

# CHINA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

MODERNIZATION  
AND TRADITION



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## **THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD AND ITS AFTERMATH, 1958–1961**

Among the more radical members of the leadership, a number of factors converged to create a mood of impatience with the status quo. The Hundred Flowers campaign seemed to disprove the idea that China could move gradually toward socialism, with people's attitudes inevitably moving toward acceptance of socialist goals. Furthermore, there was increasing dissatisfaction with the speed at which progress was taking place. Grain production in 1957 had risen only 1 percent vis-à-vis a population growth of 2 percent. Collectivization had been introduced in 1955–1956, and there were concerns that staying too long at the intermediate stage this represented might make it harder to advance to the next stage.

There was also a growing realization of the limitations that the Soviet model could have for China. The USSR had sent a number of advisers to the PRC after its founding, to assist in fields as varied as economics and ethnology. While there is no evidence that these advisers attempted to apply inappropriate Soviet experiences rigidly to the Chinese situation, they had an understandable tendency to think in terms of the categories and procedures they knew best. Since labor shortages were characteristic of the USSR, while labor surpluses were more typical in China, the Soviet tendency to substitute capital for labor did not work well in the PRC. Chinese leaders wished to put the country's huge population to work to increase production. Consistent with Mao's long-standing belief that Marxism must be made compatible with the society to which it was applied, the Great Leap Forward would implement communism in a way compatible with Chinese characteristics.

There was also a growing conviction that China's problems should be attacked by levels larger than cooperatives and villages. The leadership was in addition concerned with the growth of bureaucracy, feeling that increases in production were being held back by a morass of officially generated red tape. As well, new status differences were becoming evident. These were antithetical to the egalitarian ideas with which the party had come to power. A separate but related factor was

Mao's deeply felt desire to reduce differences between the city and the countryside. Partly this was influenced by Marxist ideology.

Particularly in his earlier writings, Karl Marx had been very much concerned with reversing the alienation of man from the product of his labor that the specialization inherent in the factory system had caused. In the communist society he envisioned, someone could be a craftsman part of the day and by turns a fisherman, hunter, and literary critic at other times. Mao Zedong, as well as many non-Marxist Chinese of this era, had been concerned with the urban-rural gap in their own country for many years. Mao seems to have felt the gap particularly keenly. The product of a rural upbringing, he had been looked down on by various CCP leaders, including the Returned Student group, both because of his relative lack of sophistication and because of his emphasis on the peasants. They had referred to him disparagingly as a *tugong*, or "earth/dirt communist." Mao felt strongly that there should not be a dichotomy between the ideologically pure (i.e., communists) and the technocrats, who were assumed to be infected with bourgeois ideology: China needed those who were "both red and expert." The Great Leap thus contained a radically egalitarian message.

It was also Mao's conviction that international forces were favorable to a bold step forward at this time. In October 1957, the Soviet Union had launched Sputnik, the world's first satellite, and had made breakthroughs in intercontinental ballistic technology earlier in the year. Mao, who often wrote poetry and was fond of using poetic metaphors in his speeches, was moved to commemorate these developments in a heavily publicized speech arguing that "the east wind is prevailing against the west wind." He urged all progressive forces, including the Soviet Union, to take advantage of these favorable developments and march boldly onward.

Not surprisingly, the vehicle chosen to seize the moment was a mass campaign, in this case the Great Leap Forward. We now know that there was serious opposition within the leadership on whether to undertake this bold experiment. While these people would later be denounced as "a small handful of rightists," they were powerful enough at the time to hold back the start of the movement for several months. Interestingly, in light of what it tells us about the nature of CCP politics, the person who gave the speech launching the Great Leap Forward was Liu Shaoqi, who would later be revealed as its main enemy. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how frequently

it occurs that someone who appears to be an enthusiastic proponent of a particular policy is in actuality opposed to it.

The early stages of the Leap involved experiments with larger-scale units of organization during the agricultural slack season of winter 1957–1958. Several cooperatives were encouraged to work together on projects such as dam building and other water-control work. The idea was to rely on local people and resources in preference to asking for state aid. Photographs of thousands of peasants scraping out tons of earth with crude shovels and even rice bowls in order to build dams appeared in newspapers in China and around the world. Outsiders' image of China changed from one of a sheet of loose sand to that of an army of ants, attacking enormous problems through group organization and sheer force of numbers. One author even entitled his study of Mao *Emperor of the Blue Ants*, the color being a reflection of the baggy blue jackets and pants that nearly all Chinese wore during this period.

In industry, hortatory slogans appeared on factory walls, urging the workers on to new goals. At first these were realistic; "Overtake England in steel production in fifteen years" was a plausible target. Although the PRC's 1957 production of steel was well below that of Great Britain, Chinese levels had been rising while Britain's steel production remained essentially the same. Also, Britain is a much smaller country than China. Hence, the PRC could reasonably be expected to draw even with England within fifteen years. However, the time period of the slogan was progressively reduced from ten years to five and even, in a couple of areas, to three years. The slogan "More, better, faster, and cheaper" appeared everywhere. A visiting Soviet scientist recalled seeing such a banner over the door of a maternity hospital where, given China's enormous population, he found it most inappropriate.

There was also an intensification of a campaign, begun somewhat earlier, to send young urban intellectuals (defined as those who had graduated from at least junior middle school) to the countryside to "take root, flower, and bear fruit." Known as the *xiangiang*, or "sent-down" youth, they were expected to share their intellectual knowledge with the peasants while at the same time learning agricultural techniques that would enable them to raise more food for China. This fit in well with Mao's desire to reduce the differences between city and countryside. In general, however, it did not fit in well with

the desires of either peasants or urban youth. Though it would have been dangerous to protest publicly, peasants resented having thrust upon them large numbers of youth who were unused to hard physical labor and ignorant of farm work. The *xiaxiang* youth tended to abhor the rigors of country living and farm chores, and to miss both their families and the amenities of city life.

Another slogan associated with the Great Leap Forward is "walk on two legs," with one leg representing the modern (as, for example, heavy industry with its need for expensive machinery, or, in the health field, up-to-date Western medical procedures) and the other leg representing the traditional (labor-intensive spinning and weaving techniques in the textile industry, and traditional Chinese medicine in the health field). The scientific method and research projects of all sorts were castigated as bourgeois. Correct political views and peasant wisdom were extolled; "bourgeois scientific objectivism" was ridiculed.

In August 1958, large-scale agricultural units called communes were formed by combining several cooperatives. The economic implications of these will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. Politically and sociologically as well, the communes entailed enormous changes. Backyard blast furnaces were intended to teach peasants the rudiments of industrial techniques, thereby helping to reduce the differences between city and countryside, and also to solve the problem of getting steel to the rural areas. This had been a problem because of poor transportation networks in the countryside. There was an attack on private property; peasants had to give up not only their private plots but, in many cases, personal possessions like wristwatches and jewelry.

Work points as a measure of income were abandoned in favor of the communist formula "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." In addition to its appeal to ideological orthodoxy, this formula would free bookkeepers of the necessity to record work points so that they too could spend more time in the fields. People were to eat at messhalls so that they did not have to waste time cooking, and incidentally so that the state could control how long they spent at meals. Theoretically, there would also be less waste if one cooked in large quantities. Housewives were to be freed from working at home by providing nurseries for their children, so that they too could become productive. Old people were to enter

"happiness homes for the aged." In some areas, there were direct attacks on the nuclear family; even married workers were to live in dormitories that were segregated by sex.

New agricultural techniques were mandated as well, including use of a double-wheeled, double-bladed plow, planting seeds more closely together and deeper than before, and utilizing land heretofore regarded as unsuitable for crops. While a few brave individuals protested at the folly of some of these ideas, most had been cowed into silence by the antirightist campaign. For a party that prided itself on implementing the slogan "from the masses to the masses," this was the very antithesis of the mass line.

For a while it seemed that the enthusiasm of the Chinese people knew no bounds. There were stories of activists who arrived at work "on the backs of green frogs" (at first break of day), of elderly and sick people who toiled eighteen hours in the fields to show their love for Chairman Mao, and of agricultural production that tripled the previous year's harvest. Such tales did not last too long. The resolution on setting up communes was introduced on August 29, 1958; by October there began to be reports of party officials meeting to discuss "certain problems" that had arisen in the course of the Great Leap Forward.

The November issue of the party's theoretical journal *Red Flag* contained an article entitled "Have We Already Reached the Stage of Communism?" It may fairly be described as an exercise in how to sound enthusiastic about the Great Leap Forward while actually trying to damp down the enthusiasts. After some discussion, the author concludes that "we" have not yet reached communism and that therefore it would be appropriate to modify the practice of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" to what he called the "half-supply" system of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his work." The real reason, of course, was that most people had reacted to the previous formulation by not working very hard. Some were responding to unreasonable pressures by passive resistance; others actively engaged in sabotage by destroying property and killing their animals rather than turn them over to the state.<sup>6</sup>

In December, it was announced that Mao would not stand for re-election as chairman of the PRC, though he retained his top party post. The stated reason was that he wished to spend more time in

theoretical study and writing. The actual reason appears to have been that the failures of the Great Leap Forward had increased the power of a less ideologically hard-line faction within the party. Liu Shaoqi was elected to assume the post vacated by Mao. The Wuhan resolution introduced by the party central committee in that month also called for “doing away with blind faith,” established definitively that China was in the stage of socialism rather than communism, and confirmed the “half-supply” system.

This and other subsequent directives dismantled much of the Great Leap Forward. For example, messhalls were told to improve the variety of food that was served, and their size was reduced. Their clients often had to spend so long traveling from their jobs to the messhalls that any economies gained from serving large numbers of people were lost by lengthening commuting time to and from the halls. The decision of whether to leave children at nurseries permanently was left to parents, who were guaranteed the right to bring their children home with them at any time. No elderly person was to be forced to enter a “happiness home”; if she or he wished to stay with relatives who were amenable to the arrangement, the state would not interfere. People were also to be guaranteed the right to eight hours of sleep each night. Private plots were returned as well, along with the right to keep a few pigs and chickens. The unit of accounting was no longer to be at commune level, but at that of the brigade—the former cooperatives, where it had been at the beginning of the Leap. Not long after, it devolved still further, to the level of the team.

Liu’s replacement of Mao as head of the PRC government did not end dissatisfaction within the elite. The descending economic spiral continued to exacerbate differences of opinion among them, and in August 1959, at a party meeting held at Lushan, it was officially admitted that many of the accomplishments claimed for the Great Leap Forward were false. The defense minister, marshal Peng Dehuai, attacked Mao for his role in planning the Leap. Peng was sacked for his bravery, being replaced by marshal Lin Biao. Mao, however, remained a low-key presence during the next several years.

Remedial measures could not bring immediate improvement. Crop damage is not undone overnight; decimated animal populations, particularly in the case of large animals who have few offspring, took several years to recover. Internationally, there were

problems as well. China's repudiation of the USSR model, and Mao's urging the Soviet Union to take a stronger ideological line, had been done in such a way as to anger the Soviet leadership. In 1960, the USSR withdrew its advisers. Many left with their plans and blueprints, leaving scientific research projects incomplete and factories half-built.

Even the weather was uncooperative. Some areas suffered from drought, others from floods, typhoons, and plagues of insects. While some saw this as the seven biblical plagues and others as a manifestation of the mandate of heaven, there were manmade causes as well. One reason for the plague of insects was a prior mass campaign against sparrows that managed to kill many other types of birds as well, thereby removing the natural predators of various types of insects. Some of the floods were due to the collapse of dams and dikes that had been poorly built by people who were not skilled in construction techniques.

Bourgeois expertise, whether red or not, began to seem desirable again. Accepting Max Weber's paradigm for modernization, the Great Leap's attack on specialization and expertise was antithetical to the modernization the leadership hoped to achieve. Indeed, it appears as a Luddite attack on modernization, with disastrous effects to the society as a whole. In this parlous state, the value of redness paled by comparison to the value of expertise. It was just such a realization that must have prompted the then party secretary-general Deng Xiaoping to remark, "It does not matter whether it is a black cat or a white cat, so long as it catches mice." The capitalist and communist systems and their results rather than cats and mice were widely assumed to be what Deng meant by his comment. With actual physical survival at stake, people resorted to desperate measures. Making do, rather than ideological orthodoxy of any sort, was the imperative of the time.

The years 1959 through 1961 are known as the "three lean years." There were widespread shortages of nearly everything: food, clothing, fuel, and even paper. An African student at a Chinese university recalled his surprise at seeing an otherwise demure young lady lift her skirt high above her waist before sitting down. He later discovered that, since the cloth ration was so low, she was trying to make the thin cotton material last for another year. The party's rationing system is in fact credited with preventing many more deaths than the famine



might otherwise have claimed. Many years later, official sources admitted that eight million people had died of causes related to the Great Leap Forward. Unofficial sources estimated the figure at between twelve and twenty million. Whatever the actual number the CCP, having expended years of effort attempting to win the loyalty of skeptics and the uncommitted, had lost considerable prestige with the masses in whose name it claimed to govern.

### **THE SOCIALIST EDUCATION MOVEMENT, 1962-1966**

By 1962, production levels had returned to their pre-Great Leap levels. In October, the party Central Committee met, with Mao Zedong appearing in a more prominent role than he had for some time. The meeting's official communiqué contained references to class struggle, "opportunistic ideological tendencies within the party," and "the spontaneous tendency toward capitalism." The situation that lay behind these rather abstract words became clearer when the Taiwan government released a series of documents obtained when a group of its frogmen-commandos staged a raid on a commune near the Fujian coast. Called the Lianjiang Documents after the commune from which they were obtained, they describe a situation believed to be fairly typical of the early 1960s in China.

The documents reveal the existence of considerable concern with so-called unhealthy tendencies, among which were

- A "spontaneous tendency toward capitalism," meaning that peasants preferred to make money on their own rather than on behalf of the collective.
- Relaxed social controls that had allowed gambling, speculative activities, and abandonment of the farmlands.
- Revived "feudal practices," including religious observances, marriages contracted for economic reasons, spiritualist scams, and even sorcery.
- A decline in cadre morale, with cadres complaining that the efforts necessary to fulfill their responsibilities far exceeded the rewards. Many wanted to resign.
- Cadre misappropriation of public funds for private use.

The next several years saw a major effort to correct these unhealthy tendencies and reintroduce socialist orthodoxy through another mass campaign, the Socialist Education Movement.

One measure adopted in the campaign was to send higher-level cadres down to work in the countryside, grouped into work teams. There was a feeling that isolation of the cadres from the masses had caused many of the country's present problems. By living and working with the people they allegedly served, cadres could better understand their problems and therefore deal with them more effectively. By early 1963 the experiences gained thereby were summarized, and the Socialist Education Movement began to take shape as a systematic campaign.

In May 1963 the party issued a document known as the Draft Resolution of the Central Committee on Some Problems in Current Rural Work or, more simply, the First Ten Points. It called for the formation of Poor and Lower Middle Peasant Associations to oversee management at the commune and brigade levels and carry out the four cleans. This entailed the cleaning up of accounts, granaries, properties, and work points.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, the associations were told to avoid interfering in routine administrative affairs. The distinction between interfering to find corruption and not interfering with routine administrative affairs was, needless to say, difficult to make. In order to make cadres spend more time in production and less on administrative work, the number of work points they could claim for the performance of administrative tasks was greatly reduced—to 1–2 percent from 4 percent or even, in extreme cases, 10 percent. Cadres were also given minimum numbers of days they needed to spend in productive labor, ranging from sixty for county-level cadres to 180 for those at the brigade level.

The next two years saw successive efforts to refine this effort to reimpose ideological orthodoxy without harming production. In September 1963, the Central Committee issued what became known as the Later Ten Points, and in June 1964 the Eighteen Points. This was followed in September 1964 by the Revised Draft of the Later Ten Points and by the Twenty-three Points in January 1965. These and other documents caused no small amount of confusion. People remained bewildered by the scope of activities of the Poor and Lower Peasant Associations, as mentioned above. They were also unable to distinguish between legitimate sideline occupations, which the party

approved of as a way to increase production, and "spontaneous capitalist tendencies," which it condemned.

What is clear from a careful reading of these successive documents is the leadership's growing pessimism that the unhealthy tendencies could be corrected soon: Longer and longer time frames are proposed. A hardening of the class line is also obvious, with a greater tendency to view problems as antagonistic (requiring struggle and violent methods to resolve) rather than nonantagonistic and capable of solution through persuasion and education. There were hints that the errant lower-level cadres had protectors at higher levels. In 1964, a new "politics takes command" campaign was introduced, and the PLA was held up as a model of political and ideological virtue for all Chinese to emulate. The cult of Mao study began to be propagated nationwide, and on a feverish pitch. At the same time, the targets to be struggled against began to be found at higher and higher levels in the party and government hierarchies. While there is no direct link between the Socialist Education Movement and the convulsive Cultural Revolution that followed it, the latter can be seen as a logical extension of the former.<sup>8</sup>