

Did Mao Really Kill Millions in the Great Leap Forward?

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Over the last 25 years the reputation of Mao Zedong has been seriously undermined by ever more extreme estimates of the numbers of deaths he was supposedly responsible for. In his lifetime, Mao Zedong was hugely respected for the way that his socialist policies improved the welfare of the Chinese people, slashing the level of poverty and hunger in China and providing free health care and education. Mao's theories also gave great inspiration to those fighting imperialism around the world. It is probably this factor that explains a great deal of the hostility towards him from the Right. This is a tendency that is likely to grow more acute with the apparent growth in strength of Maoist movements in India and Nepal in recent years, as well as the continuing influence of Maoist movements in other parts of the world.

Most of the attempts to undermine Mao's reputation centre around the Great Leap Forward that began in 1958. It is this period that this article is primarily concerned with. The peasants had already started farming the land co-operatively in the 1950s. During the Great Leap Forward they joined large communes consisting of thousands or tens of thousands of people. Large-scale irrigation schemes were undertaken to improve agricultural productivity. Mao's plan was to massively increase both agricultural and industrial production. It is argued that these policies led to a famine in the years 1959-61 (although some believe the famine began in 1958). A variety of reasons are cited for the famine. For example, excessive grain procurement by the state or food being wasted due to free distribution in communal kitchens. It has also been claimed that peasants neglected agriculture to work on the irrigation schemes or in the famous "backyard steel

furnaces" (small-scale steel furnaces built in rural areas).

Mao admitted that problems had occurred in this period. However, he blamed the majority of these difficulties on bad weather and natural disasters. He admitted that there had been policy errors too, which he took responsibility for.

Official Chinese sources, released after Mao's death, suggest that 16.5 million people died in the Great Leap Forward. These figures were released during an ideological campaign by the government of Deng Xiaoping against the legacy of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. However, there seems to be no way of independently authenticating these figures due to the great mystery about how they were gathered and preserved for twenty years before being released to the general public. American researchers managed to increase this figure to around 30 million by combining the Chinese evidence with extrapolations of their own from China's censuses in 1953 and 1964. Recently, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in their book *Mao: the Unknown Story* reported 70 million killed by Mao, including 38 million in the Great Leap Forward.

Western writers on the subject have taken a completely disproportionate view of the period, mesmerized, as they are, by massive death toll figures from dubious sources. They concentrate only on policy excesses and it is likely that their views on the damage that these did are greatly exaggerated. There has been a failure to understand how some of the policies developed in the Great Leap Forward actually benefited the Chinese people, once the initial disruption was over.

U.S. state agencies have provided assistance to those with a negative attitude to Maoism (and communism in general) throughout the post-war period. For example, the veteran historian of Maoism Roderick MacFarquhar edited *The China Quarterly* in the 1960s. This magazine published allegations about massive famine deaths that have been quoted ever since. It later emerged that this journal received money from a CIA front organisation, as MacFarquhar admitted in a recent letter to *The London Review of Books*. (Roderick MacFarquhar states that he did not know the money was coming from the CIA while he was editing *The China Quarterly*.)

Those who have provided qualitative evidence, such as eyewitness accounts cited by Jasper Becker in his famous account of the period *Hungry Ghosts*, have not provided enough accompanying evidence to authenticate these accounts. Important documentary evidence quoted by Chang and Halliday concerning the Great Leap Forward is presented in a demonstrably misleading way.

Evidence from the Deng Xiaoping regime Mao that millions died during the Great Leap Forward is not reliable. Evidence from peasants contradicts the claim that Mao was mainly to blame for the deaths that did occur during the Great Leap Forward period.

U.S. demographers have tried to use death rate evidence and other demographic evidence from official Chinese sources to prove the hypothesis that there was a “massive death toll” in the Great Leap Forward (i.e. a hypothesis that the “largest famine of all time” or “one of the largest famines of all time” took place during the Great Leap Forward). However, inconsistencies in the evidence and overall doubts about the source of their evidence undermine this “massive death toll” hypothesis.

The More Likely Truth About the Great Leap Forward

The idea that “Mao was responsible for genocide” has been used as a springboard to rubbish everything that the Chinese people achieved during Mao’s rule. However, even

someone like the demographer Judith Banister, one of the most prominent advocates of the “massive death toll” hypothesis has to admit the successes of the Mao era. She writes how in 1973-5 life expectancy in China was higher than in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and many countries in Latin America¹. In 1981 she co-wrote an article where she described the People's Republic of China as a 'super-achiever' in terms of mortality reduction, with life expectancy increasing by approximately 1.5 years per calendar year since the start of communist rule in 1949². Life expectancy increased from 35 in 1949 to 65 in the 1970s when Mao’s rule came to an end.³

To read many modern commentators on Mao’s China⁴, you would get the impression that Mao’s agricultural and industrial policies led to absolute economic disaster. Even more restrained commentators, such as the economist Peter Nolan⁵ claim that living standards did not rise in China, during the post-revolutionary period, until Deng Xiaoping took power. Of course, increases in living standards are not the sole reason for increases in life expectancy. However, it is absurd to claim that life expectancy could have increased so much during the Mao era with no increase in living standards.

For example, it is claimed by many who have studied figures released by Deng Xiaoping after Mao’s death that per capita grain production did not increase at all during the Mao period.⁶ But how is it possible to reconcile such statistics with the figures on life expectancy that the same authors quote? Besides which these figures are contradicted by other figures. Guo Shutian, a Former Director of Policy and Law in the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture, in the post-Mao era, gives a very different view of China’s overall agricultural performance during the period before Deng’s “reforms.” It is true that he writes that agricultural production decreased in five years between 1949-1978 due to “natural calamities and mistakes in the work.” However he states that during 1949-1978 the per hectare yield of land sown with food crops increased by 145.9%

and total food production rose 169.6%. During this period China's population grew by 77.7%. On these figures, China's per capita food production grew from 204 kilograms to 328 kilograms in the period in question.⁷

Even according to figures released by the Deng Xiaoping regime, industrial production increased by 11.2% per year from 1952-1976 (by 10% a year during the alleged catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution). In 1952 industry was 36% of gross value of national output in China. By 1975 industry was 72% and agriculture was 28%. It is quite obvious that Mao's supposedly disastrous socialist economic policies paved the way for the rapid (but inequalitarian and unbalanced) economic development of the post-Mao era.⁸

There is a good argument to suggest that the policies of the Great Leap Forward actually did much to sustain China's overall economic growth, after an initial period of disruption. At the end of the 1950s, it was clear that China was going to have to develop using its own resources and without being able to use a large amount of machinery and technological know-how imported from the Soviet Union.

In the late 1950s China and the USSR were heading for a schism. Partly, this was the ideological fall-out that occurred following the death of Stalin. There had been many differences between Stalin and Mao. Among other things, Mao believed that Stalin mistrusted the peasants and over-emphasized the development of heavy industry. However, Mao believed that Khrushchev was using his denunciation of Stalinism as a cover for the progressive ditching of socialist ideology and practice in the USSR.

Also the split was due to the tendency of Khrushchev to try and impose the Soviet Union's own ways of doing things on its allies. Khrushchev acted not in the spirit of socialist internationalism but rather in the spirit of treating economically less developed nations like client states. For a country like China, that had fought so bitterly for its freedom from foreign domination, such a relationship could never have been acceptable. Mao could not

have sold it to his people, even if he had wanted to.

In 1960 the conflict between the two nations came to a head. The Soviets had been providing a great deal of assistance for China's industrialization program. In 1960, all Soviet technical advisers left the country. They took with them the blueprints of the various industrial plants they had been planning to build.

Mao made clear that, from the start, the policies of the Great Leap Forward were about China developing a more independent economic policy. China's alternative to reliance on the USSR was a program for developing agriculture alongside the development of industry. In so doing, Mao wanted to use the resources that China could muster in abundance-labour and popular enthusiasm. The use of these resources would make up for the lack of capital and advanced technology.

Although problems and reversals occurred in the Great Leap Forward, it is fair to say that it had a very important role in the ongoing development of agriculture. Measures such as water conservancy and irrigation allowed for sustained increases in agricultural production, once the period of bad harvests was over. They also helped the countryside to deal with the problem of drought. Flood defenses were also developed. Terracing helped gradually increase the amount of cultivated area.⁹

Industrial development was carried out under the slogan of "walking on two legs." This meant the development of small and medium scale rural industry alongside the development of heavy industry. As well as the steel furnaces, many other workshops and factories were opened in the countryside. The idea was that rural industry would meet the needs of the local population. Rural workshops supported efforts by the communes to modernize agricultural work methods. Rural workshops were very effective in providing the communes with fertilizer, tools, other agricultural equipment and cement (needed for water conservation schemes).¹⁰

Compared to the rigid, centralized economic system that tended to prevail in the Soviet Union, the Great Leap Forward was a supreme act of lateral thinking. Normally, cement and fertilizer, for example, would be produced in large factories in urban areas away from the rural areas that needed them. In a poor country there would be the problem of obtaining the capital and machinery necessary to produce industrial products such as these, using the most modern technique. An infrastructure linking the cities to the towns would then be needed to transport such products once they were made. This in itself would involve vast expense. As a result of problems like these, development in many poorer countries is either very slow or does not occur at all.

Rural industry established during the Great Leap Forward used labour-intensive rather than capital-intensive methods. As they were serving local needs, they were not dependent on the development of an expensive nation-wide infrastructure of road and rail to transport the finished goods.

In fact the supposedly wild, chaotic policies of the Great Leap Forward meshed together quite well, after the problems of the first few years. Local cement production allowed water conservancy schemes to be undertaken. Greater irrigation made it possible to spread more fertilizer. This fertilizer was, in turn, provided by the local factories. Greater agricultural productivity would free up more agricultural labour for the industrial manufacturing sector, facilitating the overall development of the country.¹¹ This approach is often cited as an example of Mao's economic illiteracy (what about the division of labour and the gains from regional specialization etc). However, it was right for China as the positive effects of Mao's policies in terms of human welfare and economic development show.

Agriculture and small scale rural industry were not the only sector to grow during China's socialist period. Heavy industry grew a great deal in this period too. Developments such as the establishment of the Taching oil field during

the Great Leap Forward provided a great boost to the development of heavy industry. A massive oil field was developed in China.¹² This was developed after 1960 using indigenous techniques, rather than Soviet or western techniques. (Specifically the workers used pressure from below to help extract the oil. They did not rely on constructing a multitude of derricks, as is the usual practice in oil fields).

The arguments about production figures belie the fact that the Great Leap Forward was at least as much about changing the way of thinking of the Chinese people as it was about industrial production. The so-called "backyard steel furnaces," where peasants tried to produce steel in small rural foundries, became infamous for the low quality of the steel they produced. But they were as much about training the peasants in the ways of industrial production as they were about generating steel for China's industry. It's worth remembering that the "leaps" Mao used to talk about the most were not leaps in the quantities of goods being produced but leaps in people's consciousness and understanding. Mistakes were made and many must have been demoralized when they realized that some of the results of the Leap had been disappointing. But the success of the Chinese economy in years to come shows that not all its lessons were wasted.

Great Leap Forward and Qualitative Evidence

Of course, to make such points is to go against the mainstream western view that the Great Leap Forward was a disaster of world historical proportions. But what is the basis for this view? One way those who believe in the "massive death toll" thesis could prove their case would be to find credible qualitative evidence such as eye-witness or documentary evidence. The qualitative evidence that does exist is not convincing however.

Chinese history scholar Carl Riskin believes that a very serious famine took place but states "In general, it appears that the indications of hunger and hardship did not approach the kinds of qualitative evidence of mass famine that

have accompanied other famines of comparable (if not equal) scale, including earlier famines in China.” He points out that much of the contemporary evidence presented in the West tended to be discounted at the time as it emanated from right-wing sources and was hardly conclusive. He considers whether repressive policies by the Chinese government prevented information about the famine getting out but states “whether it is a sufficient explanation is doubtful. There remains something of a mystery here.”¹³

There are authors such as Roderick MacFarquhar, Jasper Becker and Jung Chang who certainly do assert that the evidence they have seen proves the massive famine thesis. It is true that their main works on these issues¹⁴ do cite sources for this evidence. However, they do not make it sufficiently clear, in these books, why they believe these sources are authentic.

It therefore remains an open question why the accounts presented by these authors should be treated as certain fact in the west. In his famous 1965 book on China, *A Curtain of Ignorance*, Felix Greene says that he traveled through areas of China in 1960 where food rationing was very tight but he did not see mass starvation. He also cites other eyewitnesses who say the same kind of thing. It is likely, that in fact, famine did occur in some areas. However Greene’s observations indicate that it was not a nation-wide phenomenon on the apocalyptic scale suggested by Jasper Becker and others. Mass hunger was not occurring in the areas he traveled through, although famine may have been occurring elsewhere. Why are the accounts of people like Becker believed so readily when the account of Felix Greene and the others he cites is discounted? Of course, the sympathy of Greene for Mao’s regime may be raised in connection with this and it might be suggested he distorted the truth for political reasons. But Becker, MacFarquhar and Jung Chang have their own perspectives on the issue too. Could anyone seriously doubt that these authors are not fairly staunch anti-communists?

Before addressing the question of the authentication of sources, the context for the

discussion of these issues needs to be set. Communism is a movement that generates a massive amount of opposition. Western countries waged an intensive propaganda war against communism. In power, communist governments dispossessed large numbers of people of their capital and land. The whole landlord and business class was robbed of its social power and status across much of Asia and Europe. Unsurprisingly, this generated much bitterness. A large number of well-educated people who were born in these countries had and still have the motivation to discredit communism. It is not “paranoia” to ask that those who write about the communist era take pains to ensure that their sources are reporting fact and are not providing testimony that has been distorted or slanted by anti-communist bias.

In addition, the U.S. government did have an interest in putting out negative propaganda about Chinese communism and communism in general. Too often discussion of this is dismissed as “conspiracy theories” and the evidence about what really happened does not get discussed very widely.

However, covert attempts by the U.S. to discredit communism are a matter of record. U.S. intelligence agencies often sought a connection with those who published work about communist regimes. It must not be thought that those people they sought this connection with were simply hacks paid to churn out cheap sensationalism. Far from it. For example, *The China Quarterly* published many articles in the 1960s which are still frequently cited as evidence of living conditions in China and the success or otherwise of government policies in that country. In 1962 it published an article by Joseph Alsop that alleged that Mao was attempting to wipe out a third of his population through starvation to facilitate his economic plans!¹⁵ This article is cited, in all seriousness, to provide contemporary evidence of the “massive death toll” hypothesis in many later works on the subject (for example in the article “Famine in China” that is discussed below).

The editor of *The China Quarterly* was Roderick MacFarquhar who went on to write many important works on China's communist government. MacFarquhar edited Volume 14 of the Cambridge History of China which covered the period 1949-1965. He wrote *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* which includes a volume on the events of 1956 and 1957 as well as a volume on the Great Leap Forward, which puts forward the "massive death toll" thesis. He also edited *Mao's Secret Speeches*. Printed in the pages of *The China Quarterly* is a statement that it was published by Information Bulletin Ltd on behalf of The Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). On 13 May 1967 The CCF issued a press release admitting that it was funded by the CIA, following an expose in Ramparts magazine.¹⁶

MacFarquhar stated when questioned by me that:

When I was asked to be the founder editor of the CQ [China Quarterly], it was explained to me that the mission of the CCF was to encourage Western intellectuals to form a community committed to the free exchange of ideas. The aim was to provide some kind of an organizational counter to Soviet efforts to attract Western intellectuals into various front organizations...All I was told about funding was that the CCF was backed by a wide range of foundations, including notably Ford, and the fact that, of these, the Farfield Foundation was a CIA front was not disclosed.

In the 26 January 2006 edition of *The London Review of Books* MacFarquhar writes of "the 1960 inaugural issues of the China Quarterly, of which I was then the editor."

He also writes that "secret moneys from the CIA (from the Farfield Foundation via the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the parent of the CQ, *Encounter* and many other magazines) provided part of the funding for the CQ—something I did not know until the public revelations of the late 1960s."

The issue goes beyond those, like MacFarquhar, who worked for periodicals connected with the CCF. It is also alleged that other magazines received funding that

emanated from the CIA more generally. For example, Victor Marchetti, a former staff officer in the Office of the Director of the CIA, wrote that the CIA set up the Asia Foundation and subsidized it to the tune of \$8 million a year to support the work of "anti-communist academicians in various Asian countries, to disseminate throughout Asia a negative vision of mainland China, North Vietnam and North Korea."¹⁷

Of course, the issue is not black and white. For example, MacFarquhar also states that he allowed a wide range of views from different sides of the political spectrum to be aired in his journal. He argues that Alsop's article would have been published elsewhere, even if he had rejected it and that he did publish replies to it which were negative about Alsop's thesis.

This may be true. However, those like MacFarquhar were publishing the kind of things the CIA might be thought to, in general, look favorably upon. (Otherwise why would the CIA have put up money for it?) The key point is that these people had a source of western state funding that others with a different viewpoint lacked.

In the last few years a new generation of writers has published alleged eyewitness and documentary evidence for the "massive death toll" hypothesis. The key issue with this evidence is the authentication of sources. These authors do not present sufficient evidence in the works cited in this article to show that the sources are authentic.

Jasper Becker in his book on the Great Leap Forward, *Hungry Ghosts*, cites a great deal of evidence of mass starvation and cannibalism in China during the Great Leap Forward. It should be noted that this is evidence that only emerged in the 1990s. Certainly the more lurid stories of cannibalism are not corroborated by any source that appeared at the actual time of the Great Leap Forward, or indeed for many years later. Many of the accounts of mass starvation and cannibalism that Becker uses come from a 600 page document "Thirty Years in the Countryside." Becker says it was a secret official document that was smuggled out of

China in 1989. Becker writes that his sources for *Hungry Ghosts* include documents smuggled out of China in 1989 by intellectuals going into exile. The reader needs to be told how people who were apparently dissidents fleeing the country during a crack-down were able to smuggle out official documents regarding events thirty years before.

Also, Becker should have discussed more generally why he believes "Thirty Years in the Countryside" and the other texts are authentic. In 2001 Becker reviewed the *Tiananmen Papers* in the *London Review of Books*.¹⁸ The *Tiananmen Papers* are purportedly inner party documents which were smuggled out of the country by a dissident. They supposedly shed light on the Party leadership's thinking at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. In his review Becker seriously discusses the possibility that these papers might be forgeries. In *Hungry Ghosts*, Becker needed to say why he thought the documents he was citing in his own book were genuine, despite believing that other smuggled official documents might be inauthentic.

Similarly, Becker cites a purported internal Chinese army journal from 1961 as evidence of a massive humanitarian disaster during the Great Leap Forward. The reports in this journal do indeed allude to a fairly significant disaster which is effecting the morale of Chinese troops. However, is this journal a genuine document? The journal was released by U.S. Department of State in 1963 and was published in a collection by the Hoover Institution entitled *The Politics of the Chinese Red Army* in 1966. According to the British Daily Telegraph newspaper 19 "They [the journals] have been in American hands for some time, although nobody will disclose how they were acquired." Becker and the many other writers on the Great Leap Forward who have cited these journals need to state why they regard them as authentic.

Becker's book also uses eyewitness accounts of hunger in the Great Leap Forward. During the mid-nineties, he interviewed people in mainland China as well as Hong Kong and Chinese immigrants in the west. He states in his

book that in mainland China he was "rarely if ever, allowed to speak freely to the peasants." Local officials "coached" the peasants before the interview, sat with them during it and answered some of the questions for them. Given that there is a good chance that these officials were trying to slant evidence in favour of the negative Deng Xiaoping line on the Great Leap Forward it is surely important that the reader is told which of the interviews cited in the book were conducted under these conditions and which were not. Becker does not do this in *Hungry Ghosts*. Nowhere in this book does he go into sufficient detail to demonstrate to the reader that the accounts he cites in his book are authentic.

For a few years, *Hungry Ghosts* was the pre-eminent text, as far as critics of Mao were concerned. However, in 2005 *Mao: the Unknown Story* was published and very heavily promoted in the West. Its allegations are, if anything, even more extreme than Becker's book. Of the 70 million deaths the book ascribes to Mao, 38 million are meant to have taken place during the Great Leap Forward. The book relies very heavily on an unofficial collection of Mao's speeches and statements which were supposedly recorded by his followers and which found their way to the west by means that are unclear. The authors often use materials from this collection to try and demonstrate Mao's fanaticism and lack of concern for human life. They are a group of texts that became newly available in the 1980s courtesy of the Center of Chinese Research Materials (CCRM) in the U.S. Some of these texts were translated into English and published in *Mao's Secret Speeches*.²⁰

In this volume, Timothy Cheek writes an essay assessing the authenticity of the texts. He writes "The precise provenance of these volumes, which have arrived through various channels, cannot be documented..." Timothy Cheek argues that the texts are likely to be authentic for two reasons. Firstly, because some of the texts that the CCRM received were previously published in mainland China in other editions. Secondly, because texts that appear in one volume received by the CCRM also appear

in at least one other volume received by the CCRM. It is not obvious to me why these two facts provide strong evidence of the general authenticity of the texts.

Perhaps more importantly Chang and Halliday quote passages from these texts in a misleading way in their chapter on the Great Leap Forward. Chang claims that in 1958 Mao clamped down on what he called “people roaming the countryside uncontrolled.” In the next sentence the authors claim that “The traditional possibility of escaping a famine by fleeing to a place where there was food was now blocked off.” But the part of the “secret” speech in which Mao supposedly complains about people “roaming around uncontrolled” has nothing to do with preventing population movement in China. When the full passage which the authors selectively quote from is read, it can be seen that the authors are being misleading. What Mao is actually meant to have said is as follows.

[Someone] from an APC [an Agricultural Producers’ Co-operative-Joseph Ball] in Handan [Hebei] drove a cart to the Anshan steel [mill] and wouldn’t leave until given some iron. In every place [there are] so many people roaming around uncontrolled; this must be banned completely. [We] must work out an equilibrium between levels, with each level reporting to the next higher level—APCs to the counties, counties to the prefectures, prefectures to the provinces—this is called socialist order.²¹

What Mao is talking about here is the campaign to increase steel production, partly through the use of small-scale rural production. Someone without authority was demanding iron from Anshan to help their co-operative meet their steel production quota. Mao seems to be saying that this spontaneous approach is wrong. He seems to be advocating a more hierarchical socialist planning system where people have to apply to higher authorities to get the raw materials they need to fulfill production targets. (This sounds very unlike Mao—but that is by the by.) He is clearly not advocating a general ban on all Chinese people traveling around the country here!

A second, seriously misleading, quotation comes at the end of the chapter on the Great Leap Forward. First Chang and Halliday write “We can now say with assurance how many people Mao was ready to dispense with.” The paragraph then gives some examples of alleged quotes by Mao on how many Chinese deaths would be acceptable in time of war. The next paragraph begins “Nor was Mao just thinking about a war situation.” They then quote Mao at the Wuchang Conference as saying “Working like this, with all these projects, half of China may well have to die.” This quotation appears in the heading of Chang and Halliday’s chapter on the Great Leap Forward. The way the authors present this quotation it looks as if Mao was saying that it might indeed be necessary for half of China to die to realize his plans to increase industrial production. But it is obvious from the actual text of the speech that what Mao is doing is warning of the dangers of overwork and over-enthusiasm in the Great Leap Forward, while using a fair bit of hyperbole. Mao is making it clear that he does not want anyone to die as a result of his industrialization drive. In this part of the discussion, Mao talks about the idea of developing all the major industries and agriculture in one fell swoop. The full text of the passage that the authors selectively quote from is as follows.

In this kind of situation, I think if we do [all these things simultaneously] half of China’s population unquestionably will die; and if it’s not a half, it’ll be a third or ten percent, a death toll of 50 million. When people died in Guangxi [in 1955-Joseph Ball], wasn’t Chen Manyuan dismissed? If with a death toll of 50 million, you didn’t lose your jobs, I at least should lose mine; [whether I would lose my] head would be open to question. Anhui wants to do so many things, it’s quite all right to do a lot, but make it a principle to have no deaths.²²

Then in a few sentences later Mao says: “As to 30 million tons of steel, do we really need that much? Are we able to produce [that much]? How many people do we mobilize? Could it lead to deaths?”

It is very important that a full examination of the sources Chang and Halliday have used for their book is made. This is a call that has been made elsewhere. Nicholas D. Kristof's review of the book in *The New York Times* brought up some interesting questions. Kristof talks about Mao's English teacher Zhang Hanzhi (Mao attempted to learn English in adult life) who Chang and Halliday cite as one of the people they interviewed for the book. However, Zhang told Kristof (who is one of her friends) that though she met the two authors she declined to be interviewed and provided them with no substantial information.²³ Kristof calls for the authors to publish their sources on the web so they can be assessed for fairness.

Deng's Campaign Against Mao's Legacy

There were some proponents of the "massive death toll" story in the 1960s. However, as Felix Greene pointed out in *A Curtain of Ignorance* anti-communists in the 1950s and early 1960s made allegations about massive famines in China virtually every year. The story about the Great Leap Forward was only really taken seriously in the 1980s when the new Chinese leadership began to back the idea. It was this that has really given credibility in the west to those such as Becker and Jung Chang.

The Chinese leadership began its attack on the Great Leap Forward in 1979. Deng moved against Mao supporters directing the official press to attack them.²⁴ This took the form of an ideological campaign against 'ultraleftism.' As Meissner, says in his study of the Deng Xiaoping era, "multitudes of scholars and theoreticians were brought forth to expound on the 'petty bourgeois' social and ideological roots of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution."²⁵

The reason for this vilification of the Great Leap Forward had much to do with post-Mao power struggles and the struggle to roll back the socialist policies of 1949-76. After Mao's death in 1976 Hua Guofeng had come to power on a platform of "upholding every word and policy made by Mao." Deng Xiaoping badly

needed a political justification for his usurpation of Hua in 1978 and his assumption of leadership. Deng's stated stance of Mao being "70% right and 30% wrong" was a way of distinguishing his own "pragmatic" approach to history and ideology from his predecessors. (The pro-market policies Deng implemented suggested that he actually believed that Mao was about 80% wrong.)

The Chinese party did everything it could to promote the notion that the Great Leap Forward was a catastrophe caused by ultra-leftist policies. Marshal Ye Jian Ying, in an important speech in 1979 talked of disasters caused by leftist errors in the Great Leap Forward.²⁶ In 1981 the Chinese Communist Party's "Resolution on Party History" spoke of "serious losses to our country and people between 1959 and 1961." Academics joined in the attack. In 1981 Professor Liu Zeng, Director of the Institute of Population Research at the People's University gave selected death rate figures for 1954-78. These figures were given at a public academic gathering which drew much attention in the West. The figures he gave for 1958-1961 indicated that 16.5 million excess deaths had occurred in this period.²⁷ At the same time Sun Yefang, a prominent Chinese economist publicly drew attention to these figures stating that "a high price was paid in blood" for the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward.²⁸

As well as the internal party struggle Deng wanted to reverse virtually all of Mao's positive achievements in the name of introducing capitalism or "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as he described it. Attacking the Great Leap Forward, helped provide the ideological justification for reversing Mao's "leftist" policies. Deng dissolved the agricultural communes in the early 1980s. In the years following the Great Leap Forward the communes had begun to provide welfare services like free health care and education. The break up of the Commune meant this ended. In an article about the Great Leap Forward, Han Dongping, an Assistant Professor at Warren Wilson College, described a "humorous" report

in the New York based Chinese newspaper *The World Journal* about a farmer from Henan province who was unable to pay medical bills to get his infected testicles treated. Tortured by pain he cut them off with a knife and almost killed himself.²⁹ This kind of incident is the real legacy of Deng's "reforms" in the countryside.

It is often said that Deng's agricultural reforms improved the welfare of the peasantry. It is true that breaking up the communes led to a 5 year period of accelerated agricultural production. But this was followed by years of decline in per capita food production.³⁰ Despite this decline, western commentators tend to describe the break-up of the communes as an unqualified economic success.

In fact, breaking up the peasant communes created sources of real hardship for the peasants. By encouraging the Chinese ruling class to describe the Great Leap Forward as a disaster that killed millions, Deng was able to develop a political line that made his regressive policies in the countryside seem legitimate.

Deng Xiaoping Blames Mao for Famine Deaths

For Deng's line to prevail he needed to prove not only that mass deaths happened from 1959-61 but also that these were mainly the result of policy errors. After the Great Leap Forward the official Chinese government line on the famine was that it was 70% due to natural disasters and 30% due to human error. This verdict was reversed by the Deng Xiaoping regime. In the 1980s they claimed the problems were caused 30% by natural disasters and 70% by human error. But surely if Mao's actions had led to the deaths of millions of peasants, the peasants would have realized what was going on. However, the evidence is that they did not blame Mao for most of the problems that occurred during the Great Leap Forward.

Long after Mao's death, Professor Han Dongping traveled to Shandong and Henan, where the worst famine conditions appeared in 1959-1961.

Han Dongping found that most of the farmers he questioned favored the first interpretation of events, rather than the second,

that is to say they did not think Mao was mainly to blame for the problems they suffered during the Great Leap Forward.³¹ This is not to say that tragic errors did not occur. Dongping wrote of the introduction of communal eating in the rural communes. To begin with, this was a very popular policy among the peasants. Indeed, in 1958 many farmers report that they had never eaten so well in their lives before. The problem was that this new, seeming abundance led to carelessness in the harvesting and consumption of food. People seemed to have started assuming that the government could guarantee food supplies and that they did not have responsibility themselves for food security.

Given the poverty of China in the late 1950s this was an error that was bound to lead to serious problems and the Communist leadership should have taken quicker steps to rectify it. Three years of awful natural disasters made things much worse. Solidarity between commune members in the worst effected regions broke down as individuals tried to seize crops before they were harvested. Again, this practice made a bad situation worse. However, it must be stressed that the farmers themselves did not tell Han Dongping that errors in the organisation of communal eating were the main cause of the famine they suffered. Han Dongping, himself, severely criticizes Mao for the consequences of his "hasty" policies during the Great Leap Forward. However he also writes "I have interviewed numerous workers and farmers in Shandong, Henan, and I never met one farmer or worker who said that Mao was bad. I also talked to one scholar in Anhui [where the famine is alleged to have been most serious-Joseph Ball] who happened to grow up in rural areas and had been doing research in the Anhui, he never met one farmer that said Mao was bad nor a farmer who said Deng [Xiaoping] was good."³²

It may be argued that Han Dongping's, at least partial, sympathy for Mao might have colored his interpretation of what he heard from the peasants. However, it must also be noted that two of his grandparents died of hunger related diseases during the Great Leap

Forward and Han Dongping often sounds more critical of Mao's policies in this period than the peasants he is interviewing.

Massive Deaths? The Demographic Evidence.

The relative sympathy of the peasants for Mao when recalling the Great Leap Forward must call into question the demographic evidence that indicates that tens of millions of them starved to death at this time. Western academics seem united on the validity of this evidence. Even those who query it, like Carl Riskin, always end up insisting that all the "available evidence" indicates that a famine of huge proportions occurred in this period.

In fact, there is certainly evidence from a number of sources that a famine occurred in this period but the key question is was it a famine that killed 30 million people? This really would have been unprecedented. Although we are used to reading newspaper headlines like "tens of millions face starvation in African famine" it is unheard of for tens of millions to actually die in a famine. For example, the Bangladesh famine of 1974-75 is remembered as a deeply tragic event in that nation's history. However, the official death toll for the Bangladesh famine was 30,000 (out of a single-year population of 76 million), although unofficial sources put the death toll at 100,000.³³ Compare this to an alleged death toll of 30 million out of a single-year population calculated at around 660-670 million for the Great Leap Forward period. Proportionally speaking, the death toll in the Great Leap Forward is meant to be approximately 35 times higher than the higher estimated death toll for the Bangladesh famine!

It is rather misleading to say that all "available evidence" demonstrates the validity of the massive deaths thesis. The real truth is that all estimates of tens of millions of Great Leap Forward deaths rely on figures for death rates for the late 1950s and early 1960s. There is only very uncertain corroboration for these figures from other statistics for the period.

The problem is that death rate figures for the period 1940-82, like most Chinese

demographic information, were regarded as a state secret by China's government until the early 1980s. As we shall see, uncertainty about how these were gathered seriously undermines their status as concrete evidence. It was only in 1982 that death rate figures for the 1950s and 1960s were released (see Table 1).

They purportedly showed that the death rate rose from 10.8 per thousand in 1957 to 25.4 per thousand in 1960, dropping to 14.2 per thousand in 1961 and 10 per thousand in 1962. These figures appear to show approximately 15 million excess deaths due to famine from 1958-1961.³⁴

**Table 1. Official Death Rates for China
1955-1962**

Year	Death Rate Per 1000
1955	12.3
1956	11.4
1957	10.8
1958	12.0
1959	14.6
1960	25.4
1961	14.2
1962	10.0
1963	10.0
1964	11.5

(Source: Statistical Yearbook of China 1983)

U.S. Demographers and the Chinese Statistics

Chinese data on famine deaths was used by a group of U.S. demographers in their own work on the subject. These demographers were Ansley Coale, John Aird and Judith Banister. They can be said to be the three people that first popularized the "massive death toll" hypothesis in the West. Ansley Coale was a very influential figure in American demography. He was employed by the Office of Population Research which was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1980s when he was publishing his work on China. John Aird was a research specialist on China at the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In 1990, he wrote a book published by the American Enterprise Institute,

which is a body that promotes neo-liberal policies. This book was called *Slaughter of the Innocents* and was a critique of China's one-child birth control policy. Judith Banister was another worker at the U.S. Bureau of the Census. She was given time off from her employment there to write a book that included a discussion of the Great Leap Forward deaths.³⁵ John Aird read her book pre-publication and gave her advice.

Judith Banister produced figures that appear to show 30 million excess deaths in the Great Leap Forward. This is nearly twice the figure indicated by official Chinese statistics. She believes the official statistics underestimate the total mortality because of under-reporting of deaths by the Chinese population during the period in question.

Banister calculates the total number of under-reported deaths in this period by first calculating the total number of births between the two censuses of 1953 and 1964. She does this using data derived from the census and data from a retrospective fertility survey carried out in 1982. (Participants in the survey were asked to describe the number of babies they had given birth to between 1940 and 1981). Once the population of 1953 and 1964 is known, and the total number of births between these two years is known, it is possible to calculate the number of deaths that would have occurred during this period. She uses this information to calculate a total number of deaths for the eleven year period that is much higher than official death rates show.

To estimate how many of these deaths occurred in the Great Leap Forward, Banister returns to the official Chinese death rate statistics. She assumes that these figures indicate the actual trend of deaths in China in this period, even though they were too low in absolute terms. For example, she assumes that the official death rate of 25 per thousand in 1960 does indeed indicate that a huge increase in the death rate occurred in 1960. However, she combines this with her estimates of under-reporting of deaths in the period 1953-1964 to come up with a figure of 45 deaths per

thousand in 1960. In years in which no famine is alleged the death toll also increases using this method. In 1957, for example, she increases the death rate from the official figure of 10.8 per thousand to 18 per thousand. Banister then compares the revised death rates in good years with the revised death rates in alleged famine years. Banister is then able to come up with her estimate of 30 million excess deaths during the Great Leap Forward.³⁶

Questions Over the Chinese Statistics

A variety of Chinese figures are quoted to back up this thesis that a massive famine occurred. Statistics that purport to show that Mao was to blame for it are also quoted. They include figures supposedly giving a provincial break-down of the increased death rates in the Great Leap Forward,³⁷ figures showing a massive decrease in grain production during the Great Leap Forward³⁸ and also figures that apparently showed that bad weather was not to blame for the famine.³⁹ These figures were all released in the early 1980s at the time of Deng's "reforms."

But how trustworthy are any of these figures? As we have seen they were released during the early 1980s at a time of acute criticism of the Great Leap Forward and the People's Communes. China under Deng was a dictatorship that tried to rigorously control the flow of information to its people. It would be reasonable to assume that a government that continually interfered in the reporting of public affairs by the media would also interfere in the production of statistics when it suited them. John Aird writing in 1982 stated that

The main reason so few national population data appear in Chinese sources, however, is central censorship. No national population figures can be made public without prior authorization by the State Council. Even officials of the SSB [State Statistical Bureau] cannot use such figures until they have been cleared.⁴⁰

Of particular interest is the question of the circumstances under which the death rate figures were arrived at by the State Statistical Bureau. The figures given for total deaths during the Great Leap Forward by U.S. and Chinese academics all depend on the key death rate statistic for the years in question.

Of course, if we knew in detail how information about death rates was gathered during the Great Leap Forward we might be able to be more certain that it is accurate. The problem is that this information is not available. We have to just take the Chinese governments word for it that their figures are true. Moreover, statements provided by Aird and Banister indicates that they believe that death rate figures were estimates and not based on an actual count of reported deaths.

Aird states that “the official vital rates [birth and death rates] of the crisis years [of the Great Leap Forward] must be estimates, but their basis is not known.”⁴¹

Banister writes that China did try to start vital registration in 1954 but it was very incomplete. She writes, “If the system of death registration was used as a basis for any of the estimated death rates for 1955 through 1957, the rates were derived from only those localities that had set up the system, which would tend to be more advanced or more urbanized locations.”⁴²

Banister suggests that the situation did not improve very much during or after the Great Leap Forward. She writes:

In the late 1960s and most prior years, the permanent population registration and reporting system may have been so incomplete and uneven that national or provincial statistical personnel had to estimate all or part of their totals. In particular, in the 1950s the permanent population registration and reporting system was only beginning to be set up, and at first it did not cover the entire population. All the national population totals for the 1950s except the census total, were probably based on incomplete local reports supplemented by estimates.⁴³

She also writes that “In all years prior to 1973-75 the PRC’s data on crude death rates, infant mortality rates, expectation of life at birth, and causes of death were nonexistent, useless, or, at best, underestimates of actual mortality.”⁴⁴

The reader searches the work of Aird, Coale and Banister in vain for some indication as to why they can so confidently assert figures for tens of millions of deaths in the Great Leap Forward based on official death rate figures. These authors do not know how these figures were gathered and especially in Banister’s case, they appear to have little faith in them.

Alleged Deaths Among the Young in the Great Leap Forward

Some demographers have tried to calculate infant death rates to provide evidence for the “massive death toll” hypothesis. However, the evidence they come up with tends to muddy the picture rather than providing corroboration for the evidence from death rates.

One calculation of deaths made by this method appears in the 1984 article “Famine in China.”⁴⁵ This article reviewed the previous work of Aird, Coale and Banister. It accepted the contention of these latter authors that a massive level of deaths had occurred, overall, during the Great Leap Forward. However, the authors also try to calculate separate figures for child and adult deaths in this period. The evidence this latter article tries to put together is very frequently quoted by those writing about the era.

The authors of “Famine in China” calculate infant deaths using the 1982 Retrospective Fertility Survey. They use this survey to calculate the number of births in each year of the Great Leap Forward. Once the number of births is estimated for each year it is possible to calculate how many of those born in the years 1958-1962 survived to be counted in the census of 1964. This can be compared with survivorship rates of babies born in years when no famine was alleged.

They use model life tables to calculate how many of the babies dying before the census died in each famine year. They then convert this figure into a figure for the number of deaths of those aged under ten in each of the famine years. This final figure is arrived at by using life tables and period mortality levels.

The authors of this article argue that the famine began in 1958-9. They calculate that 4,268,000 excess deaths for those aged under 10 occurred in this period which represents a doubling of the death rate for this age group (see Table 2). Yet at the same time there was an excess death figure of only 216,000 for those over 10 (in a country of over 600 million this figure is surely well within any reasonable margin of error). The explanation is that in the absence of effective rationing, children were left to starve in this period. But in famines, it is traditionally both the very young and the very old who both suffer. But in this year only the young suffer. Then in 1960-1961 the number of excess deaths for under 10s is reduced to 553,000 whereas the number for over 10s shoots up to 9 million. Even more bizarrely, 4,424,000 excess child deaths are calculated for 1961-62 but no excess deaths for those over 10 are calculated to have occurred in this period.

Table 2. Estimated Excess Deaths Due to Famine 1958-1962

Fiscal Year	Estimated deaths under age 10 ('000s)	Estimated deaths under age 10 and over ('000s)
1958-59	4,268	216
1959-60	2,291	7,991
1960-61	553	9,096
1961-62	4,424	0

(Source: Aston et al 1984)

There is clearly a paradox here. According to the death rate provided by the Chinese, 1960 was the worst calendar year of the famine. The death rate increased from 10.8 per thousand before the famine to 25.4 per thousand in 1960 which was by far and away the peak year for

famine deaths. If this was true, then we would expect 1959-60 and 1960-61 to be the worst fiscal years in terms of numbers of child deaths. Yet according to the authors only 24.6% of excess child deaths occurred in these fiscal years as opposed to 98.75% of the excess deaths of those aged ten or over!

It is hard to understand why there would have been such a large infant mortality rate in 1958-59. Everyone agrees that 1958 was a bumper harvest year even if grain production figures were exaggerated. The bulk of the Chinese crop is harvested in autumn 46 so it's difficult to see why massive deaths would have begun at the end of 1958 or even why so many deaths would have all occurred in the first three months of 1959. As we have seen, Han Dongping, Assistant Professor in Political Science at Warren Wilson College, questioned peasants in Shandong and Henan where the worst effects of the problems in the 1959-1961 period were felt. They stated that they had never eaten so well as they had after the bumper harvest of 1958.⁴⁷ Official death rate figures show a slight increase from 10.8 per thousand in 1957 to 12 per thousand in 1958. Why were infant deaths so much worse in the fiscal year 1958-59 according to the figures that are presented by demographers? Why did the situation improve in the year of alleged black famine?

This, it is claimed by the authors of "Famine in China", is because a rationing system was introduced that assisted all those of working age and below but left the old to die. Certainly, there is some evidence that the young of working age received higher rations than the old because the young were performing manual labour.⁴⁸

However, in 1961-2, when the authors allege the famine was still occurring, the death rate for under 10s shoots up to 4,424, 000 and the death rate for over 10s reduces to zero. It is alleged that rationing was relaxed during this period allowing the young to die. It is not explained why no old people died during this period as well. Are the authors claiming that in famines, Chinese families would let their

children die but not old people? The authors provide no evidence for this counter-intuitive implication of their analysis.

They try to back up their thesis with figures that claim to show a reduction in the numbers of those in older age groups between the two censuses of 1953 and 1964. The argument is that in a country that was developing in a healthy way the numbers of old people in the population should grow rather than fall. They argue that the figures for China in this period show a decline in the numbers of old people due to the way in which they were denied rations during the Great Leap Forward.

But the figures they quote are not consistent with mass deaths caused by a shortfall in rations for all people over a certain age. The authors state that age specific growth rates fall for males aged over 45 and for females aged over 65 between the two censuses. What kind of a rationing system would have led to such a disparity? One that provided sustenance to women aged 45-65 but not men of the same age? Besides even after the age of 65 the figures for women are not consistent. The number of those aged 75-79 grew by 0.51% on the figures presented. This figure compares well with the growth rates of age groups under 65. For example, the numbers of 20-24 years old grew by 0.57% and the numbers of 45-49 year olds by 0.55%. The figures for women do not show a pattern consistent with a rationing system that discriminated against the old. Faulty source statistics are a far more plausible explanation for the confusing figures the authors present, than their own difficult to swallow hypotheses about rationing.

Table 3. Intercensal age- and sex- specific growth rates in population 1953-1964

Age	Male growth rate (%)	Female growth rate (%)
10-14	3.83	4.58
15-19	1.30	1.61
20-24	0.66	0.57
25-29	1.42	1.13

30-34	2.07	1.47
35-39	1.13	0.91
40-44	0.90	1.02
45-49	0.48	0.55
50-54	0.47	0.83
55-59	0.16	1.27
60-64	0.00	0.96
65-69	-0.64	0.11
70-74	-1.02	-0.37
75-79	-0.08	0.51
80+	-0.54	-0.22

(Source: ibid)

This article does not dispel doubts about massive famine deaths. It is true the authors of the article can point to some corroboration in the evidence they present. For example there is a reasonable correlation between the number of births given by the Fertility Census of 1982 and birth rate figures allegedly gathered in the years 1953-1964. Also there is reasonable correlation between the survivorships of birth cohorts born in the famine to the 1964 census and their survivorship to the 1982 census.

If different pieces of evidence, supposedly gathered independently of each other, correlate, then this provides some evidence that the author's hypothesis is true. In which case there might seem to be a stalemate. On the one hand there is the correlation between this evidence, on the other there is the huge mismatch between child mortality and adult mortality in alleged famine years.

However, we must remember the concerns that exist about the general validity of population statistics released by the Chinese government after the death of Mao. In the light of these uncertainties, the correlations between the birth rate figures and the Fertility Survey figures are not really decisive. Correlations between Chinese population figures occur elsewhere and have been considered by demographers. Banister speaks in another connection of the possibility of "mutual interdependence" of Chinese demographic surveys that were supposedly conducted independently of each other. She notes that the

census figure for 1982 and population figures derived from vital registration in 1982 were supposedly gathered independently. However, there is an extremely great correlation between the two figures.⁴⁹ The possibility of such “mutual interdependence” between the Fertility Survey figures and the birth rate figures should not be ruled out.

In addition it must be said that the authors of “Famine in China” only present one estimate of the survivorship of babies born during the Great Leap Forward. Ansley Coale’s article, published in the same year⁵⁰ shows a reasonably significant but much smaller dip in survivorship in the years 1958-59 to the 1982 census than that shown in “Famine in China.” This would indicate far less “excess” infant deaths in the years in question. In addition Coale’s figures show no dip in survivorship of babies born in 1961-2 to the 1982 census, in contrast to the figures presented in “Famine in China.”

Doubts about the survivorship evidence combined with doubts about the death rate evidence greatly undermine established beliefs about what happened in the Great Leap Forward. Overall, a review of the literature leaves the impression that a not very well substantiated hypothesis of a massive death toll has been transformed into an absolute certainty without any real justification.

Questions About Chinese Census Information

A final piece of evidence for the “massive death toll” thesis comes from raw census data. That is to say we can just look at how large the number of those born in 1959-1961 and surviving to subsequent censuses is compared to surrounding years in which no famine has been alleged. We can get this evidence from the various censuses taken since the Great Leap Forward. These indeed show large shortfalls in the size of cohorts of those born in famine years, compared to other years.

Even, if it was granted that such shortfalls did occur they do not necessarily indicate massive numbers of deaths. Birthrate figures released by the Deng Xiaoping regime show

massive decreases in fertility during the Great Leap Forward. It is possible to hypothesize that there was a very large shortfall in births without this necessarily indicating that millions died as well. Of course, there had to be some reason why fertility dropped off so rapidly, if this is indeed what did happen. Clearly hunger would have played a large part in this. People would have postponed having children because of worries about having another mouth to feed until food availability improved. Clearly, if people were having such concerns this would have indicated an increase in malnutrition which would have led to some increase in child mortality. However, this in no way proves that the “worst famine in world history” occurred under Mao. The Dutch famine of 1944-1945 led to a fertility decline of 50%. The Bangladesh famine of 1974-1975 also led to a near 50% decrease in the birth rate.⁵¹ This is similar to figures released in the Deng Xiaoping era for the decline in fertility in the Great Leap Forward. Although, both the Bangladesh and the Dutch famines were deeply tragic they did not give rise to the kind of wild mortality figures bandied about in reference to the Great Leap Forward, as was noted above. In Bangladesh tens of thousands died, not tens of millions.

However, we should not automatically assume that evidence from the single year age distributions are correct. There is a general problem with all efforts to derive information from single-year age distributions from the 1953 and 1964 censuses. These figures only appeared in the early 1980s⁵² when all the other figures that blamed Mao for killing millions emerged. Censuses afterwards (e.g. in 1982, 1990 etc.) continue to show shortfalls but again caution should be exercised. Banister speaks of consistency in the age-sex structures between the three censuses of 1953, 1964 and 1982 with very plausible survival patterns for each age group from census to census. She writes “It is surprising that China’s three censuses appear to be almost equally complete. One would have expected that the first two counts missed many people since they were conducted in less than ideal circumstances. The

1953 enumeration was China's first modern census taken with only six months of preparation soon after the State Statistical Bureau was established....The 1964 census was taken in great secrecy...and included a question on people's class origins...that might have prompted some to avoid being counted."⁵³

Ping-ti Ho of the University of British Columbia wrote that the 1953 census was based, at least in part, on estimates not the counting of population and "was not a census in the technical definition of the term."⁵⁴ Yet the age-structure of this census correlates extremely well with all the subsequent censuses.

Adding to the muddle, John Aird received evidence about the age-sex distribution in the 1953 census from Chinese, non-official academic sources in the 1960s. He found the figures unreliable, stating that the numbers for 5-24 year olds are lower than would be expected and the figures for those aged over 75 are much too high. He proposed substituting a hypothetical age-sex structure for these figures for the purposes of academic debate.⁵⁵

Given such doubts, it is surely possible that the consistent age-sex structures in successive structures may be affected by a certain amount of "mutual interdependence" between records.

A trawl through the evidence reveals decisively that absolute certainty in any, politically controversial, historical question should never be derived from "academic research" or "official statistics." Politics always effects the presentation of statistics and the history of any period tends to be written by the winners. In relation to China, admirers of Mao's socialist policies clearly were not the winners.

Conclusion

The approach of modern writers to the Great Leap Forward is absurdly one-sided. They are unable to grasp the relationship between its failures and successes. They can only grasp that serious problems occurred during the years 1959-1961. They cannot grasp that the work that was done in these years also laid the groundwork for the continuing overall success of Chinese socialism in improving the lives of its

people. They fail to seriously consider evidence that indicates that most of the deaths that occurred in the Great Leap Forward were due to natural disasters not policy errors. Besides, the deaths that occurred in the Great Leap Forward have to be set against the Chinese people's success in preventing many other deaths throughout the Maoist period. Improvements in life expectancy saved the lives of many millions.

We must also consider what would have happened if there had been no Leap and no adoption of the policies of self-reliance once the breach with the Soviet Union occurred. China was too poor to allow its agricultural and industrial development to stagnate simply because the Soviets were refusing to help. This is not an argument that things might not have been done better. Perhaps with better planning, less over-optimism and more care some deaths might have been avoided. This is a difficult question. It is hard to pass judgement what others did in difficult circumstances many years ago.

Of course it is also important that we do learn from the mistakes of the past to avoid them in the future. We should note that Mao to criticized himself for errors made during this period. But this self-criticism should in no way be allowed to give ammunition to those who insist on the truth of ridiculous figures for the numbers that died in this time. Hopefully, there will come a time when a sensible debate about the issues will take place.

If India's rate of improvement in life expectancy had been as great as China's after 1949, then millions of deaths could have been prevented. Even Mao's critics acknowledge this. Perhaps this means that we should accuse Nehru and those who came after him of being "worse than Hitler" for adopting non-Maoist policies that "led to the deaths of millions." Or perhaps this would be a childish and fatuous way of assessing India's post-independence history. As foolish as the charges that have been leveled against Mao for the last 25 years, maybe.

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The Great Leap Forward (Chinese: 大跃进; pinyin: Dà Yùnjǐn) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was an economic and social campaign by the Communist Party of China (CPC) from 1958 to 1962. The campaign was led by Chairman Mao Zedong and aimed to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a socialist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. These policies led to social and economic disaster, but these failures were hidden by widespread exaggeration and deceitful Mao's Great Leap Forward was an economic program that was to take China from the agrarian stage into industrialization quickly. Agricultural Collectivism was introduced and private farms were banned. Actions taken during this program led to the Great Chinese Famine. Restrictions on rural people were enforced through public struggle sessions, and social pressure, although people also experienced forced labor.[1] Rural industrialization, officially a priority of the campaign, saw "its development aborted by the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward." [2] The Great Leap ended in catastrophe, resulting in tens of millions of excess deaths.[3] Estimates of the death toll.