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LOOKING AT CHINA'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD FROM A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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The Great Leap Forward: Introduction

The founding father of the People's Republic of China, Mao Tse-Tung initiated a political campaign in January 1958 called, The Great Leap Forward. The campaign to modernize China through increasing grain and steel production was nothing more than a devastation manifested by Mao's desire to be the best. Mao's corrupt communist movement built on grandiose ideas, secrets, and lies made Mao one of the most brutal dictators in world history. In a span of three years, an estimated 45 million people died from starvation and atrocious acts under the authoritarian leader. Mao Tse-Tung was ultimately responsible for one of the largest famines in history.

Mao charmed millions in China with delusional dreams of the nation doubling, even quadrupling its grain production within an unrealistic time frame. He believed increasing grain production by man power, predominantly the peasants, would make China the land of famine no more. He also visualized steel production increasing by the use of backyard steel furnaces, in which peasants threw scrap metal into the furnaces. Mao implemented the Great Leap Forward (GLF) with a top-down system, land reform, communes, collectivization, ineffective policies, and his heroic façade.

From 1958 to 1961, the GLF demonstrated numerous flaws in its system. When examining the GLF from a systems perspective, one can see how the GLF failed at the individual, group/societal, and regulatory levels. Discussing one of China's best kept secrets in such a way illustrates how Mao's campaign led to enormous errors with tragic consequences, including a massive death toll.

Mao Tse-Tung Had a Dream: Individual Level

At the individual level, Mao Tse-Tung was the key component for the GLF's failure. Reasons for the system failing at the individual level can be attributed to the possibility that Mao developed narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The DSM-IV-TR defined narcissistic personality disorder as "A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy ..." (Barlow & Durand, 2009, p.456). Mao met a vast majority of the diagnostic criteria for NPD. Applying NPD to Mao's decisions during the GLF can illustrate how the system failed at the individual level.

Mao insisted with great urgency for China to augment grain and steel production at an impossible rate in order to compete with the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States. Mao wanted to become the center of world communism and capitalism (Chen, 2009). At first, Mao was against importing machinery for production, so he misled China with the power of persuasion to reach his idealist targets for production. Mass mobilization of peasants, man power, was the key to modernizing China. He led China into believing that working hard for a few years would pay off for thousands of years.

At first China was excited by Mao's speeches, speeches that included exaggerated achievements. People believed in Mao, and when people didn't have faith in his fibs, Mao used absolute authority to obtain his dreams. Mao did not like criticism or bad news. When Provincial leaders tried to explain that agriculture production wasn't meeting quota, Mao insisted on believing that peasants were lying and hoarding food. As a result, peasants' houses were raided and if one kilogram of grain, if you will, was hidden, that could have cost a life or earned a beating.

In February 1959, such acts involving corporal punishment became known as the “tenacious education campaign,” (Chen, 2009, p.65). Mao was excited to hear news that his suspicions were accurate, or so he thought, but he ignored the brutality, deaths, and suicides that were the result of the movement, (Becker, 1996, p. 86). A few months later, Mao realized that the food shortages were not the result of hoarding because it was occurring in 15 provinces, (Chen, 2009). Just when Mao was about to reduce the agriculture production quota, the requisitions, Mao received criticisms on his GLF. Criticism challenged his personal authority. Mao decided to continue the GLF at an accelerated pace; He increased the number of communal dining halls by 45.7% within 14 months and the food requisitions increased dramatically, as well, (Chen, 2009). Mao demanded this decision, in spite of knowing that peasants were already starving to death.

Mao portrayed himself as a peasant, yet he lacked empathy for the peasants. When Mao heard news of starvation, cannibalism, and murders amongst peasants, he tuned it out as if they were just rumors. According to Mao’s doctor, “Mao knew the peasants were dying by the million. He did not care.” (Becker, 1996, p. 307). Nothing was going to stop Mao from his obsession with power and success. But how did Mao attain so much power over China without any revolts?

Class warfare.

Mao used the Chinese people to go against each other, to distrust each other, to murder each other, all for the sake of rich peasant versus poor peasant. Peasants were fighting blindly for interests that they had no control over. They became powerless and lost perception of what was happening to them. “It was precisely through this technique that he fooled and oppressed

millions and manipulated them into supporting him.” (Becker, 1996, p.309). Yet, in the end they were all one in the same. They were victims of a fallacious campaign to modernize China, a campaign centered on Mao and his NPD traits. Mao expected to be recognized as “superior without commensurate achievements” and “requested excessive admiration” (Barlow & Durand, 2009, p.456). All Mao cared about was having his narcissistic needs met through his followers’ loyalty. Mao’s doctor said, “Loyalty, rather than principle, was the paramount virtue,” (Becker, 1996, p.307). Demands for loyalty, admiration, and authority from a leader with fantastical ideas led to one of the largest famines in history. The Great Leap Forward failed at the individual level due to Mao and his NPD characteristics, which ultimately paved the way for too much power over China.

“Hunger, diseases, flight, famine, and deaths”: Group/Societal Level

At the societal level, China’s Great Leap Forward failures can be attributed to the local leaders at all levels. Mao’s policies were implemented in each county through communist officials, the county’s party secretary, which was the highest ranking official, and the local cadres. These leaders were in control of the peasants in a top-down system fashion, and they were each held responsible for grain and steel production quotas. Each county chief leader’s enthusiasm and loyalty towards Mao was a direct result in the severity of the famine, (Chen, 2009). Leaders were the watchdogs for the GLF. Anyone who slightly disagreed with the policies or expressed their opinions were labeled rightists and sentenced to work in the fields, prison camps, or death. At the start of the GLF, “Mao warned the Chinese in the *People’s Daily* that dissent would not be tolerated: “Anyone who does make a Great Leap is a rightist conservative ...,” (Becker, 1996, p.83). Leaders upheld this warning to the highest degree.

The leaders' actions and decisions can be examined through a phenomenon Irving Janis called, groupthink, which is basically defined as a rush to judgment, (Janis, 1982). The leaders of the GLF exhibited the following causes of groupthink: Highly cohesive group with the same ideology (communism and GLF policies), high stress from external threats (production pressures), strong leader preference (Mao), and lack of norms for systematic decision making, (Janis, 1982). Several symptoms of groupthink are found in the leaders decisions.

In Guangdong, Party Secretary Tao Zhu illustrated a symptom of groupthink, "pressures toward uniformity," (Janis, 1982). At first, Tao did not agree with the grain output requirements, but he was pressured by other members to support Mao's GLF. In 1958, Tao announced to all of Guangdong's provincial leaders "if we do not exaggerate grain output, it will be seen as a problem of attitude toward the Great Leap Forward," (Chen, 2009, p.66).

Another example of groupthink is in the province of Wuwei. The county's chief leader, Yao Kuijia enthusiastically implemented Mao's policies and outrageously lied about grain output due to production pressure from superiors. Yao claimed Wuwei's grain output to be nearly double than the actual amount in 1958 and 1959. To enforce Mao's policies, Yao demonstrated brutal and deadly force with his own hands amongst peasants who would not cooperate, and his torture tactics were copied by local cadres. Yao's enthusiasm and lies had devastating results. 1,591 villages and more than 65,000 houses were destroyed in order to make the communes function more efficiently, peasants' daily food intake was only 0.2 kilograms, and untreated edema broke out by thousands. Wuwei experienced severe famine. From 1958 to 1960, Wuwei's population declined by over 300,000, (Chen, 2009). Wuwei's death toll illustrates the consequences of no contingency plan for failure.

Other symptoms and consequences of groupthink can be seen in Wuwei's neighboring province, Anhui. Local cadres of Anhui feared their provincial leader, Zeng Xisheng, for Zeng had been appointed by Mao as the number one leader a few years before the GLF was launched. So naturally Zeng had a strong leader preference for Mao, and he was over-zealous for the GLF policies. Local cadres who "challenged the Great Leap were thoroughly purged by Mao and Zeng," (Chen, 2009, p.72).

Zeng's attitude toward the GLF led to misinformation and starvation. When Zeng heard reports of starvation in 1958 and 1959, he rejected the negative information. Rejection of information and fear of Zeng led to local leaders reporting only positive news and reporting exaggerated grain and steel productions. In 1960, Zeng should have acknowledged or known of the 81,500 deaths that occurred just a few miles away from the capital of Anhui, (Chen, 2009). This massive mortality rate shows how the symptoms of groupthink could result in defective-decision making such as, selection-bias in collecting information, failure to examine risks of preferred choice, and failure to work contingency plans, (Janis, 1982).

The leaders' decisions to make false reports, reject negative news, dish out corporal punishment, and exaggerate productions shows how the group was highly cohesive, how they lacked normal systematic decision making, how the group had high stress from production pressure, and how they had a strong leader preference, (Janis, 1982). The provincial leaders in Anhui, Wuwei, and Guandong are just three examples of how groupthink can explain the GLF's failure at the societal level.

“More, Faster, Better, Cheaper”: Regulatory Level

At the regulatory level, the GLF failed due to a highly centralized system. Mao was the central planner during the GLF. He made the policies and had control over all decisions throughout the three years. Provincial leaders followed Mao’s policies and implemented his decisions. Peasants, who were at lowest level of the system, consequently had no control under any circumstances. With all of the power at the top level, the centralized system faced high risks. One poor policy could have resulted in great failures across the country and it did.

Mao’s policies involved grain production, industrialization, and collectivization. These three policies had to move forward together and they were contingent on each other. Mao believed farms had to be combined to form larger farms called collectives, and that this would have led to an increase in grain production. Without an increase in grain production, China would not have industrialization. In short, collectivization would lead to increased grain production, which would lead to industrialization. Collectivization was a key component because “To fund rapid industrialization, most investable surplus had to be extracted from the vast peasant population,” (Li & Yang, 2005, p.844).

But Mao’s policies had numerous errors.

As peasants were forced by the thousands to live in communes, provincial leaders began to compete with each other. They reported false claims of grain output. False reports led to Mao increasing grain production targets. According to Li & Yang (2005), “grain output in 1958 was forecasted to grow to 525 million metric tons from just 195 in 1957,” (p. 845). Not only did Mao increase demands in grain production, he also exported more grain based on numbers that were not accurate. Peasants paid for the provincial leaders’ lies by working harder and eating less.

With such dramatic increases in grain production, Mao believed collectivization was successful, so he took the next step forward. Mao moved millions of peasants from grain production to steel production. Provincial leaders continued to report false claims. Peasants worked 24-hour shifts to produce useless steel as grain was left to rot in the fields. While at least 1.5 million tons of poor quality steel was produced in backyard furnaces, grain output fell by 28.6% in the fall of 1958, (Kung & Lin, 2003). Food resources declined. Famine set in 1959. China's devastation worsened until 1961.

As food and resources began to diminish across numerous provinces, Mao still maintained his pride. He refused to accept aid from the Soviet Union, yet he proceeded with exporting grain, grain that could have saved thousands of lives. In 1960, when China was experiencing a mortality rate of 25.4 per thousand, net grain export was 2.7 million metric tons, which was 1.88% of total grain production, (Yang, 2008). Grain exports were used as payments for imported machinery during the GLF. The Soviet Union offered to postpone the repayments, but Mao refused the offer. Mao isolated China from all foreign aid assistance at the people's expense.

A faulty administrative system could also be held accountable for errors during the GLF. It was a top-down system, where leaders were only held responsible to their superiors, which ultimately was Mao. According to Chen (2009), "Chinese leaders did admit that the agriculture catastrophe resulted 70% from human mismanagement and 30% from bad weather," (p. 74). That 70% may be attributed to leaders who were either manipulated to exert power, felt pressured to exaggerate production levels, or were inexperienced in managing massive amounts of people. Mao, the central planner, the great leader was eventually responsible for "human mismanagement" with dire consequences.

Mao had too much power. Provincial leaders lied for political incentives. The GLF policies were ineffective, but no one had the authority to change the system, except for Mao. The system lacked checks and balances during the GLF, (Li & Yang, 2005). China did not have a voice for “the people”. A centralized system orchestrated by Mao proved to be a catastrophe for China and one reason why the GLF failed at the regulatory level.

The Great Leap Failure: Conclusion

The Great Leap Forward proved to be a great failure. Mass mobilization of peasants led to a massive death toll. The campaign’s ineffective policies resulted in the unthinkable. China’s great secret is still, to some degree, kept in silence by the Chinese people. Details of the catastrophe weren’t revealed until some twenty years after the famine. The horrid acts committed under the authoritarian leader were concealed. Policies and propaganda kept China isolated.

Analyzing the GLF from a systems perspective only offers a glimpse into how the campaign went horribly wrong. Looking at the individual level, one could see how Mao and his narcissistic personality led to brutal power. Mao’s undeniable optimism for the campaign was highly influential at the group/societal level. Leaders not only enthusiastically embraced Mao’s policies, but they went above and beyond in implementing regulations. The wrong decisions were repeatedly made by all local leaders. Groupthink could explain how the campaign failed at the societal level. At the regulatory level, a centralized system could explain how the campaign failed; Mao, the central planner, once again, had too much control.

Ultimately, Mao could be held responsible for one of the largest famines in history. Although China may still view Mao as a revolutionary, most of the outside world may agree with Mao being one of the most brutal dictators in world history. In only three years, Mao’s campaign

led to more deaths than Hitler and Stalin combined. The millions of lives lost may never receive the recognition they deserve. The peasants essentially sacrificed their lives for a country that now has one of the fastest growing economies. Today China is considered a BRICS country with its rising powers. The Great Leap Forward failed, but Mao Tse-Tung must have done something right, sadly at the sake of millions of people who suffered from famine and years of torment.