

## Chapter summary

- One of the communist regime's priorities was to introduce land reform. They passed the 1950 Agrarian Reform Law that redistributed land from landlords to the peasants.
- During the land reform movement, Party cadres were sent into the villages to encourage peasants to seize land from their owners and organise struggle meetings. Landlords were forced to admit that they had taken advantage of the poor peasants and to give up their land. It is likely that as many as 1 million were killed.
- Forms of agricultural co-operation like Mutual Aid Teams and Agricultural Producers Co-operatives were introduced. These encouraged peasants to pool resources. They were popular and successful.
- Mao believed that the success of agricultural co-operation meant that the peasants were ready to move quickly towards communism. He announced that the peasants should be organised into massive communes.
- The communes were meant to be self-sufficient, with both agricultural production and industry. They provided services for the members of the commune. The members of the commune ate together in shared dining halls. This sharing and equality meant that the communes represented a step towards true communism.
- The services provided by the communes had an economic rationale. Mao believed that people should not have to waste time with childcare or domestic chores; instead they could wash in the fields or factory longer.
- The First Five-Year Plan copied the economic plans introduced by Stalin in the Soviet Union. They were dedicated to improving heavy industry like coal, iron, steel and electricity. It was largely successful.
- The First Five-Year Plan had positive effects for the people of China. Many peasants moved to the cities and were given permanent jobs all the year round, instead of the unpredictable seasonal labour that they were used to.
- The Plan reduced the personal freedoms of the Chinese people. After they moved into the cities, the regime could control them more easily, denying them freedom of movement and dictating what work they did. The workers were forced to join a *Danwei* (see page 218).
- Mao launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958. He wanted to improve agricultural and industrial production. This policy was called 'Walking on Two Legs'. Mao was desperate to make China a great economic power.
- In order to produce more steel, Mao demanded that the people set up backyard furnaces in their villages or workplaces. Driven on by the Party cadres, the people used everything they could to keep the furnaces burning.
- The people were encouraged to support the Four Pests Campaign. They chased away birds and other vermin that spread disease or ate food supplies.
- Ambitious Party activists exaggerated the success of the Great Leap Forward to impress Mao. Desperate to meet ridiculously overambitious targets, they demanded more productivity from the people. They requisitioned huge quantities of food from the peasants.
- The Great Leap Forward resulted in the largest famine in human history. Upwards of 30–50 million people died.
- After the Great Leap Forward, Mao took a step back from frontline politics. Instead, Liu, Zhou and Deng ran China. They abandoned Mao's schemes and returned to rational and pragmatic policies. The Chinese economy recovered.

## Recommended reading

- J. Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (Simon and Schuster, 1997). Based on interviews and archival documentation, Becker highlights the personal responsibility of Mao for the Great Famine.
- F. Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010). Recent scholarly analysis of the causes and impact of the Great Famine utilising interviews with survivors and newly accessible archives in China.
- L. Feigon, *Mao: A Re-Interpretation* (Ivan R. Dee, 2002). Especially Chapter 7, entitled tellingly 'The Great Leap into Cataclysm'. Revisionist account that seeks to reappraise Mao in a more positive light.
- M. Selden (ed.), *The People's Republic of China: A Documentary History of Revolutionary Change* (Monthly Review Press, 1980). Primary documents charting the development of Chinese communism, 1946–78. Chapter 3 has documents on the Great Leap Forward.
- D. Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 14 (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Especially Part II which features a detailed analysis of the Party's response to the Great Leap Forward and the economic recovery led by Liu and Deng.
- Z. Xianliang, *Grass Soup* (Minerva, 1995). A first-hand account of a prisoner in the Chinese gulag during the Great Leap Forward.