

Leap Forward

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STRUGGLESSESSIONS

Still today the Great Leap Forward is painted in the blackest of colors. It was used by many of the originators of the restorationist line (Liu Shaoqui and Deng Xiaoping) in the People's Republic of China as the reason to return to private markets and self ownership in agricultural commodity and property relations. It was a very complex time that preceded, but which would ultimately later precipitate, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

This obliqueness originates in part to how revisionism must attack communism in order to justify its existence, for if the Great Leap Forward was a model in any way it would reveal the backward, counterrevolutionary design of state capitalism. In other parts it has much to do with U.S. imperialism seeking the continued “containment” and destruction of a revolutionary state that was showing anticolonial struggles the way to socialist transformation and development. The two enemies of the oppressed people of the world, being in unity to one another, collided in creating the dominant ruling class thinking on this great historical event, which is one of intentional ‘authoritarian’ starvation, of ‘ultra-left’ excess and debauchery. Every Soviet revisionist aligned Party clique down to the Pentagon helped to promote, in Western publishing houses and in history departments, that to revolutionize the economy and see planning as the weapon of the proletariat was to bring catastrophe to the masses.

The Great Leap Forward was a great act of courage. Under Stalin’s leadership the Soviet Union had been aiding China for many years, yet the modern revisionists under Khrushchev suddenly delivered an ultimatum: quit criticizing the Soviet Union’s turn towards a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and their social imperialist intrigue, which included the class collaborationist policy of “peaceful coexistence,” or face isolation. Because the USSR-while it was still socialist-had helped China develop earlier as an act of internationalism, it was now poised to use their control of the economy as a form of blackmail. Their experts controlled the blueprints for key industrial projects, and by the late 1950’s essentially controlled the northeastern province of Manchuria, with a great deal of industry under the control of strong pro-Soviet elements within the Chinese Communist Party. The Soviet stopped all aid to the Chinese, with Khrushchev thinking that Mao’s revolutionaries would buckle and allow China to become a semi colony of the USSR.

Mao’s red line defied the phony-communists, which was a big deal: although with many real and tragic costs. The Soviets deeply compromised China by pulling out all their blueprints, experts, projects, and loans, essentially brutally stabbing the Chinese economy and leaving it to bleed. Within key sectors, the Soviet economic advisers had mobilized powerful networks of supporters with China to overthrow Mao. Construction stopped at scores of new plants and factories while the work at

many existing ones were thrown into confusion, mines and electric power plants were shut down, and a planned irrigation and dam project on the Yellow River, which frequently flooded and would kill thousands, was cancelled. A Soviet trade journal detailed the force with which this blockade had harmed development: the value of Soviet exports to China declined from 859,300,000 rubles in 1959 to 210,100,000 rubles in 1962; that of machinery and equipment from 537,800,000 rubles in 1959 to 24,600,000 rubles in 1962 (Klocho, 1971)

Mao knew that a concerted, independent, radical industrial offensive was highly necessary- a way that could bring China on the path to self-reliance and could get China's economy back on its feet. The attitude of the Chinese revolutionaries was clear: we can do this, we can develop our own expertise. "We can figure out how to do it," said the Chinese masses- and they did.

Challenges to Socialist Transformation and the Maoist Solution

The challenges they had to overcome were intimidating. China had no coal or petroleum, and they were told by the phony-communists and capitalists: that will be the death of your economy. But in the Great Leap, they uncovered unknown resources of coal and petroleum by mobilizing the masses on a huge scale to find it. They developed a radical critique of Soviet economics which was foundational to the Marxist understanding of political economy, and that was critical to the success of developing all three components of Marxism which made MLM possible as the third and highest stage. Mao wanted discover ways to decentralize industry and find ways to proletarianize the peasantry. Programs to spread technical knowledge, and working class experience to the peasantry were put into place. Putting these ideas into motion, Chairman Mao Zedong was following through with the powerful words of The Communist Manifesto: "Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country." And so they began to do this, with the workers and masses in command.

One such example of the start of this was the development of the Daqing Oil Fields. Veteran workers along with PLA soldiers arrived and studied geology collectively,

using amateur prospecting methods to discover the resource. Shirking the demand to follow the Soviet model of an 'oil city' several miles from the oil fields, workers insisted that production and living be integrated to cut down the commute, save expenses on urban facilities, and to be more self-reliant. Daqing was organized with centralism as a single municipality with a unified administration of oilfield and municipality, but used democracy by having a people's council whose members were elected both by the residential areas and by the oil workers. To prevent differences in living standards from developing, it integrated workers and peasants by combining city and countryside. Instead of planning a major urban center, residential points were scattered and constructed close to work sites. Several such residential points were then situated around a central town to form a cluster administered by a committee of women residents.

Outside Daqing with oil, elsewhere with the Great Leap Forward beginning, the Communist revolutionaries built small operations in the countryside – to serve agriculture. Small shops that could make blades for plows, for example. Small machine shops that could repair pumps also came about; and of course they began to develop local steel. Great amounts would be required to make the project succeed, and did have the resources or expertise for large modern blast furnaces. Some called Mao "insane" for developing these new techniques, but how did they expect the Chinese to develop steel? No prayer would make it fall from the sky.

Bourgeois historians and revisionists alike have made it primary in looking at the period to point out how the steel foundries caused problems. Yes, there were some problems. Namely: the quality was low and they were often only able to produce pig iron, which had uses, they underestimated how difficult it would be for the steel and iron to be transported.

During the Great Leap Forward, there was a huge, parallel development in agriculture: the Peoples Communes. The Chinese people developed a collective form that was basically at the county level. That meant that the peasants could pool resources on a much larger scale – develop canals and machine shops and side industries. All of this was impossible at the small-collective or family farm level; only during the Great Leap Forward did this begin to happen on a massive scale. Afterwards, they had a basis for commune machine shops, to send kids for technical training, etc.

However, did the furnaces lead to bad crops? No, as we know, in feudal times agriculture went by human-pulled and animal-pulled plows. And these furnaces did develop usable plows. There was no mechanized agriculture yet (except in a few advanced areas) – the whole point was/is to develop agriculture and industry. The furnaces did not “destroy” mechanized agriculture; the process laid the basis for Chinese peasants to be able to deal with machinery and technical things. They developed collective forms (at the Peoples Commune levels) to develop the furnaces – and those forms were later used to set up machinery repair places etc.

While the furnaces themselves did not lead to poor crop yield, in that they developed usable plows, they did divert needed labor from agriculture into industrial production. Mao had urged caution among cadres implementing the industrialization drive to not be overly ambitious with reaching targets, pointing to the fact that this was a serious political error. But in certain regions this guidance was not abided by and a productivist line was put in command. The heroic attitude of the peasants and workers in the People’s Communes to conquer nature and industrialize for revolution was stifled by those within the Party who were more concerned about reaching targets, of letting industry exploit agriculture. In the next section this will be elaborated on for more in depth.

So the Great Leap Forward was a very risky move, and it was deeply hurt by attacks by the Soviet revisionists (as mentioned before), natural drought, and mistakes on the Chinese part (mentioned above). There was a famine, indeed, but it was not as horrific as the bourgeoisie make it out to be. No one can deny that there were deaths and that in some areas there were painful consequences; yet this all must be taken

into context. As we know before 1949, China was basically semi-permanently facing wave after wave of famine. After 1949 there was basically an end to famine. The famine of 1959 was the great exception, in a period where hunger was abolished (for the first time in Chinese history!!) The population doubled under Mao and life expectancy grew by decades. A list of lives lost in India from malnutrition, which did not experience a New Democratic and socialist revolution, is several times the amount of those who perished in the GLF.

The socialist revolution made it possible to deal with famine in new ways. There was rationing and food sharing. Areas that had good harvests sent food to areas with bad harvests. The burden and impact of the bad harvests was softened, by all the new forms that socialist made. It was new and breathtaking, and saved many lives. The Great Leap Forward had its shortcomings, yes, but the way they handled those shortcomings showed the strength and superiority of socialism over capitalism. In looking at making revolution in agriculture, the Dazhai Production Brigade of the Dazhai Commune the most stunning and inspirational example.

“In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai”

One of the right opportunist errors which ultimately contributed to the death toll was productivism. In attempting to reach plan targets during the GLF it led to false reporting and over emphasis on reaching targets. The revisionist clique of Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai limited the role of the Chinese masses to the “duty” of speeding up what they saw as a purely technical process. They supported purely bureaucratic and administrative methods of stimulating the Communes.

Mao pointed the disgusting flaws of this: “Once the correct thought representing the advanced class is in the hands of the masses, it becomes a material strength to transform society and the world.” The masses did not need more work points or greater access to private market co-ops and shops. The Dazhai Production Brigade, situated high in the Taihang Mountains, proved during the GLF that they possessed overwhelming strength that was powerful enough to tame mountains and harness rivers. Poor and lower middle peasants described the Taihang Mountains as so: “The mountain is high, and rocks are plentiful. When you go outside, you have to

chamber up the slopes. There are less than 3.5 mou of land [note: this is about 0.08 to 0.13 acres of land] for each family. Natural disasters are commonplace.”

Steep ridges and rocky gullies divided the village. Top soil, deposited from years of dust storms from Mongolia, would wash away during steady rains or turn rock hard during droughts. The natural disasters described would not just be droughts, but violent floods that would ruin productive fields and sweep away peasant homes.

Throughout the GLF the Dazhai Production Brigade organized the peasants to re-route streams, tear down hills, and to increase food grain production. While crop and malnutrition is reported to have haunted the rest of China, Dazhai according to official accounts was able to not face starvation, even while not meeting the targets that were demanded to be met.

Under the guise of reducing over reporting and reducing corruption among rightist elements in the Party Shaoqui opportunistically promoted the “Four Cleans” movement as a means of attacking those grassroots Maoist elements in Dazhai. After evaluating what Dazhai had done, the Provincial Committee reclassified it as a “third class brigade with serious problems.” Chen Yonggui, who was a poor peasant that led land revolution in Dazhai, went to Peking and visited personally with Mao, talking about the growing capitalist elements within the Party waging war on Dazhai. Mao soon after went on the offensive, issuing the “Twenty-three Points” which attacked those in the Party targeting grassroots cadre, in order to rectify “those persons in positions of authority within the Party who take the capitalist road.”

Mao urged all communists to “learn from Dazhai” not because it reached certain production targets, which is all that revisionists seemed to care about. But to show how peasants, under Communist leadership, was able to change the barren ravine with all its poor natural conditions and transform an area formerly reliant on State relief into being self-reliant. This was done not just with a communist labor attitude but by politically and ideologically confronting the wage system by bombarding the capitalist headquarters, first attacking the “quota management” by provincial leadership which “relies on a system to control the people and obliges a few cadres to manage the majority of the masses,” and in getting rid of the “pace setter system,”

which remunerated labor by basing the work those in the Brigade did to two to five of the most skilled and productive workers. Instead cadre were sent into the fields, expanding the workforce and reuniting them with the masses, with individual abilities accounted for and imbursed without cadre controls, allowing the working people to manage their own affairs with no special effort to inspect or examine the “quality” of farm work performed.

On the Toll and Other Myth Making Around the GLF

Some Western commentators, such as Jung Chang, Jon Halliday, Richard Conquest and others, have taken to comparing Mao to Hitler. Hitler was the fascist head of a state that invaded countries for the purpose of German imperialism, of annexing new land, resources, and enslaved labor. The Nazi state devised scientific methods to execute on an industrial scale whole nationalities of people and experimented on all manners of people. Socialist transformation and development being equated to Nazism does not fool the worlds oppressed and working class, but it has enjoyed some currency among fascists, conservatives and even ‘leftists’. The People’s War in China, antifascist partisan movements in occupied Eastern Europe, combined with the Soviet war effort which fought 80% of the Nazi scourge from the banks of the Volga to the capital City of Berlin was what defeated fascism, but this fact is deleted from the annals of history by anti-communists who insist on an equivalency.

When it comes to the Great Leap Forward period, it was very hard (for the government or anyone else) to get accurate numbers about life and death (population size, birth rates, infant mortality rates) in the vast, disconnected Chinese countryside. The reason the numbers are not known about how many people died from hunger is because such numbers are not knowable (to be specific, there is no recording system to extract that information from) and it is not known how many more hundreds of millions of people died in the many horrific famines that ravaged China during their pre-revolutionary period either. That being said the cause, of whether it was hunger or premature death due to hardship, is never established. Some, most notoriously the anticommunist spin artists Chang and Holliday, have estimates that try to assess the ‘missing’ population on the basis of

normal death and birth rates and therefore may have included millions of those who may not have been born:

“Some scholars have used a very dubious method of arriving at grossly unrealistic and inflated ‘famine deaths’ during this period (1959–61) by taking account not only of the higher crude death rate (which is a legitimate measure) but also counting the ‘missing millions’ as a result of the lower birth rate, as part of the toll. There is a great deal of difference between people who are already there, dying prematurely due to a sharp decline in nutritional status, and people not being born at all. The former can enter the statistics of famine deaths according to any sensible definition of famine, but people who are not born at all are obviously in no position to die whether prematurely or otherwise.”

In spite of what anticommunists write, weather conditions in 1959, 1960 and 1961 undeniably had an impact besides the political error of right opportunist over reporting. Jimo County suffered horrific weather for those three consecutive years. On June 30, 1958 a ten hour rainstorm caused 22 rivers to overflow and wrecked 69 dams and reservoirs. On May 27, 1959 a hailstorm ruined 31,000 crops of five communes, causing an estimated loss of 1.35 million kilos of grain. On June 15 1959 intense rain damaged 75,900 crops, destroyed almost 5,000 houses and killed 8 people. On July 27, 1960, a hurricane wiped out 777,000 crops. These events, when aggregated together, had an undeniable impact on overall grain output in Jimo County alone.

In *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* anti-communist reactionary Jasper Becker also alleges that the People's Communes having public dining halls and canteens were also a culprit of the famine. The public dining halls however enjoyed many peasants support. They liberated Chinese women from the traditional burden of cooking, processing grain and washing dishes, allowing them to take an active role in the economic transformation of the country. As the scale of cooking increased it actually decreased the amount of fuel that was used with individual household cooking. Even before the People's Communes were launched many peasant investigating committees who visited where the industrial proletariat and students lived reported the advantages of public dining walls and wanted to

establish the same system. There is no evidence at all that promoting more communal forms such as the public dining halls had a link.

What precipitated the more disastrous aspects of this revolutionizing in agriculture? As pointed out at the start, the sudden withdrawal of Soviet advisers and inputs, leading to major economic disruptions and inability to import from previous allies, was one factor. Another was the convergence of serious drought and floods that corresponded with the revolutionary disruption of small production. There was also, of course, a problem of plans not carefully considered and implemented, the development of new small rural industries without investigating problems of quality and transport, and a serious problem of false reporting (where the apparatus below the Central government held by Mao's line produced waves of optimistic reports that masked the emergence of major problems) so that the problems reached a major size before they were confronted more frontally. The rightists in the Party bare the responsibility for upholding this model of communal success measure ultimately predicated on production brigades and grains making the most amount of output possible (leading to over reporting, bossing over peasants, taking from them without consideration for their lives). We know that to revolutionize the countryside is no crime – even in imperialist countries we must do so as well!

Article by S. Mazur

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