The North China Famine of 1876-9: An Asymmetric, Gendered Experience

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Abstract

Inspired by a joint interest in famine studies and gender historiography, this paper looks to analyse the use of gendered imagery and narratives in inspiring local, regional, national, and international aid to the North China Famine of 1876-9. First, the paper discusses the experiences of Chinese women during the disaster. From this point, it interrogates different actors' responses to these women's predicaments, from the local to the international. In the case of international actors, the paper takes a note of the Irish perspective on the famine, one cloaked, as with many other western countries in the late 19th century, in Christian doctrine, racism and imperialism. The Irish view of China in this period is under-researched, and this paper hopes to provide a good addition to both work in comparative famine studies between the two countries, and more broadly to Chinese – Irish late imperial relations.

Introduction

The North China Famine of 1876-9 was the largest and most lethal to ever hit China, all the more notable as it took place in a century in which famine was a recurring theme, giving China the reputation of the 'land of famine'.[1] In the context of a failing Confucian state apparatus, due in part to international pressure as well as internal conflict, ecological disaster, and fiscal difficulties,[2] anywhere from 9.5 to 13 million people (between two and three percent of the population) died,[3] bringing in turn both domestic and international attention to Confucianism's perceived shortcomings. Despite women being almost ignored in Confucian texts, their subordinate role within this ideology,[4] and more broadly within Chinese society was weaponised during the famine. In this essay I aim to analyse the use of gendered imagery and narratives in inspiring local, regional, national, and international aid, as well as examining Chinese women's own responses to the disaster. My analysis includes a special interest in gendered approaches to famine relief from an Irish perspective, one cloaked, as with many

1 Ó Gráda, Cormac, *Eating people is wrong, and other essays on famine, its past, and its future*, (Princeton: 2015), p. 137.

2 Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn, "The 'Feminization of Famine', the Feminization of Nationalism: Famine and Social Activism in Treaty-Port Shanghai, 1876-9" in Social History, Vol. 30, No. 4, (London: 2005), p. 421.

3 Fuller, Pierre, 'Decentring international and institutional famine relief in late nineteenth-century China: in search of the local' in European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire, (London: 2015), Vol. 22, Iss. 6, p. 875.

4 Women were largely ignored within Confucian texts.

other Western countries, in Christian doctrine, racism and imperialism. It must be noted here that my research is based solely on anglophone and francophone sources and so, is lacking in certain Chinese perspectives, especially in Chinese historiography.

An Asymmetric Experience Categorised by Gender

There is a scarcity of sources from this period, in part from their post-1949 destruction,[5] but also due to contemporary illiteracy, as well as present-day distance from the events. Despite this, it is clear that both men and women had distinctly gendered experiences of famine in this period. One invaluable source that we have in this regard is 'Pictures Illustrating the Terrible Famine in Honan that Might Draw Tears from Iron', drawn by a Chinese artist during the famine, and disseminated by the *Committee of the China Famine Relief* fund across Britain and North America. These images, which come in the form of 12 'plates', include numerous gendered references to suffering, from the daughters being sold on plate four[6] to the woman in labour dying alongside her infant on plate seven.[7] Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley draws special attention to these plates in her book on cultural responses to famine in 19th century China, which she names *Tears from Iron*. In the case of North China, local literati and Chinese observers employed two radically different image-based narratives in order to uphold Confucian morality and principles against the immorality and hopelessness forced by the famine. The first was that of the obedient woman adhering to Confucianism, even if it led to her own death or the death of her kin. This narrative included references to women killing themselves in the interest of giving more food to their family, starving to death in their homes (within the cult narrative of the chaste martyr) or even selling or killing their children, especially daughters, for the sake of their mother-in-law (placed within the bounds of filial piety).[8] These narratives gave readers hope that the moral order of Confucian society was never, and could never be, fully corrupted; that Confucian ideology could persevere (and therefore be legitimised) even in times of complete crisis and societal upheaval.

5 Reeves, Caroline, "Lost in Translation: Local Relief Provision and Historiographical Imperialism", New Global Studies, Issue 2, (Berlin, 2018), pp. 286-7.

6 Legge, Reverend Jas, *The Famine in China: Illustrations by a Native Artist with a Translation of the Chinese Text*, (London, 1878), 18.

7 Ibid, 24.

8 Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 173.

The other gendered narrative employed by local literati was that of the unchaste woman who sold her body into sexual slavery, being out on the streets (a complete breakdown of the Confucian system as women belonged inside the domestic space) and following whoever would offer her food. This woman performed the opposite function to the former: she was representative of the reasons for famine. Other gendered reasons for the famine given by local observers included women's wastefulness, their failure to perform their 'fundamental' function of weaving and spinning, having inappropriate relations with their fathers-in-law, and distracting the local officials from doing their job with their beauty.[9] There was also an association between women and wetness (*yin*), and as such, since the famine was caused by drought, it was seen by some as being brought about by women.[10] However, these narratives are formulaic and as a result, may be misleading as to the actual lived experience of women during the famine. For example, in some gazetteers, there are notes of women playing a role in localised relief initiatives, such as grain and cotton being given out by two brothers at the behest of their mother, or the donations of another man to families in his area which was said to be under instruction from his wife. As Pierre Fuller notes, compelling their men into charitable actions was a way in which women could escape the domestic sphere and engage with the outside world.[11] Another way in which women's experience of famine could differ was due to age—although the selling of girls and female infanticide[12] was common during famine times, not to mention reports of young girls being killed by family members in order to be eaten—elderly mothers were, in contrast, often protected due to societal constructs around filial piety.[13] Although frequently denied agency in these narratives, mothers and mothers-in-law would often foster close bonds with their sons and daughters-in-law in order to exploit these loyalties.

9 Ibid 171.

10 Ibid 170.

11 Fuller, "Decentring international and institutional famine relief", 879.

12 Edgerton-Tarpley cites Lillian Li here in saying that sex-selective infanticide was not really considered killing, but more so birth control, as babies were not

13 Filial piety may well have been the narrative, but it was often more likely to be for economic reasons that a father would sell a daughter or wife rather than his mother as the latter had no market value for human traders. He may also have hoped that selling his daughter or wife would give her a potential escape from the famine.

State, local, elite, religious and international responses to famine

Qing rulers' official system of famine relief had been more or less working up until the 19th century, which contributed to the legitimacy and popularity of imperial rule.[14] This system was based largely on High-Qing-China's elaborate civilian food-storage infrastructure, which came in the form of grain reserves. While a uniquely ambitious enterprise,[15] the reserves would never be effective when faced with larger-scale disasters like this famine, as in theory they only held 30% of what was needed in reserve at any given time, and in reality, probably held less. The granaries were run by local officials and elites, two groups which Pierre Fuller wishes to highlight in 'decentring' relief narratives and searching for the 'local'. Oftentimes women fit into this history of local relief within Confucianism's bounds: Fuller cites individual men giving huge donations to save girls from human traders, thus saving their chastity.[16] However, other cases, such as the aforementioned women who incited certain charitable donations, or the cases of women being prioritised in soup kitchens[17], contradict Confucian principles, (and our previous examples), giving us a multi-faceted view of women's role in shaping and receiving localised and state aid. It must be noted here that while Fuller criticises a historiography that is overly focused on non-local actors, he also admits that nineteenth century China saw a huge intensification of international relief as well as the emergence of a charity-relief sector between China's major cities, like Shanghai,[18] two trends well worth looking into.

Andrea Janku defines the North China Famine as 'THE event' of the 1870s in Chinese popular culture, as exemplified by the proliferation of articles in papers like *Shen Bao* on famine conditions, relief measures, and the brainstorming of future preventative policies. [19] This use of the press, alongside international actors, provided a new breeding ground for relief efforts, which, in the words of one gazetteer, 'broke all established rules.'[20] On a micro scale, Fuller underlines that local elites often unofficially filled the shoes of officials in relief efforts when the latter were lacking,[21] for reasons of charity, neighbourly spirit, and spiritual salvation.[22] On a macro scale, external actors such as missionaries and networks of urban elites stood in for the state in the widespread diffusion of relief policies during the famine. However, there was a disjuncture between the local donors, who subscribed wholeheartedly to Confucian societal structure, e.g., buying official titles, donating to state granaries; and the international and urban aid which often saw traditionalism as the problem, not the solution.

In this context, women were used as exemplars of the backwardness of Confucianism. It is important to note here that Western feminism[23] at this time was intricately bound up with imperialism[24] and so Western feminists saw Chinese women as requiring representation, not on their own terms, but through Westerners, especially Western women, as they were deemed unable to represent themselves.[25] In this way, the imagery employed by western missionaries and relief workers was often one of female victimhood which legitimised their intervention while also, in fact, upholding the traditionalist Chinese view of women being the weaker and less moral sex, both cause and victim of catastrophe.[26] Chinese elites also adopted this female victimhood narrative in relation to women: they were 'innocent and pitiful victims' of what was seen as a nationally humiliating slave trade. Many Chinese elite men exhibited saviour complexes as they saw an inherent link between saving women from human trafficking and the saving of the nation. For Westerners, the trafficking of women merely took its place in a long tradition of criticising practices they associated with Confucianism (along with foot-binding, concubinage, widow suicide and female seclusion).[27] This insistence on the role of the Confucian state in the plight of women went as far as many missionaries claiming soldiers' role in the trafficking of women.[28]

Although most elites still subscribed to Confucian thought and practices, a sizeable number came to both criticise and question its supposedly inherent superiority. *Shen Bao,* a Shanghai daily founded just four years

14 Janku, Andrea, 'The North-China Famine of 1876–79 – Performance and Impact of a Non-Event,' in *Measuring Historical Heat – Event, Performance and Impact in China and the West* (Heidelberg, 2001), 131.

15 Pierre-Étienne, Will. «Le stockage public des grains en Chine à l'époque des Qing (1644-1911) » In *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations.* 38 année, N. 2, (Paris: 1983), 259.

16 Fuller, "Decentring international and institutional famine relief", 878.

17 Ibid, 882.

18 Ibid, 873.

19 Janku, "Performance and Impact of a Non-Event," 127.

20 Ibid, 128.

21 Fuller, "Decentring international and institutional famine relief", 886.

22 "On the Good who open their purses all the spiritual powers bestow blessing", Plate 12, *Pictures to Draw Tears for Iron*, 34.

23 (Be it English, Irish, French or American)

24 Burton, Antoinette, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, (Raleigh: 1994), p. 207.

25 Ibid, 209.

26 Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 171.

27 Edgerton-Tarpley, "The Feminization of Famine", in *Social History*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (London: 2005), 427.

28 Ibid, 428.

before the outbreak of famine in North China, played a central role in this cultural change. While the criticisms of the state were often semi-concealed in the paper, their appearance was entirely new and unprecedented in a burgeoning press scene.[29] *Shen Bao* also played a central role in emphasising the passive victimisation of women suffering from the famine, as shown by the widely publicised famine Diary of Pan Shaon, in which women were 'tormented and ever-weeping victims'.[30]
A secondary obsession of the paper in relation to famine-stricken women was that of the physical torture which was inflicted on their bodies, whether they were being boiled alive, raped (by human traffickers and bandits), drowned, eaten or murdered. This inspired both a perverse fascination within *Shen Bao*'s dominantly male readership, as well as genuine concern and a desire to help these women.[31]
In addition, *Shen Bao* employed a number of tactics to shame Chinese people into relief work, citing Westerners giving more relief as shameful, as well as being 'a device to collect the people's heart',[32] showing anxiety around the foreign presence in China.[33] This view inspired a kind of competitive/performative aid giving, as elites responded to missionary relief efforts, and vice versa.[34] As such, the famine and its responses took their places as inspiration for, and early examples of, Chinese nationalism. This nationalism also targeted women in urging their contribution to relief efforts, especially towards the end of the disaster. However, this targeting did little to contradict Confucianism, as it came in the form of championing women who exhibited frugality, citing famine arches,[35] and urging other women to follow this example.[36]
In her article on local relief provision and historiographical imperialism, Caroline Reeves notes that China's own highly-localised systems of aid provision were rendered invisible to international actors/audiences, especially as they brought their own prerogatives and preconceptions to the disaster.[37] One such preconception in Christian missionary sources is that of the Chinese being particularly prone to abandoning those most in need of charity, which affirms for the former their own religious and racial superiority. Indeed, in one French example, the author posits that 'when the Chinese meet one of our sisters of charity, they stop and bow, as they know that they [the sisters] take in and raise the children that they abandon. It is by these facts that the superiority of Europeans is affirmed.'[38] As a result, there is a huge amount of focus placed on the dramatic relief effort of these missions and foreign relief organisations in contemporary sources.[39] What is crucial here is understanding the role that Western doctrine played in these narratives, especially, according to Reeves, in the language they employ: charity, 'caritas'[40] being a cornerstone of Christian thought and the employment of the phrase 'humanitarian relief' having a specific racialised edge[41] (think about how uncomfortable it would be to call modern domestic charity operations in Ireland 'humanitarian aid'). These narratives, especially in relation to Ireland, will be explored in the next section.

29 Backus Rankin, Mary, "Alarming Crises/Enticing Possibilities - Political and Cultural Changes in Late Nineteenth-Century China" in *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 29, 1 (Baltimore: 2008), pp. 40-42.
30 Edgerton-Tarpley, "The 'Feminization of Famine", 429.
31 Ibid, pp. 430-2.
32 Xia Jiafu, a member of the Jiangnan elite, quoted in Ibid, p. 437.
33 See Backus-Rankin.
34 Janku, "Performance and Impact of a Non-Event," p. 128.
35 Landmarks erected in honour of women who sacrificed themselves during the famine for the good of the family, part of the cult of the 'chaste widow', a figure who often received arches in her honour. See Edgerton Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, p. 174, as well as Reeves, "Lost in Translation" p. 280.
36 Edgerton-Tarpley, "The Feminization of Famine", p. 441.
37 Reeves, "Lost in Translation", pp. 278-9.
38 De Flaix, J., «Le Christianisme en Chine» dans *Le Constitutionnel*, Lundi 17 janvier 1876, «Quand les Chinois rencontrent une de nos sœurs de charité, ils s'arrêtent et s'inclinent, C'est qu'ils savent qu'elles recueillent et élèvent les enfants qu'ils abandonnent. C'est par ces faits que s'affirme la supériorité des Européens», [translation is my own.]
39 Reeves, "Lost in Translation", p.282.
40 "A reflection of Christ's selfless love" see Ibid, p. 288.
41 Reeves, "Lost in Translation", pp. 288-291.

International Perspectives and Gender

As has been previously discussed, international aid was carried out in China during this crisis in a new and unprecedented way.[42] What is most interesting to me in this case is the intersection between Malthusian thought, Christian doctrine, and imperialism on behalf of Westerners, and their gendered ideas of Chinese society. From this point of intersection, it will be possible to place the North China famine within a broader framework of both 'famine studies' and gender historiography.

Contemporary writing on the Great Irish famine, like the North China famine, experienced a feminisation, as well as succumbing to ideas around Malthusian inevitabilities,[43] and imperialism.[44] This is evident in Margaret Kelleher's work, in which she recognises a specific Irish obsession with 'a famished mother offering a dry breast to her already dead baby or a starving child sucking at the breast of its dead mother,'[45] which signified the failure of the 'primal shelter'. This imagery is also used in contemporary Irish accounts of the North China Fam-

42 Janku, "Performance and Impact of a non-Event", p.128.
43 Malthusian interpretations were those that removed human actors from the causes of the famine, blaming it solely on the drought as a form of population control. Malthusian theory is a common trend in British responses to the Great Irish Famine, as well as in the case of North China. In fact, in the Chinese case, to quote Ó'Gráda, "Malthusian interpretations of famine in China began with Malthus himself.", see Ó Gráda, Cormac, *Eating people is wrong*, p.141.

ine as a means of inspiring relief donations amongst the public, showing Irish support to be influenced by our own famine only 30 years previous.

Their mothers love their little ones with as rapturous a devotion as any of their western sisters and suffer as deep a pang and as intense a sorrow to watch the little limbs grow thinner and thinner the "wee" faces get gradually whiter and more pinched: and the yearning baby hands, through want of food, become almost transparent. Think of these things, fathers and mothers who live in happier circumstances, and, when you read of them, fancy for a moment that it is your own little one that is moaning piteously for nourishment you cannot give – for the breast which long want of food has left sterile and dry – and give something, a least even a widow's mite, to succour the perishing thousands whose bones, in the absence of speedy aid from such as you, will soon be white and bleached on the hillsides of Shansi and the barren plains of Honang.[46]

What is also evident in this excerpt is the patronising tone adopted towards the Chinese population in the assurance of Chinese mothers exhibiting motherly love in the same way as Westerners, and the emotive language around imagining oneself in the predicament of the faraway Chinese 'Other'. This paternalistic attitude can also be seen in another part of the article as it claims: 'in spite of all their peculiarities and failings too, they are… a chivalrous community'. The audience of this extract is also gendered, as it calls upon mothers as well as fathers to give aid, even saying that "a widow's mite' would be helpful in combatting this famine. The same excerpt quotes Christian missionaries as its source and adopts their language with the use of biblical references, e.g. the fall of Jerusalem. In this way, it is clear that Christian doctrine plays a key role in the Irish response. Later, on September 5th, an article is published which details the calamities of the year thus far, 'which the . . . church prays for deliverance,' in which the Chinese famine features a narrative of divine retribution, not dissimilar to that claimed by many Chinese contemporaries.[47]

Like in the case of the competitive aid giving between

44 For more on this see Martin, Amy E., "Victorian Ireland: Race and the Category of the Human" in *Victorian Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Baltimore: 2014), pp. 52-57.

45 Margaret Kelleher, cited in Edgerton Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, p. 162.

46 *The Irish Times*, "The Famine in China", March 23rd, 1878.

47 As aforementioned, the link between "heaven-sent" disasters and dynastic decline, Janku, "Performance and Impact of a non-Event", p.132.

contemporary elites and Christian missionaries in China, England and America are cited as having already sent contributions, an example to be followed by 'generous and warm-hearted people like ourselves.' This call for aid is proven to have worked, for on the 17th of June, a letter appears in the paper to the Lord Mayor of Dublin, signed by many notables of the time, including the Guinness'.

> We, the undersigned, having learned that great distress still exists in China in consequence of the famine which prevails throughout the Northern provinces of that country, and that a committee has been formed in London for the purpose of sending relief to the suffers, request… a public meeting to consider what steps can be taken towards raising a public subscription in Dublin in aid of this object.[48]

48 *The Irish Times*, "letters", 17th of June 1878.

On July 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 6th, the paper published advertisements by the CHINA FAMINE RELIEF FUND, a committee which included the Lord Mayor as chairman. The advertisement is dominated by the names of the committee members, implying that this charity was inspired as much by wanting to come across as generous and rich as it was by the plight of the starving. Nonetheless, in bold at the bottom of the piece, they implore the public for 'two and sixpence' which will 'support a life for one month.'[49]

In 'Victorian Ireland, Race and the Category of the Human', Amy Martin posits the racialisation of poverty, i.e. the Irish impoverished condition, was seen to be due in part to their race and culture, which she says was often described through gender and sexuality.[50] This too, is evident in international writings on the Chinese case, as shown by the previous examples. Martin goes on to say that as part of the Victorian gothic vision of terror, those in power made the suffering into objects, 'human tools' evicted from the definition of human, which contradicted the idea of 'Victorian humanity' as central to the British imperial project. I find that this can be extended to Irish representations of the Chinese during this famine, as they too are written in a Victorian context.[51] The refer-

49 *The Irish Times*, "CHINA FAMINE RELIEF FUND", July 2-6th 1878.

50 Martin, Amy E., "Victorian Ireland: Race and the Category of the Human" in *Victorian Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Baltimore: 2014), p. 52.

51 [Queen Victoria ruled from 1837 to 1911].

ences to the 'excitement' of the famine, of China being 'a long way off'' and the 'inhabitants…strange and peculiar'[52] in the *Irish Times* clearly represent these elements of Gothic dehumanising horror.

Conclusion

Gendered perceptions were used by contemporaries during the North China famine, whether at the most local level, or in international literature, for a variety of reasons. Whether they were employed to encourage famine relief, such as was the case in *Shen Bao* or the *Irish Times*, or also to maintain Confucian tradition, such as in the local gazetteers, women very rarely had control in their proliferation. In this way, Chinese women's agency in the disaster is often overlooked, be it due to Chinese imperial ideas concerning women and their confinement to the domestic sphere, or due to colonial ideas of non-white women needing representation, not on their own terms, but through Westerners. Both types of empires, be they Western or Chinese, are 'complex relationships of control'[53] in which factors such as age, class, race, and geography collide with gender to eliminate Chinese women from their narratives. This analysis of local, religious, elite, state, and international 'feminisations of famine' allows us to better understand the scale and complexity of these relationships of control.

52 *The Irish Times*, "The famine in China", March 23rd, 1878.

53 Burton, *Burdens of History*, p. 212.

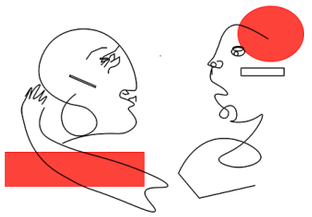
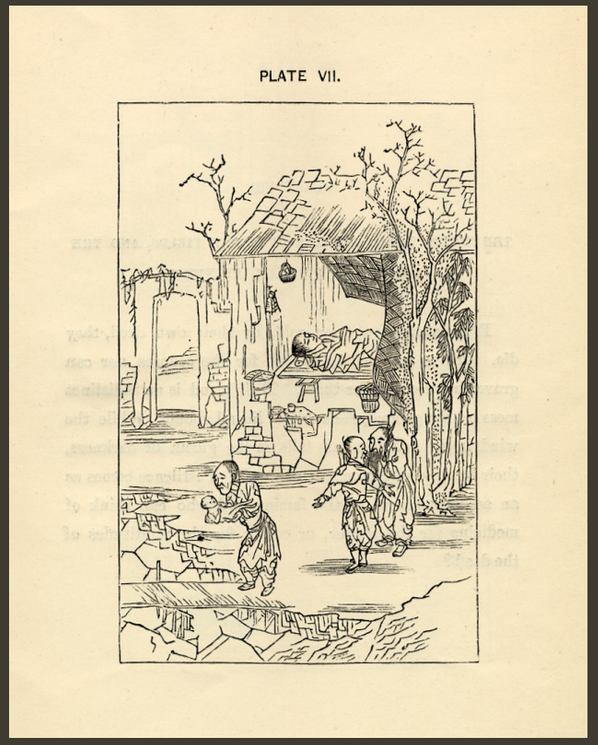


PLATE VII.

A FAMISHING WOMAN IS TAKEN IN LABOUR, MOTHER AND CHILD BOTH DIE.

What can be the result of such an event amidst the horrors of the famine? A birth in the open air under ordinary circumstances is perilous; but here, in a strange place, with disease and death around, the famishing mother gasps her last, and the child gives a few feeble wails and dies. Very few babes are born to live in this year of famine; where are the kind people to supply the swaddling clothes and money necessary to keep them alive?



James Legge and The Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund. *The Famine in China: Illustrations by a Native Artist with a Translation of the Chinese Text* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878).

PLATE VIII.

THE WHITE BONES LIE ALL OVER THE FIELDS, AND THE HUNGRY GHOSTS WAIL AT NIGHT.

From starvation, from cold, by their own deed, they die. Coffins are not to be got for the corpses nor can graves be prepared for them. Their blood is an indistinct mess on the ground, their bones lie all about. While the wind howls and the rain falls, in the gloom of darkness, their hungry ghosts moan and wail. Pestilence comes as an accompaniment of the famine, and who can think of medicine for the plague, or coffins for the multitudes of the dead?