

“One Red Bean: Food, Famine, and Moral Choice in  
Nineteenth-Century China and Ireland”

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Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

By way of background, Professor Edgerton-Tarpley recalled her time with Teaching for America in rural North Carolina—“the hardest year of my life”—and her consequent empathy for public school teachers, whose work is, she felt, more difficult than that of college teachers. She expressed some dissatisfaction with California’s Standards for inclusion of China at the K–12 levels, suggesting the possibility of bringing China aboard when teaching the Irish famine, then moved on to her motives for selecting famine as a research focus.

Famine, like other catastrophes, can be a profoundly revealing experience: the choices people make when driven to extremes of want may not be representative of human behavior in general, but they point with matchless honesty to some of our fundamental priorities. The historian Paul Greenough said that disasters such as famines “activate discussion of the culture’s ultimate values, [its] concepts of good and bad, legitimate and illegitimate.”

The red bean of Edgerton-Tarpley’s title comes from a Confucian family tale she was told during her time doing research in China. The tale is set in the Guangxu 3 era (1877). Harvests had failed, rain wasn’t falling, famine filled the land, and in one family the sole survivors, two brothers, were reduced to making a fatal decision. The elder brother, judging that continuity of the line was paramount, decided to kill and eat his younger brother, in order that he could survive to perpetuate the lineage. When his younger brother asked why he was sharpening a knife, he sternly replied, “To kill a man with,” and ordered the other to boil some water. The younger brother complied but, finding one red bean at the bottom of the pot, brought it to his brother, telling him to eat it so he would have the strength to kill him—which, since it caused his brother to collapse with emotion, effectively saved his life. (Ensuring the elder brother’s survival is a distinctively Confucian priority.)

A comparison of the North Chinese famine with the Irish famine of 1845–49, and an examination of the differing cultural responses to these two events just thirty years apart, can yield illuminating historical insights. (The Irish famine resulted from the combined influence of the potato-afflicting oomycete *Phytophthora infestans* and English policies; the North Chinese one from drought connected with the El Niño Southern Oscillation.) Professor Edgerton-Tarpley showed a few woodblock prints from the pamphlet “Pictures To Draw Tears from Iron,” produced during the North Chinese famine to acquaint the world with the horror of the event and solicit aid. She was first motivated to compare the two famines when confronted in a college course with the notion that only Western societies practiced true philanthropy. Researching a paper for that course she became puzzled by the harshness of British attitudes expressed in 1870s English-language

newspapers published in Shanghai, which criticized the ruling Qing dynasty—not for doing nothing, but for doing *too much*. English writers in the *North China Herald* of 1877 were critical of “unwise interference,” averring that the government had “hindered the import of food,” and had been “scornful of Western technology,” resorting to basic famine relief measures rather than acknowledging that famine was “a good thing,” and “a lesson from God.” This ideology further held that government intervention *causes* famine, that free relief “turns people into lazy tramps,” and that the only proper way to deal with famine involves a reliance on science and technology—not philanthropy. It began to appear to Edgerton-Tarpley that the viewpoints of the British and the Qing leadership were polar opposites. The British response to the famine in China and the contemporaneous one in British India was that “the task of saving life, irrespective of the cost, is one which it is beyond our power to undertake”; whereas the Qing position on famine was stated thus: “Bear in mind, as the first essential, that relief is to be placed equally within the reach of all, and that not a single person be left deprived of the means of subsistence.” What accounted for this stark contrast between two governments’ stated policy toward one of the most grievous things that could befall their respective populations?

The British had intervened in the past, manipulating the grain trade to favor Indian markets during famines in the eighteenth century, but seemed to embrace Adam Smith’s view, expressed in his 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*, that drought was natural and unavoidable, while a famine was the result of human malfeasance, and that therefore a hands-off approach to crop failures, rain shortages, and other agricultural mishaps was the most salutary one. The influence of Thomas Malthus could be felt as well: his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* viewed famine as curative, a divine chastisement of the human proclivity for pleasure over prudence. With this creed came a new, more punitive view of poverty, whose vigorous endorsement of poor laws condemning the needy to the misery of poorhouses rather than providing a penny of relief certainly finds an echo in critics of the modern American welfare system.

Contributing to the rise of British non-intervention was the widespread religious tenet of Providentialism, essentially a revival of the old idea that God’s hand is to be seen in the passage of all events, and that apparent misfortunes (e.g., famines) are actually God’s means of teaching His children (i.e., the poor) what they need to learn in order to improve themselves, and that it would be heretical to intercede in this educational procedure in any way. Thus non-intervention became a prevalent ideology; and Malthus, one of its chief exponents, taught it at Haileybury College, where workers in the Indian tea and spice companies were trained, and where Charles Trevelyan, an English governmental officer often accused of gross negligence in the handling of the Irish famine, learned his trade as well. Guided by Malthusianism and laissez-faire economics, thirty to forty ships a day, reaching up to 400,000 ships in 1847, left Irish harbors carrying wheat, barley, butter, and other staples to England. Had England provided Ireland any compensation for the loss of the potato crop in the form of other grains, there would still have been shortage and hardship, but not one million dead; to do so, however, would have been to interfere with free trade—and that would have been wrong.

The response of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) to famine, born of the assumption that one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a benevolent government (“benevolent” being a key Confucian term) is to nourish the people, offered a sharp contrast to the Malthusian model. Where the English considered intervention irrational, the Qing found it obligatory, and consequently set up an extensive state-run granary system, gleaning and storing a mandated percentage of each harvest and then selling it at very low prices in times of famine. This provision of cheap state grain was coupled with actual free food relief to villagers and refugees categorized as desperately needy by local magistrates. Another form of intervention—one viewed as particularly absurd by the English—was the forced resale to their original owners of homes sold by people during times of desperate hunger and poverty. All these relief measures were in strict conformity with the tenets of Confucianism, which holds that an emperor rules by divine mandate which may be rescinded should he be found wanting in benevolence (or other virtues—for it is upon his behavior that the people must model theirs; Professor Edgerton-Tarpley alluded at this point to the famous Confucian saying “The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.”). There is, within this mindset, no option to limit or deny assistance in times of famine: refusing assistance to those who are starving would be exactly the same as killing them.

Anomalies like floods and droughts were seen as being indicative of something wrong with the official Qing leadership, whose task it therefore was to figure out how they had offended heaven. In both this and the Irish scenarios there was the sense of a message being sent by heaven, but the governments disagreed about the message’s intended recipient: the English believed the famine to be a divine corrective meant for the Irish, while the Chinese interpreted it as a castigation requiring the attention of the dynastic leadership itself. Qing relief tactics thus constituted a mandatory demonstration of benevolence to a displeased divinity.

The Columbian Exchange, which brought potatoes to the Irish and sweet potatoes, peanuts, and other New World crops to Asia, proved to be a mixed blessing. The magnitude of the tragedy in Ireland was directly attributable to its dependency on the potato, while cultivation of these new crops in Asia fueled a population explosion which, combined with increasing military hostilities associated with international trade issues, resulted in some extraordinarily difficult internal policy choices for the Chinese state. What might have been a simple “Feed the People” situation one hundred years before became in the nineteenth century a classic “guns or butter” conflict, with state granaries being opened to feed the military, whose defense of the coasts against besieging Western barbarians was deemed imperative, and far too little money being diverted from the defense effort to prevent the people from starving. In Edgerton-Tarpley’s view, it was a well-intended but essentially hopeless and unsuccessful attempt at covering too many bases with too few resources.

At this point the presentation shifted to an examination of the moral choices families are forced to make when faced with the horrors of famine, and the ways in which prevailing religious, cultural, and gender-related concepts influence these choices. In Liam

O’Flaherty’s *Famine*, possibly the most famous novel associated with the Irish famine, a young woman, aware that the shortage of food means that some of her family will have to die, arranges to flee to America with her husband and young child while leaving her husband’s parents in Ireland and thereby consigning them to death by starvation. When her father-in-law confronts her about this she cries out that he thinks only of himself, that he is old while she and her husband and their child are young—and he acquiesces to her scheme. Edgerton-Tarpley pointed out that this is a distinctly un-Confucian transaction, and counterpoised to it a Qing narrative regarding a famine-stricken mother and daughter with too little food for both to survive. The reasoning in this case dictates that should the daughter die, the mother could bear another one, whereas the mother’s death would preclude such replenishment of the family: precedence is granted the elder, the parent. In the event the mother can’t bear to kill her child, so she sells her at the market for some grain instead. Professor Edgerton-Tarpley found it a useful ice-breaker in large college classes to propose the question, “If your parent and your child were tied up on a railroad track and there were only time to save one, whom would you save?” *No one* responded in favor of the child: they could have another child; but their parents had suffered so much to raise them.

There has been a certain degree of “feminization of famine” (the title of a book by Margaret Kelleher) in terms of its public image in both Britain and China. The starving child suckling at the bluish breast, the mother’s cruel enforced choices, have had a disproportionate exposure in connection with the Irish famine; while the Chinese feminization of famine involves the selling of daughters or wives, and the issue of chastity—a key virtue (for women, at least) in Confucianism. Within the compass of this doctrine both widows and unmarried women are supposed to abstain from sex, so the prospect of being sold into slavery or prostitution to mitigate a family’s starvation involves degradation beyond the hideous norm; there is a huge literature of women’s suicide in response to such decisions.

Professor Edgerton-Tarpley revealed that she had performed research on “famine foods” in preparation for her talk. This categorization involves not just bottom-of-the-barrel ingestibles to keep one alive, but items that are to some extent culturally determined: every culture defines differently the things it is willing to eat. Due to the long history of famine in China’s drought-prone north, there is a body of literature addressed to famine survival, including *Herbs to Relieve Famine*, a Chinese government-sponsored volume describing 414 plants theoretically useful in that context. Another volume details the “famine foods” identified and self-tested by a Chinese official during the 1942–43 Henan famine, described by the author as “magic foods” and by Edgerton-Tarpley as “appalling,” including husks of corn mixed with inedible beans and clay. During the famine caused by Mao’s Great Leap Forward laboratories developed food substitutes using algae and bacteria. More proletarian sources reveal a reliance on pet cats and dogs, corn husks, leaves, grass, and tree bark, the regrettably constipating white clay, and, although it is technically taboo, human flesh (there is a huge literature devoted to famine cannibalism).

The Irish famine cookbook includes grass as well (yielding the common image of people dying with mouths stained green) and the government-supplied Indian corn, which made the Irish sick since they were unused to it and uninformed on how to process it. The latter unwelcome English government issue was termed “Peel’s brimstone,” joining “Souperism,” the flux of missionary soup kitchens willing to feed people if they were willing to convert to Protestantism, as elements of famine relief the Irish felt they could do without.

How, asked Edgerton-Tarpley, would 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture respond to famine?

### Q&A

*Participant:* In the famine in Ireland the main alternative to starving was emigrating. Was this seen in China as an alternative?

*Edgerton-Tarpley:* Good point. Yes, in China people tried to escape, but it was a five-province drought; in the epicenter lots of people tried to flee but they were surrounded by famine and wound up dying on the road, and it was land-locked: there’s no easy way to the port and you’re weakened [from starvation] . . . you just can’t make it.

*Participant:* How did the Catholic church respond in Ireland?

*Edgerton-Tarpley:* The Pope made some sort of donation. Queen Victoria provided some monetary relief.

*Participant:* In [the course of] riots a good teacher was telling us that people asked him how much money a historian made, and how could he teach something so abstract, and he said, “For one reason: I want you to be very nice to the people in your town.

*Edgerton-Tarpley:* I do think you could talk interestingly about choices to high school students.

*Participant:* It sounded like Social Darwinism.

*Edgerton-Tarpley:* It was the same time period, but it’s not mentioned [in the literature].

*Participant:* Farmers are more valuable in Confucianism than merchants.

*Edgerton-Tarpley:* Right, good point, true, and that’s very different from the British viewpoint: it’s much more important to get farmers back at producing.