

## To what extent did Mao's Great Leap Forward achieve its objectives?



*A photograph from 1958 depicting peasants toiling during the Great Leap Forward. Available*

at: <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/great-leap-forward/>, Last accessed 15th

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## Identification and Evaluation of Sources:

This study will investigate the question: “To what extent did Mao’s Great Leap Forward achieve its objectives?” To keep the scope of this study manageable, I will focus on Mao’s objectives in establishing the Great Leap Forward (hereinafter referred to as GLF) in China between 1958-1961, followed by an assessment of how successfully they were met. Beyond the two sources I have chosen for evaluation, this study will draw on a variety of primary and secondary sources, a complete list of which is provided in the bibliography. These include *Political Theory of the Great Leap Forward*<sup>1</sup>, *China’s Great Leap Forward*<sup>2</sup>, and *The Causes of China’s Great Leap Famine, 1959-1961*<sup>3</sup>.

The first source I have chosen for this comprehensive study is *Mao Zedong’s Remarks at the March 25, 1959, Meeting in Shanghai*<sup>4</sup>, which includes Mao’s comments on industrialization during a conference. This source is particularly relevant to the investigation because it provides concrete explanations for the establishment of the GLF. The origin of this source is a Communist Party Conference held in Shanghai in 1959 – proving reliability as it is a primary source, providing authentic evidence from the conference. From this we can deduce that the aim of this source was to debate China's need for industrial growth. On this basis it is valuable for an investigation of my question because it provides first-hand knowledge of what Mao’s arguments were when discussing the future of China. He claimed that “To scatter one’s resources too widely is a way of sabotaging the Great Leap

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<sup>1</sup> Tetsuya Kataoka, "Political Theory of the Great Leap Forward" *Social Research* 36, no. 1 (1969): 93-122. Accessed September 8, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Clayton D. Brown, *China's Great Leap Forward - Association for Asian Studies* (Available at: <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaas/archives/chinas-great-leap-forward/>, Last accessed 8th September 2021)

<sup>3</sup> James Kai-sing Kung and Justin Yifu Lin. "The Causes of China’s Great Leap Famine, 1959–1961." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52, no. 1 (2003): 51-73. Accessed September 8, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong’s Remarks at the March 25, 1959, Meeting in Shanghai* (Available at: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123052.pdf>, Last accessed 8th September 2021)

Forward..."<sup>5</sup> emphasizing his hopes that China could become self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the source has substantial limitations for this specific research because this report provides little knowledge of what other members of the party contributed during the conference. As a result, it is unclear which members supported and opposed the formation of the GLF.

The second source I have selected for detailed evaluation is a propaganda poster produced during the GLF in 1959 to encourage the establishment of communes and production of industrial equipment (see Appendix A). This source is particularly significant to the investigation because it includes the motivations China to agree to the GLF. We can deduce that the purpose of this poster is to encourage the people of China to overachieve their goals. It bears direct reference to the party's declared goals. On this premise, it is useful for investigating the research question because it explains why many agreed to the establishment of communes and why they felt greater industrialization of the nation would benefit the economy. Nonetheless, it has considerable limitations for this research because, as a propaganda poster, it was employed to influence public opinion. As a result, we can't be confident that the material on the poster isn't biased toward the establishment of the Leap, therefore portraying images which are untrue. For example, the communes and industrial production campaigns were in some respects a serious failure in the sense that there was an ultimate widespread peasant hatred of them, as well as decline of industrial production.

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<sup>5</sup> Mao Zedong, *ibid.*, p. 1

## Investigation:

The GLF in China, 1958, was fuelled by Mao's need for rapid industrialization, but its success has been debated from the moment it was launched. For example, an important perspective was shared by Liao Gailong, a Chinese historian, who claimed that the Leap was a "decade of tortuous advance."<sup>6</sup> Liao believed that "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."<sup>7</sup> The origins of this primary source can be traced back to a Party historian, and in terms of content which includes the debating of successes along the timeline, we can conclude that its value includes first-hand knowledge of the occurrences; yet its limitation is that it is too subjective and overlooks the larger picture. Furthermore Peng Dehuai, China's Defence Minister of the time, claimed that "the achievements of the Great Leap Forward are obvious...The overall value of industrial and agricultural production rose by 48.8 per cent." However, he subsequently adds, "there was too much haste. We tried to do too much...that is a mistake."<sup>8</sup> According to Hsiung-Shen Jung, a researcher of social science, the GLF "that was influenced by political factors not only ended up with utter failure, but also deteriorated the...economy to such an extent that the future...development was severely damaged."<sup>9</sup> This study will conclude that, while the Leap had initially positive outcomes, the

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<sup>6</sup> William A. Joseph, "A Tragedy of Good Intentions: Post-Mao Views of the Great Leap Forward." *Modern China* 12, no. 4 (1986): 419-57. Accessed September 8, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Liao Gailong, "Historical experiences and our road of development." October 25, 1980, *Issues and Studies* (Part 1) 17, 10: 65-94

<sup>8</sup> Peng Dehuai, *Quotations: Agrarian reform and the Great Leap Forward* (Available at: <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/quotations-great-leap-forward/>, Last accessed 15th September 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Hsiung-Shen Jung, *Causes, Consequences and Impact of the Great Leap Forward in China* (Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v11n2p58%20>, Last accessed 15th September 2021)

famine that it brought with it would ultimately destroy China and its aspirations of becoming an agricultural economy.

In some respects, it might be argued that the GLF successfully met its objectives, as one of Mao's major goals was for China's agricultural and industrial sectors to expand rapidly simultaneously. James Kung, an Economic History professor, claimed Mao aimed to achieve this by "expanding the acreage covered by irrigation and the latter [industrial] via increasing the capacity of steel and iron production"<sup>10</sup>. As the origin of this source is a journal article published professor specializing in Chinese economic history in Hong Kong, we may assume that, while it does not offer first-hand knowledge of the events described, it is reliable because it has the purposes of educating a historian studying the GLF. 1957 saw an increase in agricultural output of 5%, although Mao believed this was inadequate. He toured China from January to April 1958, observing the more ambitious APCs, and determined that merging co-operatives into much larger communes was the most effective method to attain productivity.<sup>11</sup>

However, it could also be argued that the agricultural progresses made in China were fleeting, as they were shortly met by a neglect in farmland and food shortages. According to Prasenjit Duara, an Indian historian of China, the GLF cannot be boiled down simply to one economic reason. "The Great Leap was the product of a 'vision' rather than a plan. It sought to transform the entire social system."<sup>12</sup> This shows that Mao had made it explicitly clear that the party would centrally administer all sectors of production. Communes

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<sup>10</sup> James Kai-sing Kung, and Justin Yifu Lin, op. cit., p. 53

<sup>11</sup> Allan Todd, Sally Waller, *History for the IB Diploma: Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single Party States* (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Prasenjit Duara, "The Great Leap Forward in China: An Analysis of the Nature of Socialist Transformation." *Economic and Political Weekly* 9, no. 32/34 (1974): 1365–90.

contained a small number of factories providing work for women and children, and they were a combination of smaller farm collectives and consisted of 4,000 to 5,000 households. Later, however, it was realized that the commune system cut food output because there were no incentives for individual farmers. As a result, farmland got neglected and there were food shortages. Grain output “fell by a substantial 28% against the level of 1959, to 143.5 million tons.”<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the agricultural failures of the first Five-year-Plan, the GLF was a successful attempt in reconstructing the industry and adhering to the Soviet model of rapidly growing heavy industries. Mao hoped to industrialize by making use of the abundant supply of inexpensive labour and eliminating the need to import big machinery, converting China from an agrarian economy to a communist economy by building people's communes.

William A. Joseph, a professor of political science, claimed in “A Tragedy of Good Intentions” that “even during the Great Leap, it is frequently pointed out, there was significant capital construction...that ultimately contributed greatly to China’s industrialization.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the value of this evidence can be challenged because projected figures changed frequently, and China initially saw great success when “authorities uncritically accepted and publicized inflated production figures”<sup>15</sup>.

Nonetheless, China's industrial achievements were also fleeting, since they were quickly met with an economic disaster given the relatively low quality of materials produced. According to Joseph, “faulty handling of decentralization in industrial management has also been pinpointed as one of the major economic policy errors of the Leap.”<sup>16</sup> Initially, Mao

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<sup>13</sup> James Kai-sing Kung, and Justin Yifu Lin, *op. cit.*, p. 56

<sup>14</sup> William A. Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 421

<sup>15</sup> Clayton D. Brown, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> William A. Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 435

guaranteed that fast industrialisation expanded throughout the country using the 'Backyard Furnaces' program by producing vast amounts of steel and therefore promoting economic growth. But, to what extent? Due to its poor and brittle quality, only around 1% of the steel produced was useable. Hence, although China saw significant economic development, with about 11 million tonnes of steel manufactured, it was worthless.

It is also critical to recognize that political, diplomatic, and ideological reasons, particularly personal ones, aided Mao in achieving his goals for the GLF. They were first and foremost to surpass Britain's steel- and other-product output in 15 years. Steel output grew from 5.4 million tonnes in 1957 to 8.0 million tonnes in 1958, and then to 13.0 million tonnes in 1960 (see Appendix B). Kataoka, a Japanese professor of politics, claimed in "Political Theory of the Great Leap Forward" that Mao "sought to accomplish 'socialist industrialization' in China 'better, faster and more economically' by relying on a labour intensive, native method."<sup>17</sup>

This meant that peasants across the country had to work harder to produce more iron and steel in response to CCP directives. Furthermore, political intervention made implementing a national strategy in towns impossible. This was because the absence of private management diminished the drive for profits and reduced the motivation to work hard and create higher-quality items.<sup>18</sup>

However, the failures brought by Mao's ideological motivations are important to recognize, as they fuelled Mao to push for the quantitative development in China without regard for the disasters that would eventually befall the country. According to Ellis Joffe in "Between Two Plenums: China's Intraleadership Conflict", Chinese authorities believed that the tactics

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<sup>17</sup> Tetsuya Kataoka, op. cit., p. 97

<sup>18</sup> Allan Todd, Sally Waller, op. cit., p. 151

they adopted during the Five-Year-Plan, which gave them significant success, could be used now. “And it was this belief, transferred from the struggle for power to the struggle for development, that became the motive force behind the Great Leap Forward.”<sup>19</sup> We may deduce from the origins of this source – a book written by a Professor specializing in the history of China, that its purpose is to educate a historian researching the GLF. Its values are that that it recognizes Mao’s revolutionary ideologies and the GLF’s shortcomings, however its limitations are that there is no primary evidence on why Mao insisted on a new strategy for development and how it subsequently backfired.

In conclusion, while the GLF may have seen encouraging first results, such as an increase in steel production with predicted statistics continually shifting, it was quickly discovered that it was of low quality. Furthermore, as a result of agricultural neglect and food shortages, almost 45 million people perished of hunger during the ensuing famine. Hsiung-Shen Jung's perspective is the one I most agree with since it fully recognizes that the Leap was a catastrophic failure that damaged the economy to such an extent that subsequent development attempts were damaged. He puts this most powerfully when he says that “the failure of the people’s commune triggered the severe famine. The failure of the Great Leap Forward was obviously a man-made disaster, but the government attributed it to natural calamity.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis Joffe, “The Great Leap Forward.” In *Between Two Plenums: China’s Intraleadership Conflict, 1959–1962*, 4–8. University of Michigan Press, 1975.

<sup>20</sup> Hsiung-Shen Jung, op. cit., p. 62



## **Reflection:**

One issue raised by this study is the lack of genuine primary sources belonging to authority figures in China. In terms of this particular study, this issue manifested itself in the fact that there were many sources dealing with several diverse viewpoints on the successes or failures of the GLF, but very few were primary sources. I approached this problem by reviewing the bibliographies of secondary materials, particularly journal articles, and locating authentic quotes from primary sources. For example, my research led me to the remarks made by Mao himself during a conference in Shanghai. Throughout this process, I came to the conclusion that, while secondary sources have their merits, it is also critical to seek original sources, as they provide raw material for investigation of the events.

Another issue raised by this study relating to the challenges faced by historians is the assessment of sources based on their provenance. In this study, this issue manifested itself in the fact that I'd found perspectives from historians in journal articles in the form of quotes. For example, I initially found Liao Gailong's perspective of the GLF in an untitled website, which made it difficult to trace its origins because it did not include a bibliography, in turn making it difficult to assess its reliability. I approached this problem by researching the article on a different platform in other publications or book chapters in which it may have appeared. Ultimately finding it in a journal article by William A. Joseph, I was able to evaluate it with reference to its origins. During this procedure, I discovered that the origins of sources are not always wholly accurate, and that it is crucial to identify more than one source in order to confirm them.

A final issue addressed by this study in relation to the challenges encountered by historians is the difficulty in determining 'success' in historical events. This usually requires historians

to assess historical perspectives based on their own, frequently distorted, aims, rather than establishing a moral viewpoint. This increases the possibility of historical bias, which is problematic in the sense that historians would omit specific information in their sources in order to back up their claims. I approached this problem by analysing several different sources to obtain proof. This taught me that it is essential to identify more than one source in order to reach a more balanced and nuanced conclusion.

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## Appendices:

### Appendix A:

A



propaganda poster to encourage the creation of communes and the manufacture of industrial equipment<sup>21</sup>

### Appendix B

**Production figures (in millions of tonnes, unless otherwise stated)**

	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
Grain	195.1	200.0	170.0	143.5	147.5	160.0
Steel	5.4	8.0	10.0	13.0	8.0	8.0
Oil (millions of barrels)	1.5	2.3	3.7	4.5	4.5	5.3
Chemical fertilisers	0.8	1.4	2.0	2.5	1.4	2.1
Cotton (billions of metres)	5.0	5.7	7.5	6.0	3.0	3.0
Coal	131.0	230.0	290.0	270.0	180.0	180.0

Production figures of steel- and other product-output during the Great Leap Forward<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Wu Shaoyun, Zhang Yuqing, Lu Zezhi, *The commune is like a gigantic dragon, production is noticeable awe-inspiring* | Chinese Posters | Chinese-posters.net (Available at: <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-593>, Last accessed 8th September 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Allan Todd, Sally Waller, op. cit., p. 151