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Man Must Conquer Heaven: The Great Leap Forward and the Cost of Belief

Across the Chinese countryside in the late 1950s, the ordinary rhythms of rural life were replaced by a sense of urgent possibility. Loudspeakers crackled to life before dawn, carrying promises that a new era was at hand. Villagers gathered in packed courtyards to recite slogans, clap in unison, and pledge themselves to collective campaigns that claimed history could be accelerated and limits overturned. The air itself felt charged, as though the material world might bend if enough people believed it could. In speeches, posters, and village meetings, the message was clear: the revolution was no longer confined to politics or society; it would extend outward, sweeping across fields, rivers, and mountains.

“Make the high mountain bow its head; make the river yield its way.” Mao Zedong’s famous declaration at the Party Congress.¹ What followed was the Great Leap Forward, a sweeping campaign of “socialist transformation” launched in 1958 that mobilized millions to reshape the land, divert rivers, and smelt steel in backyard furnaces. Guided by the belief that “Man Must Conquer Nature,” the Maoist state portrayed environmental transformation as proof of revolutionary will.² While the ideals were ambitious, the realities were catastrophic: famine, population died out in fractions, widespread ecological degradation, agricultural collapse, and even cannibalism. The Great Leap Forward led to one of the most horrific historical events in Chinese history.

¹ Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

² Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 67.

For historians, however, the Great Leap Forward reveals more than a failed developmental experiment; it marks a fundamental reordering of how the new Chinese state understood nature and knowledge itself. During the Great Leap Forward, this vision was broadcast through Maoist state rhetoric that celebrated human willpower, dismissed traditional ecological wisdom, and reframed scientific authority as a measure of ideological loyalty. Speeches, newspapers, and political campaigns urged citizens not simply to transform the landscape, but to trust that “correct” thinking could overcome natural limits. The result was a political culture in which environmental management became a test of revolutionary faith rather than empirical judgment.

Existing scholarship on the Great Leap Forward approaches the period from several distinct angles but rarely brings these perspectives together. Authors such as Judith Shapiro have illuminated the ideological roots of environmental degradation, showing how Maoist voluntarism encouraged ecological extremism, mass mobilization, and a systematic distrust of professional expertise.³ Scholars like Maohong Bao and Peter Ho have examined the policy dimension of the Great Leap Forward, tracing how the absence of environmental regulation and the dominance of ideological planning produced large-scale ecological damage.⁴ Meanwhile, rhetorical scholars including Lu Xing explore how state language reshaped public thoughts, while writers such as Sally Wen Mao highlight the lived experience of famine and the emotional legacy produced by ecological collapse.⁵

³ Judith Shapiro, “Mao’s War Against Nature: Legacy and Lessons,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (2001): 93–119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23417758>.

⁴ Maohong Bao, “The Evolution of Environmental Policy and Its Impact in the People’s Republic of China,” *Conservation and Society* 4, no. 1 (2006): 36–54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26396647>.

⁵ Sally Wen Mao, “On Sparrows,” *The Kenyon Review* 41, no. 5 (2019): 77–93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776614>.

Individually, these bodies of work reveal ideology, policy, rhetoric, and social experience, but they tend to remain analytically separate. What is still missing is an interdisciplinary account that connects ideology, policy, rhetoric, environmental action, and human experience into a coherent analytical framework. My research addresses that gap by piecing these perspectives together and offering a top-down view: from the ideological roots of Maoist views of nature, to the rhetorical messages that redefined scientific authority, to the mass campaigns these messages inspired, and finally to the environmental and human consequences they produced. By connecting ideological roots to rhetorical practice, environmental policy, and ecological outcomes, this paper reframes the Great Leap Forward not only as a developmental disaster but as a moment when political belief remade the boundaries of truth.

The Root of Maoist View of the Nature

Maoist attitudes toward nature during the Great Leap Forward grew from a distinctive ideological foundation that treated the natural world as something fundamentally subordinate to human will. Judith Shapiro characterizes Mao's worldview as a radical form of Marxist–Leninist voluntarism: Mao believed that consciousness, once shaped by correct revolutionary ideology, possessed the power to transform material reality.⁶ In this framework, limits that appeared ecological or technical were understood instead as manifestations of insufficient political determination. Slogans such as “Make the high mountain bow its head” and “Man's ability to know and change Nature is unlimited” encapsulated this belief in the supremacy of human will over natural processes. Shapiro argues that this ideological conviction encouraged a culture of

⁶ Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 106.

audacity—one in which ambition was celebrated, caution was condemned, and political enthusiasm became a substitute for empirical environmental knowledge.⁷

Mao's approach to nature also developed through a selective reinterpretation of Soviet ideology, which he reshaped to fit his own revolutionary aspirations. As Shapiro shows, Mao admired the Soviet Union's enormous developmental projects, but he did not accept the Soviet view that some aspects of the natural world, such as astronomy, geology, or large-scale ecological systems, remained beyond human control.⁸ In fact, he explicitly rejected Stalin's assertion that certain natural processes were immutable, insisting instead that "Man's ability to know and change Nature is unlimited." This critique captures how Mao pushed Marxist worldview toward a far more radical voluntarist stance. Where Stalin recognizes unchangeable natural factors in planning and industrial capacity, Mao emphasized the transformative force of revolutionary consciousness and collective struggle. As Shapiro notes, he increasingly framed the remaking of the natural world as a political and moral endeavor: an opportunity for the people to demonstrate their revolutionary virtue by overcoming natural obstacles.⁹

Maohong Bao's historical analysis helps illustrate how this mindset shaped early PRC environmental governance. As Bao documents, the state embraced slogans such as "The foolish old man removes the mountain," "Create farmland by encircling the lake," and "Man must conquer heaven," each expressing a confident, combative stance toward the natural world.¹⁰ This ideological posture rested on the assumption that socialism, because it served "the masses," could not cause environmental harm, making it difficult for the government to acknowledge

⁷ Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 67.

⁸ Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 69-70.

⁹ Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 72-73.

¹⁰ Maohong Bao, "The Evolution of Environmental Policy and Its Impact in the People's Republic of China," *Conservation and Society* 4, no. 1 (2006): 37.

ecological damage even when it was already occurring.¹¹ Specialists who raised environmental concerns, including those who questioned large water projects, were criticized rather than listened to, because acknowledging natural limits contradicted the narrative of socialist capability. The result, as both Shapiro and Bao show, was an environment in which political correctness overshadowed scientific reasoning, setting the stage for the environmentally destructive campaigns of the Great Leap Forward.

Rejection of Traditional Chinese Philosophies

A crucial component of Maoist environmental thought was the deliberate rejection of traditional Chinese cosmologies, especially the Confucian doctrine of *tianming* (Heaven's Mandate), which had long framed natural forces as expressions of a moral cosmic order. For centuries, the notion that "Heaven" regulated the cycles of nature, agricultural yields, and the fate of rulers shaped how Chinese society perceived agency and causality. In this worldview, human beings existed within a hierarchy of cosmic power, and natural disasters reflected moral failures, not deficiencies of human action or knowledge.¹² This philosophical orientation, grounded in reverence toward *Heaven*, offered an interpretive framework profoundly at odds with Mao's insistence on human will, political struggle, and material transformation as the engines of history.

Maoist ideology sought to dismantle Confucious cosmology because it threatened the Party's knowledge authority. If nature was governed by a transcendent moral order, then political ideology could not claim sovereignty over material reality. Mao's voluntarist environmental

¹¹ Bao, "The Evolution of Environmental Policy," 38.

¹² Homer H. Dubs, "'Nature' in the Teaching of Confucius," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 50 (1930): 233–37.

philosophy, rooted in dialectical materialism and revolutionary consciousness, required replacing the Confucian vision of cosmic harmony with a worldview in which nature was fundamentally material, knowable, and conquerable. As Bao explains, socialist ideology framed nature as something to be remade through human labor and political will, rejecting older cosmologies that taught accommodation rather than struggle with the natural world. This ideological shift matched with the CCP's broader effort to delegitimize traditional philosophies as remains of exploitative, class-bound societies.¹³

The CCP's propaganda structure made this philosophical transformation explicit. A 1970s *Wenweipo* article titled "Man Must Conquer Heaven—A Critique of Confucius's View of Heavenly Mandate" directly attacked Confucius for promoting an idealist worldview that denied human agency. The article argued: "Confucius promoted an idealist notion of the 'Mandate of Heaven,' teaching that people should obediently submit to the dictates of 'Heaven' and could not defy its will." In the Party's framing, Confucianism was not only scientifically incorrect but politically dangerous. It is an ideology "used by exploiting classes" to render the laboring masses passive and fatalistic. The critique intensified as the article insisted that Heaven was not a moral force but "material, operating according to its own laws," and that "the necessary conclusion from dialectical materialism is that humans can—and must—conquer Heaven." By redefining nature as purely material, the Party replaced a cosmic moral order with a political one in which the CCP became the interpreter of natural law.¹⁴

Importantly, these articles did not merely refute Confucianism; they offered vivid examples designed to reshape how ordinary people interpreted their surroundings. The

¹³ Bao, "The Evolution of Environmental Policy," 51.

¹⁴ Zhou Yiman, "人定胜天——批判孔子的'天命'观" ["Man Must Conquer Nature: Criticizing Confucius's View of the 'Mandate of Heaven'"], *Wenhui Bao* 文汇报, December 6, 1973, Jiading County Wangxin Commune. Trans. Jim Wang. Accessed October 15, 2025.

Wenweipo article recounts flooding, drought, aquaculture failures, and agricultural obstacles—but in each case reframes them as problems solvable through collective labor guided by Maoist ideology. Fishermen who developed artificial fish-breeding techniques are quoted saying: “Producing tens of millions of fish did not depend on Heaven or Earth, but on Chairman Mao’s revolutionary path.”¹⁵ This framing served a strong purpose: it taught citizens to reinterpret the natural world not through cosmology but through the lens of Maoist voluntarism.

A People’s Daily article titled “Man Must Conquer Nature and the Fallacy of Depending on Heaven for Food” reinforces the same message through narratives of peasant triumph. The piece recounts production teams that defied storms, floods, pests, and droughts, attributing their success not to favorable weather but to the primacy of human agency. It declares: “Natural disasters, like all things, can be understood and can be transformed.” and “As long as we put human factors first...we can win great agricultural victories.”¹⁶ These statements echo Mao’s own philosophical commitments: knowledge of nature emerges not from ecological understanding but through revolutionary struggle. The articles thus function as ideological training texts, teaching peasants to see environmental challenges as political terrain and victories over nature as evidence of Maoist truth.

Essentially, these sources illustrate how the Party constructed a distinctly Maoist world view in which the authority to define nature, and to act upon it, rested exclusively with the political leadership. By condemning Confucian thought as “reactionary” and elevating Maoist dialectical materialism as the only legitimate interpretive framework, the state replaced centuries of cosmological restraint with an ethic of domination over the natural world.

¹⁵ Zhou, “Man Must Conquer Nature,” trans. Jim Wang.

¹⁶ Gan Cheng, “‘靠天吃饭’和‘人定胜天’” [“‘Relying on Heaven for Food’ and ‘Man Must Conquer Nature’”], *Wenhui Bao* 文汇报, September 16, 1960. Trans. Jim Wang. Accessed October 15, 2025.

Rhetorical Analysis on Mao's Speeches and Writings

If Mao's ideological rejection of traditional philosophies created the conceptual space for a new understanding of nature, it was Mao's rhetoric that filled that space with a compelling, emotionally charged political worldview. Through speeches, published writings, and widely circulated quotations, Mao crafted a language of struggle that redefined the relationship between humans, nature, and knowledge itself. His rhetoric did more than communicate policy, it reshaped the way people thought through which millions of Chinese citizens interpreted empirical reality. In doing so, it became one of the most powerful mechanisms by which scientific authority was subordinated to revolutionary ideology during the Great Leap Forward.

Mao's *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung* constructs a rhetorical universe grounded in ceaseless struggle and the transformative power of human will. Instead of acknowledging natural limits, Mao reframed difficulties as challenges that could be overcome through collective determination. His retelling of "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" captures this worldview vividly: if the masses unite and persevere, even the most immovable obstacles "can be cleared away." In other passages, Mao insists that the purpose of scientific knowledge is not merely to explain the natural world but to "conquer and change nature" to "attain freedom from nature," reaffirming that human action, rooted in correct ideological commitment, should remake the environment. These metaphors and formulations do not describe ecological processes; they are metaphors that reorganize how people perceive causality. Nature, in Mao's rhetorical frame, becomes a moralized entity whose resistance proves the correctness of struggle, and whose transformation demonstrates the truth of ideological will.

Lu Xing's analysis of Mao's rhetorical style helps illuminate the enormous persuasive force of this language. As Lu shows, Mao deliberately drew on culturally familiar imagery, such

as storms, dawn, mountains, fire, to situate revolutionary ideology within intuitive, emotionally resonant frameworks.¹⁷ These metaphors bridged the abstract and the concrete, encouraging audiences to see political struggle reflected in everyday environmental phenomena. Lu also emphasizes Mao's habit of redefining key political terms, such as "science," "practice," and "truth," in ways that aligned them with ideological goals.¹⁸ Under Mao's rhetorical reshaping, science became a measure of political correctness; "practice" meant mass mobilization guided by Party leadership; and "truth" was what produced revolutionary results, regardless of scientific facts. Mao's rhetorical genius, as Lu argues, lay in making ideological interpretations feel both natural and morally binding.

This rhetorical framework did not only appear in Mao's public writings. His internal speeches, as documented by MacFarquhar, reveal the same voluntarist worldview expressed with even greater confidence and urgency. In private meetings with Party officials during the Great Leap Forward, Mao dismissed concerns about food shortages, steel production targets, and agricultural feasibility by insisting that the masses could overcome all obstacles through political enthusiasm. In one speech, he urged cadres to "go all out" and "surpass Britain within fifteen years," rhetoric that combined nationalism with an unrealistic faith. MacFarquhar notes that Mao frequently used simplified dichotomies, faith vs. doubt, progress vs. backwardness, enthusiasm vs. conservatism, to pressure officials into suppressing empirical caution.¹⁹ These internal speeches underscore that Mao's rhetorical worldview structured and influenced political expectations at every level of governance.

¹⁷ Xing Lu, "Mao Zedong's Rhetorical Styles," in *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 69–74.

¹⁸ Lu, "Mao Zedong's Rhetorical Styles," 82–84.

¹⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar, Merle Goldman, and Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao," in *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–10.

These rhetorical practices accomplished an epistemic transformation that made the environmental extremism of the Great Leap Forward not only possible but inevitable. Mao's metaphors and slogans taught Chinese citizens to perceive natural limits as political challenges rather than environmental realities.

The ideological and rhetorical restructuring of knowledge under Mao did not remain confined to speeches or slogans; it realized in sweeping state-led interventions that transformed landscapes across China. The Great Leap Forward became the arena in which Maoist voluntarism, mass mobilization, and the belief in nature's changeability were put into practice.

Stevan Harrell offers one of the clearest accounts of the environmental consequences that followed from this ideological orientation. He identifies several interrelated campaigns that together destabilized ecosystems on an unprecedented scale. One of the most significant was the nationwide push for water conservancy projects. In 1958 alone, millions of laborers were mobilized to dig reservoirs, reroute rivers, and construct dikes. These projects were often undertaken without engineering expertise, ecological assessment, or adequate materials. As Harrell notes, many of the hastily built structures collapsed, causing siltation, soil erosion, and long-term hydrological disruption. Irrigation channels blocked natural drainage patterns, and massive earth-moving campaigns destabilized slopes and riverbanks.²⁰ These failures reflected an unrealistic confidence that political determination could substitute for scientific knowledge.

Environmental Actions in GLF

Agricultural practices showed similar patterns of ideological overreach. Under the influence of Maoist rhetoric that emphasized "surpassing nature" through collective effort, the

²⁰ Stevan Harrell, "The Four Horsemen of the Ecopocalypse: The Agricultural Ecology of the Great Leap Forward," *Human Ecology* 49, no. 1 (2021): 14-15.

state promoted techniques such as deep plowing, close planting, and large-scale monocropping—all believed to increase yields through the force of human labor. Yet as Harrell demonstrates, these methods ignored basic agronomic principles. Deep plowing disrupted soil structure and brought nutrient-poor subsoil to the surface. Close planting, justified by pseudo-scientific theories of plant cooperation, starved crops of sunlight and nutrients. Monocropping heightened vulnerability to pests and depleted soil fertility. The result was widespread crop failure, soil exhaustion, and a dramatic decline in agricultural resilience.²¹ In ecological terms, the Great Leap Forward was an experiment in simplification attempting to override biological diversity and local environmental knowledge in favor of uniform political commitments.

Kung and Lin's empirical study of the famine further corroborates the environmental degradation Harrell describes. Their statistical analysis shows that national grain output fell sharply during the three years of famine, declining cumulatively by 28 percent between 1958 and 1960.²² This collapse was a combined and direct result of natural disasters and GLF policies that diverted labor away from agriculture and undermined ecological stability. The authors note that millions of rural laborers were mobilized into steel production, waterworks, and other non-agricultural campaigns at critical points in the agricultural cycle. Crops went unharvested, fields were left untended, and irrigation systems deteriorated. This diversion of labor compounded the ecological damage caused by the agricultural campaigns themselves.²³

Kung and Lin also demonstrate how political radicalism intensified environmental vulnerability. Provinces that were more aggressive in implementing GLF directives, especially those promoting extreme communalization and mass mobilization, experienced greater declines

²¹ Harrell, "The Four Horsemen of the Ecopocalypse," 11-14.

²² James Kai-sing Kung and Justin Yifu Lin, "The Causes of China's Great Leap Famine, 1959-1961," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52, no. 1 (2003): 56.

²³ Kung and Lin, "The Causes of China's Great Leap Famine," 54-58.

in grain output and higher mortality rates. Their model shows that excessive grain procurement, driven by inflated production reports and calibrated to political ambition rather than environmental reality, extracted food from already damaged ecosystems and left rural communities with dangerously low subsistence levels.²⁴ In short, environmental degradation did not merely accompany the famine; it contributed materially to the collapse of food production and to the death toll that followed.

Case Study: Four Pests Campaign

Among the many environmental actions undertaken during the Great Leap Forward, the Four Pests Campaign stands as one of the clearest examples of how Maoist ideology transformed ecological relationships into political struggles and eventually disasters. Launched initially in 1955 and intensified during the Great Leap Forward, the campaign targeted rats, sparrows, mosquitoes, and flies.²⁵ This case study illustrates how state rhetoric, visual propaganda, and political mobilization combined to delegitimize ecological knowledge and validate environmental interventions that produced cascading ecological harm.

²⁴ Kung and Lin, “The Causes of China’s Great Leap Famine,” 67-68.

²⁵ Harrell, “The Four Horsemen of the Ecopocalypse,” 15.



Figure 1. *In the Spirit of Revolution — Eradicate the Four Pests — Promote Hygiene.*

Designed by unknown (未知), August 1966. Courtesy of ChinesePosters.net.

The visual propaganda above for the Four Pests Campaign makes this ideological reframing vividly clear. In the poster titled “以革命化的精神，大除四害，大搞卫生” (“With a Revolutionary Spirit, Eliminate the Four Pests, Promote Hygiene”), a muscular young man strides forward holding a broom and fly swatter as though they are weapons. A cheerful woman and child appear behind him, while a group of energetic peasants march energetically in the background. The scene is full of optimism: strong bodies, bright colors, and harmonious action suggest that pest extermination is both morally righteous and joyful. The upward looking eye connects local action to national purpose and signaling the Party’s guiding presence. Through these visual choices, the poster frames the campaign more as a test of political will, teaching viewers to associate personal participation with revolutionary virtue.

The People's Daily article titled “除四害” extends and further conveyed this ideological framing through textual rhetoric. It begins by asserting that the four pests “cause serious harm to the people,” establishing a moral opposition between humans and pests with strong ethos. The article quantifies the “harm” they cause with dramatic statistics, such as the claim that rats consume more than 350 million jin of grain annually.²⁶ It declares: “*Rats, sparrows, mosquitoes, and flies are animals that cause serious harm to the people.*”²⁷ By positioning pests as active antagonists, the article frames ecological relationships as political ones. Sparrows, in particular, are portrayed as grain thieves. Citing scientific authorities, the news notes: “*A sparrow weighing nineteen grams eats five and a half grams of grain per day and about three sheng per year.*”²⁸ This reductionist framing simplifies complex scientific evidence, neglecting the fact that sparrows also consume crop-eating insects, into a simplified moral obligation: elimination. It thus delegitimizes ecological reasoning by presenting unscientific figures as definitive proof that eradication is both rational and necessary.

The article also links pest eradication with public health, asserting that eliminating rats, mosquitoes, and flies prevents “dangerous infectious diseases” such as plague, cholera, and malaria. It concludes: “*As long as the masses are mobilized... the Four Pests can certainly be eliminated.*”²⁹ This line captures Maoist voluntarism. Success is not a function of ecological feasibility but of political mobilization. Knowledge becomes collective will; scientific uncertainty becomes ideological hesitation. The article's rhetoric implies that nature will yield to political unity, erasing ecological constraints from the domain of legitimate knowledge. Yet, as

²⁶ 《人民日报》社论. ‘除四害’ [Editorial: “Eliminate the Four Pests”], *The People's Daily* 人民日报, January 12, 1956. Trans. Jim Wang. Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://banned-historical-archives.github.io/article?id=c187c56521>

²⁷ “‘Eliminate the Four Pests,’” trans. Jim Wang.

²⁸ “‘Eliminate the Four Pests,’” trans. Jim Wang.

²⁹ “‘Eliminate the Four Pests,’” trans. Jim Wang.

Harrell's ecological analysis shows, the campaign's attempt to simplify ecosystems produced profound unintended consequences.³⁰ Sparrows, treated in the propaganda as purely grain-eaters, play an essential ecological role in controlling insect populations. Their mass extermination removed a key predator from China's agricultural landscapes. Harrell explains that the sudden absence of sparrows contributed to explosions of locusts and other crop-eating insects, further reducing yields already weakened by monocropping, deep plowing, and other GLF policies.³¹

Sally Wen Mao's "On Sparrows" reveals the lived consequences of the Four Pests Campaign that statistics cannot capture. Her grandmother recalls joining the nightly noise barrages in Hubei. Firecrackers, metal pails, and hammers erupting through the dark as villagers forced sparrows into the air until the birds collapsed mid-flight from exhaustion.³² The work was framed as patriotic, yet its human cost soon became unmistakable. When the sparrows died "by the millions, their corpses collected in barrels," the ecological balance collapsed.³³ Without sparrows to keep insect populations in check, locusts swarmed through the countryside, "laying waste to the grain supply" and accelerating the famine that would starve millions.³⁴ Her account makes visible the intimate image of this suffering—her grandmother boiling bark to survive, her father fed on grass and powdered rice because there was nothing else.³⁵ Through these memories, the campaign's consequences are clear: environmental devastation that led directly into starvation, and ordinary families left to endure the violence of a policy that targeted pests but ultimately consumed human life.

³⁰ Harrell, "The Four Horsemen of the Ecopocalypse," 15.

³¹ Harrell, "The Four Horsemen of the Ecopocalypse," 15.

³² Mao, "On Sparrows," 78.

³³ Mao, "On Sparrows," 78.

³⁴ Mao, "On Sparrows," 79.

³⁵ Mao, "On Sparrows," 77.

Viewed side by side, the propaganda poster, the People's Daily article, Harrell's ecological assessment, and Wen Mao's reflections converge to illustrate how the Four Pests Campaign embodied the principles of the Maoist state. Scientific reasoning about ecosystems was replaced by ideological interpretations that treated nature as an antagonist and revolutionary will as the primary tool of environmental management.

Case Study: Grain-First Campaign and Grain Procurement

The logic behind the Four Pests Campaign also shaped the state's approach to grain. This becomes clear in the mid-1950s push to prioritize grain procurement and production. The grain-first campaign pushed to prioritize grain procurement and production offers an early example of how Maoist ideology filtered into administrative policy and reshaped ecology as well as everyday rural life. Within the Maoist view, grain was the material foundation of socialist industrialization. This grain-first mindset also produced environmental strain. Forestry, animal husbandry, and rural sidelines were all pushed aside in favor of expanding grain cultivation, and even land ill-suited for farming was reclaimed to meet national targets.³⁶ Local warnings about soil exhaustion, declining yields, and ecological limits were largely ignored, because policy assumed that human will and "scientific" planning could override environmental realities. Yet it was the state's aggressive grain procurement layered on top of this expansion that deepened the damage. As Friedman observes, Mao's development strategy rested on the conviction that extracting agricultural surplus was essential for financing rapid industrial growth; this logic framed grain as a political resource whose circulation reflected the power and direction of the

³⁶ Peter Ho, "Mao's War against Nature? The Environmental Impact of the Grain-First Campaign in China," *The China Journal*, no. 50 (2003): 38.

socialist state.³⁷ The elevation of grain to a symbol of national strength created ideological pressure to treat procurement as a revolutionary task rather than an economic exchange. The state conveyed this ideological framing to the public through both administrative institutions and propaganda imagery.



Figure 2. *Sell Surplus Grain to the Nation to Support the Construction of National Industry!*

Designed by Chi Ke (迟轲), 1953. Courtesy of ChinesePosters.net.

The above poster from the period shows a smiling boatman transporting baskets of grain toward a state granary, with chimneys and cooperative banners rising in the background. The caption—“把余粮卖给国家，支援工业建设！” (“Sell surplus grain to the state to support industrial construction!”)—transforms procurement into a patriotic offering. The poster visually collapses the distance between peasant labor and national industrial development, depicting grain

³⁷ Edward Friedman, review of *Maoism and the Liberation of the Poor*, by Jan Myrdal, Steven Mosher, M. Steifel, W. F. Wertheim, Keith Griffen, Ashwani Saith, Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, Jonathan Unger, and William Hinton, *World Politics* 39, no. 3 (1987): 410-411, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010226>

as a direct channel through which ordinary people advance socialist modernization. Missing from the image, however, are the constraints facing households who struggled to retain enough of their harvests to meet basic needs. The poster thus exemplifies how the state encoded the “grain first” principle into moral obligation, encouraging peasants to interpret extraction as voluntary contribution.

Bureaucratic mechanisms further institutionalized the campaign’s ideological goals. The unified purchase and sale system (统购统销), introduced in 1953 and strengthened throughout the decade, centralized the state’s authority over agricultural output. As Friedman notes, the new system dismantled rural grain markets and placed the state at the center of all major transactions, allowing it to channel grain into industrial priorities while leaving peasants increasingly dependent on fixed quotas and rationing. Li Huaiyin’s county-level study shows how this policy translated into mobilization. In the eleven *xiang* of Songjiang, the state first levied an agricultural tax amounting to 18.5% of total output and then procured another 45.9% through unified purchase. After these two layers of extraction, peasants retained only 35.6% of their harvests; in Dongtai, they kept 68.1%. Li explicitly concludes: “the state took away three-fifths of the peasants’ harvests in Songjiang and only one-fifth in Dongtai,” leading to widespread resentment and anxiety among wealthier farming households.³⁸

The unified sale component worsened these tensions. Although in principle peasants could buy back grain from the state at subsidized prices, Li shows that in nine of Songjiang’s eleven *xiang*, only 38–65% of households received grain through unified sale, leaving nearly half without the ability to replenish insufficient reserves. The quota for unified sale, 96 catties per capita, only 17% of the grain the state had procured, proved far too small to offset the loss

³⁸ Huaiyin Li, “The First Encounter: Peasant Resistance to State Control of Grain in East China in the Mid-1950s,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 185 (2006): 153–54,

caused by procurement.³⁹ These dynamics reveal that mobilization was not enforced solely through was embedded in administrative structures that redefined peasants' relationship to their labor, their harvest, and the state.

The effects of the Grain-First Campaign thus emerged not just as sudden ecological shocks, but as structural pressures that reshaped livelihoods in rural villages. As Friedman emphasizes, grain production itself did not decline in these years; rather, the CCP's claim to the agricultural surplus created what he terms the paradox of "rich state, poor people."⁴⁰ Peasants experienced worsening deprivation despite stable output because the state's ideological commitment to extraction regardless of ecological or agronomic factors determined how grain was allocated. Bernstein's analysis of later procurement during the Great Leap Forward echoes this logic: as production figures became inflated to meet political expectations, procurement rose accordingly, deepening rural hardship and undermining household subsistence.⁴¹ The Grain-First Campaign foreshadows this pattern by demonstrating how ideological and bureaucratic confidence in the state's capacity to command grain output laid the groundwork for more extreme mobilizations.

Conclusion

The Great Leap Forward was not simply a collection of misguided policies; it was the outcome of a worldview that redefined how knowledge, nature, and human effort were understood. From Mao's belief that consciousness could transform material reality to the state's relentless insistence that revolutionary will could conquer natural limits, Maoist ideology

³⁹ Li, "The First Encounter," 155-57.

⁴⁰ Friedman, *Review of Maoism and the Liberation of the Poor*, 419.

⁴¹ Thomas P. Bernstein, "Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurements during the Great Leap Forward," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 339-77.

supplied the conceptual structure through which environmental action was imagined and justified. Rhetoric carried these ideas outward through speeches, slogans, and propaganda that encouraged millions to see ecological intervention as a test of political commitment and a marker of national strength.

The consequences became visible in the mass campaigns that followed. The Four Pests Campaign illustrated how ideological belief could overshadow scientific reasoning, prompting actions that disrupted natural systems and contributed to famine. The Grain-First campaign, emerging from the same logic, revealed how administrative policies grounded in voluntarism and political ambition placed unsustainable burdens on rural communities and landscapes. In each case, state narratives about human power over nature stood in stark contrast to the ecological realities unfolding on the ground.

Although the Great Leap Forward is now remembered as a profound failure, the belief that humans can reshape nature through decisive intervention has not fully disappeared. The slogan “man must conquer nature” no longer circulates openly, yet its influence persists in China’s large-scale infrastructural projects, river engineering, land reclamation, and emerging geoengineering efforts. These initiatives differ from Mao-era campaigns, but they continue to reflect a confidence that environmental limits can be overcome through ambitious, state-led transformation. The legacy of the Great Leap Forward thus endures in the ways China still imagines, and acts upon, its relationship with nature.

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AI Process Paper

In this paper, I used AI for three main purposes: improving word choice, helping me understand difficult readings, and getting clearer background knowledge about concepts in Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism.

Although these ideologies were not the central focus of my research paper, they were important for understanding the roots of Maoist thought. When I did close readings of Shapiro and other authors, they often mentioned connections to these traditions without fully explaining them. To fill this gap, I used Gemini to get an overview of each ideology. Gemini tends to be accurate because its answers draw from Google's search tools and link directly to reliable sources like Britannica and academic forums. After getting a basic explanation, I clicked into the sources it referenced to learn more. Concepts such as dialectical materialism and Maoist voluntarism became much clearer to me through this process, which helped me analyze my primary and secondary sources more effectively. When I encountered unfamiliar ideas during close reading, I also used Gemini to clarify meanings. While it sometimes produced incomplete or inaccurate responses, it was generally helpful.

For word choice and grammar, I used ChatGPT in the same way I have for past assignments. I prompted it to act as a grammar checker, and it pointed out mistakes in the paragraphs I uploaded and explained how to fix them. When I needed a better word, I typed the term I originally wanted to use and asked for a clearer or more fitting alternative—for example, replacing “defects” with “deficiencies.” I also asked ChatGPT to act as a critical reader, giving feedback on the clarity and depth of my analysis. In this way, AI supported me when I felt stuck and helped me strengthen both the thinking and the writing behind this project.

Pledge

My research paper is my own work and that I have fully and correctly attributed the use of any AI/proofreading tools.

Pledge: Jim Wang