



# Communist China

## The Great Leap Forward

### Transcript

Narrator: In January 1958, Mao boldly announced China's second 5-year plan: the Great Leap Forward.

An ambitious plan intended to transform China from an agrarian society into a modern, industrialized, communist nation. How did Mao intend to achieve this monumental leap? Through collectivization and industrialization. Mao promised the Chinese people a communist utopia, and they believed him. He had defeated the nationalists, the imperialists, the Japanese in World War II, and liberated China. But the Great Leap Forward resulted in a humanitarian and economic disaster. Between 30 and 50 million people died in the Great Chinese Famine.

How did the collective dream turn into a state-sanctioned nightmare? What went so wrong?

In the years leading up to the Great Leap Forward, Mao had grown impatient with the slow pace of change. He wanted to speed up the transition by industrializing and collectivizing at the same time. Moderates within the Chinese Communist Party, including Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi, disagreed. They wanted a gradual transition to avoid widespread social upheaval: industrialize first, provide farm machinery to the peasantry, and then embark on collectivization. But Mao was determined. Factory workers needed to be well fed to increase output. Peasants and farmers needed modern tools to increase yield. And because he effectively controlled the Communist Party at the time, Mao's radical vision won out.

In 1949, farmland had gradually been redistributed from wealthy landlords to the poorer peasantry. Collectivization took this one step further. All private property was abolished and every aspect of people's lives came under state control: food distribution, housing, and work routines. The idea was that by working together, output would be dramatically increased.

Historian: Four thousand, one hundred people live on this commune: 970 families, 1,600 workers. A comparatively small commune in Communist China in the year of the Leap Forward.





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**Narrator:** Each commune would not only be self-sufficient, but produce sufficient surplus grain to feed urban workers, as well as sell internationally to strengthen China's economy. Everyone would contribute.

**Historian:** These women were threshing millet. Children are excused from school and brought here in a group during the harvest season. Education and labor go together in Communist China. Everyone, young and old, works during the fall harvest.

**Narrator:** Rural families were registered to their commune and unable to relocate without official permission. Food allocated by the state went to their commune, so if they left, they had no food. When famine hit in 1959, the situation for tens of millions of peasant farmers become desperate.

The collectivization of workers occurred in the cities around factories and heavy industry. Equality for women was a key principle of the Communist revolution.

**Historian:** These women winding copper wire belong to a neighborhood co-op of 380 families. In communist China, they are considered to be emancipated from housework to support socialist construction. The commune had its own nursery. Mothers took turns looking after children. Women get 45 minutes a day away from work to nurse their babies.

**Narrator:** Food allocated by the state was eaten together in communal dining halls. Officially, everything was going to plan on these idyllic communes.

**Historian:** En route to the Suqian. On this people's commune there are over 60,000 who cultivate about 30,000 acres of cotton, rice, and wheat. They claim production almost doubled in this two-crop region after the organization of the commune. Commune farms challenge each other and everyone is organized for production.

**Narrator:** But the reality was frighteningly different. Commune leaders set incredibly high production quotas, falsified production figures to please party superiors who, in response to these numbers, took an increasingly larger percentage of the yields that were in decline. Certain practices were based on poor policies, like the forced removal of fruit and vegetable crops to grow grain, even where the soil wasn't suitable.





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Mao's propaganda line was that these foods were "bourgeois" and not worthy of production.

But what really drove the government's insistence on growing grain was that it was a more practical commodity to trade internationally. Within two years, communes across China suffered from severe food shortages. Commune leaders worked the starving peasants mercilessly. They were often treated like slaves, abused, humiliated, and beaten.

Even though Communist Party officials, engineers, and experts could see the madness of Mao's vision and the tragedy unfolding, few dared speak out. After the violent antirightist campaign in response to the Hundred Flowers free-speech movement, they knew the cost of questioning Mao.

Another part of the plan involved rapidly increasing agriculture output through crop experimentation.

Historian: Recent communist agricultural policy on the communes calls for close planting, deep plowing, plentiful use of fertilizer, and irrigation. They have bamboo poles to keep the rice from trampling. Lights have been installed to keep it growing 24 hours a day. This is the rice they claim is yielding 11,000 bushels an acre.

Narrator: In the West, most of these techniques had proven to be ineffective, if not detrimental to yield. The peasants, having tilled the soil for generations, privately dismissed the practices as useless and ridiculous. However, they also knew that anyone who publicly criticized them would be denounced as a counter-revolutionary or capitalist, and rehabilitated through publicly-humiliating struggle sessions.

Most communes never received modern farm machinery. Not that it really mattered.

Historian: The farms here did not look as though they were ready for mechanization. It was difficult to believe that the small plots would lend themselves to the use of machinery. Here, hand labor would probably always remain at a premium.

Narrator: Agricultural production was carried out using China's greatest resource: human labor. This was also true of large-scale infrastructure projects.





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**Broadcaster:** Every day in China, 100 million people do battle with nature on the water conservancy front. Here they build a new reservoir near Nanking.

**Narrator:** Mao believed anything could be achieved through mass mobilization.

The rapid industrialization of China was epitomized by the astounding steel production targets set by Mao. He wanted to double the steel production from 5.9 million tons in 1957 to 11.8 in 1958, the first year of The Great Leap Forward.

**Historian:** Steel making went on inside the plant while construction continued outside. Their goal was three and a half million tonnes of steel a year by 1961. To catch up with Britain, heavy machinery at the plant was furnished by the Soviet Union. To this production is added the output of many small furnaces, like this one. This plant made 30,000 tonnes of steel a year. And everywhere in China, near industrial plants and on communes, small furnaces have added their output to the big mills.

**Narrator:** Mao instructed the people to smelt all their scrap iron. From cooking pots and woks to farm tools. Steel fever swept the country. The steel production drive, combined with national infrastructure projects, saw millions of peasants removed from farms and relocated to new places of work. Those who stayed on farms were encouraged to make steel rather than work their farms, which meant many crops were left to rot in the fields with no one to look after them.

As backyard furnaces sprang up across China, the landscape was transformed. Towns and villages glowed like entrances to a fiery hell as smoke billowed out. The furnaces, which required a constant supply of wood, resulted in forests being stripped bare. The widespread environmental degradation was catastrophic, and all for nothing.

The steel produced was of such poor quality it was useless, and later, secretly dumped. Despite this, Mao wanted the policy to continue. The people banding together for a common cause made great propaganda. But in a sign of his now-weakening position within the government, the policy was abandoned.





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Less than two years into the Great Leap Forward, it was clear an economic and humanitarian disaster was unfolding. An estimated 30 to 50 million people died of starvation in the Great Chinese Famine. Hundreds of thousands were also executed or beaten to death on the communes after being denounced as rightists, or counter-revolutionaries. It could be for the petty crime of stealing food for their starving family, or simply questioning local officials. Urban populations fared much better than rural populations, but starvation did hit cities too.

While the economy initially grew, by 1961 it had crashed and did not reach 1958 levels again until 1964. The Communist Party admitted the policies of the Great Leap Forward had contributed to the famine. In 1962, Liu Shaoqi stated, "The economic disaster was 30% fault of nature, 70% human error." Mao, who had hoped that by initiating the Great Leap Forward, he would also regain authoritative control of the party, ended up losing his power. He stepped down as chairman of the PRC, but didn't relinquish his position as chairman of the CCP.

Mao retreated into the shadows, leaving Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to determine policy and run the country. But the chairman would make his comeback with devastating violence and fury when he launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

