

# China's Great Leap Forward

By Clayton D. Brown

**F**rom 1960–1962, an estimated thirty million people died of starvation in China, more than any other single famine in recorded human history. Most tragically, this disaster was largely preventable. The ironically titled Great Leap Forward was supposed to be the spectacular culmination of Mao Zedong's program for transforming China into a Communist paradise. In 1958, Chairman Mao launched a radical campaign to outproduce Great Britain, mother of the Industrial Revolution, while simultaneously achieving Communism before the Soviet Union. But the fanatical push to meet unrealistic goals led to widespread fraud and intimidation, culminating not in record-breaking output but the starvation of approximately one in twenty Chinese.

Too few Americans are aware of this epic disaster, and even among the Chinese, it is not well-understood. In the interest of informing a general readership of both the facts and lessons of the Great Leap Forward, the following article outlines the disaster, beginning with China's successful, centralizing reforms of the early 1950s; Mao's subsequent devolution into a paranoid despot as he purged critics and fostered a blind, fanatical devotion to his own naïve policies; and how this spiral ultimately ravaged the Chinese population. We conclude with a comparison of this famine to others and, finally, the lesson that this harrowing experience offers in the dangers of suppressing critical, independent thought.



Despite the disastrous Soviet experiment with collectivization and increasing grumbling from China's population, domestic and international events steeled Mao's resolve to surge ahead with the second Five Year Plan, also known as the Great Leap Forward.



A 1960 propaganda poster from [china-posters.net](http://china-posters.net): "Develop industrial and agricultural production, realize the simultaneous development of industry and agriculture . . ."

Source: <http://tiny.cc/ufphmw>.

### MOBILIZING THE MASSES

Mao's speech from atop Tiananmen gate on October 1, 1949, announcing the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), augured a bright Communist future for the Chinese people who had suffered decades of warfare, runaway inflation, and misgovernment. Whereas the previous Guomindang (GMD) government of Chiang Kai-shek had rested on the support of Chinese elites, Mao implemented, on a national scale, policies that made him popular among the masses, including reducing rents and redistributing land to farmers in the countryside. The reorganization of Chinese society under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) necessitated the classification of China's vast population into discrete groups such as peasants, landlords, laborers, capitalists, etc., followed by the issuance of registration cards and assignment to a *danwei*, or work unit. These measures served as the mechanism for state oversight of everything from food rations to housing to marriage, while at the same time ensuring complicity with state directives and mobilization for mass political campaigns. Initially, these mass campaigns were aimed at—and effectively combated—social vices such as opium addiction and prostitution, but soon, campaigns targeted enemies of the revolution and, during the Korean War (1950–1953), the party galvanized the population to protect its North Korean ally against the American-led United Nations. These successes bolstered faith in the party and primed the Chinese population for supporting radical programs that promised to raise China from the feudal to the Socialist, and eventually Communist, stages of social evolution.

### COLLECTIVIZATION

After the Korean War, the Chinese government turned single-mindedly to realizing socialism through domestic development on two fronts—industrialization in cities and collectivization in the countryside. For this, the Chinese modeled their approach on the Five Year Plans employed by the Soviet Union since 1928—a tragic irony given that forced collectivization under the Soviets had resulted in the starvation of between six to eight million people. Nevertheless, China's first Five Year Plan initially saw great success through investment in state-owned factories that produced such things as tractors, machinery, and chemical fertilizer with help from Soviet planners. Payment for urban development would come from China's countryside, where some 75 percent of the population lived and where the state began collectivization of agriculture. Although the regime had recently confiscated land from landlords and redistributed it to farmers, collectivization now pooled land and resources for efficiency. Vast communal fields were far more conducive to mechanized farming than millions of small, family-sized plots. The end goal of collectivization was abolishment of private ownership, or Communism, with its anticipated shared prosperity.

Collectivization proceeded in stages, first with perhaps ten families voluntarily cooperating in mutual aid teams (MAT). In this early stage of socialism, each family agreed to share their labor, tools, and draft animals with other team members while retaining ownership—a relationship that had historically existed within farming communities but was now formalized by contract. The formation of low-level agricultural producer's cooperatives (APC) was the next step. Five teams or fifty households comprised an APC, and each contributed their resources, including land, to the cooperative. Families retained title to their parcel of land and were compensated based on their contributions of land and labor. As these moderate steps toward collectivization proved effective, by late 1955 Mao moved to the next—and more controversial—phase by combining approximately five low-level cooperatives into higher-level cooperatives, encompassing some 250 households each. Private property was abolished as land; animals, tools, or other resources became property of the cooperative; and labor became the sole criterion for compensation.

The first Five Year Plan yielded impressive results. China's overall economy had expanded nearly 9 percent per year, with agricultural output rising almost 4 percent annually and industrial output exploding to just shy of 19 percent per year. More important, life expectancy was twenty years longer in 1957 than when the Communists took power in 1949.<sup>1</sup> But as collectivization entered a more radical phase, problems became apparent. Impressive industrial output statistics notwithstanding, quantity took precedence over quality, and quota requirements often resulted in shoddy final products. Also, rural people resisted private property confiscation. Despite the disastrous Soviet experiment with collectivization and increasing grumbling from China's population, domestic and international events steeled Mao's resolve to surge ahead with the second Five Year Plan, also known as the Great Leap Forward.

### A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM

In early 1956, as the first Five Year Plan reached high tide, the party, flush with success, invited comments from Chinese intellectuals and the public in a directive known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign, a metaphor equating contending ideas with blooming flowers. Initially hesitant to speak out, first scientists and then literary figures, students, and common people voiced criticisms of party poli-

cies. This was not only tolerated but encouraged until two international events reversed Mao's openness. The first was Nikita Khrushchev's shocking denunciation of Stalin, his own predecessor, who had died three years earlier. The attack on Stalin's collectivization policies and subsequent de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union served as a cautionary tale for Mao, who found himself increasingly embattled within the CCP. Then, inspired by the criticisms of Stalin, Hungarians revolted against the Soviet Union in October 1956. Moscow brutally suppressed the rebellion, and when his compatriots began public attacks against him, Mao reverted to Soviet tactics.

**THE ANTI-RIGHTIST CAMPAIGN**

On June 8, 1957, the party announced the existence of a nationwide anti-Communist plot and warned that approximately 5 percent of the population was still comprised of "rightists"—that is, political conservatives sabotaging the revolution. In response, local cadres felt compelled to identify which 5 percent within their ranks were rightists. Half a million or more were branded with the label "rightist," which went in their permanent record, ruined their careers, made them social pariahs, and, for many, exiled them to labor camps or drove them to suicide. Their labels, or "caps," would not be removed until the blanket rehabilitation in 1979, three years after Mao's death. In addition to removing the most educated from society, the Anti-Rightist Campaign discouraged the Chinese people from voicing any doubts or criticisms and left them amenable to even the most irrational and misguided policies, including the absurd notion that economic development required only ideological correctness, not scientific or technical expertise.

**A GREAT LEAP**

In 1958, Mao launched the second Five Year Plan, dubbed the Great Leap Forward. The movement bore his characteristic faith in China's bucolic masses—now unfettered by skeptical intellectuals—to surmount *any* obstacles and achieve a Communist utopia through unity, physical labor, and sheer willpower. In this final stage of collectivization, communes formed—each with some 5,500 households, more than twenty times larger than previous cooperatives. Communes would be self-sufficient in agriculture, industry, governance, education, and health care. The commune would guarantee to each individual a set income, regardless of labor contributions, but in the spirit of wild optimism that prevailed at the time, most rural Chinese threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Great Leap. Farmers worked in the fields all day and sometimes into the night, a practice known as "catching the moon and stars," all the while shouting slogans to sustain their enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup> At night, many did not bother returning home, opting instead to join other members of the commune, sleeping in makeshift sheds in the fields. Kitchens allowed a designated chef to feed the entire commune from huge pots, which were sometimes located in the fields to avoid wasted travel time. When compared with the traditional family meals, this system offered more efficient resource use and freed mothers to work alongside the men. For the same reason, families placed infants in communal nurseries while the elderly and infirm spent their days in "happiness homes," all moves calculated to impose greater equality, free up laborers, and maximize production.

Although an adequate food supply was necessary, the real gauge of development was steel. Imagine if China's hundreds of millions of farmers could also contribute to industrial development! One of the most infamous innovations of the Great Leap involved an industrial revolution in the countryside, where farmers constructed millions of backyard furnaces and then divided their time between tending crops and smelting steel. Gathering fuel to stoke all these furnaces resulted in the loss of at least 10 percent of China's forests, and when wood became increasingly scarce, peasants resorted to burning their doors, furniture, and even raiding cemeteries for coffins.<sup>3</sup> Rather than mining the ore to be smelted, everyone contributed iron implements, including tools, utensils, woks, doorknobs, shovels, window frames, and other everyday items, while children scoured the ground for iron nails and other scraps. Farmers had no technical expertise in smelting steel, of course, but these skills were derided as bourgeoisie and rightist anyway. Unsurprisingly, the campaign essentially converted practical items into useless lumps of pig iron good only for clogging railroad yards. As a testament to the growing disparity between reality and farce, Mao projected that by the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1962, China would be the world's leading steel manufacturer with 100 million tons, outproducing even the US.<sup>4</sup> That would be an increase of 2,000 percent in five years, clearly an impossibility.



Propaganda poster depicting a bumper harvest. Source: <http://tiny.cc/olpnmw>.

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During the Great Leap Forward, millions of backyard furnaces dotted the countryside. Source: <http://tiny.cc/k9ohmw>.



Propaganda poster from September 1959: “The commune is like a gigantic dragon, production is noticeably awe-inspiring.” The Chinese people were convinced that communes yielded miraculous prosperity during the Great Leap Forward, as suggested by the image. Source: <http://tiny.cc/9uphmv>.

At the same time that farmers became the backbone of industrial production, urban cadres made command decisions for the nation’s agricultural output to similar effect. They too set unrealistic quotas but also distributed pamphlets to farmers mandating the use of multiple harvests, over seeding, deep ploughing, and over fertilizing.<sup>5</sup> Although farmers knew better and did not always implement the suggestions, some were compelled to do such things as dig a hole the size of a swimming pool and pour in all their seed grain in expectation of a phenomenal crop or break up clay pots and work them into the soil—even though the nutrients had been baked out.<sup>6</sup> Ignorance at the center was met by fanatical devotion to Mao’s vision and an intense competition among communes—“if a neighboring commune projected a doubling of grain output, then certainly our commune can produce

triple.” And just as those with the greatest faith were the most “red,” anyone who questioned even the most unrealistic goals became a rightist. Recalling the consequences of the Anti-Rightist Campaign a year earlier, local leaders felt compelled to meet ridiculous grain quotas at any cost or, more often, to falsify their reports. Whether out of ignorance or fear, those in the party’s highest ranks tended not to question the exaggerated figures, and even when Mao did visit the countryside to investigate, the



The giant pumpkin paraded through the commune. Source: <http://tiny.cc/ydqhmw>.

locals intentionally transplanted crops along his route to give the illusion of wildly dense yields.<sup>7</sup> This “evidence” only encouraged flights of fancy.

When authorities uncritically accepted and publicized inflated production figures, the Great Leap Forward appeared a spectacular success. The *New China News Agency* carried stories and photos of fields that grew so dense as to support the weight of children and of supersized fruits and vegetables, like a 132-pound pumpkin and a giant radish being paraded through the commune by truck or on a palanquin.<sup>8</sup> Accepting the stories at face value, survivors recall gorging themselves in eating contests and neglecting their crops, and communal kitchens dumped leftovers from each meal. The *People’s Daily* debated how China should deal with its new surplus, and in the end, the state increased grain exports, replaced some food crops with cash crops like cotton or tea, and raised the rate of tax extracted from communes from 20 to 28 percent, despite the fact that from 1958 to 1960 overall grain production actually fell 30 percent.<sup>9</sup>

### THE LUSHAN CONFERENCE

All these trends indicated pending catastrophe, so why did no one speak out? As the disaster began to unfold in 1959, the party held a summit at the mountain resort of Lushan. There, Peng Dehuai, minister of defense and longtime associate of Mao, privately handed the chairman a handwritten letter.

In it, he first recounted their successes, but confessed that in an unprecedented undertaking such as the Great Leap Forward, mistakes were unavoidable due to inexperience. He warned of exaggerations, waste, and fanaticism but carefully avoided blaming any individual and even implied that he and others had failed to follow Mao’s wise admonitions. He concluded that they should learn from their mistakes by undertaking “an earnest analysis.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the deferential wording, Mao interpreted the note as a personal attack and convened the top party leadership, forcing those present to choose between himself and Peng.<sup>11</sup> The party voted to label Peng a rightist, and he spent the rest of the Great Leap under house arrest. As with the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the message was clear—Mao brooked no criticism, and the Great Leap would continue.



Peng Dehuai (L): Korean war hero and minister of defense, (R): under house arrest as an accused rightist. Source: (L) <http://tiny.cc/h7k5mw>, (R) <http://tiny.cc/f8k5mw>.



Chinese peasant woman and child during the famine. Source: Screen capture from the documentary film *China: A Century of Revolution (1949–1976)*, Part 2, at <http://tiny.cc/zarhmw>.

### FAMINE

Starvation became a widespread problem with the harvest of 1959. The government had raised the tax rate to 28 percent, but because local leaders had inflated the production figures on which the taxes were based, the state actually appropriated a much higher percentage of their grain. The worse the exaggeration, the greater the amount of taxes taken; some regions forwarded virtually their entire crop to the state as tax, leaving nothing on which the farmers who actually grew the food could subsist. Even when some fell short in their tax obligation, leaders who had falsified reports refused to admit the error and in some cases even accused the farmers of hiding grain—for which they were hunted, beaten, and tortured by their own neighbors. In reality, the appropriated grain sat in state warehouses or made its way to the cities where rations were cut (Mao supposedly went without meat for seven months). Undernourishment grew among the urban population and, with it, cases of edema and other maladies, but urbanites fared comparatively well.

As food reserves in the countryside diminished, peasants began dying in droves by the summer of 1960. They collapsed in fields, on roadsides, and even at home where family members watched their corpses rot, lacking the energy for burial or even to shoo away flies and rats. Some families would hide the remains of relatives in the home so that the living could collect the food rations of the deceased. Hunger drove the starving to forage for seeds, grasses, leaves, and tree bark, and when even these became scarce, they boiled leather or ate soil just to fill their stomachs, even when it destroyed their digestive tracts. Given the prevalence of hunger and exposed corpses, some inevitably turned to cannibalism. Although this involved scavenging for the most part, occasionally persons—usually children—were intentionally killed as food.<sup>12</sup> Rarely did this happen within a family, but stories are told of villagers exchanging their babies to avoid consuming their own flesh and blood.<sup>13</sup>

Although tales of famine were leaking out of China, Western scholars had little sense of the scale of the disaster. In his study on agricultural development in China that included the Great Leap Forward, Harvard sinologist Dwight Perkins asserted that the regime had avoided disaster and that “few if any

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Editor's Note: Teaching Resources for this article are available online at <http://tiny.cc/sgyfow>.

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starved outright.<sup>14</sup> It was not until the post-Mao regime that demographers began to put the picture together. Estimates of deaths directly related to the famine range from a minimum of twenty-three million to as many as fifty-five million, although the figure most often cited is thirty million.<sup>15</sup> While there is evidence to suggest that extreme weather—excess rain in the south and drought in the north—may have exacerbated the problem, weather became a convenient scapegoat, along with the GMD and the Soviets.<sup>16</sup> When Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated during the Great Leap, Soviet advisors were recalled from China, and the Soviets called in Chinese debts that supposedly caused the hardship. In some cases, peasants blamed either the GMD or their local village leader but seldom Chairman Mao or the Communist Party.<sup>17</sup> This is still the case in China's textbooks and collective memory.

### CONCLUSION

The Chinese have always faced famine. According to one study, China experienced some 1,828 major famines in its long history, but what distinguishes the Great Leap Forward from its predecessors are its cause, massive scope, and ongoing concealment. In his recent study of famine, Cormac Ó Gráda suggests that, historically, famines emerged from natural phenomena, sometimes exacerbated by human activity. Modern famines, on the other hand, stem from human factors such as war or ideology exacerbated by natural conditions.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the Great Leap Forward stands out as uniquely modern. Although previous famines affected different regions for different reasons, the Great Leap Forward affected every part of China, some places worse than others, but for the first time in China's history, migrating to another region was forbidden and probably of little use anyway. Most tragically, the subsequent purging of Great Leap excesses from history and the unspoken taboo that continues to surround it have prevented the Chinese from reflecting on and learning from this event, even as it remains largely ignored outside of China. While doubtless many lessons could be derived from the Great Leap Forward, it perhaps stands above all as a testament to the value of independent thought and free speech. The worst peacetime famines of the modern era non-coincidentally occurred under totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union in 1932–33, with an estimated six million dead; the Great Leap Forward in China 1960–62, with some thirty million dead; and North Korea in 1995, which, like the Great Leap, killed around 5 percent of the population. On the other hand, evidence confirms that “famines are very much the exception in democracies,” and it is speculated that the overall fall in famine mortality over the past century is due to the growth of democracy across the globe, both in terms of relative prosperity and humanitarian aid.<sup>19</sup> The benefits of an open, pluralistic society where criticisms of policy and authority are tolerated is a valuable lesson for Chinese—or American students, for that matter—to learn. ■

### NOTES

1. R. Keith Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 318.
2. *China: A Century of Revolution, Part 2*, “The Mao Years,” YouTube video, 114 minutes, <http://tiny.cc/zarhmv>.
3. Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82.
4. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, v. 2: *The Great Leap Forward, 1958–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 90. Today, China does indeed lead the world in steel production, but the transition from net importer to exporter of steel occurred only in 2004, nearly half a century after the Great Leap Forward. See “Special Report: China's Economy,” *The Economist* 403, no. 8786 (May 26, 2012): 6.
5. Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Touchstone, 2003), 225; Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 70–77.
6. From farmers' recollections in *China: A Century of Revolution, Part 2*, “The Mao Years” and Peter J. Seybolt, *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 52–58.
7. Becker, 72; Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), 278.
8. Chang, 225–6; Becker, 70.
9. Becker, 79, 81; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 242, 246.
10. Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 435–39.
11. A firsthand account of the meeting is given in Li Rui, *A True Account of the Lushan Meeting* (Henan: Henan People's Publishing House, 1994).
12. See Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine* (New York: Walker and Company, 2010), 320–23 and Becker, 118–19.
13. Wei Jingsheng, *The Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Viking, 1997), 246–47.
14. Dwight H. Perkins, *Agricultural Development in China, 1368–1968* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 303–19.
15. Dikötter, 324–34.
16. Different perspectives on the role nature played in the famine are surveyed in Ó Gráda, 247–49.
17. Chang, 417.
18. Ó Gráda, 9–10.
19. *Ibid.*, 13, and chapter 8 on “The Violence of Government.”