

Talk on GLF 50th Anniversary

Hungry Ghosts

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- 1 Anhui province. Fengyang Party documents after 1989 released, came into my possession. Greatest Party Secret. Where the rural reforms started. Travelled to Henan, Sichuan and other places. Interviewed many people inside and outside Party. No one has ever forgotten what happened in contrast to the Party and most China academics.

- 2 When I wrote the book attempted to explain background, put it into a context: Since it appeared still baffled by failure of people to understand certain myths and untruths. Here are some of them in no particular order.
 - 1) It was caused by natural disasters which simultaneously occurred all over the vast country but nowhere else. These disasters mysteriously stopped after 3 years.
 - 2) There was no famine but food shortages which the public distribution system were alleviated.
 - 3) No one could have predicted what would happen or the scale of the disaster.
 - 4) The Communes were good idea. Communism is idealistic. Mao was an idealist. He was constantly seeking a new revolution. He was a rebel all his life. He was interest in permanent revolution.
 - 5) Everyone suffered equally. Mao was interested in egalitarianism. China was an egalitarian society. Party members suffered along with everyone else.
 - 6) Mao was misled by false reports from below reporting great success. He did not know what was happening when he found out, he changed course.

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- 7) The Cultural Revolution damaged the reputation of the Party, but not the disaster of the GLF. The two had little to do with each other. We should sympathize with Party leaders who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.
- 8) In the CR Mao sought to destroy the bureaucracy and was carried away by the idealism of the youthful rebels.
- 9) Communist Party officials and their families were just as much victims as everyone else because they suffered persecution and disgrace.
- 10) The peasants loved Mao but his great plans were ruined by lower ranking officials who were corrupt/insufficiently educated/carried away by enthusiasm/etc. They still revere Mao.
- 11) The peasants warmly welcomed the land reform. The peasants warmly welcome the establishment of the collectives. They were even more enthusiastic about the communes. Communism was the best thing that ever happened to Chinese peasants. It got even better after 1979, when the Communist Party lifted the same 300 hundred million peasants out of dire poverty.
- 12) Communism, despite the famine was good thing for China but especially the peasants. It led to vast improvements in health provision, better schools, and longer life spans.
- 13) India was much worse off than China even though it did not suffer any famines because peasants there were not in collective farms. Consequently 40 million of them died from hunger only this was never recorded by statistics because they died individually.
- 14) Harvests improved dramatically after 1949 thanks to the Communes.
- 15) The famine in China had nothing to do with famines in other countries such as the Soviet Union, Cambodia, Ethiopia, North Korea, Somalia, Mozambique etc. China is not responsible for what happened in those other countries. It had no reason to learn anything from Stalin's failures because China is so different.
- 16) OK, maybe there is a connection but you can't say Mao deliberately set out to create a famine or target any particular class or ethnic group of people. He was not like Hitler at all.

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- 17) China is a very different place now. Much more open. They have Starbucks and McDonalds. They travel a lot, they have the Internet, you can buy a lot of books which were once forbidden. Chinese people are very well informed know about their own history.
- 18) Foreigners now also have a chance to learn all about Chinese history and culture because the Chinese government is funding Confucian Institutes in schools and universities everywhere and even paying the teacher's salaries. Cambridge University has just accepted £3.7 million from some kind of fake Chinese government foundation called Chonghua for Chinese Development studies. It is also publishing and distributing its own newspapers like China Daily around the world and effectively taking over editorial control of the existing Chinese language newspapers in Asia and the rest of the world.
- 19) It's a measure of people's continuing admiration for Chairman Mao that last year White House communications director Anita Dunn unashamedly described him as a 'favourite political philosopher' because, as she told an audience of American high school graduates, Mao showed that "You don't have to accept the definition of how to do things, and you don't have to follow other people's choices and paths, OK? It is about your choices and your path."
- 20) Prominent famine experts, like Justin Lin Yifu, now the chief economist at the World Bank, have excused Mao, arguing that unlike Stalin, he wasn't a monster who did this deliberately or knowingly. Instead the deaths were the result of mismanagement, peasants should have had the right to leave the communes voluntarily but the plan was basically a great idea. Even the great American sinologist Professor John King Fairbanks considered that Mao's greatest achievement had been to improve the lot of the Chinese peasantry.
- 21) Jung Chang, whose family history *Wild Swans* sold 13 million copies around the world, says that when she wrote the book she did not know its real cause. She grew up in Sichuan province where some 10 million starved to death and her father was a senior Party official.

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“It was only during research on Mao: the Unknown Story , that I came to realize that the fundamental cause for the tens of millions of deaths was that Mao was seizing food - which he knew his people were dependent on for survival - to export and pay for arms (particularly nuclear) industries.’

If you add up the death tolls from the famines caused by Communist leaders in China, the Soviet Union (Lenin and Stalin oversaw three mass famines), Cambodia, North Korea, Ethiopia, Mozambique, etc you reach a figure of close to 90 million. It’s the greatest and costliest example of human folly in the history of mankind.

Take Professor Amartya Sen, awarded a Nobel Prize for his work on famines and development. He chose to study the Bengal famine in 1943 when under British rule up to 3 million died and the Ethiopian and Sahel famines in the 1960s and 1970s. He then developed the theory that ‘famine is a widespread failure of entitlements’. In other words, famine and poverty are not about governments forcibly seizing peasants’ grain and closing down markets but failing to intervene enough and provide them with their ‘entitlements’.

He later published together with other scholars a three volume work The Political Economy of Famine which somehow finds no space to examine Mao’s famines or indeed any of those under other Communist governments. Yet in the 1980s, we already knew that over 20 million had died in the Leap and Robert Conquest had published Harvest of Sorrow, the harrowing account of the Soviet famines.

The reluctance to see the link between Communism and mass famine, let alone study it, is most peculiar. No one has ever enthusiastically advocated copying the policies of wartime India or Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia. But Maoism and indeed the collectivization of third world peasantry has been promoted around the world by UN agencies and many international aid agencies, and endorsed by a glittering list of intellectuals and politicians from Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Francois Mitterrand. And while the heyday of Maoism may have

passed, it is by no means over. Maoist insurgencies are still tearing apart many countries from Peru to India, Nepal and The Philippines.

Professor Sen, an adviser to the last Labour Government and many others on development policies, still believes that “China clearly got more from the egalitarian commitment of its authoritarian leadership than India did from its democratic system” because, he says, the Chinese were more successful in rapidly expanding health care and life expectancy.

Lets’ clear up a few things straight away:

China was called the land of famines before 1949 but the majority of famines were caused by military leaders forcibly seizing grain stores of peasants in order to fight wars. Chinese agriculture did comparatively well during the 1920s and 1930s and China was a food exporter. Chinese grain yields actually fell during the 1950s and did not reach pre-war levels for decades. The alleged improvement was only achieved by manipulating data as the work of Professor John Loss Buck shows. He showed that peasants were better off between 1929 and 1933 than in the 1950s. In the 1970s, most Chinese were still on near starvation levels of food rationing.

Mao was not an original thinker or theorist. Instead he dogmatically applied Marxist theories which the Russians had found to their cost were ruinous. When millions also starved to death Mao refused to change his views. He refused to listen even to what Soviet experts warned him what would happen.

For instance the Communist Manifesto required ‘the abolition of property in land’ and ‘the establishment of industrial armies especially for agriculture.’ This exactly what the CCP did. The redistribution of land plots after 1949 was only pretence. Even 60 years later the peasants have still not been given ownership of their plots In fact the entire propaganda effort of the CCP from 1921 was an outright and conscious fraud. The Party never told the peasants that after it won power it would abolish small peasant farming, abolish all peasant markets, in fact

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all markets, outlaw commercial exchanges, and indeed effectively outlaw all use of money as a means of exchange. It would also take away their houses and tools and everything they owned. Once the communes, the collective farms were created, it was crime punishable by death to try to trade or sell anything. And the first thirty years, the peasants were not paid for their work with money but were allocated work points. Or what was called Laodong quan – labour certificate. This was exactly what Marx suggested. Labourers would take this to a state storehouse and get what they need. In the Soviet Union these work points were called Sovnak or Soviet token. In reality, it means they were paid nothing at all.

If Mao and all the other Chinese political leaders had admitted what they intended to do, they would never have won any support at all from the peasants. Remember in China over 50 per cent of peasants were owner occupiers. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this deceit. It is one fundamental reason for the intensively secretive nature of everything the Party did.

Many party leaders were trained in Soviet Russia in the 1930s when the collectives were introduced and food was confiscated and when tens of millions died from hunger or in labour camps in summary execution. Even before that war communism had failed in Russia and the Russians only survived thanks to American aid. So the Chinese Communists knew full well what they intended to and what the consequences would be. They do not care and they refused to make this public but kept it to themselves. This makes it deliberate murder on a mass scale.

Far from being welcomed by the peasants, communist policies were fiercely resisted once it started being put into practice. The Party had to introduce a mass terror campaign which involved the public execution without trial up to five million peasants during land reform. As Mao said already in 1927 [Report on the Hunan Peasant Movement] : ‘We must create a short reign of terror in all parts of the countryside.’

Cadres who refused to implement this were themselves killed.

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As soon as the Party started to outlaw the trade in grain and to enforce the compulsory acquisition of food in the early 1950s, there was mass starvation. First in southern China and then in Sichuan and other key grain surplus provinces. At least three million peasants starved to death even before the first collectives were established.

As the collectivisation programme intensified, peasant resistance intensified. Peasants stopped growing food, or they hid grain, or they committed suicide, or they slaughtered their own livestock rather than hand them over to the state.

A lot of this was disguised as class war, based on Marx and Lenin's imagined division of the peasants into poor peasants and kulaks. This had little bearing on reality either in Russia or China. First of all, most Chinese peasants were organized not but class but in clans, so this was really an excuse to kill off peasant leaders and destroy any opposition. The poor peasants lost their land anyway and later starved to death as much as anyone.

It is striking that the leaders who propounded these lies before 1949 were 'ultra-leftists' like Chen Boda and Kang Sheng. Chen wrote in 1945 the book Chinese agriculture and the Classes in the Chinese countryside. Mao later relied on just these men appointed to conduct his terror campaign against his critics in the Party. And we must also remember that all these policies and ideas were being put into practice well before 1949 and 1958.

Another deliberate lie the Party propagated in the 1950s was the success of Soviet collectivisation. Even in the 1950s, many Soviet citizens were on starvation rations and agriculture never achieved the yields seen before the Revolution. Even in the 1980s, Russians had to grow their food in private allotments to survive.

So we should abandon the idea that CCP rule before 1958 was in anyway success, or driven by popular support. In fact it was a disaster and Mao could only overcome resistant by launching new terror campaigns like the Anti-Rightist campaign to crush any opposition. As for being an original thinker, this too is rubbish. Mao simply and mechanically copied Stalin in

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everything including the key instruments of control like the internal passport system, known in China as the hukou system. I think it would be hard to argue that he came up with innovations, all he had was desire to emulate and outdo Stalin just as Khrushchev was trying to move away.

A great deal has been made of the resistance to Mao while the famine was raging. I've written in the book about Lushan Party Conference, Peng Dehuai, Li Shaoqi and so on. But let's remember too that these people were never against the Party's aims and ideology, on the contrary, they had spent their lives in the cause. They only wanted to do it a little differently, perhaps a little slower. Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, Hu Yaobang and others are as guilty and complicit as the rest. They were never sufficiently motivated by concern for the deaths of millions their fellow citizens to leave the Party, go into opposition, or try to kill Mao. At least some Germans did try to assassinate Hitler. That's why even after his death, there was never been any apology or acknowledgement that the Party had done anything wrong.

Mao, of course, feared that some of them would do so. But that doesn't mean that there was an opposition. Mao himself, as he admits in several documents was unconcerned about the scale of the death toll, arguing it didn't matter as long as the objectives were attained.

The fact is Party members did not revolt because they and their families were nearly always protected by the fact of their party membership. They always had privileged access to food and other essentials even when they were in prison. It is true that a few lower ranking party officials starved to death in some villages in Anhui and elsewhere. Yet the Party protected its own and many of them lived extremely well during the famine.

Statistically everyone was poor since no one had any money, only ration tickets, but to call this a Party devoted to some sort of idealistic democratic egalitarianism is nonsense. There is a world of difference getting privileged access to food and not getting anything to eat and starving to death. People's access to food or anything else was determined by their political loyalty ranking. People were graded according to their class background and record of loyalty to the party. This is sharing weal and sorrow.

The one alleged revolt was by the Tibetans which the Party still blames on the Dalai Lama. This too is utter nonsense. The Party started a policy in 1956 and intensified in 1958 to destroy the Buddhist, shrines, temples, monasteries, confiscate their livestock, jewellery and everything else they owned and literally cart these things away in truck convoys. The feeble resistance the Tibetans put up was supposedly a rebellion.

I am tempted to argue that this was motivated by ethnic hatred and racism. Targeting ethnic groups for destruction, like the Jews, is a great crime, genocide. I think the truth is the Party targeted everyone in China the same way. The Tibetans felt they were singled out because the Party had promised them special protection after the invasion of Tibet. At the same time, there was no logical reason why it is right to say genocide is greater or different crime to kill someone because of their race or religion than on account of their class background.

Mao, remember, also turned against some his own followers especially after the famine. The civil war within the party went on during the famine, and after it, and during the Cultural Revolution. The whole notion that what happened during the Cultural Revolution was something different from what went on before is wrong. It is just an invented history. Party officials who had tried to soften the policies during the famine were persecuted before the CR. What happened after 1966 was just on a large scale and reached higher up the bureaucracy. The only people Mao could appeal to were those most ignorant of what had happened in the countryside and why, who were the students in the cities. Despite being educated, they were the most stupid ill-informed people in the country. Their idealism consisted on wreaking revenge on anyone suspected of helping the peasants survive the famine. That's why I have little sympathy for those who parade their hard luck of stories about losing out their golden youth by being sent to the countryside. Or demand to be admired for their idealism in joining the red guards.

Even more abhorrent was the way Chinese leaders spent money on exporting Maoism to Cambodia, Vietnam and many countries around the world. They were able to do so because

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even after Mao's death the Party kept to the formula of 'Three Years of Natural Disasters'. Even though figures by the Chinese Central Meteorological Centre show that in 1960 and 1961 there were fewer floods than droughts than in most years.

Equally astonishing was the phenomenon of the western fellow travellers, not only those that Edgar Snow or Francois Mitterrand who endorsed Mao's famine while it was still going on, but the later ones. European and American intellectuals enthusiastically worshipped Mao after Stalin's death when they became disillusioned with the direction of the Soviet leader. What they wanted was a full blooded return to Stalinism and Leninism, not revisionism. The enthusiasm for Maoism embraced all the leaders of the student revolutions that swept Europe, especially France, in 1968. People donned Mao badges, quoted Mao, published newspapers with his photograph on the cover like Jean-Godard, Jean Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and so on. It's a very long list. American and European universities are still full of academics who were Maoists as students. So are many political parties. Like former French prime minister Lionel Jospin. Or the current President of the European Commission, Portugal's Jose Manuel Borroso. The whole new left movement in Europe was largely led by ex-Maoists.

I don't think this whole movement would have got off the ground, nor the ardent support of Mao's allies like Ho Chi Minh, could have got off the ground if the truth about Mao and the Great Leap Forward had been known at the time. It would have been impossible for such people to stake any moral claims for leadership if it was known that Mao was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of peasants.

Our failure to understand the truth about the magnitude of the Great Leap Forward catastrophe has even bigger consequences. None of the current leaders of the CCP could hold their positions either. Many of these were fanatical Maoists and continue to hide the truth. How is it really possible that some one Bo Xilai, with his record as a violent red guard at a school where the headteachers were murdered, could be in power in Sichuan and asking people to hark back to the good old days and sing Red Songs. Nearly ten million people starved to death in Sichuan thanks to Mao and his loyal follower Li Jingquan?

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