

“Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron”

The North China Famine of 1876-1879

Essay by Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley

Introduction

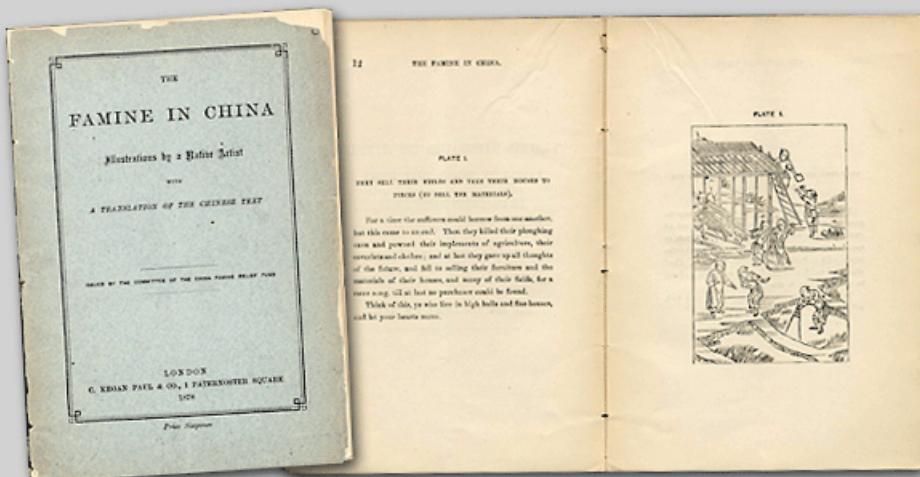
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The Famine in China, 1878

Between 1876 and 1879, the most lethal drought-famine in imperial China’s long history of famines and disasters struck the five northern provinces of Shanxi, Henan, Shandong, Zhili, and Shaanxi. The drought in the Yellow River basin area began in earnest in 1876, and worsened dramatically with the almost total failure of rain in 1877. By the time the rains returned late in 1878, an estimated nine to thirteen million of the affected area’s total population of about 108 million people had perished. [1]

This unit examines famine illustrations from a collection of pamphlets produced by Chinese philanthropists with the purely domestic objective of soliciting contributions to help relieve this enormous disaster. In 1878, a London-based committee of missionaries, diplomats, merchants, and scholars established a China Famine Relief Fund to broaden the relief effort. To help bring the horror of the famine home to their Western audience, the committee enlisted the great sinologist James Legge (1815-1897) to translate one of the illustrated pamphlets. His title—taken from the original Chinese—was “Pictures Illustrating the Terrible Famine in Honan that Might Draw Tears from Iron.”

This unit reproduces Legge’s translation in full, including the original plates (with bracketed notations beginning in “Legge”). It also draws illustrations from additional pamphlets that were never translated into English. The social and cultural dynamics of the Chinese response to the famine are addressed in the essay that follows.

INTRODUCTION

The North China Famine had local, national, and global implications. [2] It forced a series of hideous moral choices upon starving families in Shanxi Province, where the famine was most severe. Striking only a decade after the Qing government (1644 to 1911) finally suppressed three mid-century rebellions that had threatened to topple the dynasty, the famine also presented a serious crisis for an empire already beleaguered by foreign aggression, internal unrest, and fiscal woes.



Provinces affected by the famine of 1876–1879

The severity and scope of the disaster galvanized into action not only the Qing court and the officials in charge of relieving the famished northern provinces, but also Chinese and Western philanthropists living in the treaty port of Shanghai. The catastrophe received widespread coverage in Chinese and English-language newspapers published in Shanghai. As the most lethal of the drought-famines that also affected India, Brazil, Korea, Egypt, and southern Africa in the late 1870s, the disaster drew attention as well from newspapers and missionary journals in Europe and North America. [3]

As the famine grew ever more severe during the spring of 1878, Chinese philanthropists from the Taohuawu Public Hall in Suzhou, a city in China's wealthy Jiangnan (lower Yangzi) region, designed and printed a small pamphlet titled *The Incredible Famine in Henan: Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron (Henan qiluāng tieleitú)*. The twelve woodblock print illustrations of famine conditions in Henan Province, each accompanied by an eight-character heading and a poetic lament, sought to rouse people to contribute to relief efforts by making even "people of iron" (*tieren*) shed tears upon viewing them. [4]

The text next to the first illustration in the "tears from iron" pamphlet, for example, described how famine victims were forced to kill their plough oxen, pawn their farming tools and their clothing, and finally sell their fields and take their houses to pieces in a desperate effort to survive. The last sentence begged readers to have compassion: "Think of this, you who live in high halls and fine houses, and let your hearts be moved." [5]



"They Sell Their Fields and Take Their Houses to Pieces"
[Legge plate I]

China's first modern newspaper, the Shanghai-based *Shenbao*, introduced the illustrations to its treaty-port readers and praised them as [an innovative method of raising famine relief funds.](#) [6] Later in 1878 the booklet of "pictures to draw tears from iron" was translated into English and published in London. British members of the Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund [hoped it would "help to carry home to English hearts a sense of the dire distress from which these unhappy people are now suffering, and call forth from benevolent persons in this country also, a practical expression of sympathy."](#) [7]

Xie Jiafu, who directed the Taohuawu public hall and led the Suzhou relief effort during the disaster, was the person [primarily responsible for compiling and distributing the Illustrated famine pamphlets.](#) Philanthropists in Shanghai and elsewhere in Jiangnan, however, shared the work of writing the poetic laments that accompany each illustration. [8] Between 1877 and 1881 Xie Jiafu and his colleagues designed five additional pamphlets of disaster illustrations, which were compiled together in a volume titled "[Pictures Reporting Disaster in Four Provinces](#)" (*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*). [9] The illustrations in this unit are drawn from both the original *Henan qihuang tieleitu* and from the larger collection of disaster prints that includes famine scenes not only from Henan Province, but from Shandong, Shanxi, and Zhili as well. [10]

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FAMINE & PHILANTHROPY

The leading Chinese-language newspaper in late nineteenth-century China, the Shanghai-based *Shenbao*, began in 1877 and 1878 to cover on an almost daily basis the famine engulfing North China. The news that millions of people were starving to death in the drought-stricken northern provinces shocked Chinese reformers and gentry philanthropists living in Shanghai and other parts of the Jiangnan region into action.

[11] The extra-governmental famine relief effort that resulted was unprecedented in scope and style. By the summer of 1878, gentry and merchant relief organizers had established special relief offices in Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Yangzhou. Over the next three years these centers cooperated to raise over a million taels (about \$1,300,000 in 1878) for famine relief. Such elite-run relief efforts cooperated with, but remained separate from, the official relief-coordinating bureau in Tianjin, which was established early in 1878, and which also targeted Shanghai as a center of official fund-raising. [12]

In their concerted effort to limit the pernicious effects of the famine, influential members of the Jiangnan elite drew ideas from Chinese texts and philanthropic traditions. The poetic laments accompanying each of the Taohuawu public hall's famine illustrations, for instance, use descriptive phrases strikingly similar to those found in the *Qingshiduo*, an anthology of poems from the Qing period that was compiled by a Zhejiangese scholar just a decade before the famine. [13]

The decision to depict the suffering of disaster victims visually as well as in writing stemmed from Jiangnan's regional philanthropic tradition. A few decades before the Incredible Famine, a leading Jiangnan philanthropist named Yu Zhi designed two volumes of "pictures to draw tears from iron" in order to raise relief funds for victims of the Jiangnan flood disaster of 1850 and the Taiping wars of the 1850s and early 1860s. The unmistakeable similarities between the style and content of the illustrations in Xie Jiafu's *Henan qihuang tieleitu* and those in Yu Zhi's *Jiangnan tieleitu* show that Xie was deeply influenced by the earlier work. [14]

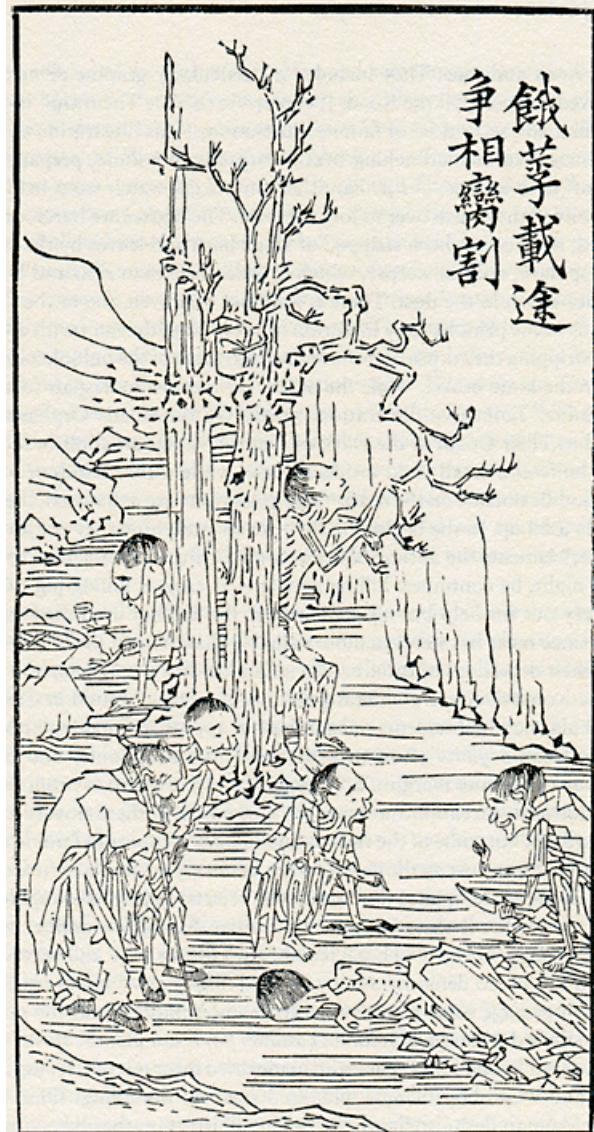
The subject matter of the Taohuawu public hall's "pictures to draw tears from iron" also drew heavily on China's long tradition of describing disasters. A particularly shocking image that appears in gazetteer essays, *Shenbao* articles, and the illustrated pamphlets is that of famine-related cannibalism. Xie Jiafu and his Taohuawu colleagues appear to have employed images of cannibalism as part of their effort to draw both tears and donations from even the most impervious audience.

They included a particularly graphic print titled "Starved Corpses Fill the Road; [People] Vie to Slice Them Up," in both their first and second set of famine illustrations. This picture depicts two emaciated men crouching over a corpse with a knife, preparing to slice off flesh and devour it. Famished onlookers watch from behind a tree, and others rush over to join the feast. The figures are barefoot and ragged, the tree has been stripped of all its bark and leaves by the starving populace, and the corpse, which is little more than skin and bones, lies face down in the dust. [15]

*People Eating People—
"Starved corpses fill the road;
people vie to slice them up."*

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 13a

[t012]
see also Legge plate VI.





Another Taohuawu illustration, this one titled "On the Roads Orphans are Lured to Their Death in the Dark of Night," shows an adult brandishing a knife at a small child, while three abandoned children huddle outside on the road.

"The grass roots are exhausted, the tree bark is used up. In the beginning they ate corpses; now they eat [living] people," laments the author of the accompanying text. Whether by day or by night, he continues, killing people is as easy as killing pigs. Children cry out for help but no one answers them. They are killed with a knife since meat has become more valuable than human life. [16]

Famine Orphans Lured to Their Deaths—"On the roads orphans are lured to their death in the dark of night."

"*Si sheng gao zai tu qi,*" 24a

[t013]

The decision to employ powerful tropes of cannibalism, possibly borrowed from the distinctive "literature of the grotesque" found in popular works such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margins*, sometimes succeeded in convincing people to become involved in relief work. The Zhejiangese merchant-philanthropist Jing Yuanshan, for instance, wrote that it was rumors of people consuming one another across a thousand li of scorched earth that first motivated Jing and his friend Li Yushu to begin raising relief donations in Shanghai. [17]

In their effort to motivate people to donate to relief efforts, Xie Jiafu and his Taohuawu colleagues also called on belief systems and fund-raising methods that had deep roots in late-imperial Chinese society. China's tradition of famine relief appropriated diverse strands of thought, ranging from the basic Confucian ideal of humaneness and the concern for the well-being of the common people, to Legalist strands which emphasized the manipulation of rewards and punishments, to popular Buddhist teachings about the oneness of all creatures. [18]

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MOBILIZING RELIEF

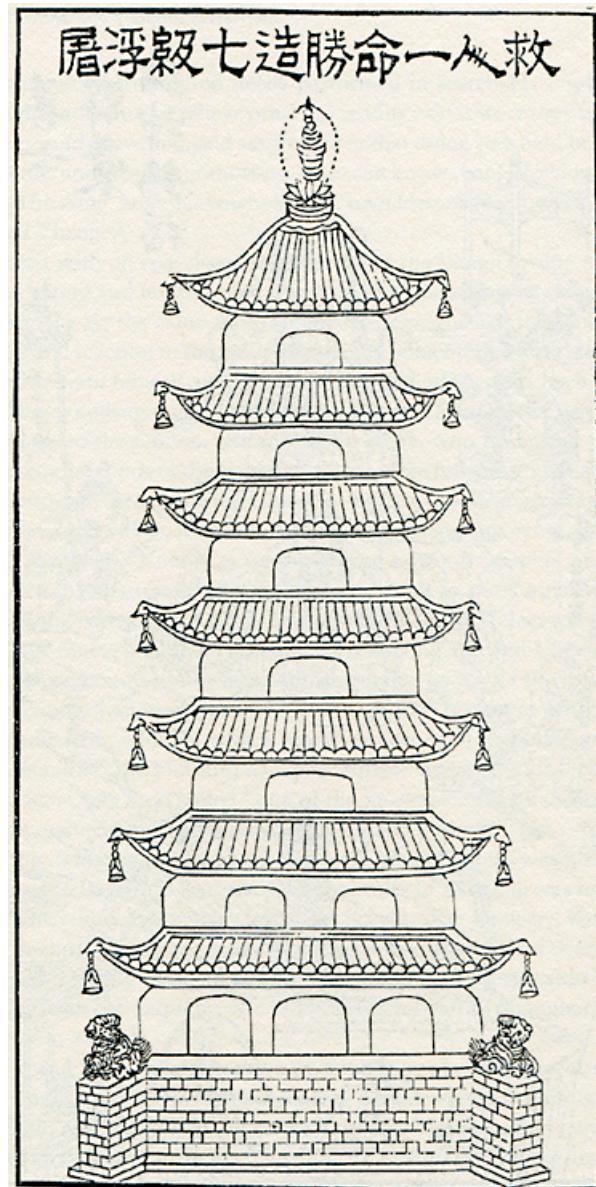
Chinese philanthropists employed a wide array of strategies to motivate people to contribute to relief efforts during the famine. For example, before they began printing disaster illustrations in 1878, members of the Taohuawu public hall used a “pagoda method” of fund-raising that had been tried by Xie Jiafu’s father a few decades earlier during a flood relief campaign and which dated back to the Ming period (1368 to 1644). They designed woodblock prints of a seven-story Buddhist pagoda and encouraged donors to accumulate merit by giving enough to get their name written on the pagoda.

The first illustration in the Taohuawu’s comprehensive collection of disaster prints is titled “To Save One Person’s Life is Better Than Building a Seven Story Pagoda.” The illustration depicts what is termed the “Wild Goose Pagoda for Shandong Relief.” The accompanying text states that everyone who contributed at least 50 wen (about six cents in 1878) to the relief effort would have his name written on a level of the pagoda. [19]

Wild Goose Pagoda for Shandong Relief—“To save one person’s life is better than building a seven-story pagoda.”

“Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 3a

[t005]



Xie and his co-workers also drew on the belief, popularized by morality books (*shanshu*), that Heaven distributed rewards and retributions for good and bad deeds. [20] While local-level observers in the famine-stricken northern provinces tended to emphasize Heaven's wrath at human misconduct in their attempts to explain the famine, Jiangnan philanthropists focused instead on the rewards that generous donors could accrue by donating to relief campaigns.

The "ledgers of merit and demerit" that circulated widely in late imperial China provided detailed advice on what people should do to earn rewards and escape punishments during life on earth and in the afterlife. Such books specifically addressed the religious ramifications of engaging in famine relief activities. One seventeenth-century morality book, for example, allotted 100 merit points to a person who saved the life of another, but deducted 100 points from the account of one who "hoards rice rather than distributing it to the needy in times of famine." [21] The *Taohuawu* famine illustrations echoed such claims.



The final print in the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* shows heavenly beings descending to shower rewards of wealth and filial sons on those who contributed to relief efforts. The illustration is titled "On the Good Who Open Their Purses All the Spiritual Powers Bestow Blessing," and the text below ensures readers that the accumulation of good actions never fails to result in "superabundant blessing." [22]

*Philanthropists Rewarded—
“On the good who open their
purses all the spiritual powers
bestow blessing.”*

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 19a

[t006]

see also Legge plate XII.

Zheng Guanying, a reformer-entrepreneur from Guangdong who played a major role in organizing the Shanghai-based famine relief effort, also highlighted the rewards Heaven would grant those who helped disaster victims. In 1877, Zheng worked with Xie Jiafu and with the Zhejiangese merchant-philanthropist Jing Yuanshan to form a relief bureau to help famine victims in Shanxi. When the government became more involved with relief efforts the following year, Zheng, Xie, and Jing cooperated with Qing officials, particularly Sheng Xuanhuai and Li Hongzhang, to broaden the relief effort to include three more stricken provinces: Henan, Zhili, and Shaanxi. [23]

In a letter to the public that was posted by the Shanghai Relief Managing Office early in 1878, Zheng Guanying reminded "those fortunate people who live in Shanghai and have enough food and warm clothing" that "saving neighbors from disaster brings many good effects." Great wealth and high rank, he explained, both stemmed from good deeds performed in secret. He implored his Shanghai audience to relieve others as readily as if it were they who were starving and drowning, and assured them that doing so would bring them filial sons and wealthy grandsons. "You can know that following the Way brings blessing, and that you hold your own fortune in your hands," concluded Zheng. [24]

When faced with a disaster of epic proportions, members of the Jiangnan elite turned to China's long and multifaceted tradition of philanthropic action and poetic lament. At the same time, there was also much that distinguished their reaction to the famine from late-Ming or hinterland responses. Both Xie Jiafu himself, and the "pictures to draw tears from iron" that he and his Taohuawu colleagues compiled, are representative of the hybrid character of Jiangnan responses to the famine.

Xie and many others who played leading roles in organizing the drive to raise famine relief funds in the Jiangnan region were reformist in outlook and committed to strengthening China by borrowing Western practices. In the 1870s and 1880s, for example, Xie Jiafu, Zheng Guanying, Jing Yuanshan, and Sheng Xuanhai were involved not only in organizing relief efforts, but also in self-strengthening enterprises such as the China Merchants Steamship Navigation Company or the Shanghai Telegraph Office. [25]

Xie Jiafu provides a useful profile of the less famous post-Taiping Jiangnan elites who responded to the famine with such alacrity. Xie came from a family with a venerable record of engaging in philanthropic activities. His father, Xie Huiting, was involved in multiple kinds of local-level charitable campaigns, and has been called "one of the most famous philanthropists in Jiangnan during the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods" (1821 to 1861). [26] According to his biography, Xie Jiafu was no stranger to disaster. Born into a local-gentry family in 1846, he was only 14 years old when the Taiping Army took over his home village near Suzhou. Xie was captured by the rebels, and more than 20 of his family members were killed. His father died shortly after his son's escape from the Taipings, and Xie temporarily moved to Shanghai with his mother. [27]

Xie and his mother were two of literally thousands of elite refugees who fled to Shanghai during the 1860s as leading Jiangnan cities fell to the Taipings. The Shanghai they arrived in had already changed a great deal since China's defeat in the first Opium War (1839 to 1842), which forced the Qing government to open the city to foreign trade and allow British, American, and French authorities to establish foreign concessions there. As it became a major hub for overseas trade as well as for north-south coastal shipping routes and east-west Yangzi commerce, Shanghai developed a distinctive Sino-Western character. [28] By the time the famine spread across North China in the 1870s, Shanghai had become the leading metropolis of the wealthy Jiangnan region and was thus in a premier position to raise relief contributions to aid the starving.

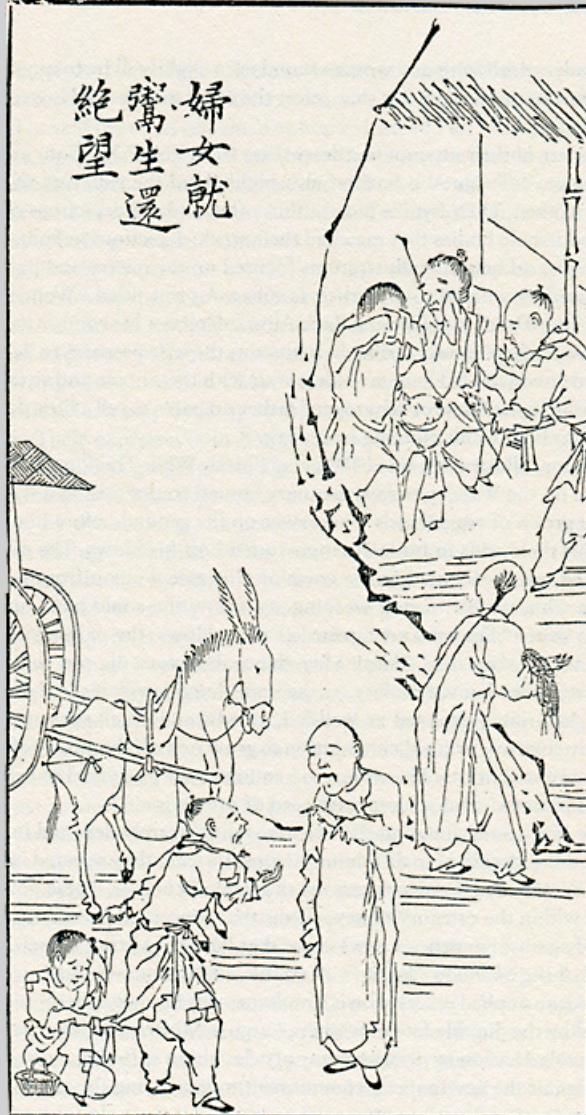
Selling Women & Children to Survive

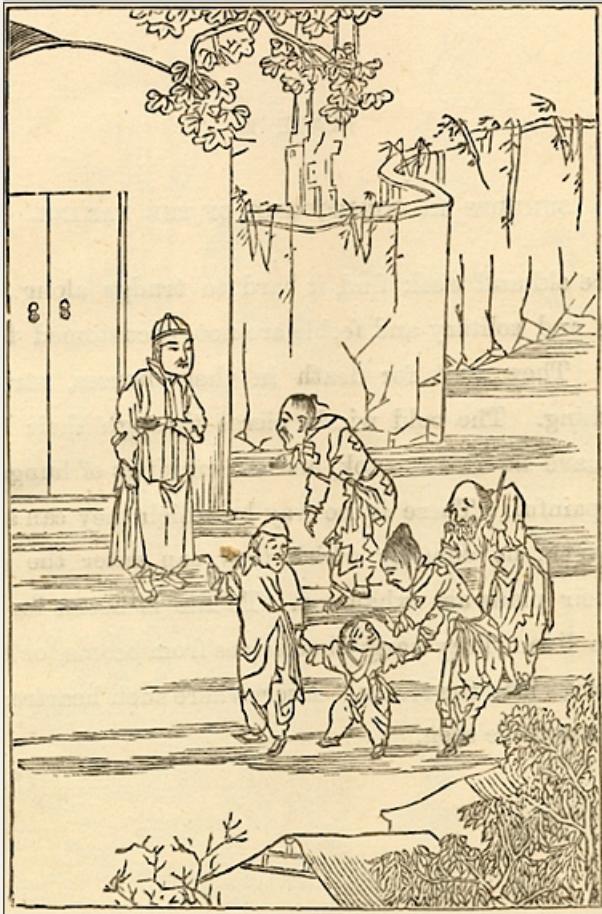
Some illustrations of the famine drew attention to the fact that starving families often resorted to selling women and children in order to survive. A print titled "Women are Sold: They Despair of Coming Back Alive," for example, depicts a husband, wife, and child weeping piteously inside their home as the wife prepares to be sold. Outside two well-fed human traders wait with their horse and strings of cash, and in the foreground a ragged father prepares to sell a little daughter who clings to his clothing in despair.

A Wife is Sold—"Women are sold. They despair of coming back alive."

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 30a

[t009]





The commentary accompanying an illustration of agonized parents selling their child in the "Tears from Iron" pamphlet points out that the alternative to remaining together in the face of starvation was to follow one the other to certain death."

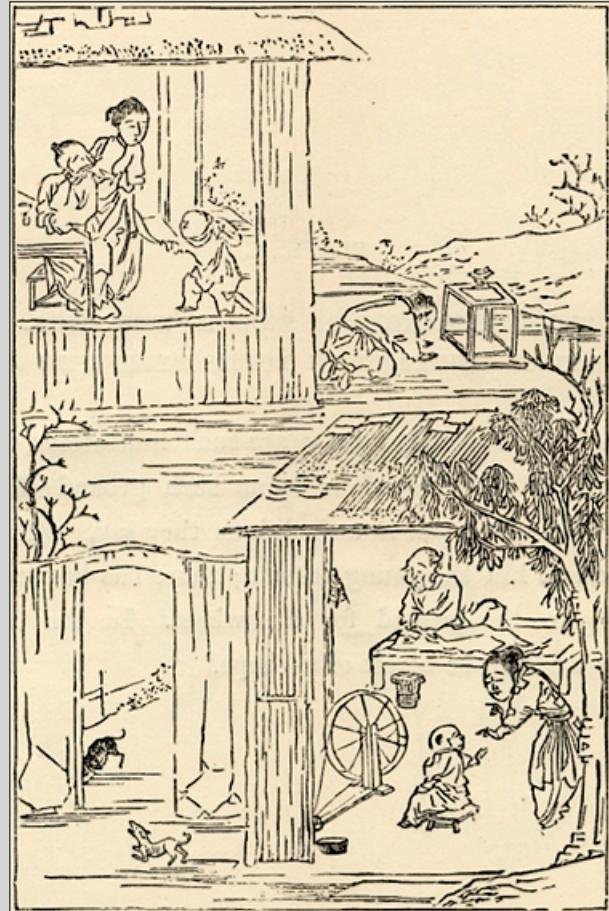
Parents forced to sell their children—"They Sell Their Boys and Girls. Parents and Children Part and Their Bowels are Rent."

[Legge plate IV]

Another graphic in the pamphlet depicts this anguish in two tiers. At the bottom of the picture, a grey-haired couple agonize over the need to sell their only grandchild. In a room above them, we see their starving filial son and his faithful wife stifling their cries.

A grey-haired couple consider selling their only grandson—"A Filial Son and a Faithful Wife Enduring Hunger and Stifling Their Cries."

[Legge plate IX]



During his time in Shanghai, Xie Jiafu became more and more interested in current and foreign affairs. At one point he encountered a Japanese official who told him about Japan's reforms under the Meiji government. Xie was impressed by what he heard of those reforms, and decided to study foreign methods. He then entered the map department of a local school, where he familiarized himself with world maps and studied foreign languages with a German man he met at the school. He became acutely aware of the importance of coastal defense and commerce. After studying for some time, he started to compile and publish Western books about foreign affairs. [29]

Before the famine struck, Xie returned to Suzhou and resided at the Taohuawu hall. There he began to expand the reach of his father's charitable activities. In the spring of 1877, while returning from conducting relief work among disaster victims in northern Jiangsu Province, he heard the disturbing news that foreign missionaries in Shandong were adopting orphaned children from famine districts. Possibly because rumors that Catholic orphanages took in abandoned Chinese children in order to sever their limbs or gouge out their hearts had circulated widely in China since the 1860s, Xie and many of his compatriots responded with suspicion to reports about missionaries taking in Chinese famine orphans. [30] Moved by the plight of the orphans and unwilling to see more of them handed over to foreigners, Xie began to raise relief contributions for famine-stricken Shandong. When other members of the Jiangnan elite heard of his intention, they donated large sums of money. Xie then traveled to Shandong, where he used the money he had raised to purchase a shelter and build a charitable school for the famine orphans. After returning from Shandong once the crisis there had eased, early in 1878 Xie mobilized gentry-philanthropists in several different Jiangnan cities to start a relief campaign for Henan. [31]

From then on, claimed Xie's effusive biography, people from six different provinces begged Xie for assistance when faced with famine. In response, he worked "from morning to night" to prepare woodblock prints (presumably the tieleitu) that publicized the plight of disaster victims. Because many were moved by Xie's work, he was able to collect over 2,500,000 taels for relief, thus saving the lives of countless people. Xie was highly praised by the Shenbao, and did not go unrewarded after the famine. He received a position at the Shanghai Telegraph Office, which was headed by two of his famine-relief colleagues, Sheng Xuanhuai and Jing Yuanshang. [32]

Stepping into the vacuum left by the decline of Qing officialdom, Xie and other Jiangnan philanthropists used their money, energy, and talent to act as de facto officials who raised people's awareness of the disaster, collected and distributed famine relief funds, promulgated detailed regulations about how to conduct relief work, and redeemed women and children who had been sold. Xie and his Taohuawu public hall, for example, established the "Qingjiang Bureau for Redeeming and Sending People Back," which sought to help women and children from famine districts who had been sold by their starving families. [33]

The Qingjiang Bureau spent most of the money that it received from wealthy donors to redeem women, build temporary sheds to house them in, give the women clothing, bedding, and food, provide relief for their families, and hire soldiers to escort them home. Those in charge of the Qingjiang Bureau also kept meticulous records listing the name, age, native place, and surviving family members of the 43 women rescued. Of the nine girls and women given money and escorted back to their native places in March 1879, for example, three were from Shandong and six from Zhili, and they ranged from eight to 17 years of age. Some were returned to family members, while those who lacked any family at all were sent to a benevolence hall in Tianjin to be cared for. [34]

Several of the "tears from iron" illustrations highlight the Taohuawu public hall's commitment to raising awareness of and relief funds for women and children who had been sold by their starving families. Some illustrations focus on the pain and suffering caused when famished family members were separated.

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REACHING A NEW AUDIENCE

In addition to illustrations of women and children begin sold by their starving families, other illustrations depict the agonies experienced by women after they were sold to wealthy human traders, who often transported them to brothels in Shanghai and elsewhere. These images of tormented women were employed by Xie Jiafu and his philanthropic colleagues to capture the attention and sympathy of new and broader audiences. A print titled “Weeping Bitterly while Thinking of Home; Beaten on the Way” portrays an angry human trader raising a whip to beat a group of ragged girls who cower on the ground before him. The girls lift their arms in futile attempts to defend themselves from his blows.

The accompanying text is narrated in the voice of a literate woman from a good family who, unable to stop weeping, asks how she could have sunk to such a state. “**The rattan whip strikes three blows; the pain penetrates my bones,**” she cries. “**Alas! May these abductors die ten thousand deaths!**” [35] The human traders are the unmistakable villains in these pictures. Invariably depicted as well-fed, greedy, and cruel, such men are harshly condemned for their willingness to grow rich off the misery of their starving compatriots. **The women, on the contrary, are portrayed as helpless and innocent victims in desperate need of protection.** [36]

痛哭思家中途被笞

Beaten Along the Way—“Weeping bitterly while thinking of home, beaten on the way.”

“Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 32a

[t010]





Still other prints depict the plight of those driven to commit suicide during the famine. A woodblock print titled "Driven by Hunger and Cold, They Hang Themselves from a Beam or Throw Themselves in a River" [37] portrays one figure standing on a chair preparing to hang herself, while three others prepare to jump in a river already populated by four silently floating corpses. [37] The illustration is strongly gendered: while the sex of three of the waterlogged corpses is unclear, all four living figures in the illustration, and at least one of the corpses, are female.

*Suicide of Famine Victims—
“Driven by hunger and cold, they
hang themselves from a beam or
throw themselves in a river.”*

“Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 12a

[t008]

*“Suicide in Consequence
of the Famine”*

[Legge plate V]



The Taohuawu's "pictures to draw tears from iron" were complex forms of cultural representation "in which the moral, the commercial, and the political" were closely intertwined. [38] While the images of suffering young women may to some extent have been used as "bait" for male voyeurs, the texts accompanying them consistently called on men to act as well as to gaze and to weep. A macabre illustration in one of the Taohuawu's later compilations gave male readers a vivid example of the consequences of postponing active intervention. According to the text accompanying the illustration titled "[He] Brings Money to Redeem Life; [She Has] Already Been Slaughtered and Cooked," a guest writing from one of the disaster-stricken provinces described how he had passed a butcher's gate that was displaying different kinds of human meat. He saw that a young woman was about to be cooked, so he rushed home to get money to redeem her with.



Unfortunately, by the time he arrived back at the gate the woman had already been killed. "Her rosy face could no longer be seen," lamented her would-be-rescuer. "All that was left was her wronged ghost hanging in the air." The message to the male reader was clear: horrible things were happening to defenseless young women in the famine districts. A generous donor could save them if he acted quickly, but there was no time to waste. [39]

*Already Killed and Cooked—
"[He] brings money to redeem
life; [she has] already been
slaughtered and cooked."*

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 26a

[t011]

The famine illustrations, like Xie Jiafu himself, also exemplify the hybrid character of Jiangnan responses to the famine. While the illustrations and accompanying laments borrowed from Qing poetry and traditional art forms such as New Year prints, they also served to inform new and broader audiences of the horrific situation in North China.

[40] The front-page *Shenbao* editorial that introduced and endorsed the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* in the spring of 1878 highlighted the innovative character of the work. After outlining the subject matter of each of the 12 illustrations, the *Shenbao* editor compared the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* to a famous Song dynasty (960 to 1279) work, *Liumintu* (*Pictures of Refugees*), by Zheng Lanmin. The journalist argued that the new disaster booklet was even more admirable than the Song-period volume because it could rouse a wider audience to action. [41] The Song-era *Liumintu*, he wrote, was shared only with the emperor Shenzong, but the new *tieleitu* must "become known to all the masses."

The *Shenbao* editor chose to print a front-page editorial recommending the illustrations specifically because of their ability to reach a new audience. "Why use them to encourage donations for each province afflicted with flood and drought?" he asked rhetorically at the end of his essay. "Because, though there have been many articles written to encourage relief, only the literate can understand them. But today when these illustrations go forth, even husbands, wives, and children in remote villages will all be able to understand them." Since more people would grasp the extent of the disaster after viewing the illustrations, he concluded, more people would contribute to relief efforts. [42]

Xie Jiafu and other members of the Suzhou gentry may have begun printing famine illustrations with a traditional audience of wealthy scholars, officials, and merchants in mind. The content and style of the poetic laments in their illustration booklets were familiar and perhaps appealing to elite donors. In Shanghai, however, the *Shenbao* capitalized on what was new about the illustrations. It advertised Xie's booklet as a creative method of drawing a broader, non-elite audience into the campaign to rescue Chinese famine victims in the northern provinces. Moreover, due to the foreign presence in Shanghai and possibly to contacts Xie Jiafu made with foreigners during his time in the city, less than a year after the volume appeared in Chinese an English edition of it was published in London, where it reached a wholly new foreign audience.

Translated by James Legge and issued by the Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund in 1878, excerpts from "Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron" also appeared in the China Inland Mission's London-based journal, *China's Millions*, where they almost certainly played a role in convincing British citizens to send donations to China. A hint of the English reaction to the volume can be detected in an article published in the *Spectator* shortly after the booklet's appearance:

We have received from China a grotesque but pathetic little picture book, painting the horrors undergone in the famine districts ... A great multiplication of this little book ... would, we are persuaded, touch more minds and hearts than any mere circular. It brings home what famine means, at once vividly and with that pathos which is all the deeper for its quaint and grotesque character. [43]

The Western, English-language audience, particularly the editors of the British missionary journal *China's Millions*, made use of the "Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron" in ways Xie Jiafu could not have imagined. In addition to calling on English Christians to send aid to Chinese famine victims, *China's Millions* also encouraged them to fund more mission work that would help prevent future disasters by "shedding light upon the masses now in heathen darkness." [44] Designed in Suzhou but advertised in treaty-port Shanghai and London, the famine illustrations took on new and in some cases quite unexpected meanings as they drew tears and monetary contributions from Jiangnan literati, treaty-port reformers, and English Christians.

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1

“Report of R.J. Forrest, Esq., H.B.M. Consul at Tien-tsin, and Chairman of the Famine Relief Committee at Tien-tsin,” *China’s Millions* (November, 1879): 139; Peking United International Famine Relief Committee, *The North China Famine of 1920-1921, With Special Reference to the West Chili Area* (1922; repr., Taipei: Ch’eng-wen Publishing Company, 1971), 9; Susan Cotts Watkins and Jane Menken, “Famines in Historical Perspective,” *Population and Development Review* 11.4 (1985): 650.

2

The North China Famine is referred to in Chinese as the *Dingwu qihuang* 丁戊奇荒 (Incredible Famine of 1877-78), or simply *Guangxu sannian* 光緒三年 (the third year of the Guangxu emperor’s reign, which was 1877).

3

Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso Press, 2001), 6-7, 61-62. Estimates for population losses resulting from the drought-famines of the late 1870s range from nine-to-13 million people in China, six-to-10 million in India, and 500,000 to one million in Brazil.

4

“An Essay Discussing Henan qihuang tielei tu,” *Shenbao*, 15 March 1878, 1.

5

The Famine in China: Illustrations by a Native Artist with a Translation of the Chinese Text, trans. James Legge (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878), 12-13.

6

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. The *Shenbao* credited Xie Jiafu (also referred to as Xie Suizi) and Tian Zilin with designing and printing the collection. Xie and Tian were based in Suzhou, a wealthy city roughly 100 kilometers west of Shanghai. “*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*,” *shou juan* (Pictures reporting the disaster in the four provinces, opening volume), in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of disaster in the four provinces, opening volume), in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of accounts for relief contributions for Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and Zhili) (n.p., 1881).

7

The Famine in China (1878), 9-10.

8

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. In one of his letters-to-the-public published by the Shanghai relief bureau, Zheng Guanying, a reformer-entrepreneur from Guangdong who helped spearhead the relief campaign in Shanghai, mentions writing “inscriptions to draw tears from iron” himself, and receiving additional laments from his friends. Zheng Guanying ji, 1074.

9

The volume of illustrations titled *Si sheng gao zai tu qi* (Pictures reporting the disaster in four provinces) was the opening volume of a twelve-volume compilation titled *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of accounts for relief contributions for Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and Zhili), compiled in 1881. This compilation is held in the historical documents room of the Shanghai Library

10

The *Henan qihuang tieleitu* is not among the five sets of illustrations in the volume of illustrations. The first set, however, has the synonymous title *Yu ji tieleitu* (The Henan famine: Pictures to draw tears from iron). Only one of the 16 illustrations in the *Yu ji tieleitu* is identical to an illustration in the *Henan qihuang tieleitu*, but four other illustrations found in both works concern the same subject matter (people eating tree bark to survive, people selling their children, famine-related suicides, and cannibalism), share the same accompanying texts, and are similar though not identical in appearance.

11

The Jiangnan (literally “south of the Yangzi River”) region includes much of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, and was the most prosperous and urbanized area of China during the late imperial period.

12

Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) 143-145. For more on the origins and motivations of the extra-governmental relief effort based in Jiangnan, see Zhu Hu, *Difangxing liudong ji qi chaoyue: wan Qing yizhen yu jindai Zhongguo de xinchen daixie* (The fluidity and transcendence of localism: Late-Qing charitable relief and the supercession of the old by the new in modern China) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2006).

13

For an introduction to the *Qingshiduo*, see Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine*, 55. The roughly 900 Qing-era poems in the *Qingshiduo* were compiled in 1869 by the Zhejiangese scholar Zhang Yingchang. The poems in sections (juan) fourteen and fifteen describe the suffering of people stricken by natural disasters, while those in section seventeen describe the sale of women and children and the plight of disaster refugees. The poems use emotional language and vivid imagery very similar to that used in Xie's famine illustrations a decade later. A short poem titled “Traveling through the Shanxi Famine” (*Jin ji xing*), for example, employed some of the exact same phrases found in both local gazetteer essays about the 1877 famine and in several of the Taohuawu illustrations. The poet mourned that Shanxi’s plains had become “a thousand li of scorched earth,” that the people were reduced to eating tree leaves and bark, and that officials grew rich off relief money while the common people starved. *Qingshiduo* (Anthology of poems from the Qing period), comp. Zhang Yingchang, 1869 preface. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), preface, 72-73, 443.

14

Zhu Hu, 85-86.

15

“*Shou juan Si sheng gao zai tu qi*,” *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*, 13a; *The Famine in China*, 22; *China’s Millions* (September, 1878), 115. The content of the cannibalism illustration in both the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* and the *Yu ji tieleitu* is the same, and the accompanying text is identical. The illustrations, however, are slightly different in form. The illustration in the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* compilation that was translated into English and published in London, for instance, portrays seven living people, while the version in the *Yu ji tieleitu* only pictures six.

16

Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu, 23b-24a.

17

Jing Yuanshan, *Juyi chuji*, 2.41a – b.

18

Joanna Handlin Smith, “Chinese Philanthropy as Seen through a Case of Famine Relief in the 1640s,” *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions*, eds. Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz, and Edward Queen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 133-168. For more on faith in Buddhism as an important motivation for elite participation in relief work, see Paul R. Katz, “It is Difficult to be Indifferent to one’s Roots:’ Taizhou Sojourners and Flood Relief during the 1920s,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica* 54 (December 2006): 1-58; Andrea Janku, “Sowing Happiness: Spiritual Competition in Famine Relief Activities in Late Nineteenth-Century China,” *Minsu Quyi*

19

"*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 2b-3a, in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*; Handlin Smith, 149.

20

For a detailed analysis of the connection that the Shenbao and leading relief organizers in the 1870s drew between famine relief work and the accumulation of merit, see Janku, "Sowing Happiness."

21

Quoted in Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-4.

22

Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund, *The Famine in China*, 34; "*Si sheng gao zai tu qi*," 19a. This illustration is the final one in both the *Henan qihuang tieleitu* and the *Yu ji tieleitu*, one of the five sets of disaster illustrations in the 1881 compilation. It is the only illustration that is exactly the same in both sets of *tieleitu*.

23

Xia Dongyuan, comp. *Zheng Guanying zhuan*, (Shanghai, Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1985), 277.

24

"*Shanghai chouzhen gongsuo quanmu Henan, Shanxi yizhen gong qi*," (A Public letter posted from the Shanghai Relief Managing Office, exhorting people to raise charitable relief for Henan and Shanxi), Zheng Guanying ji, ed. Xia Dongyuan (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1982), 1071. For further examples of Zheng Guanying's traditional ideas concerning rewards and retribution for good or bad deeds, see his volume *Jiuzai fubao* (The reward and retribution of disaster relief), which he compiled in 1878. Xie Jiafu wrote the preface for a second edition of the volume, which was printed in 1888.

25

For more information on Zheng Guanying, see Paul Cohen's *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China*, Yen-P'ing Hao's *The Comprador in Nineteenth Century China: Bridge Between East and West*, and Bryna Goodman's *Native Place, City, and Nation*. For a good introduction to Jing Yuanshan, see Mary Rankin's *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China*.

26

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 156; Janku, "Sowing Happiness," 100-10. Suzhou is about 100 kilometers west of Shanghai. For further discussion of and lengthy quotations from Xie Jiafu's unpublished diaries (held in the Suzhou Archives), see Zhu, chapters 1-3.

27

Beizhuan jibu, Min Erchang, comp., 1923. Reprint, *Qingdai zhuanji congkan* 123 (Taibei: Mingwen shuju, 1985), 506-513. Xie was back in Suzhou by the time the famine began, but he maintained close connections with merchant-philanthropists in nearby Shanghai.

28

Rudolf Wagner, "The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere," *The China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995): 426; Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh, ed. *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley: China Research Monograph, 1992), introduction.

29

Beizhuan jibu, 506-513.

30

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 108, 156; Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 162-67.

31

Zhu, *Difangxing liudong*, 108-113, 133-134; *Beizhuan jibu*, 508-509.

32

Beizhuan jibu, 506-513.

33

"Qingjiang dai shu zi qian ju," *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu*, vol. 7, part 8, 2-6.

34

Ibid.

35

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 29b-30a; 31b-32a.

36

Visual images of helpless women have also played an important role in representations of the Irish famine. A sobering illustration of the ragged "Widow O'Leary" and her two emaciated children has become the most ubiquitous visual emblem of Ireland's misery during the potato blight. Originally published by the *Illustrated London News* during the famine, today the image of the widow and the children she cannot feed graces the covers or inside jackets of numerous books on "Black '47." In the museum shop at Ireland's National Famine Museum in Strokestown, the haunting gaze of this suffering mother now stares at tourists from souvenir T-shirts, mugs, magnets, and even Frisbees.

37

"Jihan jiaopo, xuanliang touhe," (Driven by hunger and cold, they hang themselves from a beam or thrown themselves in a river) in "Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 12.

38

Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images," 8.

39

"Si sheng gao zai tu qi," 25b-26a.

40

Qingshiduo (Anthology of poems from the Qing period), 72-73, 443; Janku, "Sowing Happiness," 95-105. Janku states that the *Taohuawu* was famous for its New Year prints and drew on that expertise to design the famine illustrations.

41

Shenbao, 15 March 1878, 1. The article made no mention of Yu Zhi's disaster illustrations printed in the 1850s and 1860s.

42

Shenbao, 15 March, 1878.

43

The Famine in China, 10.

44

China's Millions (October 1878), 134.

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“Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron”

The North China Famine of 1876-1879

Essay by Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley

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Legge, James 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).

IMAGE CREDITS

The images from *The Famine in China* were provided by Yale Divinity Library, New Haven, Connecticut

The additional illustrations in the essay provided by the author are from a compilation titled *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengin lu* that is held in the historical documents room in the Shanghai Library. These illustrations include:

“Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” *shou juan* (Pictures reporting the disaster in the four provinces, opening volume), 14a, in *Qi Yu Jin Zhi zhenjuan zhengxin lu* (Statement of accounts for relief contributions for Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, and Zhili) (n.p., 1881).

Image 005. Wild Goose Pagoda for Shandong Relief—“To save one person’s life is better than building a seven-story pagoda.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 3a.

Image 006. Philanthropists Rewarded—“On the good who open their purses all the spiritual powers bestow blessing.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 19a.

Image 007. An Impossible Choice—“A hungry parent is dying: about to kill the daughter, the knife falls.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 25a.

Image 008. Suicide of Famine Victims—“Driven by hunger and cold, they hang themselves from a beam or throw themselves in a river.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 12a.

Image 009. A Wife is Sold—“Women are sold: They despair of coming back alive.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 30a.

Image 010. Beaten Along the Way—“Weeping bitterly while thinking of home, beaten on the way.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 32a.

Image 011. Already Killed and Cooked— “[He] brings money to redeem life; [she has] already been slaughtered and cooked.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 26a.

Image 012. People Eating People—“Starved corpses fill the road; people vie to slice them up.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 13a.

Image 013. Famine Orphans Lured to Their Deaths—“On the roads orphans are lured to their death in the dark of night.” In “Si sheng gao zai tu qi,” 24a.

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