

Teaching Mass Movements in the PRC, with Special Reference to Mao's Great Leap Forward Campaign, 1958-1962

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Teaching mass movements in the PRC under Mao Zedong is challenging, for the topic itself is enshrouded in the complex politics of the PRC and bracketed by the competing theoretical frameworks of China scholars. One so-called mass movement occurred during the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962), a political movement engineered by Mao and the Communist party. It sheds light on the causality of Mao era mass movements, and also helps us understand who won and who lost from participating in them.

In 1958 Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward, a campaign designed to jump start rural industrial development, build up a strong modern national state, and introduce socialism to Chinese society. Why did Mao start this campaign? In 1958 China had a primitive and yet complex agrarian economy, with nearly ninety per cent of the population living in rural villages. Mao wanted to mobilize rural dwellers to help transform this economy in ways that leaped over the stages of developmental history associated with capitalist transformations in the West, rapidly delivering China into a new socialist modernity. This utopian vision was behind the Great Leap Forward.

Other factors were important. On winning national power in 1949, the Communist party inherited an empty national treasury and lacked primitive capital. In October of 1952, Mao and high-ranking Communist party leaders determined that they had no choice but to get this capital from procuring the grain of farm households. They reasoned that they could not alienate the urban workers, that the civil servants had no money, and that they could not give the bourgeoisie leverage by appealing for its help. They intentionally targeted farmers, setting out to expropriate their harvests and other privately owned family property.

International politics, and the Cold War, influenced this movement. Mao and the Communist leadership sought to build up the country by getting involved in international markets, especially by developing beneficial trade with Japan, but in the spring of 1958 this plan received a setback: the United States began to pressure the Japanese government to restrict trade with the PRC. Responding to this pressure, Mao decided to pursue a strategy of national economic development based on self-reliance, a plan that would unfold outside of the world capitalist order. Mao was determined to realize this goal by mobilizing the masses of people in the countryside into socialist economic structures that were not dependent on outside capitalist markets, technology, and knowledge. The PRC's debts to the Soviet Union, some of which stemmed from the Korean War, and Beijing's acidic relationship with post-Stalin leaders, served to fuel this determination to go it alone.

Yet another important factor lay behind Mao's decision to initiate a "great leap forward." In reality, the Communist party-directed collectivization movement, which had taken the form of advanced production cooperatives, was not welcomed

by rural people whose independent farm economies were being subordinated to party-run cooperatives and increasingly burdened by the grain procurement demands of party cadres. By 1956-1957, rural farmers were insisting on exiting the cooperatives, refusing to hand in their harvests to state granaries, calling on party leaders to divide the land back to their individual households, and insisting on free trade in markets that were being shuttered by the party. They also rioted and robbed state granaries, and, in a few instances, joined in rebellions against the Communist party. Jolted by this development, Mao Zedong at first encouraged unhappy farmers to openly criticize his party in the Hundred Flowers Movement, but he then signaled his cadre base to crack down on dissenters. Frightened by the scale and intensity of anti-party dissent, in late 1957-early 1958 Mao decided to launch the Great Leap Forward, partly in order to wed farmers to gigantic people's communes under the direct, strict control of his party base. Farmers now had no choice but to turn their private property (farm lands and family houses) over to the big collective, and they lost the right to migrate out of their native villages without permission of officials in charge of rural household passports. Bound to the land, they had no choice but to work in collective fields with little or no pay, and to submit to the regimentation of party leaders who by and large were immune from local or national accountability and penalty.

In this respect, the mass movement of the Great Leap era actually was characterized by involuntary participation in a form of internal socialist colonization, ultimately conceived and dictated by Mao, who used this penal system not only to make rural people slave away to promote economic development beneficial to the urban based Communist political order but also to thwart the development of mass collective resistance and revolt against his socialist regime. The Great Leap Forward produced, in the words of political scientist Dali Yang, the worst famine in human history. (Yang, 1996: 1) At least 36 to 45 million people perished in this famine, which was largely the product of Mao's draconian grain procurement policy, a policy that was imposed on rural people by Mao's belligerent cadre base.

This lethal tragedy was compounded by a number of variables. One was the impulsive brutality of poor, Mao-loyal party leaders, many of whom were convinced that socialism would create a new world in which the last would come first, thus giving them previously unobtainable material benefits, a new high political status, and the protection of a closed party-based group. The spread of the famine was due to several other explicitly political factors: the institutionalization of the ideology of collectivization and the intensification of anti-democratic propensities among the Communist party's uneducated, autocratic-minded rural cadres. With Mao celebrating collectivization as a panacea for imagined rural

poverty, many fanatical local party activists put unswerving faith in the collective movement, insisting that big collective units supplant small, more efficient family units and assuming, wrongly, that the socialist economy would self-correct for all errors, including food shortages (See Friedman, et al, 1991). These same cadres, unable to win arguments over the flaws of the collective with unhappy farmers, teachers, and artisans, suppressed popular criticism of state-generated dearth, thereby inhibiting local community based solutions for addressing food scarcity and allowing the famine to develop into a serious lethal stage. The growing subsistence crisis was exacerbated because Mao and the party leaders relied on unscientific, often idiotic agricultural experiments offered by Russian scientists who knew little about rural life and the efficiency of the rural farming.

In recent years, a great debate has irrupted among scholars and journalists who have studied the lethal tragedy that was spawned by this state-directed mass movement. One school of thought, represented by historian Frank Dikötter, argues that the great famine was mainly the product of Mao and his imperial political conduct, and his radical policies (Dikötter, 2010). Another school, articulated by journalist Yang Jisheng, holds that this great disaster was not just the work of Mao per se but rather was the product of a hierarchical, authoritarian political system under the direction of a centralized single party and its supreme leader (Yang, 2008/2012). This system, so the argument goes, produced rigid orders and strict bureaucratic compliance, thus making it impossible to avoid and correct serious, life threatening errors at the grassroots level. (Yang, 2008/2012: ix, x, and Chapter 14). Both of these views have merit. In a sense, however, they create a false dichotomy that impedes our understanding of the politics that produced the massive starvation and unprecedented human rights disaster of socialist rule. Certainly, Mao himself was the principal causal agent of the Great Leap Forward, and yet Mao was operating in an authoritarian singly party system that in some ways trapped Mao and his party allies in patterns of interaction detrimental both to national state goals and the survival of rural people. Nonetheless, it was Mao who introduced this system to China through revolution and who refused to create the democratic checks on its top-down, arbitrary, uncompromising and deadly mode of governance.

I teach a seminar to a largely undergraduate audience, devoted mainly to the interdisciplinary study of the Great Leap Forward and the great famine of 1958-1962. This course introduces students in the scholarly debates over the origins of the great famine. I use Japer Becker's *Hungry Ghosts* and Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* and then compare these works with Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone*, thereby helping them understand the debate over whether it was Mao or the totalitarian political system that imposed the policies inducing the famine. In addition, and critically, I require students to read four long unedited interviews of famine survivors, so that they can get a feeling for how victims of this catastrophe experienced suffering and loss, somehow managed to survive Communist party inflicted cruelty, and why and how they assigned blame for the famine. This course is focused on ground level individual encounters with party-state power. It shows how flawed most academic research, which has little

information on such encounters, is. The narrative of this course is grounded in the raw memories of these unknown encounters. It especially focuses the student on how Mao's thinking, actions, and policies, as opposed to other factors, dragged rural dwellers into this unprecedented human rights disaster. Importantly, students are required to a) write a critical analytical review of any one book on the Great Leap and the famine, b) write a short paper on the great famine, and c) then write a longer final term paper that compares the great famine in China with a famine that occurred anywhere else in the world (Ireland 1848, Ukraine 1933, Ethiopia, 1985, etc.). In this exercise, students are required to read Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* (Claredon, 1981), and test the applicability of Sen's approach in understanding and comparing the Chinese case and the other case.

Bibliography

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