

Grade 9 Answer

Interpretation Evaluation

16
Marks

Question:

How far do you agree with Interpretation 2 about the successes of the Great Leap Forward?

Explain your answer, using both interpretations, and your knowledge of the historical context. (16 marks)

Answer:

Interpretation 1 highlights the apparent economic successes of the Great Leap Forward, noting significant increases in the production of steel, coal, cement, and other key resources by 1958. Mao's ambitious promise, "it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever," reflects the optimism surrounding the initiative. The use of backyard furnaces to produce steel, which mobilized millions of peasants and laborers, initially appeared successful. State propaganda reported that these mass mobilization efforts helped China rival industrial output from Western countries, showcasing record production levels across many sectors. However, I do not agree with this interpretation as while early figures did show rapid increases, much of the production was of poor quality, especially steel. The drive for quantity over quality led to inefficiencies and ultimately fell short of sustainable success. Furthermore, unrealistic targets set by the government led to falsified reports, exaggerating successes and concealing underlying failures, as officials feared punishment for reporting shortfalls.

Interpretation 2 presents a contrasting perspective, focusing on the devastating human and social impact of the Great Leap Forward. As collectivization policies were enforced, resources were diverted from agriculture to industry, leading to severe food shortages. Dikötter describes the desperation of the Chinese people, who faced starvation and were forced into moral compromises for survival. Mass collectivization led to the breakdown of community ties and family units, with some parents reportedly stealing from or even selling their children for food. Famine and social disintegration spread widely as local officials concealed or downplayed food shortages to meet state-imposed quotas. An estimated 30-45 million people died from starvation and related causes between 1959 and 1962, making this period one of the most catastrophic in modern Chinese history.

In conclusion, while Interpretation 1 highlights the initial economic achievements of the Great Leap Forward, I agree more with Interpretation 2. It provides a fuller picture by acknowledging the tragic human cost, which outweighed any short-term production gains. The Great Leap Forward's unrealistic targets and forced collectivization led to widespread famine and suffering, making it one of modern history's most devastating failures. Thus, Interpretation 2 better reflects the overall outcome of Mao's policies, showing that any initial economic gains were overshadowed by the massive social and humanitarian crisis that ensued.

Feedback:

This answer would get 16/16 marks because the pupil has analysed each interpretation in depth using contextual knowledge. The pupil has also given an overall judgement, with sustained reasoning and their answer is logically structured.



Source B

Source B: A propaganda poster on the Great Leap Forward from 1958. The description reads "Brave the wind and the waves, everything has remarkable abilities".



[<https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1958-024>]

Source C

Source C: In early 1959, a year into the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese Communist Party provincial committee in Shandong was flooded with letters regarding food shortages in the villages and People's Communes.

Between February 1st and February 15th we received 266 letters of complaint, passed down by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party or sent directly to the Provincial Party Committee. All the letters are concerned with food crises in the countryside... In regard to the content, most of them complained that a number of collective canteens have run out of food completely and that there is widespread fear in the countryside. Many villagers have fled or have become ill. Agricultural production has almost come to a halt...

On the first day of the New Year, many villagers from Zhou Yingli went to the fields to look for rotten sweet potatoes and carrots to fill their stomachs In some villages around Yucheng and Guting... a huge number of people have fled to other areas to beg for food. In Daming, owing to a lack of money, six people died of illness within eight days, without any treatment. In Xulou, six people died of starvation within ten days...

[<https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/complaints-hunger-great-leap-forward-1959/>]

Interpretation 1

Interpretation 1: C N Trueman "The Great Leap Forward" from historylearningsite.co.uk, 2015.

The figures for steel, coal, chemicals, timber, cement etc all showed huge rises though the figures started at in 1958 were low. Grain and cotton production also showed major increases in production.

Mao had introduced the Great Leap Forward with the phrase "it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever." By the end of 1958, it seemed as if his claim was true.

[https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/china-1900-to-1976/the-great-leap-forward/#google_vignette]

Interpretation 2

Interpretation 2: Frank Dikötter, 'Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe', 2010.

As famine spread, the very survival of an ordinary person came increasingly to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. But collectivisation also forced everybody, at some point or another, to make grim moral compromises. People turned on each other, some parents stealing from their own children or selling them to strangers for a handful of grain. Routine degradations thus went hand in hand with mass destruction. Survivors were rarely heroes, as those determined to make it in a world dominated by the law of survival had to silence their moral sentiments.