

**Activity**

**Thinking point**

In what ways did the failure of the Great Leap Forward reveal serious weaknesses in the communist regime?

**Exploring the detail**

**Mao's misconceptions**

The Great Leap Forward was based on poor science. The concept of planting crops close together, championed by Mao, exhausted the soil and actually reduced yields in later years. Deep ploughing contributed to soil erosion, as did cutting down forests to provide fuel for the backyard furnaces.

loans to the PRC to help finance economic growth. However, as the Great Leap Forward was already failing before the Soviet Union withdrew its help, this was not a major cause of the failure. On the other hand, previous dependence on the Soviet Union for technical expertise and heavy machinery still had to be paid for, even though food was in desperately short supply in China, millions of tonnes of grain continued to be exported to the USSR to repay earlier loans.

Mao had over-estimated the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Chinese people. Many peasants were reluctant to pool their resources and slaughtered their animals rather than hand them over to the communes. There were instances of peasants hoarding grain for their own consumption. In previous land reforms, the CPC had been careful to win the active cooperation of the peasants and to proceed cautiously



Fig. 9 Liu Shaoqi and Mao Zedong together in April 1959

when it was clear that the peasants were reluctant to give up their private plots. During the Great Leap Forward, however, political pressure and compulsion drove the process of forming communes. Far from this being the result of a spontaneous movement by the peasants themselves, enthusiastic local CPC cadres, taking their lead from Mao, forced the pace of change. When it became clear that many communes had been set up without adequate preparation and were not working effectively, Mao blamed over-zealous local cadres for the failure and tried to restrain some of

the more enthusiastic local leaders. This failure of the political system, however, was Mao's own responsibility. Regional and local officials took their lead from him. The anti-rightist campaign had ensured that no Party cadre would dare question the direction of Party policy or the official claims of success. The Great Leap Forward was launched and driven forward at Mao's insistence: its failure was primarily due to him.

**Summary questions**

- 1 Explain why Mao decided to launch the Great Leap Forward.
- 2 'In launching the Great Leap Forward, Mao was pursuing political objectives.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
- 3 How successful was the Great Leap Forward?
- 4 Explain why the Great Leap Forward failed to achieve its objectives.

**The aftermath of the Great Leap Forward**



Fig. 1 Mao Zedong on the Lushan mountain in 1961. When this photograph was taken, the famine which resulted in the loss of millions of lives was at its height

*In this chapter you will learn about:*

- the results of the Great Leap Forward for the Chinese people
- how far the failure of the Great Leap Forward weakened Mao's position
- how this failure caused divisions within the Communist Party over the future direction of economic planning
- the growing power struggle within the Communist Party.

The setting up of rural people's communes throughout the countryside in 1958 radically changed the situation. For the first time in China's history, large-scale collectivisation created the political, social and economic conditions which could support a rural system of social security and welfare services.

Then came three bad years during which, chiefly because of exceptionally widespread drought and floods, poor harvests were reaped throughout the country. During these three years the people were short of food, but none starved. When the lean years passed, the whole nation realised the truth of what Chairman Mao had been saying for years – that agriculture was and must be the foundation of the national economy.

1

From J. Horn, *Away With All Pests*, 1969

**The results of the Great Leap Forward**

Joseph Horn, the author of Source 1, was a British doctor who had gone to live and work in China in the 1950s and was therefore able to witness the Great Leap Forward at first hand. As Source 1 shows, he was a supporter of the regime. Jung Chang, the daughter of a communist official, also witnessed the effects of the Great Leap Forward at close quarters.

**Activity**

**Source analysis**

Study Sources 1 and 2. Explain why two people, both of whom lived in China at the time of the Great Leap Forward, could give such contrasting accounts of its effects.

Starvation was much worse in the countryside because there were no guaranteed rations. Government policy was to provide food for the cities first, and commune officials were having to seize grain from the peasants by force. In many areas, peasants who tried to hide food were arrested, or beaten and tortured. Commune officials who were reluctant to take food from the hungry peasants were themselves dismissed, and some were physically maltreated. As a result, the peasants who had actually grown the food died in their millions all over China.

2

From Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, 1992



Fig. 2 Requisitioning food from the peasants made the famine worse and caused millions of deaths

Joseph Horn's account reflects the official 1960s Chinese version of the effects of the Great Leap Forward on the Chinese people. It was not until 1980 that Hu Yaobang, the General Secretary of the CPC, officially acknowledged that there had indeed been a famine in the years 1959–62 and that 20 million people had died as a result. Since then, a number of studies by Western and Chinese historians have produced wide variations in the estimates of how many people died.

The result was famine on a gigantic scale, a famine that claimed 20 million lives or more between 1959 and 1962. Many others died shortly thereafter from the effects of the Great Leap – especially children, weakened by years of progressive malnutrition.

3

From J. D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 1990

In 1959 and 1960, some 20 million Chinese starved to death and 15 million fewer children were born, because women were too weak to conceive. Five million more perished from hunger in 1961. It was the worst human disaster ever to befall China.

4

From P. Short, *Mao: A Life*, 1999

Close to 38 million died of starvation and overwork in the Great Leap Forward and the famine which lasted four years. This was the greatest famine of the twentieth century – and of all recorded human history. Mao knowingly starved and worked these tens of millions of people to death. During the two critical years, 1958–9, grain exports alone, almost exactly 7 million tons, would have provided the equivalent of over 840 calories per day for 38 million people – the difference between life and death.

5

From Jung Chang and J. Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 2006

It would have been difficult to count the numbers of deaths from this famine in a country the size of China. Mao's regime at the time did not even try because it denied that there was a famine at all. Subsequent attempts to estimate the numbers who died have used different methodologies. Those who have arrived at a figure of around 20 million deaths have calculated the numbers of 'excess deaths', i.e. people who died in addition to the numbers who would have died in normal years. Higher figures have been obtained by taking the figures for the worst hit areas of China and extrapolating them to the country as a whole. This method is not entirely reliable as it is known that the famine was worse in some areas than in others. What can be said with some certainty is that the Great Leap Forward caused a disaster on an unprecedented scale and that tens of millions of Chinese suffered its effects for years to come. The famine was worst in rural areas than in cities and some regions suffered more than others. It has been estimated that one fifth of the population of Xizang (Tibet) was wiped out in the famine. In Anhui, Henan and Sichuan, where enthusiastic provincial Party secretaries had promoted the Great Leap Forward most strongly, perhaps as many as one quarter of the population died. Even in Beijing, which was the best supplied city, the annual death rate increased by 250 per cent during the famine years. Prostitution and banditry, which had been all but stamped out in the early years of the communist regime, began to reappear. In Henan, the militia units that had been established for self-defence during the Great Leap Forward committed the worst crimes of armed robbery, rape and murder. In Sichuan, Xizang and other Western provinces, the PLA had to be deployed to put down armed rebellions among the peasants. Worst of all, there were reports from some areas of people turning to cannibalism. The labour camps were expanded to accommodate the many peasants found guilty of trying to cultivate food for themselves or hiding food destined to be requisitioned by the government for city dwellers.

That winter [1960] cannibalism became common. Generally the villagers ate the flesh of corpses, especially those of children. In rare cases, parents ate their own children, elder brothers ate younger brothers, elder sisters ate their younger sisters. In most cases, cannibalism was not punished by the Public Security Bureaux because it was not considered as severe a crime as destroying State property and the means of production. This latter crime often merited the death sentence. Travelling around the region [Henan] over thirty years later, every peasant that I met over 50 said he personally knew of a case of cannibalism in his production team.

6

From J. Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, 1996

**Activity**

**Source analysis**

Study Sources 3, 4 and 5. Why can historians not agree on the numbers who died during the famine?

**Exploring the detail**

**The effects of famine**

During the famine of the late 1950s there were reports of people eating tree bark and grass to find some nourishment. In a situation where people were desperate for food, social order began to break down. Parents sold their children and husbands sold their wives in return for food.

**Activity**

**Source analysis**

Study Source 6. What can we learn from this about the effects of the famine on the peasants in Henan?

## Activity

## Revision activity

- 1 Summarise the main effects of the Great Leap Forward on the Chinese people. You could do this by constructing a spider diagram to show the impact on the countryside, the cities and the economy.

## Discussion point

- 2 Did the Great Leap Forward bring any positive results for ordinary Chinese people?

## Exploring the detail

## China's space programme

In 1960, China's first rocket, based on a Soviet design, was tested for the first time. After the break with the Soviet Union, China continued to develop its space and rocket programme but Chinese scientists started to design their own rockets. In 1964, this resulted in the launch of China's first ballistic missile, the *Dangfeng* rocket.

## Exploring the detail

## Peng's visit

In 1959, Peng Dehuai returned to his native village of Niaoshi where he saw lumps of useless pig iron rusting in the fields and the houses stripped of timber to fuel the furnaces. In the so-called 'happiness homes', elderly people were thin and frail and had no blankets to keep them warm. Peng did not speak out immediately against the failures of the Great Leap Forward, as he was well aware of the dangers facing those who openly criticised Mao. Mao, for his part, was already suspicious of Peng's ideological purity because, as Defence Minister, he had been responsible for making the PLA into a more professional, but less egalitarian, organisation.

By the early 1960s the Chinese government was having to import food, a policy that ran completely counter to the self-reliance that the Great Leap Forward was supposed to have achieved. In 1961, 6 million tonnes of wheat were imported, mainly from Canada and Australia but also, indirectly, from the USA. Imports continued at this level until the 1970s. It is difficult to find many positive achievements that came out of the Great Leap Forward. Mass mobilisation of labour on large-scale irrigation projects did bring the possibility of development to previously infertile regions. The capital city, Beijing, experienced a radical redevelopment that resulted in the destruction of the old city walls and the building of wider boulevards. The monumental Tiananmen Square was also created in this period. China began to develop its own nuclear weapons which resulted, in 1964, in the testing of its first atomic bomb. When set against the cost in human lives, however, these achievements pale into insignificance.

## The Third Five Year Plan and debates about economic policy

## The purge of Peng Dehuai

In December 1958, Mao stepped down as Chairman (Head of State) of the PRC. He had spoken a number of times previously about his wish to retire to the 'second front' and this was his way of doing so. He was replaced by Liu Shaoqi. This did not mean, however, that Mao was in any way relinquishing his power. He still retained his positions of Chairman of the CPC and Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission (MAC). He was merely relieving himself of the day-to-day duties of the Head of State and giving himself more time and space to concentrate on ideological matters, on which his authority was supreme.

When Mao launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958, it was clear that not all of the senior members of the Communist Party shared his optimism and his belief in the power of mass mobilisation. However, none of the Politburo were prepared to openly challenge him. In 1959, as it began to appear that the propagandist claims of unparalleled success in the Great Leap Forward did, in fact, mask a developing disaster, Mao faced his first serious challenge. Earlier in the year Peng Dehuai had returned to his birthplace in Henan and learned at first hand from the peasants about the real effects of the Great Leap Forward. Serious food shortages had already begun to appear and Peng found the people in a mood of rebellion against communal life and highly critical of the waste that resulted from Party policies. As minister of defence, Peng also knew that military transport was already being used to take relief food to the worst-hit areas.

At the next meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, at Lushun in July 1959, Peng tried to meet Mao to express his concerns. As Mao was not available, Peng decided to put his views in writing in a 'letter of opinion' – something he was perfectly entitled to do as a senior member of the Politburo. In his letter he praised the overall achievements of the Great Leap Forward but criticised specific failings. In other words, he argued that the policy was correct in theory but flawed in practice. In apportioning responsibility for the failures, he did not exempt Mao from criticism. What had been intended as a private letter addressed to Mao alone was published by Mao to all the delegates and used as an opportunity to destroy Peng's career. Peng had impeccable credentials as a Communist and veteran of the revolutionary struggle. He had a reputation for being incorruptible and independent-minded. He also had a long history of disagreements with Mao but his reputation and status

within the communist hierarchy were not enough to save him from Mao's determination to destroy him.

In his response to Peng's letter, Mao charged him with having deviated from the Party's 'general line' – one of the worst crimes of which a leading Communist could be accused. Peng was denounced as a 'rightist', like so many before him. Mao went on to say that criticism of the Party could lead to the collapse of its power and in those circumstances he would 'go away to the countryside, to lead the peasants and overthrow the government'. After the

Central Committee meeting, Mao convened a meeting of the Politburo to decide Peng's fate. It was unfortunate for Peng that his criticisms of the Great Leap Forward seemed to echo those of the Soviet leadership at a time of rapidly worsening relations with the USSR. Peng was accused of 'objectively aiding China's enemies' and leading a 'right-opportunist anti-Party clique'. Having been found guilty of all charges, Peng was dismissed as Defence Minister and placed under virtual house arrest. Although he retained his place on the Politburo, he never attended another meeting. His career was finished. To replace him as Defence Minister, Mao brought Lin Biao out of semi-retirement.

The Peng Dehuai affair was another defining moment in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. Before this it had been assumed that any leading comrade could express his views freely at Party meetings as long as the final decision was accepted by all. After Lushun, it was no longer safe for leading Communists to air views that were critical of Mao. The event had other repercussions. In 1959, there had been signs that Mao was beginning to moderate some of the wilder aspects of the Great Leap Forward. After Lushun, in a gesture seemingly designed to prove that Mao had been correct all along, he swung to the left again and launched the second Great Leap Forward in 1959–60. Therefore, an opportunity had been lost to correct a failing policy and the resulting disaster was even greater than it might otherwise have been. Finally, in an effort to root out any wider opposition within the CPC, yet another purge was launched against Party members and low-level officials. Some 6 million people were subjected to struggle meetings and forced to make self-criticism. In Sichuan alone, 80 per cent of the basic-level cadres were dismissed from the Party.

## The Third Five Year Plan

By 1961 there were signs that the Communist Party leadership were beginning to rethink their flawed economic policies. In April 1961, the communal canteens were abandoned and peasants were once again allowed to feed themselves at home – not that there was much food with which to do so. By June 1961 peasants were allowed to cultivate their own private plots and the communes began to introduce financial incentives to encourage peasants to work harder. Rural fairs and markets were again permitted and gradually many of the communes were broken up into smaller units based on single villages. By 1962 the retreat from the Great Leap Forward had gone even further. Some 25 million peasants who had drifted to the towns in search of work and food were returned to their home villages. Around 25,000 inefficient enterprises set up under

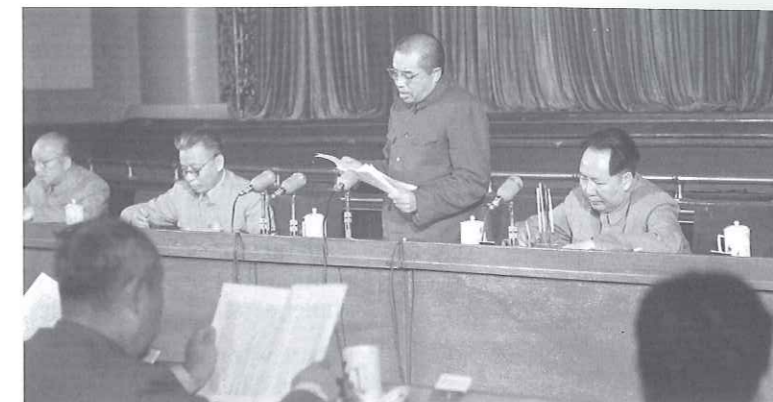


Fig. 3 Defence Minister Peng Dehuai reports on the Korean War, 1953

## Cross-reference

Struggle meetings are covered in more detail on page 38.

## Activity

## Revision exercise

- 1 Summarise Mao's reasons for purging Peng Dehuai.
- 2 Compare the treatment of Peng Dehuai with the treatment of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi in the earlier purge of 1953 (Chapter 3).
  - a What features did the two purges have in common?
  - b What features were different?

the Great Leap had been closed down. Coal and steel targets had been reduced to more realistic levels and industrial workers were once again offered financial incentives to increase production.

There was also a brief but significant period of political liberalisation. Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi led the way in rehabilitating many of the 'rightists' purged in 1957–8. Vice-Premier Chen Yi even went as far as to say that 'China needs intellectuals, needs scientists. For all these years they have been unfairly treated. They should be restored to the position they deserve.' Mao did not obstruct this policy but he did not wholeheartedly approve of it either.

This new, pragmatic approach to economic planning was largely the work of Chen Yun, one of the leading economic planners within the CPC hierarchy. In 1961, Chen had visited a commune near Shanghai and learned at first hand from the peasants about their grievances and their suggestions for improving production. It was Chen Yun who was mainly responsible for drawing up the Third Five Year Plan, launched in 1962. In this new phase of economic planning there was a significant shift away from the priorities and methods of the Great Leap Forward. Central bureaucratic control replaced the decentralisation of planning to the communes. Experts and their technical knowledge were once again valued. Production targets were reviewed on an annual basis, making the whole system more flexible. Finally, the reintroduction of financial incentives to encourage workers and peasants to work harder took the place of the moral exhortations and appeals to revolutionary fervour that had characterised the Great Leap. This more pragmatic approach gradually began to show results. By 1965 agricultural production was back to the levels attained in 1957. The output of light industry expanded by 27 per cent while that of heavy industry increased by 17 per cent. More dramatically, oil production increased by 1,000 per cent and natural gas by 4,000 per cent, freeing China from its dependence on the USSR for energy supplies.

### Key term

**Revisionism:** a term used by Marx to describe Socialists who modified or 'revised' his theories. The worst form of revisionism from Marx's point of view was the argument that Socialism could be achieved by peaceful, non-revolutionary means. Mao often used this term to describe opposition to his policies. He also used the term to describe Khrushchev's policies in the USSR.



Fig. 4 Mao Zedong meets Liu Shaoqi (left) and Chen Yun (centre) in January 1961

### Debates about economic policy

#### Mao on the defensive

Despite his success in crushing Peng Dehuai and silencing criticism of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's prestige suffered from the catastrophic failure of his policies. Chen Yun's more pragmatic approach to the Third Five Year Plan and economic recovery was supported by Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi and Bo Yibo, although Mao showed himself to be increasingly appalled by what he regarded as a retreat into 'revisionism'. In January 1962, a 7,000-cadre conference was called by Mao in a bid to rally support against any further drift away from his socialist ideals. The results of the conference, however, were not as Mao had intended. In a key speech to the conference, Liu Shaoqi praised Mao for his correct leadership but then went on to say 'It is necessary to point out that the primary responsibility for the shortcomings and errors in our work in these past few years lies with the Party centre.' The 'Party centre' included Mao, Liu himself and the rest of the Politburo, so Liu was clearly implying that Mao must share part of the

blame for past mistakes. Mao was caught unawares by this speech and judged that the mood of the conference was supportive of Liu's speech. Later in the conference Mao made a form of self-criticism in which he accepted responsibility as Chairman but made no apology or admission of personal mistakes. Nevertheless, the effect was highly significant. A figure who had previously enjoyed an aura of infallibility was, for the first time, admitting to failings. Moreover, Mao left the meeting with a feeling that his warnings about the dangers of revisionism had not been heeded by the delegates. For the next few months he withdrew from public life, leaving Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping (CPC General Secretary) and Zhou Enlai (Prime Minister) in charge of the Party and the State.

Any mistakes that the centre has made ought to be my direct responsibility, and I also have an indirect share of the blame because I am Chairman of the Central Committee. I don't want other people to shirk their responsibility. There are some other comrades who also bear responsibility, but the person primarily responsible should be me.

7

Chairman Mao, 1962. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

### Ideological differences

Gradually a clear ideological divide was beginning to appear between Mao and Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. The pragmatism of Liu and Deng can perhaps best be summed up by a statement made by Deng in June 1962. 'It doesn't matter', Deng argued, 'if the cat is black or white; so long as it catches the mouse, it is a good cat.' In other words, Deng was saying that the real test of a policy's value is whether it works and achieves results, not whether it is ideologically correct. In the eyes of Liu, Deng and Chen Yun, the situation facing China was so desperate at the end of the Great Leap Forward that the main priority must be to put the country back on its feet, even if this meant making ideological compromises such as restoring some element of private farming and private trade. Liu also favoured adopting a more conciliatory stance towards the USA and the USSR as China needed to avoid confrontations with other powers at a time when its own economy was in crisis. They believed that mass mobilisation was not an effective approach to economic development; rather, control of the economy should be placed in the hands of technical experts.

#### Mao on the offensive

To Mao this was all dangerous heresy. In his view China was, by 1962, recovering quickly from the failures of the Great Leap and no further retreats from socialist ideals were necessary. Indeed, his priority was always ideological purity. Although he conceded that mass mobilisation had not succeeded in achieving rapid economic development, this was no longer his main concern. He retained his faith in mass mobilisation as a means of class struggle, through which the gains of the revolution would be protected and socialist ideals preserved. Mao's aim was to revive the revolutionary fervour of the masses and to struggle against bureaucratic control over the economy and the danger that a bourgeoisie might emerge within the Party. At the annual summer conference in 1962, Mao returned to the political fray and posed a stark choice for China's leaders: 'Are we going to take the socialist road or the capitalist road? Do we want rural cooperation or don't we?' In his view the line being taken by Liu and Deng was 'Chinese revisionism', which had to be combated. 'Oppose revisionism (abroad), prevent revisionism (at home)' was the simple slogan that Mao used to rally the Party against the policies of Liu and Deng.

### Activity

#### Source analysis

Study Source 7. To what extent does this source show that Mao was making a genuine admission of error and responsibility for his part in the Great Leap Forward?

### Activity

#### Thinking point

Summarise the main ideological differences between Mao and the State economic planners (Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping).

In our country we must admit the possibility of the restoration of reactionary classes. We must raise our vigilance and properly educate our youth, otherwise a country like ours may yet move towards its opposite. Therefore, from now on, we must talk about this every year, every month, every day, so that we have a more enlightened Marxist-Leninist line on the problem.

8 Chairman Mao, May 1962. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

If things were allowed to go on this way, the day would not be too far off – a few years, over ten years, or a few decades at the most – when the resurgence of a nationwide counter-revolution became inevitable. It would then be a certainty that the Party of Marxism-Leninism would turn into a party of revisionism, of fascism. The whole of China would then change colour. The Socialist Education Movement is a struggle that calls for the re-education of man and for a confrontation with the forces of feudalism and capitalism that are now feverishly attacking us. We must nip their counter-revolution in the bud.

9 Chairman Mao, May 1963. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

### The Socialist Education Movement

Despite the damage to his reputation due to the Great Leap Forward, Mao still commanded enormous respect and authority within the Party. Liu and Deng were forced to stage a tactical retreat in the face of Mao's onslaught. The result was an uneasy compromise. Liu and Deng endorsed Mao's analysis of the situation but continued to use their own practical measures to aid economic recovery. Therefore, although rural capitalism was condemned, private plots for peasant farmers and rural markets continued to be allowed. This was not enough for Mao. The Socialist Education Movement was launched in 1964 to preach the virtues of the collective economy and the superiority of Socialism. This movement was also established to root out corruption among Party cadres, and here again the divergence between Mao's approach and that of Liu and Deng was apparent. Mao intended a nationwide mass mobilisation campaign of struggle meetings against Party officials. Under Liu's direction, the approach was much more centrally controlled and concerned with imposing discipline rather than ideological correctness. Work teams of over 10,000 cadres were sent to rural areas to investigate local leaderships and root out corruption and those guilty of economic crimes. For those on the receiving end the effect was the same whoever was in control. Thousands were executed and many more committed suicide. In Hubei province Party officials spoke of 'all hell' breaking loose in a 'violent revolutionary storm'. Mao, however, as a consistent advocate of class violence and mass struggle, was still far from happy with Liu's policies.

### A growing power struggle

Until 1961 Liu Shaoqi had been seen as Mao's chosen successor. It was he who had taken over the chairmanship when Mao had stepped down at the end of 1958. In 1962, it gradually became apparent that Mao was losing confidence in Liu. Partly this was due to the critical speech Liu made at the 7,000-cadre conference. It was also due to Liu's support for the pragmatic policies adopted to aid China's economic recovery. These policies, involving a number of retreats from the collective ideals that were so vital to Mao, were taken as evidence by Mao that Liu had lost

his nerve. From this came doubts that Liu could be entrusted with Mao's legacy. As his doubts grew, Mao became more outspoken in his criticisms of Liu. By late 1964 Mao was accusing Liu of 'taking the capitalist road' and being non-Marxist. He also accused Deng Xiaoping of running an independent kingdom. The battle lines were being drawn for a power struggle that would reach its climax in 1966, although neither Liu nor Deng saw themselves facing a showdown with Mao. They continued to respect him and tried to work with him, despite not agreeing to all of his policy demands.

### Support for Mao: the PLA

Mao built up alternative power bases with which he could bring pressure to bear on the Party leadership.

One of these was the PLA under the leadership of Lin Biao, a loyal ally of Mao. Lin increased the number of Party members in the PLA and stepped up the degree of indoctrination of recruits in the army. He published a compilation of selected quotes from Mao under the title *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (otherwise known as the *Little Red Book*), which was issued to all recruits and used as the basis for political education within the PLA. With its stress on self-sacrifice, self-reliance and the importance of continuing struggle, the book was used to encourage the cult of Mao within the armed forces. In 1965, Lin Biao abolished all ranks within the PLA, which appeared to make the PLA an advanced, revolutionary, egalitarian organisation and a model for the rest of Chinese communist society. He also began to extend the PLA's influence into the internal security forces and schools, factories and cultural life. By the end of 1965 the PLA had become a highly politicised organisation, totally committed to supporting Mao and able to wield considerable influence far beyond the purely military sphere.

### Support for Mao: Jiang Qing and radical intellectuals

Another source of support for Mao was a group of radical intellectuals led by Jiang Qing, his wife. In the early 1960s, Jiang rose to prominence as she spoke out, largely at Mao's behest, against writers and intellectuals who showed insufficient commitment to revolutionary values. By implication, her attacks on intellectuals were also attacks on the Party leadership for allowing 'revisionist' writings to be published. Mao had argued since the Yan'an days that art and literature should promote the revolution. During the early 1960s, however, many artists and writers had begun returning to more traditional themes in their work. For Mao and Jiang this was a dangerous trend that was made worse by the fact that Party leaders were turning a blind eye to these changes. With the central Party leadership outside his control, Mao sought support from loyal leaders in the provinces. Jiang Qing had allies among the Shanghai Party leaders who were more radical than the leadership in Beijing. Mao himself moved to Shanghai in November 1965 where he was surrounded by people very much in tune with his view that there was a pressing need to restore socialist values and discipline in the economic and cultural life of the nation.



Fig. 5 Mao Zedong at a conference in 1962 with (left to right): Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. The smiling faces of the participants hide the fact that there were growing tensions within the leadership, with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping soon to be named as the leading 'capitalist-roaders'

### Activity

#### Source analysis

Study Sources 8 and 9. What can we learn from these sources about Mao's priorities in the aftermath of the failure of the Great Leap Forward?

### Exploring the detail

#### The Socialist Education Movement

This was intended to be a comprehensive programme to reintroduce basic socialist values into Chinese society. Class struggle was re-emphasised in a campaign for the 'four clean-ups' – to remove corruption in the countryside relating to accounting procedures, grain supplies and property accumulation and in the system of allocating work points to peasants for their labour. Thousands of cadres were relocated to the countryside, both to learn from the peasants and to boost the Party's propaganda efforts among them.

### Cross-reference

See Chapter 8 for the climax of this power struggle, which became the **Cultural Revolution** launched by Mao in 1966.



Fig. 6 Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, when she was a young actress in Shanghai

### Cross-reference

See page 38 for more on the Yan'an Rectification campaign.

The Cultural Revolution Group (CRG) is covered in more detail on pages 98–100.

### Key profile

#### Jiang Qing

A former Shanghai film actress, Jiang Qing (1914–91) was Mao's fourth wife. They married in Yan'an in 1939. During the 1950s, she worked for the Ministry of Culture but otherwise did not have a major political role.

The split in the leadership of the PRC created an unstable political situation that could not continue indefinitely. By the end of 1965, Mao was ready to launch his challenge to the Party leadership. He could count on the support of Lin Biao and the PLA and Jiang Qing and her radical intellectual allies in Shanghai. He could also rely on two other key allies: Chen Boda, his political secretary and a leading Party ideologist; and Kang Sheng, his security chief. Mao's challenge would come in the form of the Cultural Revolution, which he would launch in 1966.

### Key profiles

#### Chen Boda

Chen Boda (1904–89) was a key ideological adviser to Mao. After joining the CPC in the 1920s, he went to Moscow to study and after his return became a teacher in Yan'an. During the Yan'an years he served as Mao's political secretary. During the 1950s his main role was to act as the interpreter of Mao Zedong Thought. From 1958 he also edited the Party journal, *The Red Flag*. In 1966, he became the head of the Cultural Revolution Group (CRG).

#### Kang Sheng

Born into a wealthy warlord's family, Kang Sheng (1898–1975) joined the CPC in the 1920s and was sent to Moscow for training in intelligence work. On his return he became the CPC's security chief in Shanghai in the early 1930s, responsible for identifying and removing Guomindang agents from the Party. During the Yan'an years he was Mao's security chief and was responsible for the purges of Party members in the 1942 Rectification campaign. During the Civil War he was in charge of land reform in Shandong and Shanxi provinces and ordered the execution of many landlords. A ruthless and effective security chief in the 1950s and 1960s, Kang lived an extravagant and corrupt lifestyle, surrounding himself with a large collection of valuable antiques confiscated from his victims.

### Activity

#### Revision exercise

Copy and complete the following table to show the power bases for Liu and Deng and the alternative power bases being developed by Mao.

Leader	Power base
Liu/Deng	
Mao	

### A closer look

#### The personality cult of Mao Zedong

During the 1960s the CPC's propaganda department, which was dominated by supporters of Mao, deliberately created a cult of personality around him. The cult of personality had been present in the 1950s but in a much more low-key way. Using political education classes in schools, colleges, workplaces and military units, the CPC promoted *Quotations from Chairman Mao* as the source of all truth and the means to finding a solution to all problems. Mao was promoted as the Great Helmsman who had led China out of the evils of feudalism, landlordism and subservience to foreign powers into the promised land of Communism. He was the embodiment of the revolution; the revolution was Mao. By allowing this cult of personality to grow, the Party leadership were accepting a situation in which people were more loyal to Mao than they were to the Party itself.

I was thirteen in 1965. On the evening of 1 October that year, the sixteenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, there was a big fireworks display on the square in the centre of Chengdu. The signals for the fireworks went off a few yards from where I stood. In an instant, the sky was a garden of spectacular shapes and colours, a sea of wave after wave of brilliance. The music and noise rose from below the imperial gate to join in the sumptuousness. After a while the sky was clear for a few seconds. Then a sudden explosion brought out a gorgeous blossom, followed by the unfurling of a long, vast, silky hanging. It stretched itself in the middle of the sky, swaying gently in the autumn breeze. In the light over the square the characters on the hanging were shining. 'Long Live Our Great Leader Chairman Mao!' Tears sprang to my eyes. 'How lucky, how incredibly lucky I am to be living in the great era of Chairman Mao Zedong!' I kept saying to myself. 'How can children in the capitalist world go on living without being near Chairman Mao, and without hope of seeing him in person?' I wanted to do something for them, to rescue them from their plight. I made a pledge to myself there and then to work harder to build a stronger China, in order to support a world revolution. I needed to work hard to be entitled to see Chairman Mao, too. That was the purpose of my life.

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From Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, 1992

Comrade Mao Zedong is the greatest Marxist-Leninist of our era. He has inherited, defended and developed Marxism-Leninism with genius, creatively and comprehensively and has brought it to a higher and completely new stage.

Mao Zedong's thought is the guiding principle for all work of the Party, the army and the country. Therefore, the most fundamental task in our Party's political and ideological work is at all times to hold high the red banner of Mao Zedong's thought, to arm the minds of the people with it and to persist in using it to command every field of activity.

Once Mao Zedong's thought is grasped by the broad masses, it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.

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Lin Biao in the foreword to *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, December 1966

### Exploring the detail

#### Lei Feng

Lei Feng was a soldier who had died in an accident (some accounts say that he was a fiction invented by the Party). Not a hero in the conventional sense, he was held up as an example of how doing the everyday, boring things in life with a sense of duty and commitment was in itself a form of heroism. He was portrayed as an example of selflessness, the true embodiment of the revolutionary spirit of hard work and self-sacrifice. In the propaganda image of Lei Feng, he is shown as being particularly grateful to Mao for rescuing him from the evils of the past and he always read Mao's works as a way of finding solutions to problems. His adulation for Mao helped to reinforce the cult of personality and support the message that only through reading Mao's works could the Chinese reach a correct understanding of Socialism.

## Activity

## Source analysis

Go to [www.maopost.com](http://www.maopost.com) and study the following Chinese revolutionary posters by entering the reference numbers in the search box.

- 'Chairman Mao Zedong', August 1958 (reference number 0312-001M)
- 'Chairman Mao's great soldier, Lei Feng', October 1965 (reference number 1128-001M)
- 'Long live Chairman Mao, our great tutor, great leader, great commander-in-chief and great helmsman', December 1966 (reference number 0958-001S)

- 1 Compare the 1950s poster of Mao with the one published in 1966. In what ways is his portrayal different?
- 2 Using all three posters, identify the key features of the cult of personality that was developed around Mao Zedong.
- 3 In the light of the failures of the Great Leap Forward, and from what you have learned about Chinese society at this time, how was it possible for such an uncritical view of Mao to have been accepted in China?

## Learning outcomes

In this section you have looked at the beginnings of economic planning in China after 1953 and the political and economic consequences of the various Five Year Plans. Economically, the First and Third Five Year Plans achieved major progress towards the industrialisation of China, whereas the Second Plan (the Great Leap Forward) had disastrous results. There were important political consequences of the failure of the Great Leap Forward for the ruling Communist Party. After reading this section, you will have an understanding of the growing divisions within the Communist Party and Mao's attempts to reassert his authority.

## AQA Examination-style questions

Study Sources A, B and C and then answer the questions that follow.

The people have taken to organising themselves along military lines, working with militancy, and leading a collective life, and this has raised the political consciousness of the 500 million peasants still further. Community dining rooms, kindergartens, nurseries, sewing groups, barber shops, public baths, happy homes for the aged, agricultural middle schools, 'red and expert' schools, are leading the peasants towards a happier collective life and fostering ideas of collectivism among the peasant masses.

In the present circumstances the establishment of people's communes is the fundamental policy to guide the peasants, to accelerate socialist construction and complete the building of socialism ahead of time.

A

*From the Central Committee, August 1958*

By May 1958 Mao had increased that year's steel target from six to eight million tons and cut the length of time needed to overtake Britain to seven years and the United States to fifteen years. Indeed, China might get there first, Mao suggested, and 'reach Communism ahead of schedule'. After that, all restraint was cast to the winds. The aim, as

ever, was to make China great. 'Although we have a large population,' Mao told the Politburo, 'we have not yet demonstrated our strength. When we catch up with Britain and America they will respect us and acknowledge our existence as a nation.'

B

*Adapted from P. Short, Mao: A Life, 1999*

The four year leap was a monumental waste of both natural resources and human effort, unique in scale in the history of the world. Close to 38 million died of starvation and overwork in the Great Leap Forward and the famine which lasted four years. Mao knowingly starved and worked these tens of millions to death.

C

*Adapted from Jung Chang and J. Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, 2006*

- (a) Explain how far the views in Source B differ from those in Source A in relation to the motives for launching the Great Leap Forward. (12 marks)



When answering part a) questions on sources, it is important to remember that both sources have to be used and referred to. The question asks 'how far', which requires you to identify both points of agreement as well as points of disagreement. It is a good idea to make a simple table with two columns for agreement and disagreement and make brief notes on each source under these headings. Note that both sources refer to the building of Socialism (or Communism) ahead of schedule. This was clearly a key motive behind the decision to launch the Great Leap Forward. There are, however, differences of emphasis between the two sources. Source A gives greater emphasis to political motives such as raising 'the political consciousness' of the peasants and 'fostering ideas of collectivism among the peasant masses'. Source B, on the other hand, focuses more on the need to make China a great power that could rival other powers such as Britain and the USA. The examiner will be looking for a balanced answer that identifies points of agreement and disagreement between the sources and then reaches a conclusion as to 'how far' the two sources differ.

- (b) Use sources A, B and C and your own knowledge. How important was Mao's leadership in explaining the failure of the Great Leap Forward? (24 marks)



This question requires you to use both the sources and your own knowledge. The omission of one or other of these elements in your answer will limit the marks you can achieve. It is important to refer to all three sources in your answer. Sources B and C are much more directly focused on Mao's leadership than Source A. The fact that Source A is a statement from the Party's Central Committee can be used to show that it was not Mao alone who launched the Great Leap Forward; you can use your own knowledge here to point out that the Central Committee, after some initial reluctance, was backing Mao's ambitious plans for the Great Leap when it issued this statement. The examiner will be looking for a balanced answer in which you identify and explain a range of factors that led to the failure of the Great Leap Forward and then finally arrive at a conclusion in which you weigh up Mao's personal responsibility against those other factors.