

Theodore H. White & Annalee Jacoby. *Thunder Out of China.* New York: William Sloane Associates. 1961. p174-175. {In late 1943 and early 1944, White personally witnessed the effects of a major famine in Honan/Henan province, which surrounds the city of Loyang, in inland eastern China, at about the same latitude as Tokyo. Note the terms ‘concentration’ and ‘dispossession.’}

...Stupidity and inefficiency marked the relief effort. But the grisly tragedy was compounded even further by the actions of the constituted local authorities. The peasants, as we saw them, were dying. They were dying on the roads, in the mountains, by the railway stations, in their mud huts, in the fields. And as they died, the government continued to wring from them the last possible ounce of tax. The money tax the peasant had to pay on his land was a trivial matter: the basic tax exacted from him was the food tax, a percentage of all the grain he raised, and despite the fine-sounding resolution of remittance in Chungking, the tax was being extorted from him by every device the army and provincial authorities could dream up. The government in country after county was demanding of the peasant more actual poundage of grain than he had raised on his acres. No excuses were allowed; peasants who were eating elm bark and dried leaves had to haul their last sack of seed grain to the tax collector’s office. Peasants who were so weak they could barely walk had to collect fodder for the army’s horses, fodder that was more nourishing than the filth they were cramming into their own mouths. Peasants who could not pay were forced to the wall; they sold their cattle, their furniture, and even their land to raise money to buy grain to meet the tax quotas. One of the most macabre touches of all was the flurry of land speculation. Merchants from Sian and Chengchow, small government officials, army officers, and rich landlords who still had food were engaged in purchasing the peasants’ ancestral acres at criminally low figures. Concentration and dispossession were proceeding hand in hand, in direct proportion to the intensity of hunger.

Government officials did not live lavishly by our standards, but their tables steamed with hot wheat buns and fresh meat. The lowliest party machine hack of the Kuomintang received out of the tax quotas an average of 4 pounds of wheat a day. After we had returned to tell the story in Chungking, all this was denied; the wise men told us how credulous foreigners in China usually were, and even the governor of the province of Honan said we were exaggerating as we visited him in his comfortable office. “Why,” said he, “only the wealthy had to pay in full. From the poor we collected no more than the land produced.” The actual physical brutality and indignity with which the tax was collected was sickening, but the corruption that went hand in hand with its collection was worse. The army officers and local officials who collected the grain regarded their right to tax as a supplement to their salary, a franchise to loot. Each month, after the allotments had been made to the functionaries, the surplus grain would be divided up by senior officers and placed on the market for sale for their private pockets. Such bootleg tax grain, indeed, was the chief source of the food that reached market, and the racketeers who controlled it ran the price up to the sky. Even American relief authorities, operating with American money, were forced to beg army officers for the right to buy their private hoards for distribution back to the very peasantry from who the grain had been extorted. The officers who sold it made no concessions for humanity’s sake; at the rate of exchange then current and with the famine prices in Honan, relief money that could buy 60 bushels of wheat in America could buy only one bushel of wheat in China...