

# The Emperor Strikes Back: Political Status, Career Incentives and Grain Procurement during China's Great Leap Famine\*

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*Using China's Great Leap Famine as example, this article shows how political career incentives can produce disastrous outcomes under the well-intended policies of a dictator. By exploiting a regression discontinuity design, the study identifies the causal effect of membership status in the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee—full (FM) versus alternate members (AM)—on grain procurement. It finds that the difference in grain procurement between AMs and FMs who ranked near the discontinuity threshold is three times that between all AMs and all FMs on average. This may explain why Mao exceptionally promoted some lower-ranked but radical FMs shortly before the Leap: to create a demonstration effect in order to spur other weakly motivated FMs into action.*