

50 Years After: The Tragedy of China's 'Great Leap Forward'

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On October 1, the People's Republic of China will mark the 60th anniversary of its foundation. This will be an occasion to celebrate one of the most influential victories of popular struggle in our era.

This great uprising forged a united and independent Chinese state, freed the country from foreign domination and capitalist rule, ended landlordism, provided broad access to education and health care, and set in motion popular energies that modernized and industrialized its economy. The revolutionary triumph of 1949 laid the foundation for China's present dynamism and influence, as well as providing an enormous impetus to anti-colonial revolution worldwide.

Yet despite these gains, the socialist movement and ideology that headed the revolution, identified with Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, disappeared from China soon after his death in 1976. The revolution's central leader is still revered, but his doctrines have been set aside. The country's present leadership has promoted private capitalist accumulation, not socialist planning, as China's chief engine of growth. Its policies have aroused much popular protest, but not a revived Maoist movement.

How was revolutionary China diverted onto a capitalist path? This setback has a lengthy prehistory, reaching back to the impact on Chinese Communist Party of policies identified with Joseph Stalin in the late 1920s. But much can be learned by considering the first major setback of the People's Republic, a dark episode that reached its culmination exactly 50 years ago. This was China's 1958-60 "Great Leap Forward" - an ambitious and failed attempt to jump-start rapid industrialization by reshaping China's countryside.

Revolutionary breakthrough

The first years of the People's Republic saw great progress in every sphere: the forging of a unified state; facing down imperialist reprisals, including by halting the U.S. military in the 1950-53 Korean War; surviving isolation and reprisals; economic revival; and the beginnings of industrialization. Above all, the Chinese peasantry, the driving force of the revolution, carried out a radical land reform and restored the rural economy. In 1955 almost the entire peasantry pooled its lands in cooperative farms.

But as China's first Five-Year Plan for economic development drew to a close in 1957, there were signs of disequilibrium, including massive unemployment in the cities and underutilization of labour in the countryside, ills that China's focus on capital-intensive heavy industry had failed to address.

The Communist Party leadership responded with a plan for "simultaneous development" of heavy and light industry, carried out in both urban centres and rural areas, in a crash campaign to mobilize a large portion of the rural workforce in labour-intensive industrial and infrastructural development.

The goals were praiseworthy, but how was this massive new industrial work force to be organized and fed?

'Great Leap'

It was this challenge that inspired the launch of the Great Leap Forward at the beginning of 1958 - a campaign to produce "more, faster, better, and cheaper."

In factories, hours of work were lengthened and production quotas raised. In rural areas, small-scale industrial projects were started up, the most publicized being "backyard blast furnaces" to produce iron and steel. Peasants were mobilized for major irrigation and other land-improvement projects.

Planning was based on projections that food production per hectare could be swiftly increased five to 20 times over, through introduction of large-scale collective farms and the use of new, unproven techniques of cultivation. These projections inspired Mao to declare that "planting one-third [of the land] is enough." So labour could safely be diverted to industrial projects.

As the campaign unfolded, a new social form was invented - the "people's communes" - each of which organized tens of thousands of peasants for collective field labour, industrial work, and land improvement projects. In the course of 1958, several hundred million peasants were enrolled in the communes.

Broadly speaking, the program was modeled on collectivization in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin after 1928, a program that aimed to enable the state to get direct control of peasant production and divert a large part of it to the support of industrialization.

As in the Soviet Union, the results in China were discouraging. National economic planning gave way under the strain. Shortages of raw materials and transportation blockages spread. Some rural industry projects took root, but waste was enormous, and rural steel production proved a costly failure. Floods and droughts aggravated the crisis.

Most ominous of all, agriculture was crippled by the many forms of disruption engendered by the communes, and the grain harvest fell by about 30%. By 1959, the entire country was gripped by hunger, which lasted through 1960. Starvation claimed millions of victims. It took 15 years to bring per-capita grain production back up to pre-Great Leap levels.

Famine and revolution

It is not unusual for the upheaval of revolution to be accompanied by a crisis of food production.

The young Russian Soviet republic, for example, experienced a severe famine in 1920-21. Its causes were clear: seven years of devastation by war and civil war, which had led to a collapse of urban-

rural economic exchange. The Soviet government energetically publicized this tragedy, calling in aid organizations set up by the world workers' movement as well as pro-capitalist agencies such as the American Relief Agency headed by later U.S. president Herbert Hoover.

Within a few months, the Soviets enacted the New Economic Policy (NEP), which restored the peasants' right to trade grain freely; agricultural recovery was swift.

But the course of the Chinese food crisis of 1959-60 had more in common with that in Stalin's Soviet Union during 1932-33, where forced collectivization led to a hidden famine that claimed an estimated 6-8 million victims.

In the Chinese case, the food crisis was shrouded in secrecy. Suspicions of a major Chinese famine seemed outlandish, since abolition of famine had been one of the revolution's proudest achievements. Moreover, the Great Leap began under conditions of peace and rising production. Outside observers were misled by the 50% increase in China's grain exports during the Great Leap years. It was not until after Mao's death, two decades later, that the famine's extent became widely known outside China.

There is today in China no independent movement of workers and peasants who can convey to us their historic memory and assessment of this experience.

In preparing this article, I focused on sources that are sympathetic to the Chinese revolution and its achievements, avoiding those poisoned by anti-Communist bias. But even sympathetic writers report many barriers in reconstructing the course of events. One three-person team says that on their first field trip, a month of intensive interviewing did not get at any of what were later revealed to be the key facts in the history of the village under investigation.

The Great Leap's toll

In this challenging context, the Great Leap experience has become the focus of raging controversy between Mao's defenders and detractors. Typical is the disagreement over the number of famine deaths.

In the early 1980s, the Chinese government released demographic statistics pointing to 15 million famine-related deaths. Writers hostile to the People's Republic claim this is an understatement, offering estimates as high as 38 million.

Mao's supporters say all these estimates are unreliable and biased attempts to besmirch Mao's memory, but even they concede that a serious famine took place and that the death toll was high. Among them, Robert Weil concedes 15 million or more "excess deaths"; Mobo Gao puts the total at 8.3 million; William Hinton estimates a "demographic gap" of more than 13 million, including through a decline in the birth rate. (See "Sources," below.)

As Gao notes, "even the lowest estimate of several million deaths cannot gloss over the disaster."

Mao's defenders stress the enduring achievements of the People's Republic's early years, comparing them favourably with the ambiguous record of the recent period. They are on strong ground here.

While conceding the Great Leap's excesses, Mao's defenders argue that he was not personally responsible; other leaders and subordinates, they say, were mainly to blame. Even if that is true, it tells us nothing about the Great Leap policies as such.

Moreover, Mao's defenders have little to say regarding the function and structure of the newly formed people's communes. They leave unchallenged the analysis presented in a number of recent detailed studies of village life in the Great Leap period, such as those by Edward Friedman et al., Ralph Thaxton, and also Mobo Gao.

The Commune's central importance, these studies tell us, lay in transferring the organization of farm labour, the disposal of peasants' production, and the responsibility for feeding rural producers from the peasant family to an administration that was usually located outside the village and was not subject to its control.

So great was the prestige among the peasants of the government - their government - that this change was accepted with little resistance, and promises that it would bring peasant prosperity were greeted with enthusiasm. But the actual outcome was to allocate more food to the cities and to state officials and less to rural producers, depriving them of hard-won food security.

Peasants were forbidden not only from buying or selling grain but also from traditional handicraft sidelines like rope-making. Small plots for family cultivation were abolished. Food was provided by communal kitchens - indeed cooking at home was banned. In some cases, peasant homes were torn down (without compensation) and peasants camped out in tents in the fields. Field work extended to 12 hours a day. Peasants could no longer travel without permission.

Rations in the communal kitchens, generous at first, were progressively reduced to starvation levels. The commune became a trap: peasant families had lost access to traditional recourses to stave off a food emergency.

A massive campaign to collect scrap iron for rural blast furnaces turned into an assault on the rural household: even iron cooking utensils and door hinges were seized and fed to the furnaces, leaving doorways gaping empty in the wind. Tragically, the furnaces produced little that was usable, and most were soon abandoned.

Meanwhile, local officials faced pressure to exaggerate in reports on crop yields. Many of those who insisted on truthful reporting were punished. Aggressive state grain procurement left peasants with less than the minimum needed to assure subsistence.

"The end result of all this," writes Mobo Gao, "was that the rural residents were left to starve."

New inequalities

Even in crisis conditions, distribution of food was unequal. The grain ration in 1960-61 was 8 jin/month for peasants, 21 jin for factory workers, and 24 jin for party officials whose need was less because they did not carry out manual labour. (1 jin=500 grams) The state preached equality but in reality provided privileges to those with access to networks of influence and power. Scarce goods were distributed to officials according to rank, through a five-tier supply system.

The principle of equality was also violated by creation of a caste of pariahs in the villages, composed of so-called landlords, rich peasants, and rightists. The landlords and rich peasants designation was based on landholdings long since swept away by the land reform. Outcast status was passed on to children.

An "anti-rightist" campaign, launched in 1957, targeted above all those who had complained about bureaucratic corruption or abuses. Millions were labelled rightists, in part because of government

rewards to localities that placed more than 5% in that category. During the Great Leap, anyone who complained about government policy faced the danger of being hurled down into this stigmatized caste. Hundreds of thousands were sent to labour camps, where they were held for many years.

Reprisals against suspected dissidents included “public criticism,” in which suspects were subjected to verbal and physical abuse as a means of extraction admissions of guilt. Other punishments included withdrawal of food rations, beatings, and, in some cases, killings.

Do such reports represent exceptional cases? It is true that Ralph Thaxton’s study concerns a province, Henan, where the regional authorities’ extreme application of the Great Leap policies, originally lauded as a model, was later disavowed by the central government.

But available sources do not report any trace of open public discussion of Great Leap policies, either nationally or on the commune level. These sources do not report any instances during the Great Leap where peasants successfully overturned an abusive commune or village leadership, even in communes that held back reserves in their granaries during the worst of the famine.

Nor is there evidence of attempts by the central leadership to establish guidelines to protect working people against abuse of power, safeguard dissident voices, or guarantee of the right of working people to join together in advocating alternative policies.

The way the Great Leap ended gives us something of its extremist flavour. In 1961, peasants were granted “three freedoms” - to cultivate a small private plot of land, to cook in private homes, and to engage in petty trade. Other restrictions on peasant activity also eased. Meanwhile, China stopped its multi-million-ton grain exports and began importing grain in similar quantities.

Recovery was rapid. Robert Weil reports that life expectancy in 1962 was double the Great Leap level and higher than before the emergency. Food production picked up as well, although full recovery took many years.

Capitalist road

At the height of the Great Leap, in August 1959, Peng Shuzi, a Chinese communist forced into exile a decade earlier for his dissident views, termed the newly formed People’s Communes “an effective instrument in the hands of the CCP for exploiting and controlling the peasant.”

Peng believed that this “exploitation” was different from what we experience under capitalism: the intended beneficiary was not a private capitalist but the national economy from which those in power drew their privileges.

But for the peasantry the coercive transfer of wealth out of the hands of local producers had similarities to landlordism. And despite the egalitarian idealism that was so prominent at the Great Leap’s outset, the communes functioned in a manner similar to a capitalist factory - but with no right to form a union or to change jobs. The Great Leap thus prefigured the exploitative system that emerged after Mao’s death.

When the Chinese government ultimately pulled back from the most destructive policies of the Great Leap, it did not repudiate the hierarchy, privilege, and disregard for workers’ democracy that characterized those years.

The architects of the Great Leap hoped that its arbitrary, coercive, and destructive character would

be justified by a jump in production. This, they hoped, would create the preconditions for a truly just society. However, the resulting collapse of production is strong evidence that socialist policies must not destroy but build on worker and peasant culture, wisdom, initiative, and control - what the Venezuelan revolutionists today call "protagonism."

The setbacks in the Great Leap included not only the tragic famine but also the weakening of the ties between Chinese working people and the new state they had created. It marked a step on the road that led ultimately to the rise of a capitalist system of production in the People's Republic.

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P.S.

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