



DID MAO FAIL?

by Nick Eberstadt

From the Liberation in 1949 until his death in 1976, Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) directed one of the most ambitious, wide-ranging, and, some would say, inspiring programs of social engineering ever undertaken. Mao's goal was to transform a sprawling and dilapidated empire into a modern socialist state. The price was steep. If China's current leaders are to be believed, it was far too steep.

To assess the Maoist experiment, however, one must look not to official retrospection but to the condition of China's people: What do they have to show for the sacrifices they have made and the suffering they have endured in the name of bringing forth a poverty-free society?

Until recently, the information needed to answer that question was simply not available. Lately, however, the new rulers of the People's Republic, for their own reasons, and perhaps only temporarily, have lifted the statistical "curfew" clamped down after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward in 1960. Even so, one must be wary.

As late as the mid-1970s, as many as one out of three Chinese communes could not be reached by road¹—an unfavorable situation for gathering up-to-date statistics. Moreover, despite the recent "liberalization," China is still governed by a regime that does not hesitate to execute citizens for opinions expressed in private conversation; in such a society, information does not move freely or emigrate without official sanction. Finally, Deng Xiaoping and his ascendant technocrats no doubt find it expedient to exaggerate Mao's shortcomings, thereby making their own work shine more brightly. Official data always risk losing their virtue in the hands of men who may gain by molesting them.

Bearing in mind, then, the limits of the available information, the best gauge of Mao's economic performance is, I believe, his record in the areas of health, hunger, and material equality. The question of psychological poverty—that is, the effect of totalitarianism on the human spirit—is another issue, but one which nevertheless should be remembered when judging Mao's long reign.

Before Liberation, few places on Earth had health levels as low as China's. During the 1930s, even before the Japanese invasion, life expectancy was not appreciably higher than it had been during the Stone Age. One child in three died of hunger or disease before his first birthday.²

How much better are things today?

While the American press has lavished its attention on acupuncture and the rural "barefoot doctor" system, the most reliable measure of a nation's health is average life expectancy. Before 1949, the average Chinese could not expect to reach the age of 40. Today, Beijing (Peking) officially estimates life expectancy to be about 68. That is an implausibly high figure, inconsistent even with the regime's own statistics on birth and death rates. Until the results of the 1981 Chinese census are in, the best estimates are those calculated separately by the U.S. Census Bureau's John Aird and the Library of Congress's Leo Orleans. Both reckon China's life expectancy at the time of Mao's death to have been somewhere in the low 60s—say, 60 to 64. That is still a considerable improvement over pre-Communist years.

Sri Lanka Does Better

China has outpaced Africa (where life expectancy is now only in the mid-40s) and Latin America (which 30 years ago was far ahead of China in life expectancy yet today is roughly equal).³ But Mao's achievements do not seem such triumphs when set against the record of some of his Asian neighbors. True, the average life span in China is about a decade longer than it is in any of the other large poor countries of Asia. (See chart on page 127.) Yet East Asia's smaller developing nations—Sri Lanka, South Korea, and, ironically, Taiwan—all show significantly greater average life spans. The modernizing efforts of the colonizers of Taiwan and Sri Lanka may have given those countries something of a head start. Yet Sri Lanka is probably *still* poorer economically than the People's Republic.

Why have these nations done better than China?

It could be that their respective development strategies are inherently superior. A better answer is that their populations, and so their health problems, were much smaller. The problems of administering a nation of close to 1 billion citizens dwarf those facing any other government; and in health, as in other matters, this fact must be remembered in any fair judgment of China's performance.

In a poor country, health and hunger are almost the same problem: Well-fed bodies can fend off illnesses that would finish

off undernourished ones. If health is improving, it is a sure bet that malnutrition is subsiding. China's apparent leap forward in life expectancy over the past generation almost certainly means that a larger proportion of the population is eating regular (if modest) meals. This gain may be credited in large measure to Mao. Throughout its pre-1949 history, China was a land of recurrent regional famine, brought on by a steady cycle of droughts and floods that played havoc with the countryside, now striking Anhui, now Fujian, now Guangdong. Death from starvation visited thousands, even millions, every year.

Nevertheless, we must dismiss as nonsense the claim, made during the early 1970s by many of Mao's admirers in the West, that hunger and famine are afflictions of the past.

Counting Calories

Recent studies by more dispassionate scholars—relying in part on unpublished but widely circulated Chinese data—suggest that starvation is still very much present in China. Conditions in 1961 were as bad as at any time in China's entire history, according to Princeton economist Gregory Chow. Chinese officials now concede that Sichuan (Szechwan), the southwestern "rice bowl" with a population of some 100 million, was wracked by famine in 1976. The situation was so desperate that even a hardened veteran like Deng Xiaoping (at that time an exile in Sichuan, his native province) is reported to have burst into tears while discussing the problem before a Party gathering.⁴ Sichuan was reportedly stricken again in 1977 and 1978, along with Hubei and Nei Monggol (Inner Mongolia). And last year, the government of Yunnan, the mountainous province bordering on Vietnam, Laos, and Burma, warned local officials to prepare to deal with mass starvation.⁵

One might wonder why this still happens. In many poor nations, Mao's strategy—land reform, rationing, stockpiling of grains, and expansion of rural employment—might reasonably have been expected to eliminate food shortages. In fact, there is no mystery. Despite Mao's reforms—or possibly because of them—China has failed to increase its *per capita* production of food.

Nick Eberstadt, 24, is a research fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation. Born in New York City, he received an A.B. from Harvard (1976) and Masters degrees from the London School of Economics in development planning (1978) and Harvard in public administration (1979). He is currently a doctoral candidate in political economy at Harvard. He is the author of Poverty in China (1979) and editor of Fertility Decline in the Less Developed Countries: The Emerging Patterns (forthcoming).



Li Hua's "Refugees," portraying the ravages of World War II in China.

If one compares the figures for food availability in 1949 and in the late 1970s, as some analysts have done, it is easy to massage the numbers and come up with a happy story. But to use the year of Liberation as a benchmark is misleading. In 1949, China was prostrate, its economy battered by nearly 20 years of war and political chaos. If, instead, one employs as a base for comparison a post-Liberation period of relative tranquility, a very different picture emerges. Matched against the 1957 figures, for example, the China of 1977 is rather disappointing. (See chart on page 128.) Although the *total* annual grain harvest increased by about one-third, *per capita* production has remained at about 290 kilograms. Fish, fruit, oils, and, possibly, vegetables actually became scarcer.⁶ Thus, during these 20 years, the Chinese diet declined in quality, and quite conceivably in quantity as well.

This means that at the end of Mao's reign there was slightly less food for each citizen than there was back in the 1930s, when per capita grain availability was in excess of 300 kilograms.⁷

While Mao was Chairman, China crept along with the *slowest* rate of increase in total food production of any region in the world.⁸ In recent years, the daily calories available per person have been probably about 2,000—a figure lower than the averages for India, for Pakistan, and for Bangladesh, presumed

to be the world's "basket case." (It is, in fact, about what the late Dr. Herman Tarnower's quick weight-loss "Scarsdale Medical Diet" allows the American male.)*

China's food problem is not due to circumstances beyond its control; it has not run up against some "Malthusian limit." With much the same soil and climate, Taiwan's privately owned farms produce a "caloric availability" about 50 percent greater than China's. The problem in the People's Republic is sheer inefficiency. China, alone among the nations of the world, seems to be getting less of a return on its expenditure on agriculture today than it did during the 1950s.⁹

This waste—for that is what it is—is largely the result of the socialist organization of its farms. (China's collectivized agricultural system is plagued by problems of centralization and worker motivation, as is Russia's—which explains why the 5 percent of China's farmland in private hands produces some 20 percent of the nation's food.) Hence, Beijing's panicky push (since the early 1970s) for population control: If supply does not increase, demand must be reduced. Aiming for zero population growth by the turn of the century, the Chinese government now distributes free contraceptives, encourages postponement of marriage to at least age 26, and severely restricts the food rations of couples producing more than two children. Cutting back on births no doubt strikes Chinese policymakers as preferable to the alternative—abandoning socialism.

How Equal?

Some would argue that so-so health and meager harvests are as much the result of fate as of man's doings. Not so equality of income, which is entirely a social artifact and as such a good test of Mao's economic doctrine and performance.

China is poor. It is widely believed outside China, however, that the burden of poverty is borne more or less equally by all of its citizens. That at least has been the image of the Communist regime. Under Mao, there was *some* change in the distribution of wealth. During the Nationalist era, the richest fifth of Chinese society probably had incomes more than 1,000 percent greater than those earned by the poorest fifth.¹⁰ Those days are over.

But China is far from total egalitarianism. As under other totalitarian regimes, the ruling elite, of course, only allots to the

* China's situation is all the more disturbing because its per capita caloric needs are rising. This is because the proportion of children in the PRC is falling. China is becoming more "adult," and adults need more food.

CHINA'S POPULATION DISTRIBUTION


Source: Central Intelligence Agency.

Most of the PRC's nearly 1 billion people live in the east. Arid western China contains only 5 percent of the country's population. In the vast rural triangle bounded by Xi'an, Shanghai, and Beijing, population density is 520 or more persons per square mile, about 10 times the U.S. average.

masses those freedoms and opportunities that suit its purposes. The most obvious *material* inequality is the disparity between the privileged life of city folk (one-sixth of the population) and the harsh, often miserable, existence led by everyone else. The amenities of Beijing, such as they are, might seem austere, even grim, to Americans, but they so entice the Chinese that officials do not even bother to control the movement of the capital's citizens: It is simply inconceivable that anyone fortunate enough to dwell in Beijing would choose to return to a rural commune.

Housing, education, health care, and even food rations are, in the cities, both more abundant and of better quality. Urban residents work at less backbreaking jobs. They live longer. Their

incomes are, on average, three times higher than those of their rural counterparts.¹¹ The differential is even greater for specific sectors of the urban economy: In 1978, skilled industrial workers, on the average, pocketed earnings nearly nine times greater than those of peasants.

The urban-rural gap is not so wide in China as it is in most African or Latin American nations, but it is wider than what one finds in a number of societies not normally associated with equal distribution of wealth: Greece, Guyana, South Korea, and, once again, Taiwan, to name only a few.¹² The most surprising fact about urban-rural inequality is that it seems to have *increased* since the 1930s. During that era of greedy merchants and impoverished peasants, urban incomes were only double the rural average.¹³

Bringing Up the Bottom

Owing partly to urbanization, average income in China also varies widely from province to province. As always, the wealth of China is located along the heavily populated coastal rim extending from Guangzhou (Canton) up to Manchuria; as one moves inland the standard of living plummets. If we had comprehensive figures for all sources of income (private as well as collective) in all provinces, we might well find an interprovincial variance of 300 percent. By contrast, the difference in personal after-tax purchasing power between Connecticut and Mississippi, respectively the United States' richest and poorest states, is about 45 percentage points.

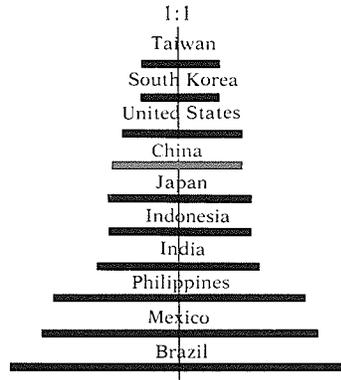
The truest test of economic equality is what happens *within* a given area, to people living and working side by side. Although information is spotty, it seems that redistribution of land, the confiscation of other property income, and the attempt to provide universal employment have diminished local differences. But even here the range remains formidably wide. A professor, for example, usually makes ¥350 a month (1 Yuan equals about U.S. \$0.65) to the assistant professor's ¥100 — a gap greater than that found in most American universities. Similarly, a chief engineer can take home ¥230, while the wages of the lowliest apprentice in his team might be less than ¥30.

How wide are *overall* wage differences in the new China? I can only guess: At the time of Mao's death, the income ratio of the wealthiest fifth of the population to the poorest fifth might have been about 7 to 1 — that is, roughly the same as it was during the mid-1950s.

A 7-to-1 ratio makes China more egalitarian than any of the

HOW EGALITARIAN IS CHINA?

This chart compares 1975 household earnings for the top and bottom fifths of the population in 10 nations. The red center line would denote a ratio of 1:1—that is, an absolutely equal distribution of income. The longer the bar, the wider the income gap.



Source: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development; International Labor Office.

HOW CHINA COMPARES

	Population	GNP per capita (1977)	Life expectancy	Literacy	Calorie availability per capita	Cement production per capita	Steel production per capita
China	949,000,000	\$410	60-64	60-70%	1950-2100	25 kg	58 kg
Taiwan	17,136,000	1,180	70-72	85-90	2750-2850	602 kg	155 kg
India	625,818,000	160	52-55	35-40	2000-2100	31 kg	16 kg
Bangladesh	82,713,000	80	45-49	20-25	2000-2100	4 kg	1 kg
Indonesia	143,282,000	320	48-50	60-65	2100-2200	20 kg	1 kg
Mexico	64,594,000	1,160	64-67	75-80	2600-2700	206 kg	86 kg
South Korea	34,697,000	980	65-67	90-95	2700-2800	409 kg	79 kg
USSR	258,932,000	3,330	67-69	95-98	3400-3500	490 kg	566 kg
U.S.A.	216,817,000	8,750	73-74	99	3400-3500	335 kg	524 kg

Note: 1 kilogram (kg) = 2.2046 pounds.

Source: Data on the United States (except on caloric availability): U.S. Department of Commerce; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development; *World Almanac*, 1980. Data on cement and steel production (except for Taiwan and Indonesia): United Nations *Statistical Yearbook*, 1978. All other data compiled by Nick Eberstadt with information from the United Nations; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development; People's Republic of China; Republic of China; Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures*, Leesburg, Va.: World Priorities, 1979.

MAO'S ECONOMY: A SCORECARD

SOCIAL INDICATORS	Before Mao 1930s	Liberation 1949	Under Mao 1957	After Mao 1977
Life expectancy (in years)	<40	<40	40-50	60-64
Literacy rate	20-30%	20-30%	35-45%	60-70%
Urban unemployment	20%	N.A.	20%*	20%*
Grain availability (kg per capita)	300-340	206	293	293
Fraction of population in extreme poverty	>½	>¾	>½	¼

INDUSTRIAL INDICATORS

Steel production (kg per capita)	<1	<0.3	8	25
Cement production (kg per capita)	<3	1*	11	58
Electric power (kwh per capita)	6*	8*	30	242
Machine tool production units (per million population)	N.A.	3*	53	>200
Gross domestic capital formation (of GNP)	5-7%	N.A.	>20%	36%**

* estimate > means "greater than";
 ** 1978 estimate < means "less than"

Source: Data compiled by Nick Eberstadt, adjusted from Central Intelligence Agency, Asia Society, and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development information.

According to Stalinist development doctrine, "bread is an intermediate product; steel is the final good." That maxim is aptly illustrated by the PRC's economic record. The lot of China's consumers has improved only modestly in the past 30 years, while heavy industry, nourished by the regime's allocation of resources, has prospered.

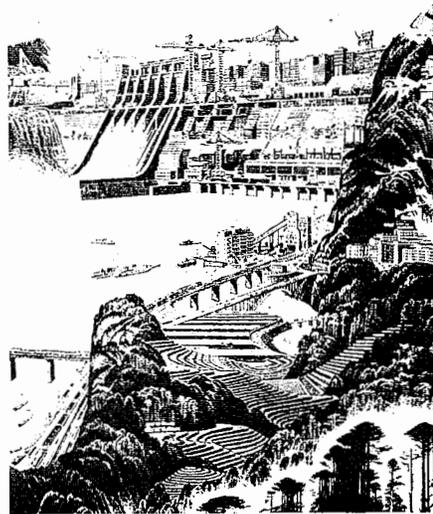
other large, poor countries, but not by as much as one might have thought. (See chart on page 127.) In any event, the surprise is that the People's Republic has shown no improvement here in two decades.

To those who had wished better for China—and I count myself among them—I can only offer the thought that the top-to-bottom measure may not be the best way of evaluating Mao's revolution. Such ratios only capture *relative* differences, and, in a desperately poor country, it is *absolute* differences that tell the most important story, that of survival. In the old China, the greatest differences were not between capitalists and workers, or landlords and peasants, but between families that ate and families that did not, between mothers who sold their babies and mothers who watched their children grow up healthy and strong. It is to Mao's credit that his redistribution strategy, whatever its costs, raised the bottom half of society from desperation to subsistence—at least when the harvest did not fail.

Can China Enlarge the Pie?

Perhaps the best way to judge China's 30-year struggle is to personalize the idea of poverty. If you had to be born poor in one of the world's poor countries, which would you choose? You would not want to be desperately poor, and China's attraction is that it has gone a long way toward eliminating that kind of desperation. In none of the countries would your odds of leading a minimally comfortable life be terribly good. I would suggest, however, that only a handful of poor countries—Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Taiwan, Cuba, Argentina, Costa Rica, and a few of the Arab emirates—offer chances distinctly better than China's. Remember, though, that the populations of those few nations add up to only 3 percent of the world's poor. From this perspective, giant China's epic struggle against poverty looks much better.

Unfortunately for China's poor, the strategy that has helped them over the past 30 years is now exhausted. Mao's tactics were essentially redistributive: land reform, confiscation and expropriation, make-work programs, rationing, and the like. That road only goes so far, and Mao had come to the end of it by the late 1950s. Try as he might with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, he could not push his people into a continual redistribution of income. The Chinese also hit some logistical limits: Given today's low average availability of food, for example, it is unlikely that hunger would be much further reduced by a more perfect division of the pie.



"Electricity is the Top Priority," by Feng Chung-tieh. Despite three decades of helter-skelter industrialization, China remains an overwhelmingly agricultural nation.

For two decades, essentially, underneath all the slogans and shouting, the welfare of Mao's people did not advance, and may even have declined slightly. The message is unmistakable: The People's Republic must move from redistribution to *production*, particularly in agriculture.

Reorienting China's economy will be a tremendous task. Few doubt that the Chinese people are equal to it. They clearly have the talent. The accomplishments of the Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, and the United States testify to what they can do when given a chance. The question is whether Beijing will risk giving them that chance. The social, economic, and political liberalization that must accompany any transition to a more productive economy would inevitably threaten the regime. Deng Xiaoping has already run into internal criticism of the tentative steps he has taken toward "rationalizing" the post-Mao economy. Faced with the choice of perpetuating poverty or losing its grip on the people, the Politburo might not bow out gracefully. China has the potential to become (in the words of General Sir John Hackett) "a Swedish version of Japan," but it is within the capacity of the present regime to create instead a Soviet version of India, or worse.

There is a disturbing pattern to Chinese history. This great civilization has brought into the world no end of remarkable innovations: The printing press, the sailing ship, commercial banking, and civil administration are but a few that come to mind. Yet, when the Chinese put these things to use, it is con-

sistently in a fashion that fritters away their head start, as when they invented gunpowder only to use it primarily in fireworks; they did not develop a cannon. In 1949, the Chinese under Mao began once more to run up an early lead over the rest of the Third World—in this case, they pioneered the eradication of extreme poverty. If China's political leaders prove too inflexible to follow through, to move on toward productivity, they will be responsible for a tragedy of truly enormous proportions.

NOTES

1. Eduard Vermeer, "Social Welfare Provisions and the Limits of Inequality in Contemporary China," *Asian Survey*, September 1979.
2. George Barclay et al., "A Reassessment of the Demography of Traditional Rural China," *Population Index*, October 1976.
3. Data on current life expectancy from International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Development Report 1979*, and Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures*, Leesburg, Va.: World Priorities, 1979.
4. Claudie and Jacques Broyelle, "Comme vivent les chinois," *L'Express*, January 23, 1978.
5. Miriam and Ivan D. London, "Hunger in China: The Failure of a System?" *Worldview*, October 1979.
6. Nicholas R. Lardy, "China's Economic Readjustment: Recovery or Paralysis?," Washington, D.C.: China Council of the Asia Society, 1980.
7. Data for the 1930s from John L. Buck et al., *Food and Agriculture in Communist China*, New York: Praeger, 1966.
8. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, *Fourth World Food Survey*, Rome 1977.
9. Nick Eberstadt, *Poverty in China*, Bloomington, Ind.: International Development Institute, 1979.
10. Estimate; based on C. R. Roll, Jr., "Income Distribution in Rural China: A Comparison of the 1930s and the 1950s," unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 1974.
11. E. R. Lim, "Income Distribution, Poverty, and Human Resource Development: The Chinese Experience," unpublished International Bank for Reconstruction and Development report, 1980.
12. Michael Lipton, *Why Poor People Stay Poor*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1977.
13. Martin K. Whyte, "Inequality and Stratification in China," *China Quarterly*, December 1975.