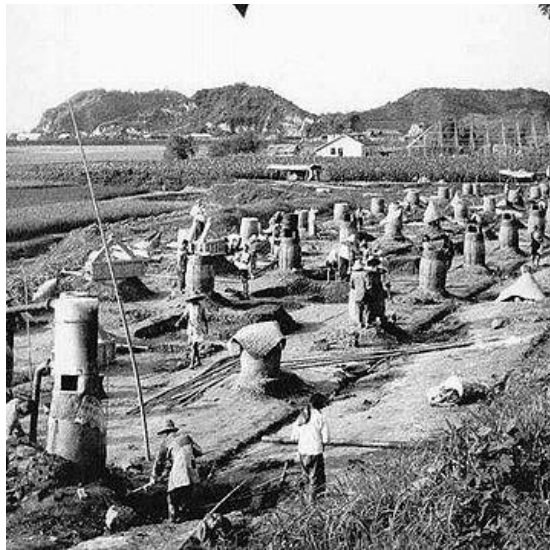


5

Early Economic Development of the PRC, and the Great Leap Forward (1953-1962)

When Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, China was still a largely agrarian economy. Mao wanted to industrialize as quickly as possible. This required creating a large surplus in the agricultural sector, to feed the increasing population and to finance industrial expansion. The Chinese leaders differed in how best to do this. The 'gradualists' (Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and others) favoured a measured process of collectivization, making use of existing professionals and expert personnel. The 'radicals' (Mao and his allies) wanted a rapid and wholesale collectivization, applying to all sectors of the economy. They regarded professionals as 'bourgeoisie' and 'revisionists' and believed that the desired results could be obtained by sheer force of numbers, if the 'masses' could be energized. Mao's authority ensured that his vision prevailed, with the launch of the Great Leap Forward. This was a vast experiment in the headlong socialization of the means of production. It was ultimately a catastrophic failure.



Backyard furnaces during the GLF, 1958 (Wikipedia: retrieved on 12 November 2023 from

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Leap_Forward.)

The principal actors and their main offices

Mao Zedong (1893-1976)

Chairman of CCP (1943-1976); Chairman of PRC (1954-1959); Chairman of CMC (1954-1976).

Zhou Enlai (1898-1976)

Premier of PRC (1949-1976); Minister of Foreign Affairs (1949-1958); First V-C of CCP (1973-1976).

Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997)

Chairman of Central Advisory Commission (1982-1987); Chairman of CMC (1981-1989); Chairman of PCC (1978-1983).

Lin Biao (1907-1971)

V-C of CCP (1958-1971); First V-C of PRC (1964-1971); Minister of National Defence (1959-1971).

Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969)

Chairman of PRC (1959-1968); First V-C of CCP (1956-1966).

Chen Boda (1904-1989)

Chairman of the Cultural Revolution Group (Mao appointment, 1966-1970); Member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo (1966-1970).

Chen Yun (1905-1985)

Vice-Chairman of the CCP (1956-1966); First Vice-Chairman of the PRC (1954-1964)

Chen Yi (1901-1972)

Mayor of Shanghai (1949-1958); Foreign Minister of China (1958-1972)

Peng Zhen (1898-1997)

Mayor of Beijing (1948-1966)

Peng Dehuai (1898-1974)

First Minister of National Defence (1954-1959)

Deng Zihui (1896-1972)

First Vice-Chairman of the PRC (1954-1965)

PRC: People's Republic of China; CCP: Chinese Communist Party; CMC: Central Military Commission; PCC: People's Consultative Conference

Early Economic Development of the PRC, prior to the Great Leap Forward (GLF)

The first Five-Year Plan (1953-57), and Russian assistance

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, came to power in 1949, after defeating the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). After an initial period of extension and consolidation of its authority, and with the ceasefire of the Korean War, the CCP was ready to roll out its First Five-Year Plan for economic development, with a view to building China speedily into a strong and wealthy modern nation. For China to be wealthy, strong, and modern had been a core desire of China's educated elite since the late Qing, after they had witnessed China's poverty and weaknesses, the West's wealth and strength, and Japan's rapid rise to join the Western ranks, after transforming herself along Western lines. However, given the 'leaning to one side'¹ policy of Mao's China, and the fact of having fought America in Korea, there was no possibility of borrowing money or technology, or of getting any help, from the West. For financial and other support China had to look to the Soviet Union, which was more advanced than China. After the October Revolution in 1917, Soviet Russia had continued to develop its modern industries through a number of five-year plans. At this point, China was entering her 'Soviet Period'; at no other time in China's history have her leaders made her so dependent on another country.

True to its Soviet inspiration, the emphasis of the First Five-Year Plan was on large-scale, capital-intensive, and technically advanced projects in heavy industry, such as steel-making complexes, oil refineries, and machinery plants. While China invested 25 billion yuan, the Soviets provided credits at the rate of 60 million yuan per year, all to be repaid. Approximately one half of the total industrial investment was allocated to the 156 Soviet-aided projects. Although the Soviet financial help came with a high price, the Soviet support was crucial. Russia sent 10,000 experts to help with the installation, operation, and other services for these plants, many of which came as kits with blueprints, to be assembled in China. It was indeed an impressive technology transfer. In connection with these projects, 28,000 Chinese received training in the USSR.

The Chinese also tried to satisfy the increasing need for skilled manpower through expansion in higher education. During 1952-1957, university and college expenditure tripled. Student enrolment shot up, with one-third specializing in engineering. Students from poor families received tuition and maintenance grants.

¹ This meant resolutely supporting the Communist bloc and opposing the imperialist and capitalist camp led by the USA.

Some made a '8-1-50' pledge: 8 hours of sleep and 1 hour of exercise per day while devoting 50 hours to studying per week.

The boundless admiration of the Chinese for everything Russian during this time led them to adopt many features of the Russian higher education system. Colleges were geared to producing graduates in natural sciences and engineering. Out of 200 institutions of higher education, only 13 offered a broad range of subjects in arts and humanities in addition to science and technology. Russian academic advisers assisted in course planning and Russian textbooks were widely used. A big effort was made to produce translated Chinese editions of specialized Russian textbooks. Russian replaced English as the second language taught in schools. In November 1952, a Soviet-inspired Ministry of Higher Education was set up, to prescribe specialist training programmes from the centre.

China also adopted Russian management methods, an authoritarian system that set targets and dispensed with management committees and worker representation. China's ideologically motivated workers were turned into pieceworkers on a highly differentiated scale of pay. The industrial plants were scattered strategically in inland centres like Baotou (in Inner Mongolia province) and Wuhan (near the Yangtze Valley), to redress the balance between the more advanced coastal cities, like Shanghai and Tianjin, and the interior. New railways were built to service some of the industrial complexes.

Because of a profound sense of urgency among the CCP leaders, Mao in particular, to develop China at an extraordinary speed, the First Five-Year Plan had unrealistic goals of doubling industrial production and increasing agriculture production by 25%. Although these goals were not reached, it was deemed a remarkable success on the whole, on account of its many positive achievements. Concentration of investment on heavy industry led to an 18% annual growth rate in this sector. The overall economy grew at a respectable 10 percent per year. Primary school children enrolment doubled, middle school and higher education greatly expanded, and agricultural output increased by about 3.8%. There was also improvement in public health.

During this same period of the Five-Year Plan, the collectivization of agriculture, a massive structural change of productive relationship in the countryside, was to be accomplished, as we shall now discuss.

The agricultural producers' cooperative movement: the gradualist approach versus Mao's urgency

Although the First Five-Year Plan modelled on the Soviet experience was reckoned a major success, there were shortcomings that led the Chinese planners to conclude that differences between Russia and China

called for an approach tailored more specifically to the concrete realities in China. China was less developed, poorer, and much more agriculturally based in the 1950s than Russia was in the 1920s. The lopsided emphasis on investing in heavy industry did not create sufficient jobs, and left other sectors underdeveloped. Developing light industry, which called for fewer technical elements and used locally produced raw materials and available skills, could be done more easily and would create a lot more employment. This would also reduce the China's dependence on Russian aid. Since investment in industry depended largely on agricultural surplus, the Chinese leaders had to find ways to increase agricultural production sufficiently to feed the increasing number of people, and also to have sufficient surplus left over to finance industrial expansion. While it was certainly necessary to invest in heavy industry, China had also to focus more attention on light industry and agriculture, a development strategy Mao called 'walking on two legs'.

Mao had been grappling especially with the question of how to get the Chinese people to produce more, particularly those engaged in the agricultural sector. Most of the population still worked in the agricultural sector, which somehow had to be squeezed to produce sufficient surplus to enable China to leap forward in industrial production, to attain modernity in the shortest possible time. Being a revolutionary who believed in socialism, Mao considered that socialized agriculture was superior to private ownership of farms, and his recipe for increasing agricultural production was collectivization of agriculture - the larger the collective units the better. But common sense suggested that such drastic economic and social change had to be carefully managed; it was not a thing to be rashly rushed through. It should be gradual, step-by-step, and agricultural production must not be disrupted. Perhaps the Chinese could learn from the Soviet example. Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture was known to have produced disastrous results, including famine. It provoked fierce opposition from the peasants, especially the kulaks (rich peasants), who perished in their millions. China needed to find her own way.

The first step of the CCP-managed revolution in agriculture was to redistribute the landlords' and rich peasants' land to the tenant farmers and landless peasants, and this was largely completed by 1952. This act was more political than economic, and it was motivated by ideas of social justice. Although peasants were pleased to become landowners, the individual plots were too tiny to offer good prospects for economic advancement for the new smallholders, let alone for the larger society. The increase in yields from the change of ownership could not be expected to be dramatic. Furthermore, this situation did not stop the re-emergence of inequality and capitalism in the countryside. Some peasants soon sold their land, and some richer peasants and cadres became moneylenders. So, it appeared that the revolution must move on to the next phase without too much delay.

The next step in the gradual transition to socialization of agriculture was for small groups of from 4 to 10 peasant families to join together to form mutual aid teams, pooling their resources in labour and draft animals. This had been tried successfully in Yan'an. At this point, the party machinery would be expanded at the grass-roots level to prepare for the formation of the 'lower' Agriculture Producers Cooperatives (APCs). Between 1952 and 1954, 20 to 40 households were grouped together into lower APCs, which could be an entire village or a part of one. The families in an APC, while still owning their plots, farmed their land cooperatively, and shared the harvest according to the land and labour they had contributed. Because the Party and its rural cadres already had a lot of experience in educating the peasants and mobilizing them in the mass movements involving land reform, and since collectivization would make the peasants better off, Mao expected the movement to be successful.

However, the harvests of 1953 and 1954 were disappointing: grain output increased by only one to two percent. The production of industrial or cash crops like soybean, cotton, and oilseed did less well, and some even declined. How could such lacklustre growth in agricultural products support the increase in population, and the industrial targets of the First Five Year Plan? Debate and dispute occurred among the dismayed CCP leaders on the possible causes of the unsatisfactory performance. The final goal of collectivization was not in question: rather, it was the timing, the speed, and the management of the process.

Many Politburo members believed that the move to APCs had been pushed too fast and too hard. Deng Zihui, the Chief of Rural Works Department of the Party, and in charge of agriculture at the State Council, spoke strongly in favour of gradualism, because he believed that the conditions for the formation of the APCs were not yet ripe. He pointed out that it was unrealistic to rely solely on the brute force of human labour to achieve spectacular increases in yield, without investment in mechanical tools, chemical fertilizers, and other inputs. He also mentioned the shortage of cadres for the tasks and hinted at the peasants' unwillingness to give up their private plots. He allowed some of the APCs to be dismantled, and some private plots and free markets to be retained to stimulate output. Although he had strong connections with Mao, his official responsibility to increase agricultural production led him to side with the pragmatic gradualists, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and Chen Yi, all of whom advocated a slow process of turning the peasants' private plots into collective farms.

Mao was poles apart from the gradualists, for he was a revolutionary, with a vision for unleashing the energy and enthusiasm of the masses to achieve spectacular growth. He and those like-minded took the view that the failure was due to swallowing too little of the prescribed medicine. 'The Party should not get off the horse quickly' he said, addressing the attendees of a 1953 conference on mutual aid and cooperation. He urged the Party to 'get back on the horse quickly' and 'not to fear dragons ahead and tigers behind.' 'If

socialism does not occupy the rural position, capitalism inevitably will', he declared. He saw the move towards the APCs as vitally important.

In the spring of 1953, the Party started a drive to form APCs. But later in the year Chen Yi, who became powerful in the Shanghai region, and others decided to dissolve 15,000 of them. In their view these APCs had been too hastily set up. Chen Yi was obliged to criticize himself for having done this, because Mao strongly disapproved of his action. In the autumn of 1954 and the spring of 1955, orders went out again to push APCs. Disappointing harvests led to widespread non-compliance. In May 1955, Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yun, who specialized in finance and economic planning, supported Deng Zihui's move to dissolve 20,000 APCs. Chen Yun reported to the delegates of the National People's Congress of that year that it was best to proceed with collectivization slowly, by first building up a solid core of well-organized and effective voluntary APCs. He estimated that by 1957 about one-third of the peasants might be collectivized, and only in low APCs. During these two years of seesawing between the Maoists, who ordered the formation of the APCs, and the gradualists, who dismantled them, the gradualists had the upper hand by the spring of 1955.

The Socialist High Tide of Mao's collectivization

Dismayed by these setbacks, Mao was not going to let the gradualists get in the way of his headlong drive to collectivization. Unable to win the majority in the Politburo to go along with him on this issue, he decided to set aside the normal party procedures, and bypass the centre of power of the Party to achieve what he wanted. When the National People's Congress (NPC) met in late July 1955, he summoned an *ad hoc* meeting of the provincial party leaders, who attended it the day after these delegates had approved Chen Yun's recommendation. Mao informed them that there was an upsurge of socialist mass movement in the countryside in favour of collectivization, but the 'timid bourgeoisie, tottering along like a woman with bound feet' in the Party would not carry out the will of the masses to lead the cooperative movement. Mao urged them to organize APCs on returning to their provinces.

Not wanting to be labelled rightists or capitalists on this issue, the provincial party leaders followed Mao's guidance, rather than supporting the gradualists' program that they had already endorsed at the NPC. Within weeks the stalled cooperative movement started up again. During August and September 1955, thousands of APCs were set up. The 'Socialist High Tide' in Mao's imagination became a reality, with headlines everywhere drumming up enthusiasm for the movement. To encourage production, Mao himself coined a slogan *duo, kuai, hao, sheng* (more, faster, better, more economical). By the end of 1955, two-thirds of peasant households were collectivized. There were already thousands of higher APCs. By the end of 1956, 88% of peasant households were in higher APCs, although there were still 8% remaining in lower APCs.

The socialization of agriculture did not involve ethnic minorities, who were not obliged to form APCs like the Han majority.

For Mao's collectivization not to fail like that of Stalin's, the cooperation of hundreds of millions of peasants was needed. How did the stalled movement suddenly turn around, and then accelerate at such breath-taking speed? A major part of the explanation has to be the flooding of the countryside with a large number of rural cadres. Between 1949 and 1954, the growth in the number of rural cadres was relatively slow. From 1954 the pace of Party recruitment accelerated. Party membership reached 7.86 million by the end of 1954, 10.73 million by mid-1956, and 12.5 million by mid-1957. Having been through centrally directed rectification campaigns, the fresh crop of rural cadres was especially responsive to commands from the centre.

It became apparent that the formerly poor and landless peasants, whose tools, animals, and skills were, on the whole, inferior to those of the more prosperous peasants, were the least attached to the little plots, which they got possession of only recently from land reform. Since they had the most to gain by pooling their resources with the other peasants, the cadres used them as the core of the APC movement. From this base, the cadres promoted the APCs using group pressure, inducements (offer of free food), persuasion (shared risks of farming), propaganda (painting a brighter future) and the threat of punishments (withholding fertilizers and other support from the community). Mao sent soldiers from his detachment of bodyguards, who were originally peasants, to their home regions to investigate the APC movements. From their reports he published a collection of examples of successful APCs, to guide the cadres. In 1955, the combination of a bumper harvest, fine weather, and lower government grain purchases, enabled the peasants to retain more surplus grain for themselves. This situation no doubt inclined the peasants to cooperate with the authorities.

After the apparently successful campaign to collectivize agriculture in the countryside, in October 1955 Mao engineered a 'Socialist High Tide in industry and commerce' by summoning a group of businesspeople to Shanghai and asking them for advice on how fast the nationalization of private enterprises should take place. Taking their cue from the Chairman, they urged speed. A few weeks later, they were taken aback by being informed that their companies were to be nationalized within 6 days. The capitalists, working as managers of their expropriated companies, were given bonds as compensation. They had no choice but to participate cheerfully in the huge celebrations staged for the transition to socialism. By the end of 1956, the government, through its discriminatory tax and credit policies, made sure that private enterprises were either taken over or reorganized as cooperatives, to achieve complete socialization of commerce and industry. Some small businesses in retailing, handicrafts, and various service sectors remained in private hands.

Ironically, the National Resources Commission (NRC), an institution the CCP inherited from the Nationalists, facilitated the change-over to state monopoly of industry in the PRC. In 1949 top leaders of

the NRC, together with 200,000 of its staff, had stayed in mainland China, and they were enthusiastic about building a state-controlled economy along Soviet lines. They had helped take control of two-thirds of China's industrial investment under the Nationalists. Until the Great Leap Forward of 1958, it was the NRC engineers who led the initial drive for industrialization in the PRC.

The Twelve-Year Plan, de-Stalinization, and rumbles of discontent

Encouraged by the triumph of socialism so far, Mao and other CCP leaders started to cast about for the best direction and strategy for the future. The socialization of agriculture, industry, and commerce, together with the high degree of central control of the Party apparatus that could direct millions of cadres to carry out the will of the centre, increased the potential for enormous successes (and huge blunders) in the CCP's endeavours to transform China. Early in 1956, Mao conceived a Twelve-Year Plan for far more revolutionary developments in agriculture and industry. He also gave an important speech called 'On the Ten Major Relationships' after he had chaired work reports and discussions involving thirty-four central ministries and departments. Only the first five of the ten relationships were focused on the economy; the rest dwelt on certain political concerns, particularly on a search for new political approaches that was partly stimulated by political changes in the Soviet Union, where Mao saw the beginnings of a 'revisionist' tendency, of which he strongly disapproved.

After Stalin died in 1953, the Sino-Soviet relationship grew even closer for a period. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, provided China more economic aid, and gave up some of the conditions demanded by Stalin. He visited China in 1954 on the occasion of the PRC's fifth anniversary. Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi each went to Moscow in 1953 and 1956 respectively, to consult with the new Soviet leaders, who were creating a new political climate and turning away from the policies of the Stalinist era. In February 1956, Khrushchev made a sensational secret speech at the Party's Twentieth Congress, denouncing Stalin as a tyrant and a paranoid mass murderer, who had committed a huge number of heinous crimes during his long career as the head of the USSR. Khrushchev blamed Stalin's cult of personality, which deified the former Soviet leader, for enabling his villainy. In due course this stunning speech was communicated to other Communist parties, including the CCP. Mao was ostensibly annoyed by not having been consulted by Khrushchev before the latter dropped such a bombshell, but Mao's real concern must have been with the fate of his own developing cult of personality, and his successors' judgement on his deeds. When the *People's Daily* reported on the subject after a five-week delay, it pointed out Stalin's achievements as well as his shortcomings.

Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign incurred Mao's displeasure, and he was also not happy with the negative feedback on the Socialist High Tide from his colleagues at the Eighth Party Congress that met in Beijing for 12 days from 15 September 1956. This CCP congress, with more than 1,000 delegates from all over China, and 140 foreign guests from 56 fraternal Communist parties, was the first since 1945. At the Congress, a succession of provincial Party secretaries complained about the Socialist High Tide and the Twelve-Year Program. The hasty expansion of APCs directed by cadres, who were better at herding the peasants into cooperatives than managing the organizations once established, led to excess, waste, disruption of rural exchange patterns, and other mistakes damaging to production and the overall rural economy. One example was the planting of too much grain and cotton at the expense of other crops, prompted by unrealistic targets for the main crops set by the local leaders. Other mistakes included the neglect of income-producing side lines, such as handicrafts; poor management of livestock; and improper distribution of income of the collectives.

In the autumn of 1956, the harvest, which registered only a modest increase from the previous year, was less than the bumper crop expected. In addition to the human failings, a fiercer than normal Typhoon Wanda swept along the productive coastal provinces in August, causing serious damage to the Chinese agricultural economy. Inflationary pressure again started to appear as state incomes fell far short of expenditure. There were shortages of food in some areas. The peasants became discontented and wanted to get out of the APCs. They killed their livestock rather than let the cooperatives have their animals. In the cities, there were workers' strikes and student unrest. The Socialist High Tide seemed not to have turned out very well.

Many CCP leaders, including Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, and Deng Zihui, decided, shortly before the Party Congress convened, to pull back to the earlier gradualist approach. During the Congress, Zhou criticized the Twelve-Year Program and warned against impetuosity. The Eighth Party Congress endorsed collective leadership, and the new Constitution omitted Mao Zedong Thought as the guiding principle of the Party, something that would have been previously unthinkable. While retaining his position as the Chairman of the Party, Mao gave up his position as the head of state. The latter post was given to Liu Shaoqi. Credit for these changes must go to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech, and the problems with the Socialist High Tide. Despite these setbacks for Mao, he was still at the pinnacle of power, with many supporters at the Politburo and among the top military leaders. The personnel shuffle and the hierarchy among members of Politburo after the Party Congress reflected this. Though there were difference in policy between Mao and most of the other CCP top leaders, there was no serious rift between Mao and his more pragmatic colleagues at this point. After the Congress, Mao decided to leave Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to manage the 'first line', or the day-to-day affairs of the state, while he would focus his energy on the 'second line', which concerned broad policy matters.

Mao did not accept his colleagues' complaints and criticisms against the Socialist High Tide, nor did he try to moderate his reckless ideological drive. He remained convinced that socialism was better, and would work, if more trouble were taken to make it work. He pleaded for its speedy development even after the Congress had already approved his colleagues' proposal for moderation. He was ready to do battle with the opposition in the Party, or even with the Party itself on this issue. Previously he had trumped the decision of his colleagues in the Politburo and got the stalled APC movement going again by reaching out to the provincial party leaders at the National People's Congress of 1955. This time he wanted to initiate a campaign to rectify the Party itself. But who was going to support him in this campaign? Other party leaders, down to the low-ranking cadres in the provinces, would have nothing to do with a mass movement that would expose them to fierce criticism from people outside the Party.

The 'Hundred Flowers' campaign

The supremely self-confident Mao hit upon a mass campaign of mobilizing the intellectuals, whom he had previously silenced, and prominent non-Communists, to air their criticisms, which he would then use as weapons to attack the Party himself. Although some intellectuals had joined the Party, many remained outside it. Mao understood that restrictions on free expression of speech, and the repression of non-party intellectuals, who had served the state through working in such areas as teaching, writing, and public administration, would only alienate them. It would be much better to elicit voluntary cooperation from this class of people, who numbered about five million, by catering more to their interests and needs, and by providing a more liberal and 'democratic' political climate for them to flourish. Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai held similar view as Mao's on the intellectuals, but not Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen, the Mayor of Beijing.

By 1956, thought reform², together with the united front strategy to find common patriotic ground with the educated elite should have borne fruit, and Mao felt that, apart a tiny percentage of intellectuals who were still hostile to Marxism, the majority were 'red' as well as 'expert'. He wanted them to cooperate willingly with the regime, without reservations. In the spring of 1956, he invited them to offer frank criticisms of the Party's bureaucratism, and of the cadres who stood over them. Mao coined the slogans: 'let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend', and 'long-term coexistence and mutual supervision'. In addition to asking the intellectuals to air their views freely, the second slogan was to let the intellectuals supervise the Party rather than just being supervised by the Party. He fully expected their

² A campaign of the CCP to reform the thinking of Chinese citizens into accepting Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, from 1951 to 1952.

criticisms to be constructive, perhaps even similar to those of his own. For about a year, fear of victimization kept the educated elites silent, while Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen were working to moderate the effects of Mao's impetuosity.

In October 1956, the Hungarian Uprising intensified Mao's push for rectification of the Party, with the educated elite to provide criticisms. He regarded the dissatisfaction of the Hungarian intellectuals as a factor contributing to the revolt, which was also linked by him to the mistaken de-Stalinization. As the head of state, Mao had the authority to convene the Supreme State Conference, which included prominent non-Communists as delegates in addition to CCP leaders, with the intention of drumming up the attendees' support for the Hundred Flowers Campaign. To a large audience at this conference, he delivered an important seminal speech: 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People'. Mao differentiated social conflicts or conflicts of interest between one class and another, such as those between the poorer and better off peasants or even between the Party and certain groups in the society, into two different types: one non-antagonistic and the other antagonistic. The former was reconcilable through discussions or other peaceful political means. The latter, such as those between the Party and its enemies, had to be removed through violent means. Although there was not much enthusiasm at the conference for Mao's demand for a rectification campaign to iron out the non-antagonistic contradictions between the Party and the intellectuals, his Politburo colleagues grudgingly approved of a mild campaign, like 'a gentle breeze and fine rain', without harsh purges.

After a year of rumblings of discontent, when Mao's directive calling for unrestrained external (to the Party) criticism finally came out early in May 1957, the public responded with a deluge of criticisms. Believing this was a real chance to vent their pent-up unhappiness about the status quo with impunity, some of the critics expressed negative opinions or found fault with the Communists regime's basic premises, such as its doctrines, policies, practices, and style of work. For example, the pro-Soviet 'leaning to one side' policy was ridiculed, on account of the mean behaviour of the Russians. There were demands for the release of imprisoned intellectuals, whose only crime was speaking their mind. Some argued for limited terms of office for party officials, as practised in capitalist countries. Mao was himself criticized for being 'very confident about the false reports and dogmatic analysis presented to him by his cadres'. He was also described as being 'impetuous in making decisions without first making a careful study of the facts'. Even Communism itself was questioned. Students in Beijing put up thousands of posters, expressing all manner of opinions in a provocative way. In Wuhan, the students rioted. A violent peasant demonstration was suppressed near Wuhan, with loss of life. The situation appeared to be spinning rapidly out of control.

Soon telegrams poured in from provincial party officials, complaining about this campaign. Finding himself in an extremely awkward position, Mao hurriedly called off the 'Hundred Flowers Campaign' early in June

1957, less than six weeks after he had launched it. A line was drawn that put subjects sacrosanct to the regime above criticism. These included: socialism, the people's democratic dictatorship, the Party, international socialism, together with Mao himself and his actions. Those who expressed negative views on these were sprouting 'poisonous weeds' as Mao described the offensive criticisms of the 'Hundred Flowers Campaign'. These people were to be punished. Instead of being able to supervise the Party, the educated elites were again subject to repression. The 'gentle breeze and fine rain' turned into an anti-rightist storm, where hundreds of thousands of intellectuals were arrested, and between 300,000 and 400,000 were 'sent down' to the countryside to carry out reform through labour for the next twenty years. The Party decided that a socialist education campaign was then necessary in the countryside, to strengthen socialist thinking among the grassroots. Once more ideological conformity reigned.

Instead of being humbled by the failed 'Hundred Flowers Campaign' he had foisted on China, Mao insisted that the outcome turned out just as he had planned. He claimed that its purpose was to allow 'devils' and 'demons' to 'air views freely', and let poisonous weeds sprout in profusion so that the people would be able to take action to wipe them out. Did Mao cunningly set a trap for the intellectuals to express themselves freely, in order to catch them as he claimed, and as some people later suspected? Mao did not need to stoop to that. He had genuinely hoped that the intellectuals would help him to 'rectify' the party bureaucrats, but he was surprised and shocked by the level of disenchantment among the intellectuals. He was also disappointed by their failure to give their hearts to the revolution. The intellectuals were made to pay the price for Mao's misjudgements and mistakes.

The Great Leap Forward (GLF)

Mao proceeds, without Russian support

Behind Mao's feverish drive towards the Party rectification and the Hundred Flowers Campaign was his desire to retrieve the Socialist High Tide and the Twelve-Year Plan shelved by his colleagues. Unfortunately for the gradualists, the 1957 harvest was dismally disappointing. Grain production was only 1% above the year before, half the rate of population growth. The surplus from agricultural production was too meagre to fund the regime's drive for rapid industrial modernization. At this point, just as China could have done with more foreign loan, credit from the Soviet Union was exhausted. The cost for quelling the uprisings in Hungary and Poland, and the financial needs of its own Five-Year Plan, left the Russians with little to spare to aid the Chinese.

Without the economic wherewithal, how were the leaders of the CCP to not only pull China out of poverty, but to join the front rank of modern industrialized nations in the shortest possible time? While others were casting about for answers, Mao already had the answer. He had seen political mobilization solving economic problems before in Yan'an. Why not now? Without the necessary financial capital, why not capitalize on the large manpower resources China already possessed? He still believed strongly that mass mobilization and politicization, Yan'an style, to achieve socialization of agriculture, industry, and all other sectors of the economy, would unlock the energy, enthusiasm, and productive forces of the people of the whole country, to make a great leap into modernity.

Mao, and the supporters of his vision, set about energetically, by every possible means, to push the Party to bring about a massive revival of Mao's Socialist High Tide, and pursue his Twelve-Year Program. Reaching out to Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen, who had disagreed with him over the Hundred Flowers Campaign, Mao not only mended his relationship with them, but also managed to win them over to support his approach to modernization. Their support facilitated Mao's preparation for a massive agricultural Socialist High Tide by launching a Socialist Education Campaign in the villages to indoctrinate the peasants, as well as by extending the current Anti-Rightist Campaign to the rural cadres to whip them into line.

Because the Politburo was still pursuing a moderate agricultural policy, Mao needed all the support he could muster to twist the arms of those at the Third Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, who were then supporting the moderates, to come over to his side. Having accomplished this coup with the help of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, Mao convened the Supreme State Conference, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to win legitimacy for his policy. After securing the approval of these 'democratic' or united front bodies for his Twelve-Year Program, Mao expanded the Anti-Rightist Campaign to include senior members of the Party in order to silence sceptics and combat pessimistic expressions or passive resistance. Party leaders, with Zhou Enlai among them, were obliged to criticize themselves for opposing the Socialist High Tide. Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun were blamed for the 1957 unsatisfactory agricultural production. After laying the groundwork for his Great Leap Forward, Mao departed in an ebullient mood for Moscow, to take part in the celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the October Revolution.

This was Mao's second visit to Moscow. In 1949, Mao had come as a nervous supplicant, seeking economic aid and military protection from Stalin, the harsh grandmaster of the international Communist Bloc, for a country that was on the threshold of being newly united. In 1957, though China still needed help, the country he led had risen in status, influence, and prestige. As a veteran revolutionary, Mao was not going to keep a low profile. Buoyed by Russia's successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile in August 1957, and

the more recent launching of two Sputniks into space, Mao boldly suggested to the Soviet leaders to foster revolutionary movements and exploit Soviet strength to hasten the collapse of the imperialists. In such an event, China would liberate Taiwan. The Russian leaders preferred not to contemplate thermonuclear war, and they stressed peaceful transformation to socialism and coexistence with the imperialists. To Mao, the Russian position appeared revisionist.

There were also doctrinal differences between Mao and his Russian hosts. The leaders of the Kremlin rejected Mao's theory of contradiction. They would not contemplate the very idea of contradiction or conflict of interest between their Party and the Russian people, be it 'antagonistic' or not. Since Russian aid was meagre and Russian influence was waning in China, Mao returned home more determined than ever that China had to forge her own developmental path. With the preparation for the Great Leap Forward (GLF) already in an advanced stage by December 1957, he was ready to unleash this movement, which was to hit China like smashing the nucleus of an atom, to release its tremendous energy.

The first phase of the GLF goes well

The first phase of the GLF took place from December 1957 to May 1958. To have the entire nation pulling in this direction, Mao convened, in January, February, and March 1958, the Supreme State Conference and the National People's Congress, in addition to three conferences of central and provincial party leaders. Mao and his lieutenants visited many provinces to persuade the doubters, to purge the recalcitrants, and to put supporters in charge. Mao conceded that only a minority of the provincial party leaders were enthusiastic followers of his policy; the others, being pulled along, had to be convinced by results.

Supervising the mobilization and decentralization of agricultural and industrial production required a large number of cadres. To address this need, party membership was first increased. Then 8 million cadres were transferred from the centre to the provinces, counties, and municipalities, all the way down to the level of production in both agriculture and industry. They were joined by large numbers of PLA soldiers, some of whom had been demobilized, in addition to one million rusticated students. Frequent rectification campaigns were conducted to make sure that these functionaries acted in accordance with the spirit and objectives of the GLF. To promote and spread the messages of this movement, Mao's theoretician and close ally, Chen Boda, launched a new journal by the name of *Red Flag*. The former Socialist High Tide slogan, 'more, faster, better, and more economical' made a big comeback. The entire Chinese nation was whipped into a state of ferment for economic production and social transformation.

In connection with increasing agricultural production, 60 million peasants were mobilized to pursue off-season water control projects. Masses of people were led to gather fertilizer, improve soil, and reclaim land.

The campaign to eliminate the four pests, namely flies, mosquitoes, rats, and sparrows, regrettably destroyed the valuable insect-eating birds. When this mistake was recognized, bedbugs were substituted for sparrows. Collectivization of agriculture still lay at the base of these mobilized activities, and this time it was to reach a hitherto unprecedented scale.

During the GLF, Mao's idea of 'walking on two legs' came into prominence. It was a development strategy capable of many applications. One example was investing in heavy industry as a priority, while developing agriculture and light industry at the same time. It was also applicable to developing sophisticated capital-intensive modern sectors, which might require foreign support, in parallel with small-scale manufacturing using available local technology and other resources. The use of this approach would suit a situation where industrial production was decentralized. Devolving the light industry to the local authorities might solve many other problems, particularly those in connection with centralized production of consumer goods, which were in short supply, partly as a result of lack of central government funding. Starting in December 1957, central ministries in charge of consumer goods were ordered to hand over their enterprises to the provincial, municipal, and county authorities. These authorities then set up locally funded small-scale industries using the local labour force. This development was in line with Mao's strategy of 'walking on two legs', as well as the ideal of 'self-reliance' that Mao and his propagandists began to propagate.

Along with these changes, the Maoists were not going to allow the social revolutionary aspects to be forgotten. The social gulf between the workers and management had to be bridged. The cadres were expected to take part in production, and the labourers were to participate in management. Experts were taken down from their pedestals, and their expertise was no longer held in awe. Ordinary folks were encouraged to invent and innovate. A large number of male peasants were recruited to do factory work in towns and cities, leading, unfortunately, to a shortage of labour in the countryside. In addition to eradicating the inequality between bosses and workers, and between mental and manual labour, the social and economic gap between cities and villages also had to be closed. Book learning was to be supplemented with practical work experience. Students were made to take time off from school to work seasonally in the fields.

By the spring of 1958, the results of the GLF appeared to be excellent. Reports of impressive increases in output led to upward adjustments of both agricultural and industrial targets. The excitement led to speculations that Mao would achieve the goals of his ambitious plan for agricultural production far ahead of schedule, and that in industry China would overtake Britain in fifteen years. Mao conducted a tour of the provinces with his supporters to see signs of progress, and to gather political support in the coming party meetings.

In May 1958, at the Eighth Party Congress (the second session), Liu Shaoqi declared that the Party had adopted a new 'General Line' that involved a 'leap forward on every front in our socialist construction'.

The new 'General Line' was in sharp contrast with the one the Party had acted upon from 1952, except for the brief periods of the Socialist High Tide. The old one had been to 'accomplish, step by step, the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce over a fairly long period'. With Liu also on board, the May Party Congress, like the National People's Congress that convened earlier, officially endorsed the GLF. Some personnel changes at the highest level took place at the meetings of the Party Congress and Central Committee Plenum. Among the losers were the gradualists, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun, as well as the Minister of Defence, Peng Dehuai, who actually opposed the GLF. Lin Biao, the Maoist military leader, was promoted to the powerful Standing Committee of the Politburo.

The Communes

In April 1958, twenty-seven high-level APCs in the Henan province, where Maoism thrived, coalesced into a People's Commune (*renmin gongshe*). Soon other APCs in Henan followed suit. Although they did so without formal direction from the centre, it was a move that facilitated the mobilization of massive numbers of people for large-scale labour-intensive projects, like the previously mentioned undertaking for water-control. Whereas the high-level APCs or Production Brigades (*shengchan dadui*) had one to three hundred households, a rural commune had on average 5,000 households, or the size of a largeish market town. A rural commune of this size would contain a cross-section of occupational groups: workers, businesspeople, students, soldiers, and cadres, in addition to peasants. In principle, taking this as the nation's basic social unit would facilitate the building of an egalitarian society, where a member from one occupation could readily take up the work of another, and where the distinctions of rank and social status would become minimal. The promise of such a development brought back cherished memories of the Yan'an-style egalitarianism to the Maoist radicals, who might also look to the historical Paris Commune of 1871 for inspiration. The 3 September editorial of the *People's Daily* claimed that 'the people's commune is the most appropriate organizational form in China for accelerating socialist construction and the transition to Communism'. The PRC was getting ready to build a Marxist utopia ahead of the USSR.

Chen Boda wrote about this movement with great enthusiasm, and Mao toured some of the new communes in August. Praising their productivity, Mao called for their extension to the entire country in September. Excited by the claim that agricultural production under the communes had doubled or increased by a factor of ten or even twenty, the Party soon endorsed this new development. The Central Committee of the CCP ascribed this phenomenon to the 'ever-rising political consciousness' of China's 500 million peasants, who were engaged in a continuous leap forward in China's agricultural production. Shortly afterwards, rural China was engulfed by a gigantic tide of commune formation. In December 1958, 120 million rural households, or 99% of

the peasant population in the 740,000 APCs in China were reorganized into 26,000 People's Communes. This radical movement was not limited to the countryside. Starting in the autumn of 1958, urban communes were also formed.

To maximize the release of labour, the private plots, which the peasants were allowed to keep within the APCs, were done away with, and the rural markets ceased to operate. As men from the countryside were shifted into industrial production, millions of women were mobilized into productive labour. They were relieved of their household duties through crèches, nurseries, and communal kitchens, which at one time may have numbered as many as 3 million, feeding 90% of the rural population with free food.

In addition to agricultural production, the labour made available by the communes was channelled into many industrial and construction projects. The assumed huge increase in productive capacity was expected to be translated into bumper harvests, and huge industrial outputs. Targets for industrial production also became highly inflated. To fulfil these targets, the number of people working in the urban state industries doubled to 50 million between 1957 and 1960. This situation placed enormous strain on the food procurement system from the countryside.

The 'backyard furnaces'

Increase in steel production was essential for China to achieve rapid industrialization. The 1958 target for steel output, fixed in February at 6.2 metric tonnes, was already a 19% increase from the previous year's production. Six months later, Mao supported the increase of this figure to 10.7 metric tonnes. A few weeks later, he suggested an even higher figure: 12 metric tonnes. Since this ambitious target was not achievable relying solely on China's existing modern steel-making complexes, the Maoists resorted to the 'backyard steel furnaces'. Using locally collected ores, scrap metal, and fuel, they hoped to increase China's steel production quickly and cheaply with thousands of such furnaces. This was the familiar approach of 'walking on two legs'. Ninety million people were mobilized to build and operate one million earthen furnaces, which dotted China's countryside among fields of crops. Seeing some of these furnaces from a distance, a foreign visitor described the 'leaping flames and columns of smoke' as looking 'like some new construction site accidentally ablaze'. Arriving on the scene, the same eyewitness wrote the following.

Small red flags fly overhead indicating the sections belonging to various companies and squads of farmer-steelworkers, who are organized like militia units. The air is filled with the high-pitched melodies of local operas pouring through an amplifier above the site and accompanied by the hum of blowers, the panting of gasoline engines, the honking of heavily laden lorries, and the bellowing of oxen hauling ore and coal.

The summer and fall of 1958 was the high point of the GLF. The Chinese masses, having been aroused to make frantic efforts to participate in a people's crusade, were led to believe that they were at the threshold of victory, and the dawn of a new society. In the factories, equality was promoted by the new worker-management relationship, and by stopping piece-rate payment. The rural communes turned virtually all property into communal ownership. Some supplied food, services, and other commodities free, putting into practice the Marxist ideal of 'from each according to his abilities, and from each according to his needs'. In the cities exhortations from loudspeakers filled the air, accompanied by martial music, with slogans such as 'transform your life', 'don't crawl behind others at snail's pace', 'self-reliance', 'walk on two legs', 'strike when the iron is hot', 'better get it done in one stroke than drag on', and so on. These slogans were also painted on walls. Reports of amazing increases of production poured in from factories and communes. In late October 1958, the harvest was reportedly double that of 1957. Reports on the production of steel and other commodities recorded similar increases. The economic growth for 1959 was expected to keep to the same incredible pace.

The ramifications of the GLF

The GLF had a broader reach than just changes in economic production and restructuring the society to accommodate these changes. It extended into education and military planning and affected China's foreign relations.

Embittered by the criticisms of intellectuals, and by students who possessed expertise but refused to be 'red' during the Hundred Flowers Campaign, to promote economic development Mao preferred to educate more peasants and workers, rather than provide more training to those who were already educationally advanced. Primary school enrolment jumped in the countryside. The existing Soviet model of centrally determined curriculum and strict academic standards seemed too elitist, and it did not fit the Maoist vision of combining theory with practice, and work with study. To produce more educated youths from peasant or worker backgrounds - 'faster, better, and more economical' - the GLF in education created 30,000 agricultural middle schools and 400 'red and expert' universities. The new schools were operated by the 'people' (*minban*), as opposed to those managed by the central Ministry of Education. Curriculum, teaching methods, and the preparation of educational materials were all in the hands of committees formed of party members, teachers, and students.

In Beijing, the Ministry of Higher Education, which exercised central regulation and control of the institutions of higher education, was merged with the Ministry of Education. The latter retained control of only fourteen out of more than fifty institutions of higher education that had been managed by the former. The others were decentralized, with their standards lowered to accommodate more students of peasant and

worker origins. The GLF seriously reduced the already small number of China's institutions of higher education which maintained high standards. The increase in the number of students was unfortunately accompanied by a great leap backwards in the quality of the education.

From late May to July 1958, Mao called an important meeting of the Military Affairs Committee that was attended by a thousand officers. A decision was made at this meeting to discontinue the building of a modern Soviet-style army dependent on Russian assistance, an approach favoured by Peng Dehuai. Having commanded poorly armed Chinese soldiers fighting a conventional war (the Hundred Regiments Offensive) against the Japanese in World War II, and later against the Americans in the Korean War, Peng was a strong advocate of modernization of the Chinese military with Soviet help. The new policy stressed instead military self-reliance combined with guerrilla strategy, and the development of China's own nuclear weapons. But the last item was to be achieved with Soviet help.

Taking a bellicose stance towards Taiwan, the military conference did not conclude without China declaring her intention to liberate Taiwan. This audacious or reckless military adventurism, at a time when China had little of the advanced modern weapons supplied by America to Taiwan, echoed the headlong move towards commune formation that ushered in the Socialist High Tide of the GLF. On both these fronts, Maoist China, lacking economic and material advantages, hoped to triumph through human energy and will. In fact, the commune movement made immense strides when the Nationalist and Chinese Communist aircraft were actively engaged in the Taiwan Strait at the end of July 1958. There was a theory that the Maoists provoked the military crisis to heighten the mobilization for the GLF. Calls for military preparedness included the arming and training of peasant militias in the communes.

As an ally of the PRC, Khrushchev was alarmed by the military conflict over Taiwan. On 31 July he came to China with his Minister of Defence, endeavouring to calm the situation. He offered various inducements, such as joint air defences, and a Sino-Russian joint naval command in East Asia, but the Chinese leaders, determined to pursue their own independent courses of action, were not moved by these offers. In August, tension with the United States, which had a mutual defence pact with Taiwan, mounted as China bombarded Jinmen (Quemoy), one of the two offshore islands near the coast of Fujian, and still held by the Nationalists. The United States, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, strongly demonstrated its readiness to defend Taiwan with deployment of forces to the region, and with a plan for nuclear strikes against Chinese cities. Surprised by the forceful American response, the bombardment abated. Zhou Enlai proposed to resume high-level diplomatic talks with the United States. The crisis ended on 6 October 1959, when Peng Dehuai, the Minister of Defence, offered to suspend the bombardment for a week and to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Nationalists.

The failure of the GLF

Whether or not the crisis in the Taiwan Strait was provoked to heighten the state of mobilization for the peoples' communes, by the winter of 1959 serious problems with the Great Leap Forward rose to the surface. Peng Dehuai, the most outspoken critic of Mao's Great Leap Forward, expressed a desperate situation in the following verse.

Grain scattered on the ground, potato leaves withered.

Strong young people have left to smelt iron, only children and

Old women reaped the crops;

How can they pass the coming year?

Allow me to appeal for the people.

Before long it became clear that the production figures in both agriculture and industry were wildly exaggerated. Peng learned that the average rice consumption fell below the 1930s and 1940s.

The massive mobilization to direct the productive efforts of the whole society had been based on ideology rather than practical experience, with the result that ill-conceived initiatives, wrong allocations of labour and resources, and other mistakes became magnified into huge economic losses and disasters. The economic, social, and family life of the entire country suffered severe dislocation, though amazingly there were no significant protest movements. The backyard furnaces produced millions of tons of steel, but of such poor quality as to be useless, while forests of trees were cut down to produce firewood, much to the detriment of the environment. Hasty expansion of manufacturing led to shoddy goods and poor plant maintenance. Inappropriate innovations such as deep ploughing, and close planting directed by ignorant supervisors, resulted in crop failures. Shifting able-bodied men from agriculture to industries meant fewer hands for agricultural production, and more mouths to be fed by requisitioning grain from the countryside. The communes were badly managed. Forced socialization, equal compensation, disruption of family life, labour gangs, and long working hours lowered morale and worker incentives. The production quotas and procurement demands were set arbitrarily high. Even peasants in normally prosperous areas did not have enough to eat.

The decline in food production, and the breakdown of the system of distribution as a result of the Great Leap Forward, led to famine on an unprecedented scale between 1960 and 1961. Death by starvation was especially prevalent in the rural areas of certain provinces. Since the system of gathering statistics had collapsed during that time, accurate information was lacking in calculating this movement's toll on human life. High party officials were silent about the extent of the human disaster. Demographic data released in the 1980s revealed a cumulative mortality rate estimated at between 16 and 27 million deaths. More recent

research puts the death toll at 40 million. The Great Leap Forward caused a sharp decline in the estimated Chinese national income, and a population drop from which it took years to recover. It plunged the Chinese economy into a major depression, with long-term aftereffects. The Chinese per capita grain production did not reach its 1957 level until 1973.

During the winter of 1958 and the spring of 1959, many party meetings were called, when problems of the Great Leap Forward were gaining the attention of the party leaders. Mao and the top party leaders, who had supported this radical movement for modernization, had committed themselves and the prestige of the Party too deeply to repudiate it. They readjusted the inflated figures, assessed the damages, tried to curb the excesses, moderated the policy, implemented suitable retrenchments, blamed the lower cadres for not having implemented the intentions and instructions of the Party properly, and prepared for another all-out effort to vindicate the movement. However, underneath the surface there was a deep current of dissatisfaction with the GLF. The most audacious opponent of the Great Leap Forward, Peng Dehuai, during his trip abroad in April 1959, spoke with Khrushchev on its shortcomings. It was a desperate gamble, if Peng had hoped to enlist Khrushchev's help to moderate Mao's revolutionary drive.

In July and August 1959 an important meeting of the Politburo took place in Lushan, a mountain resort. Peng Dehuai, with the support of other like-minded party leaders, circulated a letter to Mao criticizing some aspects of the Great Leap Forward, though he carefully exonerated Mao from blame. But Mao saw it as a personal attack on his leadership and policy. He counter-attacked, accusing Peng of having conspired with Khrushchev, whose criticism of the commune movement, and cancellation of the Russian offer of nuclear aid to China, was blamed on Peng. Peng's audacity in challenging Mao on the Great Leap Forward cost him his career. He lost his job as the Minister of Defence. The post then went to Lin Biao, who had made a habit of praising Chairman Mao. Other opponents of this movement were branded as members of the 'Anti-Party Clique' of 'Rightists'. In the midst of a campaign to purge the Rightists in the party, the Great Leap Forward was revived. There was a push toward the establishment of urban communes, particularly among workers in light industry. By the summer of 1960, almost all workers in Guangzhou became commune members. The revived Great Leap Forward failed for similar reasons as it had earlier.

Although the Great Leap Forward was not formally repudiated, it was abandoned in practice as Mao 'retired from the front line' while other leaders tried to rebuild the economy and public morale. Chen Yun's investigation of the conditions in the countryside revealed that the peasants knew better, after all, how to keep pigs alive, and plant suitable crops for rotation, in the most economic and productive way. Forcing them to conform to the national norms and 'logical' plans for collectivized development often seemed counter-productive. With the support of Liu Shaoqi, the head of state, Zhou Enlai, the Premier, and Deng Xiaoping, the Secretary General of the CCP, Mao had to accept reluctantly Chen Yun's recommendations

on dismantling the communes, closing the inefficient Great Leap Forward industrial enterprises, returning the 30 million peasants who had drifted into the city since 1957 back to the countryside, and restoring the peasants' private plots and the private rural markets. The Great Leap Forward ended up as a failed experiment in implementing an extremely radical policy of socialism in China. For Mao's tragic blunder, the people of China had to pay an enormous price in terms of tens of millions of deaths by starvation, mainly in the countryside.

At the 'Seven Thousand Cadres Conference' in Beijing, from 11 January to 7 February 1962, Mao made self-criticism concerning the GLF, and reaffirmed his commitment to democratic centralism.³ From then on, until the Cultural Revolution, Mao largely left the running of the country to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

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³ The political practice in which political decisions reached by voting processes are binding on all members of the relevant political party.