

The Great Leap Forward:
The History of Death
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The Great Leap Forward (GLF), 1958-1961, was a government run program which saw the deaths of 20-30 million people[1]. It has been researched by many great minds from around the world. It is a large topic with many different angles. I will look into four specific perspectives: the Maoist politicization of agriculture, the economics of the GLF, the fiscal policy, and the sociology of the effects of the GLF on the common peasants. These perspectives are very different and yet are still intricately connected and instrumental to understanding the GLF. In the following, I am going to introduce the basic groundwork of the GLF, and then look at the different interpretations and sources. The main point should be the interplay between the various factors not a mono-causal narrative. I do not want to represent any one side as wrong or right. My goal is not to make a moral judgment on the people or government of China. My goal is to look at this one period in history from many distinct reference points, and to discuss and challenge the sources and their discrepancies[2].

I will use the aid of historians and anthropologists to talk about discrepancies, ideals versus reality, and the concept of death as a part of historical narrative. With any historical narrative, but especially with those which deal heavily with suffering and death, care must be taken in how we portray it. While looking at the Great Leap Forward, I will

be focusing on the personal side of the narrative as well as the various issues that are raised when writing about death historically.

There are several prominent ways of dealing with death as a part of history. One of the ways that is found most often in basic historical accounts is the use of statistics to give a basic, impersonal overview of the death toll. These numbers are helpful but they are often glossed-over and their implications ignored because of the sheer detached nature of numbers. A second common method is the use of personal anecdotes from those who encountered the horrors of death first hand. These are generally found in two places: anthropological studies conducted with extensive interviews and “human interest stories” which are meant to bring the reader as emotionally close to those who suffered through the original incident. Either of these methods can lead us to a partial truth, when used alone. The cold, calculated use of statistics can de-emphasize the severity of the atrocities suffered and make it seem as though the author is downplaying the event. On the other hand, too much focus on personal accounts can lead to biased conclusions and accusations of inflammatory writing. [3]

When dealing historically with an event which effected such a large population in such a severe way, as the Great Leap Forward did, we must use caution when reconstructing historical truths. In order to better understand the real impact of the Great Leap Forward we should examine a wide variety of primary sources. Anthropological studies as well as personal accounts are prime examples of sources which will help us better gain insight into the situation of those living in China during the GLF. The two anthropological works I would like to introduce are *Chinese Village Close Up* by Fei Xiaotong and *Chen Villiage under Mao and Deng* compiled by Anita Chan, Richard

Madison and Jonathan Unger. Both works have their strong and weak points based on their situations, presentations and methodologies. In *Chinese Village Close Up* Fei Xiaotong's methodologies for collecting data seem quite sound. Fei utilizes economic figures and equations to put together an accurate report of the village's situation. And yet we must understand that he was studying and writing in China during a time when reporting negatively about the Chinese government would have been considered dangerous. Therefore, we can reasonably assume that a certain amount of self-censorship must have occurred with the writing of this book. Also, the book was originally written in Chinese, and because I am using an English translation certain nuances might have been lost. But despite these factors *Chinese Village Close Up* remains an important resource. My second anthropological resource is *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*. *Chen Village* was compiled by a group of anthropologists and historians through extensive research and interviews. Their work is very thorough; however most of the interviews were conducted as many as 30 years after the events pertinent to this paper. But because of their attention to detail regard *Chen Village* as a reliable source.

Other sources available for using in research include accounts, such as diaries and memoirs, *Grass Soup* by Zhang Xianliang, *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang and *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Li Zhisui[4]. Each of these sources comes with its own point of view, filled with preconceived notions and biases; however, each one also provides valuable personal insight into the Great Leap Forward. *Grass Soup* is a unique source as it is a combination of diary entries, written during the time when the author was incarcerated in a CCP "thought reform" camp and memoirs written years after his time in the camp. It provides insight into the personal struggles of those directly affected by the

rural policy, as well as attitudes towards the Chinese Communist Party of the 1950s. A very different perspective is introduced by Jung Chang in her book *Wild Swans*. Although *Wild Swans* also gives valuable personal insight, the entire narrative was written long after the events had taken place by somebody who experienced the GLF as a young child. Despite this it gives us one of the most personal and uninhibited accounts available of the suffering caused by the GLF. The third and final personal source I will be using is *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, an exposé written by Chairman Mao's former doctor Li Zhisui. Although it was written with personal bias as well as a possible political motivation, his memoir does help us glean some specific knowledge about the GLF, due to his close proximity to Chairman Mao. These sources may all have their weak and strong points but together they are invaluable to those attempting to understand the varied aspects of the Great Leap Forward.

Politics and Economy

The Great Leap Forward is conventionally interpreted as a political movement, inspired by the "utopian" vision. The original theory of communism which was envisioned by Marx required a world-wide class struggle to lead to a global proletariat revolution, after which a true communist state could be built from the ground up. But later Marxist thinkers, specifically soviet Russians, began to theorize that a proletariat revolution could establish communism within a single state. The soviet Russian government had been working on a set of five year plans to slowly move their country

towards true communism, however the Chinese model was supposed to move faster and smoother than their Russian neighbors’.

In the 1950s China was beginning to build a socialist state. Society began to be re-arranged under the ideas of “class struggle.” In the countryside, this most negatively affected the landlords and rich peasants. The difference between a landlord and a rich peasant is that, although they may own close to the same amount of land, the rich peasants were those who worked on the land themselves, as well as hiring farm hands and possibly renting out sections. However, the landlords did not put any of their own manual labor into the land; instead they rented the land out to poor peasants who had to pay rent to use it. Landlords were notorious for being harsh and cruel masters of the poor, sometimes beating those who could not pay rent on time.[5]

During the land redistribution the landlord families were “struggled” against and stripped of most of their land and possessions, because they were designated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as being from the “bad” class. The rich peasants, although technically designated as part of the “bad” class, were not struggled against because they had the reputation of being hard-working and fair. They did, however, have much of their land taken from them and redistributed to poorer peasant families. This first step was met with resistance by those designated as part of the “bad” class, but it was quickly accepted by those poorer peasants who were now experiencing a great increase in their land size. This increase, for many, meant more stability and less chance of total crop failure. Many of the common peasants relied on subsistence agriculture, meaning that they ate the vast majority of what they grew, so if they experienced bad weather which destroyed most of their field the family would face starvation. With the increased plot

size the poorer peasants now were able to grow a larger and more varied crop, which meant they could live with substantially less fear of starvation due to crop failure.

In 1956, not long after the redistribution of land, the CCP introduced the idea of collective agriculture. Collective agriculture was seen by the Chinese government as one of the first steps toward their ultimate goal of communism. Collectives, which later became known as cooperatives, were formed by combining the land, resources, and labor of small groups of peasants. The larger agricultural units meant more stability for those who worked them. Although this was a big transition the peasants seemed optimistic about the eventual outcome. The burden of worry over famine caused by destroyed crop was lightened. And there was great enthusiasm at the promise of more prosperous yields, as they would mean fuller stomachs. But the government was not through, the next step, known as the Great Leap Forward, would be the last piece of the plan for agricultural collectivization.

In 1958 the Great Leap Forward began and the cooperatives were again consolidated into even larger communes. There were originally around seven hundred thousand cooperatives containing on average approximately a thousand people each, however under the communes of the GLF there were only twenty-four thousand communes with at least thirty thousand people in each.[6] These communes were organized under the idea of abolishing personal ownership and turning individual family units into one large communal family. People were to eat in the communal kitchens instead of their own homes; they were to work together in an equal and fair society, rid of the oppressive class system. This was basis of the Great Leap Forward; however, nothing is ever that simple.

During the Great Leap Forward, politics became intimately entwined with economy. According to the political rationale, the overall goal was to surpass Britain economically and industrially within 15 years. One of the first stages of these plans had to include class struggle and denunciation of the old “rightest” ways. This meant the dismantling of most academic institutions, such as colleges and research laboratories. The intellectuals who ran such institutions were seen as bourgeois, class enemies of the Communist Party. The trained scientists and theorists were denounced and often taken to “re-education camps” to be taught how to be true to the Party. They were replaced by untrained peasants, who had never before been more than farmers or foot soldiers. These peasants were seen as capable of more “pure” ideas because they had not been brainwashed by the bourgeoisie intellectual society.[7] This idea is often called the “Tabula Rasa theory”; this means that those uneducated people are like a “blank slate”, easy for those in power to write upon. Chairman Mao himself referred to the peasants as “poor and blank”, which was one of the reasons that they would make the best communists, because they were so easily indoctrinated into Maoist thought.[8]

However the peasants were not trained in the science of agriculture and therefore much of what they did was not economically sound. Some of the biggest agricultural policies, as they related to the act of farming, which were brought about through the soviet “peasant scientists” included close planting, deep planting and various new fertilizing techniques as well as theories on the benefits of leaving land fallow. These techniques were quickly adopted by the Chinese Communist Party during the Great Leap Forward. The CCP could not see the foolishness behind many of these “scientific” agricultural processes. They were brought to China more because of the political

implications of using the “science of the common people” than because of any positive field testing. Unfortunately these policies only helped to heighten the problems brought on by the Great Leap Forward.

Once underway, the Great Leap Forward promised that there would be an over abundance of grain and that the people would quickly be lead into a utopian society. The basic goal of the GLF was based on the Marxist ideal of a stable utopian society in which all people living in the perfect harmony of the communal living system.[9] However the actual guidelines the GLF employed to lead them to a utopia were not based on the Marxist theory of socio-economic development.[10] They instead relied greatly on the idea that the common peasants would lead the charge towards communism and would be inspired by the communist spirit to work for the general good instead of material rewards.[11]

The collectivist vision, however, was not economically sound. Collective agriculture deemphasizes rural subsidiary industry, in fact, under the leadership of the GLF subsidiary industry, outside of crude steel production[12], disappeared from the countryside all together. Previously, before collectivization the peasants had partaken in a plethora of small handicraft industries such as raw silk production. Before collectivization the peasants ate the vast majority of the food that they grew. It was the income from supplementary subsidiary industries which helped households pay for their additional expenses. Despite increased agricultural yields, without this additional income, the local economy could not flourish. People had fewer incentives to work because all that they produced would be consumed.[13] However, under the communist ideal, the focus was kept on agricultural production over other industries.

In the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, despite local economic downturns, the ideal promoted by the central government seemed to flourish, as did the agricultural yields. When the results of the first year of the GLF began to come in they seemed generally positive. Grain production was at an all time high. And due to these positive initial reports the expectations were raised further, such that those in charge believed that the success would only continue to grow with further faith in the Great Leap Forward. One of the large factors which lead to the raising of such high expectations among top party leaders was the fact that most of the county officials were more interested in being in the party's favor than actually executing a sound economic plan. When Chairman Mao, the leading creator of GLF policy, would receive reports from the provinces the reports would contain greatly inflated information about crop yields and iron production in an attempt by the officials to win Mao's favor. Even when he visited the countryside to see the wonderful news for himself what his eyes were greeted with was not reality, it was a show put on for his benefit. "In Hebei, party secretary Wang Renzhong had ordered the peasants to remove rice plants from faraway fields and transplant them along Mao's route, to give the impression of a wildly abundant crop." [14] This false information was quickly accepted by an overly enthusiastic Mao, and with that acceptance the politics of the GLF took another step down a dangerous road, totally disconnected from reality.

The peasants were also led down the path of dangerous expectations by the propaganda of the CCP. Because of improved conditions since the end of the Japanese occupation of World War II, the peasants held a lot of hope for what the government could do for them. The faith they held for the party, supplemented by the large

propaganda push the government was making for the GLF put the peasants in a dangerous situation where they listened more to the CCP's claims than to their own knowledge and experience. In the beginning of the GLF the peasants quickly embraced the government's optimistic proposal of "three meals a day" and began to consume rice at a rapid pace. The peasants called this the "eat-it-all-up period". In their blind adherences to Chinese government propaganda the peasants drained their surplus. Anthropologist Fei Xiaotong claims that this folly was one of the first steps which lead to widespread famine and blamed its occurrence on the CCP propaganda machine. Even before the famine truly hit the Chinese populace Fei was able to see the inevitable results of the careless manner which both government and peasants were treating their food supplies. "Whether or not there exists a grain shortage in this village will be determined by the way the villagers eat. If... vigilance were relaxed at all it would be quite easy for famine to hit between harvests." [15] Unfortunately Fei's dark prediction soon became reality.

In 1959 the weather in many parts of China took a poor turn and further devastated the already struggling crops across the country. In China, where 90 percent of the common peoples' nutrition came from agricultural products such as wheat and rice the crop devastation spelled certain disaster. [16] In 1959 Peng Dehuai, a People's Liberation Army marshal and the defense minister, wrote a personal letter to Mao in an attempt to raise his awareness of the failing of the GLF and the danger posed if nothing was done to curtail the growing problems. However Mao was still in denial about the truth of the GLF, aided by the false reports being sent to him from around the country. Therefore when Peng spoke out he was harshly criticized and stripped of his position and sent into exile. After that few dared raise their voices against the Great Leap Forward. This blind

obedience to those above coupled with a general lack of knowledge about economic and agricultural theory on the part of the policy makers lead to disaster for the Great Leap Forward. Ignoring the warning signs, the policy makers allowed the GLF to continue for another 2 years. Without any sort of government intervention on the behalf of the peasant workers the famine reached monstrous heights, it is estimated that between 20 and 30 million people died during the Great Leap Forward due to starvation and sickness[17]. In 1961 the realities of the failure of the GLF finally were known and accepted as truth by the Chinese government and the process of retracting the policies that lead to such colossal failure began. However the amount to which the government was willing to accept responsibility was debated. In a meeting of top officials Chairman Mao stated that the failure of the GLF was 70 percent caused by natural disaster and only 30 percent by human error. Liu Shaoqi disagreed with Mao, saying that the figures were more likely reversed, that the famine was caused 70 percent by human error and only 30 percent by nature. However, after the meeting only Mao's percentages were immediately published.[18]

Fiscal Policy of the GLF

The Great Leap Forward can also be viewed as a fiscal policy which attempted to solve a problem which had been plaguing the Chinese monetary system for centuries: the attempted removal of middlemen. This perspective is one of those most detached from the suffering and death experienced by the peasants during the Great Leap Forward. But none the less, it is an important insight to consider when studying the GLF. To

understand this we should consider history as cyclical, problems of the past reappear and must be considered again in the present. For China, the problem of sound fiscal policy was trapped in the cycle historians often refer to as the “longue duree”.[19] To understand this concept in the context of China we first must look quickly back on the history of Chinese fiscal policy.

As early as the 14th century and definitely by the 19th century tax collection had become a corrupt money-making enterprise, as tax collectors took advantage of the difficult position of the poor peasants for their own gain. Tax quotas had to be met, despite the poverty of those being collected from; as a result a profitable loan business emerged within the local governments. The middlemen made it possible for magistrates to collect their taxes as ordered, however, it put a terrible burden upon the already poor peasant community. In an attempt to cease the extortion being forced on them by the tax collectors, a second system arose in which the lower rural elite would pay the peasants’ taxes by proxy for a fee which was more tolerable than the loan rates of the tax collectors.[20]

This fiscal system, filled with middlemen and extortionists, caused instability and unrest within the rural communities. But the system was deeply rooted and difficult to change, especially in any way which would benefit the people without forcing the government to lose significant revenue. One of the goals of the Great Leap Forward was to solve this problem. The middleman was considered one of the enemies of the revolution and therefore removing him from power was seen as a necessity for the good of the state. The redistribution of land into collectives was the first stage; many of the “rich peasants” has previously been tax collectors for the old regime, by removing much

of their land and status the CCP dealt the first blow against the institution of middlemen. The next step the new government had to take was to address economic recovery. The urban sector of Chinese society was facing a grain shortage and the government had to find a way to collect the surplus grain from the country without allowing the old system of taxes and middlemen to re-emerge. The immediate solution was to set the market price and emplace a system of “unified grain purchase”[21]. Now, as a result of the “unified purchase”, as well as the collectivization of farming lands, the government more directly controlled the grain market the middleman lost out on much of his original revenue. In the words of Bo Yibo, “this arrangement facilitated the speed of tax collection, the procedures for purchase and supply, and the arrangements of advanced contracts for purchase.” [22]

However these steps did not fully solve the supply problem, in order to do that an increase in production would be required. This is where the Great Leap Forward was hatched. Mao Zedong strongly believed that any privatization of land hindered greater production. Therefore, to ensure best production rates, the ultimate goal must be complete communization of agriculture. However the policies in place for the Great Leap Forward demanded a level of surplus that could not be met, and indeed caused great suffering to the peasants who were forced to try. And because of this a massive famine plagued the countryside. The effects that the famine had on the administration were varied. Some cadres chose to break down the communes into smaller units, while others were dismantled all together. The government was reluctant to give up control over the grain resources the country collectives held. In time the communes were taken down but

the Chinese government's goal of maintaining its reach into the peasantry without middlemen continued.

Those Who Lived It

When I look at the different points of view, especially fiscal and political/economical, I can see such a cold, calculated nature to them. But they do get the facts across, the basic “truths” of the GLF. You can grasp the idea of the magnitude of the project and the grand scale of the failure of said project. But you don't get the feeling of the depth of the individual people's suffering. In this sense death stands almost as a metaphor for the suffering brought about by the Great Leap Forward in which the true depth of the experience is largely lost.[23] Yet this is an important area to portray. Much of the significance of the GLF comes with the immensity of the scale on which this happened. But numbers alone cannot convey the severity of these deaths. No living person truly understands death, which makes our job of portraying it historically all the more difficult. What we can understand is the phenomenon Paul Cohen best describes as “death anxiety”. Death anxiety is the feeling that those posed with the threat of their own deaths experience. The primary accounts of death deal primarily with this anxiety, as we cannot have any account after the person has actually died. Death anxiety can lead people into panic and chaos. With the threat of death weighing heavily on their minds people many not act rationally, which in the case of a farming community might lead them to

leave their fields and concentrate on the horrors, rather than a solution, which only heightens the problem.[24]

As I have previously stated, we have two options when it comes to the dark task of relating human suffering and death: We may recite numbers and vague descriptions of the cause of death, or does or we can recount the most personal and often goriest of details in an attempt to come face-to-face with the truth of human suffering. Part of me thinks that we do not quite grasp the horror until we have been forced to reckon with the stories of those who have suffered the worst the GLF had to offer. But another part of me can not help but wonder if the use of such inflammatory materials cheapens the historical integrity of the paper. This is a difficult dilemma; it is hard to put into words. But I have decided that it is important to hear the voices of those who suffered. This next section is dedicated to those who experienced the Great Leap Forward first hand. The extent of the suffering caused by the Great Leap Forward varied throughout the vast continent of China. As Fei Xiaotong says in his writing about the time, “each person’s experiences are enough to write a history.”[25] And the GLF touched millions upon millions of lives. The wide variety of experience is why it is most difficult to characterize the results of the GLF in any singular way. We must keep in mind that each person’s experience with death and suffering is very individual and it is impossible to find a universal experience, but by looking at many different experiences we can come closer to understanding the situation of those closest to the incident. It is not always a pleasant scene they depict, but it is one way to attempt to retrieve the truth.

When looking at the perspectives on death, specifically unnatural death, there are usually three different view-points we can consider: the witness, the perpetrator and the

victim.[26] The most common perspective is that of the witness, for this paper we find that in sources such as *Wild Swans*. The perpetrator is difficult to pin-point, but we can designate the government policy makers and local cadres who enforced these policies as the perpetrators; however these sources are scarce and highly biased. The third type, the victims, are the most difficult to find. We can identify those who starved but did not die as victims, in which case *Grass Soup* becomes a valuable source. I stated that there are usually three perspectives; however I would like to propose a fourth category, the victim-perpetrator. This fourth category is reserved for those who, under the stress of death-anxiety committed the crimes of murder and cannibalism to stay alive. This case is not common but was prevalent enough to warrant discussion.

According to an interview of a local peasant of Chen village, the peasants of the village were initially optimistic, and even enthusiastic, about the promise of communization. “We all worked together, moving from place to place. We ate wherever we happened to be; ah, in the beginning we were all so fat!”[27] Unfortunately their positive spirits soon faded as the Great Leap Forward’s poor planning and convoluted bureaucratic nature began to show. New plans for planting methods were brought down by the government, such as close planting, which was euphemistically termed “Sky Full of Stars” planting. Such plans were tentatively received by the farmers. They knew from years of experience that many of these new theories were foolish, however they could not argue against them for fear of being labeled a “rightist”[28].

They followed the plans of actions as laid out by the CCP, despite their better judgment. The plans were numerous, foolish and time consuming. They were ordered to create furnaces for producing iron in their back yards, in which they would melt down any and

all metal objects they could, even their own pots and pans, to make iron nuggets. Keeping these furnace fires stoked required constant diligence. The peasants were spending so much time following party orders that often important tasks were left undone. In the Chen village the peasants left the cut grain in the fields as they moved on to other tasks, the grain would inevitably rot and become uneatable. That year the entire harvest was given over to the collective to fill the “surplus” quota. There was no grain stored by the peasants themselves.

As winter approached the repercussions of the system began to take their toll. “People were so hungry they had difficulty sleeping... Some people became ill and some of the elderly died. Our [Chen] village became quiet, as if the people were dead.”[29] With the disastrous results of the first meager harvest under the policies of the Great Leap Forward, the peasants had lost much of their hope and motivation for the project. Without any tangible incentives, the peasants saw no reason to plant for the next season. Instead they let their fields lay fallow as they scavenged for wild food or simply stayed home, conserving their energy.

For those who witnessed the GLF first-hand certain horrors are not easily forgotten, even if those who witnessed them were very young at the time. Jung Chang, a young daughter of two Chinese officials, grew up in Chengdu during the time of the Great Leap Forward. Despite her privileged position and young age, the toll of the GLF catastrophe touched her as well. She remembers seeing starving people swollen with Edema, a disease in which the malnourished body fills with fluid until the limbs are swollen.[30] People would attempt to treat Edema by eating chlorella seeds soaked in

urine. Since the people in urban areas were fed first those in the countryside were even more prone to Edema.

People were driven crazy with hunger, there was death everywhere, people were constantly filled with fear and anxiety over death, and because of this they did whatever they could to keep themselves alive.

“One day in 1960, the three-year-old daughter of my aunt Jun-ying’s next-door neighbor in Yibin went missing. A few weeks later the neighbor saw a young girl playing in the street wearing a dress that looked like her daughter’s. She reported this to the police. It turned out that the parents of the young girl were selling wind-dried meat. They had abducted and murdered a number of babies and sold them as rabbit meat at exorbitant prices.”[31]

Such stories were not altogether uncommon. People could not survive on their meager rations alone. Most did not resort to cannibalism, instead they spent their days picking any kind of wild grasses, roots and leaves that they could make into soup to ease their aching stomachs.

In fact, the idea of supplementing the low food rations with wild grasses became official policy in 1959. The period was called “lowered-rations-to-be-substituted-with-gourds-and-greens”. These “greens” were a wide assortment of weeds and grasses; practically anything the human body would accept, and sometimes things it would not, were thrown into the communal stew pots. The greens provided very little energy but they did help to subdue hunger pains. Some people were able to adjust and maintain a positive attitude despite the harsh conditions. “It is true that I enjoy eating all kinds of grass, but I particularly favor bitter greens and purslane. Kukucai and dandelions are in

the 'composite' family, like chrysanthemums. Dandelion greens have apparently become the rage on the tables of Europe and Japan. At the time we had no inkling of their fashionable future – we knew the plants simply as 'grass', or 'wild greens', and we ate a lot of them.”[32] But the majority found that the grasses did not provide enough energy for them to continue their physically demanding agricultural work. Many would crawl out of their homes only to eat the grass stew, before crawling back into their beds to nurse their hunger and conserve what energy remained.

Eventually, in 1961 the policies of the Great Leap Forward were rolled back and famine relief was sent to the millions suffering across the country. It took years after the end of the GLF for the truth of the severity of the mistakes made by the CCP to come to light. The lives lost during the GLF can never be reclaimed, however we should continue to study to GLF so that we can understand not only what happened but also how the people of China coped with such a disastrous time.

Conclusion

Great Leap Forward was an event in history that warrants much debate and discussion. The GLF can be studied from many angles and perspectives. For any thorough historical study research must be done in many areas. For these purposes I focused my attention on four specific side of the GLF, politicization of agriculture, economics, fiscal policy, and the sociology of the effects. These four sides are each unique and yet are intricately woven together to provide the fabric of the GLF. And within that framework I focused on the portrayal of death. With any large historical

movement which led to the deaths of as many people as the GLF did, we as historians have to pay close attention to the manner in which we portray death. As we grow to understand the policies and long historical background of the GLF we must bear in mind the consequences in terms of human suffering. If we merely give numbers and statistics about the deaths of the 20 to 30 million Chinese people we are not truly able to come to terms with the experienced truth. However, on the other hand, if we focus solely on the graphic and morbid nature of the suffering of individual people we will not be able to fully understand the implications of the GLF in the realms of politics, economy or fiscal policy. We have to balance our perspective so that we may perceive many truths at once, because an event as large as the GLF cannot be boiled down to one truth, but must be looked at from all sides to understand its intricacies.

This paper is an attempt to do just that. Despite all the work done in this field there are very few studies which try to interconnect the various aspects of the GLF while keeping in mind the central theme of death as part of the historical narrative. Hopefully my work will inspire others to look at the GLF from more than one side, to view it as more than a simple mono-causal narrative.

Of course the ideas expressed in the paper can be further expanded, both within and past the time-frame in this paper. I expanded on four perspectives within one theme, however there are more avenues left to be explored within the realm of the Great Leap Forward. Aside from searching out other perspectives, we can also take the framework I have provided and apply it to the time directly following the repeal of the GLF policies. The effects of the GLF continued to affect the people of China after the program was officially halted.

[1] Spence, Jonathan, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace, the Chinese and their Revolution*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 226.

[2] My methodology of looking at one historical moment from multiple perspectives has been largely inspired and influenced by Paul Cohen's methodologies he discusses in his book *History in Three Keys*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Cohen breaks history down into three sectors, “event, experience and myth”. Within the context of my research of the Great Leap Forward the same basic themes can be found. I will discuss the GLF as event when I layout the basic narrative, the experience will be found in the first-hand accounts of those who lived through the GLF, the myth is found within both the policies, political, economic and social, and the propaganda and second-hand reporting which presented the GLF in both exaggerated and understated ways. By using Cohen's work as a guide I have been able to more clearly identify the differing angles of the GLF and construct this paper accordingly.

[3] To address this issue I will employ the theory of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which would lead me to look at “micro-history” of certain small instances within China. By looking at a sample area, according to Geertz we may analyze that localized event to help us extrapolate a larger truth. To do this we must look at both the attitudes as well as the actions of the people in question, so that we may draw a clearer picture of the event as a whole. My study methods in employing Geertz are based on class notes taken from lectures by Susannah Ottaway, Assistant Professor of History, at Carleton College, winter 2004, based on Geertz's work in *Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[4] Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, trans. Tai Hung-Chao, (New York: Random House, 1994) 272-75, 276-78.

[5] Chan, Anita, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 19-32.

[6] Spence, 225.

[7] Becker, Jasper, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 61.

[8] Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism: Eight Essays*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 67-69.

[9] Meisner, 193.

[10] Marxist theory stipulates that the evolution of a society should proceed through four distinct stages, defined largely by economic factors. These stages include: primitive communism, slavery, feudal, capitalism and communism. Although these stages may coexist you cannot proceed to one stage without passing through the one preceding it. This is significant to note because the Chinese had never entered a true capitalist state and therefore Maoist communism had to diverge from its Marxist roots.

[11] Fairbank, John K., *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986) 299.

[12] Steel production in backyard furnaces as a policy of the GLF will be discussed later in this paper in more detail.

[13] Fei Xiaotong, *Chinese Village Close-Up*, (Beijing: New World Press, 1983) 182-85.

[14] Cheek, Timothy, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions*, (Boston: Bedford Series Press, 2002) 209.

[15] Fei, 182.

[16] Eastman, Lloyd E., *Family, Fields and Ancestors*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 62.

[17] Spence, 226.

[18] Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1991) 235.

[19] Theories on the “long duree” were based largely on notes taken from lectures by Susannah Ottaway, Assistant Professor of History, at Carleton College, winter 2004, and readings from Braudel, Fernand, *A History of Civilizations*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

[20] Kuhn, Philip A., *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 80-82.

[21] Kuhn, 104.

[22] Kuhn, 107.

[23] Cohen, 175.

[24] Cohen 175-76.

[25] Fei, 151.

[26] Cohen, 176-94.

[27] Chan, 25.

[28] Chan, 25.

[29] Chan, 25.

[30] Jung, 231.

[31] Jung, 234.

[32] Zhang Xianliang, Grass Soup, (Boston: R. Godine, Publisher, Inc, 1993) 24.

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