

Mao Zedong and the Famine of 1959–1960: A Study in Wilfulness*

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ABSTRACT In late autumn 1958, Mao Zedong strongly condemned widespread practices of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) such as subjecting peasants to exhausting labour without adequate food and rest, which had resulted in epidemics, starvation and deaths. At that time Mao explicitly recognized that anti-rightist pressures on officialdom were a major cause of “production at the expense of livelihood.” While he was not willing to acknowledge that only abandonment of the GLF could solve these problems, he did strongly demand that they be addressed. After the July 1959 clash at Lushan with Peng Dehuai, Mao revived the GLF in the context of a new, extremely harsh anti-rightist campaign, which he relentlessly promoted into the spring of 1960 together with the radical policies that he previously condemned. Not until spring 1960 did Mao again express concern about abnormal deaths and other abuses, but he failed to apply the pressure needed to stop them. Given what he had already learned about the costs to the peasants of GLF extremism, the Chairman should have known that the revival of GLF radicalism would exact a similar or even bigger price. Instead, he wilfully ignored the lessons of the first radical phase for the sake of achieving extreme ideological and developmental goals.

The Great Leap Forward (GLF) went through four major phases: a radical one that began in late 1957 during which increasingly leftist and utopian policies were promoted; a phase of relative moderation that began late in the autumn of 1958 and lasted until the Lushan (庐山) Conference in July 1959, which led to a third phase of renewed radicalism. The fourth phase of retreat from Leap excesses started only in October 1960, when top leaders became aware of the full dimensions of the catastrophic situation in the countryside. This retreat, which included the widespread return to family-farming, lasted until August 1962, when Chairman Mao Zedong called a halt. This article focuses on the second and third phases. It has three specific goals. One is to highlight the information that Mao received in late 1958 on starvation and epidemics. The second is to shed additional light on just how relentlessly Mao himself promoted the anti-rightist campaign and leftist policies after Lushan in the autumn of 1959 and well into 1960. The third is to add to existing knowledge of Mao’s hesitant and inadequate response in the spring of 1960 when

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Table 1: Rural Death Rate per 1,000 People

<i>Year</i>	<i>Death rate per 1,000</i>
1957	11.07
1958	12.50
1959	14.61
1960	28.58
1961	14.58
1962	10.32

Source:

Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1984 (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1984), p. 83.

he learned of severe abuses and deaths. Other major issues such as the role of Mao's lieutenants or regional variations are not dealt with in detail.

Famine was a hallmark of the GLF, as the data on annual rural mortality rates shown in Table 1 demonstrate. These statistics indicate that the third phase of the Leap exacted the greatest toll in human life. Mass famine engulfed numerous villages by late 1959, but the full impact was felt only from early 1960. They also show that during the Leap years excess mortality above the level of 1957 totalled about 15 million people. Widely cited estimates put the number of excess deaths at 30 million people or even more.¹ There were enormous provincial variations. In 1960, death rates in the most severely afflicted provinces were: 68.6 per 1,000 in Anhui; 54 in Sichuan; 52.3 in Guizhou; 41.3 in Gansu; and 39.6 in Henan. In 1957, 147,041 people died in Gansu; in 1960, 538,479. In Henan, 572,000 people died in 1957; in 1960, 1.98 million.² Death rates rose everywhere but in provinces such as Shanxi, Zhejiang, Beijing and Shanghai, the increases were much smaller.

The famine had several causes. Unusually severe natural disasters afflicted large parts of the country in 1959 and 1960, including provinces where the death totals were far above average, such as Henan. Man-made causes, however, far outweighed the impact of natural disasters. One was that the area sown to grain in 1959 was cut, significantly reducing output in that year.³ Others fall under the rubric of the "five winds" which blew during the Leap. One, which destroyed peasant incentives, was the "wind of communism," characterized by

1. For an overview see Carl Riskin, "Seven questions about the Chinese famine of 1959–61," *China Economic Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1998), pp. 111–124.

2. Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China* (Stanford: University of California Press, 1996), p. 38; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 3, The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–66* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 3.

3. Alfred Chan, *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 141–46.

egalitarian rewards such as “free supply,” eating in mess halls, raising the unit of distribution to higher levels thereby equalizing the incomes of poor and rich villages, closing free markets, and confiscating private plots.⁴ This “wind” also aimed at an early transition to commune and even state ownership, which meant that village (team or brigade) resources were freely appropriated and transferred to communes and counties, a practice called “equalization and transfer,” (*yiping erdiao* 一平二调). This allowed for huge increases in local investment for irrigation and industrial construction projects.

The second wind was of “blind directives,” meaning that orders were given which were unrelated to the realities on the ground, such as the setting of wholly unrealistic production targets. The third was a “wind of commandism,” by which peasants were compelled to do exhausting labour and ration grain was seized. The fourth was a wind of “cadre special privileges,” meaning, *inter alia*, that cadres appropriated food when severe shortages arose.⁵ Finally, the “wind of exaggeration of output” led to devastating increases in state grain procurements based on false data. These reached unprecedented heights in the autumn of 1959 and played a major causal role in the famine (see below).

That Mao played the decisive role in the GLF has been thoroughly documented by Alfred L. Chan, Roderick MacFarquhar, Frederick C. Teiwes with Warren Sun, Dali Yang and other scholars, as well as by the official Chinese evaluation of the Mao years published in 1981.⁶ The radical winds were fanned by intense pressures from the top to break through all developmental obstacles by resort to utopian practices, enforced by highly coercive anti-rightist campaigns. Anti-rightist movements swept through the country in 1957 and continued during the Leap. In early 1958, Mao’s withering attacks on Zhou Enlai (周恩来), Chen Yun (陈云) and Bo Yibo (薄一波) for having opposed “rash advance” in 1956 created a situation where “no one could say anything different.”⁷ Rightist, conservative thinking was harshly condemned and was replaced by visions of miraculous and instant progress, calls for bold innovation and for breaking with established conventions.

The anti-rightist campaigns and the consequent “wind of exaggeration” suggests that central leaders were kept in ignorance of the

4. For the role of mess halls in creating a wasteful “tragedy of the commons,” thereby causing famine, see Yang, *Calamity*, especially ch. 2.

5. Ralph Thaxton’s ground-breaking research in Anhui and Henan is shedding new light on the brutal struggle over subsistence and of the cruel treatment of peasants, which Thaxton believes significantly raised the death rate.

6. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 2: The Great Leap Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); MacFarquhar, *Origins, Vol. 3*; Frederick C. Teiwes with Warren Sun, *China’s Road to Disaster* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); Yang, *Calamity*; Chan, *Mao’s Crusade*; and *Resolution on CPC History, 1949–1981* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), pp. 28–29.

7. Teiwes with Sun, *China’s Road to Disaster*, p. xix and Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 2nd ed., chs. 7–8.

realities on the ground and hence were unable to stop excesses, since local officials did not dare to report the truth. This is an important and well-known explanation for the GLF catastrophe, but it is incomplete. A great deal of information did reach Mao Zedong during the autumn of 1958 and the first half of 1959. At this time Mao's own concern with rectifying excesses had signalled that he was receptive to critical reports. In contrast, between about August 1959 and the last weeks of February 1960, the available records indicate that Mao did not receive adverse information, at least partly because of the extraordinary harshness of the anti-rightist campaign of 1959–60. However, some courageous individuals may have submitted truthful reports, meaning that Mao then chose not to act on them since he was fanatically determined to push the Leap to further heights. However, information that the Leap was in trouble did reach him beginning in late February 1960.

The question of information flow, crucially important as it is, cannot be fully resolved without fuller access to archives. This article's case for demonstrating Mao's culpability in the 1960 famine, it should be emphasized, does not depend on whether or not he received negative information after Lushan. Rather it rests on the fact that he had learned in late 1958 how harmful unrestrained radicalism was to the peasants. He should therefore have known that the re-radicalization after Lushan would have similar consequences.

This research utilizes the multi-volume collection, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (建国以来毛泽东文稿), cited as *Mao wengao* (毛文稿) (*Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Establishment of the State*), especially volumes 7–9.⁸ They contain Mao's comments and instructions (*piyu pishi* 批语 批示) during and after the Leap on draft directives submitted to him, corrections of draft *People's Daily* editorials, reports sent up from below, typically by provincial Party committees, or articles he read in inner-Party journals. These he ordered disseminated to various recipients, sometimes only to central leaders, often to provincial Party committees, sometimes all the way down to commune Party committees. His comments communicated his preferences and instructions. It is likely that these volumes were influenced by politically motivated editing, but they are still very valuable. Other documentary collections consulted include *Mao Zedong wenji* (毛泽东文集, *Mao Zedong's Collected Works*), especially volumes 7 and 8, *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* (建国以来重要文献选编, cited as *Zhongyao xuanbian* 重要选编), volume 13 (*Selections of Important Documents since the Establishment of the State*) and Gu Longsheng (ed.), *Mao Zedong jingji nianpu* (毛泽东经

8. Published by Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiu shi (eds.) (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiu shi, 1987 ff). For an analysis of this collection, see Frederick C. Teiwes, "Mao texts and the Mao of the 1950s," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 33 (1995), pp. 128–149.

济年谱, cited as Mao nianpu 毛年谱, Mao Zedong's Economic Chronicle).⁹

A major source is a recently published two-volume biography, *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976* 毛泽东传 (cited as *Mao zhuan* 毛传), edited by the Documents Study Office of the Central Committee. It contains a topically organized chronological record of Mao's views, actions and travels, interspersed with observations about his shifting moods, but also editorial opinions, some of which are very critical. The biography includes citations to unpublished sources including diaries of major leaders.¹⁰ Its claims and assertions need of course to be treated with caution. While the Documents Study Office has a reputation for striving for historical accuracy, various political motives played a significant role in the writing process. Thus, the chapters on the GLF contain no statistics on the famine and, with the exception of the chapter on Lushan, largely ignore top-level decision-making processes.

What Did Mao Learn during the Moderate Phase of the Leap?

“*Production at the expense of livelihood.*” On 5 September 1958 an anonymous letter reported that in three townships in Lingbi (灵璧) county, Anhui, some 500 people had starved to death and that many were too sick to get out of bed. Causes included natural disasters, forced early transplanting of rice and lies about per *mu* output (which presumably led to excessive procurements). In a comment dated 2 October, Mao asked Anhui's first secretary Zeng Xisheng (曾希圣) to investigate and to consider taking appropriate measures. The letter turned out to be accurate. The provincial Party committee criticized itself for negligence and took unspecified corrective steps.¹¹

Mao evidently treated this as an isolated case, but he proved willing to generalize about later cases that came to his attention. In mid-November, he learned about an epidemic of typhoid fever, dysentery and gastroenteritis that had spread to 21 counties and 71 villages in Handan (邯郸) prefecture, Hebei. The cause was that some leading cadres cared only about production and not livelihood. Exhausting labour caused extreme fatigue and lowered resistance to disease, exacerbated by unhygienic mess halls and lack of timely medical assistance. Mao ordered the report to be disseminated at the Wuchang (武昌) conference: “Neglect of livelihood is a *nationwide problem* [my italics], which must immediately be brought to the attention of responsible comrades at all levels of the entire Party, first of all those

9. The first of the three collections was published by Renmin chubanshe, Beijing, 1998; the second by Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, Beijing, Vols. 12 and 13 in 1996 and Vol. 14 in 1997; and the third, by Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe in 1993.

10. Peng Xianzhi and Jin Chongji (eds.), *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1956*, 2 volumes (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003) I am indebted to Professor Roderick MacFarquhar for informing me about this source.

11. Chan, *Mao's Crusade*, pp. 140–41 and *Mao wengao*, Vol. 7, p. 436.

at the provincial, prefectural and county levels. Equal weight must be given to work and to livelihood.”¹²

Later that month, the Yunnan provincial Party committee sent Mao an investigation report on outbreaks of edema – a disease associated with severe nutritional deprivation – as well as dysentery, polio and other illnesses. “Serious deaths” had resulted. The main reason for this “heartbreaking” (*tongxin* 痛心) situation was that during the year’s ongoing, tense and bitter labour battles, leaders should have paid attention to mass livelihood. Instead, some cadres relied on force and violated laws and discipline.

Having learned this, the Yunnan provincial committee convened a meeting of first secretaries of prefectures and cities which examined their leadership style. It decided to rectify officials, and criticize use of force and neglect of living conditions. It called on the secretaries “earnestly to investigate the deaths from edema and sternly to punish violations of law and discipline and of dereliction of duty.” The committee also ordered immediate implementation of the directive of the first Zhengzhou (郑州) Conference (2–10 November) requiring that villagers be allowed adequate rest time. The secretaries were also to investigate and improve the conditions of commune members’ clothing, food, lodging and labour safety.¹³

The Chairman took this report “very seriously.” He commented that “the centre must also bear responsibility and learn a lesson,” a point noted in *Mao zhuan* but not in documentary sources.¹⁴ Mao complained that neglect of livelihood was a “nearly universal (*jihu pubian* 几乎普遍) problem” (italics mine):

Single individuals cannot be singled out and blamed for failure to pay attention to so major an issue as mass livelihood and failure to exercise care. The problem is closely connected with our having assigned tasks that are too heavy. The heavy weight (*qianjun* 千钧) of tasks presses downward on county and township cadres who have no choice but to comply. *If they screw up their courage and do a little less, they’ll be labelled right deviationists* [my italics], so they worry only about production and forget about livelihood.¹⁵

Mao thus put his finger on a major cause of what was wrong with the Leap. He added:

A bad thing can turn into a good thing. Some localities in other provinces may have committed similar mistakes but haven’t learned Yunnan’s lesson because they failed to investigate, especially the county-level cadres who in Yunnan were most responsible. Assigned tasks should not be too heavy. They should not exceed the energy limits of the masses and there should be a margin of safety for the masses. Equal weight should be given both to production and livelihood.¹⁶

12. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 7, pp. 530–31.

13. *Ibid.* pp. 584–86 and *Mao Zedong wenji*, Vol. 7, pp. 451–472.

14. Compare *Mao zhuan*, pp. 904–905 with the two preceding documents.

15. See nn. 13 and 14.

16. *Mao zhuan*, p. 905; *Mao wengao*, Vol. 7, pp. 584–85.

Two months later, on 2 February 1959, Mao spoke of five million cases of edema resulting from neglect of livelihood, but sources differ on whether this was a forecast or a statement of the actual situation.¹⁷

In early April 1959, Mao received a report from Zhou Enlai on spring famine in Shandong, Jiangsu, Henan, Hebei and Anhui. Because these were major grain producing provinces, *Mao zhuan* reports that the Chairman was bound to “pay particular attention.” The Central Disaster Relief Committee also provided statistics on spring famine in 15 provinces. On 17 April Mao asked Premier Zhou immediately to send the reports to the first Party secretaries concerned so as to “save 25.2 million people from two months of urgent danger.” He also asked Zhou to discuss the issue with NPC deputies from 15 provinces.¹⁸ On 26 April Mao commented on and transmitted a report according to which spring famine had stopped spreading in Henan and Hebei. In Shandong, peasants had largely stopped fleeing – migration being a typical response of famine-stricken villagers. The rate of edema had started to drop, but spring famine was still developing in a small number of areas. Mao insisted that all provinces “absolutely must” concern themselves with the spring famine, if only because of the need to safeguard the spring planting then under way. He called for strict frugality by mixing grain with vegetables and husks and for reducing rations in the slack season. The editors of *Mao zhuan* commented that the nationwide spring famine was not due to natural disasters (*bunan xiangxiang* 不难想像) and that Mao was very “touched” (*chudong* 触动).¹⁹

Criticism of leftism. At the Second Zhengzhou Conference held in February and March 1959, Mao Zedong kept up his criticism of leftist abuses in the communes, acknowledging that in the last four months of 1958 “we overreached and were adventurist in a big way.”²⁰ The Chairman castigated appropriation of peasant resources by the communes for investment. Henan communes allocated 50 per cent of their income to capital accumulation, state taxes and administrative costs. Production costs took up 20 per cent, leaving peasants with 30 per cent. “*Peasants have to live* [my italics] and therefore they have to conceal 15 per cent [of production].”²¹ “How can we take over the fruits of the labour of the peasants without compensation?” he asked. Doing so had “elicited a very big fright among them Everyone can see that the relations between us and the peasants are rather tense with respect to some issues. This is a

17. See *Mao nianpu*, p. 446, Mao speaks of 5 million people suffering from edema (500 wan ren hai fuzhong). In *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long Live Mao Zedong Thought*) (Taipei: Zhonghua minguo guoji guanxi yanjiusuo, 1974), Mao says that “there will certainly be X ten thousands of cases (*yiding yao X wan ren (defu) zhongbing*),” p. 278.

18. *Mao zhuan*, p. 943 and *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, p. 209.

19. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 943–44; *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, p. 226.

20. For a full scale account, see MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, Part 2.

21. *Chinese Law and Government*, Winter 1976–77, pp. 12–13.

basic question in our relations with the peasants.”²² Concentration of resources at the commune level “unavoidably” led to resolute resistance among the peasants. “This resistance was good. It made us think about this question At present, the problem isn’t localism but the deviation of egalitarianism, especially the levelling of poor and rich teams, and the excessive concentration of resources.” Mao fired “heavy artillery” to get his point across:

I now support conservatism. I stand on the side of “right deviation.” I am against egalitarianism and “left” adventurism It wasn’t localism but peasants’ protecting their just rights and interests I now represent 500 million peasants and 10 million basic-level cadres who say that it is essential to be “right opportunists,” it won’t do not to persist in right opportunism. If you don’t all join with me in going to the right, then I will be a rightist down to expulsion from the Party.²³

Mao zhuan comments that in order to turn the situation around, the Chairman had to use extreme language. It was clearly necessary, because “not a few people” were unprepared for this “bombshell,” which elicited a “big fright.” They were in a “resistant mood,” although after further explanations, they reportedly began to understand.²⁴

Mao’s subordinates were understandably reluctant to comply with his rightist line, fearing that this would backfire when he chose once more to turn left. In the past the Chairman had promoted a moderate line only to abandon it in favour of a radical one, condemning those who had faithfully executed his earlier wishes. In 1959, the inclination to play it safe was reinforced by Mao’s continued adherence to the GLF project, and because the practices that he condemned could not have been ended without scrapping the entire enterprise. Many officials may well have perceived Mao’s turn to the right as the temporary aberration that it indeed turned out to be.

Later in the spring of 1959, Mao not only justified peasant resistance but told basic-level cadres to “pay absolutely no attention to the directives from a higher level.”²⁵ Mao again reiterated this point in a letter on 29 April sent via an internal publication to officials from the centre down to the brigades, in which he stated that correcting GLF excesses was essential to arouse the enthusiasm for production of basic-level cadres and peasants. When guaranteeing output, he said: “Basically don’t pay attention to those kinds of higher level orders. Only pay attention to reality. Speak the truth and report how much output you can actually guarantee, don’t lie.” According to *Mao zhuan*, this letter was received “very warmly locally.”²⁶

22. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 915–17.

23. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 917 and 922.

24. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 920–21. The term “bombshell” is quoted from the diary of Wang Renzhong, then Hubei’s first Party secretary.

25. *Mao zhuan*, p. 944.

26. *Mao zhuan*, p. 945. The version in *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 243–242, does not include exhortations to disobey higher levels.

In sum, Mao had become well aware that the GLF had already had tragic consequences for rural people. He called for restraint but he failed to address the underlying, systemic problem, which was the GLF itself. Mao clung to the ideas that underlay the Leap even as he asked officialdom to moderate their pressures on the populace.

Mao and the Re-radicalization of the Leap

Why did Mao turn so vehemently on alleged rightists and launch a sweeping anti-rightist campaign towards the end of the Lushan Conference and during the Eighth Central Committee Plenum that followed? The basic cause was that Mao felt assaulted not just by Peng Dehuai (彭得怀)'s famous "Letter of opinion" and his alleged associates but because there were many top-level officials and others in the CCP and society at large who agreed with much of Peng's critique.²⁷ To prevail, Mao evidently concluded that only an all-out counterattack could still the critics.

Mao had come to Mount Lu fully prepared to continue on the Zhengzhou course, and his attitude encouraged other conference participants to speak out on Leap errors.²⁸ At the same time, however, he became concerned that differences of opinion could threaten the unity of Party, "from the Central Committee down to the county committees."²⁹ He pointed out that past experience had shown that setbacks and problems always gave rise to intra-Party divergencies of views. But he insisted that unity should be achieved on the basis of his own appraisal of the Leap, namely that the achievements greatly outweighed the problems. Agreement on this point would then allow for further correction of leftist errors.³⁰

From 3 July, small group discussions quickly revealed that Mao's formula only papered over fundamental differences over policy on the GLF. Zhu De (朱德) for instance, offered the "sharp opinion" that the collapse of the mess halls would not necessarily be bad. Mao, in contrast, wanted to preserve as many of them as possible. Others proposed dropping the slogan, "steel as the key link" and still others advocated an end to mass movements.³¹ A report from the military revealed a great deal of dissatisfaction among cadres in "a few" regiments and battalions, whose "resistant mood" was due to long-standing poor living conditions which they attributed to the GLF. They questioned the necessity and inevitability of communes and attacked local cadres.³² The United Front Department reported doubts voiced by non-Party officials working in state organs about

27. Teiwes with Sun, *China's Road*, p. 210.

28. See MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, ch. 10 and Teiwes with Sun, *China's Road*, Epilogue 1.

29. *Mao wengao*, pp. 331–32. Mao added Party unity to the Lushan agenda.

30. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 965–96.

31. *Mao wengao*, p. 966. Some participants strongly opposed these views.

32. *Mao wengao*, p. 342.

the Leap, the mass steel campaign and the sudden establishment of communes.³³

These criticisms went well beyond what Mao could accept. On 10 July he repeated that “Party unity cannot be achieved if there isn’t a unanimous understanding of the situation.” Non-Party rightists were negating everything. They charged that the CCP had lost “everyone’s sympathy” (*renxin sangjin* 人心丧尽), that Mao resembled the Qin (秦) Emperor, and that each year the burdens on society were rising. Mao added that some bureau and section chiefs in Tianjin said that last year’s Leap “wasn’t worth the effort” (*de bu chang shi* 得不偿失).³⁴

The Chairman feared that excessive criticisms could lead to the full-scale negation of the previous year’s achievements. He demanded that those who failed to see that the ratio of achievements to losses was 9:1 “must be helped to understand” but that no “hats” should be put on them. Mao conceded that from a partial point of view, the errors and shortcomings could be seen as dominant, but not if one examined the whole situation. Mao again warned that without a common understanding the Party could not be united and that this would affect the entire Party and the people. *Mao zhuan* viewed this as “a very important speech. It plunged the Lushan Conference into an entirely unfortunate situation given the existence of severe differences of opinion in the Party centre.”³⁵

It was in this context that the Peng affair erupted. In meetings of the north-west small group, Peng Dehuai had complained that leftism was prevailing over everything and many people were afraid to speak out. One person makes all the decisions, Peng said, thereby directly raising the question of Mao’s role.³⁶ Peng expressed great unhappiness with the atmosphere of the conference. He claimed that what he had said in the small group meetings hadn’t been reported in the Conference bulletin, which is why he wrote his “Letter of opinion.”³⁷ In his message, Peng reversed the Chairman’s appraisal of the Leap by putting “losses” before “gains.” Stinging, he charged that the Leap had substituted “politics in command” for economic laws and that it was a case of “petty-bourgeois fanaticism.”³⁸

Mao had Peng’s letter discussed in small group meetings, where it stimulated vigorous debate. “Not a few people” were critical of the sweeping nature of the letter and of specific formulations. But at the same time, “not a few people praised it, saying that his spirit was worthy of emulation,” showing “utter loyalty” (*chidan zhongxin* 赤胆忠心).³⁹ Minister Zhao Erhlu (赵尔陆) noted that “it cannot but be

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Mao zhuan*, p. 971; MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 203.

35. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 975–76. See also Li Rui, *Lushan huiyi shilu* (*Record of the Lushan Conference*) (Beijing: Chunqiu chubanshe), p. 72.

36. For a detailed analysis of the relations between Mao and Peng, see MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, ch.10, “High noon at Lushan.”

37. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 977–78.

38. See Li Rui, *Record of the Lushan Conference*, p. 133.

39. *Ibid.* p. 141 and *Mao zhuan*, p. 981.

said that the authority of the centre and of Chairman Mao suffered a slight influence.” Shanxi Party secretary Tao Lujia (陶鲁笏) observed that while some of Peng’s formulations could be misunderstood, at present, his spirit was needed. Other participants presented long lists of the errors of the Leap.⁴⁰ Zhang Wentian (张闻天), a Politburo Alternate, offered a systematic theoretical critique of the Leap, affirmed Peng and stated that he should be defended against those who censured him. These critiques were evidently offered on the assumption that the Chairman’s commitment to correcting leftist errors had not changed. But to Mao, they confirmed his emerging conviction that a serious and growing rightist threat within the Party needed to be countered.⁴¹

Beginning with a major speech on 23 July Mao took the offensive. He admitted his own errors of judgement, reiterating some of the major criticisms that he had made in the first half of 1959. But he asserted that after the corrections made in the spring, the masses did support the Party and that cold water shouldn’t be poured on their enthusiasm. The thrust of the speech was a blistering attack on waverers who panicked in the face of temporary difficulties and who were only “30 kilometres away from the rightists” (*li youpai hai you sanshi gongli* 离右派还有三十公里). Mao threatened to go back to the hills and restart the revolution, causing the “atmosphere of the meeting to become very tense.” The audience was “shocked” (*zhendong* 震动) by this abrupt switch in line. Forced to take sides, his lieutenants obeyed their leader and turned on Peng.⁴² The editors of *Mao zhuan* conclude that

... because Mao Zedong’s “left” guiding ideology had not basically been changed, and “leftism” was corrected only to a degree, it was inevitable that once he raised the anti-rightist question it would go beyond the scope that he himself would have permitted The Lushan conference caused class struggle to reach directly into the Party and caused class struggle to be further expanded. This was still another mistep (*shizu* 失足) of Mao Zedong’s.⁴³

The anti-rightist campaign of 1959–60. The ferocity and scope of the post-Lushan campaign was a response to widespread opposition to the very idea of reviving the Leap and the abrupt abandonment of the moderate policies of the spring of 1959. This was manifest not just at the Lushan meetings but also among local cadres and ordinary people. In August and September 1959, *Xinhua neibu cankao* (新华内部参考, internal reference) reported critical comments from various localities. One higher-ranking cadre, for instance, complained that mobilizing the masses once more had become difficult. They needed to rest and their leaders were unwilling to lead. In Xinyang (信阳) prefecture, Henan, such ideas were “fairly universal among both

40. Li Rui, *Record of the Lushan Conference*, pp. 138–140.

41. *Mao zhuan*, p. 983.

42. *Ibid.* pp. 984–88.

43. *Ibid.* p. 1010.

basic-level cadres and the masses.”⁴⁴ One individual in a Shanxi prefecture doubted that a new anti-rightist drive was needed. “The masses don’t understand and are confused.”⁴⁵ In Tangshan prefecture, Hebei, about half the masses were also said to be confused by the reversals. One cadre complained that procurements had left only 5.5 ounces of grain per day. “Who wants to produce more? How can people not be rightists? No matter how well the higher levels talk, when I get back [from the meeting] I won’t transmit [their words] to commune members.”⁴⁶

Most important, local criticisms were directed not just at unspecified “higher levels” but at the centre and at Mao Zedong himself. A report in early September on 17 provinces quotes “some” as saying that “the centre was responsible. Without the centre’s slogans the wind of communism wouldn’t have blown. Now they talk about right deviation but it would be better to oppose ‘left’ deviation.”⁴⁷ Among Guangdong higher cadres, some said that perhaps Mao didn’t see what was really going on when he visited the early commune model in Xushui (蓄水) county, Hebei, yet he concluded that the consciousness of all peasants was very high, so he plunged the country into the communization movement, causing many problems. In a “big debate” in the Guangdong Bureau of Water Conservancy and Electric Power, 20–30 per cent of cadres slandered the GLF as based on force. Some said: “Last year the Party suffered a rather big blow to its prestige among the masses, the biggest in a decade” Individuals “even held the extremely preposterous” view that “Chairman Mao had never committed a line error but now he has”⁴⁸ Given such scepticism and recalcitrance in the countryside, only a harsh campaign of anti-rightist repression could have secured compliance with the renewed leftist line.

The impact of the 1959 campaign was far larger than the better known anti-rightist campaign of 1957, when around half a million cadres and intellectuals had been penalized. After the collapse of the Leap, investigations revealed that in 1959–60 some 3.65 million cadres and Party members had been labelled or purged as “right opportunists,” of whom 70 per cent were adjudged to have been wronged. In addition, 3.7 million ordinary citizens had been wrongly labelled.⁴⁹ Mao, who supported these rehabilitations, observed that “we” made a mistake in disseminating the resolution of the Eighth Plenum that purged Peng Dehuai and inaugurated the anti-rightist campaign below the county level. The document should have stayed at the county level, thereby allowing for continued local implementation of the policies of the Zhengzhou and Shanghai conferences held in the

44. *Neibu cankao*, No. 2848, 16 August 1959.

45. *Neibu cankao*, No. 2854, 25 August 1959.

46. *Neibu cankao*, No. 2851, 21 August 1959.

47. *Neibu cankao*, No. 2866, 9 September 1959.

48. *Neibu cankao*, No. 2852, 28 August 1959

49. MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 3, pp. 179 and 206–207.

spring of 1959. Because the document was disseminated, he allowed, “good people who spoke the truth were declared rightists and even counter-revolutionary elements.”⁵⁰

It was Mao Zedong who personally and relentlessly stoked the anti-rightist fires, promoting class struggle from August 1959 to the spring of 1960. When he corrected a draft of the Eighth Plenum Communiqué, he added the point that “at present the main danger comes from right deviationist thinking, which has been growing among some cadres” and that Party committees “at all levels must resolutely criticize and overcome such thinking.”⁵¹ Rightists existed not only at the centre but in the provinces as well:

For instance, Anhui’s secretary Zhang Kaifan (张恺帆). I suspect such people are speculators who sneaked into the Party. During the transition from capitalism to socialism, they stand on the side of the bourgeois class. They scheme to sabotage the proletarian dictatorship, split the CCP, and organize factions in the Party, similar to the Gao Gang (高岗) anti-Party clique. Their current anti-socialist programme is to oppose the GLF, the people’s communes....

According to *Mao wengao*’s explanatory comment, Zhang had gone to Wuwei (无为) county in Anhui in July 1959, where he rectified cadre work style and took measures to “save the sick and prevent deaths.” He closed down the county’s messhalls – a particularly severe offence in Mao’s eyes – and helped the masses to cope with production and livelihood. Zhang and another official were purged as members of an anti-Party alliance, expelled from the Party and dismissed from their government posts. Three years later, Zhang was rehabilitated as having correctly implemented the spirit of the Zhengzhou and Shanghai meetings of March and April 1959. “The centre concurred.”⁵²

As the Chairman saw it, the countryside was now the site of a “fierce and deep-going class struggle”⁵³ Half a year earlier, at Zhengzhou, Mao had said that the Party lacked mass support but did not blame the upper middle peasants for this state of affairs. Now, he held, opposition was caused by a “part of the upper middle peasants and a small number of cadres representing their interests.” Mass struggle against upper middle peasants consequently became a major feature of the campaign. In December 1959, Mao took positive note of articles in *Qingkuang jianbao* (情况简报), an internal paper, on how Guangdong, Hebei and Gansu were refuting “slanders” by upper middle and older peasants, who attributed bumper harvests to good techniques rather than to politics, thereby opposing Party leadership and causing peasants to lose confidence in next year’s Leap.⁵⁴

50. *Mao Zedong wenji*, Vol. 7, p. 273. Mao’s explanation cannot of course stand up to scrutiny, if only because a veritable media blitz of anti-rightist agitation blanketed the country after Lushan.

51. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 415–16.

52. *Ibid.* pp. 431–33.

53. *Ibid.* pp. 554–55.

54. *Ibid.* pp. 639–640. For Henan’s struggle see *ibid.* pp. 606–607.

Revival of radical policies. Mao closely connected the revival of the Leap with the anti-rightist campaign: “Without stern opposition to rightism, the GLF cannot succeed The opportunity must not be lost; it will not recur.”⁵⁵ According to *Mao zhuan*, he persuaded himself that the anti-rightist campaign had aroused mass “enthusiasm” and was spurring production increases. “Instant results would be attained (*ligan jianying* 立竿见影).”⁵⁶ Consequently:

the entire country again started to set up county and commune industries as well as water conservancy projects on a large scale, mess halls, and hog-raising farms, etc. Some basic construction projects that originally were supposed to have been curtailed were launched anew. High targets, the winds of exaggeration, of issuing orders, and of communism once again spread unchecked. During the period from winter 1959 to spring of 1960 economic work was characterized by the most severe, unthinking “leftism.”⁵⁷

Specifically, Mao supported rapid grain procurements, large investments in construction projects, an early transition to commune ownership and universalization of mess halls.

First, for Mao, the success of the 1959 summer and autumn procurement campaigns was closely linked to “resolute opposition to rightist slackening of effort Anti-rightism and going all out are at present the key to grain work”⁵⁸ While he warned against excessive grain purchases, in the context of anti-rightist fervour, such cautionary notes had no chance of being obeyed. In late August and September, Mao uncritically ordered the dissemination of boastful provincial reports that grain purchases had been accomplished in record time, sometimes in only a week. One such, from Guizhou, was to be sent to a wide variety of agencies, including Xinhua, and by telegram to the provinces. His accompanying observation contained a blistering attack on rightists.⁵⁹ In mid-September, he accepted as “correct” a Gansu pledge to complete the purchase work by the end of the month.⁶⁰ Commenting on the Soviet textbook on political economy, which he and top leaders studied at length in the late autumn and winter, Mao now adopted Stalin’s 1928 term, “tribute” to characterize procurements. “The vast majority of China’s peasants,” he noted, were sending tribute “with a positive attitude.” Only 15 per cent, in other words the upper middle peasants, were opposed.⁶¹ In December 1959, he considered as “worth reading” a *Qingkuang jianbao* article on Guangdong’s plan to overfulfil grain tax

55. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, p. 425. Mao received numerous provincial reports on the anti-rightist campaign from various provinces in late summer and autumn 1959, which he usually praised.

56. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1019. The book notes that this formulation was the origin of the Cultural Revolution concept of “grasping revolution and grasping production.”

57. *Ibid.* p. 1050.

58. *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 12, p. 469.

59. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 479–480 and 495–94.

60. *Ibid.* pp. 529–530

61. *A Critique of Soviet Political Economy by Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), pp. 88–89.

and purchase plans and to do so in a mere 20 days.⁶² Also in that month, he approvingly accepted an investigation report on 14 provinces that showed that “the conditions of grain distribution are good” and that “the life of commune members is markedly improving.”⁶³

The reality stood in striking contrast to this rosy picture. In 1962, Mao acknowledged that procurements in 1959 and 1960 had been excessive because “we insisted” that there was enough grain.⁶⁴ In the late autumn of 1959, the regime assumed that 270 MMT of grain had been harvested when the corrected figure was only 170 MMT. In that year procurement net of resales to the countryside amounted to 28 per cent of output, a record. In 1960, the actual harvest of 143.5 MMT was less than half of planned output, and this time, the net amount procured was 21.5 per cent. In contrast, in 1957, when the harvest totalled 195 MMT, only 17.4 per cent of net output was procured.⁶⁵ These extraordinary levels of extraction were caused by the “wind of exaggeration,” the need to offset losses from disaster areas, and the “huge increase in demand for commercial grain” that resulted from a renewed rural influx into the cities and which required that “grain requisitioning tasks were raised time and again.”⁶⁶

Secondly, with regard to investment, Mao now praised the example of Chang’an (长安) county, Shaanxi, where the accumulation rate had been raised to 45 per cent, in sharp contrast to his stinging criticism of accumulation by Henan communes in the spring of 1959 (see above). In autumn 1959 he seized upon the idea of investing in large-scale collective pig-raising, involving establishing farms for 10,000 hogs. He had read a report from a Hebei commune that a very poor team had got rich by hog-raising, solving the problems of meat consumption and fertilizer while doubling grain output, all in one year. He asked that the report be publicized in *Neibu cankao* to encourage the whole country to do the same, calling for “driving ambition” in this regard.⁶⁷ “Mao was extremely happy ... and the whole country embarked on a large-scale hog-raising movement.” *Mao zhuan* commented that given the political climate and the commune system, this campaign would inevitably become a source of the revival of the “communist wind.”⁶⁸

Thirdly, Mao strongly supported the revived campaign to achieve an early transition to commune ownership. In late December he praised reports from various provinces on progress in this regard,

62. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 606–607.

63. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 625–26.

64. *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui*, pp. 431–32. In early 1961, *Zhongyao xuanbian* carried a document on the excess purchases. See Vol. 14, pp. 67ff.

65. For procurement and output statistics, see Carl Riskin, *China's Political Economy: The Quest for Development* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 137, table 6.7.

66. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1081.

67. *Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought*, p. 173.

68. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1019–1020; *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 585–86 and 615.

including plans for a transition in three years. In the north-east, some communes had already moved to full all-people's (state) ownership. A Sichuan commune, having largely converted to commune ownership, now planned to transit to state ownership in three years. Liaozhou (柳州) prefecture, Guangxi, planned to move towards commune ownership by increasing accumulation for the construction of commune industry. Mao praised these "excellent materials." He asked whether full commune ownership could be achieved in five years and state ownership in ten, or, given the rapid growth of commune-level industry, perhaps in two to three years, calling for discussion of the issue in 1960. When the Chairman posed such a question, it was certain to elicit competitive responses as localities sought to outdo one another in achieving his goals.⁶⁹

Finally, Mao zealously promoted the spread and universalization of the widely detested mess halls. On 18 March 1960, he commented that a Henan report "makes the reader happy," because 99 per cent of the people were members of mess halls, of which only 2.8 per cent were poorly run."⁷⁰ Mao warmly praised as "scientific" a Guizhou report from which he concluded that the transition from socialism to communism could be achieved in five to ten years. The whole country should follow without exception. He said that "it would be very good if in 1960, the country's mess halls could reach Guizhou's level," though where leadership isn't as strong it could be done in 1961 or even later. He went on to call for a large spring conference on mess halls and stipulated that these materials could be sent down to the commune Party committees. His comments were in the nature of an order and were widely implemented.⁷¹

In early March 1960, the Chairman ordered wide dissemination of a Jiangsu report on cadre rectification designed to combat the lack of enthusiasm of many cadres for the continuation of the Leap. They doubted the value of continued high-speed construction, failing to understand that the Leap would go on throughout the 1960s so as to lay the foundation for the communist transition. There was, the Jiangsu committee noted, "fairly universal" inadequate understanding of the spontaneous capitalist tendency of small producers and part of the upper middle peasants. Cadres often recalled the time when the Party had united with the upper middle peasants (prior to collectivization). They didn't understand the protracted nature of class struggle and the need thoroughly to destroy (*xiaomie* 消灭) the "ideology of the capitalist class as well as petty bourgeois thoughts and habits."⁷² The Chairman commented that these were indeed real problems, that political education was needed, decreeing that the

69. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 8, pp. 628–29.

70. *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 80 and 86–88. Mao clung to the widely detested mess halls until spring 1961.

71. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 44–46; *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1057–58, and *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 43–51 and 80–89.

72. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp 52–53.

problems that beset communes, which he had begun to recognize (see below), should not be an excuse for cadres to twist central directives in a rightist direction.⁷³

The Onset of Negative Reporting and Mao's Hesitant Response

On 21 February 1960, Mao ordered dissemination of a report by Li Xiannian (李先念), the Politburo member in charge of commerce, on the urgent necessity for additional provincial transfers of grain, oil and cotton so as to meet the needs of disaster areas and of the largest cities. Li wrote that “in some disaster areas, the ‘sprouts’ of spring famine (*qinghuang bujie* 青黄不接) had already appeared” and that state grain stocks were depleted. In Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Liaoning, grain reserves were very low and supplemental shipments were needed. Li asked Mao to authorize the immediate establishment of a national headquarters to take charge of the transfers. A breakthrough campaign (*tuji yundong* 突击运动) must be launched to secure shipments of grain. The Party committees of the provinces concerned must regard the transfers as an urgent political task requiring all-out mobilization. Grain transport must have priority; export of grain must temporarily give way. These measures necessarily entailed increased procurements from non-disaster areas. Mao apparently simply approved these proposals.⁷⁴

The Guizhou report on mess halls dated 24 February, on which, as just noted, Mao lavished praise, also mentioned instances of flight, edema and deaths in several places. In one Zunyi (遵义) city commune, there were 1,000 cases of edema and 200 deaths, the result of a poor harvest, natural disasters and excessive grain purchases. The local Party committees had failed to arrange mass livelihood after the state purchase task had been fulfilled. This did not apparently upset the Chairman; he merely insisted that frugally run mess halls could solve the problem.⁷⁵

In early March, Mao ordered distribution of a set of instructions issued by Guangdong's Party committee on solving five problems in the communes: the communist wind, false reporting, use of force, corruption and waste. One of Guangdong's measures called for re-examination of the past year's grain distribution in order to ensure that commune members would actually receive the stipulated amounts, a clear indication that this had not been the case. Guangdong decreed that at present only the conditions for transition to commune-level ownership should be created, and that “equalization and transfer” and the “five winds” needed to be curbed. The Chairman approved these anti-leftist measures, pointing out that there was an “urgent necessity to correct shortcomings and errors”

73. *Ibid.* pp. 52–53.

74. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1080; *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 29–31.

75. *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 45–51, especially p. 47.

which, if not corrected, would spread. They had been caused by cadres of a low political level whose praiseworthy aims to advance China rapidly had made them too eager. *Mao zhuan* comments that since the centre and Mao had not altered the orientation (*fangzhen* 方针) towards transition to commune ownership, it was foreseeable that these restrictions could not be put into practice, given the continuation of the anti-rightist campaign and of two-line struggle.⁷⁶

The responses by other provinces to the Guangdong document showed that they had the same problems. When Mao Zedong learned that winds such as that of communism continued to blow he reacted with “great anger.” In an act of extraordinary self-deception, he disregarded his own anti-rightist diatribes:

In some counties and communes they’ve forgotten about last year’s Zhengzhou decisions and the 18 stipulations of last April’s Shanghai conference. The winds ... all are blowing. Some commune officials are wildly arrogant and are absolutely undisciplined, daring not to ask higher levels for permission when they engage in equalization and transfer. In addition, the three winds of corruption, waste and bureaucratism are also blowing strongly and they too harm the people.⁷⁷

The Chairman called for dismissal of those responsible and the return of goods appropriated by higher levels. Those whose “errors were extremely serious and whom the masses hated the most” should be punished.⁷⁸ He blamed the county committees for failing to pay attention to abuses, charging them with dereliction of duty.⁷⁹ According to *Mao zhuan*, the Chairman then decided that he had been too severe. He modified the text, emphasizing that “the national situation was very good, that the vast majority of cadres were good people doing good and praiseworthy work.” Those comrades whose errors were not serious and who were willing to correct them should be educated, helped to correct mistakes and allowed to work.⁸⁰ This lenient language sharply contradicted Mao’s own words, and no doubt reflected his unwillingness to admit the existence of large-scale crisis conditions.

On 18 March, Mao ordered distribution of a “very good” Shandong report on arrangements for mass livelihood. In a “portion” of counties, communes and brigades, living problems had not been adequately resolved. In serious cases, people were fleeing and edema had surfaced. In response, Shandong increased grain sales and relief funds for 24 backward counties. Mao commented that the “problem of lack of grain must be thoroughly and seriously solved in a short period time.”⁸¹ Four days later, another report from Shandong cited “lack of grain and abnormal deaths in the countryside.” His response was not dissimilar to that of late 1958: “Comrades, please look at this.

76. *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 32–44, and *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1053–57.

77. *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 32–44; *Mao zhuan*, p. 1056.

78. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 98–102.

79. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1056.

80. *Ibid.* p. 1056.

81. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 62–63.

These problems exist in every provincial-level unit. If no attention is paid and they are not dealt with, they will certainly create a rift with the masses”⁸² But he did not act to find out how widespread these problems were.

On 29 March, Zhou Enlai received an anonymous letter from a member of the CPPCC on serious grain shortages in counties in several prefectures in Anhui. Deaths from starvation had occurred, some peasants had taken flight, others had abandoned their children and cadre style was “vile.” Zhou forwarded the letter to Anhui first secretary Zeng Xisheng with a request to investigate. Perhaps, Zhou noted, the report was true but it could also have been exaggerated. “But these kinds of isolated events occur in every province, especially those which last year experienced natural disasters, and attention must be paid to them.” He asked Zeng to report back to him. The footnote to this entry in Zhou’s chronicle added that Mao had also called for attention to deaths from starvation in his comment on the situation in Shandong.⁸³ But clearly, neither Zhou nor Mao felt a sense of urgency about these deaths.

On 31 March, Mao commented on a Ningxia-Hui Autonomous Region (Ningxia Huizu zizhiqu 宁夏回族自治区) Party committee investigation of Ning (宁) county on false reporting, retaliation against whistleblowers and serious violations of discipline, behaviour which Mao considered absolutely intolerable. Yet, the Chairman saw this as an isolated case and not as part of a broader pattern.⁸⁴ Even as he learned from the provinces that the “five winds” were still blowing, he refrained from examining the Leap itself, calling merely for cadre rectification.⁸⁵

A month later, Mao had more doubts, as indicated by meetings held in late April and early May in Tianjin, Jinan and Zhengzhou. On 30 April, in Tianjin, Tan Zhenlin (谭震林), the Politburo member in charge of agriculture, told Mao that ten inspection teams had been sent to Fuyang (阜阳) prefecture in Anhui, perhaps in response to the letter that Zhou Enlai had received in late March, but found that there had been only individual deaths, that most sick people had been cured and that only a few had taken flight. (These teams must have unquestioningly accepted what local officials told them, since Anhui was then in the throes of massive famine.) Tan also told Mao that a team had been sent to Daming (大名) county, Hebei, from which shortages had been reported. But in fact, people were eating a catty of grain a day, not 8 or 12 ounces as evidently had been claimed.

The Chairman observed that neither the centre nor the provinces knew the real situation. Tan told him that the counties as well as some

82. See *ibid.* pp. 98–102 for Mao’s comment and a summary of the Shandong report.

83. Shen Liqi *et al.* (eds.), *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976 (Chronicle of Zhou Enlai)* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1992), Vol. 2, p. 299.

84. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 118–19.

85. For Shanxi, see *Zhongyao xuanbian*, Vol. 13, pp. 238–251 and *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 134–36; for remarks on Jiangsu, see *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 125–26.

prefectures controlled grain but the provinces didn't know this. When asked why Henan grain sales had been so huge, Tan said that this showed that people must have grain because otherwise they wouldn't be able to work. "Mao Zedong sighed with relief, greatly comforted. So now I am more persuaded," he said. *Mao zhuan* added that a large number of deaths had by then occurred in Henan, especially in Xinyang prefecture. "But Mao didn't know this and neither did Tan Zhenlin."⁸⁶

After the meeting in Tianjin, Mao stopped in Jinan, Shandong, where he inquired about the disastrous drought and spring famine. First secretary Shu Tong (舒同) responded that the province was trying to cope. Leaders of some counties had denied having problems while other counties reported urgent trouble. Local cadres lied about output and distributed grain privately. Given Shandong's grain shortages, Mao asked whether the centre should transfer grain to the province. Shu Tong replied that the centre had promised 100 million catties but that Shandong had already transferred out 350 million. Mao expressed hope that Shandong could turn the situation around.⁸⁷

On 6 May 1960, in Henan, Wu Zhipu (吴之圃), perhaps the most fanatically leftist of the provincial leaders, informed Mao of a severe drought but insisted that the wheat crop was doing pretty well. He reported that there were many cases of edema, around 100,000, mainly in Xinyang prefecture and perhaps several tens of thousands had died. (Investigations in the autumn of 1960 revealed a death toll of 1.36 million people or 14 per cent of the population.⁸⁸) The death rate rose but Wu claimed that it was hard to differentiate between those who had died of natural causes and those who had died of edema. Neighbouring prefectures were less severely affected. Apart from drought, the main causes were that in 1959 too much grain was consumed on basic construction projects and in the anti-drought struggle. The *Mao zhuan* editors added that the main causes were excessive requisitioning of grain and the "five winds."⁸⁹

While the Chairman began to doubt the reliability of reports from below, calling for investigations, little was apparently done at this time.⁹⁰ No major effort was made to determine how widespread deaths from starvation were. He continued to believe that the places adversely affected were few or isolated and that by doing some work, the difficult situation could be ameliorated. Even as he railed against the "five winds," he was unwilling to jettison the GLF. Yet, as his biographers observe, critical problems in the economy were evident so that by April and May the "economic situation was very tense." For instance, Shanghai textile plants were closing because of lack of cotton, a situation that had not occurred since 1949. Mao's

86. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1069.

87. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1071–72.

88. MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 3, p. 3.

89. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1072–73.

90. Only in January 1961 did Mao call for intensive village-level investigations.

biographers characterize the Chairman as “extremely passive,” which reportedly caused Premier Zhou “even greater anxiety.”⁹¹ Zhou, in other words, didn’t dare take independent corrective initiatives without his master’s approval.

During the summer, the rural situation became still more critical. In the face of severe drought, the “five winds” including transition to commune-ownership continued in spite of “clear central prohibitions.” While production targets were scaled down, in the absence of “genuinely forceful, concrete measures,” nothing changed.⁹² In June 1961 Mao noted that the 1960 Beidaihe (北戴河) Central Work Conference, held from 5 July to 10 August, spent 70 to 80 per cent of its time on international matters and that only at the end was the grain problem discussed, but that the winds of communism and of equalization and transfer were not criticized.⁹³ Only in October 1960 did Mao begin to grasp the dimensions of the rural catastrophe, especially after he learned about the shocking death toll in Xinyang prefecture, Henan. “The serious extent of the problem frightened him (*chijing* 吃惊) His frame of mind was extremely grave. He couldn’t sleep. He stopped eating meat from October.” His weight dropped to 75 kg. “The centre decided that Mao should take a rest, but there was no way of getting him to comply.”⁹⁴ With Mao’s support, the regime abandoned the Leap but leftist practices were difficult to eliminate.⁹⁵

Five Explanations

Why was Mao so reluctant to give up the GLF? One reason is that he desperately wanted to prove Peng Dehuai and other Party critics wrong, thereby restoring the loss of prestige that he evidently felt he had suffered during the first phase of the Leap.⁹⁶ A second is offered by *Mao zhuan*, whose authors criticize the Chairman for failing to practise what he had preached since the early 1930s, namely “no investigation, no right to speak.”

The sources from which he derived his understanding of the situation narrowed more and more and it became very difficult to discover the true situation at the grassroots. Failure to investigate what was actually going on in the villages was a result of his age and various objective circumstances. He relied on reading reports from below, which not only were sloppy (*cuzhi daye* 粗枝大叶) but contained many false reports.⁹⁷

But even if had he insisted on talking to grassroots cadres and ordinary peasants, it is inconceivable that anyone would have dared tell him the truth. Mao was caught in a web of deception of his own

91. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1073 and 1081.

92. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1087.

93. *Mao Zedong wenji*, Vol. 8, p. 274.

94. *Mao zhuan*, pp. 1097–98.

95. See Macfarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 3, Parts 1 and 2.

96. MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, pp. 293 and 335.

97. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1073.

making. His credulousness was itself a major obstacle. When travelling to cities, he talked to provincial, prefectural and county leaders: “Everyone reported news that made Mao very happy.” On 22 September 1959, en route to Zhengzhou, he was shown an unrepresentative field that promised to yield a bumper crop. “Such goods news formed an important basis for his decisions and had a big impact on him.”⁹⁸ On tour in the latter part of October, “Mao Zedong very much believed that the domestic economic situation had seen a marked turn for the better The stories were good and the materials [he was given] were good. These kinds of news were constantly transmitted to Mao Zedong and he happily received them.”⁹⁹ In this same vein, in mid-March 1960 he ordered dissemination of a report from Hunan that claimed that “mass welfare and health were generally quite good.”¹⁰⁰ In April 1960, Liao Luyan (廖鲁言), the minister of agriculture, told Mao that the 1960 harvest would be about 300 MMT (the actual total was less than half, 143.5 MMT). When Mao asked whether it could be more, Tan Zhenlin responded in the affirmative. *Mao zhuan* claims that this was based on the exaggerated reports received from below and not on self-serving lies.¹⁰¹

A well-known third explanation, offered by Mao himself, was that the escalating Sino-Soviet conflict distracted the leadership from domestic issues. Table 2 gives a count of entries in *Mao wengao* devoted to foreign and domestic affairs. In 1959, the vast majority of entries concerned domestic matters. In 1960, in contrast, the sharp drop in domestic entries from April to June and especially from July to September clearly suggests that while the Leap festered on, Mao’s attention was indeed focused on other matters. Only in October did he once more turn to domestic issues.¹⁰²

A fourth explanation lies in Mao’s fanatical commitment to achieving socio-economic breakthroughs by means of all-out mobilizational campaigns. He knew that these were destabilizing and could easily get out of hand. But he also believed that defects could be corrected once the campaign had achieved its core objective. If corrective intervention came too early, attainment of the project itself might be jeopardized. This may explain the Chairman’s disinterest in information that contradicted his image of a countryside storming towards communism. As MacFarquhar observes, Mao’s “demonic desire for earthshaking progress ... demanded exaggerated claims of success,” overriding his pragmatic side of paying attention to costs.¹⁰³

98. *Ibid.* p. 1014.

99. *Ibid.* p. 1019.

100. *Mao wengao*, Vol. 9, pp. 64–65.

101. *Mao zhuan*, p. 1070.

102. *Ibid.* p. 1097.

103. MacFarquhar, *Origins*, Vol. 2, p. 333.

Table 2: Entries in *Mao Wengao* Devoted to Foreign and Domestic Affairs

<i>Period</i>	<i>Domestic (%)</i>	<i>Foreign (%)</i>	<i>Total</i>
1959 January–June	123 (78)	35 (22)	159
1959 July–December	137 (82.5)	29 (17.5)	166
1960 January–March	40 (80)	10 (20)	50
1960 April–June	19 (41.3)	27 (58.7)	46
1960 July–September	9 (23)	30 (77)	39
1960 October–December	37 (75.5)	12 (24.5)	49

Note:

Routine greetings are omitted, but relevant greetings, e.g. in times of conflict, as with SU, are included. I thank Ashley Esarey for assisting in the count.

Source:

Mao Zedong wengao, Vols. 8 and 9.

A fifth explanation, related to the fourth, is that Mao was fully prepared to accept mass death as the price of progress. This would suggest that the concerns that Mao voiced from November 1958 to July 1959 and again from October 1960 on were an aberration and did not reflect his real attitude. The case for this is made in a recently published book by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*.¹⁰⁴ In their brief chapter on the GLF, entitled “The Great Leap: ‘half of China may well have to die’,” the authors claim that “Mao knowingly starved and worked these tens of millions of people to death.”¹⁰⁵ In support of this thesis, they cite numerous primary and secondary sources. Some of these, however, are used in misleading ways. Compare, for example, Mao’s response to the Yunnan report on deaths from illnesses due to overwork and neglect of livelihood cited above with their dismissive appraisal: “... Mao’s response was to pass the buck: ‘This mistake is mainly the fault of county-level cadres’.” Similarly, they claim that Mao’s response to the reports he received about the spring 1959 famine cited above “... was to ask the provinces to ‘deal with it,’ but he did not say how.”¹⁰⁶

A striking instance of the use of misleading quotations is from a speech given on 21 November 1958, around the time when Mao expressed strong concern about deaths in Yunnan:

“Working like this, with all these projects, half of China may well have to die. If not half, one-third, or one-tenth – 50 million – die.” Aware that these remarks might sound too shocking, he tried to shirk his own responsibility. “50 million

104. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

105. *Ibid.* p. 457.

106. *Ibid.* p. 446.

deaths,” he went on, “I could be fired and I might even lose my head ... but if you insist, I’ll just have to let you do it, and you can’t blame me when people die.”¹⁰⁷

The Chinese original, however, is not quite as shocking. In the speech, Mao talks about massive earthmoving irrigation projects and numerous big industrial ones, all requiring huge numbers of people. If the projects, he said, are all undertaken simultaneously “half of China’s population unquestionably will die; and if it’s not half, it’ll be a third or 10 per cent, a death toll of 50 million people.” Mao then pointed to the example of Guangxi provincial Party secretary, Chen Manyuan (陈漫远) who had been dismissed in 1957 for failing to prevent famine in the previous year, adding: “If with a death toll of 50 million you didn’t lose your jobs, I at least should lose mine; whether I should lose my head would also be in question. Anhui wants to do so much, which is quite all right, but make it a principle to have no deaths.”¹⁰⁸

Chang and Halliday take literally Mao’s penchant for talking about mass death in highly irresponsible, provocative, callous and reckless ways, exemplified by his famous remark that in a nuclear war, half of China’s population would perish but the rest would survive and rebuild. In 1958, when ruminating about the dialectics of life and death, he thought that deaths were beneficial, for without them, there could be no renewal. Imagine, he asked, what a disaster it would be if Confucius were still alive. “When people die there ought to be celebrations.”¹⁰⁹ In December 1958 he remarked that “destruction (*miewang* 灭亡, also to dying out) [of people] has advantages. One can make fertilizer. You say you can’t, but actually you can, but you must be spiritually prepared.”¹¹⁰ As the authors rightly note, these kinds of remarks could well have justified the indifference of lower-level cadres to peasant deaths.¹¹¹

The accusation that Mao deliberately exposed China’s peasants to mass death during the GLF is not, however, plausible. It is true that, in his zeal to advance, he was willing to inflict severe, sometimes extraordinary hardships on peasants. But large-scale famine threatened a core claim to legitimacy of the regime. Implicit in the communist “liberation” was the promise that China’s history of famines was a thing of the past. Thus, when Mao finally began to grasp the scope of the 1960 famine, he strongly supported corrective measures. On a more practical level, Mao was acutely sensitive to the absolute necessity of preserving the peasants’ “enthusiasm for production,” meaning that at a minimum their subsistence needs had to be met.

107. *Ibid.* p. 458.

108. “Zai Wuchang huiyi shang de jianghua” (speech at Wuchang conference), Center for Chinese Research Materials (Oakton, VA, nd.), Vol. 13, pp. 203–204.

109. Mao wengao, Vol. 7, p. 201.

110. “Liuzhong quanhai jianghua” (speech to the Sixth Plenum), 9 December 1958, in Center for Chinese Research Materials, Vol. 11-B, p. 148.

111. Chang and Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, p. 457.

In sum, understanding Mao's complex and contradictory motivations is a daunting undertaking. What matters for the purposes of this report is that after Lushan, Mao Zedong dismissed from his mind the lessons that he had learned and acted on a year earlier when he sought to rectify unrestrained leftism, albeit in a limited way. This act of wilful abdication of his duty as the country's undisputed leader makes him directly responsible for the immense catastrophe that ensued.