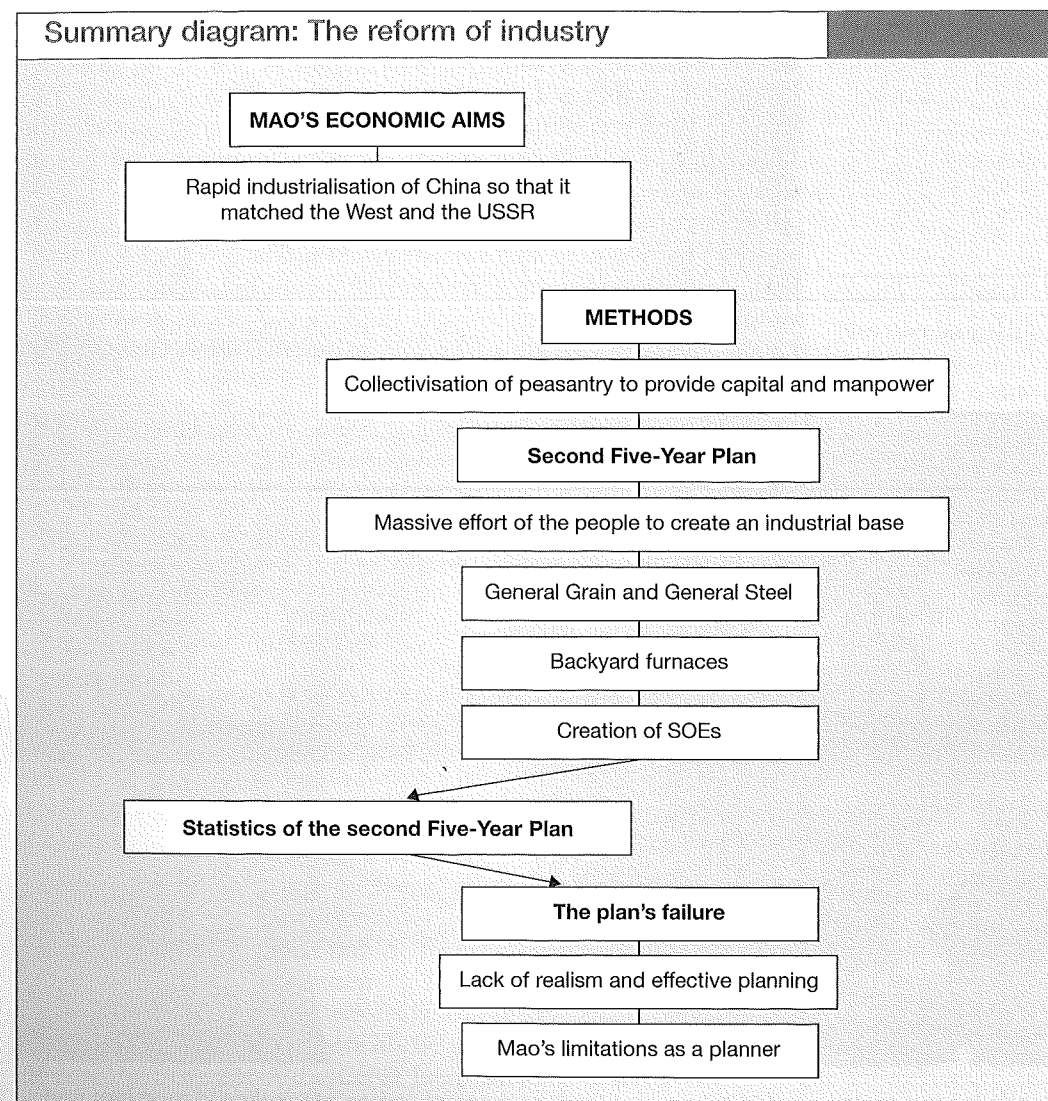


Mao's reliance on intuition

In no sense was Mao qualified as an economic planner. He admitted as much: 'I only understand social sciences but not natural sciences'. For all his adult life he had been a revolutionary. This is what continued to dominate him and consume his energies. His experience as a political in-fighter and military strategist had in no way prepared him for the task of shaping the economy of a vast nation. His approach was necessarily a series of intuitive leaps. The results were calamitous. His collectivisation programme produced not additional food, but famine; his Five-Year Plans wasted rather than successfully exploited China's vast natural and human resources.

Summary diagram: The reform of industry



Key question
What was the aim of collectivisation?

Key terms

Gruel

A thin, watery porridge.

Collectives

Areas where the peasants farmed communally rather than for themselves individually.

Communes

Organised regions where the collectives were grouped together.

Key date

Collectivisation began: 1956

3 | The Reform of Agriculture

Collectivisation

The land policy adopted by Mao Zedong has to be seen as a complement to his industrialisation plans. Although he had gained his reputation as leader of a great peasant revolution, he did not allow this to dictate his economic strategy. In his plans for the modernisation of China, the industrialisation programme had priority over all other considerations. By the mid-1950s the organisers of the first Five-Year Plan had become aware that China had a severe labour shortage. Despite the migration from the land that had occurred, those employed in industry were still only a minority of the Chinese working population. The industrial workforce would have to be greatly increased if targets were to be met.

It was also the case that, although the peasants were undoubtedly producing more food, this was not finding its way to the urban workers. The common view among the economic planners was that this was the fault of the peasants: they were indulging themselves by overeating and by having larger families which meant more mouths had to be fed. The authorities were convinced that the peasantry must be brought under strict central control and direction.

Mao himself often became impatient with what he regarded as peasant obstinacy. In one revealing statement he urged his officials: 'Educate peasants to eat less, and have more than **gruel**. The state should try its hardest to prevent peasants eating too much.'

The PRC's initial land reforms of the early 1950s had been introduced in the euphoria that had accompanied the 1949 revolution. The land had been seized from the landlords and given to the peasants. Yet even at that time the peasants had been urged to pool their resources by joining in farm **collectives**. This was the principle that was now forcibly extended. Between 1956 and 1958 the government directed that the existing 750,000 collectives be amalgamated into a number of large **communes**. In 1958 Mao made this collectivisation process an essential part of the Great Leap Forward:

- China's agricultural land was divided into 70,000 communes.
- Each commune was made up of roughly 750,000 brigades, each brigade containing some 200 households.
- The whole system was under the direct control of PRC's central government; farming methods, the sale and distribution of produce, and the setting of prices were to be dictated from above.
- Private farming would cease to exist.
- The peasants needed internal passports to pass from one commune to another.



A landlord under attack at a public meeting in the 1950s. What opportunities did the anti-landlord campaigns give to the peasants for settling scores and pursuing vendettas at local level?

Mao's attitude towards the peasants

It has been suggested that Mao shared with Stalin a belief that the peasants left to themselves were **'inherently capitalistic'**. John King Fairbank, the US expert on modern China, remarked on the contradiction that lay at the heart of collectivisation: 'the revolutionary state, having established its legitimacy by freeing the peasant from landlordism, now had him boxed in as never before. The state had become the ultimate landlord.'

In public, Mao maintained that collectivisation, far from being forced on the peasants, was a direct response to their wishes. In the summer of 1958 the CCP's Central Committee made the following declaration in Mao's name:

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 toward a happier collective life and further fostering ideas of collectivism among the peasant masses.

The deceit behind collectivisation

The CCP's claim was a great lie. Collectivisation had been imposed on the Chinese peasantry as part of a massive social

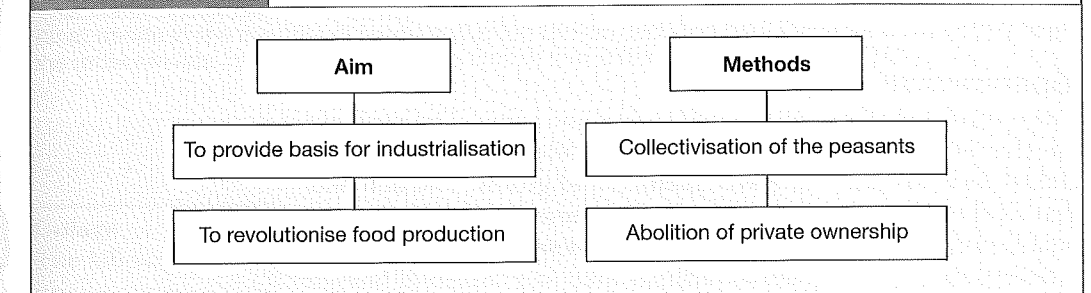
Key question
Why did Mao distrust the peasants?

Inherently capitalistic
Selfish and grasping by nature.

Key term

experiment in which the wishes of the peasants themselves were simply ignored. What is extraordinary about Mao and defies rational explanation is that, although he was himself a peasant and could justifiably claim to have led a great peasant revolution, he had a very low opinion of the class from which he came. In 1959 he declared to a group of government ministers: 'Peasants are hiding food and are very bad. There is no Communist spirit in them! Peasants are after all peasants. That's the only way they can behave.' This disregard for the ordinary people of China was to have the most appalling consequences.

Summary diagram: The reform of agriculture



Key question
How far was the famine a man-made disaster?

Key date
Widespread famine in China: 1958–62

Key term
Agronomists
Experts in agricultural science.

4 | China's Great Famine 1958–62

The collectivisation programme that began in 1956 entailed a vast social transformation that resulted in the greatest famine in Chinese history. The disruption caused by the ending of private farming was a major cause of hunger since it discouraged the individual peasants from producing food beyond their own immediate needs. But that was only part of the story. Equally significant was Mao's belief that Chinese **agronomists** had made a series of discoveries about crop growing that would revolutionise food production.

Lysenkoism

Chinese scientists were greatly influenced by the theories of Trofim Lysenko, the Soviet researcher whom Stalin had regarded as the voice of scientific truth. Lysenko claimed to have developed techniques that resulted in crops like rice, barley and wheat yielding up to 16 times more food than under traditional methods. It was later realised and admitted that Lysenko's ideas were worthless. His theories about producing such 'super-crops' were wholly fraudulent. But so strong was the influence of the USSR in the early years of the PRC that the Chinese regarded Lysenko as infallible.

A generation of Chinese researchers were trained in the notion that Lysenko could do no wrong. A Beijing doctor recorded: 'We were told that the Soviets had discovered and invented everything, even the aeroplane. We had to change textbooks and rename things in Lysenko's honour.'

Mao made Lysenkoism official policy in 1958 when he personally drafted an eight-point agricultural 'constitution' based on the theories of crop growth advanced by Lysenko and his Chinese disciples, which farmers were forced to follow. The eight headings were:

- the popularisation of new breeds and seeds
- close planting
- deep ploughing
- increased fertilisation
- innovation of farm tools
- improved field management
- pest control
- increased irrigation.

'Sparrowcide'

Taken separately these instructions had some value. The problem was that no attention was paid to the particular conditions and climate in which the crops were planted and grown. The demand that all the instructions be applied everywhere destroyed whatever benefits they might have brought if applied selectively and intelligently.

The most vivid example of the tragic results that followed from unthinking application was in regard to pest control. The whole Chinese population was called on to end the menace of sparrows and other wild birds which ate crop seeds. So, at prescribed times, the Chinese came out from their houses and with any implement they could lay their hands on made as much noise as possible. Clanging plates, metal pots and pans, they kept up a continuous din that prevented the birds from landing, so that they eventually dropped exhausted from the sky. The thousands of dead birds were then publicly displayed as trophies. Villages and regions competed with each other over who could kill the most birds.

The outcome was catastrophic. With no birds now to thin their numbers, insects and small creatures gorged themselves on the grains and plants. The larger birds that would have fed off the smaller ones were no longer around to prey on rats and their kind. Vermin multiplied and destroyed stocks of grain. The absurdity of the enterprise became only too evident in the hunger that it caused, but nobody dared say a critical word publicly since to have done so would have been to challenge Mao's wisdom.

Starvation

The bewildered local peasant communities, whose way of life had already been dislocated by collectivisation, had no means of preventing the famine that followed. Unable to make sense of the orders imposed on them from on high, they became defeatist in the face of impending doom. Those peasants who tried to ignore the new regulations and carry on with their old ways of farming were rounded up and imprisoned as 'rightists'.

China's gaols and forced labour camps (see page 129) were expanded to take in the great numbers of starving peasants who

Table 3.3: China's agricultural record 1952–62

Year	Grain production (millions of tonnes)	Meat production (millions of tonnes)	Index of gross output value of agriculture
1952	163.9	3.4	100.0
1953	166.8	3.8	103.1
1954	169.5	3.9	106.6
1955	183.9	3.3	114.7
1956	192.8	3.4	120.5
1957	195.1	4.0	124.8
1958	200.0	4.3	127.8
1959	170.0	2.6	110.4
1960	143.5	1.3	96.4
1961	147.5	1.2	94.1
1962	160.0	1.9	99.9

What trends in the quantity of food production can be deduced from the table? What clues does the table provide to the character of the famine that afflicted China in this period?

Key term
Gulags
The labour and prison camps set up in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

fell foul of the authorities. In these camps, the equivalent of the Soviet **gulags**, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, starved to death. The bare statistics of the famine are shown in Table 3.3.

The significance of the agricultural record

A careful reading of the figures in Table 3.3 shows a marked reduction in food production from 1958 onwards, the years of the famine. Although the decline does not look especially dramatic, it has to be emphasised that the figures refer to China overall; the food shortages were much more severe in the famine provinces of central China. Nearly every province in China was affected by the famine, but the greatest suffering occurred in central and eastern China. Of the 50 million who died throughout China, the worst death toll was in a great arc of misery that swept through China's rural provinces from Shandong in the east to Tibet in the west:

- Shandong: 7.5 million
- Anhui: 8 million
- Henan: 7.8 million
- Sichuan: 9 million
- Qinghai: 1 million
- Tibet: 1 million.

Hebei (Hopei) and Xinjiang were other areas that experienced terrible suffering. Parents sold their children, and husbands their wives, for food. Women prostituted themselves to obtain food for their families, and there were many instances of peasants offering themselves as slaves to anyone who would supply them with food. The following account of cannibalism in Liaoning province is typical of the experiences that later came to light:

A peasant woman, unable to stand the incessant crying for food of her 2-year-old daughter, and thinking perhaps to end her suffering, had strangled her. She had given the girl's body to her husband, asking him to bury it. Instead, out of his mind with hunger, he put the body in the cooking pot with what little food they had foraged. He had forced his wife to eat a bowl of the resulting stew. His wife, in a fit of remorse, had reported her husband's crime to the authorities. Although there was no law against cannibalism in the criminal code of the People's Republic, the Ministry of Public Security treated such cases, which were all too common, with the utmost severity. Both husband and wife were arrested and summarily executed.

A conspiracy of silence

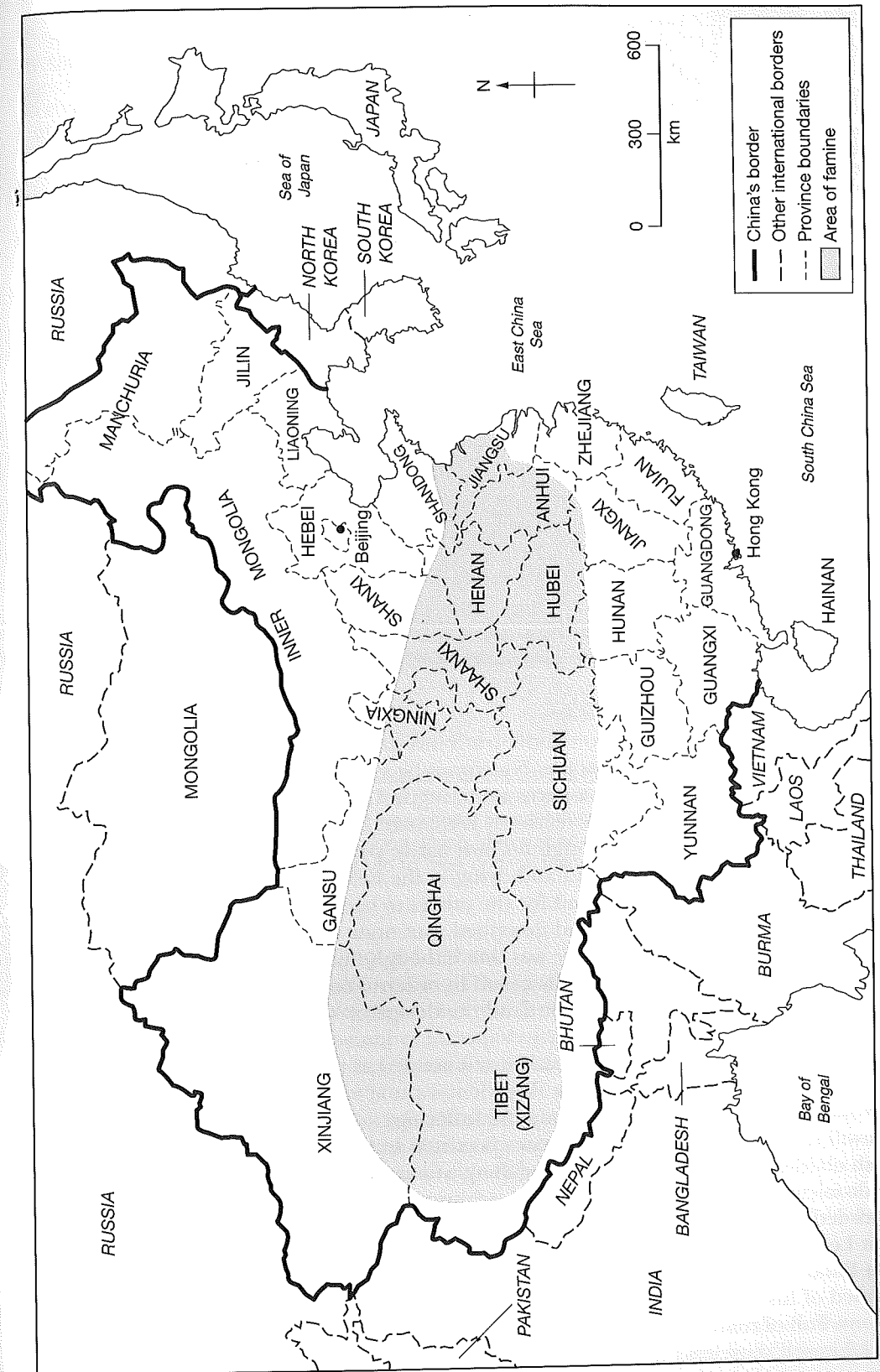
What deepened the tragedy was that many government advisers were well aware of the facts. They knew that Lysenkoism was nonsense and that people were dying by the million, but they dared not speak out. Indeed, the reverse happened; party cadres and officials reported back to Beijing that production targets were being met and that the Great Leap Forward was on course. Sir Percy Craddock, British Ambassador in China in the 1960s, commented:

Sycophantic provincial leaders cooked the books; immense increases, two or three fold, were reported; and, in obedience to the bogus figures, an impoverished province such as Anhui delivered grain it desperately needed itself to the state, or even for export abroad as surplus. On his inspection tours Mao saw the close-planted fields that he wanted to see; the local officials moved in extra shoots from other fields and moved them back when he had gone.

Officials often developed a callousness that meant they simply looked after themselves with no thought for the people at large. Dai Wang, a farmer in Jiangsu, decided in desperation to move his family to another province where he had heard that more food might be available. A loyal Communist, he described his bitter disillusion with the party officials to whom he turned for help before setting out:

At the very last minute I discovered my biscuits, our only food for the four-day journey, had been stolen. In a panic, I went to headquarters to beg for more. The leaders were enjoying a meal with numerous meat and fish dishes, and bread rolls made from flour. Party Secretary Xu, chewing a large mouthful of pork, replied, 'Right now, grain is a big problem in our country. Everyone should take his own responsibility for his food ration.' Left, empty-handed, I thought even the capitalists might not be as hard-hearted as these cadres of a communist country.

Key question
How did official attitudes to the famine make it worse?



The areas in China worst hit by the famine. How does the map help to explain why the famine might be referred to as an 'arc of misery'?



Starving refugees from the famine begging for food in Hong Kong in 1962. It was from Hong Kong, to which thousands of rural Chinese tried to flee, that news of the famine came to Western attention. Why did so many people inside and outside China find it hard to believe that there was a great famine in China?

The Lushan conference 1959

The refusal of those at the top to tell the truth was one of the great betrayals of the Chinese people. Nor can it be said that they were denied the opportunity. At a party gathering in Lushan in 1959, Peng Dehuai (see page 31), fearlessly recounted what he had witnessed on his journey through his own native province of Anhui: 'I saw my people lying dead and dying in the fields and by the roadside'. Here was the moment for the others to back him by confirming the truth of what he had described. But none did.

What made this particularly tragic was that although the Lushan conference had been officially called in order to consider the progress of the Great Leap Forward, all the delegates knew that it had been convened by the party desperate to limit the spreading hunger. The conference had been intended as the first step towards dealing with the famine. Yet when it came to it, the party members did nothing to alleviate the suffering.

Unwilling to offend Mao, the delegates persisted in their slavish obedience to him by denouncing Peng as a troublemaker and dismissing his eye-witness account as a fabrication. They then proceeded to make speeches noting the advances made under the Great Leap Forward and praising Mao for his inspired leadership. Zhou Enlai was so dismayed by the tone of the conference and so ashamed of his own silence that he stopped attending the sessions. Full of remorse, he hid away in his hotel room and drank himself senseless.

Key question
What was the significance of the Lushan conference?

Lushan conference:
1959

Key date



One of the most notorious propaganda photos of the time purported to show children playing on crop leaves that grew so thickly in the field that the youngsters did not fall through. To impress Mao and suggest abundant growth, it was known for crops to be lifted from the fields and placed together alongside the railway track along which Mao's special train travelled. After Mao had passed through the crops were returned to their original fields. Why has this photo been described as notorious?

Key term

Shanghai wing

Between its formation in 1921 and its taking power in 1949, the CCP had undergone a series of power struggles between various factions. One of these was the Shanghai group, renowned for its hard-line Marxism and its ferocity against opponents.

Jiang Qing at Lushan

One of the ironies of the Lushan conference was that Mao had gone to it expecting trouble. He had worried that some members would use the occasion to criticise his economic plans, not openly perhaps, but by implication and by suggesting that there were alternatives to his policies. It was to help him fend off these expected attacks that Mao had brought his wife, Jiang Qing, with him to Lushan. It was the first time he had asked her to play a direct role in political affairs. He judged that her notorious toughness of attitude and her influence with the **Shanghai wing** of the CCP would be very useful if it came to a fight within the party.

Mao's suppression of criticism

In the event, he had no need of Jiang's help. Whatever the original intentions some members might have had before coming

to Lushan, once there they allowed themselves to be overawed into submission. In an angry speech Mao ridiculed Peng Dehuai and told the cringing delegates that he was prepared to use the PLA against any in the party who tried 'to lead the peasants to overthrow the government'.

The delegates took this as Mao's way of saying that the supposed famine was really a fiction created by those reactionary peasants who were resisting collectivisation. What Mao had done was to declare that to talk of famine was tantamount to treason against him and the party. It was an unscrupulous move on his part but a clever one, and it worked. Faced with Mao's fierce determination, the party members, with the memories of the Hundred Flowers campaign fresh in their minds, dropped all thought of serious opposition.

The tragedy was that since Mao had declared, in effect, that the famine did not exist, it followed that little could be done in an official, organised way to relieve it. Hence the miseries of the ordinary Chinese were intensified.

Martial law imposed

The members of the CCP party may have been prepared to hide the truth but many of the ordinary people became so desperate that in a number of provinces demonstrations against the authorities began to spread; one of the key demands of the protesters was that the communes be done away with. By 1962 Liu Shaoqi, who held the office of president of the PRC, was so worried that he spoke of a civil war breaking out in China. He ordered preparations to be made to impose **martial law** and asked the PLA to stand by to suppress rebellion. Two factors prevented the crisis reaching the level Liu feared:

- The famine was at its worst in rural China where the people lacked the knowledge and skills to mount an effective anti-government rising.
- The policies that Liu himself and Deng Xiaoping introduced in 1962 began to ease the famine (see page 69).

The famine in Tibet

Relative to the size of its population, Tibet was the province that suffered most during the famine. A quarter of its four million people were wiped out. This figure becomes even more appalling when it is realised that the death toll was intended. The famine in Tibet was a man-made disaster. It was an act of **genocide** by the Chinese government.

The destruction of Tibetan culture

The PRC's treatment of Tibet provides a remarkable insight into the thinking of Mao Zedong and the party he led. Mao seemed to harbour a particular hatred for Tibet. It had been on his orders that the 'reunification' campaign in Tibet in 1950 had been so severe (see page 20). Once the PLA had defeated the Tibetan resistance fighters, the Chinese occupiers set about the

Martial law

The placing of the civilian population under military authority and discipline.

Genocide

The deliberate destruction of a people or ethnic group.

Key question

Why was the famine so severe in Tibet?

systematic destruction of the cultural, social and religious identity of Tibet.

What had once been a separate nation was renamed Xizang and forcibly incorporated into the People's Republic of China. The public practice of **Lama**, the traditional Tibetan religion, was prohibited, as were political meetings and the teaching of the Tibetan language and Tibetan history in schools. Those who resisted were arrested and imprisoned. The Chinese aim was simple – to eradicate Tibet as a nation and as a culture.

Imposition of Mandarin

Over the next decade, the Chinese government took a cynical step to speed up this destructive process. It sponsored a mass migration of people from other parts of China to Tibet. Since the new settlers were predominantly Han, the ethnic group that made up four-fifths of the overall population of China, the government's clear purpose was to fill Tibet with people whose alien way of life would swamp the local Tibetan culture.

Mandarin Chinese was imposed as the official language of Tibet; any Tibetan who wished to keep or gain a position in public affairs had to be proficient in it.

The 1959 Tibetan rising

Despite the pressure it came under, the Tibetan resistance movement was not destroyed. After its defeat in 1950, it went underground. In 1959 it re-emerged to organise what amounted to a national rising against the Chinese occupation. The Chinese authorities responded by sending in PLA units to suppress the demonstrations. Thousands of protesters were arrested and imprisoned and their ringleaders executed.

The Chinese forces made a particular point of attacking Tibetan religion. Priests and nuns were dragged from their ancient Buddhist monasteries, and publicly humiliated and beaten. Many of the monasteries were turned into barracks or administrative offices. Those that were allowed to remain as religious houses had to accept total control by the Chinese state. It became an arrestable offence for ordinary Tibetans even to mention the **Dalai Lama** in public.

The flight of the Dalai Lama

The severity with which the Tibetan rising was suppressed in 1959 by the PLA led to the flight of the Dalai Lama. This was not craven desertion. He chose to leave the country rather than wait for his inevitable removal by the Chinese. He calculated that as an exiled but free man he would be better able to voice the plight of the Tibetan people to the outside world.

In exile, the Dalai Lama became a potent symbol of Tibetan resistance. It was through him that the world's media were kept informed of the continuing severity of the PLA's occupation. Despite angry protests from the PRC, the Indian government granted sanctuary to the Dalai Lama, allowing him to establish a permanent base in Sikkim in northern India.

Key terms

Lama

A form of Buddhism which had become a defining characteristic of Tibetan culture.

Mandarin Chinese

Of China's many languages and dialects, Mandarin is the predominant one, used by the majority of people. It is the official language of government, administration and law.

Dalai Lama

The leader of Tibet's Buddhist faith, who became a powerful symbol of national resistance to the Chinese occupation.

Key date

Tibetan rising: 1959