Tragedy of the Nomenklatura: Career Incentives and Political Radicalism during China’s Great Leap Famine

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Abstract

A salient feature of the world’s largest famine—China’s Great Leap Famine—is that it exhibited enormous variations in death toll across provinces that were patterned not so much upon differences in endowment but rather in “political radicalism” or specifically grain procurement. Using newly constructed measures to reflect the excessiveness of provincial grain procurement, we explain their variations in terms of career incentives embedded in the structure of China’s nomenklatura. Specifically, although the Politburo represented the pinnacle of one’s political career, entry was prohibitive, as it required “pre-revolutionary credentials” or demonstrable contributions to the founding of the People’s Republic. To the extent that full members of the Central Committee enjoyed greater power, status and privileges than alternate members and that “entry cost” into this subordinate level of power nucleus was distinctly lower (than the Politburo), there existed powerful incentives for alternate members to demonstrate their loyalty to their patrons by pursuing radical measures during the Leap. By relating the official rank of provincial leaders during the Eighth Plenary Session to provincial variations in grain procurement, we do find robust empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that such career incentives can systematically explain the observed variations in provincial radicalism. Our analysis also confirms the fact that it was the Party First Secretary rather than Governor of a province who determined the Leap’s policy; and that “pre-revolutionary credentials”, using the frequency with which one had been elected into the Central Committee prior to the Eighth Plenum, participation in the Long March, and tenure of Party membership prior to 1949, as proxies, were significant in determining entry into the Politburo.