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The Great Leap Famine and Amartya Sen

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Great Leap Famine and Amartya Sen

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Introduction

The infamous Great Leap Famine in 1959 to 1962 is the worst famine in modern Chinese history. The catastrophic famine caused gigantic casualties, estimated from 23 million to 46 million people.¹ A professor from Hong Kong University of Science and technology, James Kai-sing Kung and a professor from Peking University, Justin Yifu Lin, argues that political radicalism created the Great Leap Famine.² Ineffective policies were carried out – grain procurement and steel and iron production – while government officials focused on protecting their careers by enforcing unrealistic goals which starved peasants to death.³

Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate argues, “in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.”⁴ According to Sen, severe famine does not happen if a country is autonomous (independent), fair and accountable (democratic), and encourages free exchange of ideas (free press). Autonomous government has the power to allocate resources according to domestic concerns, and democratic government has duty to accommodate societal concerns guided by the rule of law. Relatively free press allows citizens to express their concerns freely and notifies government with challenges in society.

The Great Leap Famine in China could also have been prevented if China at the time was independent, democratic, with a relatively free press, as Sen suggested. The Great Leap Famine was led by three key factors: Mao ignoring precautionary alarm suggested by the political elites; Mao silencing intellectuals from suggesting alternative agricultural-scientific theories; and top

¹ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-62* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 324, 333.

² James Kai-sing Kung and Justin Yifu Lin, “The Causes of China’s Great Leap Famine, 1959-1961,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52, no.1 (2003): 67.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no.3 (1999): 3-17.

leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were not informed about the villagers dying of famine. These could have been prevented under the Sen's conditions because democratic institutionalization allows political elites to freely discuss policies, freedom of expression encourages intellectuals to freely criticize scientific theories, and democratic election and mass media coverage motivates citizens to freely address their concerns. In addition to Sen's argument, authoritarian government can also prevent substantial famine if the government is autonomous, fair, accountable, and encourages free exchange of ideas such as China today.

What is the Great Leap Famine?

The casualties of the Great Leap Famine vary among scholars. Most of the estimates were based on the *1984 Statistical Yearbook* by the National Statistical Bureau, which provides official figures on population, birth and death rates between 1950 to 1982.⁷ Peng Xizhi estimated 23 million, Judith Banister reached 30 million, Cao Shuji suggested 32.5million, Yang Jisheng concluded 36 million, and Jung Chang proposed 38 million.⁸ However, a renowned historian Frank Dikötter proposes at least 45 million casualties because population numbers in *1984 Statistical Yearbook* is inflated. He argues that since 1964, overall population was systematically inflated by more than one percent or in some counties as high as 2.2 percent because local cadres wanted to receive greater rations and other goods.⁹

The severity of the famine is reflected upon testimonials from the survivors. Yu Wenhai, a production team account in Huaibin County's Fanghu Township, describes as follows:

⁷ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-62* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 324.

⁸ Ibid, 325.

⁹ Ibid, 333.

It was not unusual for people to eat corpses. I myself did so at Yaozhuang. I had gone to see the production team head Yao Denju, and in the production team office I smelled the fragrance of cooked meat... Gao Hongwen of the Gaozhuang production team had three children. When he went to build the railway at Guangminggang, his wife cooked up all three children and ate them.¹⁰

The Great Famine was a consequence of the CCP's socialist campaign Great Leap Forward which lasted from 1958 to 1962. The Great Leap Forward was proposed to transform China's agrarian society into industrial and socialist society. The state abolished private property, and citizens were encouraged to join communes where they collectively worked together to produce agricultural output. Farmers kept minimal crops based on their family size while majority of productions went to the state who used these agricultural products to fund industrial sectors.¹¹ In just three years of the movement, investment on industrial sectors doubled from 14.4 billion yuan in 1957 to 38.9 billion yuan in 1960.¹² As a consequence, major relocation of people from rural areas to the cities occurred, and by 1960, urban state-workers reached 31.24 million out of 50.44 million state-workers in total.¹³

This rapid transition from agriculture to industry significantly damaged the Chinese economy. People in the cities suffered from high inflation, and industries could not pay workers

¹⁰ Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2012), 41

¹¹ Sue Williams, "A Century of Revolution. Part II: The Mao Years (1949-76)," Directed by Sue Williams (New York: Zeitgest Films, 1994).

¹² Nicholas R. Lardy, "The Chinese economy under stress, 1958-1965," in *The People's Republic, Part I: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1949-1965*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 38-87.

¹³ *Ibid*, 368.

due to increased labor cost.¹⁴ Meanwhile, people in the countryside suffered from reduced labor but with higher demands in food productions to accommodate urban population.¹⁵ Although collectivization and rapid urbanization may have played a role in the famine, more problematic was that the state remained unresponsive to the society in need during this radical change. The Great Leap Famine occurred because the dictatorial leader ignored alarms from his political elites, promoted inappropriate agricultural policies without challenging scientific theories, and leaders of the CCP was not informed about suffering citizens.

Mao ignores Political Elites

Mao ignored political elites who tried to fix the early failures of the Great Leap Famine through severe persecution. During the early stages of the Great Leap Forward, the CCP political elites tried to fix the ineffective state policy. After one year of policy implementation, many provincial cadres started to dismantle the communal system because of its unproductivity.¹⁶ People lacked incentives to work hard in communes because everyone was paid equally disregarding the effort they put in.¹⁷ In order to motivate workers, provincial party leaders introduced household contracting system that allowed each workers take extra output if they produced more than contracted amount.¹⁸ However, the gradual shift from unproductive communes into motivating household contracting system was put to an end after the Lushan Conference.

¹⁴ Sue Williams, "A Century of Revolution. Part II: The Mao Years (1949-76)," Directed by Sue Williams (New York: Zeitgest Films, 1994).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 48-49.

¹⁷ Ibid, 50.

¹⁸ Ibid, 49.

A British journalist, Jasper Becker, argues that the Lushan Conference was the best chance to stop Mao and its ineffective policies.¹⁹ In July and August of 1959, Lushan mountain at Jiangxi province, the CCP elites gathered to discuss the Great Leap Forward. During this meeting, Defence Minister Peng Dehwei wrote a “letter of opinion,” handwritten with 10,000 characters, to Mao. The mood of Peng’s letter is depicted in the verse from Beijing Opera:

The millet is scattered over the ground.

The leaves of the sweet potato are withered.

The young and old have gone to smelt iron.

To harvest the grain there are children and old women.

How shall we get through the next year?

I shall agitate and speak out on behalf of the people.²⁰

Peng advised Mao for systematic and sober assessment of the Great Leap Forward because the Leap created conflicts between worker-peasant relationships and urban-rural developments.²¹ Peng further contended that the CCP, which had won their power with the sacrifices of peasants, must be responsible for famine.²² Although Peng addressed genuine concern for the welfare of Chinese people, dictatorial Mao was unwilling to listen to his friend’s advice. Mao argued that the suffering is “nothing but the tuition fees that must be paid to gain experience...come back in ten years and see whether we were correct.”²⁴ Consequently, Mao branded Peng and Peng’s

¹⁹ Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine* (London: John Murray, 1996), 87.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 88.

²¹ Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 51.

²² Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine* (London: John Murray, 1996), 88.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 89.

supporters as “right opportunists,” and began severe persecution.²⁵ Mao’s persecution of Peng who was his closest friend and hero of the Korean War, silenced other political elites from further questioning Mao. Also, Mao was unwilling to accept different ideas from political elites who advocated for household contracting system, which could have alleviated famine, and began collective punishment with Peng.²⁶ Inevitably, the household contracting system was suppressed and commune system became more strictly enforced. Due to Mao’s unwillingness to listen to political elites, China lost its chance to reverse the failing policy and silenced political elites from challenging bad policies, which ultimately resulted in the Great Famine.

Mao promotes false Scientific theory

In prior to launching the Great Leap Forward, Mao persecuted many intellectuals and as a result, unproductive scientific theories intensified the famine. In 1956, the CCP encouraged citizens to express concerns during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. However, Mao shortly reversed his stance because citizens were questioning the legitimacy of the single party dictatorship. Between 1957 to 1959, the CCP led Anti-Rightist Movement to persecute intellectuals who criticized against the government, and by 1958, three hundred thousand citizens were labeled as “Rightist.”²⁷ When the CCP launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958, intellectuals were in fear of criticizing government policies. As a result, the unproductive scientific theories Mao implemented were left unchallenged and contributed to the Great Leap Famine. Three key scientific myths that played significant role in the Great Leap Famine were close-planting, excessive use of fertilizer and backyard furnaces.

²⁵ Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 52.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “Uneasy silences punctuate 60th anniversary coverage,” *China Media Project*, 10 Sept. 2009, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2009/09/10/1740/>, accessed 28 Oct. 2016.

Firstly, Mao promoted close planting based on the idea from a Soviet agronomist Trofim Lysenko.²⁸ Lysenko hypothesized that seeds of same class do not compete with each other if they were densely planted, therefore, increasing overall productivity.²⁹ However, his hypothesis proved to be false for same family crops compete each other for growth.³⁰ Increased competition created inferior crops which decreased their grain production and enlarged their leaves for better photosynthesis.³¹ Secondly, the use of excessive fertilizer was implemented because the increase in green crops production level in 1957 coincided with the increase in fertilization rate.³² However, when used excessively, fertilizer decreased overall production because once past the threshold, it dries out the leaves and even causes plants to die which is referred to as a fertilizer burn.³³ Thirdly, Mao believed installing furnaces in the backyard of every commune will allow production of high quality steel out of scrap metal.³⁴ However, the steels produced in backyard furnaces were of low-quality that could not be used in industrial sectors. It only depleted resources and tired out labor force without producing any valuable output. If intellectuals were not persecuted, hence challenging Mao from implementing unproductive scientific theories, the Great Leap Forward could not have been as catastrophic as it had been.

Mao uninformed of Village concerns

²⁸ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-62* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 39.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bunny Guinness, "Correct plant spacing for a fabulous border," *Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/6692693/Correct-plant-spacing-for-a-fabulous-border.html>, accessed 1 Nov. 2016.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Chung-kuo, Nung-pao, "The Fertilizer Work Over the Past Decade," *Extracts from China Mainland Magazines*, no.187 (Oct. 2, 1959), 23.

³³ Susan Jones, "Fertilizer Burn," *American Orchid Society* 2008, <http://www.aos.org/orchids/orchid-pests-diseases/fertilizer-burn.aspx>, accessed 1 Nov. 2016.

³⁴ Zhi-Sui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: the memoirs of Mao's personal physician* (New York: Random House, 1994), 272-274, 278.

During the Great Leap Famine, the villagers who were dying of famine could not address their concerns to the leaders of the CCP because local officials silenced village petitions. The CCP has been top-down unitary system where orders are passed down from top to bottom of the system. However, the concerns from the bottom had to surpass many layers before reaching to the top.³⁵ When citizens addressed their concerns to local officials, these petitions were easily diverted before escalating to senior officials.³⁶ Also, when citizens petitioned directly to Beijing through petition department, regional concerns were sent back to regional officers.³⁷ These structures combined with restricted freedom of press, limited citizens to address severity of famine to the top political leaders of the CCP.

The lack of communication between the state and the society further resulted in exploiting the villagers. Under the pressure from their superiors to produce higher agricultural output, the regional officials inflated agricultural production. Instead of actual 5 tons, local officials reported 10 tons, and local officials used false reports to calculate the amount of state's and peasants' share in agricultural output.³⁹ The consequence of false reporting was paid by the peasants whose agricultural output was mostly taken by the state leaving lessor for themselves. When peasants repelled against the predatory state, they were punished with violence. According to Frank Dikötter, local cadres beat up local villagers, buried alive, thrown into pounds, forced to labor in the middle of winter, and etc.⁴⁰ Around six to eight percent of those who died during the

³⁵ Sue Williams, "A Century of Revolution. Part II: The Mao Years (1949-76)," Directed by Sue Williams (New York: Zeitgest Films, 1994).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Laura M. Luehrmann, "Facing Citizen Complaints in China, 1951-1996," *Asian Survey* 43, no.5 (2003): 852.

³⁹ Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza and Robin Zeitz, "Famine in China, 1958-61," *Population and Development Review* 10, no.4 (1984): 621-622.

⁴⁰ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-62* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), 294-96.

Great Leap Famine were tortured to death in regional level.⁴¹ The vicious cycle of state exploiting peasants persisted because peasants could not address their concerns to anybody other than the abusers, under the unitary system without relatively free press.

Amartya Sen and the Great Leap Famine

As Sen describes, if China at the time was independent and democratic, and had relatively free press, the Great Leap Famine could have been prevented. The state would have been more responsive to concerns from political elites, ideas from scientists, and concerns from citizens. Both political elites and leaders could have freely discussed about the cost and benefits of the policies and collectively come up with the best state policy. Also, unproductive scientific theories would have been challenged by other intellectuals, preventing them from harming the economy, and replaced by efficient theories. Furthermore, village concerns would have been addressed to the political leaders through elections and mass media coverage.

First, if Sen's conditions were met, Mao would not have been able to ignore political elites who tried to reverse famine. Leaders in democracies are more responsive toward alternative ideas because power is not centralized in one leader. The governmental power is dispersed through institutionalization in judiciary, legislative, executive bodies where each body check performances of one another. During the Great Leap Famine, Mao would not have been able to persecute all the political elites who objected his policies because democratic institutionalization limits leader's power. Also, opposition party can freely question the leader's performance in democracies. If China were democratic, General Peng's letter of opinion would not have been ignored, and provincial party cadres would have been rewarded for increasing

⁴¹ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-62* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010), xiii.

production output through household contracting system. Overall, Sen's statement correctly describes the Great Leap Famine because democratic institutionalization limits leaders' power and political opposition have freedom to object the leader which together could have prevented China from the severe famine.

Second, if Sen's conditions were met, the false and unproductive scientific theories implemented by the CCP could have been challenged and prevented from causing famine. Intellectuals in democracies are encouraged to openly debate over theories and their ideas are shared through relatively free press. This open discussion is critical in science because scientific theories are falsifiable. During the Great Leap Famine, scientific myths such as close planting, excess fertilizer usage, and steel production at backyard furnaces could have been prevented if these theories were open to discussion. The scientists could have been freely tested and debated over practicalities of suggested theories. And based on the proposed solutions, the government, could have used these ideas to fix false assumptions and implement most efficient scientific strategies. Overall, Sen correctly describes the Great Leap Famine because democracy with relatively free press would have encouraged intellectuals to openly discuss about the scientific theories. Eventually these ideas could advise the state with most efficient strategies, while preventing from having unproductive scientific theories which intensified famine.

Third, if Sen's conditions were met, the villagers could have addressed severity of the famine directly to the political leaders. In democracies, the state officials carry-out policies based on the popular consensus and citizens have the power to elect state representatives who can reflect their interest. Also, having relatively free press allows both citizens and the state to acquire accurate information about the realities of each other and share concerns mutually. During the Great Leap Famine, villagers would have been able to express their concerns to the

CCP leaders through mass media, and local officials wouldn't have reported the inflated figures nor been able to beat the citizens to death. If democratic, citizens would have voting power as their leverage against the authority, and local officials would have been responsive to citizens' concern rather than trying to satisfy senior officials through inflated figures. Furthermore, newspapers could have written about failures of the Great Leap Famine and reported about local officials committing violence to village farmers. Overall, Sen is correct in a sense that if China was democratic with relatively free press, citizens would have been able to express their concerns through election and press while the government would have been motivated to accommodate citizens' concerns, ultimately preventing the Great Leap Famine. Eventually, the idea of mutual dependence between the state and the society could have prevented having a severe famine.

China Today: Authoritarian government that listens

Still authoritarian, the government of China now leads one of the largest economies in the world without experiencing substantial famine since the Great Leap Famine. What has changed from the Great Famine is that the CCP very responsive government which encourages limited freedom of expression.⁴³ Over the past few decades, the CCP tried to incorporate fair and accountable government with freedom of expression, implementing merit-based promotion, village level democracy, rule of law, protest permissions, and less censored media. Of course, these are not absolute freedom nor fairness because legitimacy of the CCP cannot be discussed and corruption is broadly evident. However, the CCP has certainly evolved to be much more adaptive to the significant challenges of the society than it was back in 1950s, and is now capable

⁴³ Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the limits of Democracy* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

of even leading the global economy. Still authoritarian, Chinese government values free expression of ideas and responds to the society as in democracy by implementing these ideas. In short, not only independent and democratic with relatively free press as Sen suggested, but also any form of government which values exchange of thoughts and is willing to responds to the citizens can evade substantial famine.

Conclusion

Some scholars argue that famines occurred in democratic countries such as Bangladesh in 1974, Sudan in 1986-1988 and Ireland in 1945-1949. However, Burchi contends that “Bangladesh was democratic and liberal in name only and South Sudan and Ireland was not considered as parts of the United Kingdom respectively.”⁴⁴ Although these countries may have appeared as democratic, they were oppressed by their governments.

As Sen suggested, if China had independent and democratic government with relatively free press in 1950s, the Great Leap Famine could have been prevented. During the Great Leap Famine, Mao ignored political elites, silenced intellectuals, and was not informed about villagers’ concerns, ultimately resulting in the catastrophic famine with millions of casualties. The famine could have been prevented under the Sen’s conditions because democratic institutionalization allows political elites to freely discuss policies, freedom of expression encourages intellectuals to freely criticize scientific theories, and democratic election and mass media coverage motivates citizens to freely address their concerns. However, when looking at current Chinese government, not only democratic but also independent, fair, and accountable authoritarian government which encourages free exchange of ideas could evade substantial famine as well.

⁴⁴ Francesco Burchi, “Democracy, institutions and famines in developing and emerging countries,” *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 32, no.1 (2011): 22.

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