

## To What Extent The Disastrous Consequences of the Great Leap Forward Movement Were the Responsibility of Chairman Mao?

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### Abstract

The Great Leap Forward Movement has always been a focal point in China's contemporary history; This essay sets out to examine the extent to which Chairman Mao is responsible for the disastrous consequences by analyzing both objective and subjective causes of the Great Leap Forward Movement. By researching the background, sources, causes, and the events of the Great Leap Forward Movement presented, this paper studies the degree of failure including industrial elements—steel production for example, agricultural policies and political policies. Additionally, it analyzes one of the consequences of Great Leap Forward Movement — Great Chinese Famine.

**Key words:** Responsibility; Consequences; Great leap forward; Causes

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### INTRODUCTION

The Great Leap Forward Movement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was an economic and social movement carried out by the Communist Party of China (CPC) from 1958 to 1961. The movement was led by Mao Zedong, and aimed to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a communist society by means of accelerated industrialization and collectivization. It led to the Great Chinese Famine, which in the end resulted in

the death of millions of people due to starvation (Wikipedia, 2014). At the same period, China witnessed economy shrink and stagnation, the latter as the repercussion of the failed industrialization. To sum up, the disastrous GLFM lead to both human sufferings and economic losses.

Great Chinese Famine (known also as the Three Years of Natural Disasters or the Difficult Three-Year Period) refers to the period between 1958 and 1961, characterized by widespread famine, drought, poor weather. The policies of the Communist Party of China contributed to the famine; which means the results of the famine are due to the Great Leap Forward Movement. According to government statistics, there were 15 million excess deaths in this period. While unofficial estimates, even though varied, putting the number of famine victims to be between 20 and 43 million (Peng, 1987, pp.639-700)

Before the occurrence of the movement, China had, for the last century, been suffering from foreign invasions, civil wars, unequal treaties and political disorder etc., which left the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with a backward economy when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded on October 1, 1949. Against this backdrop, Chairman Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958 in the sake of producing a stronger and more powerful China.

The primary sources would be used to give the statistics of production during the period and the number of deaths during the famine. The secondary sources which used are Michael Lynch, *Access to History: The People's Republic of China 1949-76*; Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*; Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution*; Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*; Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone*; John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*; and Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*. Some of these sources need to be reevaluated for subjectivity in which they might present the CCP and Mao in a more negative or positive light.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

As an important event in China's history, Great Leap Forward Movement has been researched by abundance of scholars from different perspectives, for instance, causes, and evaluation of Great Leap Forward Movement. Zhang Zhihui pointed out that the word "Great Leap forward" was firstly proposed in the essay "encouraging all people to discuss the Forty Compendium and reach the summit of agricultural production" in People's Daily (Qi, 1999). Li (2005, p.2) has analyzed the causes of the Great Leap forward Movement in economic and political aspect; Wang (2001) analyzed the social reasons for Great Leap Forward Movement; Li (2001) indicated that the causes for Great Leap forward Movement were the leaders failed in dealing with the following relations: the relations between wars and peace, Soviet model and Chinese characteristics, Democracy and centralism etc.. Li (1997) pointed out that Great Leap forward Movement led by Mao Zedong has largely exceeded the real social and economic conditions of China of that time, which led to its tragic destiny. Li (2003) considered that the large contrast between the subjective motivation and the objective results of Great Leap forward Movement demonstrated the total failure; while the origin for this failure was the false transformation of the development focus. Some western historians including Jonathan Spence, Michael Lynch, Frank Dikötter, Jack Gray, Roderick MacFarquhar, and John Fairbank etc. analyzed the culpability for the movement. This paper researches Mao Zedong's responsibility for Great Leap forward Movement by analyzing the causes of this movement.

As mentioned above, this essay examines the degree to which Chairman Mao should be responsible for the consequences of Great Leap Forward Movement, which severely injured China's economy and slowed down the modernization process, by analyzing events and the causes of the movement. Different causes of the movement implied specifically Chairman Mao's responsibility for this mistake; and the result of this research may serve as a lesson to be learned for the future development.

## 2. INVESTIGATION OF GREAT LEAP FORWARD MOVEMENT

After the founding of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced a series of new policies including, agricultural collective, 100 Flower Campaign, and Steel Smelting, etc..

### 2.1 Agricultural Policy and Famine

The collective agricultural police designated specific places where farmers lived and worked together (see Figure 1), and shared the same tools. And the grain produced was distributed equally to each individual. This policy was designed to encourage farmers to form and

join collectives, which meant to increase their efficiency without robbing them of their own land or restricting their livelihoods. By 1958 private ownership was entirely abolished and households all over China were forced into state-operated communes. This policy reduced the initiative of peasants, and f was unable to reach the ultimate goals.



**Figure 1**  
Collective Farming in a Chinese Rice Field in 1958

Moreover, Mao took the advices from Soviet scientists and decided on the implementation of various new agricultural techniques. For example, deep ploughing — to plough at a depth of one to two meters instead of fifteen to twenty centimeters — was utilized, which in the end failed since it destroyed the fertile surface soil layer. In another case, the soil quality was drastically reduced by the overdosing of fertilizer, generating eventually barren land. A future demonstration is close planting, where seeds were embedded densely in soil and competed for limited water and space.

The "Kill the Sparrows Campaign", also called The Four Pests Campaign, was launched by Mao in 1958 with the aim to decrease the amount of sparrows, rats, flies and mosquitoes so as to protect the crops from these vermin. However, the deaths of large amount of sparrow fractured the food chain and drove up the number of pests and insects, especially locusts. Opposite to the original plan, crops were instead damaged.

As a result of all of these policies, the grain production in 1958 dropped from 200 million tons to 160 million by the end of 1962 (Gray, 2001, p.313). What's worse, much of the production was exported to foreign countries, such as the Soviet Union, while large quantities of grains left were stored in cities such as Beijing, Xinyang and Hefei (Lynch, p.59). More importantly, the CCP refused foreign aid from the USA, wishing to maintain internationally an illusion of China's successful modernization.

Many local officials exaggerated and falsified the numbers of the grain production in their reports to meet the overambitious targets from Mao's policies. By doing so, they would prove their efficiency and their loyalty to Mao. Government propaganda also claimed success grain production. In one famous propaganda picture,

some children were standing and laughing on piles of wheat crop leaves (see Figure 2). But in fact, these crops were lifted from other fields and put on a platform. Frank Dikötter also reminded us of the point that all leaders of the Great Leap Forward Movement were responsible for the consequences, quoting Liu Shaoqi's telling Mao "The center is the principal culprit, our leaders are all responsible" (Dikötter, 2001, p.121).



**Figure 2**  
**Children in Shandong Province Standing on a Wheat Field Smiling. Actually the Wheat Was Taken From Other Fields and Put on a Platform** (Lynch, 2008, p.63)

## 2.2 Industrial Policy-Steel Smelting

The major force in industrialization was laid on steel production, which was referred to as the "Steel Smelting" movement. In 1958, Mao set unrealistic targets for industrialized production, and proclaimed that "in 15 years, China would catch up or exceed with the UK" (Lynch, 2008, p.45).

His overambitious yet clear goals for industrialization were shown, for example, as an international Communist meeting in Moscow in 1957, where he stated that:

The East wind is bound to prevail over the West wind, because we are powerful and strong. The problem is that you just cannot decide things with the quantity of steel and iron; rather, first and foremost, things are determined by people's hearts and minds. (Lynch, 2008, p.45)

The above words revealed Mao's determination on steel smelting and firm belief that China would surpass the Western countries.

He and CCP established backyard furnaces with which everyone in the country was demanded to produce steel using scrap metal or personal possessions. Over 100 million Chinese people were engaged in this "battle of steel". 50,000 melting furnaces were enacted by the end of July 1958, 190,000 in August, 700,000 by the end of September and a million in October (Fairbank, 2006, p.371). The historian Roderick MacFarquar described the situation at the time:

People carried baskets of ore, people stoked, people goaded buffalo carts, people tipped cauldrons of white-hot metal, people stood on rickety ladders and peered into furnaces, people wheeled barrows of crude steel. (Lynch, 2008, p.49)

Although Mao held the thought that industrialization was the path to a stronger China, the reality is that metal produced in the movement was of low economic worth or even entirely worthless, suggesting another non-functioning policy. The causes of this failed attempt were two-folds: First, China was equipped with outdated and inefficient technologies in 1958; second, inadequate infrastructure was difficult to transfer steel to be effective.

## 2.3 Political Policies

In 1957, Mao launched the "100 Flower Campaign", where intellectuals were greatly encouraged to criticize the state and the socialist policies. Nevertheless, Mao received more criticisms — including complaints about agricultural collective — than initially expected. As a response, Mao immediately launched the Anti-Rightists Campaign at the end of 1957, in which he silenced the opposition from both experts and intellectuals, claimed to have "executed some 800,000 people" (MacFarquhar, 2008, p.500). After this, Mao effectively strengthened his rule and adopted more hard-line socialist policies. And the second Five Year Plan reinforced these collective economic and agricultural plans.

However, there were also those who told Mao the truth. In July 1959, Peng Dehuai, the CCP's Minister of Defense, wrote a letter to Mao about the Great Leap Forward Movement, where he disapproved of Mao's methods and criticized the "wind of exaggeration" of grain production. Later, during the Lushan Conference (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenum of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of CCP) in July 1959, Mao criticized Peng and replaced him with Lin Biao. It has been suggested that "Mao took Peng's report as a personal attack" (Fairbank, 2006, p.372).

In the Biography of Mao Zedong, Feng and Jin stated that during the Lushan Conference, Mao received many exaggerated reports about the monthly agricultural production and even suspected the inaccuracy of these reports. The book also says that when Mao was taken onto tours to visit the farmlands, the local cadres ensured that he could only see the most prosperous farmlands in the area (Feng & Jin, 2003, pp.10-36).

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## 3. CAUSES OF GREAT LEAP FORWARD MOVEMENT

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### 3.1 Objective Causes of Great Leap Forward Movement

Since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the US-led Western imperialist countries regarded the new-

founded nation as an important enemy. Consequently, they took measures to prevent China from regaining the legal status of the United Nations and attempted to make “two Chinas” in the world; meanwhile, they blocked Chinese economy from every aspect. In this situation, the new China had to survive from the blockage and develop itself into a strong country. In addition, the worsening Sino-Soviet relations gave China the realization that being powerful was critical, as pointed by Song Yinggui

in the background of Cold War in the western world, China had been involved into the pressure of high-speed development; when the relations between Soviet Union and China became worsening, that pressure became intensified, and it stirred up the Great Leap Forward Movement (Song, 1995).

Under this pressure, the Chinese leaders, including Mao Zedong, were tasked with developing China both politically and economically, which contributed to the motivation of launching the Great Leap Forward Movement.

Furthermore, having going through the Anti-Japanese war and the civil wars, China herself had suffered tremendously. Compared with Western countries, she was extremity backward and impoverish, demanding a quicker way to develop. This certain circumstance drove Chinese leaders' attention and efforts entirely into development. Mao Zedong mentioned “China's economy was too backward, the materials were lacked eagerly, which made us fell into a passive state; in this aspect, we need liberate from the situation” (Hu, 1991, p.366). And thus Chinese people had to explore a way to develop quickly, for the purpose of liberation. Great Leap Forward Movement was regarded by Mao Zedong and some other leaders of central authorities as a fast way to develop.

Moreover, although China has gone through several years' wars and revolutions, she had little experience of economic development. Mao (1992, p.357) once said that China lacked experience because it carried on the economic construction only for 7 years. Therefore, Soviet Union, also a socialist country, served as an example for China with its over 30 years' development. However, leaders including Mao Zedong ignored China's reality while taking on Soviet Union's experience, which undoubted lead to failures in the end.

### 3.2 Subjective Causes of Great Leap Forward Movement

After its establishment in 1949, China has carried out several revolutions, for instance, the land revolution completed in 1952, the three Great Reconstructions accomplished successfully in 1956, and the all-round development of the construction of socialism in a fiercely quick way etc. These positive outcomes gave people an illusion that China had marched onto a fast and healthy path of development, while the reality of a backward economy was ignored and no targeted development method was studied and adopted.

In the first few years in 1950s, China was truly impoverished, as Mao Zedong said “what could we produce now? We could Manufacture the tables, or chairs...however, we could not manufacture cars, airplanes, tanks or tractors” (1999, p.329). He determined to catch up and surpass the developed imperial countries and proposed the strategy “catching up and surpassing”. In October 1955, Mao Zedong pointed out “our goal was to catch up with America and surpass the Britain... we have to realize this goal” (1999, p.500). In addition, the goal of the transition to communism led by Soviet Government and the successfully launch of satellites in the end of 1950s changed the world and presented to people the great blueprint and prospect of communism, which encouraged Mao Zedong to a large extent. Considering that Soviet used two five-year periods to realize industrialization and six years Collectivization of agriculture, Mao believed that China could use three five-year periods to reach the goal of industrialization as well. Therefore, “fifteen years later, we could catch up with and surpass the Britain”. (Bo, 1993, p.691) In Mao's mind, surpassing Britain and America was totally possible. Just as People's Daily said:

China is a country with large population, few cultivated land, and backward economy; in order to build a strong socialist country, and make our comprehensive strength rise to advanced countries in the world in several couple of years and the life level improved to a large extend; the pace of contribution must be fast and large<sup>1</sup>;

“China needed to develop the social productivity, realize the industrialization and agricultural modernization with the fastest speed”<sup>2</sup> Mao thought that our country's economy not only need but also could develop in high speed. He said: “the awakened masses could make unprecedented and unimaginable miracles”<sup>3</sup> under this political state of being anxious for success, the time of catching up and surpassing goals has been brought forward again and again. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Plenum of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of CCP held in May 1958 Mao put forward a slogan “China will catch up with Britain with seven years and another more eight years or ten years on the basis of seven years catching up with America” (1972, p.477). Soon, he proposed “catching up with or surpassing Britain only needs two or three years, and two years are possible instead of fifteen years or seven years” (1992, p.357). With the time shortened, the economic goal elevated largely. Taking the steel production as an example, Eight-second Conference held in May planned the steel production of 1958 was to be 7,100,000 tons, while the Beidaihe Conference demanded the steel production to reach 10,700,000 tons, more than twice as 5,350,000 tons in 1957; in 1959 steel production would reach 27,000,000 to

<sup>1</sup> *People's Daily*, 12/12/1957

<sup>2</sup> *People's Daily*, 21/6/1958

<sup>3</sup> *People's Daily*, 3/2/1958

30,000,000 tons and would surpass British steel production in two years. In order to realize these unrealistic goals, the Great Leap Forward Movement was carried out.

Moreover, Mao believed that anything could be achieved only if the masses' strengths were collected. He exaggerated the strength of the masses beyond the reality and the subjective initiatives. As a result, the masses fell into the production fanaticism. The imagination has flooded over the reality. And Great Leap Forward Movement ended in failure. (Zeng, 1998, p.5) Besides, the drawbacks existed in the country's political systems and Mao's personal arbitrary acts were other reasons for Great Leap Forward Movement. Against the new backdrop after Communist Party's taking office, the eighth conference of the Party stressed on strengthening the Party's construction, especially insisting on the principles of democratic centralism and collective leadership, expanding inner-party democracy and opposing the cult of individuals. While in fact, in the Party, the formation of Mao Zedong's personal arbitrary, one-man, patriarchal acts broke completely the principle of democratic centralism and the party's collective leadership. The party lost the ability of correcting leaders' errors. So when the Great Leap Forward Movement was proposed by Mao Zedong, other leaders failed to prevent or correct the mistakes. These are other causes for Great Leap Forward Movement.

## CONCLUSION

After examining various factors and causes for Great Leap Forward Movement during 1958-1961, especially after analyzing the reasons detailedly, the paper could conclude that Mao should take responsibility for the disastrous consequences of the Great Leap Forward Movement to a large extent. Putting aside non-controllable factor — the influence from western countries and China's economy in 1950s, Mao should, though with good intention to make China stronger, take accountability for the Great Leap Forward Movement in the following aspects: Making unrealistic goals divorced from reality and the objective disciplines without researching deeply; ignoring to check the results or rethinking or improving the policies. In addition, Mao exaggerated the strength of the masses beyond the reality and the subjective initiatives. The unrealistic quotas and targets set out by Mao — as evidenced by Mao's overambitious statement that China could surpass the UK in steel production in fifteen years — doomed that the movement would grow up to be a failure. The impossible steel and grain quotas showed that Mao himself lacked the necessary knowledge in both industry and agriculture to guide the projects to success. Finally, Mao fell into arrogance that he refused to accept suggestions or criticism from others or correct the errors. When backyard furnaces and new agricultural

policies proved to have failed, Mao denied the suggestion to abolish them. All matters proved that Mao needs to take responsibility for the suffering and economic losses caused by the Great Leap Forward during this period to quite a large degree.

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