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The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961)

**Historical events and causes of one of the biggest
tragedies in People's Republic of China's history**

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to analyze the Chinese Great Leap Forward (大跃进 Dayuejin) (1958-1961) and the reasons why its economic and social policies caused such a big imbalance and deficit in the Chinese economy.

The thesis is divided in four chapters:

The first chapter focuses on the Leap's antecedent period; it begins with a very brief introduction to the key events after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo 中华人民共和国) that seeks to provide the reader the general internal and external context of the first years of PRC. In particular I will focus on the First Five-Year-Plan (1953-1957) and on the international relations between China and the Soviet Union.

The second section reports on the Leap's policies, ideologies and goals. Starting with the "Sixty articles on working methods" (21st of January 1958) that launched the Great Leap Forward, I will then explain other contents of the Second Five-Year-Plan (e.g. the steel campaign, the water conservancy campaign and the four pests campaign).

At the end of this section, I will talk about the People's Communes, seeking to explain their inception and evolution to the formation of the system of "seven guarantees" or "ten guarantees".

The third chapter addresses the period after the launch of the Leap's policies. In that term the Government admitted some of his target mistakes and tried to modify the Leap's utopian and ambitious purposes. However, the end of this process coincided with the Lushan Conference (2nd July-16th August 1959). "Thanks to the correction of the mistakes [of the Great Leap's Forward policies] during the first half of the year 1959, if the Lushan Conference didn't take place, in the second half of the year 1959, the disorders created during 1958 could have been eliminated and the great famine could have ended within the year 1959."¹

¹ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/6404050/> 墓碑：中国六十年代大饥荒纪实，20/09/2009: YANG Jisheng 杨继绳, "Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi", "墓碑:中国六十年代大饥荒纪实" (The tombstone: a record of China's great famine of the Sixties), August 2007, pag.387.

This section concludes with a summary of facts of Sino-Soviet relations, focusing on the interruption of the connections between the two parties. A specific analysis of how did the Leap's policies were partially influential.

The central point of the thesis is the last and fourth part. "In a planned economy system, the market cannot decide how to use the resources. To guarantee that a society keeps on producing profits, entirely depends on the leaders of the macroeconomics department, that have to carry out an overall balance."² Within this chapter I will explain the reasons why the Leap failed, I will seek to demonstrate that the aforementioned "overall balance" was missing and why did ultimately failed.

提要

大跃进是中华人民共和国的第二个五年计划，是在50年代末进行的。这场经济建设运动给中国的经济带来了很大的损失。

这本论文的第一章讲的是大跃进以前的情况，特别是第一个五年计划（1953-1957）的政策以及当时的中-苏关系。

第二章谈的是大跃进的政策和目标（比如工作方法六十条，炼钢铁和其他的政策，等）并且描述了人民公社是怎么建立和发展的。

第三章讨论的是对大跃进的修正。政府在那一段时间里想办法整顿一些太“左”倾的错误。但是庐山会议后这种纠正的工作就结束了。

最后一章讲的是第二个五年计划对中国造成的严重影响：当时的中国的经济情况面临严重困难，包括严重的财政赤字和粮食的极度缺乏，等等。

由于大跃进违背了中国当时发展的客观规律，因此对中国在比较长的一段时间内的发展造成了严重的影响。

² Ibid. p.475.

Introduction

The Great Leap Forward was an economic plan that caused a serious imbalance in Chinese economy between the end of the 50's and the beginning of the 60's. The Chinese Communist Party invested large amounts of hope and resources in this Second Five-Year-Plan. However, at the end the worsening of the economic situation nullified all economical results obtained during the first years of the People's Republic of China. This thesis sets out to answer how this was possible? And further, why did it fail?

Purpose

The Great Leap Forward caused a great famine and, consequently, roughly 25 million people starved to death. The aim of this work is to give an explanation to such a big devastation. The thesis analyzes the reasons why the Leap and the Chinese government permitted such a big tragedy to happen.

The failure was both complicated and caused by a combination of factors. First of all, the bases on which the Leap started (e.g. the Sixty Articles on Working Methods) were often detached from Chinese reality, and the targets were set without a real economic calculations and adherence to economic regulations.

Secondly, the campaigns of mobilization of the masses were often taken to the extreme. Some of them were reasonable (e.g. the water conservancy campaign), but, in realizing them, people were often flew into a frenzy irrational extremism that provoked the contrary of the attempted effects.

Method

To compose this work I utilized Chinese sources as well as English and Italian ones. In addition, to give the reader a complete view of the theme, I have often reported CCP Chairman Mao Zedong or his collaborators speeches, CCP official documents' pieces (usually issued within official meetings) and articles published in well-known Chinese journals (e.g. *"Red Flag"*, *"People's Daily"* etc.).

CHAPTER 1

On October 1, 1949 the People's Republic of China was established. The new government had to face many difficulties, first of which was to stabilize and reinforce its power during the first years of its rule.

Other critical aims were to fight against backwardness and poverty and work for growth and development; to realize this, however, the government had to unify the economic and social differences existing between the urban and rural populations of the country³.

One of the first measures that the government took to reorganize the rural areas was the "agrarian reform" (28th June 1950). The scope of this action was to free the rural production forces from all feudal systems, to develop agriculture and set up the basis for industrialization. The realization of this industrialization was the objective of the Chinese Government's First Five-Year-Plan (第一个五年计划 *di yi ge wu nian jihua*) (1953-1957) which gradually saw the realization of collectivization.

1. THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR-PLAN (1953-1957)

The First Five-Year-Plan was an economic plan that laid down the aims for production and investments. The plan was wholly inspired by the Soviet Union's model as the PRC did not develop from either an advanced or industrialized economy.

As noted above, an important objective of the new government was to raise the Chinese economy from the poverty. Therefore, the plan's main scope was a high rate of economic growth with special attention to industrial development (with a strong focus on heavy industry). This was first realized through a gradual nationalization of private industries, with the goal of increasing central State control on the production process as well as exploiting the rural labour forces.

³ Guido SAMARANI, *La Cina del Novecento: dalla Fine dell'Impero ad Oggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004, Pag.192.

Nationalization of industries was gradually realized over the years by the PRC by offering incentives to factory owners to let them sell their properties to the State or to let them start joint state-private cooperation enterprises.⁴

With this plan the Party also modified the agricultural system. The final objective was Collectivization (农业集体化 *nongye jitihua*) which was realized through gradual steps, at the beginning through the “Mutual Aid Teams” (互助组 *huzhuzu*) (1952): they were formed by roughly 10 households who possessed their land and their working tools, but brought together labour force. The real collectivization process started within the next step i.e. the “Lower-stage Agricultural Producers’ Cooperatives” (初级农业生产合作社 *chuji nongye shengchan hezuoshe*) (1954-1955): they were voluntary associations in which 30 to 50 households brought together not only their work but also their land, animals and working tools. Farmers received a certain income according to their work and the value of the land that they made over to the cooperative. The last passage towards Collectivization was realized between 1955-1957 with a high tide period arising from the creation of the “Higher-stage Agricultural Producers’ Cooperatives” (高级农业生产合作社 *gao ji nongye shengchan hezuoshe*). They were entities formed by a minimum of 100 to a maximum of 300 households. With the creation of these entities, the collective property of the land was consolidated and an end was put to the private ownership. The rural incomes derived now only from the farmers’ work depending on a system of “work points”.⁵ In this level of Cooperatives “the Central Party Organization was not only the organizer of the rural economy, but also the supervisor of the political and social administration”.⁶

⁴ <http://countrystudies.us/china/87.htm>, 20/11/2009 (electronic version of the book Robert L. Worden, Andrea Matles Savada and Ronald E. Dolan “*China: A Country Study*”. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987.

⁵ SAMARANI, “*La Cina del Novecento...*”, cit., p.214; <http://www.scribd.com/doc/6404050/> 墓碑：中国六十年代大饥荒纪实，20/09/2009: YANG Jisheng 杨继绳, “*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi*”, “墓碑:中国六十年代大饥荒纪实” (The tombstone: a record of China’s great famine of the Sixties), August 2007, pag.326-328.

⁶ YANG 杨, “*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...*”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pag.326-328.

The First Five Year Plan gave good results and the Gross Domestic Product grew from 1953's 82.4 billion Yuan to 1957's 106.8 billion Yuan.⁷

2. THE SINO-SOVIET RELATIONS IN EARLY PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA'S YEARS

After the establishment of the PRC, the international climate was dominated by the Cold War and most foreign countries did not extend diplomatic recognition to the new Chinese state. The Communist Party's commitment to socialism let the PRC gain the Soviet Union's alliance. At the end of 1949 Chairman Mao flew to Moscow and in February 1950 the leaders of the two countries signed the "Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance Treaty".

One of the most important consequences that derived from this contract was engagement by the Soviet side to help China's rise. So after the Treaty was signed thousands of economical, industrial and technical advisors were sent to China to contribute to the efforts to reconstruct Chinese economy during the Fifties.

In spite of Stalin's death in 1953 and the change of leadership in Russia, these years were a period of excellent relations between the PRC and its Soviet partner, and during the first Five-Year-Plan soviet advisors became even more numerous.

But the relations between the two Parties started to deteriorate after 1956, when Khrushchev, in his so-called "secret speech" to a closed session of the CPSU's 20th Congress on February 25th 1956, denounced the crimes committed by his predecessor Stalin, and also Stalin's cult of personality. The Chinese felt a subtle criticism in Soviet Union's leader's statements.

Some of the principal problems which were to cause a definitive split between the Chinese and Soviet communist parties in the early 60's emerged in November 1957, when the leaders of the world's communist movement met in Moscow to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. During this meeting, some of the opposite Sino-soviet ideologies started to arise. For

⁷ SAMARANI, *"La Cina del Novecento..."*, cit., pp.211-212; http://app.finance.ifeng.com/data/mac/year_idx.php?type=001&symbol=0010207/12/2009.

instance, the passage from capitalism to socialism: following Soviet's leader's idea, "communists might come to power by parliamentary means"⁸, that means that Khrushchev believed in the idea of peaceful transitions. But the Chinese side argued that "there is still not a single country where this possibility [of peaceful transition] is of any practical significance"⁹.

More crucial was the issue of how to deal with American imperialism. "Khrushchev asserted that following the Marxism-Leninism theory, 'wars are inevitable as long as imperialism exists', but he had argued that the situation had changed since that theory had been formulated. Now in all the countries there were powerful forces working for peace and so 'war is not fatalistically inevitable'".¹⁰ The Soviet Union's leader thought that the competition between communism and imperialism had to be moved from a military field to an economical one, in this way it could become clear which of the two systems is more efficient; this idea also included military denuclearization and avoided a continuous armament.¹¹

Despite these differences of opinion, China and the Soviet Union on the 15th October 1957 signed the "Sino-Soviet Agreement on New Technologies for Defence" (中苏国防新技术协定 Zhong-Su guofang xin jishu xieding). This document provided that Russia furnish China with atomic energy, guided missiles and other technologies; but the main point was that the Soviet partner helped China to construct the basis for nuclear tests.¹²

Despite this Agreement, at the Chengdu Conference (9th-26th March 1958), Mao clearly stated that for the next Five-Year-Plan (i.e. The Great Leap Forward) Chinese people should detach themselves from Soviet Union's method: "Internationally we must be friend with the Soviet Union, all people's republics, the Communist parties and labour classes in various countries. That is a principle. In learning, however, there are two possibilities: one is concentrated copying, and the

⁸ Roderick MacFARQUHAR, *"The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 2: The Great Leap Forward 1958-1960"*, Columbia University Press, 1983, pag.7

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ MacFARQUHAR, *"The Origins..."*, cit., pp.7-9.

¹¹ SAMARANI, *"La Cina del Novecento..."*, cit., pp.243-247.

¹² <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/中苏国防新技术协定>, 20/11/2009.

other is to have your own creative spirit. Learning should be coupled with creating; slavish copying of the Russian regulations and system lacks the spirit of creativity.”¹³ With these words Mao shows his will to change methods for the next plan: as the first Plan was completely inspired by the Soviet example, the second Plan would not have such blind faith in that model.

The reasons of the Sino-Soviet split, which occurred in 1960, are numerous; among them was the Soviet leader’s skepticism of the Great Leap’s Forward. Due to lack of space I will not treat all the split’s causes in this thesis; however, in the third chapter, I will address the consequences of the Leap. In short, I will explain how the Leap’s policies were a cause of the irreversible worsening of relations between the Chinese and Soviet Communists Parties.

¹³ MacFARQUHAR, *“The Origins...”*, cit., pp.36-37.

CHAPTER 2

1. THE SIXTY ARTICLES ON WORKING METHODS

The ideological and philosophical contents and the goals of the Great Leap Forward are clearly expressed for the first time in the "Sixty articles on working methods". On the 21st of January 1958, after the Conferences of Hangzhou (3rd-4th of January 1958) and Nanning (11th-22nd of January 1958) CCP Chairman Mao Zedong disclosed a document that he called "The Sixty Articles on Working Methods" (工作方法六十条, *gongzuo fangfa liushi tiao*)¹⁴.

In the preface of the document, Chairman Mao clearly indicated the purposes of the new five year plan and the objectives of the Sixty Articles:

"[...] A new high tide of production has risen, and is still rising. To adapt to this new circumstances, certain methods of work of the party Center and local committees have to be modified. Not all the points listed below are new. Some are; others come from years [of experience]. They are the conclusions of the comrades of the Centre and the regions reached in January 1958 at the Hangzhou and Nanning conferences. Within these points, most of them refer to speeches pronounced by comrades, during the conferences, which stimulated me. Some are thought over and written down by me, some others are simply direct notes of what other comrades have said; the important points (on rules and regulations) are drafted by Comrade Liu Shaoqi¹⁵ after consultations with local members of the Party; only a few are put forward by me. Not all the points concern working methods, some pertain to actual work tasks and some to theory and practice, but mostly on working methods. Our main purpose is to seek to obtain a progress on working methods so as to adapt to the needs of the changed political conditions [...]"¹⁶

Article 9, written by Mao, is relevant as it explains the structure of the plan:

¹⁴ YANG 杨, "Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...", "墓碑:中国六十年代..." pag.317.

¹⁵ *Liu Shaoqi was the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress between 1954 and 1959 and then President of the People's Republic of China from 1959 till 1968. Between 1956 and 1968 he also was Vice Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party.*

¹⁶ http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-01/06/content_2423605.htm, 13/10/2009; http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_05.htm, 13/10/2009.

“There are three production plans: two are central plans — one must be fulfilled and this is the one to be published; the other is expected to be fulfilled but not to be published. There are also two local plans — the first local plan is the second central plan which, from the point of view of a locality, must be fulfilled, while the other is expected to be fulfilled. The second central plan is the basis of comparison.”¹⁷

The targets of the plan have often been decided without a grounded knowledge of the Chinese economic reality. During the following years after the publication of the articles, the Government fixed the targets (e.g. those relating to steel and iron production) without following economic regulations and were simply driven by an over enthusiastic spirit.

The methods to adopt these policies were expressed in article 4:

“The three important methods are: over-all planning, regular inspection, and annual reviews and comparisons.”¹⁸

In articles 10 and 11 Mao stressed the need to give more importance to industry: “Mao asks, starting from the year 1958, to the Central Authorities together with CP Committee of the Provinces, Cities and Autonomous Regions to emphasize the industrial sector, to make the local industrial output, in 5 to 7 years, or within 10 years, surpass the agricultural output.”¹⁹ In the following years this excessive stress on industry, let people neglect agriculture and light industry with a consequently disastrous lack of grain and other rural products as well as light industry items.

In subsequent articles Mao urged the masses to complete in advance the Program [for Agricultural Development (纲要 Gangyao), 1956-1967]²⁰, and, in article 13, he explained the timetable of the leap:

“The next ten years will be determined by the following three years. Efforts should be made to bring about the basic transformation of the look of most areas in the next three years. For other areas, a longer time may be called for. The

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹XIE Chuntao 谢春涛, “Dayuejin kuanglan” “大跃进狂澜” (The raging waves of the Great Leap Forward), Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1990, p.33.

²⁰Ibid. p.34.

slogan is: fight a hard battle in the next three years. The method is: mobilize the masses and test everything.”²¹

In articles 21, 22 and 23 he expressed the Leap’s philosophy:

In article 21 Chairman Mao urges people to start a technological revolution to overtake Britain in fifteen or more years. In order to fulfill this objective, “we [the Chinese people] must learn new things such as a real understanding of business matters, science and technology. If we do not, we shall not be able to lead.” The article concludes with the statement “we must carefully combine technology with politics”.²²

Article 22 continues with the concept of the previous article, saying that “Red and expert, politics and business; the relationship between them is the unification of contradictions. [...] It is beyond any doubt that politics and economy, politics and technology must be unified. [...] This is the meaning of ‘red and expert’.”²³

Article 23, written by Liu Shaoqi, has particular importance:

“[...] A part of the superstructure is composed by all kinds of rules and regulations formulated by each government’s department. Many of them, drawn up during the past eight years, are still applicable, but a considerable number of them have become obstacles to heightening the initiative of the masses and the development of the productive force. The latter kind should be revised or abolished. [...] In revising or abolishing irrational rules and regulations, [...] [we] must establish a general principle: under the premise of developing socialist enterprises according to the principles of ‘more, faster, better and more economical’ (多快好省 duo-kuai-hao-sheng) planning and of [keeping things] to the right proportions, on the basis of raising the consciousness of the masses, [we] allow and encourage the people to break those rules and regulations which restrict the development of the productive force. [...] The more important and nationally significant rules, have to pass through the approval of the Chinese

²¹ MacFARQUHAR, “*The Origins...*”, cit., pp.29-30 and http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-01/06/content_2423605.htm, 13/10/2009; http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_05.htm, 13/10/2009.

²² http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-01/06/content_2423605.htm, 13/10/2009; http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_05.htm, 13/10/2009.

²³ Ibidem.

Party's Central Committee and of the State Council; the technically significant ones need to have the approval of the departments concerned. Then they are popularized among similar units throughout the whole country or province. After a period of time since they have been put into practice, if it is necessary, old rules and regulations will be revised or new ones introduced in the light of new experiences. This is the mass-line method of formulating and revising rules and regulations."²⁴

This article, in my opinion, had two obstacles to its application: first is the fact that Liu urged people to smash and abolish the rules which act as obstacles to production. At the same time he filters this process by stating that the new rules, replacing the old, unusable ones, must pass through the control and approval of the local or central government. This should be seen as a major barrier to the formation of new adapt regulations. The second obstacle was that those who dared to complain or criticize the Party's members' or cadres' decisions, always ran the risk to be considered a member of the "rightist bourgeoisie" or as an enemy of the Party.

After the disclosure of this document the movement of the Great Leap Forward was officially launched and the foundations for a big proportion tragedy had been laid.

2. OTHER CONTENTS OF THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

There were also other relevant policies adopted within the Leap, such as the "water conservancy campaign" (1957-1958). This campaign promoted dam construction and priority was given to the accumulation of water for irrigation. Secondary priorities included drainage and flood control. On the 16th of January 1958 the "*People's Daily*" published an article urging people to realize "irrigation and water conservancy" and "water and soil conservation".²⁵

Important for its devastating consequences was the "Four pests campaign" (1958-1962). It was considered a hygiene campaign and consisted of eliminating flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ YANG 杨, "*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...*", "墓碑:中国六十年代..." p.354

Another extremely relevant measure was the “steel and iron campaign”. During the Beidaihe Conference (an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau, 17th to 30th of August 1958) the members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, the First Secretaries of the Communist Party coming from each province, city and autonomous region and the leading cadres of each department²⁶ met in Hebei Province to discuss about the results obtained thanks to the precedent policies and to decide new targets. During these meetings the members of the Party decided to raise 1958’s steel target to 10.7 million tons (a hundred percent increase over 1957 output); which meant that the same amount of steel would have to be produced in four months than had been produced in the preceding eight months. In order to achieve these ambitious aims the government urged people to produce steel and iron wherever possible, even in their courtyards. Many peasants left their agricultural work to join the campaign. In this frenzied production, every village had furnaces to melt everything possible, even pots and pans. This was the beginning of the backyard steel campaign.²⁷

As was often the case in those years, these campaigns were taken to the extreme.²⁸ For example an exaggerated construction of dams and irrigation ditches often caused fields to flood; the massive elimination of birds and flies created ecological imbalances; and the lack of predators let bad bugs invade the crops. Moreover, to fulfil these ambitious steel targets, peasants were taken from the rural areas to industrial factories and furnaces, even during important harvest periods.

In the eyes of many, especially local cadres, the devastating consequences of these campaigns were immediately clear; however, no one dared to speak due to the ever-present risk of being accused of “rightism”.

3. THE PEOPLE’S COMMUNES AND THE BEIDAIHE CONFERENCE (北戴河会议 Beidaihe Huiyi) (17th-30th August 1958)

²⁶ Ibid., pag.73.

²⁷ XIE 谢, “*Dayuejin...*”, “大跃进...”, pp.93-97

²⁸ I will deepen better the motivations of the failure of the leap in the last part of this thesis.

3.1 How were the People's Communes born?

An official version on the rising of the communes, was publicized by the Party exactly a year after their formation on the 29th of August 1959 in the *"People's Daily"* (人民日报 renmin ribao). The article said:

"At the meeting which was called in March of 1958 in Chengdu and attended by some leading members of the Central Committee and the local committees of the Chinese Communist Party, Comrade Mao Zedong took this into consideration and proposed appropriate amalgamation of smaller cooperatives in a planned way. This proposal was later formally approved by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. After that, in May, the second session of the Eighth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party put forward the general line for building socialism. This general line gave boundless inspiration to the masses of cadres and people in the rural areas. Their morale and determination soared to unprecedented heights [...] This new form of social organization was entirely a creation of the masses. In its earlier stages, it was given a number of different names. In June the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and Comrade Mao Zedong selected the name "people's commune" as one that best expressed the essence of this form of organization and would be most welcome to the masses. It was unanimously adopted at the Beidaihe meeting of the Communist Party in August."²⁹

The official version is partly true as the steps of the creation of the communes dates back to 1955 when CCP Chairman Mao, in his book *"Socialist high tide in China's countryside"*, urged people to create big communities (大社 dashe); at that time he pointed out that :

"In a small community with few people, little land and small funds, it is impossible to build a large scale administration and it is not possible to use machinery. This type of small community limits the develop of the production forces, and can't last for long. As such, it should progressively united with other communities. "

"After this, in some places people started to create 'big communities', but as they did not obtain good results, they dissembled a short time after."³⁰

²⁹ <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1959/PR1959-36b.htm>
29/10/2009;

http://media.ifeng.com/hotspot/chuanmeiliushinian/pinglun/200908/0809_7878_1292099.shtml 29/10/2009.

³⁰ XIE谢, *"Dayuejin..."* "大跃进...", pp.70-71.

During the Chengdu Conference Mao stated again that to speed up the development of production forces, there was the need to make the relations of production both larger and more “communal”.

“China is now implementing the ‘irrigation and water conservancy’ campaign and in few years we will also realize the mechanization of agriculture. Trying to make this happen, if the scale of the Productive Cooperative is too small, we could incur difficulties in the organizational and developmental aspects of the production. To adapt to the requirements of the rural production and cultural revolution, and where possible, we have to transform the small scale production cooperatives in large scale ones.”³¹

After the Chengdu Conference (9th-26th of March 1958) on the 12th of April the “*People’s Daily*” published Mao’s idea of transforming “small communities” (小社 xiaoshe) into “big communities” (大社 dashe), small townships (小乡 xiaoxiang) into big townships (大乡 daxiang) and transform villages into a “community” (社 she).³²

After the issuing of the Chengdu Conference documents to Party members, people all over the country began to work to create the envisioned People’s Communes. Across China, the people tried to emulate Cuoya Shan’s Commune (嵯峨山 Cuoya Shan), in Suiping County in Henan province, which was shown as a model by the Party for its record of production.³³

3.2 What were the People’s Communes?

On the 16th of July 1958 Chen Boda³⁴ published in the Party’s journal “*Red Flag*” the thoughts of Chairman Mao regarding the Communes:

“Comrade Mao Zedong says that our orientation should be progressive and orderly in order to create a big commune which communalizes work and industry; agriculture; business and business exchanges; education (basic education), militia

³¹ Ibid.

³² YANG 杨, “*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...*”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” p.331.

³³ XIE 谢, “*Dayuejin...*” “大跃进...”, pp.70-71.

³⁴ **Chen Boda** was Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong’s personal secretary and close associate and editor of the Party’s journal “*Red Flag*” during the 50’s.

(people's militia, but also the people's army) as to create China's society's basic units."³⁵

Following Mao's suggestion, during the Beidaihe Conference, the Party drafted "The resolution by the CCP Central Committee on the question of the creation of rural People's Communes" (中共中央关于在农村建立人民公社问题的决议 Zhong-Gong Zhongyang guanyu zai nongcun jianli renmin gongshe wenti de jueyi). In this document the Central Committee of the CCP set the general conditions required to create the Communes saying that there had to be integration between government administration and commune management as well as the unification of peasants, workers, businesses, educational institutions and military systems.³⁶ In the document the passage from the collective system into the communes was seen as a "natural trend".

The document also discussed the scale and size of the Communes noting that where the countryside was vast and sparsely populated the commune could be composed of less than 2000 households; making a single township commune permissible. In larger centres, a single township could be divided into multiple communes of up to 6-7 thousand households. In some other cases communes could also be formed by groups of 10-20 thousand households (in the few realities when circumstances permitted).³⁷

The communes were divided into three levels: the Commune itself, the Brigade (generally corresponding to the previous Higher-stage APC) and the Teams (usually as big as the Lower-stage APC).³⁸

The basic difference from the previous form of collectivization was that in this organization, people not only had to organize rural work, but also to administrate socio-political life within, which meant that inhabitants also had both economic and government functions.

As the communes developed, some put in practice a system of "seven guarantees" or "ten guarantees" which outlined the methods for its residents. These guarantees included meal allowances, clothing, housing, money for births and weddings, education, medical care, heating, haircuts and theater entertainment. People also built boarding schools in order to grow "red and

³⁵ YANG 杨, "Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...", "墓碑:中国六十年代..." pag.333.

³⁶ Ibid. pp.78-80.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ SAMARANI, "La Cina del Novecento...",cit., p.226.

expert” children and to teach them, from a young age, the meaning of collectivized living (including taking meals in mess halls) and sharing every aspect life inside the community.³⁹

Everything in a commune was shared and any type of private property was abolished. “In a couple of years [1959-1961] the approximately 75 thousands Higher-stage APCs were transformed in more or less 24 thousands People’s Communes”.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid. pp.101-106; MacFARQUHAR, *“The Origins...”*, cit., pp.103-106

⁴⁰ SAMARANI, *“La Cina del Novecento...”*,cit., p.226.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter starts with the last phase of the Great Leap Forward where the CCP noticed the mistakes of the Second Five-Year-Plan policies and their efforts to readjust and correct them.

1. THE FIRST ZHENGZHOU AND THE WUCHANG CONFERENCES

The review work has partly developed during the First Zhengzhou Conference (2nd–10th November 1958) and the two Wuchang Conferences. The former was an enlarged meeting of the political bureau (21st–27th November 1958) and the latter was the CCP's 6th Plenum Session (28th November–10th December 1958).

During these meetings the Government underlined the positive results of the policies adopted in the preceding period, but also discussed its mistakes (one finger out of ten, 九个指头和一个指头 *jiu ge zhitou he yi ge zhitou*). For example with respect to the theory regarding the communes the CCP stated that the country is still characterized by a socialist form of government (in which the rule “to each according to his work” is in force) and that full communism (that implies the rule “to each according to his needs”) has yet to be realized, largely because the communes were still based on collective ownership and not yet on the peoples’ ownership. In private, Chairman Mao stated that it might take between 15 to 20 years or longer to realize communism.⁴¹

Premier Zhou Enlai⁴² also admitted to flaw in the steel production process. He said that the Beidiahe Conference was characterized by an over-enthusiastic climate and unrealistic goals. The Party then reduced steel production targets for the following year from 30 million tons to a more modest 18 million tons.⁴³

2. THE SECOND ZHENGZHOU CONFERENCE

⁴¹ YANG 杨, “Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pag.336.

⁴² *Zhou Enlai was People's Republic of China's Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs from the foundation of the PRC till his death.*

⁴³ XIE 谢, “Dayuejin...” “大跃进...”, pp.289-290; pp.115-121.

In Mao's opinion one of the main problems that needed to be discussed during this CCP Central Committee enlarged meeting in Zhengzhou (25th February-5th March 1959) was ownership of the communes.

The main problem was that the rich brigades produced more than their needs and that the poor brigades could take the surplus of their brethren. This had the effect of demotivating both rich and poor communes. It deterred large communes from produce more because as they worked harder and lost part of their harvest. The poorer communes then had less incentive to work as they could easily rely on their larger brethren for help. A common consequence was that the people living in rich brigades concealed their production or blocked the way to their village to prevent their harvest from being taken away.⁴⁴

Within this conference the Party tried to find solutions to this problem and published the document "Some stipulations regarding the People's Communes administrative management system (a draft)" ("关于人民公社管理体制的若干规定 (草案)" Guanyu renmin gongshe guanli tizhi de ruogan guiding (cao'an)). Part of the content of this document was taken from one of Mao's speeches in which he proposed 14 prescriptions to solve the problem: unified leadership, the brigade as the basis, management divided by levels, devolution of powers, three levels of accounting, estimation of profit or loss at each level, distribution of income, decisions by communes, appropriate accumulation, rational adjustments, law of value, value of exchange, to each according to his work, acknowledge of differences.⁴⁵ Mao wanted to abolish three mistakes of the "communist wind" (共产风 gongchanfeng): "egalitarianism, indiscriminate transfer of resources and loans collection" (一平, 二调, 三收款 yi ping, er tiao, san shoukuan). Mao felt that these three characteristics were a source of panic for the people and had to be abolished in order to prevent the risk of the communes collapse.⁴⁶ Despite these readjustment policies the communes kept

⁴⁴ MacFARQUHAR, "The Origins...", cit., pp.146-153.

⁴⁵ XIE谢, "Dayuejin..." "大跃进...", pp.124; MacFARQUHAR, "The Origins...", cit., pp.154-155.

⁴⁶ XIE谢, "Dayuejin..." "大跃进...", pp.291-292.

on producing negative socio-economical results that were partly revealed by Peng Dehuai⁴⁷ during the Lushan Conference (2nd July-16th August 1959).

3. THE LUSHAN CONFERENCE (2nd July-16th August 1959)

“Thanks to the correction of the mistakes [of the Great Leap’s Forward policies] during the first half of the year 1959, if the Lushan Conference didn’t take place, in the second half of the year 1959, the disorders created during 1958 could have been eliminated.”⁴⁸ The Lushan Conference certainly represented an important moment in the course of the events of the PRC and the consequences that derived of this meeting were devastating

From the 2nd of July until the 1st of August a CCP Central Committee enlarged meeting took place in Lushan; from the 2nd until the 16th of August the 8th Plenum Session of the Party opened in the same city.

An important participant at this meeting was Peng Dehuai, Defence Minister of the PRC, who travelled extensively around China in late 1958 and early 1959. He witnessed, first hand, the results of the Leap’s bad policies and started to be conscious of its serious mistakes. During the Lushan Conference, on the 17th of July, after a long reflection, he decided to write a letter to the Chairman Mao Zedong: in that paper Peng opened by denouncing the mistakes of the “backyard steel campaign” saying that it had been wasteful and caused losses in both labour (人力 renli) and material resources (资源 ziyuan). He suggested a review of these measures based in realistic goals and outcomes and using pragmatic and real facts.⁴⁹ He repeated that the “left” mistakes (“左” 倾的错误 “zuo” qing de cuowu) occurred because of the Party’s socialist inexperience and over-enthusiasm (many cadres thought that the communism was right around the corner).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Peng Dehuai was the Defence Minister of People’s Republic of China and a member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1955 he was also made a marshal of the People’s Liberation Army.*

⁴⁸ YANG 杨, “Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pag.387.

⁴⁹ XIE 谢, “Dayuejin...” “大跃进...”, pp.151-155.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chairman Mao's reaction wasn't immediate, he waited a few days before counterattacking, probably because he first wanted to single out Peng's other "allies". On the 23rd of July, during a speech at the Conference, Mao finally responded to Peng's letter. This marked a turning point for the Conference (from that moment on the atmosphere within the comrades became more tense) as well as a turning point in the history of the PRC.

On the 2nd of August the 8th Plenum Session of the Party began. The discussion focused on two main problems: a review of production targets for the following year and decisions as what measures to adopt with the dissidents.

Peng Dehuai and his allies were purged and excluded from the Party's activity. The worst consequence, however, was that in order to justify their severe decisions towards the traitors, the government would not admit their policy mistakes and didn't continue working on the readjustment activity started at the end of the previous year. Rather, the Party tried to reaffirm the Leap's principal decisions and add strength to the anti-rightist movement (as in 1957). Those persecuted were people that were against the commune's ideologies, those who opposed the Party's Leap policies in general, as well as those who disliked Marxist-Leninist theories.⁵¹

4. THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

As noted in Chapter I, the reasons for the 1960s Sino-Soviet Split are complex and widespread multifaceted. Among the most significant is the launch of the Great Leap Forward. On several occasions, Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the CPSU, criticized the Chinese Leap, especially the establishment of Communes and the practices of backyard steel production.

For example, in a speech to the CCP in Poznan, Poland Khrushchev stated: "the Soviet Union soon after the end of the Civil War [1918-1921] started to build Communes; but [in general] the Communes don't have good economical and political characteristics, so those Communes [as well] didn't give good results so we decided not to build them anymore and we organized the rural areas with the Cooperatives."⁵² On another occasion "he professed himself unable to understand the logic of many Chinese domestic policies like the

⁵¹ MacFARQUHAR, *"The Origins..."*, cit., pp.247-251.

⁵² YANG 杨, *"Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai..."*, "墓碑:中国六十年代..." pag.395.

'hundred flowers' and the great leap forward."⁵³ A further example of criticism towards the Chinese policies was on 1st December 1959 at the Hungarian Party Congress, on where the Soviet leader stated: "If we become conceited, if we commit mistakes in our leadership, if we distort the teaching of Marxism-Leninism on the building of socialism and Communism, these mistakes can be exploited by the enemies of Communism".⁵⁴ Although the attack is less explicit in this case, the reference to the Chinese example is certainly evident.

⁵³ MacFARQUHAR, *"The Origins..."*, cit., p.262.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.265.

CHAPTER 4

1. WHY DID THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD POLICIES FAIL?

The PRC had a planned economy where successful production depended entirely on macro-economic experts whose task was to keep a balanced economy with the goal of achieving high output and production rates. In particular, a balance between: “stock and consumption, supply and demand, industry and agriculture, light and heavy industry, relations within industries [...] materials, finances, foreign exchange etc.”⁵⁵ was critical to the success of the economy. If planners did not consider all of these factors, a waste of materials, drops in production rates, financial losses were certainties.⁵⁶

1.1 The consequences of Steel and water conservancy campaigns

With the Leap, the Government stressed the development of heavy industry especially in steel production industry and backyard steel campaigns. These pressures provoked a materials, manpower and energy squander and, by the end of the year 1958, although 11.07 million tons of steel had been produced, only 8 million were usable as the steel produced by the rural villagers, was often of bad quality and impossible to use. Furthermore, building the furnaces and maintaining their operations was expensive, materially expensive and was a waste of manpower, as the people involved in steel production were generally peasants who were taken away from agricultural work. Workers in the these new steel factories were generally peasants who were chiefly, able-bodied adults who increased by 20 million between 1957 and 1958. Also some others linked industry connected to steel production (transport, carbon, electricity etc.), did consequently grow.

Heavy industry was developed at the expense of light industries. Due to the numbers of new steel factories being built workers of the light industries

⁵⁵ YANG 杨, “Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pag.475.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

were moved to steel factories and, occasionally, light industries were transformed into steel production factories. Consequently, since some light industries converted their production or did not have enough workers to produce their products, there was a shortage of everyday items.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the water conservancy campaign caused several squanders: between October 1957 and early 1958 the numbers of people working on water conservation projects rose from 25 million to roughly 100 million, many of whom were peasants. Characteristic of these projects were inhuman working hours as workers worked day and night with only few hours of rest permitted. Although some of the projects built within the water conservancy campaign were successful and did prevent flooding, most were useless and caused disasters some years after and other projects were simply abandoned and left uncompleted.⁵⁸

1.2 The worsening in “numbers”

By 1959 economic difficulties started to become evident. By April 1959 there was a country-wide grain shortage and by the end of the year there were total shortages of other foods and other products such as cooking oil, sugar, thermos bottles, porcelain dishes, glasses, shoes, etc. These shortages led to nutritional deprivation and starvation was no uncommon.⁵⁹ As noted above, this can be attributed to the emphasis on heavy industry which neglected agriculture and light industry’s production. For example, in 1960 the total output value of agriculture had dropped by 12,6% from the previous year and light industry’s total output had dropped by 9%⁶⁰ Food shortages were also caused by a high requisition of grain by the state. Between 1957 and 1960 the requisition increased by 84%.⁶¹ This was furthered with the lack of peasants in rural areas which meant that it was nearly impossible to produce bumper crops. Comparing agricultural production before the beginning of the Leap in 1957 and 1961, one of the most tragic years of the Leap, grain production had

⁵⁷ XIE谢, “*Dayuejin...*” “大跃进...”, pp.93-98.

⁵⁸ YANG 杨, “*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...*”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pag.466-467.

⁵⁹ XIE谢, “*Dayuejin...*” “大跃进...”, pp.135-142; pp.202-203.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp.201-202.

⁶¹ YANG 杨, “*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...*”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” p.475.

diminished by 24,3%, cotton by 51,2%, cooking oil by 57,1% and farm animals by 28,8%.⁶²

In this imbalanced situation, other problems started to appear: workers' salaries increased as did their purchase power too; however there was a lack of consumer goods. In 1961 twice the amount of paper money was circulating than in 1957 and this quantity was much more than was needed for commodity circulation and resulted in heavy currency inflation.

In 1960 public finances started to be in crisis. Up to June 1960 income was quite regular, but by July-August 1960 public finance income dropped substantially. July's income was 17,3% less than June's and August's 4,6% less than July. By 1961 China was faced with a serious financial deficit.⁶³

1.3 Over enthusiasm and extremism

An Extremist is "one who advocates or resorts to measures beyond the norm, especially in politics".⁶⁴ Several examples of extremist behaviors were apparent during the Leap's period, and examples will be discussed below.

The steel campaign (discussed throughout) is a prime example: in 1958, the steel target grew constantly up to Beidaihe Conference which fixed the unrealistic and overenthusiastic target of producing 10,7 million tons of steel. The extremist tides continued and after the Conference, the government decided to sacrifice all other industries and the rural production in order to reach steel production goals. To purchase this objective, in every area people started to build new factories in an unrestrained way, the only thing that counted was to catch the imposed aim at any cost, but the population didn't know yet that they would have suffered the heaviest consequences of these actions.

The water conservation campaigns and the four pest campaigns are similar examples which evolved in the same ways trend. The water conservation programs were first discussed in an article in the "People's Daily", resulting in people rushing into a frenzy and irrational dam construction which caused great financial waste and worsened the floods and natural disasters of

⁶² Ibid. pp.466-468.

⁶³ XIE谢, "Dayuejin..." "大跃进...", pp.204-205.

⁶⁴ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/extremism> 08/12/2009.

the following years. With respect to the pest campaigns, instead of trying to preserve the ecological balance, people took the campaign to the extreme and tried to exterminate the four pests (flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows) which resulted in crop devastation by locusts and bad bugs.

Another terrible mistake of the CCP was its complete refusal to accept criticism or suggestions. This behavior happened both within the Country by punishing or purging all people that dared to speak (e.g. Peng Dehuai) and also externally towards the Soviet Union. The repeated “attacks” by the Soviet leader towards the Communes and the Leap’s policies were not seen as a possibility for reflection, but as offensive attacks. The Soviet Union’s softening relations’ with the United States were seen by the Chinese as signs of weakness and loss of fundamental communist’s principles rather than a reason to reflect on their own policies.

1.4 The failure of the Communes

As preannounced by previous attempts in 1955 and anticipated by Khrushchev in his speeches, the construction of the People’s Communes showed its frailty from the beginning.

Some months after the Beidaihe Conference, the peasants started to complain about the Communes. In the following months the Government tried to correct their mistakes, but modifications were limited because the leaders could not infringe on the rules of the communist ideology and the system that that the ideology imposed. As such, the work to rectify the Communes was merely “stopgap” activity and an attempt to improve the basis. This attempt to correct the mistakes of theirs formation ended soon after the Lushan Conference.⁶⁵ Another problem in the Communes was the lack of manpower. Even during the harvest period, peasants were occupied by the steel campaign and a low number of farmers took care of the crops.

Moreover, there were problems connected to production due to the imbalances between the Communes as the richer, more productive Communes had to help the poorest ones. This system did not encourage either rich or poor communes to produce more than their effective needs as surpluses of the rich

⁶⁵ YANG 杨, “Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai...”, “墓碑:中国六十年代...” pp.335-337.

ones were taken away and poor Communes could easily receive the support of others.

Finally, State purchase was excessive. The few remaining peasants working in the fields had inhuman working hours to provide the crops for their Commune, the people involved in steel production and the high State requisition.

Conclusions

The Great Leap Forward caused roughly 25 million victims. As it violated the objective law of China's development, its effects influenced Chinese economy growth for a long time.

A combination of extremism and enthusiasm promoted by the Party members were the basis of this catastrophe. However who mainly paid the consequences of these mistakes was the population. All over the country, people starved to death and the only guilty people were the members of the Party who, rather than admit their mistakes, rushed into an insane campaign whose consequences influenced in a bad way Chinese society of the following years.

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