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In fact, the 'national bourgeoisie' were assisted by the new government: by 1953, the number of privately owned industries had increased from 123 000 to 150 000, while the number of workers in private firms rose from 1.6 million to 2.2 million. In all, this private sector accounted for almost 40 per cent of China's industrial output. The government even used nationalist pleas to encourage some of those who had fled in 1949 to return to aid economic reconstruction, and help develop and modernise China's economy.

The Communists concentrated on dealing with unemployment by placing large state contracts with private firms, and improving workers' pay and rights by insisting that firms paid a minimum wage and gave paid holidays to workers. In addition, the government controlled access to raw materials. However, private firms still operated as capitalist ventures – receiving profits (though these were controlled) that were big enough to give these 'national capitalists' a very comfortable life-style.

'The transition to socialism', 1953–55

As a result of the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance signed between the Soviet Union and China in January 1950, China was to receive financial and technical assistance from the USSR for the next 15 years. Further agreements were made in 1953, 1954 and 1956. Although the financial assistance mainly consisted of short-term credits rather than loans, over 10 000 Soviet engineers were sent to China – all this helped create 300 modern industrial plants.

By 1952, the leaders of the CCP felt they had achieved sufficient economic recovery to move on to their promised 'ten years of development'. In November 1952, acting on Soviet advice, Mao set up a State Planning Commission – headed by Gao Gang – to design a Five-Year Plan to expand and modernise China's economy in both agriculture and industry. Initially, however, China's involvement in the Korean War until 1953 (see Chapter 5) meant there was little surplus funding for this project.

When the Plan was first announced in late 1952, total industrial and agricultural production – despite the revival of China's war-wrecked economy – was still only at mid 1930s levels; while modern transportation systems were still largely lacking. Nonetheless, in January 1953, it was announced that the 'bourgeois-democratic' phase of the

Industrial reforms

In 1949, China's urban population was about 20% of the country's total population. Initially, the Communist-dominated coalition government moved slowly to develop its industry. In 1949, most of China's – not very extensive – industry was owned by foreign companies. One of the government's first steps was to nationalise, without compensation, the largest industrial firms and commercial enterprises owned by the 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie', and those owned by foreign companies and GMD supporters. Most of the latter had fled with Jiang to Taiwan.

In March 1950, the government began to deal with inflation by centralising finance and taxation, and restricting the circulation of foreign currencies. The banks were also nationalised and, in 1951, a People's Bank was set up, which by 1955, had ended inflation by taking control of all financial transactions and by limiting the issue of bank notes. Thus, as early as 1950, much of the most modern elements of China's urban economy were already 'socialist'.

'National Capitalism'

The 'United Front' approach saw the government prepared to cooperate with small-scale Chinese capitalists – known as the 'national bourgeoisie' – in what was known as 'National Capitalism'. These were mainly commercial entrepreneurs, owners of small factories and workshops, shopkeepers, and managers of industrial and commercial enterprises. While these people were suspicious of the long-term aims of the victorious CCP, they were won over by their stated policy of controlling but not immediately eliminating capitalism. This was done in order to avoid further disrupting the already fragile and devastated economy.

According to Mao, it would be necessary to use elements of urban and rural capitalism to improve and modernise the national economy and that, therefore, the policy of Communists would be to 'control not eliminate capitalism'. As a result, most small firms were left in the hands of their private owners, in what was an urban mixed economy, comprising both state- and private-owned firms.

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revolution was over, and that its socialist phase was now beginning. On 1 October, on the fourth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the government set out its aims for the 'transition to socialism'.

Mao and his supporters saw the development of industry as allowing for the eventual collectivisation of agriculture, while the latter would then allow for the completion of the socialist revolution. Thus, both industry and agriculture were to be tackled at the same time.

The First Five-Year Plan and industry

The First Five-Year Plan was designed to build up heavy industry (such as steel, machinery, chemicals, coal, electricity) over the period 1953–57. This was to be largely financed by surpluses coming from a more efficient agriculture. At first, it was implemented in the Northeast Administrative Area, headed by Gao Gang – who then rolled the Plan out to the rest of China.

The main thrust of the Five-Year Plan was towards the 'socialist transformation of industry' via a process of nationalisation and the development of heavy industry. To begin with, many private businesses were converted into 'joint private-state enterprises', with most of the investment – and control – coming from the government. Many other owners were persuaded to sell their companies to the government, in return for generous compensation. Many owners and directors remained in executive positions on the boards of these companies, and continued to receive dividends from their shares from the company profits – this continued until 1962.

By the end of 1955, the private sector of China's urban economy had been eliminated, with all medium and large-scale factories and commercial enterprises nationalised. However, many smaller handicraft industries and workshops remained either privately owned, or became cooperatives.

Soviet assistance

It was planned to build almost 700 new major heavy-industry enterprises – with nearly 500 to be located in the interior, so that they were nearer to the necessary raw materials. The Soviet Union was to provide 156 industrial units, which were seen by the Chinese planners as 'the core' of their Plan. In fact, though, the Russians financed less than one-third of the costs of these units; while Soviet financial aid was very

limited, amounting to about 3 per cent of China's total investment in the Plan.

However, more significant was the technology, expertise and training provided by the Soviet Union. Over 12 000 Soviet and East European experts were sent to China in the 1950s, and over 6000 Chinese students and 7000 workers travelled to the USSR to be trained in modern science and technology.

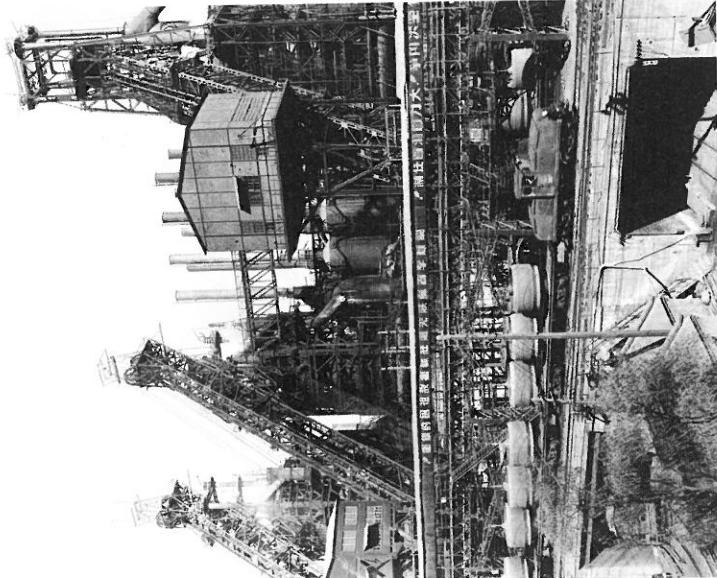


Figure 2.4: The steelworks at Anshan, which became China's most important iron and steel complex under the First Five-Year Plan. Much of the initial equipment was provided by the Soviet Union.

Results of the First Five-Year Plan

The targets for industrial growth set by the Plan was 14.7 per cent a year. In fact, Chinese industry grew even more rapidly than this. According to Nicholas Lardy, the annual increase was 18.1 per cent. This was more or less what was claimed by official statistics. However, even more conservative Western estimates calculate that the overall annual

growth rate was 16 per cent. At the same time, national income grew at an average annual rate of 8.9 per cent.

Yet, despite these dramatic increases in production, the concentration on heavy industry and rapid industrialisation caused shortages of goods and housing in the towns.

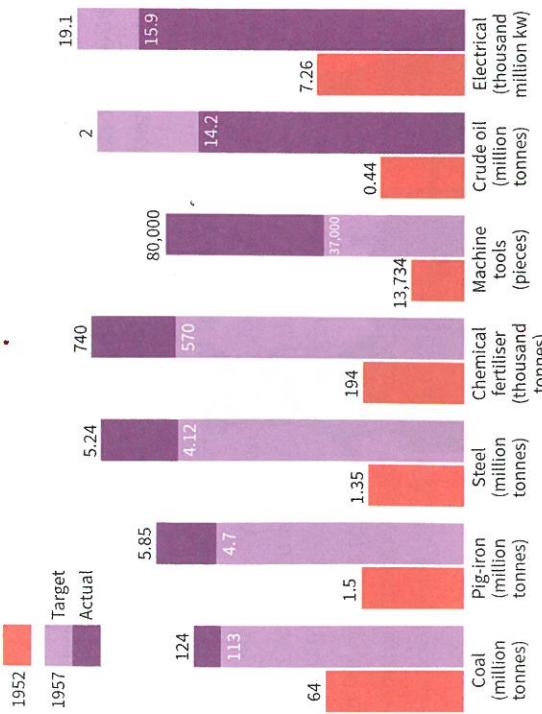


Figure 2.5: Official Chinese government statistics, showing the increased industrial production achieved under the First Five-Year Plan begun in 1953. Although the accuracy of these statistics is questioned, most historians are agreed that tremendous increases were nonetheless achieved.

There were particularly large increases in rolled steel production, cement, coal and electric power. At the same time, China – for the first time – began producing its own trucks, tractors, jet planes and merchant ships. In addition, the number of industrial and construction workers increased from about 6 million to 10 million by the end of the Plan, while China's urban population increased from 70 million to 100 million during the same period.

Overall, total industrial output more than doubled, growing at an average 6.5 per cent per capita each year – this rate, if it had been sustained, would have resulted in a doubling of national income every eleven years. These results compared very favourably for those of other newly independent developing countries – for instance, the figures for India (which had economic conditions similar to those of China) in the 1950s was well under 2 per cent per capita.

Nonetheless, most contemporary analysts – Communist and non-Communist – judged the results of the Five-Year Plan as broadly successful.

KEY CONCEPTS ACTIVITY

Significance: Carry out some additional research on the CCP's industrial reforms, and then write a couple of paragraphs to show how important financial and technical assistance from the Soviet Union was in the early successes of China's First Five-Year Plan.

Impact on industrial workers

However, for China's industrial workers, the rapid industrialisation meant increasing subjection to strict codes of labour discipline. It also led to greater wage and status differentials – and thus inequalities – based on skills and outputs. Before 1952, trade unions had been relatively independent but, by 1955, had largely become state instruments geared to increasing workers' productivity. In addition, the rapid industrialisation required many more administrators, managers and technical experts. As has been seen, this led to concerns about an emerging non-revolutionary bureaucracy. There was also growing inequality between urban and rural areas. This latter problem was something Mao decided to address from 1956 onwards, and eventually led to the Great Leap Forward (see Chapter 3).

The First Five-Year Plan and agriculture

Initially, CCP leaders believed that the move to full collectivisation (i.e. full social ownership) and the abolition of private land ownership, would not be for several years. Mao himself at first believed that for this to happen, industrial development via three Five-Year Plans would be needed. Those Party members who, at the time, urged much more rapid progress were criticised for advocating 'utopian agrarian socialism' – i.e. for believing that China could become socialist just by transforming agriculture.

In 1952, a new Land Reform Act proclaimed the need for three further stages of agrarian reform. The first stage began in early 1953, with the government encouraging more peasants – on a voluntary basis – to form Mutual Aid Teams (MATs), which many peasants had begun to set up after 1949. These involved about 6–20 families, with families retaining their own private farms, but assisting each other at busy times. By mid 1953, 40 per cent of peasant families were part of MATs and, by early 1955, this had risen to 65 per cent.¹

Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives

The second stage, again voluntary, saw peasants encouraged by local Party cadres to organise their farms into larger collectives by combining several MATs into Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives (APCs).

These APCs – known as lower-stage (or semi-socialist) cooperatives – each involved between 30 and 100 families, and were intended to improve efficiency and output. Under this system, the land was farmed cooperatively – but still belonged to individual peasant families, which received rent from the cooperatives in return for the use of their land. Families were also allowed to retain some land for their own use – approximately 5 per cent.

Early problems

Initially, the government planned that, by the end of 1957, only one-third of peasant farms would be organised in these APCs. By mid 1953, almost 15 per cent of rural households were members of APCs, and this reform continued during 1953–54. However, the harvests of 1953 and 1954 were relatively poor, which had serious implications for the industrial aspects of the Five-Year Plan. This had calculated that the move to APCs would result in a 30–50% increase in agricultural productivity within two or three years.

According to official statistics, the annual increase in the production of food grains was 3.8%. However, foreign estimates put the growth rate at 2.7% – this barely kept pace with China's population growth of 2.2% annually. In order to feed the growing numbers of industrial workers, the government imposed a relatively high grain tax on peasants, along with high quotas of grain, which peasants had to sell at low fixed prices to the state.

In addition, in 1954, the government banned the sale of surplus grain on the private market – instead, peasants had to sell all surplus grain at the lower prices fixed by the state. This led to food shortages as the drop in peasant incomes led many peasants to flock to the towns instead of growing food in the countryside. While some found employment in factories, many joined the ranks of the unemployed – a problem made worse following the demobilisation of much of the PLA as a result of the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Mao and his supporters then became concerned that the pace of land reform was too slow and was, in fact, undermining plans for developing the national economy. Fears were also expressed about signs of an increased tendency towards rural capitalism, with rising numbers of 'rich' and 'middle' peasants who were reluctant to pool their land with 'poor' peasants. As a result, many 'poor' peasants remained in relative poverty. Finally, there was evidence that rural cadres themselves were becoming more concerned with making money from their farms than with implementing Party policy.

As early as October 1954, the Party's Politburo began to call for a more rapid move towards APCs. The pace was stepped up, and the number of APCs quickly rose. However, there was evidence of mounting peasant dissatisfaction in some areas. As a result, in March 1955, the State Council ordered a temporary halt to further expansion, in case it disrupted food production. Although, in May, the CC ordered a resumption of the APC campaign, it was to be at a more gradual pace.

Stepping up the pace

Mao considered this inadequate and, in July 1955, he spoke of the need to step up the pace, and launch a 'high tide of socialism' in the countryside which, he said, should result in all peasant households being in APCs by 1960. Mao's argument – that conservative Party cadres were holding back the peasant's desire for further reform – was a clear break with the Party consensus up to that date. He bypassed the CC (in which he was in a minority) by presenting his ideas to provincial and regional Party leaders who were in Beijing for a session of the National People's Congress. Mao's plans were then formally ratified by the CC in October 1955.

The pace of cooperativisation was then quickly stepped up: by November 1955, the proportion of households involved increased to 60%. By the end of the year, almost 2 million lower-stage cooperatives had been organised – this marked an increase four times bigger than the figures for mid 1955. By and large, there was no significant opposition to this policy. By then, farming families got about 50% of their income from rent, and 50% from ‘work points’ (exchanged for food and goods) for their work within the cooperatives – this encouraged many families with larger landholdings to participate.

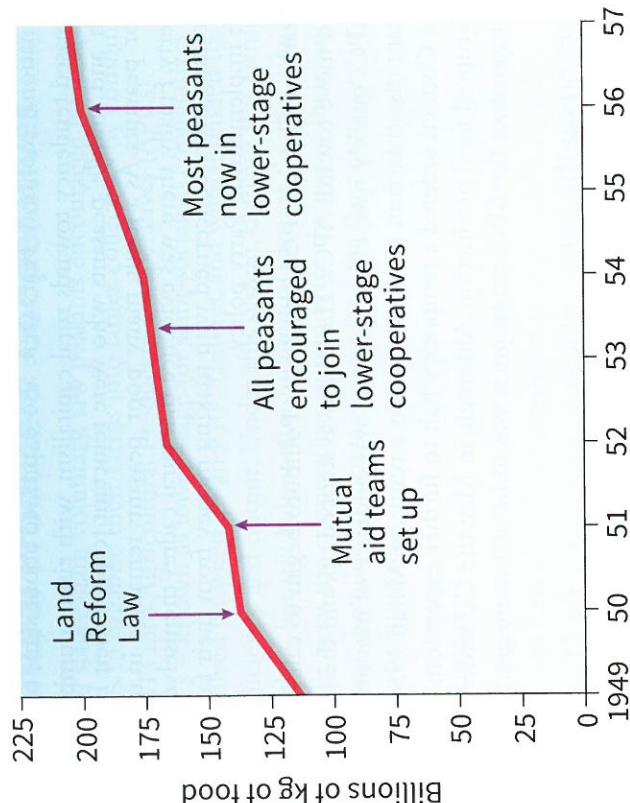


Figure 2.6: The increase in agricultural production achieved in China between 1949 and 1957.

Encouraged by this success, Mao spoke of the ‘victory of socialism’ by the end of the year and, in December 1955, new targets were set: to complete the semi-socialist stage by the end of 1956, and then to move towards fully socialist collectives by 1960. As in the early history of the CCP, Mao was now identifying the peasantry as crucial for China’s ‘transition to socialism’.

The creation of HAPCs began in the spring of 1956, and continued until August 1958. The aim of these HAPCs was to achieve a socialist agricultural system, by making virtually all land collectively owned, with individual peasant families only retaining a small proportion of their land (about 7 per cent of cultivated land by the end of 1957). They were no longer paid rent for their land, which became the property of the cooperative. Instead, they were paid wages out of the profits of the cooperative, based on work points earned by their labour in the cooperative.

This new system gave a bigger role to the local CCP bodies, which were charged with ensuring that plans were implemented in their areas. However, many peasants were unhappy about losing most of their land, and there was a general reluctance to join the new HAPCs. In addition, many of the local administrators struggled to cope with some of the practical issues involved with larger-scale planning.

KEY CONCEPTS ACTIVITY

Change and continuity: Write a couple of paragraphs to show how the HAPCs were (a) different from and (b) similar to the earlier lower-stage APCs.

Consequently, although the assumption had been that these new cooperatives would result in higher agricultural production, the levels actually reached for 1956 and 1957 were lower than planned. It was this situation that led Mao, initially, to consider new approaches in 1957. He reluctantly agreed that state taxes and compulsory grain purchases should be reduced, and that peasants should be allowed to spend more time on their private plots and sell such produce on the private market.

The Second Five-Year Plan

A Second Five-Year Plan was ready to run from 1958 to 62, which was intended to expand light industry, improve workers' living standards, and develop science and technology. However, Mao had become increasingly concerned during 1955 that agriculture was growing too slowly, and so wanted to increase the pace of economic development. To do this, the First Plan had assumed that, as in the Soviet Union, the task of 'primitive socialist accumulation' (obtaining capital funds to finance

industrial development which would create a socialist society) would be achieved by 'exploiting' the countryside.

In fact, at the same time that the CCP was beginning to formulate what became the Hundred Flowers campaign, Mao was already arguing for economic developments that would drop the traditional Soviet model of Five-Year Plans. These ideas eventually became the basis of Mao's Great Leap Forward. However, while he wanted a break from Stalinist industrial approaches, he did not intend to abandon Stalinist methods as regards the political methods of the CCP. As Source 3.3 shows, having sidelined his opponents within the Party, Mao was determined to launch a radical and massive transformation of China's economy.

SOURCE 3.3

Having effectively silenced all real and potential critics [via the Anti-Rightist campaign], Mao moved forward with plans for the rapid shift of all China to the commune system. An opportunity for open discussion and realistic appraisal of the Party's achievements was lost. Instead, Mao announced that China would now begin a 'great leap forward' to catch up with European powers like Britain in just 15 years. What was to become the first great cataclysm to hit the PRC was thus launched by Mao and his supporters in 1958.

Benson, L. 2002. *China since 1949*. Harlow: Pearson Education. p.31

The Great Leap Forward

In February 1958, Mao and his supporters proposed that there should be a simultaneous development of industry and agriculture. In the document 'Sixty Points on Working Methods', Mao described his plan as a 'Great Leap' which, he predicted, would result in China's industrial production overtake developed Western economies such as Britain within 15 years.

This was the signal for what, in 1958, became known as the Great Leap Forward (GLF) – this was a dramatic departure from the Soviet model of gradual economic development. It was also a significant shift in the way the Party thought China should be governed.

technically, the Great Leap was just one part of a new CCP policy known as the 'Three Red Banners'. These were:

- The General Line for Building Socialism (for the simultaneous development of both industry and agriculture)
- The Great Leap Forward (the mobilisation and organisation of labour)
- The creation of People's Communes.

These policies were developed by Mao, and were pursued against strong opposition from many leading CCP leaders. To overcome this opposition, Mao used regional and provincial leaders to begin the reforms he wanted to see put into operation. Particularly important were 'model' communes such as the Qiliyang People's Commune in Henan province, and the Yangyi Commune in Hebei province. Once these had begun, Mao pushed for them to be set up across the whole country.

ACTIVITY

Using those resources available to you, carry out some additional research on the reported achievements of 'model' communes. Then write a couple of paragraphs to explain the extent to which such claims were reliable.

The main focus of the GLF was the countryside, where under-employment (because of 'slack' seasons) meant that peasants could also be harnessed for small and medium-scale industrial production. This was sometimes referred to as 'walking on two legs'. The idea was that basic consumer goods factories, small chemical and fertiliser plants, and tool workshops could be built in rural areas, without peasants having to move to urban areas. These would also be more responsive to local conditions and needs, and would more quickly create the funds necessary for the development of heavy industry in the cities.

Though later the GLF was sometimes presented as showing that Mao was opposed to modern technology, he in fact saw the GLF as a way of developing China's technological base more quickly than the traditional Soviet approach. However, he was concerned about how to develop technology without giving rise to a privileged technocratic élite. He hoped this could be done by making ordinary Chinese people 'masters

of culture and science' and thus not overly-reliant on a technological élite. Several CCP leaders were also aware that the problems of under-employment in rural areas – which had led to peasants moving into towns and so causing unemployment in the cities – had not been fully solved by the First Five-Year Plan.

Mao's aim was to turn China into a modern industrial – and fully socialist – state in a very short time. Although the draft Second Five-Year Plan was never formally abandoned, this is what in practice happened. Instead, the Great Leap Forward became the new Second Five-Year Plan. Yet it soon became clear that this Great Leap Forward had no clearly drawn-up blueprints for how this transformation was to be achieved in practice.

'Revolutionary romanticism'

However, in order to achieve this transformation, Mao did not think merely in terms of financial investments and raw materials – he also saw the right political attitudes and determination as crucial. Voluntarism and revolutionary utopianism were strong strands within what became known as Maoism. The planners began to speak about 'General Grain' and 'General Steel' – these two would bring about the changes Mao and his supporters wanted. What counted, it was said, was not so much skill as enthusiasm and commitment. People were to be enthused by slogans such as: 'more, faster, better, and cheaper'.

In fact, as early as May 1956, Mao had made a speech – 'On the Ten Great Relationships' – in which he stated his aim of distancing China from the Soviet Union by abandoning the centralised Soviet development model of concentrating on industry. Mao began to argue for rapid industrial and agricultural growth via a mass campaign. Instead of basing this on greater levels of capital expenditure, Mao believed that China's huge population could be harnessed to achieve the necessary surplus funds required for rapid development.

For instance, as China lacked sufficient mechanical diggers, it would be necessary for many construction projects – such as dams – to be built with simple tools and labour-intensive manual labour. In many respects, Mao argued that China's under-development and relative poverty would enable it to make this Great Leap Forward. His 'revolutionary romanticism' placed great emphasis on 'revolutionary enthusiasm', and called for a concentration on agriculture, light industry and small-scale industries that required minimum capital investment.

In October 1957, Mao's idea of 'simultaneous development – which was the central core of his Great Leap Forward – was formally adopted by the Party, and was officially approved and launched during the Eighth Party Congress in May 1958. Mao's arguments for the GLF reflected the debates which had surrounded the Hundred Flowers campaign – when Mao had contended that a 'class struggle' was taking place between socialist and bourgeois/capitalist attitudes and ideas.

By implication, this 'class struggle' between proletarian and bourgeois ideas could also be within the leadership of the CCP itself, as well as in society as a whole. His policies, it was said, were vital to secure China's progress on the 'socialist road'.

To secure his position at the top of the Party – where one of his biggest opponents was **Peng Dehuai** – Lin Biao was promoted to the CC and the Politburo. While Liu and Deng were doubtful, in 1958 they remained quiet.

Peng Dehuai (1898–1974):

Peng joined the CCP in 1927, and was a veteran of the Long March. During the Korean War, he was in charge of the Chinese troops sent to defend North Korea from the US/UN invasion. From 1954 to 1959, he was Minister of Defence and one of the ten Marshals of the PLA. His differences with Mao's Great Leap Forward led to an open clash in the summer of 1959. As a result, he was purged from all his posts and placed under house arrest. Briefly brought back by Liu and Deng in 1965, he was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, and was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1970. He died in prison, but was post-humously politically rehabilitated under Deng's rule.

Party criticisms of the GLF

Debates within the CCP about the policies of what became the Great Leap Forward eventually brought to a head a growing division within the leadership between the centre-rightists and leftists over the way in which China should be developed in the future. This had already begun before the end of 1955, with the centre-right increasingly seeing Mao and his supporters as reckless utopians, and Mao seeing these leaders as a

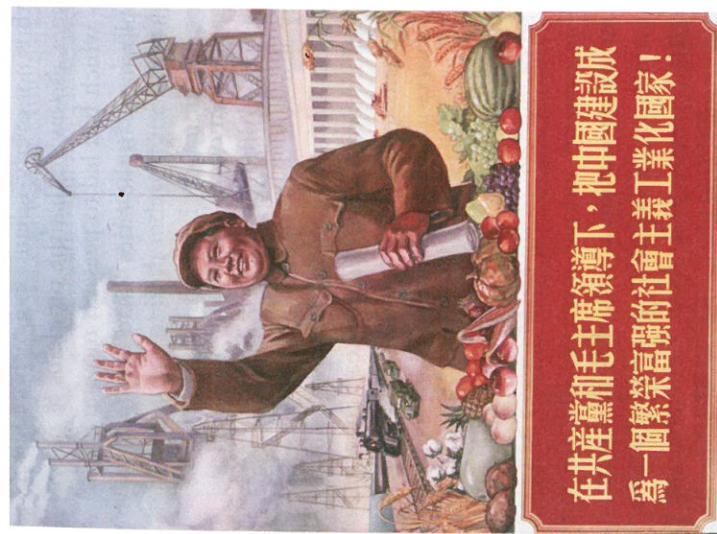


Figure 3.3: A propaganda poster produced during the GLF, depicting Mao.

Mao began putting these ideas forward at the same time as the Hundred Flowers campaign was developing. As with that political campaign, Mao was concerned about the political impact on the CCP of rapid industrial development and the growing influence of urban society. In particular, he worried that the increasing implantation of cadres in urban areas might corrupt the ideological 'purity' of the Party which, before 1949, had had few urban links.

Consequently, he began to think of ways in which to re-emphasise the importance of bringing about the socialist transformation of the countryside, as a way of preventing a love of the relative luxury and easy living in towns and cities from corrupting Party cadres and administrative bureaucrats, which might result in a loss of revolutionary commitment. In many ways, Mao seemed to be wanting to revive the heroic 'Yanan spirit' displayed by the CCP during the Long March and the Civil War in the 1930s. The method chosen was to create massive urban and rural communes.

As early as November 1958, some leading members of the CCP began to criticise the unrealistic targets and the lack of sound planning. A meeting in Zhengzhou saw Mao forced to slow down the push to totally abolish a market economy in rural areas and, in December, a meeting of the Eighth CC at Wuhan confirmed the retreat from certain 'excesses' associated with the drive to establish communes, and revised downwards many of the ambitious production targets set in August.

It was at this meeting that Mao first proposed that he step down from his position as chairman of the PRC. This was accepted in principle, although he remained as chairman of the Party (see Chapter 4).

Another meeting at Zhengzhou in March 1959 confirmed these revised targets and, in April, the CC voted to return powers to the smaller units of Communes. Part of reason for this is that it was soon seen that many of the Communes lacked the facilities and trained personnel to carry out administrative and budgetary functions. Many even lacked the buildings or resources to provide the requisite schools, canteens and care facilities.

Mao's position within the CCP was further undermined by the fact that, by the end of 1958, some areas were also beginning to see resistance from peasants to his new policy. In some localities, PLA units were needed to suppress the resistance. Particularly severe was the insurgency that broke out in Tibet in March 1959. This revolt – which received limited US aid – had begun because of opposition to the 1950s' land reforms, which many Tibetan landowners and peasants saw as breaking the Seventeen-Point Agreement reached in 1951.

By the time the National People's Congress met in April 1959, the insurgency had been easily crushed by the PLA. The government then confiscated the largest landholdings and distributed them to peasants with smaller landholdings. However, these disturbances strengthened the hand of Mao's critics within the Party leadership. In fact, it was at this NPC meeting that Mao was officially replaced as chairman of the PRC by Liu Shaoqi. The divisions within the leadership of the CCP, between those who supported or opposed Mao, were now becoming increasingly apparent.

However, Mao remained concerned that bureaucracy within both Party and state, and the negativity of richer peasants, were undermining the scheme. In particular, this was a serious problem, as the development of industry was dependent on obtaining a growing surplus of grain and raw materials from rural areas.

Implementation of the GLF

Despite lack of funds and equipment, many new dams, bridges and canals were constructed in the early period of the Great Leap. One example was the building of Tiananmen Square in Beijing: begun in 1957, it was completed in 1959, and – important for Mao – was bigger than Moscow's Red Square. Government propaganda published these achievements, in order to inspire people to even greater achievements.

Industry and the GLF

As far as industry was concerned, a number of urban communes were established from the summer of 1958. However, because of various difficulties, this was halted in December 1958. From then until 1960, the CCP concentrated on rural areas. However, in 1960, in order to cope with signs of growing shortages, workshops and vegetable gardens on the outskirts of larger urban areas were hastily organised.

The main change was the reorganisation of urban areas into communes, which were intended as economic, administrative and military bodies. Usually, large factory or residential areas were grouped together, and each commune provided workers with accommodation, schools, hospitals and other facilities. Sometimes though, several towns were merged to form bigger communes. Once economic conditions began to improve, urban communes largely disappeared.

In addition, there was an increase in the number of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and the ending of former owners receiving a share of the profits. There was also a massive increase in the production targets set, and pay differentials and bonuses were ended.

The Rural People's Communes

The main drive, though, was on the establishment of huge rural communes, which were to be formed by merging many collectives together. These were to make huge contributions to industrial production as well as increasing the amount of foodstuffs produced.

in what became known as 'backyard furnaces'. The targets set in June 1958 were extremely high: over 30 million tons by 1959, and 50–90 million tons in 1962.

The campaign urged peasants to produce 'twenty years in a day'. Even individual families felt encouraged to build their own furnaces – this applied to some government ministers, too.

In August 1958, the Politburo also agreed the basis for establishing People's Communes in rural areas. By the end of 1958, almost all of China's peasants had been grouped into about 25 000 huge communes.

The biggest ones took over the political and administrative functions of the counties. Other communes were the size of township (*xiang*) administrations. Each commune contained about 5000 families, or about 30 000 people on average. Some, however, had fewer than 5000 members, while others had over 100 000. This involved an almost total abolition of the private ownership of land, and an expansion and intensification of collective labour.

Communes also had a military function, and the GLF was accompanied by the revival of the idea of a 'people's militia'. By the end of 1959, 220 million people had joined the militia, and over 30 million had been armed with old-fashioned rifles. This soon sparked a debate about the role of the PLA – as some Party members saw the militia as replacing a professional standing army.

This went hand-in-hand with the idea of the communes as exercising political power, and not just being responsible for economic production – with some Party cadres seeing this as a form of 'proletarian' rule. This idea, in particular, seemed to undermine the existing state and Party bureaucracies and these groups quickly took advantage of emerging economic and organisational difficulties to limit the impact of this 'proletarian' direction.

In order to build dams and irrigation systems, urban workers, technicians and Party cadres were sent to rural areas to help the peasants. With large numbers of males employed on such construction projects, it was women who filled their places in agriculture and light industry.

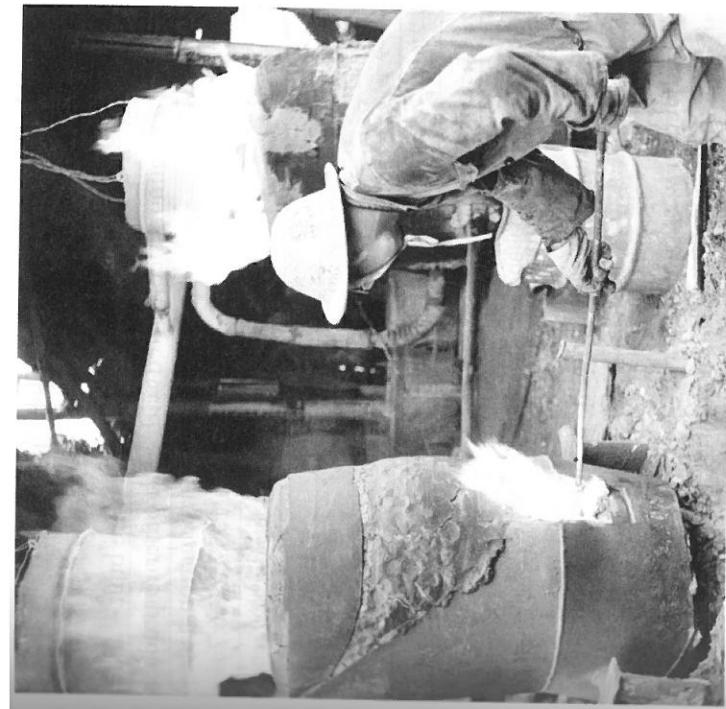


Figure 3.4: An example of the 'backyard' furnaces constructed during the Great Leap Forward.

As in the urban areas, these rural communes were to provide all the amenities people needed: such as schools, banks, health care and communal kitchens. All tools and materials possessed by the collectives were managed by each commune. The state then set quotas for each commune: the state would take a certain proportion, and the remainder was for consumption within the commune.

The people in each commune were divided up into production brigades (often basically a village) and smaller work teams. Each brigade was given a production quota, and each member was 'paid' in work points – though women were paid at a lower rate than men. These work points could then be spent to buy items in the commune stores; some families also received payment in cash.

This 'drive to produce metals locally' involved over 90 million peasants in industrial projects, which required shifting their labour from farming to build brick furnaces in order to produce crude steel. Very often, tools,

nails and metal household items were melted down and added to the ore being smelted.

It has been estimated that over 500,000 such furnaces were built – and different brigades and communes competed with each other to produce the most steel. The government announced that steel production had more than doubled – from 5.35 million metric tons in 1957 to 10.7 million tons in 1958.

	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
Steel	8.80	13.87	18.66	8.70	6.67
Coal	270.0	369.00	397.00	278.00	220.00
Cement	9.30	12.27	15.65	6.21	6.00

Figure 3.5: Production of steel, coal and cement in million metric tons, 1958–1962.

Source: Adapted from J. Fenby, 2013, *The Penguin History of Modern China*, London, Penguin Books, p.414.

As far as food production was concerned, the government tried to increase yields by getting peasants to do ‘deep ploughing’ and close planting. During 1958, such methods appeared to be working – the 1958 harvest produced about 215 million tons of grain, compared to 196 million tons in 1957. However, official figures claimed 375 million tons – though this was later revised downwards to 250 million tons. This distortion was largely the result of over-reporting by local commune officials who were concerned to give the impression they had met – or even exceeded – production quotas set by the state, even when they had not. The problem was that, once the state had taken its tax, many communes were left with insufficient resources.

	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
Livestock					
Pigs (millions)					
Draught animals (millions)					

Figure 3.6: Food production in China, 1957–61.

Source: Adapted from J. Fenby, 2013, *The Penguin History of Modern China*, London, Penguin Books, p.414.

Theory of Knowledge

History and the role of the individual:

While it can be argued that an individual – such as Mao – might have considerable influence on some aspects of the course of history within their own lifetime – such as the GLF – does this also apply to long-range historical developments over several generations? Do transgenerational/historical trends – such as long-term economic developments – have much more importance than any influence an individual might exert within the perspective of generational history?

Grain output	Total grain (million metric tons)	Rice (million metric tons)	Wheat (million metric tons)
1957	185	86.8	23.6
1958	200	80.8	22.6
1959	170	69.3	22.2
1960	143.3	59.7	22.2
1961	147.5	53.6	14.25