

# *A Tragedy of Good Intentions*

## **Post-Mao Views of the Great Leap Forward**

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“Hell is paved with good intentions.”

—James Boswell

*The Life of Samuel Johnson*

In the post-Mao reconstruction of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), two periods—the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)—are identified as times when extreme Leftism dominated the Chinese Communist Party and brought the country to the brink of political and economic ruin. These episodes, often referred to in such terms as the “two comprehensive Leftist mistakes,” the “two grave setbacks,” and the “two declines,”<sup>1</sup> are viewed as sharing many characteristics as expressions of ultra-Leftist ideology (Deng Liqun, 1982: 123; Laio Gailong, 1982: 211; Du Wenzhen and Zhang Yongtao, 1979: 1). Yet they are also differentiated in several important aspects, not the least of which is in the severity of the damage that each is said to have brought to

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China. As the authoritative 1981 Resolution on Party History states, "The 'cultural revolution' . . . was responsible for the most severe setbacks and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic." By contrast, the Resolution, although highly critical of the mistakes of the Great Leap, is restrained in its description of the movement and speaks only in passing of the "serious losses" incurred between 1959 and 1961 (Resolution, 1981: 29, 32).

However, by many objective criteria, the Great Leap Forward (GLF) was a much greater disaster for the Chinese people than was the Cultural Revolution (CR). For example, per capita consumption of grain, pork, and cotton cloth *increased* (by 0.4%, 0.5%, and 18%, respectively) between 1966 and 1976, whereas grain consumption *decreased* by 22% between 1957 and 1961, pork by 72%, and cotton cloth by 57% (Statistical Yearbook of China, 1985: 477; Li Chengrui, 1984: K2-15; Liu Suinian and Wu Qungan, 1984: 170-74). Translated into more graphic and tragic figures, the human cost of the CR pales in comparison with that of the GLF. The official reckoning of the number of people "persecuted to death" during the CR is put at approximately 35,000 while other credible projections of the numbers who perished due to the disorder of 1966-1976 reach as high as one million; in contrast, estimates of the "excess mortality" caused by the Great Leap famine of 1959-1961 range between 15 and 30 million! (A Great Trial in Chinese History, 1981: 21; Goldman, 1983: 116; Shalom, 1984: 46-63, 81-88; Bernstein, 1984: 343; Ashton et al., 1984: 613-45.)<sup>2</sup>

One purpose of this article is to analyze why the GLF is judged rather more benignly than the CR in the eyes of the post-Mao Chinese leadership. Of broader concern is the matter of how the Leap itself is assessed as a particular variant of the ultra-Left trend that is said to have dominated the political life of the country for nearly half of the Maoist era. The point here is not to reconstruct the history of the years 1958-1961, but to construct a portrait of what may be regarded as the prevailing official line on the GLF regarding such questions as: What were the causes of the

Leap? What were the major Leftist errors committed during those years? What were the most important consequences of the Leap? Who bears responsibility for the deviant line that gave rise to the movement? What are the main lessons to be learned from the experience of the GLF? and, What is the relevance of those lessons for China's current modernization drive?

#### *GENERAL PERSPECTIVES*

Many discussions of the Great Leap Forward place the movement within the framework of the 10-year period of 1957-1966. The Resolution on Party History calls this period "The Ten Years of Initially Building Socialism in All Spheres," whereas Party historian Liao Gailong has labelled it as the "decade of tortuous advance" (Resolution, 1981: 24; Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 66). This framework is sometimes broken down into subperiods with the admittedly disastrous GLF englobed between two phases in which the orientation of the Party and the trend of economic development are assessed positively. As Liao Gailong put it, "These ten years may be roughly divided into three stages. In one stage [1957], we followed the correct line; in another stage [1958-1960], we made mistakes; and in still another stage [1961-1966], we corrected our mistakes" (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 66).

Thus the decade of 1957-1966 is evaluated as a period of overall success in which the errors of the Leap are considered an aberration. This is said to have been a time when much of "the material and technological basis for modernizing our country was largely established" (Resolution, 1981: 27). Even during the Great Leap, it is frequently pointed out, there was significant capital construction (especially in iron and steel, mining, and textile enterprises) that ultimately contributed greatly to China's industrialization. For example, 68% of new large-scale metallurgical projects undertaken between 1949 and 1964 were begun

after 1958 (with the vast majority built during the Leap years), whereas over 36% of all steel-making capacity put in place between 1950 and 1970 was constructed in 1958-1960 (Liu Suinian and Wu Qungan, 1984: 71). An updated companion volume to the Resolution on Party History concluded its summary commentary on the GLF by noting that, "We must strictly distinguish mistakes in work guidelines from the valuable revolutionary spirit of the Party and the people and the accomplishments" of the Leap years (*Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi*, 1985: 323).

In addressing those responsible for drafting the Resolution on Party History, Deng Xiaoping commented that the CCP's work in the 10 years prior to the Cultural Revolution "should be assessed as generally good; in the main, it proceeded along the right road." "We suffered setbacks and made mistakes during that period," he admitted, "but the achievements were the main thing." Deng lauded the prestige of the Party at the time as well as the fine atmosphere and high spirits that pervaded society. In a reference that obviously included the GLF, he observed that "when we met with difficulties, we were able to get through them quite smoothly," thus amplifying the current view that the negative experiences of the Leap do not detract from the overall upbeat assessment of the decade before the CR (Deng Xiaoping, 1984: 288).

This evaluation of the years 1957-1966 contrasts sharply with the judgment concerning the Cultural Revolution decade of 1966-1976, which is dubbed the "ten years of internal chaos" and has been subjected to a campaign of "thorough negation" (*chedi fouding*) that denies even the smallest virtue to that era.<sup>3</sup> Great pains are taken to show that whatever economic progress may have occurred between 1966 and 1976 was in spite of the CR and should be attributed to such factors as return on earlier investments (especially in the energy sector) and the adherence to the correct line by the vast majority of cadres and masses who loyally remained on the job despite the chaos around them (Li Chengrui, 1984: K7-8, 15). One *Hongqi* article has argued that a major

reason for the economic progress (however slight) during the CR was that “Comrade Mao Zedong was able to absorb the lessons of the ‘Great Leap Forward’” and that, despite his Leftist errors during “the ten years of turmoil, he was still comparatively careful in economic work” (Gao Zhiyu, 1981: 68).

The GLF and the CR are both regarded as examples of “comprehensive mistakes” (*quanjuxing de cuowu*) that affected all aspects of the Party’s work. In this sense, they stand apart from “partial mistakes” (*jubuxing de cuowu*) such as the “rash advance” during collectivization and the anti-Rightist campaign of 1957 that had much more limited impacts (Tao Kai, 1982: 141; Deng Liqun, 1982: 143). But even within this shared framework the GLF and the CR are distinguished in such a way as to suggest that the latter was a much graver type of “comprehensive mistake.” As one commentary on Party history said, “Not only were the mistakes of these three years [1958-1961] corrected comparatively quickly, but the duration [of the Leap] was also not too long; therefore the errors of these three years are different from those of the ‘cultural revolution’,” which were much more protracted and resistant to correction (Tao Kai, 1982: 141). Indeed, official post-Mao views of the GLF make a great deal of the various installments of rectification of Leap policies and especially of Mao’s role in leading the adjustments of late 1958-mid 1959 and the early 1960s when he is said to have put forth many important ideas on the objective laws of socialist economic development (Hongqi, 1981: 25). In contrast, Mao is seen as holding firm to his erroneous views on class struggle until his last mortal breath, whereas the CR is said to have ended only with the forceful removal of the Gang of Four. Thus the GLF is viewed as a period in which the Party made drastic mistakes but ultimately was able to redeem itself through the established mechanisms of rectification and self-criticism; on the other hand, the CR could be remedied only through such irregular interventions as the death of the Chairman and the arrest of some the Party’s highest-ranking leaders.

*THE ORIGINS OF THE  
GREAT LEAP FORWARD*

The most common theme in post-Mao analyses of the origins of the GLF concerns the combination of inexperience and arrogance that is said to have characterized the leadership of the CCP as they embarked upon the task of formulating the Second Five-Year Plan in the mid-1950s. The cumulative effect of successive domestic triumphs such as the victory in the civil war, the rehabilitation of the economy, the completion of the socialist transformation of agriculture, industry, and commerce, and the routing of the "opposition" in the anti-Rightist campaign, along with what was perceived as a highly advantageous international situation, led the Party to become infected with an "incautious spirit" (Wu Qungan, 1981: 27). Believing that they could do no wrong, the Party leaders undertook to bring about a rapid and sustained leap in the pace of China's development by relying on the formula of commitment, consciousness, and mobilization that had, in many ways, brought them their earlier successes.

Speaking of the circumstances that gave rise to the Leftist errors of excessive targets, commandism, and boastfulness during the Leap, the Resolution on Party History explains that

This was due to our lack of experience in socialist construction and inadequate understanding of the laws of economic development and the basic economic conditions in China. . . . More important, it was due to the fact that Comrade Mao Zedong and many leading comrades, both at the Center and in the localities, had become smug about their successes, were impatient for quick results, and overestimated the role of man's subjective will and efforts [Resolution, 1981: 28].

This line of argument contains a blunt admission of naïveté about the complexities of economic planning and the relevance to modernization of earlier guerrilla and post-Liberation experiences. But it also implies—sometimes quite explicitly—that the CCP in the mid-1950s was trying to remold China amidst unprec-

edented circumstances in which mistakes were inevitable; therefore, such reasoning suggests, the errors of the GLF should be regarded as “setbacks occurring in the process of our Party’s probing socialism” (Shi Zhongqiang, 1981: 54). Indeed, much effort is expended to argue that such “setbacks” were the product of a certain time and do not amount to a general indictment of socialism or the CCP. As Luo Gengmo (1981: 8), one of the economic planners involved in the Leap, observed, misadventures like the GLF were “only transitory and localized problems” that were ultimately corrected by the Party itself and must not be interpreted as “inherent roadblocks” or flaws in a planned economy.

Post-Mao analyses are clear and consistent in asserting that those who made mistakes in the Leap were motivated by ideological optimism and patriotic aspirations. Their errors are seen as a product of overexuberance, not malice. At the conclusion of a self-criticism for his part in the GLF, Bo Yibo reflected in 1981 that “the masses excused us for doing wrong things because *our intentions were good*” (Bo Yibo, 1981: K34; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Frequent reference is made to qualities like the “high level of activism” and the “enthusiasm and initiative for socialism” that characterized the times, along with the admonition that such motives must be affirmed even though they were taken to extremes in the GLF (Tao Kai, 1982: 136; Resolution, 1981: 28; Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 1985: 323). One survey of changes in a single area of rural Sichuan from 1949 up to the early 1980s concludes a discussion of the 1958-1960 period by describing how a small backyard blast furnace from the mass steel campaign has been left in place as a “souvenir” and a “key protected historical relic” commemorating the “grievous experience” of the GLF and as a reminder to the people that they “must never again commit such follies”; yet the same article praises the “noble and heroic spirit of daring,” as well as the “enthusiasm and creativeness” of the masses during the Leap. Although acknowledging that during the GLF many people in the area “indulged in the wildest fantasies, thus causing incalculable

losses and waste,” the report also comments that those were times when “people dared to think and dared to act and achieved a lot of marvelous results” (Mu Qing et al., 1982: 41).

The positive portrayal of the motives that led to the Leap seems to exonerate those responsible for the movement’s errors. It also contrasts sharply with the thoroughly sinister intentions attributed to those held to blame for the excesses of the CR, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four. While Mao’s motive for initiating the CR is ascribed to his misguided “theses” about the nature of class struggle in socialist society—which is interpreted as a benign, if tragic mistake—Lin and the Gang are depicted as driven by the most selfish and destructive counterrevolutionary aims.<sup>5</sup> This distinction is what sets Mao’s ultra-Leftist errors apart from the criminal acts of Lin and the Gang; but it is also part of what distinguishes the more forgiving attitude toward the GLF from the total denunciation of the CR.

One of the most interesting and controversial components of the post-Mao critique of the GLF concerns the links between earlier periods of PRC history and the Leap. Although admitting the errors of the latter stages of collectivization and the 1957 anti-Rightist campaign, the 1981 Resolution does not posit any specific relationship between these prior events and the GLF. Other sources, however, are explicit in tracing such connections. Some see the three years or so prior to the GLF as generating a double-edged political environment that both placed a premium on activism and created a reluctance to raise the specter of adventurism. For example, the 1955-1956 “rash advance” in collectivization is seen as sowing the ideological seeds for the GLF. The official view is that the early stages of the socialist transformation of agriculture—the establishment of the agricultural producers’ cooperatives in 1954-1955—were carried out in a smooth and effective manner, but that the next installment—the collectivization of 1955-1956—was “too abrupt and too hasty” (Wang Songpei and Zhu Tiezhen, 1981: 14). This set a precedent for pressing further radical social change ahead of the development of the economy, which left a lasting imprint on the Party’s guiding ideology despite the economic disruption and popular



resistance caused by the excessive pace of collectivization. “We failed to see the necessity of consolidating the cooperatives after they were formed in the rural areas,” noted one commentator,

and committed the error of leading the several hundred million peasants, who had just stepped unsteadily into the gate of small-scale collective ownership, to rashly realize a big-scale collective ownership or even the ownership by the whole people and leap into communism [Xue Xin, 1982: 85].

Liao Gailong has been even more blunt in positing a connection between the errors of collectivization and the GLF. At the time of the “rash advance,” Liao has observed,

Party leaders began to overestimate the high speed in the development of production and to overemphasize such factors as subjective initiative and political role . . . and began to have the impractical idea of seeking quick results. By this time the mistake of the so-called Great Leap Forward had already sprouted. When did the idea of the Great Leap Forward come into being? Probably in 1955. We can all read the preface and editor’s note of *The Socialist Upsurge in China’s Countryside*, and we can find the idea of seeking quick results everywhere [Liao Gailong, 1981a; Part I, 78].

Liao and others also suggest a link between the antirightist campaign and the Leap. Liao upholds the current orthodoxy that the anti-Rightist campaign was ideologically correct and politically necessary, even though he acknowledges that its methods were too extreme and antagonistic. Nevertheless, he contends that the events of 1957 had a “serious impact” on later developments by sanctioning the use of more coercive means of dealing with contradictions in socialist society and skewing the political process in such a way as to allow the Leftist trend, begun in the collectivization drive, to grow to destructive proportions. He traces all the Leftist transgressions from the GLF through the CR to “the development and enlargement of the mistake in the antirightist campaign,” which was gradually transformed from a

partial error into a deviant trend that affected “the overall situation” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 78).

The precise nature of the connection between these events is traced to the way in which the anti-Rightist movements of 1957 and 1959 (in the aftermath of the Lushan Plenum) “made people both within and outside the [Party] afraid to tell the truth” (Luo Gengmo, 1981: 8). On the one hand, the ideological milieu created by the campaigns caused “cautious comrades who held to ‘seeking truth from facts’ in planning production” and who had serious doubts about the Leftist drift of the Leap to be “taken to be ‘Rightist conservatives,’ ‘fence-sitters,’ and ‘account-settlers’ . . . even to the point where [their hesitation] was seen as a manifestation of class struggle” (Wu Qungan, 1984: 29). On the other hand, those same pressures induced local level leaders to go to extremes in carrying out Leap policies and to falsify production statistics in order to win the accolades that went along with activism. Both consequences of the anti-Rightist movements are viewed as having fateful effects on the crisis of 1959-1961.

A debate over the degree to which the Leftist errors of the 1950s call into question the entire guiding ideology of the CCP first appeared in PRC academic circles in the spring of 1980, but quickly gained enough momentum to attract critical attention from the official and semiofficial press. Essentially this debate revolved around the question of whether the theory and practice of the CCP during the socialist transformation reflected the deviant ideology of “agrarian socialism” (*nongye shehuizhuyi*) or whether the Party remained faithful throughout the 1950s to the “scientific socialism” (*kexue shehuizhuyi*) of Marx and Lenin.<sup>6</sup> The agrarian socialism argument was, in many ways, a logical extension of the more commonly held view that the roots of the GLF can be traced to the mistakes of the latter phase of collectivization. This argument pushed the erroneous trend in CCP ideology back beyond the errors of 1955-1956 to the decision in 1953 to increase the pace of the socialist transformation in both agriculture and industry and, in some presentations, even back into the very nature of the “national democratic” revolution that brought the CCP to power. Although this

thesis acknowledged that the original plan to develop the mutual aid teams gradually into cooperatives was appropriate for China's needs in the early 1950s, the acceleration of the socialist transformation was viewed as representing "an abrupt ideological change of course" that

stood the sequence of industrialism and alteration of the ownership system on its head, eliminated the decisive role in remaking society played by the upgrading of the productive forces, and, in fact, turned historical materialism into historical idealism. It contained basic faults of ideology, as a consequence of which minor theoretical deviations would unavoidably result in major failures in practice [Ying Xueli and Sun Hui, 1980: 6].

The GLF was certainly among the "major failures in practice" attributed to the agrarian socialist ideology of the CCP.

By its emphasis on the rapid transformation of the relations of production in the 1950s, the Chinese variant of agrarian socialism was alleged to have violated the essential principle of scientific socialism, which is that "after the proletariat has seized political power, the first central task is to concentrate all energy on raising the social forces of production and to develop them faster and to an even higher level than under capitalism" (Wang Zhongyi, 1980: 2). The fact that China's revolution took place in a poor, peasant society, rather than in a country with more advanced means of production and a well-developed proletariat as envisioned by Marx and Engels, should have dictated that development of the economy be regarded as an even more pressing task. But the social reality of the revolutionary movement propelled the vanguard party to adopt the viewpoint of its main source of support, the small-producer poor peasantry. In light of China's stage of development in the first half of the twentieth century, the revolution "could not be anything but a modern peasant war led by the Communist Party." Rather than being able to mold the situation in China to fit with the demands of scientific socialism, the CCP was itself remolded by the peasantry; the result was that the Party under Mao's leadership "rationaliz[ed] Marxism" and "pinned a narrow pragmatist and historical idealist tail on

Marxism." This neglect of the "scientific knowledge and scientific logic accumulated over many centuries" led to the appearance of agrarian socialism as the guiding ideology of the CCP and was "the source of the theoretical errors [that] we made in the late period of socialist transformation" (Ying Xueli and Sun Hui, 1980: 26).

Once it had become the ideological captive of the peasantry, the CCP was led into a whole series of fateful mistakes. The Party leadership came to "worship the spontaneity of the peasant class" and perverted Marx's scientific analysis of the peasantry by equating the revolutionary potential of "the poor peasants in the countryside with [that] of the modern proletariat." This led to a wave of "egalitarian rubbish" in the socialist transformation as the Party gave vent to the "fanatical and utopian" demands of the rural masses for rapid and radical change. It also caused the CCP to forge an ill-conceived alliance with the peasantry and to abrogate the united front between the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie, which should have been utilized to "control" the least progressive social class, the peasants. The policy of "allying with the peasants on a socialist basis to destroy capitalism" was, it is argued, "a metaphysical view" that violated any logical application of scientific Marxism to China. This subsequently caused "a premature revolution to wipe out capitalism" and the erroneous elimination of the "state capitalism stage" of development that China so desperately needed (Ying Xueli and Sun Hui, 1980: 23, 28, 22, 25). Agrarian socialism thus led the CCP to propel China along a course of nationalization and collectivization that was entirely inappropriate to its level of development in the 1950s and ultimately to pursue such fantastical schemes as the Great Leap Forward.

Those who rejected this thesis readily admitted serious deviations in the latter stages of collectivization and the GLF, but vehemently denied that these deviations reflected agrarian socialism or that they negated the basic success ("an historical miracle") of the socialist transformation (Hua Shi, 1981: 41). For these critics, the intra-Party disputes during the 1950s concerned only the "pace" of change and not "the fundamental guideline of the

Party” that cooperativization was a necessary step for China to take at the time. They argue that the proponents of “gradual and steady development of agricultural cooperation were correct” and should not have been criticized; but it is also wrong to conclude “that those who were in favor of a rapid development [of cooperation] were advocating ‘agrarian socialism’” (Xue Xin, 1982: 73). The agrarian socialist argument was also faulted for assuming that China in the early 1950s simply was not materially or ideologically prepared to begin the transition to socialism and should have instead engineered a stage of state capitalism. On the contrary, at the time of Liberation, modern industry was highly concentrated and the confiscation of bureaucratic capital allowed the new government “to get control of the national economic lifelines and enabled the state-owned economy to become the leading component of the entire economy.” This, in turn, “formed the material preconditions for China’s building socialism” (Zhou Yongchuang, 1981: 93-94).<sup>7</sup>

Far from being a retrogressive social force that has subverted the mission of the CCP, China’s poor peasants were touted in the critique of agrarian socialism as “a progressive laboring class” and as “the most reliable allies of the proletariat” in all stages of the revolution (Xue Xin, 1982: 82; Hua Shi, 1981: 45). Other examples of true agrarian socialism (for instance, the Russian *narodniks*) were cited to show that the path of socialist transformation in China had nothing in common with such a perverse ideology. For example, whereas agrarian socialists seek to establish an economic system based on individual, small-scale, self-sufficient peasant ownership and romantically spurn any industrial or commercial development, the CCP, it was pointed out, had always rejected such utopianism and advocated collectivization, technological transformation, modernization, and firm proletarian leadership of the peasantry (Zhou Yongchuang, 1981: 93). The CCP has, indeed, been guilty of errors of absolute egalitarianism at times, but this should not be regarded as a reflection of agrarian socialism because it “was not aimed at turning the whole social economy into an individual economy marked by equality and uniformity.” Rather, the egalitarianism

of the CCP was “subjectively aimed at consolidating the collective economy, though objectively it had a harmful and destructive effect on the collective economy” (Shi Zhongquan, 1981a: 12).

The official evaluation of the GLF is rather circumspect in discussing the movement’s ideological origins. But there are traces of the agrarian socialism thesis in commentaries from people who must be regarded as carrying some political weight within the Party leadership. For instance, in a major address to the National Party School expressing his views on the necessity for a thorough critique of CCP history, Liao Gailong (1981a: Part I, 84) observed that the mistakes of the Leap showed that “in the minds of the Party leaders, there was a rather systematic Leftist fantasy of socialism, which may also be called the peasant communism of absolute egalitarianism. This communism or socialism . . . was not scientific. It was a daydream [that] represented the peasants’ prejudices based on egalitarianism.”

Liao’s estimate aside, the CCP certainly summoned a lot of media muscle to rebuff the agrarian socialism argument. The Party even singled out for criticism in a Central Committee document the academic article that first offered the agrarian socialism thesis (Chengming jihpao, 1981).<sup>8</sup> This response was a reflection of the Party’s effort to shore up its prestige and the legitimacy of socialism. This, in turn, was necessitated by the acknowledged crisis of confidence unleashed in the wake of the dramatic, multifaceted changes that followed Mao’s death and the CCP’s often graphic condemnation of wrongdoing within its own ranks during the 20 years between 1957 and 1976. The agrarian socialism analysis of the Leftist errors of the 1950s obviously raised certain questions that were too thorny and challenged certain cows that were too sacred for the leadership’s liking. It is one thing to admit error; it is quite another to impugn the guiding ideology and the class basis of the Party. In the agrarian socialism thesis, the mistakes of collectivization and the GLF were seen as a natural and inevitable outgrowth of a movement condemned to ideological deviance by its own social roots in the peasantry. In contrast, the sanctioned evaluation of

the socialist transformation maintains that the ultra-Leftism that led the CCP astray in the mid-1950s was only a late-blooming trend within an otherwise healthy Party.<sup>9</sup>

### *MISTAKES AND CONSEQUENCES*

In many ways, the litany of errors now attributed to the Great Leap Forward varies little from the critique of the movement that emerged during the mid-course adjustment from late 1958 through mid-1959 and again during the final retreat from the Leap in the first years of the 1960s. Post-Mao discussions of the GLF frequently contain the standard list of ultra-Leftist deviations committed at the time: “excessive targets, the issuing of arbitrary directions, boastfulness, and stirring up of a ‘communist wind’” (Resolution, 1981: 28).<sup>10</sup> The “communist wind” (*gongchanfeng*) refers to various policies that aimed to achieve a “premature transition to communism”; these policies included the free-supply system, the “leveling” of rich and poor units to achieve greater equality, transformation of ownership and accounting systems to embody a higher level of socialization of the means of production and methods of distribution, and zealous restriction of private economic activity.

In ideological terms, the mistakes of the GLF are traced to the Leftist error of “subjectivism” on the part of the leadership.<sup>11</sup> Although their subjective motives may have been good, Party leaders fell into the trap of letting their own revolutionary aspirations overwhelm their appreciation of the material and ideological constraints on what was possible to achieve at that point in time. As a result, there was no careful investigation or experimentation, and the Leap “was frivolously launched by relying only on political ardor and subjective wishes” (Zhonggong Jiangxishengwei dangxiao dangshi jiaoyanshi, 1983: 335). Commenting on why he went along with the inflated grain production targets for 1959, Luo Gengmo has confessed that “I myself was fascinated by this beautiful picture [of] our country’s

future, which I realize now represents nothing but wishful thinking" (Luo Gengmo, 1981: 7).

This subjectivism was compounded by the error of voluntarism, the belief that human will and energy, properly mobilized, can overcome any objective impediments to revolutionary change and economic development. There was undue reliance on "human sea tactics" and a neglect of science and technology; this, in turn, created a situation where expertise was denigrated and "the masses were running this and the masses were running that," which led to disasters like the backyard steel campaign (Luo Gengmo, 1981: 10; Deng Liqun, 1982: 143).

The GLF is also critically scrutinized for Leftist mistakes in economic management. The setting of unrealistically high targets, especially in grain and steel, is perhaps the most frequently cited planning error of the Leap. Political pressures and ideological extremism led to a vicious cycle between exaggerated output claims and projected production. The result was that "such false figures made people even more hot-headed" and economic planning came to be treated like a "'fairy tale' (*shenhua*) rather than as a science" (Sun Yefang, 1981: L5; Wu Qungan, 1981: 28). One concrete form of the high target syndrome of the GLF was setting output quotas according to unrealistic international standards as exemplified in the effort to outpace British and American steel production within a few years. As one recent analysis of the Leap put it: "If the goal to surpass Britain in 15 years [as set in 1957] had been carried out in a down-to-earth manner, it would have been possible to complete." But the planners got carried away with "making a good show" and said that China could "surpass Britain in three years and the United States in ten, and then enter communism ahead of schedule." Even when it was clear that the 1960 steel target could not be fulfilled, they persisted in trying to make "competition steel" (*zhengqigang*) simply to keep pace with the timetable for catching up with the West. The result was a complete disregard of quality and efficiency because the production of steel had become a "political question" rather than an economic one (Wu Qungan, 1981: 29).



Faulty handling of decentralization in industrial management has also been pinpointed as one of the major economic policy errors of the Leap. It is not so much the devolution of economic decision making itself that caused difficulties, but the way in which local power was “inappropriately expanded.” The “downward release” of the GLF did not work because it took “the form of a political movement” without careful thought and gradual implementation. Things might have turned out differently, it is now asserted, if the localities had been given *more* power “in planning, in capital construction, and in the handling of finance, natural resources, and labor power” (Zhao Tiehe et al., 1983: 33). Criticism of such haphazard decentralization is meant to stand in juxtaposition to the much more thorough and systematic deconcentration of economic power that has taken place in recent years.

The Great Leap is also blamed for causing serious economic imbalances that continued to grow throughout the Cultural Revolution and were corrected only after the Third Plenum of December 1978. The nodal imbalance was that between heavy industry, on the one hand, and light industry and agriculture on the other; this problem is sometimes referred to as the imbalance between “the two types of social production,” that is, the reproduction or expansion of the means of production versus production of goods intended for consumption (Liu Guoguang and Wang Xianming, 1980: 24). The major error here was the enforcement of the policy of taking “steel as the key link” (*yigang weigang*) in the development of the national economy. This led to a neglect of light industry, which by 1960 accounted for only 33% of total industrial output, compared to 55% in 1957 (Wu Qungan, 1981: 34). The bias toward steel and heavy industry in general likewise precluded increasing state investment in agriculture; the rural sector was also severely damaged by a host of other policies designed to subordinate agriculture to the drive for rapid industrial growth. These policies included the instruction to “take grain as the key link” (*yiliang weigang*) that was promoted in order to enhance local self-reliance in the absence of outside investment and to ensure the supply of basic foodstuffs to the recently swollen urban work force. This was combined with the

policy of high procurement quotas and low procurement prices and the deflection of needed field labor to capital construction and industrial employment. The outcome was a catastrophic sectoral imbalance in economic growth as embodied in the fact that industrial output increased by 1.3 times between 1957 and 1960, whereas the total value of agricultural output actually fell by 30% in the same period (Wu Qungan, 1981: 32-33).

The GLF is also faulted for creating a sharp imbalance between heavy industry and the infrastructure needed to support it. The steel fetish of 1958-1960 generated unrealistic demands for natural resources (especially coal and iron) that led to reckless exploitation and enormous waste. Similarly, the Leap put unbearable pressure on the poorly developed transportation system, thus inducing bottlenecks and the overstocking of goods at critical transit points (Wu Qungan, 1981: 34).

The exaggerated emphasis on heavy industry also exacerbated the imbalance between accumulation and consumption in the distribution of national income that is a common problem in socialist planned economies. The trend toward higher rates of accumulation was necessitated by the GLF's forced pace of development in sectors of the national economy that required massive state investment (for instance, steel). During the First Five Year Plan (1953-1957), the average rate of accumulation was 24.2% of national income, whereas during 1958-1962, it averaged 30.8% and reached a peak of 41% at the height of the Leap (Liu Guoguang and Wang Xianming, 1980: 22). The result was both a sacrifice in consumption investment that adversely affected living standards and enormous enterprise waste as accumulated funds could not be used efficiently given technological and managerial limitations. Current accounts often muster dramatic statistical comparisons to demonstrate the futility of excessive accumulation, such as the fact that for every 100 *renminbi* (RMB) of state accumulation during the First Five Year Plan, national income increased by 35 RMB, whereas in the 1958-1962 period, 100 RMB of state accumulation yielded only a 1 RMB increment in national income (Wu Qungan, 1981: 32).

The final area of imbalance often cited as a hallmark of Leap economic policy is that between market supply and demand for

basic necessities and other goods. Although social purchasing power went up in 1959, the heavy industry tilt had already created a “tension” in the market as desired products were largely unavailable. Eventually this reached a point where “there was an acute shortage in the food and clothing that people must have, and even minimum needs could not be guaranteed” (Wu Qungan, 1981: 35).

In sum, by pushing targets that created serious distortions in the economy, the GLF is viewed as having laid the foundations of its own demise. Rather than living up to the promise of “one horse taking the lead, ten thousand horses galloping ahead” (*yima dangxian, wanma benteng*), the policy of “steel as the key link” is now said to have led to a situation in which “ten thousand horses stood mute” (*wanma qixin*), that is, the entire economy was brought to a virtual standstill (Wu Qungan, 1981: 34).

There has been a difference of opinion within the Party leadership as to whether artificially intensified class struggle was one of the major mistakes of the Leap or whether that particular Leftist error only seriously affected work after 1962. Liao Gailong has observed that the work of the GLF, continuing a trend begun in the anti-Rightist campaign, “was coercively promoted through airing of views and debates on the part of the masses, a method which enlarged the scope of class struggle” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 83). According to Liao, the critical error that ultimately gave rise to the GLF and then the CR was the reversal of the assessment of the 8th Party Congress that the main contradiction in China was no longer class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie but had shifted to the conflict between the relatively advanced relations of production and the absolutely backward state of the forces of production. This reversal on the issue of class struggle in socialist society began at the 2nd Plenum (May-June 1958) on the eve of the Leap and was pushed even further at the 10th Plenum (September 1962). This is one sense in which the CR, Liao argued, “was the climactic development of the Left deviationist line in the years from 1958 to 1960” (Liao Gailong, 1981: Part I, 88).

In contrast, Deng Liqun, member of the Secretariat and former director of the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department,

has strongly denied that class struggle was a salient issue in the Leap, though he acknowledges that it did begin to preoccupy Mao after Lushan. Asking the members of his Hebei Provincial Party School audience to “think back a bit,” Deng (1982: 143-144) commented,

from 1958 through the first half of 1959 . . . who was making class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie? We were all putting everything into the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and the whole Party had turned to [economic] construction. . . . Because we lacked experience, we committed Leftist mistakes. . . . When the ‘Great Leap Forward’ . . . ran into trouble, Comrade Mao Zedong’s thoughts turned to class struggle, but the major strength of the whole Party was still devoted to economic work.

Deng, one of the most outspoken critics of the “spiritual pollution” allegedly caused by the post-Mao economic and cultural reforms (Schram, 1984: 437-448), would seem to be speaking for those in the Party leadership who want to portray the GLF in a less malevolent light than the CR in order to maintain some semblance of legitimacy for the Maoist era.

It is ironic that the mistake of the Great Leap considered to be the most egregious in terms of long-term consequences actually occurred *after* the Leap was over. Even though the abandonment of Leftist policies was well underway in 1961-1962, there was never an official, substantive analysis of the political line behind the Leap.<sup>12</sup> Many post-Mao sources concur that the GLF was not subjected to rigorous ideological criticism in the early 1960s and conclude that this failure provided fertile ground for a resurgence of ultra-leftism in the CR. Due to the highly charged political environment of the Leap, Party members dared “only to criticize Right [errors] and not Left [errors]” even after the radical policies of the movement had proven bankrupt. Consequently, “the ideological roots as well as the social and historical roots of the Left mistakes were not liquidated. No one could say that this was a mistake of the Left line, or that this was a mistake of Left opportunism. No one could even say so.” Consequently, the mistakes of the Leap “were summed up on the premise that the Party line was correct” (Jiang Qi and Zhou Shangwen, 1980: 22;

Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 87). Even though errors in “practical work” were conscientiously remedied, “the Leftist errors in guiding ideology were not thoroughly corrected”; this made it inevitable that the Party would “again make Leftist mistakes” (Deng Liqun, 1982: 144; Wang Menggui, 1981: 66). It is now concluded that it was through just such an incomplete critique of the Leap that “the mistakes of 1959 and those of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 had inner links and were inseverable” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 88).

The outcome of the Lushan Plenum in the summer of 1959 is regarded as the major source of the failure to subject the Leftist line of the Leap to critical scrutiny. The Plenum had originally been convened to continue the process of rectifying excesses in Leap policies begun earlier that year. But Mao’s reaction to Peng Dehuai’s charge that “petty-bourgeois fanaticism” had led the Leap astray provoked a Party-wide campaign against “Right opportunism” that completely overwhelmed the Plenum’s instructions for a sharp retrenchment in the Leap. Indeed, the Plenum was followed by a revival—and, in some ways, an intensification—of the movement.

The condemnation of Peng at Lushan is now judged to have been “entirely wrong.” But the most serious consequence of the Plenum is seen as the way in which “it cut short the process of rectification of ‘Left’ errors, thus prolonging their influence” and greatly exacerbating the country’s economic difficulties (Resolution, 1981: 29).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the post-Plenum anti-Rightist campaign created a lingering ideological environment that made it impossible to criticize ultra-Leftism even after the demise of the Leap.

Post-Mao accounts of the Leap are generally quite forthcoming when discussing the economic consequences of the movement. The occasional statistics cited in this article are but a small sampling of the relevant data that have been released and that provide an indication of the magnitude of the damage wrought by the Leap. This willingness to admit the disastrous economic effects of the GLF is part of the current leadership’s general effort to delegitimize Leftist policies.

Official commentaries on the Leap exhibit a wide range of responses from frank admission to obfuscation when discussing the most disastrous consequence of the movement, the famine that swept parts of rural China in 1959-1961. The Resolution on Party History refers only to "the serious losses to our country and people" in describing the economic impact of the GLF (Resolution, 1981: 29). Many other discussions follow suit and employ a variety of euphemisms when dealing with the topic. For example, one article summarized the effect of the excessive accumulation rate in the national economy by observing that "it even proved impossible to maintain simple agricultural reproduction." The result was that the "people suffered tremendous sacrifices in their consumption" (Liu Guoguang and Wang Xianming, 1981: 23). Other analyses of the Leap characterize the deleterious effect of the "communist wind" that accompanied the commune movement as having "seriously damaged social productivity and . . . the people's livelihood" and note that the crippling of agriculture by the high-target mentality of the Leap eventually "caused us to lack food and clothing" (Xue Xin, 1982: 85; Tao Kai, 1982: 141). Damning accounts of the errors of the GLF often seem to lose their critical nerve when confronting the fact of a famine that claimed tens of millions of lives.

However, there are accounts of the Leap that do not mince words when it comes to describing the famine. Luo Gengmo, in a self-criticism for the idealism that initially led him to support the high grain and steel targets, has lamented that "The visitation of famine in the villages in the winter of 1959 [and] especially [in] 1960-61 . . . finally dashed the dreams to pieces" (Luo Gengmo, 1981: 7). Liao Gailong, remarking on the "heavy price" paid for the mistakes of the Leap, asked rhetorically, "How many people died of hunger?" (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 85). Although Chinese sources rarely mention specific numbers in connection with the famine, one account has noted that, in 1961, 100 million people only had one-half *jin* of grain to eat per day and that "edema and even starvation . . . occurred in many places" (Wu Qungan, 1981: 34-35). Sun Yefang noted that excessive procurement quotas based on falsified output reports and other Leftist errors in statistical work during the Leap exacted a "high price in

blood” as reflected in a rise in the mortality rate from 1.08% in 1957 to 2.54% in 1960 (Sun Yefang, 1981: L5). It is left to those with the necessary additional data statistical skills to calculate what such an increase in the death rate means in terms of actual human lives.

#### *WHO WAS TO BLAME?*

The official line on the Great Leap Forward that prevailed during the Cultural Revolution attributed the problems of the Leap to Rightist sabotage by Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai, natural calamities, and the Soviet withdrawal of technical aid from the PRC in mid-1960.<sup>14</sup> Recent views of the GLF focus on the movement’s extreme Leftism as the major source of its dysfunction. Drought, flood, and Soviet betrayal may have complicated the situation, current reasoning asserts, but responsibility for the tragic dimensions of the crisis must be attributed to the “Party’s mistakes in leadership” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 85).

If the Party was to blame, the next question is: Who in the Party? The source of error is traced to ideological deviance at the Center rather than to simple overexuberance on the local level: “[W]e cannot say that the grassroots cadres stirred up the ‘communist wind.’ The decision of our Party Central Committee and Comrade Mao [Zedong] on the establishment of the people’s communes was in itself a factor for the gust of ‘communist wind’” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 83). Within the Center, Mao is held to have been “chiefly responsible” for the Leap, but the “collective leadership” at that time is also said to bear some responsibility (Resolution, 1981: 28). Commenting on the section of an early draft of the Resolution on Party History that deals with accountability for mistakes in the 17 years prior to the CR, Deng Xiaoping (1984: 281) cautioned that,

we should not speak only of Comrade Mao, for many other leading comrades in the Central Committee made mistakes too. Comrade Mao got carried away when we launched the Great Leap

Forward, but didn't the rest of us go along with him? Neither Comrade Liu Shaoqi, nor Comrade Zhou Enlai for that matter objected to it, and Comrade Chen Yun didn't say anything either.

The matter of collective culpability for the GLF aroused some controversy in the Party during the process of drafting the Resolution. In his contribution to a "Special Compilation" of materials circulated to promote the study of the document after its publication, Party historian Tao Kai rebuffed those who still insisted that, during the years 1956-1966, "other people were correct and Comrade Mao Zedong alone was mistaken, or that Comrade Mao Zedong represented wrong, while others represented right." Such a position was improper, Tao Kai continued, because it "doesn't accord with reality, it isn't fair, and it doesn't accurately assess Comrade Mao Zedong's merits and faults." Tao pointed out that "everyone was together" on the anti-Rightist campaign of 1957 and that the same was true of the launching of the Leap when "only a minority of comrades didn't approve or put forth different opinions." On the contrary, "the majority gave their approval and support and were of the opinion that we should 'leap forward.'" Tao noted that Mao's efforts to cool the Leap in late 1958 met resistance within the Party and that when the Chairman proposed a scaling down of steel targets "many people just wouldn't change and wouldn't accept it." Thus the GLF "wasn't the problem of a single person, but that many people had ideological problems." Unlike during the CR, the Central Committee continued to operate more-or-less intact throughout the Leap; therefore that body must accept some of the blame for the ultra-Left trend of the times (Tao Kai, 1982: 142-143).

Prevailing orthodoxy follows Deng Xiaoping's assessment that Mao must be credited with "earnestly correcting the 'Left' mistakes" of 1958-1960 (Deng Xiaoping, 1984: 281). Nevertheless, there has been disagreement over how well Mao truly faced up to the error of his ways in the GLF. Once again, Party propagandist Deng Liqun and Party historian Liao Gailong appear as protagonists of sharply differing perspectives on yet another aspect of interpreting the Leap. Deng Liqun, reflecting



the views of the “residual Leftists” in the leadership who want a less severe public evaluation of Mao, has argued that “you can’t say that Mao didn’t accept the lessons of the ‘Great Leap Forward.’” Saying that he had never seen or heard anything to indicate that Mao sought to change the ownership system or revolutionize the forces of production as an objective of the CR, Deng contended that the Chairman “was very cautious on this question” after the Great Leap Forward. Lin Biao and the Gang of Four may have had such designs in mind, but not Mao. In the early 1960s, the Chairman gradually became more concerned about class struggle in the Party, which eventually led to the CR, but, Deng implies, that error was in no way a simple repetition of the mistakes of the Leap (Deng Liqun, 1982: 123).

Liao Gailong dissents from this analysis. The CR, he asserts, was partly “the product of the ‘Left’ impractical ideas about socialist construction or the product of ‘Leftist’ socialist fantasy” that gradually emerged after 1957 and first found full expression in the Great Leap. On the one hand, this Leftism “advocated continuous class struggle; on the other, it sought quick results and wanted transition to communism all at one stroke.” In the period 1961-1966—after the GLF and prior to the CR—Mao did offer some good suggestions for rectifying errors in rural work, but, Liao argues, “even when correcting ‘Left’ mistakes, [Mao] did not point out what kinds of mistakes *he had committed*. He did not admit his own mistakes.” Therefore, he again fell prey to his distorted vision of socialism and, as in the Leap, he launched the Cultural Revolution “for the purpose of realizing his whimsical ideas” (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part I, 86; emphasis added; Part II, 90).

Liao Gailong’s analysis suggests that the errors of the GLF and the CR were linked in several ways. Not only do the roots of the excessive class struggle that engulfed China between 1966 and 1976 go back into the movements of the 1950s, but Mao also used the Cultural Revolution to pursue the vision of a more egalitarian society that he first put forth in the Leap. Furthermore, Mao, like the Party as a whole, was guilty of eschewing a thorough analysis of the ultra-Leftist line of the GLF and satisfied himself with

piecemeal policy adjustments. This amounted to an evasion of responsibility that ultimately bred the Cultural Revolution.

#### *THE LESSONS OF THE LEAP*

The post-Mao critique of the GLF serves the political purposes of the current leadership by helping to discredit the radical ideology and policies of the Maoist era. But the analysis of the Leap and the subsequent reform period of the early 1960s is also designed to provide concrete lessons in how to “shake off ‘Leftist’ dangers in economic work” and how to “do a good job in present . . . adjustment work” (Wu Qungan, 1981: 27). Recent discussions of the GLF frequently take the form of pedagogical insertions in articles that deal with much broader and more contemporary topics, such as the appropriate rate of annual economic growth in China’s current modernization program. These articles warn that failure to learn the “bitter historical lessons” of the Leap could open the way for a similar Leftist tragedy in the future (Li Rui, 1985: K10).

The basic lesson to be learned from the Leap is that “changes in the relations of production must accord with the situation in productivity” (Wang Menggui, 1981: 64). The commune movement, the implementation of egalitarian distribution schemes in both industry and agriculture, and the curtailing of private plots and rural markets are considered among the radical policies that were introduced during the GLF with the intention of boosting production, but had the contrary effect of undermining productivity by severely dampening individual labor incentives. The Third Plenum of December 1978 set in motion a process of reform that corrected “two decades of detours” and recognized the facts that socialism must be “rooted in reality” and that the socialist system “will wither away if there are attempts to help it grow by pulling it up artificially” (Yan Ling, 1982: 117).

The policy implications of this lesson are that China must have flexible strategies and tactics for modernization and not try to make its development fit into a “rigid pattern” dictated by a

dogmatic definition of what constitutes socialism. Rather the task now “is to create those specific forms of the relations of production that correspond to the needs of the growing productive forces and facilitate their continued advance” (Yan Ling, 1982: 117-118; Resolution, 1981: 78). In other words, the logic of the Leap has been turned on its head: Instead of letting radical social change pave the way for economic growth, the development of production should now basically determine what sorts of changes are necessary and appropriate in such spheres as management, ownership, and distribution.

Another category of lessons to be drawn from the experiences of 1958-1961 involve the mistakes made in economic planning that reflected the Leap’s “impatient effort to develop the productive forces” (Liu Guogang and Wang Xianming, 1980: 21). Obviously, one lesson is to avoid the same specific decisions about targets, rates of accumulation and consumption, the balance of sectoral investment, and so on that led to the disaster. More broadly, three basic principles form the core of the economic message to be learned from the Leap.

First, “economic construction must comply with objective law.” Subjectivism like that giving rise to the Leap must not be allowed to override hard-nosed assessments to what is feasible in terms of certain universal rules of economic development and China’s specific circumstances. Second, “the growth of the economy must be stable” (Wang Menggui, 1981: 64, 65). Objective economic laws set definite limits on the pace of development; although it still may be possible to achieve rapid and sustained growth—indeed, the word “leap” is even still used on occasion (for example, *Shijie jingji daobao*, 1984)—the “blind pursuit of speed [while] ignoring economic results” will only be counterproductive in the long run (Xie Minggan, 1983: 85). Third, improvements in the standard of living of the people must be the basis for judging the success or failure of any economic policy.<sup>15</sup> The GLF and the CR are considered unmitigated disasters in this regard and current efforts to link productivity and remuneration more directly, as well as to adjust the investment balance between heavy industry, light industry, and agriculture are seen as steps towards

remedying the negative consequences of ultra-Leftism on the material well-being of the Chinese people.

The official view of whether the guiding principle of the GLF, the General Line for Socialist Construction, has lost all relevance for the current period has gone through a process of evolution over the past few years. The legitimacy of the General Line persisted even beyond the Third Plenum as symbolized by Ye Jianying's invocation of its central phrase in his speech commemorating the PRC's 30th anniversary in October 1979. "The task now facing us," Ye intoned, "is to . . . bring into play all positive factors so that we can work with one heart and one mind and *go all out, aim higher, and achieve better, faster, and more economical results* in building a modern, powerful socialist country" (Ye Jianying, 1979: 22; emphasis added). The presentation of the General Line was modified in 1980 to delete such "incitant phrases as 'going all out' and 'aiming high,'" while adding "planned" and "proportionate" to give the formulation a more scientific basis (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part III, 82-83).<sup>16</sup>

The 1981 Resolution on Party History declared that the General Line was "correct" at the time it was promulgated because "it reflected the masses' pressing demand for a change in the economic and cultural backwardness of our country" even though it "overlooked objective economic law" (Resolution, 1981: 28). One commentary characterized the Resolution's approach to evaluating the General Line as a good example of applying "one divides into two" in that it included both positive and negative assessments; but it added that "the weak points and problems [of the General Line] are perhaps the basic aspect." Saying that the Line lauded revolutionary spirit, but neglected scientific attitude in promoting socialist development, the commentary noted the disastrous consequences of the GLF and said, "We must draw a lesson from this." Although some comrades were still spouting the General Line as a principle to be applied to the Four Modernizations, "we should not raise it again. . . . We cannot simply repeat a formulation that is divorced from reality and overemphasizes going all out and aiming high. . . . We need a new formulation" (Tao Kai, 1982: 136-138). Indeed, the catch

phrases of the General Line have been all but eliminated from economic discourse in the PRC.

### *CONCLUSION*

Have the lessons of the Leap been learned? While it is unlikely that the post-Mao era will experience a revival of the intensive mobilization strategy for development, there have been indications that the CCP leadership has not completely shaken what might be referred to as the “Great Leap mentality.” In the two years following the death of Mao and the ouster of the Gang of Four, the CCP launched a “mini-Leap” under the direction of Hua Guofeng. In language reminiscent of the criticism of the high targets of the GLF, Hua was censured for “his share of responsibility for impetuously seeking quick results in economic work” (Resolution, 1981: 49). For example, the surge in capital construction supported by Hua led the accumulation rate in 1976-1978 to reach an excessively high average of 33.4% (with a peak of 37%), thus repeating what has been identified as one of the major economic errors of the GLF (Liu Guoguang and Wang Xianming, 1980: 22). In addition, Hua was blamed for leading a “‘Great Leap Forward’ of a foreign nature” by authorizing the purchase of vast amounts of imported technology that far exceeded China’s financial or absorption capacities (Sun Yefang, 1981: L6; Chao Tung, 1981: W1). The current policy of “readjustment, restructuring, consolidation, and improvement” that now forms one of the guiding principles of PRC economic policy (Zhao Ziyang, 1984: 1) is designed to rectify the new imbalances induced by the mini-Leap as well as longer-standing Leftist errors in economic work that date back to the GLF and the CR.

However, there are a number of trends in recent PRC policy that suggest that some aspects of the ideology that propelled the Great Leap Forward still inhabit the consciousness of the CCP in the mid-1980s. For example, the insistent implementation of the rural responsibility system even in places where such a model may not be most appropriate to local conditions or accord with the

wishes of the local population bears some resemblance to the commandism that accompanied the commune movement in the summer of 1958 (Zweig, forthcoming). The continuing invocation of the ideal of reaching communism (albeit according to a much attenuated timetable) that is part of the official scenario for building a Chinese "spiritual civilization" contains echoes of the millenarianism of the Leap. Likewise, the view that "people's subjective efforts" can facilitate the "jumping over" of historical stages of development to build socialism in a poor, agrarian country persists despite the dramatic relaxation of ideological constraints on policymaking since 1978 (Wen Xueliang, 1982; Xu Changqing, 1983).

Chinese commentators have themselves shown concern that ambitious but not unrealistic national objectives like quadrupling agricultural and industrial output by the year 2000 may fall victim to the Great Leap-like tendency of "some comrades" to seek maximum short-term growth rates rather than steady and balanced increases that take into account the constraints imposed by China's "short supply of energy, means of transportation and communications, and raw materials." To ignore such realities would repeat the errors of the GLF and only lead to "inferior quality, appalling waste, and poor results" that undermine any benefits derived from "temporary high speed" economic growth (Yu Youhai, 1985: K5-6). Finally, vestiges of the Leap can be detected in the muted, but nonetheless continued reliance on the campaign method of problem-solving and policy implementation. Such techniques may still work well for killing rats,<sup>17</sup> but when applied to complicated situations like family planning that bring state and individual interests into conflict, they may easily lead to the same cycles of coercion and resistance, inflated targets, and deceitful reporting that characterized the "communist wind" of the Great Leap Forward (Wasserstrom, 1984).

The official view of the Great Leap Forward offered by the current Chinese leadership is caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, there are many ways in which that view reflects an honest spirit of self-criticism. There is often a disarming willingness to acknowledge that the Party made a series of major

blunders beginning in the mid-1950s due to inexperience, arrogance, complacency, and organizational ineptitude. Recent reforms also demonstrate that much has been learned from the GLF and that many of those now in power are determined to avoid committing similar mistakes.

On the other hand, there are elements of rationalization and face-saving in the prevailing line on the Great Leap. The tendency to remind the public of the “good intentions” of those who perpetrated the movement, the effort to deny that the failures like the GLF reflect shortcomings of socialism, and the general avoidance of detailed descriptions of the most drastic consequences of the economic collapse of 1959-1960 all add up to a certain defensiveness about the period. This defensiveness is particularly noticeable when the critique of the GLF is compared with that of the Cultural Revolution. As pointed out at the outset of this article, although the negative effects of the GLF were, by many measures, far worse than those of the CR, the latter is analyzed much more harshly than the former. Why this discrepancy?

The most obvious reasons are temporal ones. The scars of the Cultural Revolution are much rawer than those of the Great Leap. Living reminders of the troubles of 1966-1976 still abound, whereas memories of the GLF have faded with time. The main protagonist of the Leap, Mao Zedong, is 10 years dead. But even with archvillains like the Gang of Four in prison, the leadership obviously feels that partisans and beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution line retain enough leverage in the Party, the army, and the economy to warrant the launching of a major rectification drive aimed at eliminating their “pernicious influence.” There is also a perception—and not an unfounded one—that the experience of the CR was much more searing than that of the GLF. For all its tragedy, the Leap did not involve the level of social antagonism that gave the CR its particularly virulent and vindictive character. Although the Leftist policies of the late 1950s brought the Chinese economy to, and in some ways beyond, the brink of collapse, it did not threaten to plunge the country into anarchy and civil war as did the “internal chaos” of 1966-1976.

The second set of reasons for the more lenient treatment of the Great Leap are political. The victims of the GLF were largely peasants, whereas those who suffered most in the CR were veteran cadres and intellectuals. It is the latter social groups that have the power to define prevailing perspectives on past events, and the repudiation of the CR is an important aspect of their effort to redress the historical record to their benefit. Furthermore, many of those now in power—for all their current disavowal of Leftist economic policy—played important roles in the formulation of the Leap. They have, for the most part, forthrightly confronted the question of their own responsibility for the movement. But there are obvious limits beyond which they would not want exposés of the GLF to tread for fear of compromising the authority of their claim to rule. Carefully guided self-criticisms may serve as a useful *mea culpa* in restoring the tarnished prestige of the Party, but letting too many skeletons out of the collective closet could quickly prove counterproductive.

The defensiveness with which the Party guards its right to be the final arbiter of the “correct” line on the interpretation of recent historical events like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution reflects the dilemmas of shifting patterns of political legitimacy in post-Mao China (Teiwes, 1984: 82-92). Although there has been significant progress in recent years in lessening the arbitrary powers of individuals and installing regularized procedures for policymaking and personnel recruitment, the CCP is still unable to sever its own image as a ruling party from Mao’s legacy. The generational links with the Maoist era remain strong, and whatever past mistakes Party leaders may acknowledge, they must still preserve the sanctity of Mao’s mission (which is now *their* mission) to lead the Chinese nation in building socialism. Thus, despite the major errors of his later years, Mao is still depicted as the great leader whose merits far outweigh his faults; likewise, the dire consequences of Mao’s greatest tragedy—the Great Leap Forward—are obfuscated by references to benign motives and positive achievements, whereas the most severe facets of the Cultural Revolution are ascribed to the machinations of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, not the Chairman.



Differing attitudes about how the Party should account for its past malfeasance find expression in conflicting views of how Chinese socialism should adapt to the 1980s and beyond. There are those in the CCP leadership—like Liao Gailong—who have argued for a more searching examination of what went awry in the first decades of CCP rule. It is no accident that such people have also shown a more open mind about China's future and have been among the most forceful advocates of far-reaching political reforms in the Leninist system.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, leaders like Deng Liqun who have been cautious about probing past mistakes still see the Party's legitimacy as rooted in yesteryear's triumphs. They have serious doubts about transferring the basis of legitimacy to more legal-rational grounds or letting performance in producing tangible benefits for the Chinese people determine the Party's political stature. Those who have a more restrictive attitude toward public scrutiny of the Party's record have also exhibited a narrower vision of the boundaries of change in the present. They remain wedded to the view that both the evaluation of historical events and current policy must ultimately be judged by their effect on preserving Party hegemony over Chinese society.

The prevailing official line on the years 1958-1961 partakes of both the open and the conservative approaches to dealing with the past. This ambivalence reflects the conflict within the Party over how such controversial historical questions should be treated. It also reminds us that the telling of history is still a very political matter in the PRC, especially when it revives memories as painful as those of the Great Leap Forward.

#### NOTES

1. "Two declines" (*liang luo*) refers to the two periods of economic decline in the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution, which are contrasted with the "two rises" (*liang qi*) in the economy during the periods from Liberation through the First Five Year Plan (1949-1957) and the post-Leap readjustment (1963-1965).

2. Ashton et al. (1984) state that "the demographic crisis" of 1958-1961 in China "was the largest in human history." Not only do the authors attribute 30 million "premature

deaths" to the famine of those years, but also calculate 33 million "lost or postponed births" as part of the crisis (p. 614).

3. See *Renmin ribao* (1984) for the lead article in an extensive campaign to "negate" the CR.

4. The same point is made about those who made Leftist errors during collectivization; see Wang Songpei and Zhu Tieshen (1981: 15).

5. On Mao's "principal theses for initiating this [cultural] revolution," see Resolution (1981: 32-36). For a discussion of post-Mao views of the motives of Lin and the Gang, see Joseph (1984: 167-179). One of the most explicit recent defenses of Mao's intentions in the CR is contained in a speech by Deng Liqun given in conjunction with the transmission to lower levels of the 1981 Resolution of Party History. In this talk, Deng argued that Mao launched the CR in order to remedy certain "seamy sides" (*yin an mian*) of life in the Party and state that existed in the mid-1960s. Although he used improper methods to achieve his ends, Deng continued, it should be recognized that "this kind of thinking and this kind of motive were good" (*zhe yang yizhong xiangfa, zhe yang yizhong dongji shi haode*) (Deng Liqun, 1982: 90).

6. For a sampling of articles supporting the view that the CCP, did, indeed, suffer from agrarian socialism, see Wang Zhongyi (1980); and Ying Xueli and Sun Hui (1980). On the contrary side, see Xue Xin (1982), Hua Shi (1981), Shi Zhongquan (1981a, 1981b), Zhou Yongchuang (1981), Zhong She (1981), and Li Tao (1981).

7. There are also numerous articles at this time that argue—without specific reference to the agrarian socialism debate—that Marx and Engels did believe that it was possible to establish socialism in less developed countries. See, for example, Zhang Hongwen (1983); Zheng Jianbang (1983); Xu Changqing (1983); Zhong Longpin (1984).

8. The article referred to is Ying Xueli and Sun Hui (1980).

9. In 1980-1981, there were numerous articles in the PRC press and academic journals about the role of egalitarianism in peasant wars of earlier periods in Chinese history, for instance, the Taiping Rebellion. These articles reflected many of the themes of the more sensitive controversy over the origins of the ultra-Leftist trend in the socialist transformation of the 1950s. For a summary of the main points in the historical controversy and a listing of some of the most important articles, see *Renmin ribao* (1981).

10. On the criticism of ultra-Leftism during the various installments of adjustment and retreat of the Leap, see Joseph (1984: chaps. 7-9) and MacFarquhar (1983: chaps. 3-4).

11. For a discussion of "subjectivism" as a generic form of ultra-Leftism, see Joseph (1984: 39-47).

12. I have elsewhere referred to this lack of critical analysis of the Leap's failures as "the incomplete critique of ultra-Leftism" (Joseph, 1984: 75-81).

13. Peng Dehuai's exoneration is symbolized by the 1981 posthumous publication of his autobiography, which contains a chapter on Lushan and the complete text of his "Letter of Opinion" to Mao in which he offers his criticism of the Great Leap (Peng Dehuai, 1981: 265-287).

14. For a nutshell presentation of the CR view of the Leap, see *Renmin ribao* (1971: 14-15).

15. For a discussion of the impact of the GLF and the adjustment policies of the early 1960s on standards of living, see Wang Ping (1981).

16. The new formulation reads: "achieve greater, better, faster, and more economical results by a planned and proportionate development of the national economy" (Liao Gailong, 1981a: Part III, 82).

17. See Xinhua (1985), for a report that Chinese peasants killed 526 million rats in 1984 after a "drive to eliminate rats was touched off by a circular from the State Council."

18. Liao Gailong has gone on record (1981b) as calling for extensive political reforms, including checks and balances, separation of powers, and decentralization; see also Moody (1984).

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