



Lushan Conference

Lúshān Huìyì 庐山会议

The Lushan Conference (Plenum) was held in 1959 to discuss China's Great Leap Forward, an effort to initiate projects to increase agricultural and industrial production. Although the Leap had some success, Mao Zedong's policies were criticized, and the withdrawal of Soviet experts and natural disasters led to starvation and near economic paralysis. Despite this, the Leap is considered a catalyst for the Cultural Revolution.

The Lushan Conference refers to the Eighth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held in Lushan (Jiangxi Province) in July–August 1959. The main topic of discussion was the Great Leap Forward, which refers to the first three years of China's Second Five-Year Plan (1958–63). The Leap was an effort to rapidly modernize and industrialize China by relying on its vast population and human potential. This plan broke with past Soviet industrialization practices under Stalin and contributed to the break between China and the Soviet Union.

The Leap built on the prior three stages of collectivization of Chinese agriculture: mutual aid teams followed by low-level agricultural producers' cooperatives, and then, in 1955, by high-level agricultural producers' cooperatives with one hundred to three hundred families. The move to high-level cooperatives, though in many ways voluntary, also produced dissent within party leadership and

resistance by many peasants. Mao Zedong (1893–1976), who was both Chairman of the CCP and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), was among the strongest advocates of rapid, though voluntary, collectivization. Mao contended that the collectivization of agriculture not only could precede the mechanization of agriculture, but also would provide the conditions and resources necessary for the mechanization of agriculture.

The Leap had some success in creating structures for and initiating industrialization, water conservancy, irrigation projects and educational opportunities in the countryside. It created communes that united up to hundreds of high-level cooperatives and tens of thousands of people. The communes promoted collective labor, virtually egalitarian incomes within work units, as well as nurseries for children and canteens where people could eat their fill—in part to free up women for social labor. The Leap also mobilized millions of peasants to build backyard steel furnaces to produce steel for local needs. Additionally, by pressuring communes to outperform each other, the Leap attempted to increase significantly agricultural production, but overall the efforts described here never achieved their goals and to some degree had serious negative consequences.

As early as February–March 1959, many of the errors of the Leap were becoming apparent. In his speeches in early 1959, Mao supported the overall direction of the Leap while calling for moderation in many aspects, for example: not eliminating wage differentials or equalizing wages at this time; underreporting, rather than overreporting, production to allow some leeway in planning; maintaining ownership at the brigade rather than commune level

thus pre-empting “leveling” between units; and allowing more time for analysis before moving forward with the Leap (Mao ... wansui [1967–69] 1974). But Mao was subjected to significant criticism, and in April 1959 he resigned as president of the PRC, ceding the position to Liu Shaoqi. Mao maintained his position as chairman of the party until the position as president was abolished in 1968 with Liu’s disappearance during the Cultural Revolution. In 1970, shortly prior to his death, Lin Biao advocated resurrection of that position (for himself).

When the Lushan Plenum began in July 1959, the Leap was at the head of the nation’s agenda. At the Plenum, Minister of Defense and long-time Communist revolutionary Peng Dehuai wrote a letter to Mao strongly criticizing the Leap, Mao, and what Peng called “petit-bourgeois fanaticism” (Qui Jin 1999). Mao accepted many criticisms of the Leap and criticized his own role in contributing to the errors of the Leap, acknowledging his own responsibility for the unrealistic goal of producing 10.7 million tons of steel (and the associated backyard steel furnaces) and for propagating the communes. Yet he continued to argue that the Leap was positive; he suggested moderating certain aspects—such as allowing the weak communes to fail rather than maintaining them all (as leftists proposed) or eliminating them all (as rightists proposed)—and encouraged more efficient planning. Mao called for others to take responsibility for their roles in establishing the goal for steel production, promoting the communes and helping to undermine state planning. Perhaps more significantly and somewhat contradictorily, Mao argued that Peng’s criticisms were not just errors of judgment by a comrade, but rather demonstrated that Peng was acting as an enemy of socialism. But Mao gave no clear criteria for what made these criticisms an attack on socialism. The lack of criteria subsequently created significant problems in the Cultural Revolution in that much of the chaos resulted from the fact that individuals were denounced based on having “capitalist thoughts” or “opposing Mao” despite the fact that Mao’s Thought had contradictory elements and that no clear criteria of what constituted socialist or communist were ever established.

As a result of Mao’s criticism following the Lushan Conference, Peng Dehuai was removed from his position as Defense Minister and replaced by Lin Biao (who became Mao’s closest “comrade-in-arms” during the early part of the Cultural Revolution until he died in 1971,

allegedly fleeing after leading a coup attempt against Mao). But many officials who agreed with Peng remained in high-level positions within the party. In 1962, Liu Shaoqi tried to reverse the dismissal of Peng, and Peng himself wrote an 80,000-character letter requesting a reversal of the verdict. Several years later, Wu Han, a vice mayor of Beijing, wrote a play entitled *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, as an allegory to call for Peng’s reinstatement. The critique of this play was one of the opening salvoes of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Peng was jailed and mistreated in prison, dying without public acknowledgment in November 1974. In 1978 the CCP reversed the verdict on him.

Despite modifications to the Lushan Conference, the Leap continued. Many communes exaggerated their grain output to get recognition as outstanding supporters of the Leap, the result of which was that the state collected excessive grain as taxes, leaving inadequate amounts of food and seed. By late 1959 and early 1960, the situation in the countryside became quite dire, which was exacerbated by other factors. The Soviet Union broke relations with China and in July 1960 withdrew its technical experts, blueprints, and aid. This was due in part because of disagreements over foreign policy and in part because of significant differences over the nature of socialism and communism. In addition, drought and floods in many parts of China from 1959 to 1962 made the situation even worse. As a result, during “The Three Bad Years” (1959–1962) it is estimated that up to thirty million people died of starvation. Mao was pushed to the sidelines and less radical policies, associated with President Liu Shaoqi and party general secretary Deng Xiaoping, were implemented. These policies helped to resuscitate China’s economy to a significant degree; however, they also allowed increasing inequality and corruption throughout China. In Mao’s eyes, these policies increased the gap between the leaders and the masses and began to sow the seeds of capitalism. This perception was a key to Mao’s call in the mid 1960s for a radical remaking of China’s communist revolution and the overthrow of Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and others as capitalist roaders in the party

In many ways the Lushan Plenum set the stage for the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s criticism of Peng was a harbinger of his argument that class struggle continues under socialism. Although criticized by many as a

Members of the People's Liberation Army work beneath the gaze of a photograph of Chairman Mao. The Lushan Conference marked a change in the course of Chinese government policy.



deviation from Marxism and Leninism, the notions of the continuation of class struggle under socialism and the need for continuous revolution were key elements of the Cultural Revolution. The struggle for Peng Dehuai's rehabilitation, the characterization of the Leap, and the subsequent period under the leadership of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were integral to the Cultural Revolution.

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Further Reading

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