

Exam focus

REVISED

Below is a sample answer to the following exam-style question. Read the answer and the comments around it. Bear these in mind when tackling the activity at the end.

'Mao's policies were entirely to blame for the Great Famine of 1958–62.' How far do you agree with this statement?

This statement is correct to a great extent. The Great Leap Forward was an attempt to increase Chinese agricultural and industrial production very rapidly. It was a complete failure which cost the lives of over 30 million Chinese. It was Mao who decided to launch the Great Leap Forward that led to the famine. It was his policies that created a political environment which made famine more likely. It is clear that without Mao's policies there would not have been a famine. However, he is not entirely to blame. The Party cadres lied to Mao about the true levels of production, and the weather exacerbated the famine.

Mao's policies were greatly responsible for the famine. It was Mao's belief in the idea of 'Walking on Two Legs' that meant that China attempted to increase production in agriculture and industry simultaneously. This was far too ambitious and frantic, a poorly planned economic development that created unrealistic targets for production. Mao's belief in 'mass mobilisation' – that through sheer force of will and hard work any economic obstacle could be overcome – meant that he refused to listen to his colleagues like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping who advised him to adopt a more pragmatic approach. One example of his misguided policies was steel production. He demanded that peasants create 'backyard furnaces', small steel-producing furnaces. He demanded incredibly high production from the furnaces and this led peasants to burn vital fuel, including cooking fuel, and to melt down their cooking utensils and woks. Unable to cook food, many died of starvation. Furthermore, they could not take time to collect the harvest. Others were simply too exhausted by trying to keep up with Mao's production targets to be able to collect the harvest. Food rotted in the fields while the people starved.

Mao's economic plan to create self-sufficient communes also contributed to the famine. In the communes, peasants would live collectively, sharing everything: land, food and even parenting responsibilities. The high production targets meant that time spent by peasants doing anything other than working had to be reduced. Mao introduced food halls: these were meant to reduce the burden on women of cooking food. However, they were extremely badly supplied. Soon the food ran out but with woks and oil allocated to the backyard furnaces, people were no longer able to cook for themselves. Women were forced to turn to prostitution to survive, while many men were forced to leave their families to forage for food.

Mao had a personal, political objective in the launching of the Great Leap Forward for industry and agriculture. He wanted to make himself the key leader of Communism in Asia, above the leader of the Soviet Union. He wanted to be able to boast that his economic policies were more successful than those of the Soviet Union. It was his personal desire to impress the Soviets that gave rise to his overly ambitious economic policy and thus the Great Famine: even when it was clear that the Great Leap Forward was a failure, he refused to back down and continued to export food to the USSR.

However, Mao cannot take the entire blame for the devastating famine of 1958–62. The Party cadres must also take some blame. Desperate to advance their careers, they exaggerated the success of the Great Leap Forward, making ridiculous claims about the level of food being harvested. Fooled into believing that production targets were being met, Mao kept increasing the target, leading to ever-greater food requisitioning and even more

The introduction is directed and focused. It suggests the way in which the answer will develop, and notes some of the wider factors at work in the period.

The answer discusses the stated factor of Mao's policies, and explains the devastating effect they had in the countryside.

The role of the communes in the famine is addressed. While the information here is accurate, the material is focused on the social impact of the communes rather than on the famine itself.

The information in this paragraph is not strongly linked to the famine, which is only mentioned briefly at the end.

widespread starvation. However, Mao should still take most of the blame. His use of violent campaigns such as the Three and Five Antis campaigns had created an atmosphere of terror where no one was willing to speak out against his policies. Anyone who might have offered criticism of his economic policies or suggested more rational and pragmatic policies had been silenced. They remembered the Hundred Flowers campaign: no one was willing to speak up any more. His purging of opponents within the Party, such as Gao Gang and Rao Shushi in 1954, meant that no other Party leaders were willing to point out the problems of Mao's policies. By 1958, Mao was surrounded by advisers who were too scared to do anything other than agree with him.

Finally, an important reason for the severity of the famine was that the weather was particularly bad. Typhoons caused flooding in South China and there were droughts that reduced the flow of the Yellow River by two-thirds. Eight of the twelve main rivers in Shandong province dried up. Over 2 million people died through drowning or because their crops were destroyed. Mao himself believed that weather conditions had caused the famine and it is true that the weather in 1958 did reduce the harvest.

In conclusion, it is clear that Mao's economic policies did contribute to the severity of the famine of 1958–62, but they were not the only reason. Mao's use of terror in the preceding years meant that no one was willing to argue with him. Also, ambitious Party cadres conspired to falsify their production levels, causing Mao to impose ever-greater targets. Furthermore, the weather conditions in this period were an important contributing factor. Overall, however, the failure of Mao's policies was the greatest factor. It was Mao's over-ambitious economic targets that produced a political environment with the incentive to lie about production levels. It was Mao's personal desire for prestige and power that led him to try to increase production so rapidly. Although weather conditions did contribute to the failure of the Great Leap Forward in the first year, Mao was wrong to claim that they were the biggest factor. The weather improved after 1958 and so weather conditions can only be seen as a contributing factor that exacerbated the problems of the Leap, rather than a fundamental cause. In the final analysis, Mao must take by far the greatest responsibility for the devastating famine of 1958–62.

The answer investigates some other reasons for the famine, with some good references to exaggerated figures on agricultural output and to the widespread culture of fear which prevented people from speaking out about the famine.

The conclusion reaches an overall judgement. It makes it clear that there were several reasons for the famine, but that Mao's policies were the most significant factor.

The answer explores a number of key factors and attempts to analyse the relationship between them. There is a good range of accurate factual material deployed, though it is slightly uneven in some places. References to Mao and the USSR are not made very relevant. The conclusion weighs up the relative significance of various factors, and the overall judgement is well substantiated. The organisation of the answer is logical and the argument is clearly made. The answer is a secure Level 4 response.

Changing focus

This essay argues that the most important reason for the Great Famine was Mao's policies, but the essay also considers a range of other factors. Pick one of these other factors and rewrite the introduction, the conclusion and the relevant paragraph, arguing that this factor was the most important.

AS-level question

'Agrarian land reform brought widespread benefits to the people of China.' How far do you agree with this statement?