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 2, p. 423.

53 Gao Hua, “Da zaihuang yu siqing yundong de qi yuan” (“The great famine and the origins of the four clean up movement”), 2000, <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wkgb.asp>.

54 Li Rui, “Xinyang shijian’ jiqi jiaoxun” (“The lessons of the ‘Xinyang Incident’”), *Yanhuang chunqiu*, No. 4 (2002), p. 21.

Today, the official interpretation of the Xinyang Incident is given within the framework of the leftism of the local leadership. As in the official historiography, the local cadres were made scapegoats.⁵⁵ However, in most of the Chinese books on the Great Leap Forward the event is not even mentioned. In written memoirs, retired local cadres from Henan have challenged the views of the provincial Party historiography. Their treatment as scapegoats, especially for the Xinyang Incident, has caused deep dissatisfaction. Unlike the narratives of Wang Ding or Liang Zhiyuan, cadres from Xinyang are questioning the official evaluation of the famine rather than blaming individual cadres for misguided implementation.

As an example, Zhang Shufan, who held the position of vice-secretary of the bureau of the Party committee in Xinyang, raised the question of whether the local famine should be called the “Xinyang Incident” or “Henan Incident.”⁵⁶ This implicitly means that the provincial leadership under Wu Zhipu has primary responsibility for it rather than the leader of the region, Lu Xianwen. In his memoirs, Lu Xianwen is an ignorant and heartless leader who tried to hide the fact that hundreds of thousand peasants were starving in Xinyang, but he was shielded by Wu Zhipu. Zhang explains that he demanded the opening of the grain stores because he did not want to take personal responsibility for starvation. Because of his suggestion, Lu Xianwen suspended him from work until early 1960.

Zhang Shufan quotes from a conversation which took place between Wu Zhipu, Tao Zhu, the Party secretary of the central south region, and himself after the People’s Liberation Army had changed the government of Xinyang in 1961. According to his memoirs Wu said to him: “Comrade Zhang Shu, the Party committee of the province did not know in the beginning that the Xinyang region had problems. I heard that you and Lu Xianwen had different opinions. Why did you not tell me about it? Maybe the problem had not become that serious.” Zhang replied: “Comrade Wu, how can you say that the Party committee of the province did not know about it. Wasn’t the criticism organized by you?”⁵⁷ Tao Zhu both inferred and stated that everyone was aware that the criticism against Zhang was wrong, but now he has been rehabilitated he should not speak about the topic again. This story shows that Zhang is deeply dissatisfied that Wu Zhipu was not punished and that the central government saw his rehabilitation as ending the debate about responsibility.

In his article Zhang also doubts the sense of the rectification movement of 1961. All the secretaries working for the Party committees of the cities and counties were expelled from the Party and 200,000 local cadres were educated by “special treatment.” When he saw that soldiers chained up cadres and dismissed them, he began to cry, asking himself how all these cadres could be

55 Regarding the “Xinyang Incident” see Becker, *Hungry Ghosts – China’s Secret Famine*, p. 112.

56 Zhang Shufan, “Xinyang shijian: yige chentong de lishi jiaoxun” (“The Xinyang incident: bitter lessons from history”), *Bainian chao*, No. 12 (1998), p. 44.

57 *Ibid.* p. 43.

counterrevolutionaries. After the establishment of the new leadership, he was criticized again for his objections to the punishment of his colleagues. Zhang still hopes today that history will bring justice to the cadres of Xinyang in the end. He ends his article with the statement that the people of Henan kept Pan Fusheng in good memory, but not Wu Zhipu. This statement opposes the official history of the province. Zhang is unhappy that Wu was never punished and he sees his own rehabilitation in 1962 for his criticism during the Great Leap as a way to force him to be silent about the responsibility of the leadership of Henan.

One of the most shocking articles published in the PRC is the memoir of She Dehong, a retired cadre from the municipality of Xinyang. He writes that despite the fact that the masses were deeply dissatisfied, nobody dares to make their own comments against the background of the official evaluation of the Xinyang Incident, even though it lacks accurate details.⁵⁸ In contrast to the memories of Zhang Shufan, She Dehong describes the starvation in detail. On a trip back to his home village in December 1959, he saw a mountain of over 100 corpses. After he arrived, he realized that half his family had starved to death. In nearly every village in Huaibin county, cannibalism took place.⁵⁹ After he came back from his home village, he was afraid to tell the truth to his supervisors because he would be struggled against. The higher-ranking cadres could even beat him to death and suicide would have been treated as a confession of guilt. It seems that She Dehong has to justify his silence about the starvation – even to himself – to this day. He wants to make the reader understand that it was very dangerous to speak about the starvation during the famine.

In the spring of 1960, nutrition in the public mess halls improved somewhat. The corpses began to smell horribly, but people recovered enough strength to bury them. In order to cover up the extent of the starvation, the local government decided to dig mass graves with over 100 corpses in them.⁶⁰ She Dehong estimates that the grain in the grain stores of Xinyang was enough to feed 8 million peasants with a ration of 400 grams per day. If the government had opened the grain stores, nobody would have starved.⁶¹

Even though She Dehong does not directly attack the official evaluation of Wu Zhipu, he finds that the punishment of thousands of local cadres in the rectification campaign of 1961 was not fair. He is deeply upset that so many peasants starved to death. Thus although these local cadre accounts differ in their emphases and particular content, in aggregate they bring the suffering, starvation and terror of the Great Leap Famine to the discourse, because they have family connections in the villages and saw it with their own eyes. They are unhappy with the scapegoating of local cadres, especially in Xinyang, and are particularly

58 She Dehong, “Guanyu ‘Xinyang shijian’ de yishu” (“Memories of the ‘Xinyang Incident’”), in Zhongguo nongcunyanjiu bianji weiyuanhui (ed.), *Zhongguo nongcun yanjiu 2002 quan* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003), p. 325.

59 *Ibid.* p. 329.

60 *Ibid.* p. 330.

61 *Ibid.* p. 331.

unhappy because thousands were labelled as counterrevolutionaries rather than mere “leftists.” Even 50 years after the event, retired cadres feel the need to express their own views of the famine and challenge the official evaluation of the responsibility in Henan.

Responsibility in the Memories of the Villagers

In order to access the memories of the villagers, I went to four villages in Henan in February and July 2005 and conducted oral history interviews with over 25 peasants and cadres who are now over 65 years old and who would have been teenagers or adults during the famine. I visited two villages in Xin’an county near Luoyang in the west of Henan and conducted research in the county archives. The third village is located in Yiyang county. In summer 2005 I went to Judong, a village in Runan county which was under the administration of Xinyang during the famine.⁶² While in Xin’an and Yiyang county the death rates were relatively low, according to the memories of the villagers in Runan county, half the population starved to death. This article focuses only on the role the question of responsibility plays in the memories of the villagers.

All in all, the language of the villagers, cadres and peasants is not influenced by official Party historiography as strongly as the urban intellectuals. Keywords of the official historiography – such as communism, “three years of natural disaster,” left-wing radicalism or utopian socialism – did not play any role in the memories of the old villagers. In contrast, young villagers who helped me to find interviewees were often influenced by the official school text books. The former cadre Chen Chuwu remembered the Great Leap Forward as nothing but working in the fields and on the construction sites day and night.⁶³ Nobody remembered any utopian euphoric mood in 1958. While official historians blame peasant egalitarianism as one of the origins of leftist policies,⁶⁴ the villagers see themselves as victims of the Communist Party and its policies. When I asked the peasant Li Zhuru, who was 17 years old in 1958, whether he had been willing to join the People’s Commune, it seemed to him to be a strange question. He answered: “If you were willing or not, you just had to join.”⁶⁵ Nobody presented himself or herself as a former supporter of Mao Zedong and his movements which seem to be senseless today. Li Zhuru even called the whole Mao era a “waste of labour and money” (*laomin shangcai* 劳民伤财). Against this backdrop of total repudiation of the Mao era, everyone could avoid the question of their own responsibility. Most of my interviewees lost their belief in Mao Zedong during the famine. However, the central state played no important role in the memories of the villagers.

62 All names of persons and villages are pseudonyms.

63 Interview with Chen Chuwu, 12 February 2005 (Baotou, Xin’an county, Henan).

64 Bo Yibo, *Reflections on Certain Major Decisions and Events*, Vol. 2, p. 1285.

65 Interview with Li Zhuru, 12 February 2005 (Baotou, Xin’an county, Henan).

Stealing unripened grain (*chi qing* 吃青) and eating things like grass were the survival strategies of the peasants. In the mountain area in the west of Henan there was even a black market providing expensive food. The villagers see themselves as active victims, because they had their own survival strategies during the famine. In this context, the question of personal responsibility is relevant, because stealing or running away harmed other people. Statements like, “everybody was a thief, even the children” or “everybody just took care of himself,”⁶⁶ demonstrate that these survival strategies were widely accepted under the circumstances of the famine. In the village Judong in Runan county, the men from the production team fled to Qinghai province in 1959 and left their parents, wives and children alone at home. According to the memories of the villagers, most of the children and the elderly starved to death. In 1961 in Qinghai, after the news that private plots had been reintroduced and the famine was over, the men went back to Judong. In interviews, the women did not blame the men for running away. Against the experience of the co-operated exodus, cadres and peasants presented themselves as a united community in their memories.

In Judong, the villagers talked openly about cannibalism. Even the peasants who fled to Qinghai province heard rumours about cannibalism in Guangshan county in the Xinyang region. The student Zhang Xueli asked Wu Tiancheng, the former leader of the production team: “At that time people ate the corpses of people who had been starved before. Is that correct?” Wu answered: “Yes, corpses. At that time the people had no choice.”⁶⁷ Wu did not morally condemn cannibalism. Everyone in Judong heard about it, but nobody confessed his or her own involvement or mentioned names of people who did it. In doing so, nobody in particular could be blamed for these terrible events.

The cadres I interviewed did not deny their power and privileges during the famine. For example, Li Pengkui became the Party secretary of the production brigade in 1958. Even in the beginning he spoke out that the peasants were starving and a lot of them got dropsy. Li said: “At that time a cadre was like an emperor. You could be struggled against anytime he wanted. If he wanted you to sweep the street, you had to do it. I was the Party secretary of the brigade ... The few thousand people in the village were under my command.”⁶⁸ He said he was privileged (*shenghuo te shuhua* 生活特殊化), because the cadres managed the food in the public mess halls, the financial budget and the work point system. As a result, they could use hunger as a weapon. Li ordered even peasants with dropsy to work in the fields. In spite of the fact that he had so much power, he did not accept any personal responsibility for harming the hungry peasants or even raise the question of it. Today, Li believes that the Communist Party betrayed him as a loyal follower, because he did not get any pension. On the

66 *Ibid.*

67 Interview with Wu Tianchen, August 2005 (Judong, Runan county, Henan).

68 Interview with Li Pengkui, 11 February 2005 (Baotou, Xin'an county, Henan).

contrary, he presents himself as a victim. He regrets his dedication to the CCP, but he feels no personal guilt for his actions against the peasants.

In Henan, beatings and torture were aspects of daily life at the struggle meetings during the Great Leap Forward. Peasants and cadres told frightening stories about this political terror, but in most cases they did not mention any names of particular cadres. In the interviews, retired village cadres and children of former “rightists” criticized Mao Zedong and the Communist Party, but still tried to maintain harmony within the village. While the cadres show sympathy for the grievances of the “bad elements” and their children, the former outcasts of the village do not blame them. The memories of cadres, peasants, men and women had so much in common that I treat the rural neighbourhood in the natural villages as one united collective memory.

While the villagers believe that the central government was responsible for the famine, they did not demand an apology or compensation, but they are conscious of moral responsibility for the famine. Peasants were able to remember the power struggle between Wu Zhipu and Pan Fusheng which led to a radicalization of the Great Leap in Henan, but it does not seem to be important for them. Things are more complicated when it comes to assigning responsibility for the Xinyang Incident. Most of the villagers I interviewed had heard about the Xinyang Incident and the mass starvation, even in the counties close to Luoyang. In the aftermath of the famine, local cadres who joined an investigation team told their neighbors in Baotao about mountains of crops on the streets in the Xinyang region. The peasants outside Xinyang used a comparison with the “Incident” to explain that the situation of their villages was not that bad.⁶⁹

For the villagers in Judong which was under the administration of Xinyang during the famine, it was unclear who should be blamed. The young peasant woman Xuemei even asked me: “Who was responsible for the ‘Xinyang Incident’?”⁷⁰ The old cadre Li Minghu who was a manager of a public mess hall in 1958 said that Mao Zedong and the central government did not know about the mass starvation in Xinyang.⁷¹ Li was the only interviewee who referred to the legend of the good emperor and the evil local officials. The villagers remembered that the leader of the region, Lu Xianwen, was responsible for false reports in 1959, but they did not know that the Party secretary of their own county was sent to prison in 1961. The power struggle in the county leadership had no connection with their daily life.

The narrative of villagers differs from the official historiography in a striking way, but they share one thing in common. At the moment, neither the villagers nor the state want to raise the question of responsibility for particular crimes or actions. The memories are constructed in a way which saves the harmony in the villages.

69 Interview with Li Bin, 12 February 2005 (Baotou, Xin’an county, Henan).

70 Interview with Huang Xuemei, 8 August 2005 (Judong, Runan county, Henan).

71 Interview with Li Minghu, 9 August 2005 (Judong, Runan county, Henan).

Disconnected Discourses and the Hegemony of the CCP

In the PRC, different discourses about the responsibility for the Great Leap famine have developed. The memories of urban intellectuals are close to the official interpretation which tries to avoid the debate through the acknowledgment of the formal responsibility of the central government. In Henan, the dissatisfaction felt by local cadres with their role as scapegoats challenges the official memories. Local cadres from other regions blame colleagues for the excesses of the Great Leap. These cadres bring sensitive topics like starvation and cannibalism to the discourse. Local cadres from Henan raise the question of the moral and legal responsibility of the provincial government and Wu Zhipu. The collective memories in the villages included suffering and the privileges of the local cadres during the famine. The memories of the villagers are not influenced by the explanations of the official interpretation, things such as leftism or bad weather. The peasants see themselves as active victims who managed to survive.

Neither the state nor members of society want to discuss their own responsibility for any particular actions. At the same time, the official interpretation of responsibility which had been defined in the Resolution of 1981 fails to give a convincing answer to the question of responsibility; final judgements remain elusive. The discourses about the Great Leap are unlinked and have no connection with each other. As long as there is no link between the discussions of urban intellectuals, dissatisfied local cadres and the rural communities as a source for memories of starvation, the official interpretation will not lose its hegemonic position. In her research about the memories of the Cultural Revolution, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, has discussed a phenomenon she calls “fragmented memories.” She has pointed out that in different groups and factions of the Red Guard, rebels could remember their own suffering and see themselves as victims.⁷² Regarding the Great Leap, the memories are fragmented as well. This leads to the question of which social and political factors could explain these phenomena.

An objective reason for the disconnected discourses is the legacy of the dual society (*eryuan shehui* 二元社会) in China.⁷³ During the Mao era, urban and rural society was divided by the household registration system (*hukou* 户口) which forced the peasants to stay in their villages. These walls between cities and villages continue to exist in the minds of the Chinese people. I have seen that many intellectuals are not interested in the problems of the peasants. In the system of dual society, peasants had no access to the public space. In present-

72 Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “In search of a master narrative for 20th-century Chinese history,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 188 (2006), p. 1072. Regarding “fragmented memories” see also Lee and Yang, *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution*, p. 5.

73 Regarding the separation between rural and urban society see Sulamith Heins Potter, “The position of peasants in modern China’s social order,” *Modern China*, Vol. 9, No. 4. (1983), and Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden Cheek, “The construction of spatial hierarchies: China’s *hukou* and *danwei* system,” in Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich (eds.), *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 23–50.

day China, state-controlled labour union, businessmen's or artists' organizations were founded, but no peasant associations. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the Leninist Party does not require that high-ranking cadres in Beijing take the memories of local cadres from Henan seriously and understand them as part of a discourse about national history. Most historians of the counties in Henan accepted the official interpretation, because under this paradigm they can avoid discussing the responsibility that local governments might have for the famine.

The gap between urban and rural society also forms part of the large gap between the state and villages. In my interviews, even cadres of the rural townships believe they are not a part of the countryside.⁷⁴ My field study points out that archival documents written by county officials and memories of the peasants focus on different topics. Peasant strategies of survival, such as stealing unripened grain in the field, the so-called eating green, are hardly mentioned in the archival documents. On the one hand, professional historians in China have learned to focus on the leadership, not on the peasants. On the other, the official interpretation of the Great Leap has not reached the minds of the older villagers who experienced the famine. Urban intellectuals and historians are often not aware that collective memories of the famine continue to exist in rural communities. These might be the reasons why the memories and discourse about the famine are disconnected.

Moreover, there is no other event in post-1949 history that challenges the legitimacy of the CCP at such a high degree; the fact that millions of peasants starved in New China is a terrible shame. In the memories of the villagers, the famine is not an isolated event, but often linked to other disastrous experiences such as the Cultural Revolution or the corruption of today.⁷⁵ If intellectuals are looking for an ally to overcome Party rule, they could start to transmit the memories of the peasants into the public space and use the famine as an argument against the rule of the CCP.

Museums for the victims could be built, something which Kang Jian had already demanded in 1998.⁷⁶ Forty years after the event it is difficult to clarify the legal responsibility for the famine. The last leading cadre of the central government who was in office during the Great Leap Forward, Deng Xiaoping, died in 1997, and most of the local cadres who tortured and murdered people during the famine have already died or are very elderly. Investigations into what exactly happened in the countryside would bring conflicts to every rural community. It currently seems as though peasants and cadres try to avoid trouble. But should there be political polarization, memories of the suffering in the past and anger about the present could become an explosive mixture.

74 Interview with Huang Liang, 12 February 2005 (Wangcun, Yiyang county, Henan).

75 Wemheuer, *Steinmudeln*, pp. 230–32.

76 Kang Jian, *Huiluan de huanmie – Renmingongshe de jingshilu (The Glorious Disillusion – Warning about the People's Commune)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1998), p. 558.