

## A Chinese Lesson for New Orleans (and elsewhere)

HELEN DUNSTAN\*

You don't need to know anything about Chinese history to understand this lecture. But as I am going to plunge you into the detail of famine-relief administration, you will have an easier time if you know that in the eighteenth century China was ruled by the Qing dynasty, which meant a Manchu emperor and a mixture of Chinese and Manchu officials in the upper echelons of government. China Proper was divided into eighteen provinces, which may be thought of as territories approximating to the size of France. The major subdivisions of the provinces were called prefectures; below the prefecture were jurisdictions that, strictly speaking, should be called county-level units, although I will just call them counties. It is conventional to use the term 'county magistrate' for the official in charge of all aspects of county government.

A quasi-*tsunami* struck the Chinese coast near Shanghai in August 1747 and caused massive damage up the Yangzi estuary and far inland. At first sight, the regional authorities seem to have done even worse than their recent counterparts in New Orleans in terms of the tardiness of their response. To be sure, the Provincial Administration Commissioner drafted twenty-one instructions to make sure that all the county magistrates knew what to do. He forwarded them to his superior for approval before he sent them out – and that was over three weeks after the onset of the disaster. It took his superior another five days to approve them, and then it may have been another six before they went out. This was far too late to be ordering the delivery of emergency rations to people who were cut off by floodwater on

\* *Helen Dunstan is Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney. This inaugural lecture was given on 26 July 2007.*

the high ground where they had taken refuge. Perhaps, however, the point was both to order help for those who were still stranded, and to validate more prompt initiatives already taken by those same local officials who had reported that they had launched the usual procedures. The intention may have been to reassure these officials that they need not fear censure for having used state funds to provide food in a form suitable for people who had no cooking equipment with them – a more expensive proposition than letting heads of peasant households collect supplies of raw grain that would last a month.

True, it is harder to rationalise the late instructions for the retrieval and economical disposal of the corpses of the drowned. Would there be immunity for officials who had already used state funds to pay for coffins, as opposed to reed mats, for ‘floating corpses’ that were not claimed for burial by relatives? What were the implications for public health if some local officials waited to be told that they should urgently arrange for corpses to be hauled out of the receding floodwaters? The point I want to stress, though, is that it is not that the local authorities did not know what to do when a disaster struck. The instructions from on high make sense only on the assumption that relief procedures were understood by county magistrates in a general way, but that clarification on points of detail was thought necessary as the authorities faced the challenge of minimising homelessness and hunger after an exceptionally destructive flood.

I will focus not on the relief effort following the quasi-*tsunami*, but on a subject on which we are better informed: the floods that started in July the previous year in a much poorer region further north – floods caused by excessive rainfall. We know so much about the 1746 floods because a sub-provincial official known as an intendant left his collected working papers from the period when he was seconded to supervise relief in a tranche of territory that comprised three counties: from north to south, Pizhou, Xiuqian, and Taoyuan. I would like to acknowledge the work of a team at Renmin University in making available a typeset, punctuated version of this collection, which I shall hereafter call ‘the casebook’.<sup>1</sup> It offers revealing glimpses into the world of a senior official striving to balance correct bureaucratic

procedure with prompt, meticulous attention to the pressing needs of over 800,000 flood victims, those of the aforesaid counties, which were only three of the ten worst-stricken jurisdictions. Clearly, the imperial state was implementing a massive relief operation.

I will highlight a few noteworthy features of the approach to flood relief reflected in the casebook. This part of the paper will remind us that the commitment and capacity to save lives on a vast scale were no less a triumph of premodern Chinese civilisation than 'tang poetry and porcelain; my concluding reflections will take as starting point the common instinct to characterise certain features of imperial Chinese governance as 'surprisingly modern'. After considering the assumptions about the nature of modernity that this instinct presumably reflects, I shall note the potential of historical research to liberate normative discussions about the state-society relationship from the ideological fetters of the last two centuries. In a world that does not seem to be postmodern, but whose islands of prosperity are threatened by massive ecological collapse, a redefinition of civilisation to include rational disaster-preparedness and institutionally-based humanitarianism would hardly be gratuitous. I shall also make some shallow observations on the theme of human rights.

Let me first comment on the magnitude of the disaster. Documents included in the casebook tell of lakes, rivers and the Grand Canal bursting their banks, of dykes and sluice gates being overwhelmed, unleashing sudden torrents. Homes collapsed; crops in the low-lying fields were inundated; even the crops on higher ground were harmed by the excessive rainfall. As late as September, the desolate scene that the provincial governor surveyed by boat in a less badly stricken region still featured numerous flood victims camping wretchedly along the dykes, having seen their crops submerged, homes destroyed, and domestic grain stores and everyday utensils all 'swept clean away'. A seventeenth-century image, of peasants salvaging whatever wheat they could, reminds us of the need for restoration of the agricultural environment, a process to which, in the eighteenth century, the state often contributed – by mobilising labour to dig drainage channels, directing wealthy landlords to issue seed grain to their tenants, and lending seeds to poorer farmers. By some time in October, winter

wheat had been sown on a proportion of the stricken acreage that ranged from 20 to 70 percent. The question is, how was the labour force enabled to survive to plant the seeds, and how would it survive while they were growing? The answer, to a very large extent, is state assistance.

The core of the relief effort was an emergency feeding and shelter program, followed by a period of planned, means-tested distributions that I will refer to as the winter feeding program. Much of the detail in the casebook concerns the latter stage, when peasants would receive subsistence support for a number of winter months that varied with their assessed need. Need was assessed through two surveys: one survey assigned a percentage disaster rating to each field, and the other classified all eligible peasant households as either 'extremely poor' or 'poor, but less so'. Even for the neediest beneficiaries, the winter subsistence program would not start till mid-October, and so for most recipients there would be a gap between the end of the emergency program and the beginning of winter relief. Deplorable as this must seem, the statistics generated by the planning process bespeak a most impressive level of commitment.

	'Very poor' adults	'Very poor' children	'Less poor' adults	'Less poor' children	Total
Pizhou	37,766	26,897	175,131	108,952	348,746
Xiuqian	43,979	18,242	156,323	47,206	265,750
Taoyuan	40,432	21,963	106,388	51,111	219,894
<b>Total</b>	<b>122,177</b>	<b>67,102</b>	<b>437,842</b>	<b>207,269</b>	<b>834,390</b>

Table 1

The number of persons assessed as eligible for relief in the three counties, broken down by degree of household poverty and adult or child status is in total 834,000: over 560,000 adults and approaching 275,000 children. And even these figures are incomplete.

What resources would the government commit to feeding all these people? The statements of expenditure to date and anticipated

future cost received in late October are incomplete in the senses (a) that not all counties reported all their costs, and (b) that further costs were to be incurred by a later decision that the period of relief should be extended. The figures are inconsistent also in that units are different: some are stated in taels (Chinese ounces) of silver, others in Chinese bushels of grain. Fortunately, a 1:1 conversion rate was being assumed, so we can simply speak of 'tael-equivalent units' (TEUs).

	Matched construction costs	Subsidies for house repair	Cost of initial feeding program	Cost of winter feeding program	Total
Pizhou	925.716	1,405.80	7,682.175	86,680.05	<b>96,693.74</b>
Xiuqian		2,697.75	7,967.850	99,117.08	<b>109,782.68</b>
Taoyuan		8,175.75		90,466.50	<b>98,642.25</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>925.716</b>	<b>12,279.30</b>	<b>15,650.025</b>	<b>276,263.63</b>	<b>305,118.67</b>

Table 2

Total planned expenditure was 305,000 TEUs, of which 12,000 constituted subsidies for house repair, while the bulk of the resources would be for the winter feeding program. You may well ask how much these sums were worth by eighteenth-century standards, and one convenient comparison is with the total 'value' of each county to the state in terms of annual tax income. The available tax data for Pizhou and Xiuqian are diabolically complicated, and it is only after several weekends of Excel spreadsheets that I propose estimates for annual tax quotas as of 1746. Being cautious, I conclude only that the government was committing to flood relief much more than twice the gross income to which it was theoretically entitled each year from these counties. This munificence is the more remarkable in that, in 1746, the entire province was enjoying a one-year respite from the most important category of tax, under a decision to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the emperor's accession by freeing all the nation's landowners from this tax for one year during 1746–48.

	Approx. tax quota as of 1746 (taels)	Resource commitment (TEUs)	Number of relief-eligible victims	Commitment (TEUs) per victim
Pizhou	35,000.00	96,693.741	348,746	0.277
Xiuqian	33,000.00	109,782.675	265,750	0.413
Taoyuan		98,642.25	219,894	0.449
<b>Total</b>		<b>305,118.661</b>	<b>834,390</b>	<b>0.366</b>

Table 3

I now turn to three issues that are addressed in the correspondence collected in the casebook: were the landless to be eligible for assistance; how should officialdom react to peasant mobility following the floods; and what was the best way of ensuring supply continuity when need seemed likely to outstrip resources? We are now entering a realm that is familiar to anyone who has opinions about the theory and practice of the modern welfare state. In this case, an intense paternalism is shown to have been complemented, rather than subverted, by awareness of market forces and of the danger of abuse.

The relief system was, in principle, designed for peasant farmers. What, therefore about the rural proletariat – and semi-proletarians whose meager livelihood was underpinned by tiny sums of capital? Should they be allowed to benefit? It is not the treatment of tenants that is in question here. Although, in this society, some might have thought that tenants, like slaves, should be fed by the landlord family in time of dearth, the firm decision, taken on pragmatic grounds, was that tenants – probably the majority of local farmers – would be fed by the state. The phrase ‘the landless poor’ in the casebook refers not to folk who rented all the land they tilled, but to hired labourers, itinerant traders, and economic specialists, such as fishermen. Local officialdom could not but recognise that, strictly speaking, such people should not have access to the relief program, but this made the more humane authorities uneasy. Let us first hear from the prefect who was in charge of two of our three counties. He noted in a letter to the intendant that, besides the peasants,

[There are] grass-cutters, fishermen, persons who carry goods on shoulder-poles or on their backs, not to mention those who depend entirely on hiring out their labor or eke a living out with petty capital: all these are members of the landless poor who have no constant means of livelihood. As soon as the cold winter comes, there is no more grass, and the rivers are frozen. As work has stopped, there is no way for them to sell their labour. Even if they have some handicraft skill or minor business, because their capital is small and their profits insignificant, it will be hard for them to support themselves into the new year. These landless poor have therefore always been included in relief provision in the stricken villages where they reside, being entered in the accounts under the 'poor commoners' category.

Unfortunately, this customary extension of the rules was now perceived to be in jeopardy, because of a bureaucratic jack-boot. In this province, a fair bit of discretion had been used in allocating food relief, with the result that the accounts had been repeatedly rejected by a central-government Board of Revenue that had an allergy to non-compliance with 'established regulations'. Horror of horrors, the province had been ordered to carry out its relief operations by the book in future. This would mean a new rigour in systematically linking the number of months for which each household would receive relief to the percentage disaster rating assigned to each field. But how could one then determine the entitlement of those who had no land to be assessed? The provincial administration did what university departments would do if they were ever cursed by blindness in the upper echelons with any similar dilemma, that is, turn to some conspicuously well-run department, say Italian Studies, and ask how they are handling the matter. The next-door province was no less a paragon, but alas, when the hand-copied dossier for its 1744 relief campaign arrived, what did it say, in the usual bureaucratese, but:

Given that relief issued according to the regulations extends only to households that have land, leaving the landless poor at serious risk of loosing their foothold, the relief operations of recent years have all been carried out according to expediency.

However, it did seem that the next-door province was using village-level disaster ratings to determine relief entitlements for the landless poor, and then it turned out that, after all, there was a central-

government ruling that not only legitimized but actually mandated a flexible interpretation of the rules. In 1740, a policy watchdog had pointed out that failure to extend relief to the landless would 'inevitably' force them to take to the roads. The emperor had accepted a recommendation that, in future famines, local authorities be told not to distinguish between the landed and the landless poor, but to ensure that no disaster victim certified as 'poor' fell through the safety net of state assistance. This was all very well, but unambiguous guidelines would have made it easier to deal with the Board of Revenue. The provincial administration commissioner proposed a commonsense procedure but suggested that it would be prudent to seek clarification from the Board. His insecurity is understandable, although unhelpful to the landless poor.

I will deal briefly with the subsequent discussion as to how far compassion should go. There was a local precedent for extending relief at least to the 'widows, widowers and orphans' among the landless poor of unscathed villages. In view of the lowered capacity of normal patrons to hire labour and buy nonessentials in a famine year, should one go even further, and provide some relief to other landless residents of unscathed villages? The provincial leadership thought this too lavish, but it reaffirmed the logic as it applied to the landless poor of stricken villages. In one set of guidelines, landless labourers and landless people with a skill to sell were singled out as worthy of compassion. The earnings of the latter were very limited, and their post-flood opportunities still more so. As for labourers, there was 'no one to hire them.'

What makes all this interesting is that it shows thoughtful concern with the predicament of marginal members of local communities – people who lacked the security even of tenancy but were still seen as industrious enough to be deserving. This portrayal contrasts with a crude dichotomy, in later rhetoric, between respectable landowning peasants and the vagabondish landless. But there is another contrast I would like to mention. On the one hand stand our practical administrators, who recognised the constrictions, in post-disaster winters, of the labour market and of the market for the goods and services of landless micro-entrepreneurs. On the other

stands the policy watchdog who, in 1743, had advocated that the state stockpile less grain in case of famine, and, in that context, had blithely suggested that silver distributed instead of grain could serve victims as petty trading capital. But let us now move to the second issue: what should the state do about flood victims like these who took to the roads to look for food.

The Qing state had a system for caring for people who fled from famine; nice and concise in Chinese, the name for it might be translated as '[system of] reception centres and assisted passage home'. This system was partly motivated by compassionate concern to stop people dying of hunger by the wayside – a humanitarianism most clearly shown in occasional voluntary subscription drives within officialdom to provide padded winter clothing for the temporary vagrants. However, there were less altruistic reasons for concentrating displaced peasant families in reception centres, feeding them until the early spring, and then having them escorted home, with money or food rations for the journey.

The refugees for whom the system was intended are usually represented as peasant smallholders. The state did not want such people to leave their land at all: they were to be fed in their home villages until it was possible to plant the next year's crop, thus reviving the cycle of production out of which the taxes would be paid. It frustrated post-disaster planning if peasants wandered to seek food elsewhere just as the state was finalising preparations to feed them at home. Alas, however, as Pierre-Étienne Will has pointed out, the gaps in state provision might have been calculated to ensure that many would take to the roads.<sup>2</sup> Physical displacement by the torrents, hunger, lack of confidence in, or knowledge of, the state's intentions, and ineligibility for relief would have driven off many residents, some of whom would move too far to 'hear that relief [was starting] and return' as the administration hoped. Rather than (a) risk the migrants becoming a law-and-order problem, and (b) jeopardise the springtime planting and the taxes, the state preferred to implement the system of reception centres and assisted passage home – in turn creating the danger that people who could expect nothing if they stayed at home would make sure that they qualified for refugee

assistance – or so it was alleged.

During the 1740s, there were many complaints about the tiny travel grants as an incentive to unnecessary migration. By the end of the decade, the court had decided to abolish the whole system in its nominal existing form – as resettlement assistance for potentially productive able-bodied males and their families. In 1748 came an edict stigmatising beneficiaries as violence-prone swindlers so shameless as to turn migration for the sake of resettlement benefits into their constant means of livelihood. The scope of government assistance was subsequently narrowed to ‘the elderly, the very young, women, and the disabled’, who were not to be escorted home but simply provided with food rations for the journey. Despite some wavering, the abolition was confirmed in 1753 and reaffirmed a decade later. Although this lecture focuses on flood relief in 1746, I will now say a bit more about the abolitionist rhetoric of 1748–63, because it is through contrast that the attitudes expressed in 1746 gain much of their significance.

The rhetoric of abolition was crude and dichotomising. On the one hand were the genuine refugees from famine: decent landowners, probably few in number because they valued their land too much to leave it, but who, if they should take to the roads, would be travelling purposefully, either in search of employment or to join relatives who could assist for the duration. On the other hand were the feckless, disreputable idlers, persons with no land to cherish and no compunction either about abusing state provision or about plundering the villages through which they passed. As the court put it in 1753:

Although the petty folk may be in temporary difficulty over food, they ought naturally to wait calmly for relief. Those who set out with their dependants in all four directions are for the most part ruffraff. They are certainly not respectable people who dwell content with their portion.

The professed concern was not only that a system that rewarded its footloose abusers would tempt the solid peasantry into opportunistic migration. Another spectre raised was that the officious paternalism of the reception centers and repatriation escorts would hinder genuine famine refugees in their responsible quest for employment. The climax

came in 1763 when, despite expressed concern that refugees must be helped home to undertake the urgent work of draining fields, an edict not only pronounced that all such wanderers were landless, but also suggested that repatriation would be useless and oppressive for them too. The proper lot in life of landless people was to rove the four directions in search of opportunities to earn their food. What help was it to 'bind them and whip them on their [homeward] way, forcing on them what ... they cannot bear'?

No doubt, in eighteenth-century China as in our world, government pronouncements had a certain efficacy in naturalising prejudicial stereotypes of welfare recipients. To return to our case study of flood relief in 1746, it is clear that the provincial authorities were concerned about abuses of the refugee assistance system – one directive even insinuated that the great majority of claimants were 'vagrants, roving beggars, and persons who have been away from home for years earning their food as hired labourers'. But a more measured discourse prevails in the casebook, one that recognised the danger of abuse and prescribed detailed countermeasures, while simultaneously embodying the same kind of sympathetic thoughtfulness as we have seen in the discussion of how landless victims should be treated.

In one striking passage, the fact that poor people have taken to the roads is represented not as a sign of their short-sightedness or opportunism, but rather as a reflection of bad management on the part of local government. On 14 October, the intendant sent a sharp reprimand to the Pizhou magistrate because a patrolman had reported a party of over ten people of both sexes 'fleeing from famine'. The report had identified their home village, the official responsible for the relief-eligibility survey in that village, and the explanation that the wanderers had given. They had been absent when the village register of households was compiled; they were therefore without grain, and the collapse of their home left them no choice but to take to the roads. In other words, they were claiming to have been excluded from relief because their names were not on the register used as a checklist in the survey. What I want to stress is the intendant's alacrity in assuming the Pizhou county government to be at fault. His nagging rhetoric conveyed a presumption of negligence. He cited another

report of refugees from the same area alleging underreporting of persons who were eligible for relief. This, he said, was clear evidence that post-disaster migration in Pizhou resulted from 'unsatisfactory management'. How could the Pizhou authorities have pitilessly left the wanderers to flee? Were they not in danger of betraying the magnanimous intent both of their superiors and of the emperor, with his concern that 'there should not be a single individual who does not find his place'?

The concept of the common person's 'place' – his foothold that must not be lost – runs through the discourse of the refugee assistance system in its heyday. One defensible way of looking at that system, although not one I favour, is that it represents the government cleaving to an ideal of rural fixity that socioeconomic change had rendered out-of-date at least two hundred years before, and that the eighteenth-century population boom was making even more unrealistic than it had been in the sixteenth century. Be that as it may, there is something rather impressive, given the vast number of people for whom relief was being planned, in the survival of another short report alerting the intendant that one Pizhou family of five and one of three had been found 'fleeing from famine', allegedly because their headman had refused to include them in the relief roster. The magistrate thus incurred an urgent directive to ascertain, 'immediately on receipt of this command', whether or not the wanderers had been wrongfully excluded. If so, he was to 'call them back' without delay, have them added to the relief roster, and report. The hierarchy, it seems, cared enough about that 'single individual' who might 'lose his place' to have created means by which his perilous position might be brought to the attention of superior authority.

To understand the provincial leadership's instructions for handling refugees who arrived in his jurisdiction, we must keep in mind the reasonable assumptions made: most arrivals would probably be from within the same province, or possibly the next-door one, and an expensive operation to feed them in their home communities was in preparation. The general approach, therefore, was to send the wanderers home whenever possible, and reserve reception-centre treatment for those who were not fit to travel. But let us look at a

set of guidelines that the intendant received on 21 October. These guidelines reflect preoccupation with the risk of abuse, and they considerably narrow eligibility for assistance, but they still recognise a range of circumstances that would justify intelligently differential treatment.

According to the new instructions, when wanderers arrived in a jurisdiction, the authorities should first ascertain whether their home localities had been afflicted, and, if so, why they had not stayed there to receive relief. Those not from disaster areas were to be allowed to go home if they wished, but should not be assisted. Those from nearby disaster areas were not to be assisted either. Their own county authorities should be notified that they would be returning, so that they could have their status verified and receive relief if eligible. Assistance to go home should be reserved for those who not only claimed to be from relatively far-off stricken areas, but also manifested physical evidence of malnutrition, were accompanied by family dependants, appeared hard pressed by cold and hunger, and would not have been able to return without a cash allowance. These people would not be eligible for winter care in the reception centre: it would be the responsibility of the authorities of their home jurisdiction to ensure that, on return, they were included in the relief distribution.

Exempt from mandatory return home but ineligible for assistance of any kind were able-bodied males who could support themselves through labour and were not accompanied by family dependants. Once such people had been so perverse as to leave their disaster-stricken home communities, they forfeited the consideration given to the landless who remained at home. A person who exercised mobility could be deemed capable of moving into regions where disaster had not so depressed demand for labour as to make work impossible to find. Some of these people may not have been eligible for relief at home – they may have been from ‘less poor’ households, whose able-bodied males were expected to fend for themselves.

This left for the reception centres not only the elderly, the sick, the disabled and ‘those who would find it hard to travel in the winter’s cold’, but also able-bodied adult males who had come with their families over long distances, those with elderly parents who needed

a son's physical support in travelling, and those with sick wives who needed care. In all such cases, provided that it was not practical to separate the able-bodied male from his dependants, the whole family was to be eligible for the classic program: food and shelter over the winter, and an assisted return home when spring arrived. The list of suitable beneficiary types is short, but it is worth reproducing because it seems to reflect its author's ability to think of famine refugees as real people. In Qing government directives, we do not often encounter wives as persons who might be physically in need of care from husbands. But the possibility would have occurred to officials who had thought seriously about what famine meant.

I turn now to the third issue: how to ensure continuity of relief supplies when need seemed likely to outstrip resources. Hungry people need to eat, but what the authorities of the three counties had in store was mainly silver. The anticipated requirement for the winter feeding program totalled 276,000 tael-equivalent units (TEUs). Not long before the opening of relief, they had 189,000 TEUs on hand, but 74 percent of that was in the form of silver. One bushel of unhusked rice was being deemed equivalent to one tael of silver, but there is reason to doubt whether the administration could have bought bulk supplies of grain at that ideal, benchmark price in the last three months of 1746. We may, therefore, well ask whether the eligible families were really likely to receive relief in the form sanctioned by commonsense and long-standing tradition: uncooked grain.

The same doubt arises yet more sharply if we jump to mid-February the following year, when the provincial authorities were budgeting for an extended relief period plus an extra monetary benefit for victims in the ten worst stricken counties. The new provincial administration commissioner estimated that, after using up the resources left over so far, the authorities in affected areas province-wide would need at least another 260,000 taels of silver and 299,000 bushels of husked rice. The silver was the easy part. The commissioner could assume that there were still unused relief funds in the prefectural treasuries, so all he had to do was allocate the sum required out of these funds, and order the responsible authorities to send the silver off to the flood-stricken counties. Rice was more problematic. The commissioner could see

his way to allocating a mere 24 percent of the amount required. Most of the balance would have to be provided in silver, from the salt tax. We can calculate that, in the total allocation of resources for the supplementary relief period, silver would predominate over rice in a ratio of more than 5:1.

The assumption that silver and rice were interchangeable rested on the belief that one could give disaster victims silver in partial or even total substitution for grain. In this province, which was the most highly commercialised in China, it was thought safe to assume that merchant rice would be available on the markets of dearth-stricken regions, having been attracted by a combination of high prices and ease of transportation on a dense network of waterways. The key was therefore to ensure that peasants had the wherewithal to buy rice 'imports'. It is interesting that this assumption, arguably better suited to the richer counties further south, was made by officials discussing flood relief for the environmentally vulnerable north part of the province.

It is not that the supply even of merchant rice was thought to be unfailing. Let us see how the provincial governor advised his subordinates before the winter feeding program started. Although the normal procedure, if one were issuing silver at all, would be to mix silver and grain consistently throughout the relief period, it would make good sense, he said, to issue silver in the ninth and tenth months of the lunar calendar, and either rice, or a mixture of rice and silver, in the eleventh and twelfth. The former two months were the immediate post-harvest season, and the harvest would be good that year both in those local villages that had escaped the floods and in more fortunate adjacent jurisdictions. 'With new rice entering the market and visiting merchants making their rounds, the price of grain is surely bound to fall in no time.' With the rain and snow of winter, by contrast, merchants might not continue to arrive, and grain prices would rise. It would be much better for the poor to receive rice from the authorities in such circumstances than in the post-harvest season when they could buy it cheaply.

By the spring of 1747, the shortage of actual grain created tougher problems. There would be no point in issuing silver in the first

two lunar months, when grain would be scarce on the markets. Distribution in silver would have to wait until the month before the early-summer wheat harvest, when prices would peak and the government would start making cut-price sales of special stockpiles, in a procedure called 'price-stabilising sales'. At this point, one's tone must change: no more calls to admire sensitive and thoughtful planning, because what emerges now is managerial expediency. Only those victims assessed as most in need should have assistance in the first two months; those assessed as needing only one month of relief must wait until the end of the third month (8 May) for doles of silver. Even in the first and second months, when there would be little grain to buy, household relief entitlements should be issued partly in silver if possible. While we may well ask what all this meant for those affected, it is worth reconstructing the rationale for saving grain so that it could be sold while market prices peaked, instead of given to the hungry in the spring. On the one hand, the annual pre-harvest peak of market prices would probably put grain out of the reach of many ordinary people who had not been disaster victims. One must have grain to sell to them in order to prevent food riots. On the other hand, if the state could get a decent return despite selling at less than market prices, there would be funds with which to rebuild the reserves when prices fell after the autumn harvest. One could not risk being caught with even fewer stocks next year.

We will now stop eavesdropping and ask what lessons these overheard bureaucratic conversations may have for us today. I begin by noting that many a listener would pat the participants on the back for being 'surprisingly modern', or even regard their 'modernity' as the most interesting feature of the story. After all, these people thought rationally, and in secular terms. They were engaged in rational, quantitative planning. Implicit in their social welfare institutions were issues that we face today: paternalism versus self-reliance; welfare abuse; the negative stereotyping of welfare claimants and of dislocated persons. And if the individuals whom we have been observing were still operating uncritically in paternalistic mode, they also implemented relief distribution policies that would not have made sense without some basic consciousness of market forces

– even if they had no reason to expound that consciousness with the sophistication that some of their contemporaries had shown. They did not reiterate the argument, made to the emperor in 1743, that boosting effective demand for grain by supplementing peasant incomes would attract commercial imports. However, their relative comfort with the counter-intuitive practice of distributing relief in monetary form would have been applauded by the foremost welfare economist of the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

The objection to the ‘Weren’t they modern!’ way of thinking is not so much that to imagine that rationality is a defining characteristic of modernity flies in the face of modern history, betrays that naïve post-Enlightenment belief in linear progress that is in full retreat throughout the Western academy, and reflects an absurd vanity on the part of us moderns. As Robert Hymes has shown, rational, market-conscious thinking about famine relief policy had already been published in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279).<sup>4</sup> The religion (superstition)/rationality dichotomy may have helped Europeans since Voltaire to make sense of the revolutionary changes taking place in Europe (and its overseas extensions), but we should not assume that it has the same value universally.

However, to draw attention to the rationalism of a Han Feizi (d.233 B.C.) or his teacher Xunzi would only be to make debating points. We can more easily recognize our Qing-dynasty officials as superb exemplars of premodern rationality by asking what would be thought of a present-day government that sought to deal with the aftermath of catastrophic floods by relying solely on the organizational techniques of the eighteenth-century Sino-Manchu bureaucracy. More positively, we could ask how the mid-Qing relief managers could have obviated some of the dysfunctional expedients identified above, had their world only had access to modern means of transport and communication, modern agricultural inputs, modern pumping technology, perhaps even modern ways of keeping population records. In brief, although modern technology is not a panacea, nevertheless with helicopters, telecommunications, computers, higher agricultural productivity, power-driven pumps, and faster means of transporting grain in bulk, the relief managers could probably have saved more lives, allocated

resources more accurately and efficiently, eliminated the waiting periods that drove peasants to the roads, broadened the eligibility criteria, and had more choice as to whether to distribute relief in money or in kind. They had superbly rational organisational skills, but worked at a snail's pace by modern standards. With computers, e-mail, and perhaps an airborne courier service, those sets of guidelines that stand today as testimonies to their authors' thoughtfulness could have been drafted, critiqued, revised, approved, and disseminated to the field administration within hours, not weeks, thereby eliminating delay and confusion as subordinates awaited orders or made incorrect assumptions as to what the policy would be this year.

To praise the managers for their 'modernity' is therefore to overlook the transformations in human capacity that have been brought about by the series of technological changes that began with the Industrial Revolution – or, to accept Jack Goldstone's refinement, that were inaugurated with the unprecedented application of steam power to industrial production in the 1830s.<sup>5</sup> That for which the Qing flood-relief managers should be praised is their successful harnessing of the premodern resources that were at their disposal to embody a far more significant commitment to the survival of the poor and vulnerable than was evinced by the New Orleans authorities (and higher echelons of the United States governmental hierarchy), despite the far more sophisticated technological resources available to the latter, in the hurricane-caused flood of 2005. To be sure, the comparison is unfair: what caused domestic outrage in the United States in 2005 (apart from the neglect of the environmental infrastructure that, if properly maintained, might have prevented the disaster in the first place) was the disorganised nature of the immediate official response to a calamity that had come as a shock, although in fact it was predictable. We have no evidence that the first few days and weeks of the Chinese floods of 1746 and 1747 were any less traumatic for their victims, or that the immediate official response was any better organised by mid-Qing standards. With this flaw acknowledged, the comparison is still overwhelmingly in favour of premodern China. Here was a government that planned in advance for natural disasters and devoted immense administrative and fiscal resources to managing

their aftermath.

No one would suggest that the precise procedures used in eighteenth-century China should be wrenched from their historical context and applied in the contemporary United States. The paternalism of practices based on the concept of the villager's 'place' among the ancestral fields would seem oppressive in an age in which it is increasingly accepted that people like to find their own solutions when they can, and that preferred solutions may involve mobility. It is therefore dangerous even to say that what should be adopted is the 'spirit' of Qing-dynasty relief procedures. However, in a world in which socialism and the socialistic institutions of the welfare state have been increasingly eclipsed, it may be worth insisting that government commitment to the economic survival of the weakest members of society was institutionalised in China long before the foundation of the modern Western welfare state, to say nothing of the more radical reshapings of society in China after 1949. In other words, there is no need to banish the idea of some contextually appropriate, government provided safety net in the retreat from the perceived excesses of the so-called 'Mummy-Daddy state' or 'iron rice-bowl'. Whatever government self-interest may have underlain the ideal of preserving everybody's social foothold, its translation into relatively effective famine relief practice will have made eighteenth-century China a more truly 'civilised' society than those that lacked such practice. What forms of safety net may be appropriate in different contemporary societies East and West is open to discussion. The point is that the concept antedates socialism and could survive its eclipse.

What is civilisation? Mohandas Gandhi defined it not in terms of poetry or architectural wonders, but very simply: 'Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.'<sup>6</sup> This definition has its problems: what, I wonder, is the duty of a nihilist, and what 'mode of conduct' would instruct him in it? However, in its original context, as part of an argument that India had 'nothing to learn' about civilisation from the continent that gave the world the factory and the machine gun, the simple statement has immense rhetorical effectiveness. Perhaps it can still shock us usefully today.

Talk of 'duty' in quotidian Anglo-Saxon political discourse often has a conservative, authoritarian ring: citizens should think less about their rights and more about their duties. What is attractive about Confucianism as a political philosophy is that it emphasises duty as the guiding principle not so much of subjects as of rulers. To be sure, an over-developed sense of responsibility on the part of individual or collective rulers is conducive to paternalism. But there are different kinds of father.

In a thoughtful essay, Sumner Twiss has pointed out that there is no need to regard 'human rights' as a Western conceptual monopoly, for a number of 'Third World' and other non-Western viewpoints have contributed to three 'generations (types) of human rights': the predominantly 'civil-political rights' that are most easily linked to Western liberalism, the 'socio-economic rights' associated with 1970s critiques of 'exploitation' and colonialism, and the 'developmental-collective rights' 'emerging [in the 1990s] amidst Third and Fourth World claims for global redistribution of power, wealth, and the common heritage of humankind (e.g., ecosystem, peace)'. These three 'generations' have enriched each other, leading to creative reinterpretations of the potential of each.<sup>7</sup> The resulting amalgam is far more welcoming to diverse cultural traditions than any one 'generation' would have been alone. Twiss argues that there are multiple points of contact between the three 'generations' and the Confucian tradition. He points out that a Confucian, or more precisely Mencian, understanding of human nature, voiced by the Chinese delegate to the conference that drafted the 1948 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', influenced the wording of that charter's opening statement about human beings.<sup>8</sup>

To the extent that the Confucian tradition has a particular affinity for the 'socio-economic' class of rights, one can only encourage its twenty-first century inheritors to keep up the pressure. It is not so much that Confucianism has so many compatibilities with human rights that it could 'justify internally its agreement to participate in an international human rights consensus'.<sup>9</sup> Rather, establishing its coparcener status in the global human rights discussion would be one way for China to play a resurgent role in the twenty-first century

world order. If it proved able to expand support for socio-economic rights within the 'international human rights consensus', this might prove beneficial both for poor countries, and for those rich countries in which socialist traditions are marginal or have become so. At the same time, a clearer willingness on the part of Western governments to welcome non-Western contributions to global human rights discussion might help to defuse the resentment of Western hypocrisy and arrogance that undermines well-meaning Western criticisms of non-Western human rights performance and helps to sustain the violence of contemporary international relations. Much might, in short, be gained from mutual remonstrance based on an eclectic, jointly built philosophy of human rights. Humility before the highest standards of responsible Confucian governance would be of benefit in any place where individuals are neglected, tortured, or oppressed – including, of course, China.

This, then, is the Chinese lesson for New Orleans (and elsewhere): that the subaltern-class 'individual' who might 'lose' his/her present 'foothold' in society matters, and that recognition of his/her importance should be embodied in intelligent measures to provide whatever protections may be best planned, coordinated and/or supplied by government, be it local, regional, or national. What these measures may be varies with context, but in a world of gathering ecological crisis, maintenance of the environmental infrastructure, where possible, is basic. Where it can be seen that no amount of civil engineering can stave off disaster in the medium term, disaster planning is the last recourse of responsible government. The 1746 Sino-Manchu bureaucracy could serve as inspiration.

## Notes

- 1 Anon., *Zhen'an shigao* (Draft directives from a relief casebook), 1746–47. Abridged and reprinted from manuscripts held by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in *Zhongguo huangzheng quanshu* (Complete collection of Chinese works on famine relief), eds Li Wenhai and Xia Mingfang (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 2003–), vol.2, part 2, pp.103–74.
- 2 Pierre-Étienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China*, trans. Elborg Forster, Stanford, 1990, pp.236–37.

- 3 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford, 1982, *passim*.
- 4 Robert P. Hymes, 'Moral Duty and Self-Regulating Process in Southern Sung Views of Famine Relief', in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, eds Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer, Berkeley, 1993, pp.294–99.
- 5 Jack A. Goldstone, 'Neither Late Imperial nor Early Modern: Efflorescences and the Qing Formation in World History', in *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*, ed. Lynn A. Struve, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, pp.274–75.
- 6 See chapter 13, 'What is true civilization?', of Gandhi's 1922 treatise *Indian Home Rule*.
- 7 Sumner B. Twiss, 'A Constructive Framework for Discussing Confucianism and Human Rights', in *Confucianism and Human Rights*, eds Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, New York, 1998, pp.32–34.
- 8 Twiss, pp.41–43.
- 9 Twiss, p.45.