

## Mao's Great Leap Forward<sup>1</sup>

The Great Leap Forward started in 1958. The Great Leap Forward (the second of China's Five Year Plans), was Mao's attempt to modernize China's economy in both industry and agriculture. The story of the Great Leap Forward is an excellent illustration of how the lack of political freedom in communism, and the economic control exercised by the government, feed off each other to cause much suffering.

Chinese farmland was "collectivized" (that's such a nice way to say "confiscated by the government") and reformed into a series of communes. The average commune consisted of 5000 families. People in a commune gave up their ownership of tools, animals, etc., so that everything was owned by the commune. People now worked for the commune and not for themselves. The life of an individual was controlled by the commune. Schools and nurseries were provided by the communes so that all adults could work.

By the end of 1958, tens of millions of people had been placed into over 26,000 communes. The speed with which this was achieved was astounding. The government did all that it could to whip up enthusiasm for the communes. Propaganda was everywhere – including in the fields where the workers could listen to political speeches as they worked as the communes provided public address systems. If the communes lacked machinery, the workers used their bare hands. Major construction projects were done in record time – though the quality of some was dubious.

The Great Leap Forward also encouraged communes to set up "back-yard" production plants. The most famous were 600,000 backyard furnaces which produced iron and steel for the communes. The figures for steel, coal, chemicals, timber, cement etc all showed huge increases. Grain and cotton production also showed major increases as well. Mao had introduced the Great Leap Forward with the phrase "it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever." By the end of 1958, it seemed as if his claim was true.

### ***Great Sparrow Campaign***

However, in 1959, things started to go wrong. Part of the Great Leap Forward was the Great Sparrow Campaign, started because sparrows were seen as voracious consumers of grain seed. It was decided that the peasants in China should bang pots and pans and run around to make the sparrows fly away in fear. Sparrow nests were torn down, eggs were broken, their nestlings were also killed.

By April 1960 the Chinese Academy of Science found that sparrows ate insects more than seeds (implying that it wasn't a good thing to kill the sparrows). Mao ordered the end of the campaign against sparrows. By this time, however, it was too late. With no sparrows to eat them, locust populations ballooned, swarming the country and compounding the problems already caused by the Great Leap Forward and adverse weather conditions, leading to a famine.

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the material in this article has been plagia...uh...adapted from Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward, by Alfred L. Chan.

### ***Workers Taken off Farms***

Another problem was the fact that workers devoted to this program were not employed in more useful projects. By October 1958, some 50 million people were claimed to be working in the iron and steel production campaign to dig for coal, search for iron ore, fell trees, build furnaces, smelt iron and steel. Another 50 million people were involved in support functions. So many workers in the iron production took many farm workers away from their fields – so desperately needed food was not being harvested. Ironically, one of the key factors in food production in China was the weather and 1958 had particularly good weather for growing food. Party leaders claimed that the harvest for 1958 was a record 260 million tons – which was not true. The actual figure was 170 million tons.

The excellent growing weather of 1958 was followed by a very poor growing year in 1959. Some parts of China were hit by floods. In other growing areas, drought was a major problem. The harvest for 1959 was 140 million tons of grain – well below what China needed at the most basic level. In parts of China, starvation occurred.

The harvest of 1960 was even worse than in 1959. Nine million people are thought to have starved to death in 1960 alone; many millions were left desperately ill as a result of a lack of food. The government had to introduce rationing. This put people on the most minimal of food and between 1959 and 1962, it is thought that 20 million people died of starvation or diseases related to starvation.

China imported 5 million tons of grain in 1960, including, ironically enough, some 2 million tons of rice.

How bad did it get? In 1968 an 18-year-old member of the Red Guard, Wei Jingsheng,<sup>2</sup> took refuge with a family in a village of Anhui, and here he lived to write about what he saw:

We walked along beside the village... Before my eyes, among the weeds, rose up one of the scenes I had been told about, one of the banquets at which the families had swapped children in order to eat them. I could see the worried faces of the families as they chewed the flesh of other people's children. The children who were chasing butterflies in a nearby field seemed to be the reincarnation of the children devoured by their parents. I felt sorry for the children but not as sorry as I felt for their parents. What had made them swallow that human flesh, amidst the tears and grief of others — flesh that they would never have imagined tasting, even in their worst nightmares?

### ***Backyard Furnaces***

Pig iron and steel produced by the backyard furnaces was frequently too weak to be of any use and could not be used in construction, its original purpose. Chen Yun, a member of the Politburo (the policy-making body in the communist parties), wrote to Mao that forty to fifty percent of the pig iron smelted by the small blast furnaces had so much sulfur that it was useless for these steel or casting. The newspaper of the Central Committee of the CP, the People's Daily, stated that "We cannot deny

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<sup>2</sup> In 1996, Wei Jingsheng was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. He is a winner of numerous other human rights and democracy awards, including the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 1996, the National Endowment for Democracy Award in 1997, the Olof Palme Memorial Prize in 1994, and the International Activist Award by the Gleitsman Foundation.

that the labor paid out by many people has come to naught. They have dug out the ore, transported it to the furnaces and tried to smelt day and night. However, because of the defects of the blast furnaces, no iron was produced. Although sometimes iron was produced, the quantity, quality, and cost were far behind the others.”<sup>3</sup>

Buildings constructed by this substandard steel did not last long. Buildings created with this iron and steel were unsafe, and collapsing at an alarming rate. Yun reported that accidental deaths in the Ministry of Construction system alone numbered 435, or 2.2 times the rate of 1957.

By 1959, it was obvious that the Great Leap Forward had been a failure and even Mao admitted this. Some party members put the blame on him. He was popular with the people but he still had to resign from his position as Head of State (though he remained in the powerful Party Chairman position). The day-to-day running of China was left to three moderates: Liu Shaoqi,<sup>4</sup> Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. In late 1960, they abandoned the Great Leap Forward. Private ownership of land was reinstated and communes were cut down to a manageable size. Peasants also had the incentive to produce as much spare food as was possible as they could sell any spare that they had a market.

These three moderates had restricted Mao’s power but his standing among the ordinary Chinese people was still high as he was seen as the leader of the revolution. He was to use this popularity with the people to resurrect his authority at the expense of the moderates. The movement that he used to accomplish this was called the Cultural Revolution.

### ***Why was this allowed to go on?***

Why didn’t people protest this gross waste? Fear of confronting Mao and his pet project. For example, there were two main administrative agencies overlooking the iron program, the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry, and the First Ministry of Machine Industry. However, in the Anti-rightist campaign of 1957, in that Ministry of Metallurgical Industry, some 64% of its leadership, as well as 10 percent of the people in the actual “businesses” involved in metal producing, had been re-assigned lower-level jobs. This made the survivors much more cautious about rocking the boat. Also, there is no evidence that the First Ministry of Machine Industry (it later lost the “First” from its name) ever complained to Mao about the situation.

People had seen what had happened to others about whom Mao was unhappy with. In the Anti-rightist Campaign in 1957, some 300-500,000 intellectuals had been suppressed, and assigned to jobs lower on the pay scale. Such condemnation could not just be directed at people below. Even influential leaders could be ostracized if they went too far astride the boundaries Mao set for them. In July 1959, Mao gathered Communist Party leaders to discuss this Great Leap Forward. Zhao Erlu, a general in the

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<sup>3</sup> Edition of October 10, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Liu was the one who stated that the famines of the Great Leap Forward were 30% due to weather, and 70% due to man. He was Chairman of the People's Republic of China, China's head of state, from 27 April 1959 to 31 October 1968. He fell out of favor in the later 1960s during the Cultural Revolution, due to his perceived 'right-wing' viewpoints and, it is believed, due to the fact that Mao viewed Liu as a threat to his power. He disappeared from public life in 1968. He died under harsh treatment in late 1969, but he was posthumously rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping's government in 1980 and given a state funeral.

PLA, was planning to ship samples of sub-standard pig iron to this Lushan Conference, to provide proof of these pessimistic allegations, but Zhou Enlai discouraged him from doing so.

Undoubtedly what happened to Peng Dehuai was an example to many others lower down the food chain. Dehuai was the defense minister and also a Politburo member, and he wrote a private letter to Mao in July 1959 (when the Lushan Conference was meeting), warning about “petty-bourgeois fanaticism” in the Great Leap Forward, a very veiled attempt at trying to get Mao to see that there were problems in this movement. . Peng criticized the Great Leap Forward as a “rash advance.” Mao was furious, and ordered it read at the conference at Lushan. Major Chinese leaders denounced Peng as a “conspirator,” “hypocrite,” and “rightist.” As a consequence, he was removed from all posts and placed under constant supervision and house arrest in Chengdu, Sichuan; Lin Biao took over the post of Minister of Defense. Zhou got the Central Committee to condemn Peng Dehuai in a resolution.

## The Year Zero<sup>5</sup>

### **Part One**

The year 1960 was the darkest moment in the long, long history of China. Two thousand years before, a massive peasant uprising brought about the collapse of the Qin empire, the first great dictatorship to unify and control all the disparate peoples of ancient China. Now the nation had been unified once again under one great leader, Mao Zedong and the fertile fields of Henan, where the first known Chinese dynasty, the Shang, was founded, were littered with the bodies of peasants who had starved to death.

In a small village in Guangshan county in Henan, Mrs. Liu Xiaohua, now aged 65, still vividly remembers the events of thirty-six years ago. One afternoon in 1994, perched on a small footstool, dressed in faded blue cotton trousers and smock, and occasionally smoking a cigarette, she recalled what had happened. On the muddy path leading from her village, dozens of corpses lay unburied. In the barren fields there were others; and amongst the dead, the survivors crawled slowly on their hands and knees searching for wild grass seeds to eat. In the ponds and ditches people squatted in the mud hunting for frogs and trying to gather weeds.

It was winter, and bitterly cold, but she said that everyone was dressed only in thin and filthy rags tied together with bits of grass and stuffed with straw. Some of the survivors looked healthy, their faces puffed up and their limb swollen by oedema,<sup>6</sup> but the rest were as thin as skeleton. Sometimes she saw her neighbours and relatives simply fall down as they shuffled through the village and die without a sound. Others were dead on their earthen *kang* [an earthen or rock platform, to be slept on] beds when she awoke in the morning. The dead were left where they died because she said that no one had the strength to bury them.

She remembered, too, the unnatural silence. The village oxen had died, the dogs had been eaten and the chickens and ducks had long ago been confiscated by the Communist Party in lieu of grain taxes. There were no birds left in the trees, and the trees themselves had been stripped of their leaves and bark. At night there was no longer even the scratching of rats and mice, for they too had been eaten or had starved to death. Lucky villagers would sometimes find their corpses curled up in a hole but it was better still to find an old burrow from another season which might contain a winter store of grain or berries. Most of all she missed the cries of young babies, for no one had been able to give birth for some time. The youngest children had all perished, the girls first. Mrs. Liu had lost a daughter. The milk in her breasts had dried up and she had been forced to watch her child die. Her aunt, her mother and two brothers had also died.

The village is now a collection of mud huts surrounded by bamboo and trees, and the most prosperous villagers are building fine brick houses with tiled roofs and walled courtyards. Thirty-six years ago, all the villagers lived in houses made of mud bricks with thatched straw roofs, each divided into two or three rooms. In February 1960, Mrs. Lu remembered, most of the huts were deserted. The straw roofs had fallen in and weeds grew in the courtyards. The wood from the doors and windows had been taken away and often the lintels too, all to be bunt in furnaces to make steel. At night the family slept

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<sup>5</sup> Excerpted from *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, by Jasper Becker. Free Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup>Oedema (American English, *edema*) is an abnormal accumulation of body fluid in cell tissues, causing swelling.

together on the *kang* which could be heated from underneath. That winter, however, without even a cotton eiderdown [quilt] to keep them warm, they froze. The best eiderdowns had been given to the commune and in many households the last shreds of cotton had been eaten. There was no fire in the clay hearth under the hang because the cadres, the officials of the Communist Party, had forbidden the peasants to cook food at home and all fires had been outlawed. Their iron griddles and nearly all the woks and pans had been taken away to be melted down into steel. Sometimes the peasants used an earthenware pot to try and boil some soup or bake a kind of pancake of leaves but they were usually caught and a savage beating would follow. There was only one place in the village from which smoke was allowed to rise. This was the collective kitchen, set up when the commune was founded two years earlier. It was established in the house of the Wang family. They had once been the richest peasants in the village but they had been dispossessed of their land and killed before the commune was created. On the wall outside, the cadres had painted a slogan: 'Long live the people's communes.'

## **Part Two**

The collective kitchen was, said Mrs. Liu, the most terrible aspect of the commune. The grain from the autumn harvest had been taken from the villagers and delivered up to the state. Now the only source of food was the kitchen. Twice a day, at 11 AM and 4 PM, the cook would bang a piece of metal hanging from a rope and the villagers would queue up with their bowls to receive their ration of soup. The soup was a thin gruel into which the cooks had thrown the leaves of sweet potatoes and turnips, ground corn stalks, wild grasses and anything else the peasants could gather. In queuing for the soup the villagers fought with each other, the younger and stronger ones pushing the elderly aside. The first to be served risked getting nothing but water, and those who came late might find it had all gone. She remembered one incident when a cadre tried to restore discipline and punched a woman so hard that she fell down and never got up. Those who worked in the kitchen survived the longest but the best off were the family of the village Party secretary. At night he was able to steal food to feed his family, and although this was only dried pea powder, it kept Mrs. Liu, his sister-in-law, alive.

The first to die, she said, were the families of those who had been labelled rich peasants, for they were given the lowest rations. The next group were those who became too weak to work, for they were given nothing. Families tried to pool their rations and often the husband would rule that any female children should be allowed to die first since if they lived they would later be given in marriage to another family. Their food was given to the elderly. Then these too began to die. Often the villagers hid the corpses in their huts so that they could claim an extra ration. A few villagers had tried to hide some food by burying it underground. She remembered in particular the constant searches for hidden grain, teams of cadres looking for secret cavities would go round the huts with iron rods, poking at the roofs and walls and prodding the ground. They searched through the courtyards and the piles of dung and straw, determined to find the grain that they said the peasants were hiding. By that time the peasants had nothing, but a few months earlier they had collected some grain which they had gathered from the fields at night before the harvest was taken in. During the harvest season, the cadres had searched the peasants as they left the fields and had beaten anyone they caught trying to eat the wheat kernels. Mrs. Liu had been forced to spit out some kernels when she was spotted chewing while labouring in a field. She was not severely punished but others were. One man was tied with his hands behind his back and suspended from a tree. Another, the widow of a rich peasant, was buried alive with her children.

Still others were dragged by their hair through the village while the rest were ordered to beat and kick them.

She knew, too, that at night some of her neighbours went into the fields to cut the flesh from the corpses and eat it. She pointed to a neighbouring village, another collection of huts across the fields, where a woman had killed her own baby. She and her husband had eaten it. Afterwards she went mad and the secret came out. That winter, said Mrs. Liu, human beings turned into wolves. There were stories that some of the villagers who fled were killed and eaten. Too weak to walk far, they often collapsed and died where they had fallen on the road. Some of those who fled were caught by the militia, villagers wearing red armbands and armed with sticks and knives, who were ordered to patrol the main roads. She thought they were put in prison and died there. In other places, she heard that the villagers, led by the Party secretary, had tried to storm the granary at the commune headquarters but had been shot by members of the militia armed with guns.

When the villagers were too feeble to go out into the fields, the cadres came and beat them, trying to force them to go out and forage for food. And throughout that winter they were made to gather for frequent political meetings and to receive instructions on work quotas. There were health inspections, too, and she remembered how difficult it was trying to keep her hut clean. Many villagers suffered bouts of diarrhea and vomiting from the strange diet.... A few tried to eat earth mixed with grass but it solidified in their stomachs and they died.

Above all, Mrs. Liu recalled the end when the soldiers came in trucks and began throwing sacks of wheat on to the road. She managed to walk the six miles to the road and ate the grain raw. Out of the 300 people that had been in her village at the start of the famine, only 80 survived. Mrs. Liu still believes it was Chairman Mao who saved them by sending troops to rescue them and that otherwise all would have perished.

This book is the story of what happened not just in this one village in Guangshan county but in a million others throughout China.