

The Great Leap Forward from myth to history

By Peter Lee

The Great Leap Forward, a calamity that killed tens of millions, afflicted China with the misery and morals of a concentration camp and spawned the Cultural Revolution, was once a shunned and shameful topic.

But convenient myths - such as the threadbare explanation of "Three Years of Natural Disasters", fingerpointing at the Soviet Union, and exculpatory emphasis on quixotic but seemingly admirable revolutionary enthusiasm - are now crumbling as a new generation feels enough distance to confront the painful past, and at the same time races to record the memories of the citizens who suffered through the period before they pass on.

Through the efforts of Chinese and foreign researchers, a more complete history of the Great Leap Forward is emerging from archives and personal accounts, as a parade of folly, viciousness, and cruelty. This history - and the current regime's incomplete willingness to confront it - is finding resonance in the campaign to discredit Chongqing neo-Maoist firebrand Bo Xilai, and the effort to shape the agenda of the new leadership cadre that is expected to assume power in 2013.

In the process, the era of the Great Leap Forward and its aftermath is acquiring a new name: The Great Famine.

The Great Leap Forward was born of hubris: Mao Zedong's bet that his version of socialism could unleash unprecedented productivity from the Chinese economy and show the supercilious commissars of the Soviet Union who was the best and greatest Communist leader.

In 1958 and 1959, China was convulsed by massive, disruptive labor projects, collectivization, and a mad rush to steelmaking. Agriculture was disrupted by diversion of labor and misapplied programs of deep planting, marginal land recovery, and over-irrigation. At the same time, local leaders made extravagant claims of increased agricultural output attributed to the new socialist system, figures that were further padded as they travelled up the chain of command to Beijing and, fatally, became the basis for central government grain requisitions.

Things turned very dark very quickly as local cadres emptied granaries in order to meet their requisition targets and demonstrate their ability, zeal, and loyalty to their superiors.

One county in Henan claimed production of 7 billion jin of grain (about 3.5 million tonnes) - but actually produced only 2 billion jin - of which 1.6 billion jin was requisitioned.

By the late months of 1958, throughout China communal kitchens - where farmers in the new collectives went to get fed - were either handing out thin gruel or were no longer bothering to light their fires at all. People began to starve.

Despite concerted efforts by local and provincial leaders to cover up, it was soon apparent at the center that something was seriously amiss. And things got worse.

Mao Zedong adopted the self-serving explanation that the shortfall in grain was the result of a counter-revolutionary resurgence in the Chinese countryside, with ex-landlords and rich peasants conniving to conceal their bumper grain harvests from the state.

Ironically, his convictions were buttressed by the party secretary of Guangdong province, who

conducted a successful campaign to root out one million tonnes of grain hidden by desperate peasants. His name: Zhao Ziyang.

As the situation deteriorated in the Chinese countryside, therefore, the afflicted areas were not regarded as disaster areas needing outside assistance; they were nests of anti-state criminals who had to be compelled to give up their ill-gotten grain.

Then things got even worse. As news of widespread suffering trickled up to the party leadership, *sub voce* dissatisfaction with Mao's policies was amplified at the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959 as open criticism of the Great Leap Forward as a whole by defense minister Peng Dehuai and party elder Zhang Wentian.

Mao interpreted the criticism at Lushan as an attack on himself by a cabal of candidate Khrushchevs and launched an all-out political war, loyally abetted by Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, and most other senior leaders, against Peng, Zhang, and any cadre that presumed to criticize the Great Leap Forward.

The full human and political dimensions of the Great Famine - and a damning portrait of Mao as a leader who was happy to slay the messengers, by the tens of millions, rather than endure the humiliation of acknowledging the failure of his policies before his peers in China and the Soviet Union, or accept diminution of his authority and political power - are found in the book *Mao's Great Famine* by Dr Frank Dikotter (New York: Walker & Co, 2010). In the words of Dikotter: Had the leadership reversed course in the summer of 1959 at Lushan, the number of victims claimed by famine would have been counted in the millions. Instead, as the country plunged into catastrophe, tens of millions of lives would be extinguished through exhaustion, illness, torture, and hunger.

As party ranks were purged of over 3 million officials whose doubts led them to soft-pedal Great Leap Forward policies (and swelled by new, more ruthless but perhaps less-qualified additions), local cadres, in a convulsion of fear, fury, and opportunism, beat, tortured, and killed peasants they considered thieves, malingerers, and complainers, while trying to obscure the dimensions of the disaster from their disbelieving superiors.

Dikotter told Asia Times Online how he was struck by documents surviving in mainland archives that showed that as many as 2.5 million people were tortured or beaten to death in those desperate years.

In his view, the Great Leap Forward was perhaps unique in scope of homicidal activity inflicted by the regime and its agents: more than the Great Terror accompanying the Chinese Communist Party's consolidation of power in the early 1950s, and more than the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, whose violence was on conspicuous national and international display in China's cities but not inflicted wholesale on China's hundreds of millions of peasants.

Beyond overt violence, there was the dark issue of the use of food by cadres as an instrument of reward - and execution. Dikotter noted to Asia Times Online:

Who do you give the food to? You give to those who are reliable ... food was used as a weapon distributed according to political considerations ... feed the strong, not the weak, the aged, the sick ...

The worst suffering took place in provinces like Sichuan, Hunan, and Gansu, which counted their leaders as some of Mao's most committed supporters.

The final toll is unknowable but most probably amounts to approximately 45 million excess deaths for the period from 1958 to 1962, when the central government finally acknowledged the extent of the catastrophe and retreated from collectivized agriculture.

Many of the critics of the Great Leap Forward were rehabilitated in the 1980s, after the fall of the

"Gang of Four". However, the venom of those years has yet to be completely expelled from China's system.

The volatile world of Chinese microblogs was roiled on April 29, 2012, by a statement posted by one Lin Zhibo, head of People's Daily Gansu Bureau and, apparently a neo-Maoist and supporter of Bo Xilai, the now-disgraced "Red Mayor" of Chongqing:

"To bash Chairman Mao, some people even fabricated lies about the death of tens of millions of people during 1960 to 1962. To confirm the number, some visited those Henan villages which experiences the worst famine at the time. It turned out that the truth didn't match their lies. Many villagers have heard of people starving to death but never personally saw one themselves, which is direct evidence that very few people died of starvation at the time." (translations by Offbeat China) [1]

Lin's statement was indignantly rebutted in dozens of replies from netizens posting recollections of their parents of the horrendous suffering their families had endured, such as:

"The Great Famine experienced by my family. My hometown is Jingyan at Leshan. One of my aunts married a Mr Xiong from the same village. They had a total of 8 members in their family, the couple, one son, two grandparents, and three siblings. They all starved to death during the Great Famine. None survived! The tragedy happened right to our parents' generation. How does Lin Zhibo dare to deny it?"

An interesting element of this affair was what Sherlock Holmes termed the dog that didn't bark or, in this case, the censor who didn't censor. As Offbeat China put it: "Luckily no one seemed to report censorship over stories of the Great Famine on Sine [sic] Weibo."

The story took an even more interesting twist as some public figures weighed in on the Communist Party's greatest failure, a topic that might, under other circumstances, be considered taboo.

Apparently in response to Lin's microblog post, economist Mao Yushi (recently awarded the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty by the Cato Institute) on May 2 posted a moving excerpt on his blog from his 2010 memoir, *A Journey Without Regret*. He discusses the reach of famine - including a family of 12 in the village of whom only one had survived - and the suffering he personally experienced while rusticated to Shandong in 1960 as a rightist:

When people suffering hunger, their human consciousness yields completely to their base nature as a stinking skin sack. People lose any ideals and have only one desire, that is to "eat." ... While I was in Teng County, I was unendurably hungry. My entire body swelled up with edema, I couldn't even put on my shoes and it was difficult simply to bend at the waist ... I was able to make it through for only one reason, and that is that I ate quite a few locusts during summer and autumn ... I would catch one and put it in an envelope. When I had seven or eight, I would burn the envelope in the fire ... and cook the locusts ... the locusts' digestive tract was filled with a green liquid ... it was extremely bitter and difficult to swallow. But hunger makes people disregard any other consideration ... If I had had to stay there for two more months I would, without question, have died. [2]

Then Southern People Weekly, a human interest and current affairs publication of the liberal Southern Media Group, devoted the cover and four in-depth articles of its May 21 edition to first-person testimony concerning the catastrophe of The Great Famine.

One piece profiles a survivor who erected a crude memorial stele in his home town in Henan to the 73 victims (out of a total population of 128) who failed to make it through the "grain pass" to survival.

Another presented survivor stories from Gansu collected by a young writer that provide further insight into the misery and degradation of the period: the man who ate the dead and was shunned by his wife and son; the 100-plus people suffering from edema [swelling caused by fluid beneath the skin and body cavities] who were herded into an abandoned kiln to hide them from the visiting investigative team of senior party member Dong Biwu and died when it caved in; and

the young man who staggered out of his house and collapsed, only to hear someone inside implore him to "Could you please die a little further off?", perhaps so that the family could be spared the insupportable effort needed to move and bury his corpse.