How did the consequences of revolution shape the new order?

How did the new regime consolidate its power?

How did the revolution affect those who experienced it?

To what extent was society changed and revolutionary ideas achieved?
**SECTION B TIMELINE**

**POLITICAL**
- Mao arrives in Moscow
- Liu Shaoqi appointed president of People's Republic of China
- 'On the Question of Intellectuals' – Zhou Enlai speech
- Formation of Agricultural Cooperatives
- Campaign against counter-revolutionaries
- Launch of Three Antis movement (*sanfan*)
- Beginning of Five Antis movement (*wufan*)
- Gao Gang accused of Party intrigue

**MILITARY**
- North Korean troops cross 38th parallel
- Chinese offensive against UN forces
- Ceasefire in Korean War
- Armistice in Korean War signed
- Khrushchev denounces Stalin
- 'On the Question of Intellectuals' – Zhou Enlai speech

**SOCIAL - CULTURAL**
- Agrarian Reform Law (*fanshen*) unfolds across China
- Marriage Law
- Sino-Indian war begins
- Campaign against counter-revolutionaries
- Launch of Three Antis movement (*sanfan*): Mao arrives in Moscow
- Beginning of Five Antis movement (*wufan*): Liu Shaoqi appointed president of People's Republic of China
- Gao Gang accused of Party intrigue

**ECONOMIC**
- Little Leap Forward or High Tide begins
- Beijing rally celebrates joint-state ownership of industries
- First Five-Year Plan begins
- Mao's Twelve-Year Agricultural Plan adopted
- Second Five-Year Plan approved
- 7000 Cadres' Conference
- Second People's Commune
- Socialist Education movement launched
- End of 'Three Bad Years' of famine
- Socialistic Commune Movement
- 7000 Cadres' Conference
- Beijing rally celebrates joint-state ownership of industries

**UNCORRECTED PAGE PROOFS**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Military</th>
<th>Social-Cultural</th>
<th>Economic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Centralisation</strong>&lt;br&gt;With the founding of the PRC, China became a centralised, hierarchical system dominated by the Communist Party.</td>
<td><strong>People's Liberation Army</strong>&lt;br&gt;The People's Liberation Army (PLA) played a key role in consolidating power in the early years of Communist rule.</td>
<td><strong>Mass campaigns</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Fanshen</em> saw denunciation of landlords ('speak bitterness') and admissions of immorality ('speak frankness'). Cleanliness drives improved sanitation.</td>
<td><strong>National capitalists</strong>&lt;br&gt;Pragmatic policies designed to stabilise the economy were initially pursued by the CCP, with 'national capitalists' urged to continue managing businesses.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>International isolation</strong>&lt;br&gt;Isolated from the West following the Korean War, the People's Republic established close ties with the USSR in the 1950s.</td>
<td><strong>Outlying regions</strong>&lt;br&gt;Outlying regions of the People's Republic, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, were brought under central rule by the PLA in the 1950s.</td>
<td><strong>Starvation</strong>&lt;br&gt;30-40 million people starved to death in the 'Three Bad Years' famine following the Great Leap Forward.</td>
<td><strong>Land reform</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Agrarian Reform Law (1950) (<em>fanshen</em>) gave peasants the right to redistribute land; this intensified during the Korean War.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mao's purges</strong>&lt;br&gt;The first major purge within the CCP came in 1953-54 with the Gao Gang affair. Peng Dehuai was purged after the Lushan Plenum (1959). The fall of Lin Biao (1971) caused popular disillusion and uncertainty.</td>
<td><strong>Korean War</strong>&lt;br&gt;In 1950, China was drawn into the Korean War in support of North Korea against US-led UN forces. The Chinese military fought to a standstill at the 38th parallel.</td>
<td><strong>Civic virtues</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Socialist Education movement encouraged virtue through the Learn from the PLA and Learn from Lei Feng campaigns.</td>
<td><strong>Five-Year Plan</strong>&lt;br&gt;Inspired by the USSR, China adopted a Five-Year Plan (1953-57) focusing on heavy industry. Agriculture was collectivised in stages from Mutual Aid Teams to Higher Cooperatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hundred Flowers</strong>&lt;br&gt;Mao initiated the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1957, encouraging intellectuals to criticise the party. Mao was surprised by the fierceness of the criticism that emerged, and launched the Anti-Rightist campaign.</td>
<td><strong>International conflicts</strong>&lt;br&gt;In the 1950s, China had territorial disputes with India and tensions in the Taiwan Straight. After the Sino-Soviet split, the PRC and USSR had periodic border clashes. China built shelters and moved industries inland in fear of nuclear war.</td>
<td><strong>Women's rights</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Marriage Law of 1950 gave women the same legal rights as men and banned arranged marriages, child marriages and polygamy. Sun Yixian's widow, Soong Qingling, and others in the Women's Federation, advocated for women's rights.</td>
<td><strong>High Tide</strong>&lt;br&gt;Industry was nationalised and agriculture further collectivised in rapid fashion during the High Tide of 1955.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sino-Soviet split</strong>&lt;br&gt;From 1956-64, relations between the PRC and USSR deteriorated, with accusations of 'revisionism' and mutual criticism.</td>
<td><strong>US rapprochement</strong>&lt;br&gt;The international standing and security of the People's Republic improved significantly following the normalising of relations between China and the US in 1971-72. The PRC gained a seat on the UN Security Council.</td>
<td><strong>Health</strong>&lt;br&gt;'Barefoot doctors' assisted in providing basic medical attention to the villages. Mass inoculations increased life expectancy.</td>
<td><strong>Great Leap Forward</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Great Leap Forward (1958-61) introduced People's Communes, Work Teams, backyard steel smelters and bizarre experiments with farming. The GLF led to widespread famine.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Revolution</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution encouraged popular attacks on the CCP establishment and brought down President Liu Shaoqi.</td>
<td><strong>Young people</strong>&lt;br&gt;Young people were central to the Cultural Revolution, as Red Guards and as participants in the 'Up to the mountains, down to the countryside' movement. Some members of this 'lost generation' suffered greatly.</td>
<td><strong>Limited recovery</strong>&lt;br&gt;Increased state expenditure in rural areas, particularly small-scale industries, improved agricultural production during the later years of the Cultural Revolution.</td>
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[DIAGRAM TO BE INSERTED: DIVERSE EXPERIENCES]
CHAPTER 4

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

(1949–1961)
INTRODUCTION

At the founding of the People’s Republic in October 1949 Mao said that China ‘will never again be an insulted nation. We have stood up.’ The country was finally free from the domination of foreign imperialism and Guomindang corruption. The fighting that began in the warlord era thirty years before came to an end with the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War. The Communists now faced the daunting task of bringing stability to a nation torn apart by decades of war and economic turmoil. The CCP had already proven itself a revolutionary force in rural areas; it now had to govern all of China. The party, which still faced hostility from some quarters, assumed this enormous challenge with little experience of ruling urban areas or managing a national economy. On the eve of the capture of Beiping in the Civil War, Mao remarked, ‘Today we’re heading into the capital to take the big test [gan kao: high Imperial exam], no wonder everyone is nervous … All of us have to make the grade.’

Despite this, the early period of the People’s Republic was remarkably successful. In the space of three years the government revived the economy, gained control of outlying regions and established a new social and political order. Things began to go awry, however, in the late 1950s. Political repression, a feature of the People’s Republic from its outset, escalated following the Hundred Flowers campaign. The Great Leap Forward, an attempt to bolster the economy and strengthen the new socialist order, proved to be a catastrophic failure that inflicted great suffering. Relations between China and the Soviet Union – initially close – grew tense by the late 1950s and early 1960s. The CCP’s efforts to implement its revolutionary agenda in this period were both triumphant and tragic. Mao admitted in 1949, ‘We shall soon put aside some of the things we know well and be compelled to do things we don’t know well. This means difficulties.’

Many of these ‘difficulties’ would come from shaping the new society to the particular ideological vision of Mao Zedong.
THE NEW ORDER

Mao Zedong: ‘Our constitution is of a new socialist type, different from any of the bourgeois type.’

POLITICAL CHANGE

On 20–21 September 1949, the CCP held the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. The conference drafted a preliminary constitution to outline the new political order of the People’s Republic. The subsequent Organic Law of the Central People’s Government and Common Program was a clear appeal to national unity. Eight ‘democratic parties,’ including the Democratic League and Guomindang Revolutionary Committee, would govern alongside the Communists, although the CCP remained dominant. Eleven of the twenty-four ministers in the new government were non-Communists. Jonathan Fenby argues that this amounted to ‘window dressing; the non-Communist politicians were known as “flower vases” – there for decoration.’ In 1954, a formal constitution was drawn up and the first National People’s Congress (NPC) was held, thus establishing the processes and structures of government that continue to this day.

The National Congress, a parliament of sorts, was the end result of a multi-tiered process. First, 200 000 local assemblies elected county representatives, who then chose representatives for the provincial level. This body then elected delegates for municipal assemblies, which in turn decided who would sit in the National Congress. Within the congress a Standing Committee presided over matters. The NPC elected Mao president, the head of state. The new government, the State Council, was a cabinet made up of ministries. It was headed by Premier Zhou Enlai, who also served as minister of foreign affairs. Provincial, county and municipal governments implemented policies at the lower levels.

The Chinese Communist Party, of which Mao was chairman, provided the core personnel of government and was the real seat of power. Though not technically the government, the party was interwoven with the state. The CCP had a centralised, hierarchical structure. The Communist National Party Congress, which met irregularly, represented delegates from lower level party bodies from across the nation. These included six regional committees, twenty-nine provincial committees, and around 2500 county and city committees. The Party Congress (not to be confused with the National Congress) voted in a Central Committee that would debate and suggest amendments to major policies. Meetings of the Central Committee were called ‘plenums’ or ‘plenary sessions.’ The Central Committee also selected the members of the higher-ranking Politburo (short for political bureau), which met more regularly and had fewer members. An elite group of around five men made up the Standing Committee of the Politburo, a powerful and dominant body that guided other members of the Politburo. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Chen Yun (Ch'en Yun) and Liu Shaoqi served in the Standing Committee during the early 1950s. The final Communist organisation was the Secretariat; an administrative arm of the Central Committee which supervised and facilitated communication between higher and lower committees. The secretary-general of the Secretariat, appointed in 1954, was Deng Xiaoping. All government functions were carried out under close party direction and major policies originated from the Politburo.5

MILITARY CHANGE

In the new government, the military had close ties to the party and state. The People’s Liberation Army was closely supervised by the Military Affairs Committee (under the Politburo). Leading figures in the military, such as Peng Dehuai and Lin Biao, held key positions in the party and government.

NEW IDEAS

In his 1940 work On New Democracy, Mao spoke of China undergoing revolution in its ‘bourgeois-democratic’ phase in transition to socialism.6 He by no means meant that this entailed capitalist liberal democracy. Nor was China a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ as was the Soviet Union. After 1949, Mao said that state power, in theory, would be exercised through a People’s Democratic Dictatorship of the four ‘revolutionary classes’:

1. Peasantry
2. Proletariat (workers)
3. Petit-bourgeoisie (lower-middle class; small business owners)
4. National capitalists (managerial middle class; ‘loyal industrialists’).

All were guided by the Communist Party. It was a relationship symbolised by the stars of the flag of the People’s Republic. Mao saw no contradiction in the notion of a democratic dictatorship. According to Mao,

Democracy is practised within the ranks of the people ... The right to vote belongs only to the people and not to reactionaries. The combination of these two aspects, democracy for the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries, this is the people’s democratic dictatorship.7

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In the People’s Republic the ‘new democratic’ coalition of revolutionary classes upheld a dictatorship over ‘reactionaries’ and ‘bad elements.’ As the party of the proletariat (working class), the Communists claimed the right to administer and guide the new society to socialism.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING:
1. Why does Jonathan Fenby describe the inclusion of non-Communist ministers in the early PRC government as ‘window dressing’?
2. Explain the symbolism of the PRC flag as a representation of a ‘People’s Democratic Dictatorship.’
3. Make a list of the ways in which the CCP consolidated its authority on coming to power in 1949. In what way were these measures ‘guided by pragmatic considerations’?

CONSOLIDATING COMMUNIST POWER

Mao Zedong: ‘The Chinese revolution is great, but the road after the revolution will be longer, the work greater and more arduous.’

The first few years of the new regime were guided by pragmatic (practical) considerations. An effective administration needed to be established, law and order maintained, and the economy revived. Reconstruction and consolidation were pressing concerns but reliable and effective administrators were in desperately short supply. Although the Communists had governed the Liberated Areas during the Civil War, the four-and-a-half-million members of the CCP made up less than one per cent of the Chinese population. Ruling one of the world’s largest and most populous nations was a different prospect from running a soviet community. Initially, civil servants who had served under the Guomindang were encouraged to stay at their posts. They were promised decent salaries and urged to work for a New China. Many accepted the offer. Educated Chinese overseas were encouraged to come back and help rebuild the homeland. With little understanding of Communist policies or outlook, many gave up good careers in the West to contribute to the new society. Most would later harbour deep regrets at this fateful decision.

Many PLA soldiers and officers had never set foot in a big city before 1949. Some found modern conveniences confusing. City dwellers spoke with amusement at seeing soldiers washing rice in Western toilets, thinking they were sinks, and looking horrified when they pulled the ‘more water chain’ and their meal flushed away. Others tried to light cigarettes on lightbulbs.

WORKING WITH NATIONAL CAPITALISTS

To ease their transition to power, the Communists made known their willingness to use the resources and expertise of ‘national capitalists’: industrialists who were willing to give support to the CCP. Hoping to keep the economy stable, Mao offered China’s numerically small but influential managerial middle class the opportunity to work with the new government. Many were compensated for factories or equipment taken by the Communist authorities. Favoured treatment, however, was not extended to all members of the urban elite; businesspeople deemed as having worked too closely with the former GMD government and suspected of being hostile to the CCP were denounced as ‘bureaucratic capitalists.’

9 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 356.
10 The experiences of Wu Ningkun, an intellectual who returned from America to China, illustrate this point. See Wu Ningkun, A Single Tear (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).
Their property was confiscated outright by the state. The Communists did try to retain the managers of most enterprises. One deputy manager of a mint in Beijing trembled before the arrival of an inspection team of Communists officials, yet after a tour of the factory and some brief questions about production methods, a CCP official told him, ‘You seem to know what you are doing. You are in charge.’11

The banking sector, transport industries, electricity and gas suppliers were all brought under direct government regulation. Assets and industries controlled by foreign powers, except the USSR, were likewise nationalised.12

Financial stability, which had so devastatingly eluded the Nationalists, was achieved with commendable speed. In May 1949, a new ‘people’s currency’ – the yuan or renminbi – was introduced and foreign cash banned. By nationalising all banks the government was able to enforce strict centralisation of exchange and dramatically decrease the amount of paper money in circulation. A simple but ingenious pay system was introduced whereby wages were based on the prices of five basic items: flour, coal, rice, cotton cloth and oil. Price controls were also brought in, meaning that wages stayed in line with the basic cost of living and were far less vulnerable to the whims of inflation.13 Taxes were similarly reformed and made more equitable. This eased financial pressures on the badly-off and increased government revenue from 6.5 billion yuan in 1950 to 13.3 billion yuan by 1951.14 By decisive fiscal measures and careful management the rampant inflation of the Nationalist years, which had reached 85 000 per cent in 1949, was brought down to fifteen per cent by 1951.15

THE KEY ROLE OF THE ARMY

While Communist influence was being exerted in urban areas, the military brought the border regions and remote rural areas under central control. By 1951 the People’s Liberation Army had enforced Communist power over all outlying areas of the old Qing empire, including Tibet, Hainan and the far northern province of Xinjiang (with the exception of Outer Mongolia). The PLA played a major role in the governance of China during the early 1950s. China was divided into six regions administered by four officials: a chairman, a party secretary, a political commissar and a military commander. Military commanders and political commissars were officers in the PLA, while many others with positions in the civilian government also held posts in the army. Until 1954, China remained under this system of quasi-military administration.

Mao Zedong: ‘Tibet is a part of China.’

On 7 October 1950, Chinese troops crossed into Tibet. By the eighteenth century, Tibet was considered a protectorate of the Qing empire, but following the 1911 revolution it became quasi-independent. On coming to power the Communist government was determined to reassert control over Tibet, for reasons of national security and from a belief in the historical sovereignty of China over Tibet.
the region. While some Tibetans along the border welcomed the Chinese, hoping for an end to heavy taxes imposed by the theocratic Lhasa government, others resisted the invading ‘liberators’. Fierce mounted tribesmen of the Khamba people waged a bitter campaign against the People’s Liberation Army in the Tibet–Sichuan border region. Fearing all-out occupation, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, sought talks with the Chinese government. The resulting Seventeen-Point Agreement reached on 23 May 1951 formally designated Tibet an ‘autonomous region’ of the People’s Republic. The agreement meant that the Chinese would control Tibet’s internal security and foreign policy, while the Lhasa government under the Dalai Lama would largely control domestic matters.

Between 1951 and 1954 the PLA strengthened its position in Tibet, building highways into the region, increasing its garrisons of troops and searching out caches of arms hidden in local monasteries. Tensions built up between the Chinese and Tibetans. The agrarian policies of the Great Leap Forward were a particular focus of ill-feeling; protests grew into outright rebellion in March 1959. The PLA responded with overwhelming force, including heavy artillery, tanks and air strikes. Many thousands of Tibetans were killed and some of the most treasured Lamaist monasteries destroyed. The Dalai Lama fled Lhasa and, along with a great number of his followers, was given sanctuary in India. The Tibetan insurgency continued for some time, supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which trained Tibetan rebels. The uprising was eventually put down while the Dalai Lama established a Tibetan government in exile at Dharamsala in India, where he continued his criticism, with varying degrees of conciliation, of Chinese policies on Tibet.

The Communist government was resolute in controlling the region over the following years. Important projects for modernising Tibet’s infrastructure were undertaken. The Tibetan people, however, remained resistant to efforts at outside control and were resentful of ‘occupying’ authorities. In 1988, the Dalai Lama made known that he would no longer campaign for the sovereign independence of Tibet; however, his relations with the government of the People’s Republic remained strained. In 2009, the fiftieth anniversary of the Tibetan uprising, the Dalai Lama accused the Communists of bringing ‘untold suffering and destruction to the land and people of Tibet ... they literally experienced hell on earth.’ In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared, ‘The Dalai Lama clique is confusing right and wrong. They are spreading rumours. The democratic reforms [under Chinese rule] are the widest and most profound reforms in Tibetan history.’ Tibet remains one of the most sensitive issues in China today (one of the ‘three Ts’: Tibet, Taiwan and Tiananmen) and potentially the ‘biggest headache’ for the Chinese government in terms of continued political and social unrest.

A range of contrasting viewpoints on the Tibetan issue can be found on websites belonging to Students for a Free Tibet, the Government of Tibet in Exile, the Chinese Government (see White Papers on Tibet) and the Xinhua News Agency. You might like to find out about infrastructure and social projects undertaken by the Chinese government in Tibet and compare these benefits to the concerns of Tibetan independence and human rights groups.

16 Brian Catcphole, A Map History of Modern China (US: Heinemann, 1977), 108.
17 Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 474.
18 Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 556.
21 Cited in Matt Wade, ‘Dalai Lama speaks out on “hell on earth”,’ 1.
22 Charles Li, senior ABC producer, Beijing, interview with author, 19 January 2009.
MILITARY CHALLENGES: THE KOREAN WAR

Zhou Enlai: ‘The Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression, nor will they ... tolerate seeing their neighbours invaded by imperialists.’

In the first year of its inception, the People’s Republic was drawn into an international war in Korea. It was a costly conflict that came at a time when China desperately needed to focus on reconstruction; the war made this task much more difficult. It would also affect domestic social and political campaigns by heightening fear of spies and ‘counter-revolutionary’ influences. Yet the conflict in Korea would demonstrate that the Chinese Communist government was a force to be reckoned with in international politics.

NORTH KOREAN EXPANSIONISM

After Japan’s defeat in 1945, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel, with a communist government in the north, under Kim Il-sung, and an American-backed government in the south, headed by right-wing Syngman Rhee. Kim hoped to emulate Mao’s success and unite Korea under communist rule. The armed forces of the Democratic People’s Republic (North Korea) were bolstered by Soviet military equipment. A further reassurance to the North Koreans came on 12 January 1950 when US Secretary of State Dean Acheson publicly stated that South Korea and Taiwan were not within the ‘defensive perimeter’ of the United States’ international interests.\(^{23}\) In 1949, Kim had raised the possibility of waging war against South Korea and Josef Stalin had largely approved of Kim’s ambitions. He had, though, warned Kim, ‘If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger. You have to ask Mao for all the help.’\(^{24}\) Stalin also said that the question of war in Korea must be decided by the Chinese and Korean comrades. Although Stalin made it clear that China would have to bail Kim out if he got into trouble, Mao was kept out of the negotiations. In May 1950, Kim flew to Beijing and told Mao of Stalin’s approval of his forthcoming campaign. Mao too gave his support; however, Kim conveniently failed to mention Stalin’s so-called reluctance to ‘raise a finger’ in the East. Neither did he offer a definite or detailed briefing to Mao. For his part, Mao did not envisage having to fight on the Korean peninsula and had, in fact, been planning to demobilise PLA troops in the north. He assumed Kim would be able to handle his own military affairs. Mao was instead focused on a plan to invade Taiwan – the island stronghold where Jiang Jieshi and the remnants of the GMD had fled in late 1949.

NORTH INVADES SOUTH

On 5 June 1950, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel. Within a matter of weeks they had pushed back the South Korean Army and a small contingent of their American allies, taking almost the entire Korean peninsula. The southern capital, Seoul, fell in just three days. US President Harry Truman was quick to react. He decided that a communist victory in Korea could not be tolerated and secured the United Nations’ backing for intervention. Under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, the American military and their Western allies

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23 Alan Lawrence, China Under Communism (London: Routledge, 2000), 22.
24 Cited in Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 365.
launched a spectacular counter-offensive on 15 September. MacArthur’s troops routed the North Koreans, swept past the 38th parallel – capturing the northern capital Pyongyang – and advanced toward the Chinese border. Kim II-sung begged Mao for help.

Mao and his comrades were alarmed. They did not wish to see their communist ally fall to US ‘imperialism’; neither did they want a hostile government installed in North Korea, which bordered China’s industrial heartland in Manchuria. A hastily convened meeting of the top CCP leaders fretted over how to proceed. PLA General Lin Biao and China’s leading economist, Chen Yun, urged caution. The People’s Republic could hardly afford a costly war when economic reconstruction was such a pressing priority. Mao, Premier Zhou Enlai and General Zhu De nonetheless felt that intervention was necessary. Urgent communications were made to the USSR. Stalin agreed to involve the Soviet air force. Those committed to aiding North Korea prevailed but their decision to intervene was not taken lightly. Mao had previously pointed out to Kim Il-sung, ‘Your enemy is not an easy one. Don’t forget, you are fighting the chief imperialist. Be prepared for the worst.’

CHINA JOINS THE WAR

Mao barely slept for days as the decision to oppose America was debated. Lin Biao claimed he was ill and refused to lead the campaign. General Peng Dehuai, a tough, no-nonsense veteran of the Long March, was called in to command the ‘People’s Volunteers,’ as the Chinese expeditionary force was named. Meanwhile Zhou Enlai sent warning to the Americans to halt their advance. MacArthur paid no attention, apparently oblivious to the two-million Chinese troops amassing across the Yalu River, which marked the Chinese–Korean border. At this point Stalin dealt the Chinese a terrible blow by reneging on his promise of Soviet air support. His forces would not be ‘properly prepared’ for some months. The Chinese now faced the prospect of either continuing alone without air cover or losing face by withdrawing their offer of support to Kim. The Chinese honoured their commitment to the Korean Communists. On 8 October 1950, Mao released a formal decree approving the campaign and on 15 October the People’s Volunteers crossed the Yalu River.

American reconnaissance failed to determine the strength of Chinese forces in North Korea. They estimated that 10 000 troops had crossed the border. In reality, Peng Dehuai had 350 000 troops ready, with more on the way. General MacArthur confidently declared that he would ‘get the [US] boys home by Christmas’ and continued to move as quickly as he could toward the Yalu. On 25 November, the Chinese slammed 200 000 troops into the Americans and by sheer weight of numbers forced them into a headlong retreat south. In seven weeks, North Korea was retaken, and, in January, Seoul was re-captured by the Communists. The success of the People’s Volunteers came at a huge price. The weather had dropped to minus thirty degrees centigrade and the Chinese soldiers suffered greatly from exposure. The Chinese suffered appalling losses due to their inferior firepower and a total lack of air cover; by the end of the war, 900 000 soldiers were out of action, missing, wounded or killed.27 Among the 500 000 deaths was Mao’s oldest son, Anying. The Americans and their allies had 157 000 men out of action, 54 000 of whom had been killed. By January 1951, UN forces

27 Craig Dietrich, People’s China, 67.
had launched an effective counter-attack and fought the Chinese to a bloody stalemate at the 38th parallel. MacArthur urged the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese mainland but his hawkish adventurism was by this time too much for President Truman, who sacked him and installed General Matthew Ridgeway in his place. An uneasy ceasefire was called in July 1951, although it was not until 27 July 1953 that a formal armistice was signed.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE KOREAN WAR

The Korean War had immense repercussions for China’s new regime. In 1951, the US successfully sponsored a UN resolution that declared China to be the aggressor in Korea. An economic embargo was enforced — a significant setback to the economy – and the People’s Republic was excluded from the United Nations until the 1970s. ’China’ was represented by Jiang’s Republic of China (ROC), based in Taiwan. The US assistant secretary of state, Dean Rusk, explained that while the government in Beijing ‘may be a colonial Russian government … it is not the government of China. It does not pass the first test. It is not Chinese.’ In the midst of the Korean War, America vowed to support Taiwan in the event of future Communist aggression, thereby putting an end to plans for campaigns from the mainland. The People’s Republic was made more reliant on Soviet support. Land reform and political movements, which had been proceeding with moderation, were dramatically intensified. The Chinese were whipped up in to a virtual frenzy, with a campaign to ‘Resist America, Aid Korea.’ Rumours of American atrocities abounded, such as the use of germ warfare and the testing of atomic weapons in Nevada on Chinese prisoners of war. ‘In this superheated atmosphere,’ Philip Short argues, ‘the campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries burned white-hot.’

The Korean War cost the People’s Republic dearly. Mao later said it was a mistake, ‘100 per cent wrong.’ In addition to the massive casualties, vast amounts of capital were needed to finance the war. Mao said in 1952, ‘Last year what we spent on the war to resist US aggression and aid [North] Korea more or less equalled our expenditures for national reconstruction.’ Yet the Korean War was also a great boost to Chinese morale. Russell Spurr titled his book on the conflict Enter the Dragon — an apt metaphor. Mao’s forces had taken on the ‘biggest imperialist’ and not been beaten. China had, at last, ‘stood up.’

28 A prohibition on trading with a particular country.
29 Cited in Edwin Moise, Modern China, 134.
30 Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 436.
31 Alan Lawrence, China Under Communism, 27.
32 Cited in Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995), 231.
Section B: Consequences of the Revolution

**Fanshen: Land Reform**

**Mao Zedong:** 'The peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not, who is the worst and who is not quite so vicious, who deserves punishment and who deserves to be let off lightly – the peasants keep clear accounts.'

Land reform had long been a focus of the Chinese Communist movement. The promise of delivering ‘land to the tiller’ had been enacted in the areas liberated by the PLA during the Civil War, particularly in northern China (though for the most part in a moderate form). The redistribution of land was considered the fundamental element of revolution by many peasants. With the founding of the People's Republic, the CCP formalised its policy on land reform through the Agrarian Reform Law of 28 June 1950. Thousands of party cadres were sent out to the countryside to organise a nationwide campaign to redistribute land and denounce landlords. The key principle underpinning this revolution in the villages was *fanshen*, or ‘turning over.’ Work teams of Communist activists established Peasants’ Associations that helped to identify the ‘reactionaries’ and ‘counter-revolutionaries’ in their local area. One activist recalled,

> So the first thing to do is to find out exactly who’s who in the village and how the village works: who profits, who suffers. You generally choose to live with the poorest peasant you can find and you live with him – not eating or sleeping any better than he does. You do that until he sees you really mean it – until he gives you his confidence.²⁴

Party officials (cadres) then tried to impress upon the peasants that the exploitative landlords were to blame for their poverty.

Once the landlords had been identified, ‘Speak Bitterness’ meetings were encouraged in which everyone in the village gathered together and subjected the landlords and better-off peasants to long public denunciations. This was an opportunity to ‘stand up’ by publicly expressing indignation at the years of mistreatment and exploitation. The Speak Bitterness meetings were emotionally charged — those making accusations openly wept or screamed out in anger, as did the spectators. After the peasants had ‘spoken bitter,’ a People’s Tribunal decided on the fate of the accused. If a landlord was deemed a ‘local despot’ (tyrant), his property would be shared out. Particularly despised landlords and those who had collaborated with the Japanese were often beaten. Some were executed. At the beginning of *fanshen*, landlords who were considered to have been fair in their dealings with peasants were treated leniently and given enough land to support

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themselves. Some were made to pay higher taxes, give their tenants cheap rent or annul debts.\textsuperscript{35} The Agrarian Reform Law allowed landlords to keep not only the land cultivated by their immediate family but also rented land and fields farmed by hired hands, as long as this amounted to no more than half of their holdings.\textsuperscript{36}

**LAND REFORM ESCALATES**

Two factors led to the radical intensification of the land reform movement. Firstly, once the class struggle and passions of rural people had been unleashed they were harder to contain than the Communists had anticipated.\textit{Fanshen} was based on a moderate approach to dealing with the larger and wealthy landowners, and aimed to protect the more productive farms to ensure that food supplies were not disrupted. However, local People’s Tribunals did not always take this into account, and their bitterness led to excesses. Secondly, once the Korean War got underway, fear of counter-revolutionary influences made the official attitude to landlords less restrained. A wave of executions swept the countryside. It is difficult to determine the exact number of deaths. Although the figure of one million is most often cited, Jasper Becker argues that between two- and five-million landlords may have been executed.\textsuperscript{37} In his 1927 report on the peasantry, Mao had argued that the tough justice of the common people was fair and acceptable:

True, the peasants are in a sense ‘unruly’ in the countryside. Supreme in authority, the peasant association allows the landlord no say and sweeps away his prestige ... Doing whatever they like and turning everything upside down, they have created a kind of terror in the countryside. This is what some people call ‘going too far’ ... Such talk may seem plausible, but in fact it is wrong. First, the local tyrants, evil gentry and lawless landlords perpetuated the worst outrages. The peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not, who is the worst and who is not quite so vicious, who deserves punishment and who deserves to be let off lightly — the peasants keep clear accounts ... Secondly, a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Edwin Moise, \textit{Modern China}, 118.

\textsuperscript{36} Jack Gray, \textit{Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 289.


\textsuperscript{38} Mao Zedong, ‘Investigation into the Peasants Movement in Hunan,’ in \textit{Selected Works I} (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press), 27–8.
As he did in 1927, Mao lent his full support to the judgments and punishments of the People’s Tribunals. The aim was to destroy the traditional rural order, dominated in the past by the political and social standing of the landlords, so that a socialist one could emerge in its place. Land reform also brought much support to the new regime. Having the peasants carry out the agrarian reform themselves was also important; Philip Short explains that ‘peasants who killed with their bare hands the landlords who oppressed them were wedded to the new revolutionary order in a way that passive spectators could never be.’ Land reform both fulfilled an essential revolutionary ideal for the peasants and actively involved them in the revolutionary movement. ‘In a pact sealed in blood between the party and the poor,’ the peasants were now complicit in making the new society – including its expressions of revolutionary violence.

THOUGHT REFORM AND THE ANTI CAMPAIGNS

**Mao Zedong:** ‘We definitely have no benevolent policies towards the reactionaries or the counter-revolutionary activities of the reactionary classes.’

THOUGHT REFORM

Mirroring the hardened approach toward landlords, three campaigns began in the early 1950s targeting ‘subversive’ groups in urban areas. As in the Rectification movement at Yan’an, intellectuals were made the focus of the Thought Reform campaign (‘sixiang gaizao’) beginning September 1951. University professors, teachers, writers and other educated people were called upon to amend their ‘bourgeois’ attitudes through self-criticism and admission of ‘incorrect’ thoughts. Intellectuals were required to attend mass meetings, at which they were assigned to smaller groups for intense discussion. Those undergoing Thought Reform read Marxist texts, made lengthy self-criticisms and assisted others in pointing out faults as they gave public declarations of their ideological shortcomings. Part of this process was writing one’s autobiography – with repeated editing – which amounted to an admission of all aspects of one’s bourgeois habits. As the process went on, intellectuals were called before ‘struggle sessions’ where they reported and were judged on their progress by Communist cadres, their peers and groups of workers or students. Those not deemed to be sufficiently remoulded were sent for ‘re-education’ through hard labour in the countryside. Most were subjected to months of self-criticism and ‘struggle.’

PUBLIC DENUNCIATIONS

The Thought Reform movement featured highly publicised denunciations of well known figures and their works. While the philosopher and famed literary reformer associated with the New Culture movement, Hu Shi, lived in Taiwan, his followers and his ideas were attacked with considerable menace. In 1953, Liang Shuming (Liang Shu-ming), a member of the Democratic League party who attended government committees as an adviser, received a verbal hammering from Mao. When Liang voiced concerns over CCP policies in rural areas, Mao...
snatched the microphone and snarled, ‘I suppose you think you are very beautiful ... but to me you stink.’ For the next hour, Mao outlined why intellectuals such as Liang were in need of rectification:

There are two ways of killing people: one is to kill with a gun and the other with a pen. The way which is most artfully disguised and draws no blood is to kill with the pen. That is the kind of murderer you are. Liang Shuming is utterly reactionary ... What service did you do, Liang Shuming? In all your life, what service have you ever done for the people? Not the slightest, not the least bit.42

In 1955, Mao personally initiated a campaign against Communist literary theorist and writer Hu Feng, who had criticised the politicisation of popular culture. Accused of heading an anti-Party conspiracy, Hu was arrested and imprisoned until 1979.43 Maurice Meisner argues that the Communists saw their campaign not as a punitive practice but rather an ‘educational’ measure designed to produce ‘correct thoughts’ that would, in turn, bring about correct political and social behaviours. For some, the experience was a genuine personal conversion and an understanding of the self in a new way.44 There were, though, times when it was used in a punitive manner.45 Thought Reform was a traumatic and psychologically taxing experience. Some later called it a ‘carefully cultivated Auschwitz of the mind.’46 China’s intellectual classes were in effect cowed by Communist authority while their skills and knowledge were preserved for the service of the new society.

THE THREE ANTIS

In 1951, simultaneous with Thought Reform, the government launched sanfan, or the Three Antis, a campaign against ‘corruption, waste and bureaucratism.’ Sanfan aimed to uncover politically unreliable government officials and corrupt party cadres. Under closest scrutiny were public servants who had worked for the Guomindang. Mao declared, ‘We need to have a good clean up ... which will thoroughly uncover all cases of corruption whether major, medium or minor, and aim the main blows at the most corrupt, while following the policy of educating and remoulding the medium and minor embezzlers so that they will not relapse.’47

THE FIVE ANTIS

The Three Antis were expanded in 1952 to the Five Antis, wufan, which targeted tax evasion, fraud, ‘cheating’ (excessively profiting) from government contracts, theft of government property and bribery. Businessmen and industrialists, who had been previously reassured of their place in the People’s Republic, were the subject of wufan. Jack Gray describes the campaign as ‘an opportunity to pulverize China’s capitalists politically.’48 Mao believed that it was the ‘sugar coated bullets’ of bourgeois capitalists that brought about the corruption of Communist cadres and government officials. During the campaign, 450 000 businesses were investigated.49 Fines were handed out and some businessmen were imprisoned. Between 1952 and 1953, most factories became joint private–state ventures as heavy fines took their toll on China’s industrialists. The so-called tigers had been de-clawed. Ross Terrill argues that it was not necessary for the Chinese Communists to destroy the bourgeoisie for they were easily subdued by the new order: ‘Many capitalists simply turned red when the heat went on, silently, like lobsters put in hot water.’50

41 Cited in Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography, 236.
42 Cited in Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 454.
46 Cited in Frank Dikotter, The Tragedy of Liberation, xiii.
48 Jack Gray, Rebellions and Revolutions, 291.
49 Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 96.
50 Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography, 235.
PURGES AND EXECUTIONS

The mobilisation of ordinary people was a feature of the Anti campaigns and remained an ongoing characteristic of the People’s Republic. Cadres were encouraged to report on their comrades, workers informed on their bosses and neighbours kept an eye on each other. Few people were tried in a formal court; those suspected of any of the Antis were brought before a mass meeting of workers and party activists. Suspects were ‘struggled’ against and made to confess their crimes. A struggle could go on for days before a satisfactory confession and expression of remorse were given. A punishment was then decided. In some cases, managers and officials were purged from their positions and sentenced to hard labour. Some were executed. More commonly, people found guilty were shamed through public denunciation and the imposition of large fines. Even for these people, however, the experience was often harrowing; the humiliation of ‘losing face’ and the pressures of struggle meetings were simply too much for some. Zhou Qingli, the wife of a well-to-do Shanghai businessman, recalled, ‘So many wealthy people committed suicide at this time. They could not stand the idea of a public trial.’

A CULTURE OF SPYING

As soon as the CCP came to power, structures were put in place for applying party influence among everyday people through compulsory household (hukuo) registration and workplace (danwei) registration. Employees in all industries were required to be a member of their danwei or work unit, which responded to government directives. Street committees, which coordinated local initiatives, were another important driver of mass campaigns. Party cadres encouraged all to watch for ‘reactionary’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ leanings amongst their neighbours and work colleagues. A culture of spying and informing was fostered; children were even told to report on their parents. Involvement in meetings and campaigns was virtually compulsory as non-attendance would raise suspicions. Fear of public humiliation, a traditional feature of Chinese culture, was thus used to ensure political and social conformity. Unlike Soviet Russia, China did not need a large political policing organisation to monitor and expose would-be and actual counter-revolutionaries; this was done by the people themselves.

In addition to being registered for a particular household and local work unit, each Chinese person was given a class label — chengfen — that reflected their occupation and family background. Divided into broad class groupings, there were more than sixty chengfen, which were further ranked into ‘good,’ ‘middle’ and ‘bad’ categories, depending on one’s apparent commitment to the revolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOOD CLASSES</th>
<th>MIDDLE CLASSES</th>
<th>BAD CLASSES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• CCP cadres</td>
<td>• Middle peasants</td>
<td>• Rich peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Soldiers</td>
<td>• Petty-bourgeoisie (e.g. shopkeepers)</td>
<td>• Landlords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Industrial workers</td>
<td>• Intellectuals and professionals</td>
<td>• Capitalists</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Revolutionary martyrs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Poor and lower-middle peasants</td>
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</table>

51 Cited in C. K. Macdonald, Modern China (Tonbridge: Basil Blackman, 1985), 37.
52 Frank Dikotter, The Tragedy of Liberation, 47.
In the new society, the principle of *fanshen* was neither limited to the countryside nor exclusively concerned with changing the economic and social makeup of a village. *Turning Over* also applied to attitudes and past ‘sins.’ In urban areas, people of all walks of life participated in ‘Speak Frankness’ meetings, which were similar to and sometimes called ‘struggle sessions;’ people publicly expressed sorrow at the wrongs they had committed and begged for forgiveness. Street committees played an important role in organising these meetings and pressuring individuals to participate, especially if they were considered to be lacking in revolutionary zeal.

**SOURCE ANALYSIS**

Look carefully at the poster ‘Suppress counter revolutionaries, safeguard good circumstances,’ and complete the tasks below.

1. Describe what appears to be happening in the scene depicted.
2. Analyse the tone and intended message of the source.
3. Using the source provided and your own knowledge, explain why certain groups of people were the targets of repression and public denunciation by the Communists in the early 1950s.
4. Evaluate the significance of political repression during the early years of the People’s Republic of China. In your response, refer to the source provided and other views.

**CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT**

Write an essay of 600–800 words on one of the topics below. Your essay should include an introduction, paragraphs supported by evidence from primary sources and historical interpretations, a conclusion and a bibliography. Topics:

- How did the Chinese Communist Party consolidate its state power through political, social and economic change in the period 1949–53?
- Discuss how the CCP coming to power affected the lives of three social groups in China during the early to mid 1950s.
- ‘Practical measures rather than ideological campaigns were the focus of the early years of Communist rule in China.’ To what extent do you agree?

**DIVERSE EXPERIENCES**

Select three sources from this chapter that depict/describe the CCP’s public campaigns in the period 1949–53. What impression do the sources give of the effects of the campaigns on a range of Chinese people?
DOCUMENT

JOURNALIST JACK BELDEN ON FANSHEN, 1949

A landlord must overturn his thoughts, not only so he won’t rob his tenant of the fruits of his labour, but so that he himself can cease to be a landlord and be born again as an entirely new man. A husband must cease to beat his wife not only for his wife’s sake, but so that he may become a new person. A ‘broken shoe,’ or a prostitute, must reform so that she can become a young girl again, one capable of finding a husband or a useful place in society ...

Repentance was a method of impressing on people that certain types of conduct were wrong under the new order. Thus, offenders against the social order were to bow their heads, kowtow on the ground and admit all their sins. In this way, the Communists obviously hoped to set up invisible directors inside each man to guide his actions in the new way of life.

Public confession was another way in which the Communists sought conformity. But here again the methods were more Chinese than they were Marxist ... In China ... confessions were made in public.

Thus Speak Frankness Meetings became forums where individuals confessed their sins against the body social ... The reverse of the Speak Frankness Meetings, of course, were the Speak Bitterness Meetings, where people confessed, not their sins, but their sorrows. This had the effect of emotional solidarity. For when people poured out their sorrows to each other, they realised they were all together on the same sad voyage through life and from the recognition of this they drew closer to one another, achieved common sentiments, took sustenance and hope.

Struggle Meetings were also definite weapons in molding public opinion and regulating morals. Tenants struggled against landlords, wives against husbands, farmers against thieves, the individual against the bad demon inside him. The central idea behind many such meetings was public humiliation.53

ACTIVITY

SOURCE ANALYSIS

Read Jack Belden’s comments on fanshen and complete the tasks below.

1. Outline how people were expected to change their behaviour and thinking as part of fanshen.

2. Explain the purpose and consequences of public confessions, as suggested in the source.

3. Using the source provided and your own knowledge, explain why the CCP encouraged fanshen, especially in rural areas.

4. Evaluate the significance of the CCP’s use of mass campaigns in the period 1949–53. In your response, refer to the source provided and other views.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND SOCIAL CAMPAIGNS

Mao Zedong: ‘Women hold up half the sky.’

THE MARRIAGE LAW

The Communist government brought about significant benefits in the social and economic standing of women. The Marriage Law of May 1950, the first major legislation passed by the new government, gave women the same legal rights as men and banned customs such as arranged marriages, child marriages, polygamy, foot binding and the practice of buying brides. Women were free to choose their own partners and divorce abusive husbands. Further laws guaranteed women the right to equal pay, maternity benefits and, in some cases, work-based childcare. Women’s rights were enshrined in Article 48 of the Constitution:

Women’s rights were enshrined in Article 48 of the Constitution:

Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, in political, economic, cultural, social and family life. The state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work to men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women.54

‘Registration of marriage by free choice.’

DID YOU KNOW?

As a young man during the New Culture movement, Mao Zedong wrote a number of articles explaining the importance of women’s rights.

WOMEN AND WORK

The new regime provided greater opportunities for women to join the workforce and be involved in party campaigns, such as through their street committees or by holding positions of responsibility in government organisations. The writer Han Suyin heard the following radio announcement in the early 1950s: ‘It is better for a woman to have big hands and big feet. Big feet are beautiful, big hands are capable hands. A white skin is sickly.’ There was also a dedicated national body for women’s rights: the All-China Women’s Federation. Founded in 1949 and quickly gaining a membership of seventy-six million, the federation celebrated the

contribution of women to society and advocated for policies to improve their day-to-day lives. While emphasising the emancipatory role of the Communist Party, the Women’s Federation also involved other progressive political figures, such as its honorary president Soong Qingling, Sun Yixian’s widow.

Despite campaigns to implement the Marriage Law and provide support to women, the traditional view of what constituted ‘women’s work’ remained, to a large extent, intact. Housework was still generally considered the responsibility of wives and efforts to improve women’s rights had limited success in rural areas, where traditional patriarchal attitudes remained strong. Chinese women were nonetheless considerably better off than they had been under the old regime. One writer wryly observed that China’s women had risen to the status of second class citizens.\textsuperscript{56}

**CLEANLINESS DRIVES**

In addition to explaining and popularising government decrees and organising mass meetings, the danwei-level street committees played an important role in social welfare. The heads of street committees arbitrated in family and neighbourhood quarrels, undertook fire prevention and rubbish collections, distributed welfare to the needy and organised local recreational activities. In a spectacular drive to improve cleanliness in the new society, people were mobilised to clean the laneways, their household belongings and seemingly every inch of urban living space. Throngs of residents would be seen in the street scrubbing, polishing and sweeping. Street committee officials visited each household to inspect and critique housework. Keeping up to standard largely remained the burden of women.

**PUBLIC HEALTH**

Many advances were made in public healthcare in the early 1950s. Mass inoculations prevented diseases that had affected China for centuries. Outbreaks of cholera, smallpox and typhus dropped dramatically. Educational campaigns discouraged the tradition of spitting, thereby reducing the spread of tuberculosis. Urinating in public was also frowned on — a measure that improved sanitation in urban areas. Life expectancy, a significant measure of national health, rose from 36 in 1950 to 57 by 1957.\textsuperscript{57} The government’s efforts in disease prevention were a key contributor to this. The prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases also dropped dramatically after 1949. Brothels were closed and sex workers were trained for other occupations. Opium addicts were put in rehabilitation programs and traffickers were severely punished with long prison terms or execution.

**HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

Read the following historical interpretations on Communist rule in the early 1950s and fill in the table that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maurice Meisner: “The new regime was authoritarian and often repressive, but the cities were governed honestly and efficiently for the first time in modern Chinese history.”\textsuperscript{58}</th>
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</thead>
</table>

\textsuperscript{56} Craig Dietrich, People’s China, 71.  
\textsuperscript{57} Lee Feigon, Mao: A Reinterpretation (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 107.  
\textsuperscript{58} Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 97.  
\textsuperscript{59} John King Fairbank, The Great Chinese Revolution, 279.  
\textsuperscript{61} Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, 336–8.  
\textsuperscript{62} Frank Dikotter, The Tragedy of Liberation, xi, xv.
**ACTIVITY**

**John King Fairbank:** ‘Here was a dedicated government that really cleaned things up – not only the drains and streets but also the beggars, prostitutes, and petty criminals, all of whom were rounded up for reconditioning.’

**Joseph W. Esherick:** ‘Most Chinese did not experience the success of the revolution and the coming to power of the CCP as some form of personal liberation. It was a new world, in many respects, and for most it was a better world. But the PRC ushered in a better world in part because the CCP brought order and discipline to their environment, and this was probably as important to many as was any sense of liberation.’

**Jung Chang and Jon Halliday:** ‘Once the state was secure, Mao began systematic terrorisation of the population, to induce long-term conformity and obedience … Mao intended most of the population – children and adults alike – to witness violence and killing. His aim was to scare and brutalise the entire population.’

**Frank Dikotter:** ‘The Chinese Communist Party refers to its victory in 1949 as a “liberation”. The term brings to mind jubilant crowds taking to the streets to celebrate their newly won freedom, but in China the story of liberation and the revolution that followed is not one of peace, liberty and justice. It is first and foremost a history of calculated terror and systematic violence … the first decade of Maoism was one of the worst tyrannies in the history of the twentieth century, sending to an early grave at least 5 million civilians and bringing misery to countless more.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOHN KING FAIRBANK</th>
<th>JOSEPH W. ESHERRICK</th>
<th>MAURICE MEISNER</th>
<th>JUNG CHANG AND JON HALLIDAY</th>
<th>FRANK DIKOTTER</th>
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<tr>
<td>What were the consequences of CCP rule on Chinese people? (early 1950s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>What evidence is used to support the historian’s viewpoint?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the historian’s overall assessment of early CCP rule?</td>
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<td>Which interpretation(s) do you find most convincing, and why?</td>
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Josef Stalin: ‘You’re a winner now, and winners are always right. That’s the rule.’

When the CCP came to power, Mao said that in foreign relations China would ‘lean to one side,’ meaning it would seek an alliance with the Soviet Union. On 16 December 1949, Mao made his first trip abroad, taking a train to Moscow. The Chairman was noticeably nervous during the journey – so much so that he became ill and nearly fainted while stretching his legs during a stop in Siberia. Meeting Stalin was a big deal; he was a formidable personality and the leading figure of the international Marxist movement. Members of the Soviet Politburo lined up to meet Mao and a lavish welcome was staged at the Kremlin. Mao was Stalin’s guest of honour at his seventieth birthday celebration in mid-December.63

At their first meeting, Mao announced that he was seeking ‘Something that doesn’t just look good, but tastes good.’64 The head of the Soviet secret police force (KGB), Lavrentii Beria, snorted and giggled when this was translated, thinking that Mao was alluding to something sexual. Stalin asked for clarification. Mao gave none but Stalin knew what was being hinted at: Mao wanted a new diplomatic agreement to replace the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty signed by Jiang Jieshi in 1945. The territorial status of Outer Mongolia was also discussed. Stalin told Mao, ‘You’re a winner now, and winners are always right. That’s the rule.’ Stalin, however, proved to be an elusive and tough negotiator. While Mao was billeted in a comfortable dacha (chalet) just outside Moscow, Stalin refused to take telephone calls and repeatedly cancelled meetings. Weeks went by and Mao showed little interest in the entertainment on offer, such as a trip to the Bolshoi Ballet. Mao soon became annoyed at Big Brother’s obstinacy; Stalin relented and in January 1950, Zhou Enlai joined Mao to negotiate the terms of a new treaty.

The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, signed on 14 February 1950, was somewhat sweet and sour. Under the terms of the treaty, a loan of US$300 000 000 was made to China (to be paid in instalments over five years), the USSR agreed to support China if it came under military threat, and Soviet experts and machinery would help China develop its industries. The Soviets, however, got the upper hand in lucrative joint stock ventures to extract Chinese minerals in Xinjiang and they continued to occupy the naval base at Port Arthur. Outer Mongolia also remained in Soviet hands, which riled the Chinese. Soviet aid came at a price too – the loan had strict and steep repayment conditions. The alliance nevertheless strengthened the socialist bloc at a time when international tensions were mounting. In 1949, Mao had declared, ‘The Chinese people must lean either to the side of imperialism or to the side of socialism. There can be no exception. There can be no sitting on the fence; there is no third path.’ Mao returned from his trip to the Soviet Union and announced with much fanfare that there was ‘eternal and indestructible friendship’ between the Chinese and Soviet peoples.66 After the death of Stalin in 1953, Sino-Soviet relations would become increasingly strained and Mao would show that he could indeed take his own distinctive ‘third path’ to socialism.

63 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 363–4.
64 Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 423.
65 Cited in Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 422.
66 Alan Lawrence, China Under Communism, 21.
THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

**Liu Shaoqi:** ‘The Soviet road is the road all humanity will eventually take.’

By 1953, the government of the PRC had carried out initial social and political campaigns, brought inflation down to manageable levels and ensured military control of the nation. On 1 October, the fourth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, the Chinese government announced the beginning of ‘the general line for the transition to socialism’ and the end of New Democracy (as a phase of the bourgeois democratic revolution). How this might be achieved had been debated and agreed upon by Communist leaders in January. The USSR was looked to as the model for further development, particularly in industrial production. Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi declared, ‘The Soviet road is the road all humanity will eventually take. To bypass this road is impossible.’ Like Stalin had done in 1928, the government drew up a Five-Year Plan to guide China into a new era of economic progress. Its exact content was not made public until 1955.

**PRIORITY INDUSTRIES**

Priority was given to heavy industry, which received 88.8 per cent of the government’s budgeted capital. Manufacturing industries received just 11.2 per cent investment. A bare minimum of investment was assigned to agriculture. Seven-hundred new industrial enterprises including oil refineries, petrochemical manufacturing units, metallurgical plants, coal mines and power stations provided the foundation of the Five-Year Plan. Transport infrastructure also received attention and new bridges and railways were built. Rail and road bridges across the Yangzi River at Wuhan provided a link between the north and south without the need for time-consuming ferry crossings. The Soviet Union played a key role – around 10 000 engineers and advisers came to China to establish the new industrial plants and install Soviet-made machinery. Twenty-eight-thousand Chinese went to the USSR for training.

**PRODUCTION QUOTAS**

The Chinese Five-Year Plan followed the Stalinist model in setting production quotas and regulating these through a central administration. Targets were set by a State Planning Commission and the heads of industrial enterprises and regions were required to meet them. The First Five-Year Plan achieved considerable success. It met most of its industrial targets – some were exceeded – and laid the basis for further economic advances. A very respectable increase of ten to sixteen per cent in overall annual production was achieved. China, for the first time, was able to produce its own trucks, aircraft, cars and ships.

**LOAN REPAYMENTS**

Whilst Soviet technical assistance was greatly appreciated, investment loans were of questionable value, being in effect more beneficial to Russia than China. Repayments were so steep that by 1955 China was repaying more than it was.
receiving in aid. Soviet capital was limited, accounting for about three per cent of total investment. The bulk of the costs for the Five-Year Plan came from the Chinese, financed largely at the expense of the agricultural sector. While Soviet investment brought impressive gains in heavy industry, growth in overall farming production — vital to China’s large population and grain trade — was only four per cent a year.71

STAGED COLLECTIVISATION

While they followed the Soviet model in industrial planning, the Chinese were more original in their rural policies. The USSR had collectivised agriculture as a means to increasing government income and improving efficiency; however, the coercive practices employed to force Russian peasants into collective farming had brought much suffering. The Chinese Communists sought an eventual collectivisation of the countryside, but they did so in a gradual and persuasive manner. Peasants were at first encouraged to form Mutual Aid Teams, in which up to ten families shared tools, draught animals and labour during the peak harvest and planting times. Once teams had been established, ‘lower’ Agricultural Cooperatives (twenty to forty households) and then ‘higher’ Agricultural Cooperatives (100–300 families) were encouraged. In lower cooperatives, peasants would receive payment depending on the amount of land they owned (ownership titles were retained) and the labour they contributed. In higher cooperatives, land ownership became collective — farmers were now paid for their labour only.

AGRICULTURAL STAGNATION

The greater concentration of workers under cooperatives allowed for excess labour to be assigned to carry out small-scale irrigation works, such as new dams and ditches, and clearing land. While limited funds were given to the agricultural sector, which might seem strange given its importance, it was assumed that the more ‘socialist technique’ that came with gradual collectivisation would balance this out and bring great benefits. Farmers would take on more efficient, superior production methods and harvests would increase. The shift from mutual aid teams to cooperatives met resistance in some areas, as peasants were reluctant to give up their newly acquired land. The government had also imposed high grain taxes and low fixed prices to fund its industrialisation drive — a measure that many peasants found exploitative. Grain production, expected to increase significantly, grew by just two to three per cent annually. Some crops, such as soybeans and cotton, experienced a decline. Food production was therefore barely keeping pace with a population growth of 2.2 per cent.72 This worrying stagnation of the agricultural sector was a potential brake on the industrial progress of the Five-Year Plan. China’s

72 Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 124.
leaders began an earnest debate among themselves: ‘Did they prescribe the wrong medicine, or was the dose too small? Should they go backward or forward?’

### THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

- From 1949, the PRC sought close economic and diplomatic ties with the USSR.
- The USSR provided funding and advisers.
- Emulating the USSR, China implemented a Five-Year Plan with priority given to heavy industry.
- Agriculture (farming) was collectivised in stages (Mutual Aid Teams to Higher Agricultural Cooperatives).
- High production quotas were set by the State Planning Commission.
- Heavy industry made significant gains but agricultural production lagged.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Complete the following tasks:

1. Using dot points, outline the objectives of the First Five-Year Plan.
2. Write a short paragraph explaining the successes and limitations of the Five-Year Plan.
3. In small groups, discuss why the Five-Year Plan and the aid received from the Soviet Union have been described as ‘sweet and sour.’

### THE GAO GANG AFFAIR AND THE HIGH TIDE OF 1955

**Mao Zedong:** ‘We must guide the movement forward boldly and must not fear dragons ahead and tigers behind.’

The pace and degree of agricultural collectivisation remained a hot topic in upper party meetings throughout the Five-Year Plan. Advocates of a gradualist position rallied around Finance Minister Bo Yibo (Po I-po), Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi, leading economist Chen Yun (the architect of the industrial modernisations), Politburo member Chen Yi (Ch’en I) and Zhou Enlai. These moderates, who together were an influential voting bloc in the Central Committee, believed there was little sense in pushing for collectivisation until such time that industry could provide the tools and machinery to modernise farming further. With the backing of Liu Shaoqi, the director of the party’s Rural Work Department, Deng Zihui (Teng Tzu-hui), even authorised the dissolution of a large number of...
Agricultural Cooperatives in 1953 and 1955. According to Deng, the move to cooperatives was premature in some areas. Liu Shaoqi warned of the danger of ‘false, dangerous and Utopian agrarian socialism ... no collectivisation without mechanisation.’ Mao did not agree, nor did his ideological ally Chen Boda. Mao believed that if the peasants were left to their own devices their ‘spontaneous tendencies towards capitalism’ would run unchecked. Furthermore, Mao and Chen believed that revolutionary zeal could overcome any material deficiencies. Mao’s opinion did, however, fluctuate on exactly how fast the change should be implemented.

**THE GAO GANG AFFAIR**

Politburo member and chief Communist in Manchuria, Gao Gang (Kao Kang), was one of Mao’s spokesmen articulating the need for collectivisation. Gao’s career had flourished during the early years of the new regime. He presided over the building of many new industrial enterprises in Manchuria, a region rich in mineral deposits, and fostered close relations with the USSR. Mao’s backing of Gao during the Five-Year Plan would indirectly lead to the first major political purge of the CCP in the era of the People’s Republic. In late 1952, Mao called Gao to Beijing and appointed him head of the State Planning Commission. When Mao privately complained to Gao of Liu Shaoqi’s seeming lack of enthusiasm for a more radical pace of socialist development, Gao took it as a sign that his own political fortunes were on the rise. He harboured ambitions to unseat Vice-Chairman Liu as Mao’s second-in-charge. In 1953, Gao sounded out other leading Communists on whether they would join in his conspiracy. He won over Shanghai party boss, Rao Shushi (Jao Shu-shih), with the allure of a high post under his leadership. PLA Marshals Lin Biao and Peng Dehuai also expressed interest. Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun, however, went straight to Mao and reported Gao’s plotting.

On 24 December 1953, a Politburo meeting was convened and Mao berated Gao for creating divisions in the party. With the Chairman’s blessing, Liu and Zhou unleashed a campaign of scathing attacks against Gao Gang and Rao Shushi at party gatherings in February 1954. Gao was accused of running an ‘independent kingdom’ in Manchuria. Gao begged to see Mao but was refused an audience. He and Rao were arrested and purged from the party on 31 March 1954. Rao spent the next twenty years in prison, while Gao committed suicide a few months after
he was expelled. Lin Biao and Peng Dehuai were cleared of any wrongdoing, while Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping both received promotions. Mao was clearly pleased with their loyalty. According to Mao, the Gao Gang affair indicated that there was an ‘anti-Party sinister wind’ blowing. The turn of events revealed Mao’s emerging imperial leadership style and set a dangerous precedent of intrigue at the top of the CCP hierarchy. He was evidently prepared to play his comrades off against each other in order to strengthen his own authority. Liu and the others had been given a salutary reminder that their positions relied upon Mao’s continuing favour.

**RURAL COLLECTIVISATION INCREASES**

With the government taking a hefty portion of grain from producers, hunger and unrest developed in some regions; these regions were not keen to collectivise further. The leaders of the CCP Politburo had by early 1955 come to a consensus that Agricultural Cooperatives could only be implemented carefully and gradually – a view not shared by Mao. Mao told Deng Zihui, the most outspoken critic of hasty collectivisation, ‘Your mind needs to be shelled with artillery.’ Dissatisfied with the party leadership, Mao convened a conference of regional and provincial CCP secretaries in July 1955. He delivered a speech on ‘The Question of Agricultural Cooperation’ in which he rebuked those who failed to embrace the ‘high tide’ of socialism:

> An upsurge in the new, socialist mass movement is imminent throughout the countryside. But some of our comrades, tottering along like a woman with bound feet, are complaining all the time, ‘You’re going too fast, much too fast’ ... on no account should we allow these comrades to use the Soviet experience as a cover for their idea of moving at a snail’s pace.

Dragons ahead and tigers behind were not to be feared, Mao declared. Mao’s appeal to the party at large had an electrifying effect and placed the initiative firmly back in his hands. Provincial officials launched an all-out drive to bring as many peasants into ‘higher’ Agricultural Cooperatives as they could. Mao hoped that half of the rural workforce might be collectivised by the end of 1957. Whipped up by revolutionary fervour, Communist cadres in the countryside were keen to do even better. They mobilised support amongst the poorer peasants by extolling the virtues of collective farming and placed pressure on those who expressed caution. By December 1956, ninety-seven per cent of the peasantry had joined the cooperatives. Mao was overjoyed and told his secretary that he hadn’t been as happy since the defeat of Jiang Jieshi.

**NATIONALISATION OF INDUSTRY**

The so-called ‘Little Leap’ in the countryside was echoed by a similar drive for further socialist measures in the cities. In late 1955, Mao asked a delegation of businessmen their opinion on how socialism might be extended in industry. Having had their backsides ‘burnt’ by the ‘pepper’ of the wufan Five Antis movement, the industrialists enthusiastically gushed that nationalisation of what remained of the private sector should be carried out as soon as possible. It was an extraordinary tactic by which the state was not obliged to force nationalisation by decree, but achieved it through persuasion (with thinly veiled intimidation). On 6 December 1955, Mao declared that by the end of 1957 all private enterprises would be taken
over by joint-state ownership. Mao’s vision was completed by the end of the first fortnight of January. On 15 January 1956, a rally at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square was attended by 200,000 people to celebrate the triumph of socialism over capitalist private enterprise. There were incongruous scenes of businessmen leaping for joy and enthusiastically embracing as they handed over the deeds to their factories and firms. Other cities made rapid moves to emulate Beijing.

THE TWELVE-YEAR AGRICULTURAL PLAN

Although the ‘high tide’ of 1955 was satisfying for Mao, the successes of the First Five-Year Plan brought new problems. Central planning required a large bureaucracy. Mao was concerned that as the Communists established themselves in power, revolutionary sentiment might be lost. Many comrades were ‘tottering’ on ‘bound feet’ rather than showing a knack for hard work and revolutionary endeavour. Mao’s sense that ‘rightist conservatism’ was holding back further progress bothered him, as did the question of how to rectify the imbalance of rural and urban China. Mao began to doubt the virtues of Soviet-style economic planning. Something new was needed. He proposed a Twelve-Year Agricultural Plan that called for grain and cotton output to be doubled. Collectivisation should be pursued ‘more, faster, better and more economically.’ The Plan was formally endorsed by the State Council and Central Committee in January 1956, but Mao felt it was given a lukewarm reception by the rest of the Politburo. Premier Zhou Enlai and other moderates, including economic planning officials, expressed concern at the impact of collectivisation. Grain harvests were down and peasant handicrafts were suffering. Mao believed that lessening collectivisation would only impede much-needed improvements. An infusion of Yan’an-style energy was what was needed; mass line was preferable to centralised bureaucracy.

THE EIGHTH PARTY CONGRESS

1956 brought further unpleasant surprises. There were popular uprisings against Communist regimes in Hungary and Poland. Dramatically, at the Twentieth Party Congress in the USSR on 25 February, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev revealed and denounced the crimes of the deceased Josef Stalin. His strongest criticism was of Stalin’s cult of personality. This was potentially dangerous for Mao, given his own cult-like approach to leadership. The question of a personality cult was obliquely addressed at the Eighth Party Congress of September 1956 – the first since the Communists had come to power. Direct references to Mao Zedong Thought as the CCP’s guiding doctrine were dropped from the CCP constitution, a measure proposed by Marshall Peng Dehuai. A leadership team, headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, emerged. Mao declared that he would move to the ‘second line’ where he would consider broader policy questions, whilst the ‘first line’ of day-to-day administration would be handled by Liu and Deng. The Congress also saw Zhou Enlai offering a critical analysis of the rapid pace of collectivisation and Mao’s Twelve-Year Plan. It appeared the ‘high tide’ would soon be slowed down, a severe personal setback for Mao. Events would show that Mao did not find the views of the party leadership agreeable. The challenges facing Maoist-style socio-economic development – in particular avoiding a ‘Hungarian situation’ and retaining a ‘revolutionary’ central bureaucracy – were responded to by Mao with a surprising tactic.
Mao countered the challenges of 1956 through a campaign to encourage greater freedom of expression amongst intellectuals. He believed the benefits would be two-fold: intellectuals could help to make the party more responsive to popular sentiment; and social grievances could be expressed safely through discourse rather than protest. In January 1956, Zhou Enlai had given an address to non-Party academics, ‘On the Question of Intellectuals,’ which attempted to clarify the problematic class status of China’s intelligentsia. Zhou explained that, ‘The overwhelming majority of intellectuals have become government workers in the cause of socialism and are already part of the working class.’ The government was by this time concerned with China’s shortage of technical expertise – a worrying obstacle to industrial development. Creative thinking, essential for scientific innovation, needed encouragement. Zhou’s speech promised a more lenient and understanding relationship between the Communists and intellectuals. Mao carried through with this idea and revived the classical expression, ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.’ The principle was first publicly espoused, on Mao’s behalf, by Lu Dingyi (Lu Ting-i), head of the Central Committee’s propaganda department, at a meeting of scientists, writers and artists in May 1956. Letting ‘a hundred flowers bloom’ was taken to mean that a variety of opinions and freedom of speech were valued by the Communists. Mao hoped that public debate would shake up the party bureaucracy and ‘vaccinate’ the masses against the sort of suppressed discontent that had plagued Hungary.

INITIAL RESISTANCE

By the end of the year little had come of Mao and Zhou’s efforts. Most intellectuals were wary of the sudden call to state their views freely. Many feared arrest, as was the fate of Hu Feng in 1955. One Democratic League minister noted, ‘During the past year, not many flowers bloomed and few schools of thought contended in the academic and ideological fields ... the basic cause lies in the fact that the higher intellectuals are still suspicious.’ With the exception of

82 Cited in Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 171.
83 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 303.
84 Cited in Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 179.
Mao and Zhou, most party leaders were similarly unenthusiastic about unleashing popular criticism. The mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, did his best to dampen the movement by keeping a tight hold over reports in official newspapers, such as the People’s Daily. Liu Shaoqi also tried to rein in Mao’s campaign but the Chairman remained determined to see his Communist garden bloom with more variety. Mao said that even Jiang Jieshi’s works and the ideas of Liang Shuming (who had been rebuked during the 1951 Thought Reform movement) should be open to public discussion. Critical intellectuals need not be feared: ‘If they have something to fart about, let them fart! If it’s out, then one can decide whether it smells bad or good ... If the people think their farts stink, they will be isolated.’

The hesitation of other Communists only fuelled Mao’s desire to push his ideas more vigorously. Mao reinvigorated the Hundred Flowers campaign on 27 February 1957, with a speech to the Supreme State Conference, whose members included delegates of the democratic parties, scientists, academics and writers. That he chose to address a non-Party forum was significant and reflects Mao’s frustration with his CCP comrades. Mao’s speech, ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,’ was his way of explaining the nature of conflict in a post-capitalist society. Although class conflict had ceased, Mao argued that ‘contradictions among the people’ were still bound to occur. Such contradictions were different from class conflict. They could and should be resolved peacefully amongst the people by the Maoist approach of unity-criticism-unity. Debate and criticism were of value in this process for they would eventually achieve a greater consensus. Contradictions were only harmful if they were ignored and allowed to aggravate the people – as had happened in Eastern Europe. Mao’s dialectical outlook found no harm in contradictions: ‘They are just contradictions, that’s all. The world is full of contradictions.’

Mao’s campaign for critics of the party and government to voice their opinions began to gather momentum. By April, Mao had won over his colleagues, who were reassured that the forthcoming rectification by popular means would be ‘a gentle breeze and a fine rain.’ Mao also made a three-week train journey through eastern China during which he did his best to ease the concerns of provincial party cadres and encourage non-Party intellectuals. His rapturous welcome at carefully stage-managed meetings with local peasants and workers gave him a sense that the people were fully supportive of his measures. It was mass line on a mass scale. On 13 April 1957, the People’s Daily, which had previously been silent on the issue, released an editorial promoting the Hundred Flowers. That Mao was seeking non-Party criticism was now widely known and the first critics began to speak up.

85 Cited in Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 458.
86 Jack Gray, Revolutions and Revolutions, 303.
87 Cited in Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 457.
88 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 390.
FLOWERS BEGIN TO BLOOM

By May 1957, signs of lively ‘blooming and contending’ were apparent. This critical fine rain soon grew to a torrential downpour at public meetings, in non-Communist publications and through large wall posters at universities. People expressed dissatisfaction at the CCP’s monopoly on political power, meddling by Communist cadres in intellectual matters, valuable research time wasted in attending political meetings, and the ‘work style’ of party officials, which was said to be no better than that of corrupt GMD bureaucrats or Imperial mandarins. Communist officials were accused of ‘sitting in sedan chairs and keeping themselves from the masses.’

One young academic lamented the fact that the government treated him and his colleagues like ‘dog shit, one moment and 10 000 ounces of gold the next.’ Even Mao was criticised for his ‘arbitrary and reckless character’ and his tendency to be ‘very confident about the false reports and dogmatic analysis presented to him by his cadres.’ That the Communists were accused on a number of occasions of betraying their socialist ideals was a particularly stinging rebuke. Whilst the Hundred Flowers was largely a movement amongst students and academics, in some cities workers went on strike over political and economic concerns. There were student riots at some universities. Popular unrest was mounting.

‘POISONOUS WEEDS’

Mao was shocked. Although he had expected and welcomed criticism, he had assumed it would be constructive and would criticise practices and individuals within the Communist administration – not the system itself. He had hoped for ‘moderate criticism of the details, rather than the fundamentals, of life in the new China.’

Mao made it known that critical talk had gone beyond acceptable boundaries. On 8 June 1957, an editorial in the People’s Daily signalled the end of the Hundred Flowers movement by announcing that denunciations of the party would no longer be tolerated. Mao’s speech, ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions,’ was published by the paper on 19 June with significant revisions. Mao now made a distinction between ‘non-antagonistic’ contradictions and ‘antagonistic’ contradictions. The former could be resolved peacefully and were beneficial; the latter were bourgeois, dangerously anti-revolutionary and needed be opposed through class struggle. Mao explained that this was like distinguishing between fragrant flowers and poisonous weeds. Ideas that were contrary to socialism, divisive, critical of the democratic dictatorship, democratic centralism or the Communist Party were ‘poisonous.’ ‘Any word or deed at variance with socialism,’ Mao claimed, ‘is completely wrong.’

Between February and June the tone of the speech had changed from liberal to threatening.

THE ANTI-RIGHTIST CAMPAIGN

After just five weeks, the cultivation of ‘flowers’ turned into the pulling of ‘weeds.’ Deng Xiaoping was appointed to direct an Anti-Rightist campaign. Tens of thousands of academics and students were subsequently put through harsh denunciations and self-criticism meetings. Institutions where intellectuals were employed were required to expose a quota of five per cent of their staff as Rightists; failure to so would result in the institutional leadership being suspected of Rightist leanings. Self-criticism was only the beginning of their...
woes; between 300 000 and 400 000 ‘Rightists’ were sent to the countryside for ‘re-education through labour’ in prison camps. Their terms of labour could be up to ten or even twenty years. Many thousands lost their jobs or were demoted to positions far below their qualifications. People whose partners were deemed Rightists were urged to ‘draw a line’ between themselves and their spouse and seek a divorce. Forty per cent of the Guomindang Revolutionary Committee and Democratic League parties were found guilty of following an ‘anti-Communist, anti-people, anti-Socialist bourgeois line.’ Their influence thereby declined further. The prospect of professional ruin and the pressure of self-criticism led to many suicides. Early morning exercisers at Beijing’s Summer Palace gardens would encounter bodies floating in the lake and hanging from trees. The Anti-Rightist campaign ruined countless lives. Not only a great injustice, the campaign did serious damage to China’s higher education system and discredited people with technical training and expertise. This would have tragic consequences for economic planning during the Great Leap Forward.

The Hundred Flowers campaign has often been presented as a Machiavellian trap. Michael Lynch argues that ‘Mao’s apparent mellowing was an act. He had not really become more tolerant; he was engaged in a ruse.’ The speed with which the movement was brought to an end, Lynch contends, suggests that Mao had been planning to expose and remove his critics all along. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday agree that Mao had ‘cooked up a devious plan ... Mao was setting a trap ... He was inviting people to speak out so that he could use what they said as an excuse to victimise them.’ Mao admitted that he did set a trap of sorts, but explained that his motives were honest:

After the Hundred Flowers campaign, Mao retained a deep distrust of intellectuals for the remainder of his life. Mao was fond of saying, ‘Peasants have dirty hands and cow shit-sodden feet, but they are much cleaner than intellectuals.’

The purpose was to let demons and devils, ghosts and monsters ‘air views freely’ and let poisonous weeds sprout and grow in profusion so that the people, now shocked to find these ugly things still existing in the world, would take action to wipe them out ... The Communist Party foresaw this inevitable class struggle. Some say this was a secret scheme. We say it was open.”

Mao’s motives

Alan Lawrence is sceptical of Mao’s portrayal of the Hundred Flowers as an intentional trap: ‘It implies that the Communist Party knew what it was doing: that it was in control all along.’ Mao’s doctor, Li Zhisui, recalls that, ‘Mao of course was shocked. He had never intended that any of the criticisms be directed against him. He had never meant the party as an institution to come under attack ... Mao had grossly miscalculated.’ Like Lawrence, Edwin Moise, Maurice Meisner and Craig Dietrich believe that Mao’s motives were complicated and ambiguous. Mao’s claim that he
Hundred Flowers – regardless of intent – certainly went a long way towards silencing those who dissented from Chairman Mao’s ‘revolutionary’ line. It was ‘an extraordinary response to the challenges the CCP was facing,’ according to Jonathan Fenby, one that demonstrated Mao’s ‘naïveté – and then his utter ruthlessness.’

**Philip Short on the Hundred Flowers**

The ‘Hundred Flowers’ was the most ambitious attempt ever undertaken in any communist country to combine a totalitarian system with democratic checks and balances. Even Mao was unsure what it would produce. ‘Let’s try it and see what it’s like,’ he said at one point. ‘If we acquire a taste for it, there will be no more worries.’ What would happen if the Party did not ‘acquire a taste for’ being criticised was left discreetly unsaid... As the torrent of popular anger, mistrust and bitterness swelled, Mao began to have second thoughts... Mao had not made one but two misjudgements. He underestimated the volume and bitterness of the criticisms, and the cadres’ ability to withstand them. What had started as an attempt to bridge the gap between the Party and the people (and had been only incidentally an effort to expose and punish a small number of anti-communist irreductibles) was turned on its head. It became a trap not for the few but for the many – for the hundreds of thousands of loyal citizens who had taken the Party at its word.

97 Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, 434–5.
98 Cited in Craig Dietrich, People’s China, 109.
99 Alan Lawrence, China Under Communism, 41.
102 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 386.
103 Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 464, 466, 469.

**HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

Read the above accounts of the Hundred Flowers campaign and complete the tasks below.

1. According to Short, what was Mao trying to achieve with the Hundred Flowers campaign?
2. With reference to further evidence and Short’s perspective, explain how the Hundred Flowers campaign had a different outcome than what was intended.
3. Compare Short’s account with the other historical interpretations. To what extent is his view convincing?
THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Mao Zedong: ‘I have witnessed the tremendous energy of the masses. On this foundation, it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever.’

By the summer of 1957, the Soviet-style First Five-Year Plan was coming to an end. A second Five-Year Plan, with similar aims regarding investment and planning, had been drawn up by government economists and approved in September 1956. The results of the first plan had been quite pleasing, with particular success in heavy industry. Yet the ongoing suitability of the Stalinist model was seriously questioned. Agriculture was not achieving the surplus required for further export or sustaining the growing population. The emergence of bureaucratised state agencies, which managed economic and social policies, was also detested by Mao. The Chairman felt that planning had become overcentralised. The direction of collectivisation remained a further unresolved issue. A number of contradictory policies were put forward, but not clearly endorsed, in September 1957. The Central Committee gave cautious approval to the winding back of some collective farms and approved the proposals set out in the Second Five-Year Plan. Mao’s more radical 1956 Twelve-Year Plan for Agriculture also remained accepted ‘in principle.’

COMPETING WITH THE WEST

The immediate catalyst for policy change came from an unusual direction. The Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched on 4 October 1957, prompting a wave of euphoria in socialist countries around the world; Russia, not America, had made the first major step in space exploration. Mao quipped with glee that the United States ‘hadn’t even launched a potato.’ 104 In the wake of Sputnik, Nikita Khrushchev declared that in fifteen years the Soviet Union would overtake the United States in the production of electric power, steel, coal, iron and oil. In November, Mao went to Moscow to address the Conference of World Communist Parties, marking the fortieth anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Mao gave a rousing speech in which he declared that ‘the east wind prevails over the west wind.’ Never one to be seen lagging behind, Mao boldly told the gathered communist delegates that in fifteen years China would overtake Great Britain in steel production. Buoyed with revolutionary optimism, Mao returned to Beijing determined to inspire the Chinese people ‘to get to heaven in a single leap.’ On 12 December, the National Economic Planning Conference reiterated Mao’s declaration that China would surpass Britain’s steel output. While the means to achieve this were not identified, Mao felt there was an urgent need for an alternative, more original, path to socialist development.

SEEKING TRUTH FROM FACTS

To ‘seek truth from facts,’ Mao set out on a four-month tour of provincial China. As in the past, Mao met with adoring crowds, and local officials carefully stage-managed his visits. Mao, however, believed he was genuinely in touch with popular sentiment; he was particularly interested in the outcome of a campaign that had mobilised millions of peasants to complete massive water conservation projects. A profusion of irrigation ditches, canals and reservoirs had

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104 Cited in Philip Short, Mao: A Life, 478.
been constructed — their production exceeded official targets. These had been built by hand with sheer manpower as there was often no machinery available. Other huge engineering feats, such as the expansion of Tiananmen Square, were also undertaken. The potential of the Chinese people to achieve great things by their collective will sparked Mao’s imagination. He spoke with renewed enthusiasm of the Yan’an days when human endeavour triumphed over seemingly impossible odds.

THE VIRTUE OF BACKWARDNESS

There were a number of important meetings of policy-making bodies in early 1958, at which Mao lobbied for a renewal of revolutionary virtue in economics and social relations. Between trips to different provinces, Mao gave speeches to the Supreme State Conference, National People’s Congress and gatherings of central and provincial party leaders. A recurring theme was his disdain for bureaucratic and ‘expert’ planners. Regulations only held back the ‘productive forces’ of the masses. In typical fashion, the Chairman extolled creative thinking and mass enthusiasm but warned of false reporting of production targets and rash implementation of new ideas. The ‘correct’ line between pragmatism and idealism was becoming blurred and difficult to judge. Mao didn’t see this as a problem — a love of contradictions was his trademark. The ideal of ‘disequilibrium,’ a lack of balance, was held by Mao as one of the essential laws of historical development.105

There were strong ideological assumptions behind Mao’s thoughts, but unlike more orthodox Marxist thinkers, Mao believed that backwardness was a virtue in revolutionary progress. China’s low level of economic development was not an impediment to the socialist transformation of society. According to Mao, human consciousness was more decisive than material conditions. A communist society — in terms of its societal values — could emerge before its economic structures were fully realised. The Chinese people were endowed with characteristics that made them particularly amendable to this socialist transformation of the soul:

China’s 600 million people have two remarkable peculiarities; they are, first of all, poor, and secondly blank. That may seem a bad thing, but it is really a good thing. Poor people want change, want to do things, want revolution. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches, and so the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it.106

MAOIST ECONOMICS: THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Mao once said, ‘If you are too realistic you can’t write poetry.’107 That the Great Leap Forward (GLF) would come to be driven by utopianism, irrationality and a lack of sensible policies is true. However, the ideas that Mao and his adviser Chen Boda were exploring in 1958 were neither illogical nor invalid.108 Mao spoke of an economy that would ‘walk on two legs’ through ‘simultaneous development.’ Heavy industry would continue to receive capital investment but rural areas would aim to acquire small-scale industries that would generate their own capital. A vast resource lay in the peasants, whose labour was untapped outside the planting and harvest seasons. More efficient organisation of their work would surely bring further gains. The countryside would therefore make use of its massive population with labour-intensive projects to produce goods, improve rural infrastructure and further encourage collective values. As had been carried out in the Border Regions and Yan’an during the Civil War, rural cooperatives would engage in the small-
scale production of hand tools, fertilisers, cloth, handicrafts, coal for local use and simple medicines. Local know-how and innovation could make use of lower-grade raw materials that heavy industrial enterprises could not. Far from requiring heavy investment, these measures would actually produce their own capital. Funding for agriculture could therefore remain fairly low.

The emerging problem of unemployment would also ease as recent migrants to the cities could be encouraged back to the countryside and given appropriate jobs. A further result would be a ‘technical revolution,’ whereby common people would learn basic scientific knowledge and skills in the course of their everyday work. In learning by doing, the masses would come to be ‘socialist-conscious, cultured labourers,’ largely removing the need for an elite class of experts.109

THE LAUNCH OF THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

At the second meeting of the Eighth Party Congress of 5–23 May 1958, the Great Leap Forward was officially launched. It was not a detailed blueprint but rather a declaration of revolutionary intent. Mao argued for the need to ‘let the people explode.’110 The production targets set out in the Second Five-Year Plan were revised upwards and the slogans of the High Tide were proclaimed again: ‘Go all out, aim high, and achieve greater, faster, better, and more economical results in the building of socialism.’ A greater degree of collective organisation in the countryside was encouraged. Mao gave more addresses to delegates than normal, one of them stating:

I once asked some comrades whether we live in heaven or on earth. They all shook their heads and said we live on earth. When we look at the stars from earth, they are in heaven. But if there are people in the stars, when they look at us, wouldn’t they think we are in heaven? Therefore I say that we live in heaven as well as earth.111

Philip Short describes Mao at this time as being ‘on an adrenalin high pumped up by the limitless vista of a bright communist future in which nothing would be able to withstand the concerted efforts of 600 million people.’112 Brimming with energy and new ideas, in the coming months Mao repeatedly spoke of ‘going all out’ and ‘aiming high.’ Linked with the slogan ‘achieving greater, faster, better, and more economical results,’ these ideals would form the General Line of the Great Leap Forward.

Frustrated at the lack of development in rural areas, many provincial officials were deeply inspired by Mao’s General Line. Party idealists readily embraced the idea of China leaping ahead of its capitalist rivals and were therefore keen to embrace radical Maoist innovations to achieve this end.113 Echoing the Chairman’s visionary pronouncements, Xie Fuzhi, a Central Committee delegate and the minister for public security, proclaimed,

We are supernatural. Maybe we are supernaturals of the second order. Maybe on another planet there are people who are brighter than we are, in which case we are of the second order, but if we are brighter than they are we are supernaturals of the first order.114

PEOPLE’S COMMUNES

The principal basis for the Great Leap Forward, which Mao saw as the means by which the transition from socialism to communism could be achieved, came
about spontaneously, although it fitted well with the idea that rural communities should strive towards greater efficiency of labour. In the midst of the water conservation campaigns, a number of Agricultural Cooperatives in Henan Province amalgamated into a single large organisation in order to meet labour shortages. The organisation, calling itself the Sputnik Commune, was founded on 29 April 1958. A number of other regions followed suit. On 9 August, while touring in Shandong Province, Mao saw a banner above a village headquarters reading ‘People’s Commune.’ It was the first Mao had heard of the term and he liked it very much. A reporter overheard him remark, ‘The people’s commune is great!’ and the next day his declaration – much like an Imperial edict – appeared on the front page of every newspaper.¹¹⁵

The movement to establish People’s Communes grew exponentially. From 17–30 August 1958, Mao called an enlarged meeting of the Politburo and secured approval for the idea. By the end of the year, 740,000 Agricultural Cooperatives were reorganised into 26,000 People’s Communes.¹¹⁶ According to a People’s Daily editorial of September 1958, ‘The main features of the people’s commune are that it is bigger and more socialist.’¹¹⁷ The communes were indeed much bigger than cooperatives and averaged 5000 households, with total populations of up to 100,000 people. Their significance, as the editorial indicated, was not just their size; they were decidedly more socialist in many of their initiatives. Private plots were replaced by the complete collective ownership and farming of land. Smaller fields were combined into much larger ones and tilled by hundreds of people at a time. Tools and livestock also became collective property. Wages were paid in ‘work points,’ which were exchangeable for everyday items, rather than money.

¹¹⁵ Li Zhisui, The Private Life of Chairman Mao, 269. The translation is sometimes given as ‘The people’s communes are fine’ or ‘The people’s commune is good.’
¹¹⁶ Alan Lawrence, China Under Communism, 58.

SOURCE ANALYSIS

Look carefully at the poster ‘The communes are big, the people are numerous, the natural resources abundant, it is easy to develop a diversified economy – People’s Communes are good’ and complete the tasks below.

1. From the source, identify signs of economic success the People’s Communes have achieved.
2. Outline the ways in which the artist suggests that the People’s Communes have improved the everyday life of peasants.
3. Using the source provided and your own knowledge, explain the agricultural policies of the Great Leap Forward.
4. Evaluate the significance of the Great Leap Forward for rural China. In your response, refer to the source provided and other views.

‘The communes are big, the people are numerous, the natural resources abundant, it is easy to develop a diversified economy – People’s Communes are good.’ (1960)
Communes were organised along military lines, with units of ten to twenty brigades, made up of a dozen or so smaller units called work teams. The ‘troops’ of the work teams marched in military formation as they set off to ‘battle nature’ (work). Communes were military in function too, as each trained and armed its own militia. There was speculation by some observers that even the nuclear family was coming to an end; large nurseries allowed parents more time to work in the fields while communal kitchens and eating halls fostered collective spirit and reduced the number of people required for cooking meals. The elderly were brought together and cared for in ‘Happiness Homes.’

The most optimistic party cadres claimed that communes were not just a means to the eventual transition from socialism to communism; they were a fledgling communist society in the present. Mao spoke with great enthusiasm that communes would bring to an end the ‘Three Great Differences’ in China: divisions between city and country, between worker and peasant, and between mental and physical labour. Administration of public welfare, schooling, local defence, farming and small industry were all the responsibility of the commune. It was claimed that each commune owned its own means of production and that more formal state functions would soon be unnecessary. Historians critical of Mao’s intention argue that the communes really allowed for the Communist Party to govern the peasants more stringently than ever. According to John King Fairbank, ‘The state had become the ultimate landlord.’

More scathingly, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday argue that ‘The aim was to make slave driving more efficient.’

Whatever the aims of the CCP leadership, there was genuine enthusiasm for the People’s Communes among many ordinary people; such enthusiasm was an important factor in the early successes of the Great Leap Forward. Many peasants and workers felt they were building a prosperous future with their own hands. It was ‘an exciting experience,’ recalled Li Zhisui, ‘Something big was happening in the Chinese countryside, something new and never seen before.’

Zhao Tongmin, a peasant, had fond memories of working in his commune:

Those were the days. Whenever I sit at home and think about it I feel happy again ... What was so great? The fact that so many people came together. Their discipline was marvellous. Everyone came to work on time and all joined in with a will. No line divided village from village, people from here and people from there! ... Those were great days! Great days!

A translator for Beijing’s national radio broadcast service, Sidney Rittenberg, was exhilarated to engage in voluntary manual work alongside his colleagues during the Great Leap. He recalled, ‘I felt the thrill of being one of the people who didn’t just talk about changing the world, but actually did something about it.’

**BACKYARD STEEL PRODUCTION**

Mao was whipping up a frenzy of enthusiasm to achieve his grandiose vision of an ideologically pure and prosperous new society. It was clear, though, that the steel industry would struggle to meet the proposed targets. To boost metallurgical production, a campaign to build ‘backyard’ steel furnaces was introduced. Small furnaces had long been used to forge simple farming implements. It no longer seemed wise to invest heavily in large steel mills when smaller ones could be established cheaply at a much greater rate. But, Mao asked, ‘If these small backyard steel furnaces can really produce so much steel, why do foreigners build such gigantic steel mills? Are foreigners really so stupid?’

### Footnotes:

120 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 269–70.
province, which was governed by a particularly fanatical Maoist, the Chairman was given a tour of some backyard steel works and shown their product. (To Mao’s untrained eye, it looked like good steel and may have even been produced elsewhere at a modern furnace.) Mao was impressed and his doubts were allayed.

The production of backyard steel was taken up by people of all walks of life. Furnaces were made from mud bricks and people competed to produce the most steel. Peasants in the People’s Communes were especially hard working. There were even small steel mills in the grounds of Zhongnanhai, the compound in Beijing which housed leading CCP officials and their families. The drive to make steel soon assumed manic proportions – people tended smelters night and day and virtual forests of smoking chimneys sprang up across the country. Vast woodlands were destroyed for fuel. The search for scrap metal became a further obsession – woks, tools, doorknobs, nails, bicycles and wagon wheels were all melted down. ‘The country looked as though it had been picked clean by iron-eating ants,’ writes Harrison Salisbury.124 Privately, some people felt that melting metal to make more metal was rather silly, while others revelled in the collective competition to ‘send up Sputniks’ or ‘launch a satellite’ (make the most steel).

COMMUNAL KITCHENS AND ENTERTAINMENT

While the peasants made steel and tilled the fields they were encouraged to eat as much as they liked at communal kitchens. Acting troupes, puppeteers and musicians provided entertainment to those working the furnaces. One commune official, Wang Wende, spoke with great enthusiasm of the food and entertainment provided:

We all ate well during the smelting drive – bread and noodles at midnight for all hands. Huge pots next to every furnace provided the noodles. Who can ever forget it? And then there were the skits, the drama teams, the films! All the barriers between the people broke down ... We ate a lot of meat. It was considered revolutionary then to eat meat. If you didn’t eat meat it wouldn’t do ... People even vied with each other to see who could eat the most.125

In addition to backyard steel, peasants were shown how to identify surface deposits of uranium. Backyard smelters were used to refine the ore into functional grade uranium. Edwin Moise argues that while this caused a good deal of pollution, backyard uranium smelters made a significant contribution to China’s emerging nuclear power industry.
Whilst enjoyable and satisfying, the generous meals served by the commune kitchens were setting a dangerous precedent. The peasants were consuming food reserves that had yet to be replenished. The steel drive was also taking men away from farm work. In the end, the campaign proved a failure. Ordinary people with homemade furnaces, despite their best intentions and revolutionary enthusiasm, are not metallurgists. The quality of backyard steel and iron was extremely poor – low in purity and brittle ‘like cattle droppings.’ Backyard mud furnaces also tended to wash away in the rain. A number of hand-dug canals and dams, reinforced by earth walls, similarly did not last. The quantity-over-quality approach had proven flawed.

AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENTATION: LYSENKOISM

The weather in 1958 was exceptionally good and a bumper grain crop was ready for harvest. Innovations based on the theories of Soviet agronomist Trofim Lysenko were encouraged to increase yields further. Lysenko claimed to have proven that biological and ecological characteristics of plants and animals are acquired from the immediate environment or direct forebears, rather than from genetic makeup. For example, the seeds of fruit trees, after storage in very cold conditions, could supposedly be planted in snowy regions with positive results. Two Lysenkoist theories adopted with particular enthusiasm by the Chinese included close planting and deep ploughing. It was thought that close planting would lead to greater yields as seedlings of the same plant type would not compete with each other. The theory of deep ploughing postulated that previously untouched fertile soil should be brought to the surface and that larger root systems should be encouraged. In practice, topsoil was made barren by being mixed with clay and sand brought up from the depths, in some cases three metres below the usual ploughing level. Close planting of rice restricted the amount of wind that passed through the crops, resulting in poor quality and lower yields. Crops unsuited to a particular region were planted in abundance, in the Lysenkoist belief that they would grow if well-tended.

Why was the time-honoured wisdom of China’s peasant farmers – not to mention common sense – so readily abandoned? Because the Great Leap Forward extolled innovation and the supremacy of human will at the expense of ‘expert’ advice. One of Mao’s close associates, Kang Sheng, explained in a lecture in 1958, ‘We should be like Marx, entitled to talk nonsense. What is science? Science is simply acting daringly. There is nothing mysterious about it ... just act recklessly and it will be alright.’

The ‘Four Pests’

It was not long before a request from the Chinese government marked ‘Top Secret’ reached the Soviet embassy in Peking. In the name of socialist internationalism, it read, please send us 200,000 sparrows from the Soviet Far East as soon as possible.127

The sparrow was later replaced by the bedbug as ‘number four pest.’

**SOURCE ANALYSIS**

Look carefully at the poster ‘Everybody comes to beat sparrows’ and complete the tasks below.

1. Outline the features of the Four Pests campaign, referring to the source.
2. Explain how nature was controlled during the Great Leap Forward, referring to the source provided and your own knowledge.
3. Evaluate the significance of this campaign and other policies of the Great Leap Forward. In your response, refer to the source provided and other views.

**ACTIVITY**

During the Great Leap Forward, mathematics students demonstrated their revolutionary disregard for ‘bourgeois specialists’ and ‘expert’ knowledge by deliberately calculating equations incorrectly and putting decimal points in the wrong places.

**MANIPULATION OF STATISTICS**

Ross Terrill points out that Mao’s philosophy on numbers reinforced the unrealism of the Great Leap Forward.128 In the way the Chinese phrase ‘ten thousand years’ is used to designate an infinitely long time rather than a literal period of time, Mao was often imprecise in his estimations. He would say that something might come about in five or twenty or forty years. When reviewing whether steel production targets should be increased from six-million to nine-million tons, Mao proposed, ‘Let’s just double it! Why dilly-dally? Let’s make it eleven million tons.’129 Mao had ‘an almost metaphysical disregard for reality, which might have been interesting in a poet, but in a political leader with absolute power was quite another thing.’130 On one occasion, Mao said that economics was like playing the game mah-jong and all you had to do was double the stakes.

What most directly led to disaster, however, was misinformation. Planning and statistical monitoring were passed from the central government ministries to communes and provincial officials.131 The production of grain was not tied to set quotas; the cadres in charge of the People’s Communes were simply told to produce as much as possible. Mass rallies were held, at which representatives from different communes vowed to achieve spectacular grain harvests. Whilst a one-acre field might normally produce one ton of grain or rice, commune activists pledged fifteen to thirty tons. Amid gongs, drums, singing and fanfare, work teams launched competitive drives to over-fulfil their preposterously high targets.

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127 Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, 449.
128 Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography, 287.
129 Cited in Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 399.
Section B: Consequences of the Revolution

A 1958 propaganda photo shows a field where the crop was so dense it supported the weight of four children. It was later revealed that a concealed wooden platform held the children up.

‘Good News Reporting Stations’ took the place of proper accounting and central authorities were told about plentiful harvests only. The false sense of success was bolstered by ‘show fields’ set aside for inspection by officials; these contained rice or grain recently transplanted from other fields, giving the impression of incredibly high yields per acre. To fulfil quotas, commune officials falsified and inflated harvested grain figures. ‘With each repetition,’ Jasper Becker argues, ‘the lies became more and more fantastic, a ghastly parody of Chinese Whispers.’

Not all reports were taken at face value. Economist Chen Yun doubted the accuracy of many claims. One of Mao’s secretaries, Tian Jiaying (T’ien Chia-ying), was likewise sceptical and saw the attitudes of provincial officials as irresponsible: ‘In the past, our party has always sought truth from facts, but this isn’t what we’re doing now. People are telling lies, boasting ... This is ridiculous. It is shameful.’

Voices of reason, such as Tian’s, were shouted down by the multitude of Maoist sycophants and idealists, unable or unwilling to acknowledge reality. Similarly, cadres or other local officials who raised questions or urged caution were liable to be struggled against as ‘deniers’ who were ‘casting aspersions on the excellent situation’.

Jung Chang recalled, ‘It was a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practised to an incredible degree.’ Li Zhisui, Mao’s doctor, felt that, ‘Everyone was hurrying to jump on the utopian bandwagon ... everyone was caught in the grip of this utopian hysteria ... The excitement was contagious.’

Mao, too, joined in the game and came to believe the slogans and inflated reports. It seems Mao heard and saw only what he wanted to — that the Great Leap Forward was a tremendous success.

**‘SURPLUS’ GRAIN**

Based on faulty statistics indicating a sizeable grain surplus, the government negotiated export sales to fund heavy industry. There was a lively debate in the *People’s Daily* on how China might deal with its apparent abundance of food. Nations with close ties to China, such as Albania, North Vietnam and North Korea, even received shipments of free grain. Favourable weather and enthusiasm had increased agricultural output from 195 million tons in 1957 to 200 million tons in 1958. However, provincial officials reported that 450 million tons had been harvested. In 1959, the harvest was 170 million tons but reported as high as 500 million.

Production fell because of poor management and a decline in peasant enthusiasm. Some grew disillusioned with the ‘work points’ system that allocated the same rewards to all people of a certain type despite how much each one worked, there was no incentive, other than revolutionary idealism, to put in extra effort. Even enthusiastic workers could not sustain the frenetic pace required. Central authorities, having been inundated with glowing reports of bountiful harvests, subsequently imposed high grain levies. Around thirty per cent of the harvest had previously been collected by the state; this rose to about ninety per cent.

 Provincial officials and rural cadres did their best to send in as much grain and rice as they could. Given that many communes had already consumed their stores of food, grain requisitioning meant going without. Disaster was looming.
The Great Leap Forward: A People's Commune

1. Primary school
2. Maternity clinic
3. Hospital
4. Library
5. Communal kitchen and canteen
6. Grain storage (note abundant harvest)
7. Notice board outlining breakthroughs in production
8. Electricity station
9. Communal laundry
10. Cinema
11. Kindergarten and nursery
12. General store
13. Delegation of visitors from another commune being shown field and harvest
14. Agricultural experimentation
15. Concrete factory
16. Fertiliser factory
17. Fertiliser
18. Slogan on truck: 'Help the country to develop'
19. Happiness Home for the elderly
20. People's Militia
21. Large yard: steel production
22. Slogan encouraging greater crop yields: 'Increase the production by 100,000 jin'
23. People's militia
24. People's militia
25. Large yard: steel production
26. Cotton picking
27. Rice farming by Work Team
28. Fishing boat
29. Water conservation project
30. The Great Sparrow Campaign

Chapter 4: The People's Republic of China (1949–1961)

UNCORRECTED PAGE PROOFS
ATTEMPTS TO CURB THE GLF

THE WUHAN PLENUM

A Central Committee plenum (meeting) was held at Wuhan from 28 November to 10 December 1958. There, ‘Some Questions Concerning People’s Communes’ were raised. The party had become aware of the problems emerging in rural areas and was seeking to rein in the more radical aspects of the Great Leap Forward. The General Line was right but implementation had been hasty and careless. Rather than 450 million tons, it was decided that a harvest of 370 million tons was more ‘realistic.’ Production quotas were reduced and communes were made more accountable. Some private markets were allowed to reopen, families could tend their own small vegetable plots and food was no longer provided in communal kitchens. Investigative teams set out from Beijing to assess the effects of the GLF. In short, the plenum tinkered with, rather than rethought, the policy.

At the Wuhan Plenum, it was announced that Mao Zedong would not stand for re-election as China’s president but would continue to be CCP chairman. He was apparently satisfied with his achievements to date and wished to spend more time on broader theory and policy than day-to-day administration. The party went to some lengths to reassure the general public and the Communist rank-and-file that Mao had not been demoted. Liu Shaoqi was appointed the new head of state, formally assuming the presidency in April 1959. Liu was the dominant figure in a series of high level meetings in early 1959 that endorsed more pragmatic measures and further moderated the Great Leap. By the summer, communes did little more than supervise Agricultural Cooperatives. Mao was present at the National People’s Congress, Supreme State Conference and Central Committee meetings at which there was a ‘judicious trimming’ of policies. It seemed the Great Leap Forward was being quietly wound down. The economic situation nevertheless continued to deteriorate. Fields were not being farmed effectively, partly because labour was going into backyard iron production or tools had been lost in the smelting drive. Famine was breaking out in a number of provinces.

FACT-FINDING MISSIONS

The Great Leap Forward was not going at all well and Mao wanted to know why. Mao told one of his bodyguards, ‘Something has gone wrong in the countryside.'
I must find out what out what it is.'\textsuperscript{142} He said to the governor of Henan, ‘all my plans are messed up.’\textsuperscript{143} Leading Communists, including Mao, took it upon themselves to travel to various regions and investigate problems. Mao went to Manchuria in January to see how large steel plants operated. He learnt that good steel can only be made in professional refineries with good sources of fuel. He did not, however, order that backyard steel production should cease. Mao felt that the revolutionary enthusiasm of the people should not be dampened.\textsuperscript{144} In June, Mao visited his old home village of Shaoshan in Hunan; it was the first time he had been back in thirty-two years. Mao chatted with villagers, saw his family home and took a swim in the local reservoir. He heard some complaints but was also told that the People’s Communes were ‘really good.’ It was what he wanted to hear: the Great Leap needed adjustments but was, on the whole, a fine ideal.

Like Mao, Marshall Peng Dehuai had made a trip to his home village of Niaoshi, which was also in Hunan and not far from Shaoshan. Peng was appalled by what he found. The villagers were hungry and living in squalor. Elderly residents of the local Happiness Home shivered on flimsy bamboo mats as there were no proper beds. Children in the kindergarten were crying with cold and hunger. Peng shouted, ‘What sort of Happiness is this?’\textsuperscript{145} He gave 400 yuan from his own pocket to buy bedding for the kindergarten and elderly home. He also assured the villagers that he would tell his fellow leaders in Beijing of their plight. Peng then spent April to June making a diplomatic visit to the Soviet Union. He reputedly shared his misgivings about the Great Leap with Khrushchev.

### LUSHAN: PENG CRITICISES MAO

In July 1959, the leading figures of the CCP gathered at Lushan for a Central Committee plenum. High on Mount Lu, the summer resort of Lushan offered a cool respite from the stifling weather, in which the policies of the Great Leap Forward could be reviewed in comfort. Before the plenum, Peng Dehuai had tried to meet with Mao; as Mao was unavailable, Peng outlined his concerns in a private letter.\textsuperscript{146} Peng was a no-nonsense, straight-talking soldier – certainly not one of the fawning sycophants seeking to ingratiate themselves with Mao. Although Peng and Mao had known each other a long time and were not unaffectionate with each other, they had many disagreements. Mao seemingly took Peng’s letter as a personal affront; on 16 July he submitted ‘Comrade Peng Dehuai’s Statement of Opinions’ as a formal document to the Politburo and called for comment. While it outlined some of the party’s recent achievements, Peng’s letter expressed concern at ‘winds of exaggeration’ brought by ‘petty-bourgeois
fanaticism’ and criticised ‘hasty and excessive’ socialist transformation. Peng did not mention famine but argued there was serious fault in the Great Leap Forward:

Bewitched by the achievements of the Great Leap Forward and the passion of the mass movement, some leftist tendencies emerged ... In the view of some comrades, putting politics in command could be a substitute for everything ... But putting politics in command is no substitute for economic principles, much less for economic measures.147

Peng was clearly refuting Mao’s frequent claim that ‘politics should be in command.’ According to Lee Feigon, ‘Peng had told the emperor he had no clothes. When Mao insisted that he was, metaphorically, well clothed — as others had been telling him on his tours of the countryside — few besides Peng cared to contradict him.’148 Mao was in danger of losing face, particularly in light of Khrushchev’s speech on 14 July that criticised the People’s Communes in China. Mao suspected Peng of colluding with the Soviet leader – a dangerous development given the fate of Gao Gang in 1954.

MAO SILENCES PENG

When the Lushan Plenum formally got under way, Mao opened with a generally positive summation of the situation: ‘The achievements are tremendous, the problems are numerous, the experience is rich, and the future is bright.’149 The delegates then broke into small groups for discussion and debate. Mao gave no indication of his thoughts on Peng’s letter. Central Committee members were misinterpreting his silence now, reading it as approval when in fact Mao was becoming more and more disgruntled.150 Peng remained critical of the GLF and won over a number of comrades to his views. Others were soon offering similar assessments. It seemed the party leadership was on the verge of abandoning the policy. Mao took this as an attack on his leadership, and on 23 July 1959, stepped into the fray. He began with an air of nonchalance as he addressed a full gathering of the Central Committee: ‘You have talked so much. Now allow me to talk for an hour or so, will you? I have taken sleeping-pills three times and still couldn’t sleep.’151 As Peng sat ashen-faced in the back row of the auditorium, Mao launched into a scathing counter-attack and rebuked those whose revolutionary zeal appeared to be wavering. A master of political intrigue, Mao simultaneously blamed and excused himself for the failures of the Great Leap Forward:

Everybody has shortcomings. Even Confucius made mistakes. So did Marx ... I have seen Lenin’s manuscripts, which are filled with changes. He, too, made mistakes ... I devoted myself mainly to revolution. I am absolutely no good at construction, and I don’t understand industrial planning ... I should take primary responsibility for 1958 and 1959. It is I who am to blame.152

While taking ‘primary responsibility,’ Mao also put it back on others. No one had pointed out that his ideas were ill-founded or taken him to task when they didn’t work out: ‘I do not claim to have invented the people’s communes, only to have proposed them.’153 All comrades needed to share some responsibility, and if they had a problem, they best speak up: ‘You must all analyse your responsibility. If you have to shit – shit! If you have to fart – fart! You will feel much better for it.’ The tension amongst delegates was palpable, but Mao was only getting started:

We are under attack from within and outside the Party. The majority of comrades need to strengthen their backbones. Why are they not strong? Just because for a time there were too few vegetables, too few hair-grips, no soap, a lack of balance in the

147 Cited in Immanuel Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 692.
148 Lee Feigon, Mao: A Reinterpretation, 133.
149 Cited in Craig Dietrich, People’s China, 137.
150 Li Zhisui, The Private Life of Chairman Mao, 312.
151 Cited in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, 469.
152 Cited in Immanuel Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, 693.
153 Cited in Margot Morcombe and Mark Fielding, The Spirit of Change, 175.
Over the following days, relations between Mao and Peng deteriorated further. Harrison Salisbury relates one confrontation:

Peng said that if the 5 billion yuan uselessly spent for backyard steel had been put into consumer goods it would have made a pile higher than Mount Lu. Mao interrupted to say: ‘Not so high as Mount Lu.’ ‘OK’ retorted Peng, ‘a little bit lower.’

Peng asked Mao, ‘Do you hear the people outside? They are not crying “Long live Chairman Mao,” but “We’re hungry. We want food.” What did we fight the war for?’ The fiery general bluntly reminded the Chairman that people can’t eat poetry. Both men screamed obscenities at each other. Mao eventually presented the Politburo with a stark choice: if they didn’t want to follow his leadership he would go back to the countryside, raise another Red Army and overthrow the government. In the end, no one took up Mao’s offer to voice further objections or back Peng Dehuai. Speeches and reports that presented the Great Leap Forward in a critical light were discreetly forgotten and all sided with Mao. On 16 August, the Central Committee released a document condemning Peng Dehuai as an ‘anti-Party element’ and reaffirmed the General Line of the Great Leap Forward. Peng was replaced as defence minister by the loyal Maoist Lin Biao. A new Anti-Rightist campaign was carried out to silence and punish any other ‘little Peng Dehuais’ in the party and government.

The Lushan proceedings were of great significance. Mao made it very clear that his authority was paramount. No longer would the Politburo openly challenge his views. According to Salisbury, ‘Mao had turned his band of brothers into a claque, clapping hands and nodding heads like mechanical dolls.’ One Communist official, Wang Bingnan (Wang Ping-nan), later recalled:

After Lushan the whole Party shut up. We were afraid to speak out. It stifled democracy. People didn’t tell Mao their honest opinions. They were afraid. This led straight to the terrible times of the Cultural Revolution.

154 Cited in Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 411.
155 Harrison Salisbury, The New Emperors, 179.
156 Jean Pasqualini, cited in the BBC documentary, Chairman Mao: The Last Emperor (1997).
Famine: The Three Bad Years

Mao Zedong: ‘Even if there’s a collapse that’ll be alright. The worst that will happen is that the whole world will get a big laugh out of it.’

After the 1959 Lushan Plenum, any retreat from the radical economics of the Great Leap Forward would have been a loss of face for Mao and the CCP. Policies that had been marked as failures were now vigorously defended.

The People’s Communes were revived, as were Lysenkoist farming practices. Grain targets were set at 270 million tons, lower than previously proposed but still far above the actual harvest of 170 million. There was even a push to create communes in urban areas. People began to sell personal items before the government could claim them as public property.

The Great Leap Forward thus went on for a further year after Lushan. The result, according to John King Fairbank, was ‘an all-time first-class manmade famine... The GLF had played itself out as a Mao-made catastrophe.’ Conditions in several regions were made more difficult by flood, drought and locust plagues in 1959 and early 1960.

The suffering of rural people was further exacerbated by the whims of Chairman Mao, who insisted on-upholding the General Line of the Great Leap Forward. ‘It was grotesque,’ says Sidney Rittenberg, ‘in that Mao was an adventurer who didn’t hesitate to embark on adventures with hundreds of thousands of people’s lives at stake.’ One of the worst famines in Chinese history would soon claim many more lives than this.

As the situation deteriorated, officials continued to report to the central authorities that everything was fine and tried to prevent news of the famine from leaking. Public security bureaus intercepted mail and entire villages were placed under lockdown. People who tried to escape were arrested and imprisoned for ‘vagrancy.’ No one would admit what was happening – until Mao said so, there was no famine.

Some commune officials did their best to help the people under their care, but others, who tended to be the Maoist fanatics, extracted as much grain for the government as possible. One official said, ‘It is not that there is no food. There is plenty of grain, but 90 per cent of the people have ideological problems.’ Some regional CCP cadres even tortured peasants who refused to toil in the fields or hand over their remaining food. Peasants who tried to revert to tried and tested farming methods were sent away to forced labour camps as ‘right opportunists.’

During the ‘Three Bad Years’ of 1959, 1960 and 1961, up to thirty-million people died of starvation. People showing symptoms of malnutrition, such as oedema (yellow skin and swelling of the limbs), were a common sight in the cities.

A former school teacher recalled the hardships of the time:

159 Delia Davin, Mao Zedong (Glouchestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 73.
161 Jasper Becker disputes the theory that bad weather contributed to the famine.
162 Sidney Rittenberg, interviewed in Chairman Mao: The Last Emperor (BBC, 1997).
163 Yang Jisheng, Tombstone, 21.
165 Jasper Becker, Hungry Ghosts, 115.
166 Jasper Becker, Hungry Ghosts, xi.
DOCUMENT

MS. FAN, FORMER SCHOOLTEACHER, ON THE CHINESE FAMINE

The starvation began in 1958 and 1959, and got worse in 1960. If you check the population statistics you’ll find that the population born in 1960 is much less. At that time, only those families that were really quite rich would give birth to a baby. For us, as citizens in towns, things were better as we got food rations, but even that was nowhere near enough to fill our stomachs.

I was thirteen years old at the time and lived with just my younger brother at home as my parents went to another city to earn money to support our family. So our aunt took care of us from time to time. We lived as neighbours. At the beginning of each month we took home our bag of grain. I could get 6.5 kilograms, which was the ration of an adult. My brother’s ration was smaller as he was still a child. We would grind the grain into powder at weekends so as to get more rice. I had to calculate the right amount for thirty days. It wasn’t really like rice, actually a kind of powder or paste – there was much less rice and more water. And pickle was the only dish for the meal. I would carefully count the grain to cook every day, set the amount, and then at the end of each month we would have some extra leftover grain so that we could finally enjoy a nice rice meal. When the rice was ready, I would fill two bowls and put exactly the same quantity in each bowl. Then I’d put both bowls on the table and let my brother choose one. I’d take the one that was left. Yet he always ate so fast and would sometimes grab my bowl after his! I couldn’t fight him. I would only weep and cry. This kind of situation happened often.

Our aunt didn’t calculate the amount of grain very well during the month; as a result her big family of eight children were always short of food at the end of the month. Then it happened that she began to suspect that I stole the grain from her home. I remember all those sad things. But the worst starvation happened in rural areas. People didn’t get any food.167

SOURCE ANALYSIS

Read Ms. Fan’s account of life during the Chinese famine and complete the tasks below.

1. Outline the effect of the Chinese famine on family relationships, as suggested by the source.
2. Describe the experiences of urban people during the Three Bad Years (1959, 1960 and 1961). In your response, refer to the source provided and your own knowledge.
3. Analyse the extent to which the Three Bad Years were a symptom of Mao’s compromised revolutionary ideals. In your response, refer to the source provided and other views.

EXPERIENCES OF FAMINE

In country areas the famine brought unparallelled social upheaval and suffering. People were forced to consume food substitutes such as sawdust, grass, bark and soil. Serving a sentence of hard labour as a Rightist, Jean Pasqualini, a man of French-Chinese background, recalled the crime of a fellow inmate:

One day a group of people came into our camp. They were all peasants. So I said to one, ‘What are you in for?’ He says, ‘For ruining public property.’ I said, ‘What did you do?’ He said, ‘I ate the bark off trees.’ When I heard that I felt very bad.168

167 Author interview (13 February 2009), translated by Rachel Fan. Note from translator: ‘My aunt’s eight children now have very good relations with my family. Her younger brother – my father – is now very close to her. They are all very close families; those things just happened in those hard times.’

168 Jean Pasqualini, cited in the BBC documentary, Chairman Mao: The Last Emperor.
Cannibalism was widespread. People cut flesh from dead bodies and neighbours ate each others’ children so that they did not have to eat their own. Becker describes at some length the ‘famine culture’ which justified desperate practices such as ‘swap child, make food.’\textsuperscript{169} Husbands sold their wives and daughters into prostitution. Thousands of children were abandoned or orphaned. Some children were left in holes by the side of the road, deep enough so they could not climb out and follow after their families, but in view of passers-by, who, it was hoped, might adopt them.

It is difficult to confirm the number of casualties resulting from the famine of the Three Bad Years; the government did not recognise the famine and kept poor records. The devastation was not acknowledged until after Mao’s death. Some sources indicate a death toll as high as eighty-million.\textsuperscript{170} Estimates of twenty- to thirty-million are more commonly accepted. According to Frank Dikotter, ‘at least 45 million people died unnecessarily between 1958 and 1962,’ and it may well have been even worse than that.\textsuperscript{171} The leading Western expert on the famine, Jasper Becker, concludes that while up to forty-million may have died, thirty-million is the most ‘reliable figure.’ He adds, ‘From a moral perspective,’ debate over death statistics ‘is meaningless ... In terms of sheer numbers, no other event comes close to this.’\textsuperscript{172} China’s famine was extraordinarily widespread and caused to a large extent by government policy. To show sympathy with those suffering, Mao adopted a vegetarian diet: ‘Everyone is starving. I can’t eat meat.’\textsuperscript{173} More often, though, Mao seemed breathtakingly callous. Towards the end of 1959, he reportedly said, ‘Even if there’s a collapse that’ll be alright. The worst that will happen is that the whole world will get a big laugh out of it.’\textsuperscript{174} On another occasion he mused, ‘Working like this, with all these projects, half of China may well have to die. If not half, one-third, or one-tenth – 50 million – die.’\textsuperscript{175}

\begin{center}
\begin{figure}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{famine_victim.jpg}
\caption{A victim of famine in China.}
\end{figure}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{170} ‘Death Toll under Mao High as 80m,’ \textit{The Australian}, 19 July 1994, 8.
\textsuperscript{171} Frank Dikotter, \textit{Mao’s Great Famine}, x, 333
\textsuperscript{172} Jasper Becker, \textit{Hungry Ghosts}, 273.
\textsuperscript{173} Li Zhisui, \textit{The Private Life of Chairman Mao}, 340
\textsuperscript{174} Cited in Jasper Becker, \textit{Hungry Ghosts}, 235.
\textsuperscript{175} Cited in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, \textit{Mao: The Unknown Story}, 458.
WAS MAO A MONSTER?
HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Mao’s suggestion that the collapse of the Chinese economy would be a cause for amusement, and his flippant remarks regarding the death of fifty-million people, are anecdotes taken from Chang and Halliday’s book Mao: The Unknown Story. Chang and Halliday offer these quotes to suggest that Mao knew millions would perish because of his policies and that he deliberately allowed the tragedy to unfold.

While not denying the terrible disaster that came from the Great Leap Forward and Mao’s responsibility for much of it, a number of historians have been critical of Chang and Halliday’s scholarship on this matter.176 They argue that, at times, Mao employed crude phrasing for rhetorical effect, humour (sometimes in bad taste), poetic symbolism or irony, and that he could be intentionally vague, contradictory and misleading. In other words, he didn’t always intend to be taken literally.177 Taking Mao’s comments out of context can therefore overly simplify or change their meaning.

When read in full, Mao’s speech at a Politburo meeting at Wuchang on 21 November 1958 might suggest a different interpretation:

Do not pursue vanity, and get a disaster. We should reduce the amount of our task. On the waterworks, the whole nation accomplished 50 billion cubic metres of earth last winter and this spring, but for this winter and next spring, the plan is 190 billion, three times more. There are various other tasks, steel, iron, copper, aluminium, coal, transport, machinery, chemicals; how much labour and financial resources are needed? Working like this, I am afraid that half of China may well have to die. If not half, one-third, or one-tenth – 50 million deaths. 50 million deaths, if you are not fired, at least I will be. Should we do so much? It is OK if you really want to, but the principle is no death. If you insist, I cannot stop you, but I should not be killed when people die. Next year’s plan is to produce 30 million tons of steel, should we plan so much? Can we do it? How many people must work for it? Will people die? We should lower our tone in this meeting, cool the air down. The string of the huchi [a Chinese instrument] should not be pulled too tightly. There is a risk of breaking down.178

Mobu Gao argues that rather than dismissing the death of millions, Mao’s intention was ‘to warn his audience of the dangers of overwork and overenthusiasm in the Great Leap Forward.’179 In a similar vein, Sidney Rittenberg believes that Mao was exaggerating the potential number of deaths for effect, ‘to try to bring unruly comrades into line.’180

179 Gao, The Battle for China’s Past, 75.
180 Sidney Rittenberg and Amanda Bennett, The Man Who Stayed Behind, 247.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

After reading the historical interpretations above, discuss and note down answers to the following questions.

1. Do you think Mao genuinely believed that up to fifty-million Chinese people would die in the achievement of the Great Leap Forward? Explain, with reference to his speech at Wuchang (see above).

2. Chang and Halliday imply that Mao’s policy failures were tantamount to mass murder. To what extent do you agree with this assessment?

3. What did Mao’s personal style and language suggest about his approach to leadership?
Mao privately voiced concern at the way his policies were implemented. During the Great Leap Forward, he could not understand why things were not working out. Rather than blaming himself, he expressed displeasure with a number of subordinates and fellow leaders. The following views reflect on Mao’s policies and how they were carried out.

Maurice Meisner, American historian

[Since the Great Leap was ‘utopian’ in nature from the beginning, it is generally assumed that failure in the end was inevitable. But a fair historical evaluation of the Great Leap in general and communization in particular does demand that one take into consideration the vast inconsistencies between what was intended and what was done, the striking differences between what originally were basic rational (and perhaps possible) Maoist policies of socio-economic change and the largely irrational fashion in which Maoists attempted to implement these policies.181]

Li Zhisui, Mao’s doctor

Mao was a great philosopher, a great soldier, and a great politician, but he was a terrible economist. He had a penchant for grandiose schemes. He lost touch with the people, forgot the work style that he himself promoted – seeking truth from facts, humility, attention to details. This was the source of the country’s economic problems ... Mao was a complex and often contradictory man. As the emperor, he believed in his own infallibility. If wrong decisions were made, wrong policies introduced, the fault lay not with him but with the information provided to him. The emperor could not be wrong, but he could be deceived.182

Sidney Rittenberg, American communist and CCP volunteer

I think there was a drastic change, really a drastic change [in Mao after he came to power]. I want to say fatal change really because my main impressions of Mao – before coming to power – was that he was one of the best listeners I had ever spoken with. He focused his whole being on you. What you were saying was the most important thing to him. He now became imperious. He tended to penalize people who stood up against him on issues. He became someone who liked to hold forth and wasn’t a particularly good listener.183

Rebecca Karl, American historian

Mao dared to propose and activate a revolutionary project calling every convention into question so as to remake the world. Recalling Mao’s challenge is to recall a time when many things seemed possible; it is to remember possibility against pressure to concede to the world as it now appears.184

181 Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 250–1.
182 Li Zhisui, The Private Life of Chairman Mao, 307, 296.
183 Sidney Rittenberg, interviewed in As It Happened: Mao – A Life (SBS, 2006).

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Read the historical interpretations above and complete the following tasks.

1. Discuss the extent to which the Great Leap Forward was a failure of policy, and the extent to which it was a failure of implementation. Then draw a continuum and place the GLF in the appropriate place between ‘policy failure’ and ‘implementation failure.’

2. Draw up a table listing Mao’s positive and negative personality traits.

3. Discuss the extent to which we should judge historical figures such as Mao on their intentions. How much do these count in the final analysis?
THE SINO-SOVET SPLIT

**Mao Zedong:** 'The Soviet Union may attack Stalin, but we will not. Not only that, we will continue to support him.'

An important influence on the rhetoric and direction of Chinese (Sino) politics in the late 1950s and into the 1960s was an increasingly strained relationship between China and the Soviet Union. On 25 February 1956, the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, gave his so-called ‘Secret Speech’ to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. To the surprise of the Chinese Communists, and many others, Khrushchev denounced Josef Stalin as a brutal dictator. The Secret Speech, formally titled, ‘On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences,’ was ‘a bone chilling litany of Stalin’s transgressions, which included self-glorification, paranoia, despotism, mass arrests, torture, extracted confessions, punishments without trial, deprivations, mass murder of military officers, and inaction against the Nazi invasion.’

Deng Xiaoping and Zhu De, who led the Chinese delegation at the Twentieth Congress, returned to China a week later with a copy of Khrushchev’s speech, which was hastily translated. While Stalin had caused the CCP many difficulties in the past, Mao had continued publicly to support him. Even Stalin’s refusal to meet all of Mao’s diplomatic requests during his first visit to Moscow in 1949, not to mention his negligible backing in the Korean War, did not sour diplomacy between the two countries. According to Mao, Comrade Stalin had been ‘a friend to all people everywhere and a friend to the Chinese people.’ In private, however, Mao revealed deep personal antagonism towards Stalin. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Mao welcomed Khrushchev’s leadership and Sino–Soviet relations grew closer. Particularly pleasing was Khrushchev’s renunciation of the USSR’s ‘special rights’ in China, such as control of the Central Manchurian Railway and Port Arthur on the Liaodong peninsula. Nonetheless, Mao never showed Khrushchev the same respect he showed Stalin. Mao now saw himself as the world’s top communist statesman; the new Soviet leader did not.

**CCP COMMENTS ON STALIN**

Khrushchev’s Secret Speech greatly bothered Mao and the Chinese leadership. The Chinese comrades were not consulted and had no warning of the sudden change in Soviet opinion. They were left to make a hasty re-evaluation of a man who for many years was much admired in China. Mao felt that Khrushchev was publicly airing dirty laundry and had betrayed a great revolutionary leader. The condemnation of Stalin also reflected badly on Mao’s own cult of personality. In April 1956, the Chinese Communists offered their own assessment of Stalin, which was decidedly different from Khrushchev’s:

Some people consider that Stalin was wrong in everything. This is a grave misconception. Stalin was a great Marxist-Leninist, yet at the same time a Marxist-Leninist who committed several gross errors without realizing they were errors. We should view Stalin from a historical standpoint, make a proper all-round analysis to see where he was right and where he was wrong, and draw useful lessons therefrom.

In his ‘proper all-round analysis,’ Mao came to the conclusion that Stalin’s achievements outweighed his mistakes seven to three. He could be viewed critically but should not be condemned outright. The Chinese Communists were clearly showing a determination to break with the Khrushchev Soviet line.

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185 Craig Dietrich, *People’s China*, 97.
187 Mao Zedong, cited in *Chairman Mao: The Last Emperor*.
191 Alan Lawrence, *China Under Communism*, 38.
THE NUCLEAR THREAT

Other changes in Soviet policy, initiated by Khrushchev, were not to Mao’s liking. Seeking to ease relations with the West, Khrushchev declared that peaceful coexistence between communist and capitalist nations was both possible and desirable. In the age of nuclear weapons, conflict between the major powers was far too great a risk to humankind; even localised disputes should be discouraged in case they led to greater wars. This too was unwelcome in China, where anti-imperialist rhetoric was paramount and the United States was painted as chief villain. Mao also maintained that localised wars of national liberation were of great value to peoples of the developing world.  

During the Great Leap Forward, anti-Americanism had intensified; Mao had declared that advances in both China and the Soviet Union would demonstrate that ‘the east wind prevails over the west wind.’ In the New Technology and National Defence Pact of October 1957, Khrushchev offered Mao a token of socialist solidarity – assistance in developing nuclear technology. Mao readily agreed. Yet, much to the consternation of Soviet leaders, the Chairman expressed an alarming indifference toward the possibility of nuclear war. During a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Nehru in 1954, Mao claimed, ‘The atom bomb is nothing to be afraid of. China has many people. They cannot be bombed out of existence. If someone else can drop an atomic bomb, I can too. The death of ten or twenty million people is nothing to be afraid of.’ During his 1957 visit to the Soviet Union, Mao speculated that if a nuclear war killed a third of the world’s population, the Chinese would emerge at an advantage. On many occasions, Mao stated that the atom bomb was nothing more than a ‘paper tiger which the US reactionaries use to scare people.’ Mao’s pronouncements on nuclear war – even taking into account his rhetorical bluster – worried the Russians, especially given that they had pledged to help the Chinese develop their own bomb. Could Mao be trusted with such a powerful weapon?

KHRUSHCHEV VISITS CHINA

Khrushchev visited Beijing in July 1958. He had hoped to gain backing for joint Soviet–Chinese long-wave radio stations on the Chinese coast. Mao was far from impressed. He snapped, ‘We don’t want you here. We’ve had the British and other foreigners on our territory for years now, and we’re not ever going to let anyone use our land for their purposes again.’ The Soviet leader had difficulty making sense of Mao: ‘I was never exactly sure that I understood what he meant.’ Khrushchev also failed to win Mao over to his views on Soviet–US détente. Mao told his doctor,

Khrushchev ... wants to improve relations with the United States? Good, we’ll congratulate him with our guns. Our cannon shells have been in storage for so long they’re becoming useless. So why don’t we just use them for a celebration? Let’s get the United States involved, too. Maybe we can get the United States to drop an atom bomb on Fuzhou. Maybe ten or twenty people will be killed ... Let’s see what Khrushchev says then.

TENSIONS IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT

On 24 August 1958, the Chinese Communists tested the support of their Soviet allies by launching heavy artillery bombardments against the Nationalist-occupied
islands of Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu (Mazu) in the Taiwan Strait. Mao and his comrades were deliberately stirring up trouble with Taiwan in order to provoke the United States and, in turn, make difficulties for the Soviet Union in its talks with the US. In response to the Chinese bombardment, the US made a substantial show of force in the Taiwan Strait; not until mid-September were tensions in the region calmed. Moscow offered only lukewarm support to Beijing during the crisis; Khrushchev did not want to be drawn into a conflict with the United States.197

The Soviet leader was also annoyed by Mao’s claim that the People’s Communes of the Great Leap Forward would allow China to achieve communism before the Soviet Union. Khrushchev is said to have exasperatedly told a delegation of Chinese Communists, ‘It’s impossible to leap into communism.’198 Khrushchev was by now convinced that Mao was a wrong-headed romantic deviationist, intent on wasting Soviet aid on foolhardy schemes.199

THE SOVIETS WITHDRAW SUPPORT

Relations between China and the Soviet Union turned from sour to bitter after mid-1959. A border clash between China and India a week after the 1959 Lushan Plenum elicited a declaration of neutrality in the dispute from the Soviet government — much to the fury of the Chinese. On 20 June, a week after Peng Dehuai returned from Russia, Moscow informed Beijing that the Soviet Union was backing out of its promise to provide China with nuclear weapons. In late September, Khrushchev made a visit to Beijing on his way home from a trip to the United States (the first US visit by a Soviet leader).Flushed with optimism from his talks with President Eisenhower, Khrushchev was keen to mend differences with China. Khrushchev felt the People’s Republic needed to recognise that ‘we ... must do all we can to exclude war as a means of settling disputed questions.’200 The Chinese would have none of it. Khrushchev received neither an honour guard at the airport nor a welcoming speech.201 A number of Chinese officials, such as Marshall Chen Yi, were openly rude to their guest. The visit was cut from seven days to three, such was the hostility between the supposed comrades.

By early 1960, both sides were trading insults and accusations. Mao charged the Soviet leadership with ‘emasculating, betraying and revising’ revolutionary Marxism, while Khrushchev called Mao ‘an ultra-leftist, an ultra-dogmatist, and a left deviationist.’202 In July 1960, Russian technical personnel were abruptly recalled from China and instructed to take with them all their blueprints. The loss of 1400 Soviet scientists and engineers was a shock to the Chinese and greatly compounded the economic difficulties of the Great Leap Forward.203 Many factories, bridges and other infrastructure projects were left half-finished. Mao complained, ‘The Russians have landed us in the shit.’204

Despite the withdrawal of Soviet assistance, the People’s Republic managed to develop nuclear technology. On 16 October 1964, China detonated its first atomic bomb at Lop Nor in the Gobi Desert. The successful test was celebrated throughout China. Mao marked the occasion by composing a short poem: ‘Atom bomb goes off when it is told. Ah, what boundless joy!’ The detonation was auspiciously timed, occurring two days after Khrushchev’s demise as Soviet leader. The Chinese code-name for the bomb was ‘596,’ a reference to June 1959, when Khrushchev withdrew support for the Chinese nuclear program.

On his 1958 visit to China, Khrushchev was received by Mao in his swimming pool. While Mao cheerfully invited the Soviet leader to have a swim, it was a thinly-veiled diplomatic insult. Khrushchev, who could not swim, joined Mao in the pool; he bobbed around in a pair of floaties while interpreters did their best to help from the sidelines. Li Zhisui said, ‘The Chairman was deliberately playing the role of emperor, treating Khrushchev like the barbarian come to pay tribute.’

198 Ross Terrill, China in Our Time: The Epic Saga of the People’s Republic: From the Communist Victory to Tiananmen Square and Beyond (Simon & Schuster, 1992), 34.
200 Cited in Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China, 557.
201 William Taubman, Khrushchev, 393.
203 Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China, 250.
204 Cited in Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography, 303.
A number of international communist gatherings in the early 1960s failed to bridge the widening gap between China and the Soviet Union. Throughout 1962–63, Chinese denunciations of the ‘revisionist’205 Soviet government grew ever more shrill. India provided the catalyst for further tensions. Unbeknownst to the Indian government, in the mid-1950s a Chinese road had been built to link Xinjiang with Tibet; the road went through land claimed by India. Fighting between border troops broke out in 1959. In October 1962, Chinese troops occupied the disputed territory and pushed back Indian forces. Having staked their claim, the PLA withdrew from the conflict. Describing the dispute as ‘stupid’ and ‘sad,’ Khrushchev nonetheless showed where his loyalties lay by refusing to endorse China’s territorial claims and providing arms and economic contracts to India.206

THE END OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

In his July 1964 article, ‘On Khrushchev’s Phoney Communism and Its Historical Lessons for the World,’ Mao wrote that there was a ‘struggle between Marxist-Leninists the world over and the revisionist Khrushchev clique [in-group].’207 The same year, Mao said, ‘The Soviet Union today is a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie ... a fascist German dictatorship.’208 Regardless of the country’s socialist economy, privilege amongst Communist Party officials had created real class inequality in the Soviet Union; according to Mao, it was on the ‘capitalist road.’ The fear that China was following a similar path would play a leading role in the Cultural Revolution of the mid-to-late-1960s. Mao had often assessed the Chinese Revolution and CCP policies in the context of global developments; central to this in the 1960s was the hostility between Moscow and Beijing.209

On 14 July 1964, China ended its formal diplomatic relations with the USSR. The emergence of a new Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev in October 1964 failed to improve relations. According to the Chinese, the USSR now had ‘Khrushchevism without Khrushchev.’210 Increasing numbers of troops were deployed along the Russian–Chinese border, leading to periodic clashes. The breakdown of Sino–Soviet relations also had broader diplomatic consequences, as China now had to face two antagonistic superpowers instead of one. Oddly enough, the only country in the European socialist bloc with which China remained on good terms was Albania.211 Thus, the biggest communist nation and the smallest thus developed a close partnership.

205 ‘Revisionists’ were said to betray the ‘Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist’ model of communism.
206 Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China, 557.
208 Cited in Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography, 304.
210 Jonathan Fenby, Modern China, 425.
211 Albania had broken off relations with the USSR in 1961.

CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT

Write an essay of 600–800 words on one of the topics below. Your essay should include an introduction, paragraphs supported by evidence from primary sources and historical interpretations, a conclusion and a bibliography. Topics:

- Why did the relationship between China and the Soviet Union deteriorate after 1956? Why was the end of diplomatic relations in 1964 so significant?
- ‘Mao and Khrushchev represented two vastly different approaches to socialism.’ What were the differences, and how were they played out in the 1950s and 1960s?
In 1949, Chairman Mao acknowledged that ‘to win country-wide victory is only the first step in a long march of ten thousand li [miles].’ The journey to a new society was indeed arduous for the Communists; it was lined with both triumph and catastrophe. By the mid-1950s, the new regime, having consolidated its power, was providing economic and political stability and a range of social programs. But despite making improvements in several areas, the CCP government showed itself to be hostile to criticism and dissent – those seen as socially and politically unreliable were repressed or executed, particularly once China joined the Korean War. There were vigorous debates amongst China’s new leaders about the best way to expand the economy and create a socialist society. One such question was the proper pace for collectivisation in rural areas. Mao Zedong, a strategic and political genius, came to play a major role in such policies. But while he might have been a brilliant revolutionary, Mao was erratic and volatile as a statesman.

With a keen eye on developments abroad, Mao launched the Hundred Flowers campaign, which aimed to provide a vent for popular discontent and garner support for the government. Mao was shocked by the extent to which people voiced their dissatisfaction; he quickly turned on those who criticised the party. Similar intolerance was shown to Marshall Peng Dehuai when he voiced doubts about the Great Leap Forward. A radical attempt to overcome China’s economic backwardness through experimentation, revolutionary zeal and collective effort, the Great Leap Forward ultimately proved a failure. The results were poor production output and a devastating famine. The CCP acted ‘daringly’ but it was not ‘alright.’ The people the Chairman described as ‘poor and blank’ suffered terribly from the ‘beautiful characters’ of Maoist innovation.

China’s relations with the Soviet Union became increasingly strained in the late 1950s and early 1960s, culminating in an end to formal diplomatic relations. The Great Leap was finally brought to an end by Liu Shaoqi in late 1960 and a program of recovery was introduced. This, however, would set China on a road which Mao did not find agreeable.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CONSTRUCTING AN ARGUMENT

Write an essay of 600–800 words on one of the topics below. Your essay should include an introduction, paragraphs supported by evidence from primary sources and historical interpretations, a conclusion and a bibliography. Topics:

• ‘For the CCP, a revolutionary new society proved more difficult to manage than a revolutionary movement.’ Discuss.
• ‘In the early years of the PRC, ideology and experimentation brought more hardships than improvements.’ To what extent do you agree?
• ‘The Great Leap Forward showed that Mao was too poetic and impractical to run a government.’ Is this a reasonable assessment?
• ‘When faced with criticism, the Chinese Communists responded with repression.’ Discuss.

Alternatively, create your own historical question on the consequences of the CCP coming to power and how this brought change to Chinese society in the 1950s and early 1960s.

SOCIAL-CULTURAL CHANGE

The Chinese Communists attempted to change social and cultural life through a range of mass campaigns. Create a comparative table like the one below and fill it in.

### PRC MASS CAMPAIGNS, 1949–61

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>LAND REFORM (FANSHEN)</th>
<th>SPEAK BITTERNESS (FANSHEN)</th>
<th>THREE ANTIS (SANFAN)</th>
<th>FIVE ANTIS (WUFAN)</th>
<th>THOUGHT REFORM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Groups affected</strong></td>
<td>A range of social groups, mostly the urban population.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectuals, e.g. teachers, academics, writers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus of campaign</strong></td>
<td>Corrugation, waste, bureaucracy.</td>
<td>Tax evasion, fraud, bribery, cheating on government contracts, theft of government property.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consequences</strong></td>
<td>Millions of landlords executed. Poor/middle-income peasants received re-distributed land.</td>
<td>Those targeted were subject to denunciations at mass meetings, fines, imprisonment.</td>
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</table>
BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES
Select a photograph or propaganda poster depicting China before, during or after the Great Leap Forward. Annotate the image with speech or thought bubbles to show a conversation between the people pictured, expressing their beliefs and attitudes about the Great Leap Forward. Display your graphic in the classroom and compare it with those of other students.

DIVERSE EXPERIENCES
Write a paragraph on the following topic: How did two or more different social groups experience everyday life in the People’s Republic of China during the 1950s and early 1960s?

KEY PEOPLE
Discuss the contribution of the following key people to Chinese society between 1949 and 1961:
- Mao Zedong
- Liu Shaoqi
- Deng Xiaoping
- Peng Dehuai
- Lin Biao.

ECONOMIC CHANGE
Using a format similar to the Chapter Overviews in this book, create a diagram showing how the Chinese economy changed between 1949 and 1961. In your diagram:
- Choose four or more economic reforms/events in the new PRC
- For each reform/event, list 2–3 details, e.g. why the reform was made, who was directly affected, and how it affected the Chinese economy overall.

Compare your diagram with those of other students. Then, as a class, discuss the consequences of the CCP’s economic policy on Chinese society, and the extent to which the policies could be considered a compromise of revolutionary ideals.
FURTHER READING


An in-depth analysis of the policies and consequences of the Great Leap Forward. Becker discusses the problematic nature of the events, people and policies that shaped the PRC.


An exceptionally useful and interesting compilation of fourteen academic reviews of Chang and Halliday’s biography of Mao. The contributors, China specialists of international standing, give complexity and balance to Chang and Halliday’s portrayal of the Chairman.


Chang and Halliday’s biography of the ‘unknown’ Mao has been the source of considerable debate. Although the book has been much lauded in the popular press, academics have questioned many aspects of this highly critical account of Mao Zedong, particularly its problematic referencing. A good read, but not a well-rounded assessment of Mao.


A well structured and accessible account of the events, people and policies that shaped the PRC.


A detailed study of the causes and consequences of the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward.


A scathing account of the policies and practices of the early years of rule by the Chinese Communist Party.


An insightful and detailed analysis of the Great Chinese Famine. Useful for both its personal anecdotes and statistical analyses.


A concise academic study of the Communist era. Accessible for most students.


Arguably the best biography of Mao to date. A detailed, insightful and compelling account. Short paints a complex human picture of a man and his times.