

Mao Zedong's Theories on Labor Collectivization and Political Decentralization (1958-63)

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to most completely and holistically define Mao Zedong's political opinions, philosophical theory, and general rationalizations that influenced or motivated the methodologies of the Great Leap Forward campaign, including this movement's radical principle goals of decentralization and collectivization. It will not, however, delve into the collectivization's failures nor its indubitable impact, but rather the theoretical reasonings propelling Mao into creating the movement. This paper builds on and accounts for previous works like Tetsuya Kataoka's "Political Theory of the Great Leap Forward" (1969), addressing its thoughtful insights but also its shortcomings, analyzing both pre existing research in the field with Mao's original works in effort to contribute meaningful interpretations to discussions on Mao Zedong thought and its influence.

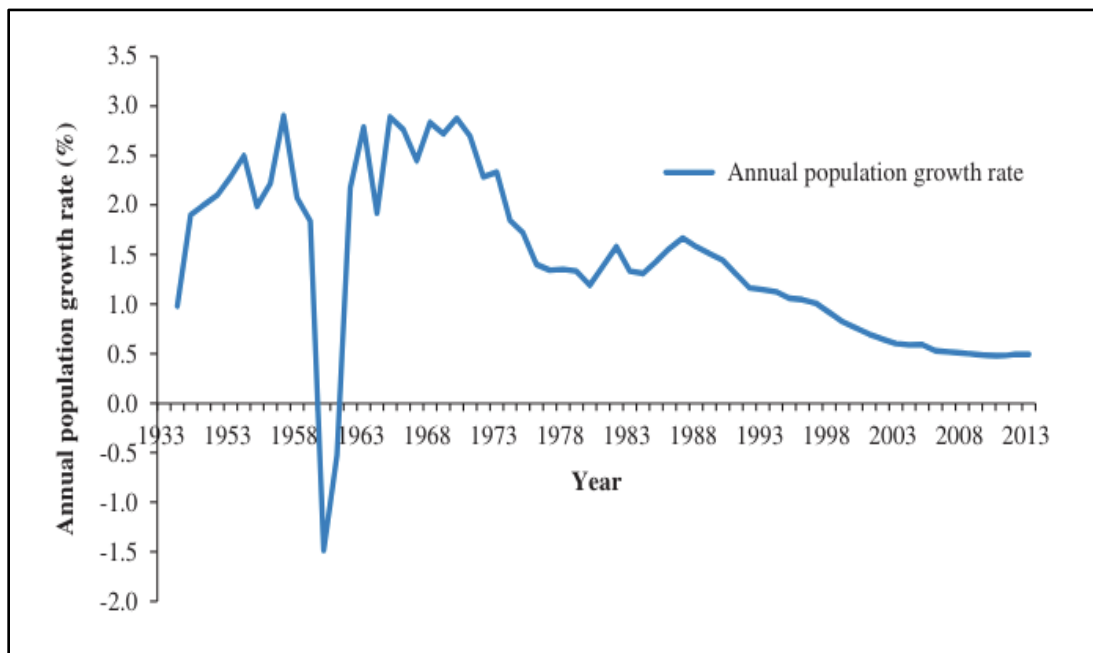
Keywords: The Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong Thought, Maoism, Collectivization

I. Introduction

The New Year's Editorial of the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), heralded Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) Great Leap Forward (*Dà yuè jìn*, 大跃进) (GLF) as an ingenious initiative to surpass the United States in twenty to thirty years in industrial production, contributing to his "exceeding the UK, catching the USA" campaigns (*chāoyīng gǎnměi*, 超英赶美) that took place all across China. However, the impacts of his radical labor restructuring and rapid industrialization will be remembered as one of the greatest losses of human life ever recorded; there were multiple, consecutive years of negative population growth rates easily distinguishable in China's history as seen in Figures one and two. Figure three shows China's gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing power parity (PPP) shrink to levels observed in 1951, demonstrating an obvious and distinct economic recession for

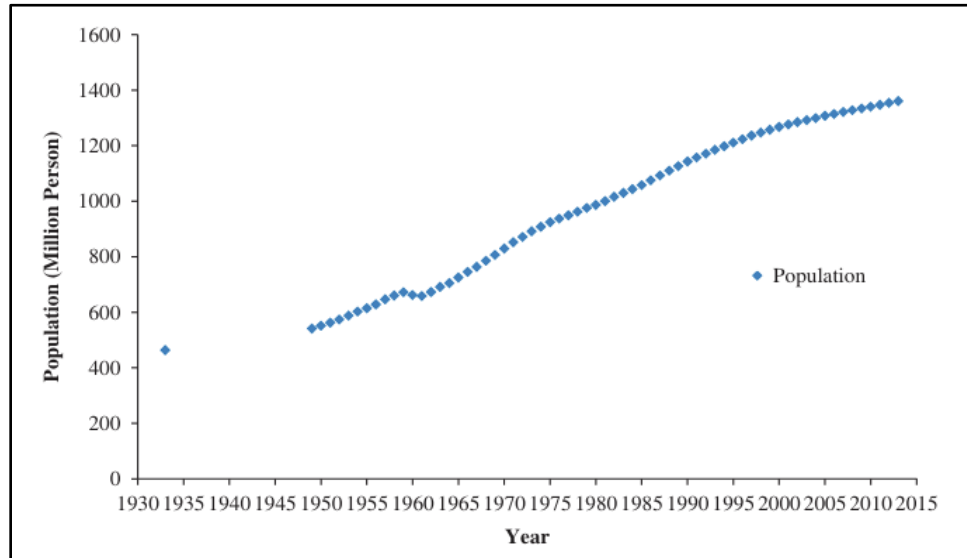
three straight years. This was immediately after the introduction of the GLF movement and the implementation of collectivization strategies. Nearly all the historical economic aggregates and population metrics point to a period of extreme societal instability, making the Chinese labor collectivization and the larger GLF movement two of the most discussed topics between scholars of modern Chinese history. Accordingly, a similar research question was formed by Tetsuya Kataoka in his 1969 paper “Political Theory of the Great Leap Forward.” However, Kataoka’s paper overlooks Mao’s dialectical materialist philosophical influence on decentralist labor management. It also lacks the specific Maoist ideological contradictions motivating a deviation from Stalin-influenced centralist ideologies. This includes Mao’s critique on Soviet disservice to continuous revolution and mass-line methodologies in policy. Mao’s ideological adaptations to his environment, in what he called the “Sinification of Marxist-Leninism,” also played a large role in the labor movement, especially Mao’s insistence on the mobilization and proletarianization of the peasantry. The subsequent sections of this paper will attempt to more holistically delve into Mao’s political theories and personal philosophies, both mentioned and unmentioned in Kataoka’s paper, that supported the GLF’s approach to labor management and collectivization.

Fig. 1: Annual Population Growth Rate (in percent): 1933-2013



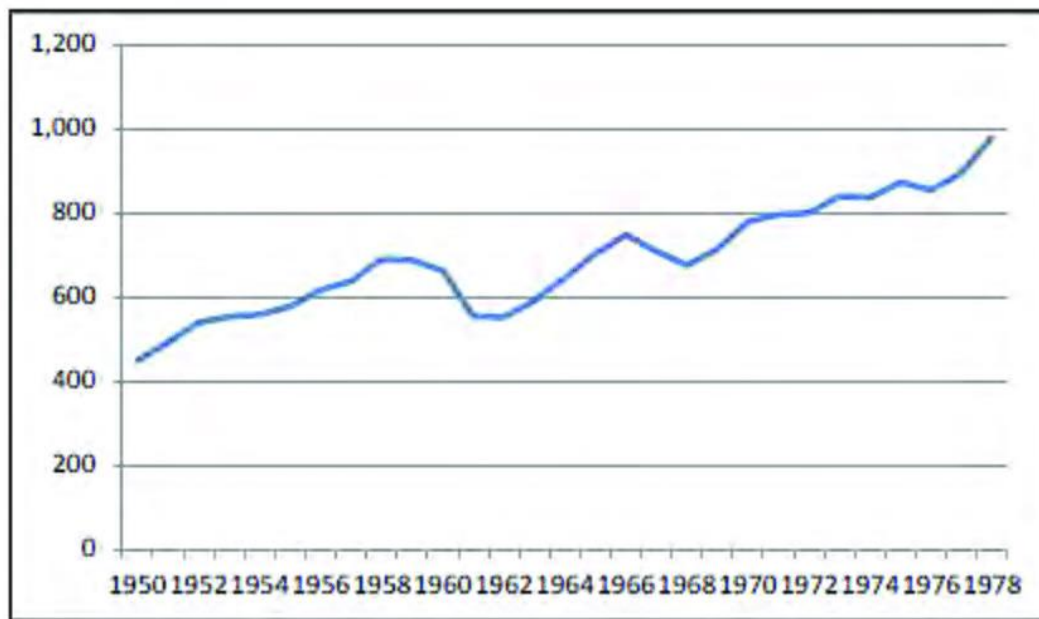
Source: “Spatiotemporal Dataset on Chinese Population Distribution and Its Driving Factors from 1949 to 2013” by Lizhe Wang & Lajiao Chen (2016)

Fig. 2: Population (in millions): 1933-2013



Source: “Spatiotemporal Dataset on Chinese Population Distribution and Its Driving Factors from 1949 to 2013” by Lizhe Wang & Lajiao Chen (2016)

Fig. 3: Chinese Per Capita GDP: 1950-1978 (in billions and PPP basis)



Source: “China’s Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States” from the Congressional Research Service (2015)

Chinese Collectivization

This paper refers to the Chinese collectivization as the involuntary or voluntary establishment of communes that collectivized and shared pre-existing assets and private property like labor, agricultural equipment, and farmland. Historically, this process often aimed to create a classless society by abolishing private property, such as in Soviet kolkhoz (колхоз) and sovkhoses (совхоз). Both the Chinese First Five Year Plan (*Dìyīgè Wǔnián Jìhuà*, 第一个五年计划) (1953-58) (FFYP) and the GLF utilized collectivization as a mode of increasing agricultural production but to different extents. The GLF People's Communes were not just state-mandated agricultural collectives; they were comprehensive labor units intended to integrate all aspects of life. This included not only farming but also local industry, education, healthcare, and governance. Communes did so by gathering local agrarian groups into larger units and dividing this human capital into different divisions of labor that were essential for commune self sufficiency. The GLF used collectivization to spread decentralization in the form of returning power to local and provincial authorities, specifically through the provincial focused governance structure. Additionally, the GLF's communes sought to create self-sufficient labor units that could also function independently of traditional family structures. As for earlier agricultural collectivization during the FFYP, three categories of voluntary peasant-led cooperatives/collectives emerged:¹ mutual-aid teams in which four to five households pooled labor and equipment for harvest during peak season; elementary cooperatives of twenty to thirty households collectivizing their assets as well as in distribution of their revenue;² and advanced cooperatives that existed on a village-wide scale of 150-200 households (Lin, 1990).³ These collectives were pretty successful and popular, with 753,000 advanced cooperatives forming by the end of 1957, containing 119 million member households and encouraging little resistance from peasant farmers (Lin, 1990). Outside of agriculture during the FFYP, collectivization consisted of the voluntary concession in individual firms and personal property for government joint private-public enterprises, representing a more subtle collectivization method in which

¹ This extremely intuitive and comprehensive system was mentioned by Justin Yifu Lin in his article concerning collectivization and applications in game theory. In "Collectivization and China's Agricultural Crisis in 1959-1961," in *Journal of Political Economy* 98, no. 6 (1990).

² Revenue was also distributed to households and individuals that contributed equipment or land in forms of dividends, essentially a rent-based system. Thus, the idea of personal property was still present.

³ "Advanced cooperatives" became the basis of the GLF's collectivization strategies, as all means of production were collectivized and personal property was aimed to become nonexistent. However, wages were still awarded to households and individuals based on "work points" which represented their time and labor invested in the commune's agricultural practice.

private property still existed and could be bought out by the state. This process was pressured in heavy industry, banking, infrastructure, and resource industries.

Contextualization: The Soviet System and the First Five Year Plan

Preceding the GLF, the FFYP was designed to shift the Chinese economy from agrarian to industrial using a heavily Stalinist-influenced development strategy. A necessary component of this plan was to increase agricultural productivity to support urban regions and raise capital for industrial investment. This can be summarized in using three state-implemented methods: one, by mobilizing China's large agricultural manpower and shifting it into labor-intensive infrastructure projects;⁴ two, by relying on traditional methods of increasing yields, such as closer planting, more effective weeding, and the usage of natural fertilizers; three, the pressuring and encouraging of peasants' households to voluntarily collectivize their settlements which was predicted to increase agricultural output. These methods succeeded, increasing grain output from 163.9 million tons to 200.0 million from 1952-58 (Lin, 1990: Ministry of Agriculture, 1989).⁵ Chinese investment in both heavy and light machinery also produced positive returns. The total gross value of industrial and agricultural output increased from 94.6 to 138.7 billion yuan from 1953-57 (Shabad, 1959).⁶

Nearing the end of the FFYP, Mao began forming a plan of action. He feared a return of a capitalist system within China after the brief return of a more lax free market system by the end of 1956. Additionally, the FFYP had exceeded the planned spending limit in industry investment, spending 55 billion yuan instead of the expected 42.7 billion (Lin, 1990).⁷ And while the FFYP did result in passable, not spectacular, growth in China's industrial sectors, Mao Zedong ultimately wanted to increase their overall output in both agricultural and industrial sectors significantly whilst also reducing their dependence on Stalinist-influenced strategic aid and financial support. He also considered the Soviet system and socialist methods of rapid industrialization from the West as economically slow⁸ and too politically moderate for the Chinese economic system. As such, he began splitting from Stalinist ideologies through his

⁴ Examples include irrigation, store houses, and road networks which all increased agricultural product and long run aggregate supply.

⁵ Table states that the original statistics were from the Ministry of Agriculture (1989), pp. 6-8, 112-13 and 147-49.

⁶ Value in billion yuan in terms of 1957 prices.

⁷ The 55 billion yuan includes funds from local sources; the actual value is 49.3 without local funds which is still larger than the estimate. The value is represented in billions of yuan in 1959 prices.

⁸ Mao had stated: "The rate of development of the Soviet economy is not high enough, although it is faster than the capitalists' rate" in his theoretical work *A Critique of Soviet Economics* (1960).

Sinification of Marxist-Leninism. The culmination of all these events resulted in a new goal of recreating the economic system in a total excision of the capitalist relations of production, beginning his conception of the GLF movement.

II. Mao's Foundations in Supporting Collectivization

Mao Zedong's motivations behind the GLF were multifaceted and diverse. One of the first and major catalysts, however, was the ideological split between Stalinist and Maoist principles that pushed the CCP away from further Sino-Soviet cooperation. Mao's critique of Stalin began when dogmatic and totalitarian policy was observed in the later to end stages of the Stalinist Soviet Union. The Maoist idea of continuous revolution⁹ contradicted Stalin's post-revolution vision of state building and his focus on power consolidation; Stalin also expressed a static view of class struggle and believed he had achieved socialism, differing from Mao's emphasis on consistent ideological innovation and mass mobilization. Chairman Mao's mass line methodologies were also contradicted by Stalin's failures in listening to and revising policy based on the reactions of the masses. In Mao's speech, "Stalin's Place in History," extracted from the People's Daily editorial of April 5th, 1956, he criticized Stalin for falling into the trap of the "cult of the individual," where he placed himself above the party and the people, avoiding third party advice and accountability, referencing Stalin's faults in Yugoslavia.

Chengtu Leadership Conference

Many arguments against Russian influence were made during the talks of the 1958 Chengtu CCP Leadership Conference. For example, this quote showcases two additional points:

"The Chinese people had got so used to being slaves that they seemed to want to go on. When Chinese artists painted pictures of me together with Stalin, they always made me a little bit shorter, thus blindly knuckling under to the moral pressure exerted by the Soviet Union at that time. Marxism-Leninism looks at everyone on equal terms, and all people should be treated as equals. Khrushchev's complete demolition of Stalin at one blow was also a kind of pressure, and the majority of people within the Chinese Party did not agree with it" (Mao, 1958).

Firstly, it examines the ideological existence of Soviet superiority during this time period. Mao labeled this as a "pressure" unto Chinese media to appeal to the inescapable Russo-influence

⁹ To learn more on the ideological differences of Maoist continuous revolution and the Trotskyite permanent revolution, read John Bryan Starr's "Conceptual Foundations of Mao Tse-Tung's Theory of Continuous Revolution," in *Asian Survey* 11, no. 6 (1971): 610–28.

existing throughout the FFYP and civil war reconstruction. Secondly, it was an attempt to dissociate with the new Soviet leadership, as the CCP saw Nikita Khrushchev's takeover as a complete failure for Soviet Russia. Khrushchev's "radical" economic pragmatism, like increased consumer goods production, and beliefs in peaceful coexistence with Western capitalist countries was disapproved by Mao and the anti-revisionists in the CCP. This was a common theme of criticism, making appearances in many of his speeches and works.

Mao also connected philosophical constructs like dialectical materialism and the idea of "unity through contradictions" to foster a new system of production, which soon transformed into one of the principal foundations in motivating collectivization, specifically for political decentralization. To be more specific, he wanted to empower local and provincial authorities, contrary to the highly centralized Stalinist system, to balance different speeds and intensities in production, ensuring that while one task is being completed, another is being prepared or initiated. This approach is described as a "wave-like form of progress," where different phases of activity complement each other. Furthermore, Mao's speaking points at the Chengtu conference emphasized reaching balance in careful deliberation and rapid progress, finding equilibrium in fast and slow initiative. Many of these ideas were formed on Mao Zedong's interpretational framework of dialectical materialism written in *On Contradiction* (*Máidùnlùn*, 矛盾论) (1937). His book placed more significance on "the unity and interpenetration of opposites" than Friedrich Engels's other two principal laws on dialect, "changes from quantity into quality" and "negation of the negation," which Mao decided to retire into sub laws. This shows his common theme of unity through opposites, which further correlates with his philosophical arguments for government decentralization. He rebukes the idea of "stagnant water," which achieves unity through perpetuality, a quality he wants China to avoid by instead pursuing radicalist policy.

Another idea brought up at the Chengtu Conference was ending the traditional unit of consumption, production, education, and procreation, or the traditional Chinese structure of family.

"The family, which emerged in the last period of primitive communism, will in future be abolished. It had a beginning and will come to an end . . . they have become merely units of consumption, and units for rearing and bringing up labor reserves, while the chief unit of education is the school. In short, the family may in future become something which is unfavorable to the development of production" (Mao, 1958).

A motivator for the commune system was to dismantle the traditional Chinese family structure that formed units of production in which exporting and producing goods were not prioritized. To elaborate, family units in the agrarian west created small villages consisting of both close and

distant relatives who mainly utilized farming for self-sustenance and offered the remaining unconsumed product for local trade. This did not coincide with the CCP's goals, as China needed national agricultural circulation to support areas that focused on industrialization. Accordingly, the traditional family structure was "abolished" through collectivization, promoting the domestic supply chain and allowing urban zones to focus exclusively on industrial manufacturing. Collectives mandated child care facilities and separate living arrangements which split families and relatives while artificially creating units of production based on sex, age, or division of labor within commune living.

Mao's Relationship with the Peasantry in Labor

Mao Zedong signified the mobilization and the revolutionary potential of the Chinese peasantry both in his essay *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, known as the *Hunan Works*, and as an ideological motivation behind the GLF. Although this was untraditional to Marxist-Lennism in which the industrial proletariats were prioritized, Zedong's Sinification of Marxism-Leninism was largely a byproduct and adaptation to China's environment. The peasantry was extremely relevant to Mao Zedong because of China's backwards nature at that time, consisting mostly of poor land-renting farmers rather than landless wage-earning proletariats in the likes of Europe and Soviet Russia. The GLF was his rapid and artificial proletarianization of the peasantry where he intended to strip private property and land from peasants to fully free them of the capitalist relations of production. The GLF's creation of People's Communes was also intended to eliminate the remnants of feudalism and bourgeois exploitation in the countryside. Additionally, Mao promoted false reports on his campaign's success to feed a perspective of economic and social success behind the revolution against the bourgeoisie. He explains the value of spreading positive propaganda in raising the peasantry's support and the futility of "political problems" and reactionary criticisms in his "Talks At The Nanning Conference" (1958).

"Please do not mention this term opposition to "bold advances," all right? This is a political problem. Any opposition would lead to disappointment, and 600 million disappointed people would be an overwhelming problem. Put out both hands for people to see how many fingers have sores. "The storehouses are empty," "The market is tense," using too many people spending too much money — should we oppose them? All these must be opposed. At that time it would have been best not to bring up the subject of opposition to "bold advances," and merely say that one finger had a sore. Thus it would not have raised the storm which blew away three things: 1) the achievement of greater, faster, better and more economical results; 2) the forty article program; and 3) the promotion committees. These are all political rather than functional problems. If one

finger has a problem it can be cured with a little treatment. Did not “storehouses are empty” and “the market is tense” finally change half year later?” (Mao, 1958).

For Mao, achievements outweigh economic roadblocks; he was very interested in maintaining a good face to the public. Furthermore, he felt many criticisms were based on politics rather than functionality. Because of Mao’s understanding of the peasantry’s importance, he stresses the need to please and garner their support. This leads to very overexaggerated bookkeeping and in turn high expectations in agricultural and industrial outputs. Mao's focus on the peasantry was an adaptation of Marxist theory to the unique conditions of China. The GLF was a continuation of Mao’s vision of transforming China into a completely socialist society through the mobilization and proletarianization of the peasantry.

III. Conclusion

Nearly all of Mao’s theories and expectations surrounding the GLF had severe unintended consequences and ultimately failed. His complete reliance on pure theory rather than empirical evidence was the greatest factor. The Great Leap Forward sought to decentralize, collectivize, and counteract the ideological deviation into Western methodologies. Decentralization was supported by Mao’s theories on mass line and continuous revolution. He argued in returning local and provincial authority to receive regional criticism and revise their plan accordingly, thus increasing efficiency and productivity by region. Local authority also meant an avoidance of excessive bureaucratic traps present in Stalinist-influenced centralized systems. Collectivization mobilized the peasant class and attempted to achieve Mao’s goals of a classless and egalitarian society when in reality it spread massive famine and created an inoperable agricultural system. Obsession and hatred toward revisionism clouded his rationality, pushing him to motivate a radical system to simply disprove Western revisionist thought. This was one of the main takeaways from Katakao’s work in comparing Khrushchevite and Maoist thought. Reflecting upon Chinese collectivism exposes an interesting perspective on communist economic systems. The lessons learned from the GLF are invaluable in approaching new systems of labor and in improving standards of living across the world.

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