Introduction
The Great Leap Forward Movement of the People’s Republic of China was an economic and social programme carried out by the Communist Party of China from 1958 to 1961. The movement was led by Mao Zedong, and aimed to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a communist society by means of accelerated industrialization and collectivization. Before the occurrence of the movement, China had been suffering from foreign invasions, civil wars, unequal treaties and political disorder, which left the Chinese Communist Party with a ‘backward’ economy; one that was unable to sustain itself. In addition to
this, the widely applied political and military ideology of Maoism, established by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China, claimed that instead of the peasants being a revolutionary class, hand in hand with their industrial working “comrades”, they were the revolutionary class. This belief system contributed to the lack of poor planning by the Chinese government as many of their decisions were based on this belief of empowering the peasants at a cost of the entire nation.

Consequently, against this backdrop, Chairman Mao Zedong launched a second five year plan known as the Great Leap Forward in 1958, in the sake of producing a stronger, more powerful China. There were many reasons for the failure of the Great Leap Forward, namely the commune system, the establishment of backyard blast furnaces, rapid industrialization and the centralized control of the Chinese government. However, all these causes can be attributed to one main cause, which subsequently resulted in the failure of the Great Leap Forward: the lack of central planning by the Chinese government.

The main goal of the Great Leap Forward was to ‘overtake all capitalist countries’ in a fairly short time, and become one of the richest, most advanced and powerful countries in the world. In order to achieve this economic modernization, the commune system of collectivized agriculture was implemented, reforming China into a series of communes, with each commune containing approximately 5000 families. The People’s communes were formed in support of the Great Leap Forward campaign, in which the people surrendered their tools and farm animals to the commune and much of their personal property. Women were encouraged to leave wifely duties and join the work brigades. Brigades had been working at irrigation and water conservation projects, and with the establishment of the communes, these projects were expanded. Everybody involved in the communes was urged not only to meet set targets, but to beat them. As a result of this mentality embedded into the minds of the workers, if the communes lacked machinery, the workers used their bare hands. This resulted in the production of poor quality goods that were of no use to the Chinese government. The establishment of the commune system was the first cause that contributed to the failure of central planning, and thus the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

Furthermore, another of Mao’s goals during the Great Leap Forward was for China to surpass Britain in steel production in less than five years, as according to Mao, a measurement of a nation’s industrial strength could be measured by the amount of steel it produces. In order to achieve this, backyard blast furnaces were established that urged the peasants to melt down scrap metal to make useful items such as tools and utensils. However, due to the pressures placed on the peasants by the government to rapidly increase steel production, peasants began melting down useful items in order to produce unusable masses of metal. The destruction of useful objects in order to increase the production of backyard furnaces resulted in the production of substandard metals that were too brittle to be used. These substandard metals contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, which can be seen as a central planning issue.

Subsequently, the diversion of labour away from agriculture through the production of backyard blast furnaces and other non-agricultural projects resulted in the decline of food production in China. The heavy focus that was placed on increasing the steel output of the country, resulted in the withdrawal of labour from the agricultural sector. This proved to be disastrous for China, as grain production plummeted, resulting in widespread famine and starvation. Consequently, 30-40 million people died of starvation or diseases related to starvation.

Furthermore, the centralized control of the Chinese government resulted in no one with the authority to change things being informed of the decline in food production. The commune leaders were under pressure to exceed past production and when production declined, they did not report these figures. They, in fact, reported what the higher authorities wanted to hear; a falsified increase in output production. Thus, the policy errors that were leading to food shortfalls went on beyond the point when anyone could do anything about them. The central government made things even worse for the peasants by taking a share of their grain production based upon the falsified production figures, and thus leaving the peasants too little to survive on.

Therefore, the systematic failure of central planning by the Chinese government resulted in the failures of the agricultural sector as well as the failure in the production of steel. Consequently, China experienced the production of inferior steel, the drop in agricultural production and thus, the loss of millions of lives. Due to the fact that the Great Leap Forward was not based on any sound economic analysis, but simply unrealistic output targets set by Mao Zedong and based on the ideology of Maoism, one is able to contribute its failure
to the lack of central planning by the Chinese government, which encapsulates various other causes, as mentioned above.

Review of Literature

Source A: Yong Cai and Wang Feng (2010)
Reproductive Consequences of China’s Great Leap Forward Famine [Online]
[Accessed: 3rd April 2015]

This is an article written by Yong Chai and Wang Feng for the University of Reitaku in Japan. In the article, Yong and Wang explore the consequences of China’s Great Leap Forward. The article focuses on the idea that the Great Leap Forward in China resulted in one of the ‘costliest famines ever in human history.’ The article explains how agricultural collectivization and forced industrialization, especially in steelmaking, resulted in enormous interruptions in the economy, laying the foundations for further and worse crises. In addition to this, the article states how the blind pursuit of output goals led to fake statistics and wasted labour and resources, contributing further to the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

This article was very valuable as it provided many causes that led to the failure of the Great Leap Forward; namely ‘political blunders,’ the establishment of communes, the decline in the agricultural sector and forced industrialization in steel production. Furthermore, the article highlighted and explained how these individual causes contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, which were crucial in answering the main question. This article was also written for a well renowned University, which reiterates its validity and accuracy. However, due to the fact that the article was focused on the infertility women experienced as a result of the famine and death in China during the Great Leap Forward, it failed to provide in depth analysis on the main causes that contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward. The article focused rather on the consequences and impacts of the aforementioned causes as a whole; namely behavioural adaptations and reproductive responses to the famine.

Source B: Adriene Palese (2009)
The Great Leap Forward 1958-1961 [Online]
[Accessed: 4th April 2015]

This is an article written for Lunds University in Germany by Adriene Palese. The article focuses on the idea that the failure of the Great Leap Forward was caused by a combination of factors and not just one single factor. It states that the first cause that contributed to the overall failure was that the basis on which the Great Leap Forward was found was detached from Chinese reality, as the targets that were set were done without real economic calculations. The most clear example being, the unrealistic pressure placed by the government on the development of heavy industry such as steel production industry and backyards steel campaign, resulting in the production of poor quality goods that were impossible to use. Industrialization and urbanization also contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

This source was extremely valuable as it outlined all the causes that contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, explaining each one in the context of what was happening in China at the time. Furthermore, the article was also written for a University, which validates its reliability and integrity. There were no limitations to this source, as it provided all the necessary information that was required in answering the main question and as a result of this, one is unable to find any critique or limitations towards it.

Source C: Mark Yuying An, Wei Li, Dennis Tao Yang (2001)
Great Leap Forward or Backward? [Online]
[Accessed: 5th April 2015]

Written in March 2001, the article, Great Leap Forward or Backward, focuses on two main causes that characterized and led to the Great Leap Forward disaster; a collapse of grain output, and the associated famine in China between 1959 and 1961. According to the article, the failure of the Great Leap Forward can be attributed to the systematic failure in central planning along with the unrealistic expectations for agricultural productivity gains from collectivization. Consequently, excessive burdens were placed on peasants
to produce massive amounts of agricultural resources, leaving them with insufficient food to sustain their high labour productivity. As a result of this, the widespread famine led to the collapse in grain output, which in turn resulted in the death of millions of people.

This source was very useful because it focused specifically on the main question. It gave statistics, dates and detailed facts, which generated a greater sense of understanding when looking at the main question. Consisting of 34 pages, this highly detailed article provided immense understanding and background to the Great Leap Forward and China during 1958-1961. Furthermore, the article was written by three authors, one being Professor Dennis Yang, a Professor of Business Administration at the University of Virginia, who is a native of China. As a result of his immense involvement in the topic and his culture, greater insight into the Great Leap Forward movement was provided.

However, the article enlisted many formulas and Mathematical equations that at times, made it difficult to understand what the authors were trying to convey. The formulas were seemingly irrelevant to the Great Leap Forward and the causes of it, making this a limitation in the research.

Source D: WORLD BOOK, INC (2011)

Chinese Revolution
233 N. Michigan Avenue: World Book Publications

The Chinese Revolution is a book published by World's Book Documenting History. This book was extremely detailed, covering a large time frame starting from the 1911 until 1997. The book focuses on all aspects of China, from the founding of the People’s Republic to the Korean War, and the eventual split of the Soviet Union and China. Pages 28-31 focus on the ‘Great Leap Backward,’ exploring the economic depression, food shortage and decline in industrial output during the Great Leap Forward. This chapter is given the heading ‘Great Leap Backward’ as it is implying that this movement was a failure, moving the country in a backwards direction, instead of in an intended forward direction. According to the book, new farming and steel production techniques such as the establishment of backyard blast furnaces resulted in the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the death of more than 30 million people. These new farming and steel production techniques simply ‘did not work,’ as the farmers had little understanding of steel production, and the backyard furnaces simply turned out lumps of unusable, low-grade iron. The process drained the communes of important metal objects, from pots and pans to plough blades, while vast amounts of timber were felled to fuel the smelting. In addition to this, there were also attempts to develop and utilise new farming techniques, many of which failed.

This book was very valuable as the mix between information and pictures, letters and actual images of the time, added to overall understanding of the time period. The book contained many interviews of the people of China, adding a different perspective to the research. The personal stories and personal accounts of the events made for a very interesting and informative read.

However, the book lacked focus as to what the main causes of the failure of the Great Leap Forward were, focusing mainly on Sino-Soviet split. In addition to this, although the personal stories added a greater sense of understanding for the reader, they may be interpreted as biased as it is how they experienced the Great Leap Forward and perhaps not how it actually was for the entire population.

Analysis of Sources

The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social campaign that intended to change China from an agrarian economy into a modern society. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, an attempt was made to transform China into a society capable of competing with other industrialized nations, within a short, five-year time period. In January 1958, the Great Leap Forward was launched, and between 1958 and 1960, millions of Chinese citizens were moved to communes to work on farms or in manufacturing. These communes were formed in support of the Great Leap Forward campaign, in which people surrendered their personal property to the communes and joined the work brigades in order to expand existing projects, such as the water conservation project. The Great Leap Forward, intended to be a five-year effort, was halted in 1960 after three brutal years that resulted in the deaths of millions of people; the initiative is said to have cost an estimated 20 to 48 million lives. One is able to conclude that the systematic failure of central planning, which encapsulates a variety of causes such as the submission of false grain output statistics, industrialization, the procurement of grain and the introduction of new farming and steel production techniques, by the Chinese government is the main cause that resulted in the failure of the Great Leap Forward.
The submissions of false grain output statistics by the farm workers to the Chinese government, combined with the requisitioning of grain by the government based on these false output statistics, were important causes for the failure of the Great Leap Forward. As seen in Source A, this was due to the fact that false output statistics fuelled enthusiasm for further unrealistic output goals, making the population ill prepared for a crisis that was soon to worsen. The government was under the impression that their output targets were being met, and thus, kept setting higher targets. However, the targets that the government was setting were not being met, but due to the fear of the farm workers of losing their lives if they revealed the truth to the Chinese government, they continued to conceal the truth and release false output statistics.

Consequently, China's leaders came to operate with vastly inflated output figures; in the case of the 1958 harvest, grain production was reported in December 1958 at 375 million metric tons. Verification after April 1959 yielded a reduction to 250 million metric tons, and in 1961 a further check lowered the 1958 harvest to 200 million metric tons. In the case of 1959, output was believed to be 270 million metric tons; later verification reduced this to 170 million metric tons.

Furthermore, exaggerated reports of output naturally led to the conclusion that the state ought to have its share of this ‘apparent increase’ in order to support a more ambitious industrialization programme and increase the countries profits. This resulted in a famine, as the government was taking food from the people of China and selling it to other countries in order to expand their profits, unaware that there was no increase in the output of grain, but rather a drastic decline covered by the submission of false output statistics.

Another factor highlighting the poor planning by the Chinese government, was the unrealistic pressures placed by the government on industrialization of the country, which thus led to the failure of the Great Leap Forward. During this time, all other industries in China, such as the agricultural industry, were neglected in order for the country to focus all their attention on the production of steel. Source B states that by April 1959 there was a country-wide grain shortage and by the end of the year there were total shortages of other foods and other products such as cooking oil, sugar, thermos bottles, porcelain dishes, glasses, shoes, etc. These shortages led to nutritional deprivation and starvation; this can be attributed to the emphasis on heavy industry (steel production) which neglected agriculture and light industry's production. Food shortages were also caused by a high requisition of grain by the state; between 1957 and 1960 the requisition increased by 84%, and as previously mentioned in Source A, this was catastrophic as the country did not have the grain to support such large requisitioning. The failure of planning by the Chinese government to ensure that all industries were equally focused on resulted in a large food shortage across the country, contributing to the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

Urbanization, combined with the heavy focus on the production of steel led to the lack of peasants in rural areas which meant that it was nearly impossible for them to produce crops. Comparing agricultural production before the beginning of the Great Leap Forward in 1957 and 1961, one of the most tragic years of the Leap, grain production had diminished by 24.3%, cotton by 51.2%, cooking oil by 57.1% and farm animals by 28.8%. It is therefore clear to see that the lack of food and subsequent famine were caused by the failure of central planning by the Chinese government, who did not take the aforementioned factors into account when establishing and commencing the Great Leap Forward.

Industrialization during the Great Leap Forward led to the fall in grain output, and consequently, starvation and death in the country. As discussed in Source B, Source C also credits the failure of the Great Leap Forward to industrialization, which can indeed be seen as a central planning issue. During industrialization, the Chinese government diverted a large amount of rural labour from agriculture to industry; the agricultural labour force was reduced by 38 million between 1957 and 1958. These diverted labourers were likely the more productive, leaving the less productive peasants to man agricultural chores. The diversion resulted in a neglect of agricultural work, sometimes leaving grain to rot in the field. The heavy focus that was placed on the development of heavy industry rather than the agricultural industry resulted in the lack of food. Due to the lack of central planning by the Chinese government, millions of farm workers were diverted from producing grain to rather producing steel. This was a huge failure for China as the country no longer had enough food to feed its own people, causing the death of millions of people.

In addition to this, the government increased state procurement of grain; increasing from 46 million metric tons in 1957 to 64 million metric tons in 1959, even as grain output had actually fallen in 1959. Net exports of grain were raised from an average of 2.11 million tons between 1953 and 1957 to 3.95 million tons in 1959.
Grain retained in rural areas fell sharply from 273kg per capita in 1957 to 193kg in 1959 and further down to 182kg in 1960. Since grain was the primary source of food energy in China at the time, the drop in per capita food availability coincided with the onset of the worst famine in human history. Estimates of calorie intake show that daily per capita availability of food energy in China fell from over 2100 calories in 1957 to about 1500 calories in 1960. As a result of the failure of central planning by the Chinese government, industrialization and grain requisitioning transpired throughout the country, leaving the Chinese people with little to no food to eat on a daily basis. Without food, the workers did not have the energy to continue to work in both agriculture and heavy industry. Consequently, the Great Leap Forward can be seen as a failure, as the expansion of these two sectors, agriculture and industry, were the main reasons for the launch of the Great Leap Forward, but due to the lack of planning by the Chinese government, these sectors were unable to expand, leaving China in a much worse position than before the launch of the Great Leap Forward. Furthermore, new farming and steel production techniques, such as the establishment of backyard blast furnaces, were also contributors to the failure of the Great Leap Forward. According to Source D, Mao declared that in 1958 China would double its annual steel production and that common farmers would facilitate this remarkable achievement. Without consulting experts on metallurgy or steel production, Mao ordered the construction of backyard smelting furnaces in every commune. The peasants would play a lead role by producing steel themselves, obtaining scrap metal, melting and refining it, and then handing it over to the state. With little understanding of steel production, the backyard furnaces simply turned out lumps of unusable, low-grade iron. The process drained the communes of important metal objects, from pots and pans to plough blades, while vast amounts of timber were felled to fuel the smelting. In addition to this, there were also attempts to develop and utilise new farming techniques, many of which failed. The outcomes of these failed experiments were catastrophic and by early 1959 it was apparent within the party that the Great Leap Forward had failed irrevocably, with the main reason being the lack of central planning by the Chinese government. The loss of important metal objects and the production of unusable, low-grade iron were direct results of the establishment of backyard blast furnaces which placed the workers in dangerous working conditions and caused the failure of the Great Leap Forward.

Conclusion

The main cause that resulted in the failure of the Great Leap Forward was the lack of central planning by the Chinese government. This became evident when researching the main causes that led to this catastrophic failure, as most of the causes that were listed were a direct result of this poor planning. Through the exploration of various causes that led to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, namely the submission of false grain output statistics to the Chinese government, high requisitioning rates based on these inflated output figures by the government, unrealistic pressured placed by the government on industrialization, rapid urbanization based on the ideology of Maoism, and the introduction of backyard blast furnace, one is able to conclude that it was due to the lack of planning by the Chinese government that these issues arose.

One of the main reasons why the Great Leap Forward can be deemed a failure is due to the millions of lives lost as a result of it; an estimated 30-40 million people died of starvation or diseases related to starvation. In addition to this, the Chinese economy was left in a much worse position than before the introduction of the Great Leap Forward. Furthermore, none of the intended goals of the Great Leap Forward were achieved, such as becoming the leading country in steel output.

Due to the nature of communist China, research and statistics during this time period were very limited, and often varied on a large scale. For example, different websites had varying statistics regarding the amount of deaths during the Great Leap Forward, often ranging from 10 million deaths between each different source. This limited my research as I was unable to acquire exact results from official government reports, as these simply did not exist. Furthermore, the secrecy surrounding communism further limited my research, as many historians made predictions regarding the causes of the failure of the Great Leap Forward, without any sound evidence such as statistics by the government, as mentioned above.
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