

Historians have disagreed about how far Mao was to blame for the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine more than any other cause, what is your view about how far Mao?

By 1958, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had used the first Five Year Plan, the Hundred Flowers Campaign and their propaganda programmes to consolidate their economic, political and social position in China. As a result, Mao's ambitions were high, and he vowed to overtake Britain economically in 15 years at a meeting with Khrushchev. However, the scope of the failure of the subsequent campaign and the destruction it caused can be recorded as one of the biggest man-made calamities of the 20th Century, with the resultant casualties numbering in the tens of millions. The debate over the causes have been categorised into four generic ideas: the failures of central government, that of local government, the impact of natural disasters, and 4 the USSR's split with China. The nature of records from the Chinese Communist Party is one of pro-CCP agenda and misinformation, as well as the extensive censorship on any media published about the period in China, this means that the amount that official records can be used is questionable and historians in the period straight after the Great Leap Forward had little access to accurate accounts, consequently, there is still much debate over the GLF. Furthermore, throughout this piece both the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and Great Famine (GF) will be referenced in relation to their causes, yet in many instances the causes of one can be considered the cause of both, since the GLF itself was a direct source of the famine.

The first historian and journalist that stands out first is Yang Jisheng and his book: *Tombstone the Great Chinese famine*. Jisheng is a Chinese national born in 1940 who watched his father die due to starvation in the Great Leap. Thinking this was an isolated tragedy he continued to fervently support the Party. Yet his opinion began to change with the Cultural Revolution and his assignment to Xinhua news Agency. During his career as a journalist, he began to gather sources and information about the Great Leap, finally comprehending the scale of its destruction. In contrast, Lee Feigon juxtaposes Jisheng as an American. In *Mao: A Reinterpretation* he gives support to Mao, yet when discussing the Great Leap Feigon does appreciate that it was a failure and Mao made mistakes. Never forgetting to claim these mistakes were that alone and not, as others would suggest, deliberate moves to cause destruction. Feigon comes from a seemingly neutral background, finding his data and sources much from official and unofficial party documents about Mao himself. Lastly, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday also contradict the opinion of Feigon. Chang, born in 1952, grew up comfortably in China since her father was a top cadre in the Party and her family enjoyed far more luxuries than most of the population. Chang's view was drastically changed during the Cultural Revolution, where she and her parents were denounced and expelled from their positions of splendour.

Yang Jisheng

When discussing the Great Famine, Jisheng appears to take an objective approach to the events, despite his connection to the disaster. As a result, he considers 3 broad causes; Mao himself, his impact on the politics of the GLF and the effect he had on the development of a totalitarian regime in China, the effect of the Soviet Union's split with China and finally the impact of natural disasters at the time.

In the latter part of his book, the chapter describes the causes of the famine begins with the heading, "Mao Zedong, China's Last Emperor"¹, from here then the author illustrates how in his opinion Mao

¹Jisheng, Y., (2008) *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-62*, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX: New York. 505

designed senior Chinese government to revolve around him, attempting to take advantage of a totalitarian/dictatorial leadership style. As a result, the author claims Chairman Mao held the greatest hand in causing the famine, in his neglect of the true problems, and consequently his actions in placing blame on the party cadres and other factors that did not reflect reality. Jisheng does this by explaining that from the inception of the Party and their insurgent nature under the Nationalist government pre-1949, Mao had believed in the importance of his peasant's revolt, with him as the prime leader. However, as the Party was established in China and being leader became more about running the country instead of leading a revolution, Mao remained steadfast in wanting to be supreme leader, despite this no longer being what was required of him. This is highlighted by Mao's pursuit for "constant revolution", dictated by Mao Zedong Thought, the media to which was ubiquitous in Chinese society². As the Party's control grew from central government to the military, media and almost every other section of society, as did Mao's hold in and on China become stronger, or as Jisheng states; "(Mao's) iron grip on the party and the military made him China's ultimate political and ideological authority"³. With this, the author states that violence was inevitable, as when the time of the famine came it was the cadres who were used as scapegoats while the "victims of the disaster continued to venerate Chairman Mao"⁴. Jisheng claims that instead of addressing the problem, Mao and the Central Committee elected to blame "political and class enemies" at the grassroots level, despite the "greatest injury had resulted from faithful execution of the Central Committee's policies"⁵ and that the Central Committee was ultimately responsible. These claims are reflective of the events of the time, as during the GLF and beginnings of the famine, the party introduced ludicrous campaigns such as the "Backyard furnace campaign", an initiative designed to encourage the peasant population to melt down any metal they had into pig iron or steel for other industrial projects. However, this only meant that much of the peasants' useful tools and machinery were taken apart, as well as the metal produced being such a low quality that it could not be used. The historian emphasises his point, giving examples such as that of Mao's request for a dramatic increase in the production of Mao-tai Liquor, for which 10,040 tons of grain was then allocated, which could have gone to the 200,000 inhabitants of Guizhou Renhuai County, most of whom then starved as a result in the GF⁶.

Elsewhere in the book, Jisheng considers the effects of exogenous factors from the Party, such as the split from the Soviet Union and the claims of extensive flooding/ natural disaster. Of the USSR, the author completely discounts this, and that to "blame the Famine on the Soviet Union's abrogation of its agreements is in clear contradiction of facts"⁷. Since the withdrawal of soviet experts and reneging on contracts had little to no effect on soviet industry and agriculture⁸. He does this in addition to eviscerating the view that soviet pressure on China to repay debts also contributed to the disaster⁹. Moreover, concerning the impact of anomalic rain patterns, Jisheng once again refutes Mao's claim attributing the GF to "natural calamity"¹⁰ instead leaning towards validating Liu Shaoqi's comment that

² Mao Zedong Thought, available at: (<https://chineseposters.net/themes/mao-thought>), [11/10/2021]

³ Jisheng, Y., (2008) *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-62*, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX: New York. 506

⁴ *Ibid.* 514

⁵ *Ibid.* 466

⁶ *Ibid.* 482

⁷ *Ibid.* 442

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* 443

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 472

the disaster was “three parts natural disaster and seven parts man-made disaster”¹¹, a conclusion the party official came to after interviewing peasants and party cadres alike, as well as this view being contrary to the usual consensus of the time for senior party members, pointing to the plausibility and trustworthiness of this comment.

Before concluding and evaluating the argument that Yang Jisheng presents, it is essential to consider the background and methodology, from/by which the author is writing, as this may influence how his argument and evidence is weighted. Jisheng is a Chinese national who grew during the time of the famine and experienced the death of his father as a result of it. Later in his life he joined the Xinhua News Agency, a state-run agency that was immensely influential in the Mao era of China. In addition, he joined the CCP in 1964 and remained a strong supporter until the events of the Cultural Revolution, which was the inception of his doubts about the Party and their efficacy. The final straw came then in 1989 with the Tiananmen Square massacre, destroying his last loyalties to the Party. During his time working as a journalist, Jisheng and his colleagues were able to collect first-hand accounts, conduct interviews across the provinces most afflicted by the GF, as well as find documents and evidence that only went to solidify his view.¹²

It appears that despite his close affiliation with the CCP, by the tone used and diligence of research, that Jisheng writes without any leaning agenda, instead being objective in his views and analysis of events. This is highlighted as he effectively takes into account all the factors and views them considering what he sees as the facts. His conclusion is that Mao became an arrogant leader who “regarded himself as an emperor”¹³, and was the most direct cause of the Great Famine. By his contributions ignoring the real problems, instead lying to the general population about not only the extent of the crisis, but also its presence at all. Jisheng’s evaluation is thereby extremely valuable for answering the question of who was to blame for the famine for two main reasons; the evidence is gathered and analysed without agenda, also being a source that has been scarce used by western historians due to the nature of Chinese party documents. Secondly the judgement Jisheng ends with is consistent with much of the historical consensus, adding credence to his conclusion.

Lee Feigon

As a revisionist, the majority of Feigon’s book is a pro-Mao description perspective on the Chairman of the CCP and his actions in this position. Despite this, the circumstances of the Great Leap Forward force him to admit that in this time Mao made mistakes. However, since the purpose of the book is to make the reader become more lenient to Mao, the chapter concerning the GLF and Great Famine is at odds with itself, between the opinion of Feigon and the facts of the time which lean against him. Due to this the author makes references to the opinions of others, instead of statistics of the period. Feigon casts two main opinions when discussing the Great Leap Forward, firstly that the mistakes of party cadres and provincial officials led to mass mismanagement and complications, but secondly that some of Mao’s actions did cause problems for the party and the people. The author also refers to foreign tensions such as the split with the Soviet Union, or over some islands between China and Taiwan, although he fails to give much information on the impact this had on the GLF and GF.

¹¹(1991), Selected works of Liu Shaoqi (*1st Edition*), People's Publishing House: Beijing. 315

¹² Jisheng, Y., (2008) *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-62*, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX: New York. 43, 145, 158, 257, 260, 293

¹³ *Ibid.* 505