

The Failure of Communist Mass Mobilization Efforts and Subsequent Political Empowerment of
the Masses in a Semi-Socialist Chinese State

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In 1955, Hu Feng, a Chinese artist that advocated for the necessity of autonomy in artistic expression, was the target of a nationwide, government-sponsored campaign that denounced him as a bourgeois intellectual. The persecution of dissidents like Hu Feng in the mid-twentieth century revealed communist party commitment to controlling all areas of Chinese society, and the government's evolving role in the economic and social sectors dominated politics in the following decades. In order to develop a fully socialist state the 1960s and 1970s, Communist leadership attempted broad economic and social reforms targeted towards modernizing the nation and establishing a new China free of harmful capitalist, bourgeois elements. Communist party members that led mass mobilization efforts like the Cultural Revolution established a precedent of popular involvement in government that echoed in the Tiananmen protests. Ultimately, reactions to Maoist policies, such as the development of capitalist free trade zones and the expansion of a bourgeois middle class, prevented the full establishment of a socialist base in China.

Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign alienated the Chinese populace, rather than uniting it under a socialist industrialization effort, and the campaign's failure ultimately provided a stimulus for the questioning of communist policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The campaign centered around maximizing productivity, and new labor contribution and earning systems were meant to inspire people to participate in production, and, by extension, the socialist rebirth of the country. However, the establishment of the commune system and the collectivization of property dictated by Great Leap policy had tremendous social and economic implications. Mess halls and kindergartens of the commune system challenged familial units and gender hierarchies, and the militarization of rural communities into production units disrupted tradition to create a socialist, classless society. Ultimately, the culmination of steel industry

insolvency, crop failure, and government inflation of production estimates lead to the Great Famine, and the shortcomings of the Great Leap as a state-run social and economic revolution inspired radical questioning of Maoist thought and policy. Economic devastation inspired Peng Dehuai to issue a critique of Great Leap policies in 1959, and his contention that the campaign centralized government power and took power from the masses established a new precedent of questioning the political elite. Peng was eventually imprisoned and labelled a rightist, but his interrogation of the political status quo would influence dissidents during the Cultural Revolution and attempts at Chinese modernization in the late 1970s. Thus, the Great Leap Forward marked the inability of the Chinese government to establish a true socialist base, as it became a stimulus for critiques of communist policy, triggered economic failure, and resulted in the deaths of millions of people that the campaign meant to mobilize.

The Cultural Revolution developed in response to the failures of Great Leap policies, and the movement introduced new ideas of mass participation in government. Economic failure and famine in the early 1960s allowed Mao to mobilize people that were disillusioned by government ineptitude in a movement to destroy old habits, old thinking, old customs, and old culture while removing rightist tendencies from the communist party. The Cultural Revolution eventually spiraled out of control, with Mao's Red Guards destroying remnants of feudal society and lynching suspected capitalists, but the movement's foundation in mass mobilization signaled a transformation of Maoist thought. In his 1966 "Bombard the Headquarters" poster, Mao emphasized the power of the masses in liberating themselves, and he introduced the idea that common people should not be afraid to criticize those in power. Thus, the Cultural Revolution marked a significant departure from previous mass mobilization efforts like the Great Leap Forward that favored a top-down approach to promoting socialist thought. This idea that

common people have a role in determining government policy reverberated in later protests, and ultimately prevented the establishment of a fully socialist society because Chinese people had the agency to question socialist practice.

Similarly, because the struggle between communist factions was never fully resolved, the Cultural Revolution did little to fully achieve its initial goals of removing all old and elitist factions and establishing a fully socialist state. Mao led the Cultural Revolution as a popular movement against what he perceived to be capitalist, bourgeois infiltrators of the Communist central government in the mid-1960s, and, ironically, he garnered support by listing government shortcomings that were products of his own Great Leap strategies. Although it aimed to topple old ways of thinking, the movement resulted in little political change, as many of the communist elite maintained power in the weakened single-party government following the Cultural Revolution. Further, the movement reinforced the intellectual, bourgeois thinking that it was trying to erase by engaging students and intellectuals that were weary of Great Leap failures; producing a new generation of government critics. The Cultural Revolution's unclear resolution called to question the validity of Maoist thought, and attempts to proliferate socialism were hindered by the movement as former Red Guards began to question the value of Maoism in the context of the movement's violence and chaos.

The Cultural Revolution's legacy of mobilization and protest informed popular involvement in government following Mao's death in 1976, and Deng Xiaoping's new attempts to advance socialism in the economic and social spheres weakened the government's Maoist foundations. Deng rose to power in the late 1970s and advocated for the necessity of modernization and the acceptance of some capitalist and Western practices as a precursor to true communism, which would come with the accumulation of wealth. Economic struggles remnant

of the Great Leap Forward and continued social unrest lingering from the Cultural Revolution mandated a significant transformation in Chinese policy, and Deng addressed these issues by establishing new institutions like Special Economic Zones for international free trade. While these free trade zones had economic benefits, the existence of government-supported capitalist hubs on the Chinese mainland represented a significant departure from Maoist policy that dictated the strict application of socialism in economics. Similarly, market systems established under Deng created wealth inequalities that led to the development of a new capitalist bourgeois class, and his advocacy for individual wealth accumulation in the name of the state contradicted Mao's idea of a classless, socialist society. Individualism and consumerism indirectly triggered by Deng's policies thus marked a break from more orthodox socialism advocated by party leaders in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Deng's reform policies coincided with the emergence of a new, open discourse about the government, mounted by people influenced by communist mass mobilization efforts and the loosening of Maoist thought. Mao's Cultural Revolution centered on power of the masses to unite under an inclusive movement, and his assertion that people should not be afraid to challenge the government inspired Chinese people to reclaim their political franchise and continue challenging the communist government. In the 1980s, peasants simply left communes and farmed land on their own, reclaiming some of the economic mobility and independence that they lost under the Great Leap commune system of the 1960s. The overwhelming economic success of this action again revealed the power of the masses, and this new climate of political questioning deviated from former communist policy that mandated government control of thought and individual expression. Perhaps the most dramatic example of new mass involvement in politics is Wei Jingsheng's famous "The Fifth Modernization," which was posted

in 1978 and called for the democratization of the Chinese government. Following the tradition of the Cultural Revolution, Wei called for an overthrow of old communist thought centered around the class struggle and cast communist central leadership as “political swindlers.” While Wei effectively crossed the boundary of tolerable dissent and was soon arrested by the government, the wide success of his poster and the sensation of his trial revealed that the Chinese people were willing to question communist leadership, a phenomenon that resulted from the failure of communist efforts to establish a socialist base across all sectors of Chinese society.

Mass mobilization efforts mounted by communist leaders in the mid-twentieth century ultimately failed to establish a pure socialist base because they fostered mass involvement in politics and resulted in reactionary, liberal policies that deviated from traditional Maoist thought. Modernization attempts in the 1970s had to address economic circumstances created by the Great Leap Forward along with the chaos and upheaval of the Cultural Revolution movement, and communist belief in the power of the masses ultimately served to undermine party goals, even as leaders like Mao and Deng attempted to maintain a socialist order. Ultimately, capitalist institutions like Special Economic Zones and the development of a distinct middle class revealed the inability of the Chinese government to fully establish socialism. The 1989 Tiananmen protests suggest that communist leaders inadvertently established a powerful precedent of mass participation in government through their mobilization efforts, rather than equalizing and socializing the thought of Chinese society.

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