

Toward a Structure–Agency Framework for Analyzing Elite

Conflict:

Structural Origins, Social Conjuncture, and the Outbreak of the Great Leap Forward

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Abstract: Scholars of elite conflict, particularly within comparative political economy who focus on developmental states and social coalitions, often adopt a Weberian, meso-level perspective. This approach typically concentrates on specific intermediate groups, examining how supposedly depoliticized and interest-free bureaucrats compete over particular policies based on their distinct ideologies, interests, resources, and power. I argue that this meso-level perspective neglects the inherently political nature of elite conflict, especially regarding both the politicized structural origins of elite interests and the agency factors, such as pivotal political events, that actively transform interest cleavage into outright conflict.

Using the Great Leap Forward (GLF)—the 20th century’s largest economic experiment—as a key historical case, I propose a new structure–agency framework for analyzing elite conflict: Why did Mao’s radicalization fail in 1955 but succeed in 1958, despite identical structural conditions? I contend that elite interest cleavages are fundamentally rooted in the politicized structural origins of state power—for example, its historical phase and its position in the global capitalism structure—while their actualization as a conflict depends on the social conjuncture and how key actors imagine and interpret the prevailing situation (agency/contingency). My comparative historical analysis demonstrates that two critical temporalities—the structural tension between the post-revolutionary state’s strong Party organizational capacity and weak infrastructural state capacity, coupled with the catch-up pressure facing a late-developer state—fueled the underlying policy conflict between Maoist radicalism and technocratic moderation. The dramatic shift of the social conjuncture between 1955 and 1958 altered actors’ interpretations and imaginations about the situation, ultimately triggering the elite conflict and the outbreak of the GLF. By conceptualizing the core theoretical concepts of structural origins and social conjuncture, this work makes a contribution to the fields of elite conflict theory, comparative historical sociology, and 20th-century Chinese studies.

Keywords: elite conflict, structural origins, social conjuncture, comparative historical sociology, the Great Leap Forward

Note: This writing sample (8,375 words) is formatted with 1.5 line spacing (instead of double spacing) to minimize the total page count while presenting the complete research framework.

Introduction

The study of elite factions and conflict stands as a central, enduring topic in social sciences (Pareto 1935; Mosca 1939; Michels 1962). This dissertation builds upon Zhou's (2023) conceptualization of elite factions, which combines classical theories of Mills (1956), Mann (1986), and Lachmann (2000). According to Zhou, "An elite faction is a group of individuals with political, economic, ideological, or military power who are organized around shared ideas and interests" (Zhou 2023: 52). This comprehensive definition integrates the view of interest cleavages that are characteristic of classical elite theory with the competitive dynamic highlighted by historical sociologists. The perspective adopted here can be categorized as a Weberian, meso-level approach. This approach focuses on intermediate groups, particularly examining how supposedly depoliticized and interest-free bureaucrats compete over policies based on their distinct ideologies, interests, resources, and power.

A significant body of research in comparative political economy and the historical political economy has adopted this lens, examining how specific meso-level elite groups influence policymaking and policy paradigm shifts. For instance, the developmental state literature highlights how different groups of bureaucrats, sharing common expertise, educational backgrounds, social networks, and reputation, form coherent collective action to compete for policy dominance (Johnson 1982; Haggard 1990; Evans 1995). Similarly, the social coalition paradigm examines how historical interest conflicts among different economic groups and their inherent sectoral interests (e.g., industry or agriculture) define their contemporary policy preferences (Gourevitch 1986; Rogowski 1989; Blyth 2003; Prasad 2012; Mudge 2018; Hung 2022).¹ Many influential China studies on elite conflict and policy-making also employ this perspective. Examples include Wang (2024), who discusses how economic bureaucrats with different disciplinary backgrounds and career trajectories compete for economic policy dominance, and Zhou (2023), who analyzes how competition among

¹ The social coalition paradigm initially referred to early comparative political economy studies focused on interest conflicts defined by economic structure and historical evolution (e.g., Gourevitch 1986; Rogowski 1989) (Zhu 2006). This dissertation groups the paradigm into the same theoretical lineage as later historical political economy (HPE) research—including works by Prasad (2012), Mudge (2018), and Hung (2022)—due to their shared focus on the historical evolution of interest conflicts and the inherent sectoral interests of elite groups.

technocrats with different demographic theories and economic views shaped population policies and discourses across East Asia. Zhang (2020) employs Bourdieu's state theory to explain how political elites with varying levels of political capital engage in competition by formulating distinct property tax policies.

These studies, employing a Weberian, meso-level perspective, offer valuable theoretical and empirical insights into elite conflict and policymaking. However, I argue that this perspective suffers from two major limitations. First, it offers an insufficient explanation for the origins of the distinct interests held by elite groups. It primarily discusses how so-called depoliticized factors—such as historical conflict, shared sectoral interests, professional backgrounds, and social networks—shape common interests and overcome collective action problems.² This approach overlooks how elite policy preference cleavages are fundamentally shaped by broader, politicized structural factors, particularly the nature of state power itself. Second, it lacks a specific mechanism to explain how interest cleavages ultimately translate into actual conflict. In practice, elite cleavages do not automatically lead to overt conflict; instead, such conflict is often triggered by specific political moments that are activated by the agency of key actors. In other words, this translation process involves elements of agency and contingency.

Therefore, this dissertation develops a new structural–agency framework for analyzing elite conflict (see Figure 1). I contend that elite interest cleavages are fundamentally rooted in the politicized structural origins of state power (structure), while their actualization as conflict depends on the social conjuncture and the way it alters key actors' interpretation and imagination of the prevailing situation (agency/contingency).

² Wang (2024: 242) points out “that economic policymaking during the reform period became ‘relatively depoliticized,’ shifting decision-making power to economic bureaucrats over political leaders” (Zhang 2025). I use the term “depoliticized” to describe the seemingly technical and value-neutral characteristics of policy competition among meso-level groups (such as bureaucrats) and, simultaneously, to underscore the inherent oversight of political and structural factors in the Weberian meso-level perspective.

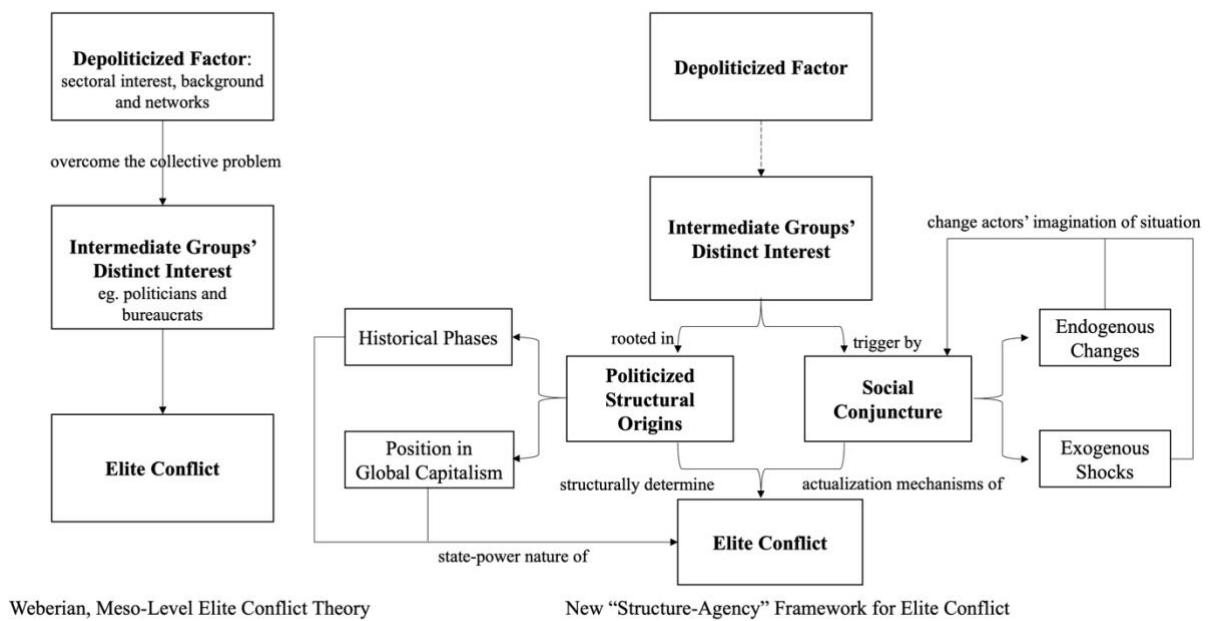


Figure 1. The comparison of Weberian elite conflict theory and the new framework

The politicized structural origins constitute the foundational structural factors that shape the core contradictions of elite conflict by fundamentally determining the very nature of state power and defining the major tasks confronting state building. These origins can be divided into two primary components: the state's historical phase and its position in global capitalism. The state's historical phase encompasses its political and economic development stage, such as whether it is an established democracy (Lieberman 2003), a post-colony (Centeno 2002; Boone 2003), a post-communist state (Fairbanks 1999), or a post-revolutionary state (Levitsky 2022). Economically, this phase includes whether the state is an early or late developer (Gerschenkron 1962; Johnson 1982). The position in global capitalism, conversely, refers primarily to the structural placement of the state: its core or periphery status in the world system (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1994). Crucially, this global position, alongside the late/early developer status, structurally shapes elite preferences and cleavages concerning specific economic policies.

The social conjuncture, integrating the core insights of eventful temporality (Sewell 1996) and individual agency (Ermakoff 2014), refers to the concrete situation that elites confront at a specific historical moment (Xu and Reed 2023). This moment alters key actors' interpretation and imagination of the prevailing situation and ultimately leads to the actualization of the elite

conflict. The conjuncture is composed of two components: endogenous change and exogenous shock. Endogenous change refers to the gradual, internal processes that subtly alter elite interpretations of the situation, often driven by economic factors exhibiting objective patterns of change (e.g., economic chaos following the socialist upsurge in the countryside). Conversely, exogenous shock refers to pivotal, contingent events—such as critical political changes—that fundamentally and abruptly reconfigure the social conjuncture, decisively changing how key agents interpret and imagine the current crisis or opportunity (e.g., the Soviet 20th Party Congress, the Hungarian Revolution and Polish protests, and the Moscow Conference).

In summary, the politicized structural origins fundamentally shape the core contradictions of elite conflict (structure), while the social conjuncture is a contingency and agency force that enables this contradiction to be translated into overt conflict. This structure–agency framework, by integrating broader political and structural factors with specific historical narratives and the role of agency and contingency, complements the Weberian, meso-level perspective and provides a more historically oriented explanatory model for understanding elite conflict.

This dissertation employs comparative historical analysis (Mahoney 2004) and a theory-guided case study method (Morse 2012; Zhang 2017) to examine the causal power of my structure–agency framework through a reinterpretation of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) historical narrative (Gorski 2018). I conduct unobtrusive historical research by analyzing accessible historical archives, biographies, memoirs, and official histories (Gottschalk 1950). Prior scholarship, spanning both history and social science, largely offers an exogenous account of the GLF’s origins, focusing on meso-level failures such as the lack of formal rules or external organizational triggers including campaign mechanisms. Historians typically attribute the cause to the lack of formal rules and individual factors of Mao’s leadership, arguing that Mao Zedong exercised his charismatic authority and employed despotic power to oppose technocratic moderation and enforce radical mass-mobilization policies (Bo 1993: 877; Meisner 1977; Macfarquhar 1983; Shen 2008). Social scientists offer more mechanism-oriented explanations, citing the failure of routine bureaucracy and fragmented

authoritarianism as triggers for Mao's adoption of campaign-style governance (Zhou 2009; Feng 2011; Cai 2020; Zhou 2023; Chen and Zhang 2025). However, this meso-level, exogenous explanation leaves two critical questions unanswered: First, although the lack of formal institutions enables Mao's employment of despotic power, what were the fundamental politicized structural factors that shaped the elite conflict between Mao and the technocrats? Second, if Mao can exercise his charismatic authority to arbitrarily introduce the radical policy, why did Mao not launch the GLF at the onset of conflict in 1955, waiting instead until 1958?

My framework proposes an endogenous explanation, arguing that the core conflict was fueled by two critical temporalities—the structural tension between the post-revolutionary state's strong Party organizational capacity and weak infrastructural state capacity, coupled with the catch-up pressure facing a late-developer state (politicized structural origins). The activation mechanism was the social conjuncture between 1955 and 1958. I demonstrate that the social conjuncture of 1955–1956 initially alleviated the elite conflict. The economic chaos following Mao's socialist upsurge in the countryside 农村社会主义高潮 of 1955 and the destabilizing nature of Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev's anti-Stalin speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 disabled Mao's focus, forcing him into a temporary retreat. This enabled the circulator/technician's 综合平衡派 economic philosophy to prevail, leading to the introduction of an anti-adventurism policy 反冒进 (Lin 1989). Conversely, the social conjuncture of 1957–1958 dramatically escalated the conflict. The political fallout from the Hungarian/Polish events and the shift from the 1956 Rectification Movement 整风运动 to the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign 反右运动 redirected Mao's attention back to class struggle as the primary contradiction 主要矛盾 (Shen 2005). Moreover, through the Anti-Rightist Campaign 反右运动, Mao re-consolidated party-wide consensus, enabling his return to the economic field (Chen 1998; Zhong 2013). Furthermore, Mao's ascendant international reputation following the Moscow Conference exacerbated the structural tension between China's status as a major political power and its reality as a minor economic power, driving him to launch the GLF. This critical shift in the social conjuncture enabled Mao to strip the

economic bureaucracy of its power and regain control over economic policy, ultimately triggering the outbreak of the GLF.

This dissertation offers significant contributions to the fields of elite conflict theory, comparative historical sociology, and 20th-century Chinese studies across two primary dimensions. First, theoretically, I conceptualize the politicized structural origins and social conjuncture as core analytical concepts. This develops a structure–agency framework for analyzing elite conflict, one that moves beyond the Weberian literature’s limitations by focusing on macro-political factors and the agentic mechanisms that translate cleavage into action. Second, empirically, this research reinterprets the GLF’s historical narrative through the elite conflict lens, addressing the shortcomings of prior exogenous explanations that focused narrowly on meso-level institutions or individual factors of leadership. In doing so, this study aims to “bridge gaps and break boundaries between sociological inquiry and area-specific knowledge,” which Zhang (2025) describes as utilizing a “theory-informed China studies” approach to contribute theoretical and empirical insights to comparative historical sociology. (Walder 2004).

Literature Review: Critiquing Exogenous Explanations for the Great Leap Forward

The current literature among historians and social scientists largely offers a meso-level, exogenous explanation for the outbreak of the GLF, focusing on external structural failures, such as the lack of formal rules, or organizational triggers, such as campaign mechanisms. This body of work, however, often lacks a comprehensive examination of the endogenous structural political–economic roots of the conflict and the specific contingent mechanisms that ultimately activated the elite conflict.

Historians discuss the origins of the GLF by pointing to a wide array of factors, including Mao Zedong’s personal agency, the highly centralized political system, urgent catch-up pressure, revolutionary legacies, and ideological and international factors. From the angle of top-level political dynamics, Mao’s personal agency, economic philosophy, and the allocation of his attention were decisively responsible for the GLF’s occurrence and its specific timing

(Xiao 1999; Shen 2008). This is often linked to the highly centralized political system that enabled Mao's personal authority (Zou 1994; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Li 1996/2006). Concerning economic modernization, the catch-up pressure faced by the post-revolutionary regime, coupled with the external threat of Cold War, compelled the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a late-developer state to adopt the Stalinist model of prioritizing heavy industry (Wang 2009; Yang 2009). Furthermore, drawing on historical and revolutionary legacies, the Party's established experience with campaign-style governance from the Yan'an period, alongside the widespread support it garnered from local cadres, facilitated the radical policy shift (Chen and Kung 2020; Esherick 2022; Huang 2024). Finally, peripheral elements—such as the influence of utopian socialist theory and egalitarian peasant ideology (Li 2000; Lin 2008), the international context in which socialist countries sought to surpass the capitalist world (Liu 2000), and Mao's intention to move beyond the Soviet classical planned economy model (Shen 2009)—are also considered.

Conversely, social scientists have focused on the institutional and organizational mechanisms underlying the GLF, examining the tournament system resulting from political centralization and economic decentralization (Zhou 2009), which, though revealing the institutional base of the GLF's operation, does not fully explain the cause of its outbreak. Zhou (2023) posits that the “regularization of charismatic authority” was intended to overcome the “failure of routine bureaucracy” to achieve political goals; however, this claim does not entirely align with the historical fact that the routine bureaucracy was actively developing and strengthening its central planned economy system before the GLF. A more robust line of structural inquiry is presented by Feng (2011); it emphasizes that the “intrinsic pressure of catch-up modernization” and the legacy of a “revolutionary indoctrination regime” necessitated the reliance on despotic power and campaign-style governance due to the lack of sufficient infrastructural capacity to realize transformative ideals. Similarly, Chen and Zhang (2025) argue that “campaign-style governance” is rooted in the Party-state's centralized political authority, with leaders initiating campaigns primarily to “overcome the problem caused by fragmented authoritarianism, coordinate the bureaucracy, and realize specific political goals.”

While both Feng (2011) and Chen and Zhang (2025) successfully identify the GLF's structural background—the lack of infrastructural capacity and the fragmented authoritarianism environment—they consistently overlook the contingent, agentic factors that determined when the GLF was launched.

Thus, the existing meso-level, exogenous explanations leave two critical questions unanswered: First, although the lack of formal institutions enables Mao's employment of despotic power, what were the fundamental politicized structural factors that shaped the elite conflict between Mao and the technocrats? Second, if Mao can exercise his charismatic authority to introduce a campaign-style way to arbitrarily implement his radical policy, why did he not launch the GLF at the onset of conflict in 1955, waiting instead until 1958? Therefore, this literature demonstrates the necessity of moving beyond the meso-level, exogenous focus to develop an endogenous explanatory framework that can address the dual puzzle of the GLF: namely, the fundamental structural origins of the elite conflict, and the precise contingent temporality that activated its outbreak.

Theoretical Framework: a Structure–Agency Model of Elite Conflict

My structure–agency framework for analyzing elite conflict argues that elite interest cleavages are fundamentally rooted in the politicized structural origins of state power (structure), while their actualization as conflict depends on the social conjuncture and how key actors imagine and interpret the prevailing situation (agency/contingency). I use the case of the outbreak of the GLF to examine the causal power of this framework (Gorski 2018), focusing on three questions: First, what are the politicized structural origins of the elite cleavage between Maoists and economic technocrats regarding developmental strategy? Second, what are the core differences between Mao's radical mass mobilization economic strategy (MMES) and the technocrats' general equilibrium theory (GET), and how do they relate to the Soviet planning model and the imagination of the market? Third, how did the specific social conjuncture (agency/contingency) activate the policy cleavage, leading to the outbreak of the GLF? This section first conceptualizes the core concepts and then demonstrates their application in the GLF case.

Politicized Structural Origins: Two Temporalities Faced by the Chinese Communist Party

I submit that politicized structural origins constitute the foundational structural factors that shape the core contradictions of elite conflict by fundamentally determining the very nature of state power and defining the major tasks confronting state building. These origins can be divided into two primary components: the state's historical phase and its position in global capitalism. The state's historical phase encompasses its political and economic development stage. Politically, the primary tasks range from building a welfare state and mitigating political polarization in an established democracy (Lieberman 2003), to monopolizing violence and clearing colonial remnants in a post-colony (Migdal 1988; Boone 2003), to navigating strong Party capacity versus weak infrastructural capacity in a post-revolutionary state (Levitsky 2022), and, finally, to state reconfiguration and avoiding re-feudalization in a post-communist setting (Fairbanks 1999). Economically, this phase includes whether the state is an early or late developer. Late-developing states may achieve what is known as the latecomer advantage through import-substitution industrialization (Gerschenkron 1962; Johnson 1982; Chang 2002) or suffer from the so-called latecomer curse in political and technological innovation (Sachs, Woo and Yang 2001). The position in global capitalism, conversely, refers primarily to the state's structural placement: its core or periphery status in the world system (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1994). Core states face tasks similar to those of established democracies, while peripheral states, such as late developers, must actively resist what has been referred to as "dependent development" (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Evans 1979). Crucially, this global position, alongside the late/early developer status, structurally shapes elite preferences and cleavages concerning specific economic policies.

I propose that the politicized structural origins of the elite conflict between Maoists and economic technocrats stemmed from two inherent and intersecting temporalities confronting the PRC: the structural tension between the post-revolutionary state's strong Party organizational capacity and weak infrastructural state capacity, coupled with the catch-up pressure facing a late-developer state. As a Leninist party with a strong moral mandate for

social transformation (Feng 2011), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite—including both Maoists and economic technocrats—shared an intense aspiration for catch-up development in the face of the post-revolutionary state’s weak economic base. This fundamental consensus is articulated in the CCP’s 8th National Congress Report:

“The major contradiction at home is already the contradiction between the people’s demand for the building of an advanced industrial country and the reality of a backward agricultural country... The current primary task of the Party and the entire nation is to concentrate forces to resolve this contradiction and transform our country as quickly as possible from a backward agricultural country into an advanced industrial country.” (CCP Central Commission [1956] 2011: 292–293)

However, this consensus on the goal was undermined by China’s weak infrastructural capacity. This structural tension created a profound strategy cleavage between the two elite factions. Technocrats led by Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun opted to steadily advance development by relying on formal central planning to strengthen the state’s infrastructural capacity, while Mao argued for bypassing the infrastructural deficit by leveraging the revolutionary Party’s strong organizational capacity—the radical method of mass mobilization—to achieve quicker catch-up. This revolutionary legacy of mass mobilization found wide support among local cadres. Consequently, the intersection of these two critical temporalities led to the fundamental policy cleavages between Maoists and economic technocrats (Figure 2).

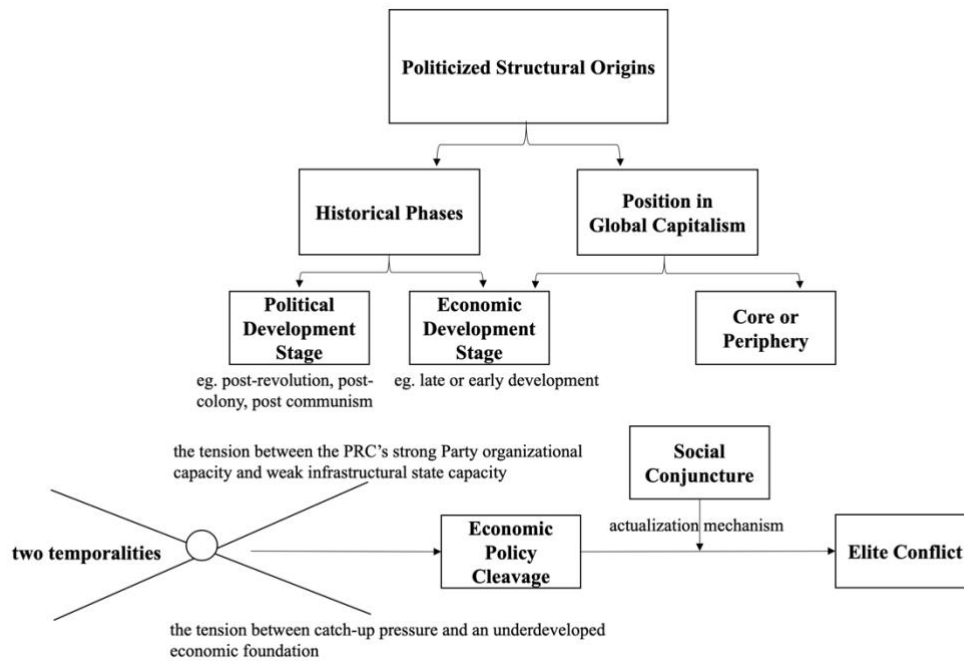


Figure 2. The mechanisms of politicized structural origins and its application in the case of the Great Leap Forward

Economic Policy Cleavage: the Conflict Between Maoists and Economic Technocrats

Facing the shared goal of catch-up development, the CCP elite developed two divergent economic ideologies. The first was the moderate GET approach, led by economic technocrats such as Zhou Enlai. This approach prioritized central planning, technology, cadres, and fiscal balance. The second was the radical MMES, represented by party politicians such as Mao Zedong, which championed mass mobilization, local vitality, and breakthrough development (Zhou 2023). GET proponents explicitly emphasized “the necessity of a highly technical foundation,” the “full utilization of scientific knowledge,” the belief that the state “must rely on the active labor of intellectuals” (Zhou [1956] 2011: 10), and the objective requirement that “finance, credit, and material resources must be balanced, and plans and budgets must be formulated with foresight and prudence” (Li [1957] 2011: 333). Conversely, Maoists (MMES) advocated for “full steam ahead,” “large-scale mass movements,” simultaneous development of enterprises (large, medium, and small) and methods (indigenous and foreign), and the perpetual pursuit of breakthroughs (Mao [1958–1960] 1997–1998: 上, 383, 467; 下, 719; 755).

The policy cleavage between GET and MMES proponents manifested across all domains of early economic construction (1950s–1960s) and has been studied extensively.³ Schmalzer (2016) highlighted that in 1960s agricultural development, the dominant approach was not the technocratic GET but a “Red Revolutionary” perspective, which prioritized mobilization and political leadership over centralized planning. Zhou (2023) demonstrated how population control was politicized as a part of GET, contrasting it with Mao’s autonomous faction (MMES), which favored mobilization over technical constraints. Wang (2024) further defined GET adherents as the “circulators (bureaucracy),” whose ideology opposed Mao’s philosophy and later influenced China’s post-reform path (Weber 2021).

Following the theoretical lineage set by Shirk (1993), Weber (2021), and Wang (2024), I position the MMES and GET within the broader economic imaginations (Blyth 2003). First, contrasting with the plan–market dichotomy, MMES represents a radical version of the planned economy, possessing the potential to dismantle the existing planning system, while GET aligns with the moderate, orthodox planned economy (Perkins 1991). This fundamental split parallels the global debates over shock therapy versus gradualism marketization methods in the 1990s (Table 1). Second, when comparing the two with the orthodox Stalinist planning model, GET is generally closer, inheriting its focus on cadres and technology, but it is more flexible on central–local relations due to the Chinese Revolution’s unique local context (Whiting 2002; Rithmire 2014). MMES fundamentally diverges from traditional models: It prioritizes mobilization, mass movements, and indigenous techniques 土技术 over the Stalinist emphasis on expertise, and its encouragement of local, dispersed industrial systems exceeds centralized planning. Most crucially, MMES possesses a unique philosophical foundation—Mao’s theory of contradiction—rejecting the concept of eternal balance and advocating a model of continuous breakthrough development (Table 2). Mao Zedong personally articulated his economic philosophy as being fundamentally distinct from the Soviet model:

³ For example, the New Tax System Incident (1952) and the foundation of the State Planning Commission (1954). My analysis is solely centered on the elite conflict from 1955 to 1958, specifically the pivotal policy shift from anti-adventurism policy to the GLF.

“We must struggle hard for three years to forge a Chinese socialist construction line... Stalin was basically correct, but he had errors. They did not combine agriculture and industry, and they opposed the combination of large, medium, and small enterprises. We combine large, medium, and small, with the foundation placed on the small ones, relying on the localities and the small scale. They rely on standardized design, cadres, and technology. “ (Mao [1958] 1999: 177–195)

“The comprehensive proposition is to be both ‘red and expert,’ combining leadership with the masses. We need both technology and political thought; we need both cadres and the masses; we need both democracy and centralization.” (Mao [1958], cited in Li [1996] 2006: 233)

Economic Development Strategy \ Mode of Economic Operation	Planned Economy	Market Economy
	MMES Approach	Shock Therapy
Radical Approach		
Moderate Approach	GET	Gradualism

Table 1. The position of MMES and GET in the imagination of a planned versus a market economy

Models of Planned Economy	Maoists' MMES	Technocrats' GET	Classical Stalinist Model
Core Characteristics	MMES	GET	Rigid Central Planning; Low Mobilization
Central-Local Relations	Local Predominance, using local initiative to pressure the center	Central-Local Balance, Central Planning as the primary tool	Pure Central Planning; Limited Local Autonomy
Industrial System	Predominantly Local Small-Scale Industry	Central-Local Balance, Central Industrial System as the main structure	Pure Central Industrial System
Primary Agents of Economic Construction	Mass Mobilization	Technocrats; Cadres	Technocrats; Cadres
Philosophical Basis	Theory of Contradiction; Continuous Breakthrough;	GET; Criticized by Mao as Metaphysics	None; Criticized by Mao as Metaphysics
Objectives of Economic Construction	Catch-up and War Preparedness; Global War	Catch-up and War Preparedness; Relatively Peaceful Environment	Catch-up and War Preparedness; Global War / Peaceful Transition

Table 2. A comparison of different planned economy models

Social Conjuncture: Actualization Mechanism of Conflict and the Outbreak of the Great Leap Forward

However, interest cleavage does not automatically translate into outright elite conflict. Its actualization as conflict depends on the social conjuncture and the way it alters key actors' interpretation and imagination of the prevailing situation (agency/contingency).

The social sciences have long explored the roles of time and contingency in event development. Historical institutionalism emphasizes time and sequence by demonstrating how the order and combination of variables shape subsequent outcomes (Pierson 2004). For example, Ertman (1997) argued that states engaging in state-building after 1450—and thus able to leverage a nascent educated bureaucracy—were more likely to develop bureaucratic polities, while those building states before 1450 tended toward patrimonial forms (Gorski 2003). Smith

(2007) revisited the resource curse theory, demonstrating that oil discovered after state-building often hampers governance, while states that discover oil after building institutions avoid this pitfall. Menaldo (2016) shared similar views, connecting oil, state institutions, and development.

However, for historical sociologists, the concept of time and sequence represents just one aspect of contingency (Abbott 2001). Building on Hall (1999), Ermakoff (2015) delineates several aspects of contingency beyond mere temporal effects such as period and sequence effects, including conjunctural causation—emphasizing the varied combination of forces across time and space—chance and individual agency. Ermakoff (2008) advocates for individual agency, stressing that the decisions of key actors and the alignment of these decisions during moments of uncertainty are crucial to outcomes, as exemplified by his work on the collective abdication of elite parliamentarians facilitating the Nazi rise. Equally crucial in sociology is eventful temporality (Sewell 1996), which emphasizes the decisive, structural influence of antecedent events on subsequent outcomes, famously arguing that the storming of the Bastille invented the very concept of a modern revolution.

The social conjuncture, a concept I develop, integrating the core insights of eventful temporality (Sewell 1996) and individual agency (Ermakoff 2014), refers to the concrete situation that elites confront at a specific historical moment. This moment alters key actors' interpretation and imagination of the prevailing situation, and ultimately leads to the actualization of the elite conflict (Xu and Reed 2023). The conjuncture is composed of two components: endogenous change and exogenous shock. Endogenous change refers to gradual, internal processes that subtly alter elite interpretations of the situation, often driven by economic factors exhibiting objective patterns of change (e.g., economic chaos following the socialist upsurge in the countryside). Conversely, exogenous shock refers to pivotal, contingent events—such as critical political events—that fundamentally and abruptly reconfigure the social conjuncture, decisively changing how key agents interpret and imagine the current crisis or opportunity (e.g., the Soviet 20th Party Congress, the Hungarian Revolution and Polish protests, and the Moscow Conference). The social conjuncture thus captures the eventful

temporality aspect by highlighting the decisive impact of both endogenous and exogenous events on subsequent outcomes. In doing so, it simultaneously emphasizes the individual agency aspect through the mechanism by which these events reshape key actors' imagination and interpretation of the current situation, thereby influencing their subsequent decisions and the final outcome of the conflict (Figure 3).

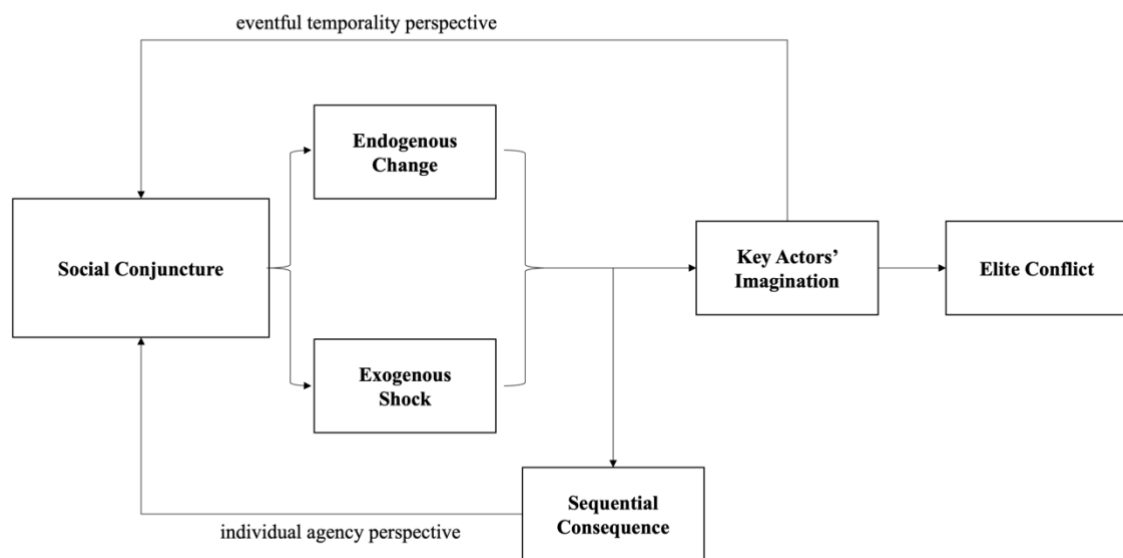


Figure 3. The mechanism of social conjuncture

Studies on elite conflict in China also highlight the role of contingency and situational factors. Drawing on Ermakoff (2008), Zhang and Shi (2024) propose a theory of situational conflict, arguing that the key to conflict actualization is not ideological cleavage itself but, rather, key actors' understanding of the current context—especially their (over)reaction to opponents' actions. Han (2019) similarly contends that interest cleavages convert into actual conflict only within specific historical contexts and policy disputes. Focusing on the 1959 Lushan Conference, Luo (2022) suggests that the meeting escalated into a Mao–Peng Dehuai conflict because Mao's perception of the situation shifted, leading him to link Peng to a “counter-Party clique” to resolve growing discontent against his MMES and, implicitly, his personal authority (Dittmer 1977).

In the GLF case, the cleavage between the Maoists and the GET faction over economic policy existed from 1955 onward. However, the 1955–1956 social conjuncture mitigated the conflict: The economic chaos following the MMES’ implementation in 1955 (endogenous change) and the Soviet 20th Party Congress’ criticism of the cult of personality (exogenous shock) convinced Mao that the situation was unfavorable. Consequently, he temporarily shelved the MMES, allowing the GET faction to gain the upper hand and implement the anti-adventurism policy. Conversely, the 1957–1958 social conjuncture decisively fueled the conflict. Influenced by the 1956 Hungarian/Polish events (exogenous shock), the shift from Party rectification to the anti-rightist movement (endogenous change) led Mao to once again prioritize class struggle over economic development. Additionally, the 1957 Moscow Conference (exogenous shock) significantly enhanced Mao’s international reputation, intensifying his sense of catch-up pressure. Interpreting the 1957–1958 situation as favorable, he decisively criticized the GET faction and its anti-adventurism policy (the actualization of elite conflict), pushing through the MMES and culminating in the GLF. Evidently, in the policy shift from anti-adventurism to the GLF, the social conjuncture and key actors’ interpretation of the situation played the decisive role.

Method and Source

This dissertation employs a dual methodological strategy, using both within-case analysis and inter-case analysis. The policy transition from anti-adventurism to the GLF is treated simultaneously as a sequential, processual case and as a comparison of two distinct social conjunctures leading to divergent elite conflict outcomes. For the within-case analysis, I use the theory-testing process-tracing method (Beach and Pedersen 2019) to examine the causal power of my structure–agency framework in explaining this specific episode of elite conflict (Gorski 2018).

The GLF is selected because it represents a consequential elite conflict in 20th-century China that is sociologically interesting due to the manifest roles of politicized structural origins and social conjuncture in its outbreak, possessing both typicality (Wang 2002) and paradigmatic status (Ermakoff 2014). For the inter-case analysis, I deliberately avoid the

Millian method of agreement or difference (Skocpol 1979; Mahoney 2003). Instead, I treat anti-adventurism and the GLF as theoretical counterfactuals (Zhang 2020), applying the comparative historical method to demonstrate how differing social conjunctures produced distinct elite political outcomes.

The primary goal of this empirical section is not mere historical narration but theoretical inference—to test the framework’s causal power and reveal its sociological significance. Therefore, this study adopts an unobtrusive research approach (Gottschalk 1950), drawing evidence from historical archives, official histories, biographies, memoirs, and secondary literature to support the theoretical claims.

Case Analysis

In this case, the two critical temporalities faced by the PRC fueled the elite conflict between the Maoists’ MMES and the technocrats’ GET. The social conjuncture of 1955–1956 mitigated the elite conflict, allowing the GET faction’s anti-adventurism policy to prevail. Conversely, a decisive change in the social conjuncture during 1957–1958 fundamentally reshaped Mao’s perception of the situation, prompting his firm commitment to launch the MMES, escalating the conflict and ultimately leading to the outbreak of the GLF (Figure 4).

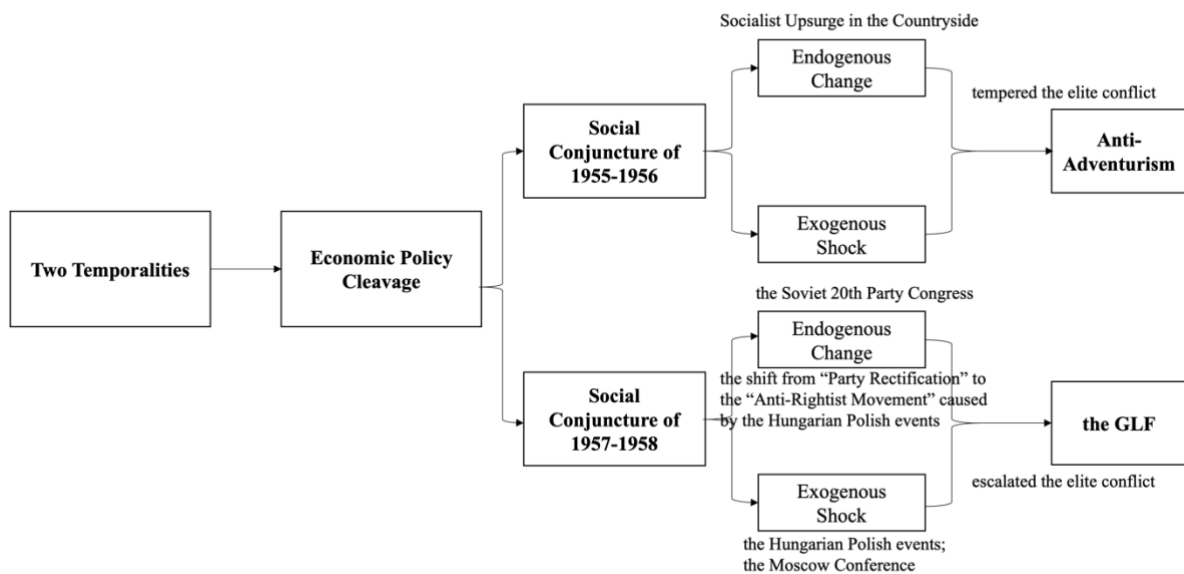


Figure 4. The causal power of the structure–agency framework in the case of AA and GLF

Socialist Upsurge in the Countryside and the Rise of Economic Policy Cleavage

The genesis of the GLF can be traced directly to the conflict over anti-adventurism, which originated with Mao's personal mobilization for the socialist upsurge in the countryside—his initial attempt to implement the MMES in the agrarian sector. The acceleration of the agricultural cooperativization movement was closely linked to Mao's subsequent critique of Deng Zihui and the Rural Work Department.

In early 1954–1955, facing mounting tensions in cadre-mass relations and economic chaos due to the simultaneous push for cooperativization and large-scale grain extraction, Mao briefly proposed a conservative policy of “stop, contract, and development” (停、缩、发) to temporarily decelerate agricultural cooperativization. However, even during this brief retreat, Mao's underlying commitment to catch-up development and socialist transition remained firm. CCP Central Committee and State Council records indicate that prior to issuing the “urgent directive on stabilizing grain procurement” (CCP Central Committee and State Council [1955] 2011: 64–69), Mao met with Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai, and Deng Zihui, criticizing their lack of enthusiasm for the socialist transition and warning them that even in a period of consolidation, they must “not repeat the mistakes of 1953” (Du 1993: 380). This demonstrated the consistency of Mao's pursuit of the MMES.

However, Mao's assessment of the situation shifted following a report to the Provincial and Municipal Committee Secretaries' Conference on May 17, 1955. He concluded that the Rural Work Department's prior judgment on rural tensions was overly pessimistic, dismissing it as “spreading rumors” (发谣风). Crucially, this shift was significantly influenced by the local cadres' revolutionary legacy, which, fueled by the two critical temporalities, spurred an enthusiasm for catch-up development. The cadres' tendency to emphasize the benefits of cooperativization while downplaying rural tensions effectively reshaped Mao's perception of the situation. A provincial example highlights this tendency, as the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee's 1954 directive claimed: “The development of the mutual aid and cooperation movement across the province is fundamentally normal and healthy. ... The chaotic state of

management in the cooperatives is also gradually being overcome” (CCP Jiangsu Provincial Committee [1954] 1959: 81–82).

This shift in perception led to Mao’s swift denunciation of Deng Zihui and the Rural Work Department in July–August 1955 for their “right deviationism” (右倾) and being “women with bound feet” (小脚女人). This critique not only promoted accelerated agricultural cooperativization but also saw the nascent form of the MMES’ philosophical basis and campaign style, which would later define the GLF. Mao articulated this emergent philosophy:

“Regarding the issue of development, [it is a choice between] ‘no advance’ and ‘rash advance.’ The current problem is not to criticize rash advance, not to criticize ‘exceeding objective possibility,’ but to criticize no advance—to criticize the failure to recognize and utilize ‘objective possibility.’” (Mao [1955], cited in Lin 2008: 177–178)

“In short, leadership should not lag behind the mass movement. Yet the current situation is exactly this: The mass movement is ahead of the leadership, and the leadership cannot keep up with the movement. This situation must be changed.” (Mao [1955] 2011: 49–73)

However, beneath the surface of apparent progress, the socialist upsurge concealed serious economic ramifications. The economic endogenous change personally driven by Mao resulted in two key consequences: First, the resultant damage provoked a swift reaction from the GET faction, and second, the economic failure forced Mao to temporarily retreat from the economic sphere.

Faced with the chaos caused by the upsurge and the subsequent “critique of right-leaning conservatism” (批右倾保守), Premier Zhou Enlai repeatedly voiced concerns between January and June 1956. While Mao insisted on “not pouring cold water on the masses’ enthusiasm,” Zhou’s speech at the 24th Plenary Meeting of the State Council on February 8, 1956, explicitly stated that the “rash advance” required a “cold water wash”: “We need to be both more and faster, but also better and more economical,” and “I urge everyone to pay attention to seeking truth from facts” (Zhou [1956] 2011: 111–112). Senior economic bureaucrats, including Liu Shaoqi, Chen Yun, Li Fuchun, Bo Yibo, and Li Xiannian, all concurred with Zhou Enlai’s assessment (Wen 2006; Lin 2008: 172).

In fact, Zhou Enlai's final direct confrontation with Mao during his lifetime centered on the anti-adventurism economic policy, with Zhou explicitly opposing Mao's proposal to allocate an additional 2 billion yuan for basic capital construction at a late April Politburo meeting. Confronted by near-unanimous opposition from the central leadership, Mao was forced to temporarily retreat from the economic field, leaving the center in early May to travel south for leisure. Nevertheless, his profound dissatisfaction with anti-adventurism persisted. He expressed strong displeasure with the June 20th People's Daily editorial titled "Oppose Conservatism and Oppose Rash Impetuosity," scribbling only three words: "I won't read it." He later explicitly stated during the Nanning Conference in 1958 that the editorial was "scolding me, so why should I read it?" (Mao [1958], cited in Li [1996] 2006: 17).

This raises the critical puzzle: Why did Mao, despite his intense opposition to anti-adventurism in 1956, wait until January 1958 to launch his counter-attack at the Nanning Conference? Was it solely due to the economic chaos forcing his retreat (endogenous change)? Or, was it the collective opposition of the technocrats curtailing his power (the elite situation)? In fact, beyond these two factors, the social conjuncture of 1956, particularly the exogenous shock of the Soviet 20th Party Congress, fundamentally influenced Mao's choices and his interpretation of the situation. The 1956 conjuncture compelled Mao to temporarily withdraw from the economic dispute to address far more critical international and domestic political affairs.

The Contingent Exogenous Shock of the Soviet 20th Party Congress and the Adoption of Anti-Adventurism Policy

The Soviet 20th Party Congress and its aftermath—a critical contingent event constituting the 1956 social conjuncture—influenced the course of China's elite economic conflict in two principal ways. First, the event diverted Mao's attention, forcing him to expend energy managing the ideological fallout from Khrushchev's so-called secret report across the socialist bloc, temporarily sidelining him from domestic economic policy disputes. Second, the Congress' critique of the Stalin model and the "cult of personality" prompted Chinese political elites across various fronts to reflect on the post-1949 trajectory, fostering an atmosphere of

positive, democratic introspection. While this atmosphere did not directly restrain Mao's charismatic authority, it did encourage him to voluntarily forgo personal cult propaganda, withdraw from the elite economic conflict, and tacitly endorse the technocrats' anti-adventurism policy.

Addressing the ideological disarray caused by the secret report, Mao and the CCP were compelled to manage the crisis and act effectively to stabilize the Soviet image within the fraternal party system (Shen 2008). From February to September 1956, a significant portion of Mao's energy was dedicated to addressing the 20th Congress' impact and its implications for the upcoming 8th National Congress. In April 1956, Mao convened multiple high-level meetings to interpret and respond to the political repercussions, culminating in the People's Daily statement titled "On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." This piece vigorously defended the Soviet Union's leading status in the international communist movement, reasoning, "How can one imagine that a socialist country, unprecedented in the world and the first to practice the dictatorship of the proletariat, would not commit one error or another?" (CCP Central Committee [1956] 2011: 225).

In addition to the immediate diversion of Mao's attention, the CCP's defense of Soviet leadership, characterized by a theoretical sophistication arguably exceeding that of the new Soviet collective leadership, paradoxically boosted Mao's and the CCP's international prestige. While this rise in stature did not directly resolve domestic economic disputes, the steady accretion of Mao's personal prestige—further enhanced by the subsequent Hungarian Revolution and Polish protests, and ultimately peaking at the Moscow Conference—set the stage for the explosive "critique of anti-adventurism" and the GLF's outbreak in 1958. Thus, the secret report created both an immediate political distraction and an unintended consequence in 1958.

More critically, the 20th Congress' critique spurred profound domestic reflection across multiple policy lines. This included introspection on the United Front (统一战线) work (Li Weihai); the strengthening of socialist legality led by Liu Shaoqi and Dong Biwu; the expansion of socialist democracy by Zhou Enlai; and—most relevantly for this paper—the

GET faction's strong advocacy for central planning, "comprehensive balance," and anti-adventurism championed by Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Li Fuchun, Li Xiannian, and Bo Yibo (Party Literature Research Office 2011). This created a democratic atmosphere within the CCP, fostering a collective drive to correct past errors. Although these reflections did not structurally abolish Mao's ultimate despotic power, this democratic climate in 1956 was instrumental in encouraging Mao's self-imposed decision to temporarily retreat from the economic conflict.

In summary, the combination of economic chaos resulting from the socialist upsurge (endogenous change) and the 20th Congress' shock (exogenous shock) compelled Mao to temporarily withdraw from the elite conflict in 1955–1956. Consequently, the 8th National Congress of the CCP in 1956 formally adopted the policy of "opposing both conservatism and rash advance, and making steady progress through comprehensive balance" (Li [1956] 2011: 263–264). The GET faction thus decisively gained the upper hand in this phase of the elite conflict. Zhou Enlai highlighted the necessity of this balanced approach in his report on the Second Five-Year Plan:

"First, the rate of development of the national economy should be reasonably determined based on need and possibility, placing the plan on a foundation that is both proactive and reliably stable, in order to ensure the relatively balanced development of the national economy... When we drafted the 1956 plan, given the previous year's bumper harvest and the great victory achieved in socialist transformation, it was necessary and possible to set a relatively high rate for national economic development. However, we did not properly balance the scale of capital construction with the capacity for material supply... and this created a situation of considerable tension across all aspects of the national economy." (Zhou [1956] 2011: 150–152)

Why did the pragmatic policy of the 8th Congress, at which the technocrats prevailed, abruptly give way to the radical GLF and People's Commune Movement just one year later? As argued, Mao's withdrawal was merely a temporary maneuver forced by the prevailing social conjuncture. The critical question remains: What dramatic changes occurred in the 1957–1958 social conjuncture that allowed Mao to immediately reassert the MMES?

Returning to Class Struggle and the Mass Mobilization Economic Strategy: Hungarian and Polish Events and the Anti-Rightist Movement

Simply put, in the 1957–1958 social conjuncture, the exogenous shock of the Hungarian Revolution and the Polish protests led to an endogenous change—the shift from Party rectification to the Anti-Rightist Movement. This movement fundamentally altered Mao’s perception of the situation, leading him to return to the path of class struggle and MMES. The exogenous shock of the Moscow Conference boosted Mao’s international prestige, while the contradiction between China’s great political power and small economic scale ultimately spurred Mao to actualize the elite conflict, criticize the GET faction’s anti-adventurism, and launch the GLF (Figure 8).

The Hungarian/Polish events—which broke out in October 1956 in opposition to domestic governments and Soviet imperial intervention—served as the critical exogenous shock that led to the endogenous change from Party rectification to the Anti-Rightist Movement in China. This movement fundamentally altered Mao’s perception of the "situation," prompting his return to class struggle and the MMES development path. The exogenous shock of these events had three major consequences. First, managing this crisis continued to absorb Mao’s attention, enabling the GET faction to sustain its anti-adventurism economic policy domestically, with Chen Yun reiterating the importance of the “comprehensive balance” principle in January 1957, emphasizing that planning requires “looking ahead and falling behind” (瞻前顾后) (Chen [1957] 2011: 4–8). Second, handling this crisis, which highlighted a theoretical weakness in the new Soviet leadership, cemented the rising prestige of Mao and the CCP within the socialist bloc (Shen 2008). This growing stature culminated in the 1957 Moscow Conference, a critical exogenous shock that ultimately catalyzed Mao’s decision to launch the GLF.

Most crucially, the domestic reaction to the Hungarian/Polish events, combined with the “minority causing trouble” (少数人闹事) incidents in late 1956, spurred Mao’s decision to launch the long-brewing Party rectification (党内整风). Initially, Mao’s attitude toward the unrest was moderate; he believed that “disturbances among the masses in our society are bad things, which we do not approve of. But the occurrence of such incidents, in turn, can prompt

us to learn lessons, overcome bureaucracy, and educate cadres and the masses” (SID Vol.10: 59-88). Seizing this opportunity, he launched the Party rectification campaign with initial mild methods. However, the subsequent open-door rectification (开门整风)—which shifted the movement to include the entire society—caused Mao to make a severe and erroneous estimate of the situation. He became convinced of the widespread existence of Rightist elements who he said were “viciously attacking socialism and the leadership of the Communist Party.” This miscalculation prompted Mao to abandon the 8th Party Congress’ conclusion formulated by the GET faction—to which he already held reservations—and decisively revert to the MMES path centered on class struggle. Mao’s speech at the Third Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee directly reflected this transformation:

“The contradiction between the working class and the bourgeoisie and the contradiction between socialism and capitalism is the major contradiction throughout the entire transitional period... The Eighth Party Congress said the contradiction between the enemy and ourselves was fundamentally resolved. Now it seems that this is correct, but only in the economic aspect; from the political aspect and ideological aspect, we cannot say this...The Eighth Party Congress resolution said that the current major contradiction is the contradiction between the demand of the advanced social system and the reality of backward productive forces. This contradiction will still exist in the long run, but currently, it is inappropriate to say this.” (Party Literature Research Office 2003: 717–720)

This Anti-Rightist Movement served to forge consensus and provide the necessary foundation for the GLF. At the top level, Mao used rectification methods to criticize anti-adventurism, oppose dogmatism in the military, and disparage rightist officials to unify support for radical economic construction. At the grassroots level, cadres employed what were called “big character posters and big debates” (大鸣大放大字报大辩论) to pave the way, encouraging the masses to spontaneously embrace radical industrial and agricultural construction (Lin 2008).

The Moscow Conference and the Final Outbreak of the Great Leap Forward

While the Anti-Rightist Movement had already altered Mao's perception of the domestic situation, the final exogenous shock that triggered his firm commitment to launch the GLF was his experience at the Moscow Conference. Mao's heightened international prestige during the conference made him acutely aware of the structural tension between China's status as a rising political power and its reality as a minor economic power, compelling him to launch the MMES and GLF. Before departing for Moscow, Mao revealed his intent to return to the economic sphere but was met with silent resistance from the GET faction, whose representatives continued to emphasize the comprehensive balance policy. Dissatisfied with this passive resistance, Mao used the close of the Anti-Rightist Movement and the newly defined class contradiction to propose being a promoter of revolution at the Third Plenum:

"In doing things, there are at least two methods: One is to achieve the goal slowly, and relatively poorly; the other is to achieve the goal quickly, and relatively well... Over the past year, several things were swept away. One was to sweep away 'more, faster, better, and more economically.' No need for more, no need for faster. As for better and more economically, those were also swept away incidentally. 'Anti-adventurism' swept away more, faster, better, and more economically, swept away the Forty Articles on Agriculture, and also swept away the Promotion Committee. This is Right-deviation; this is retrogression." (Mao [1957] 2011: 533–535).

As Mao arrived at the Moscow Conference with the intention of transcending the classical Soviet communist mode, his global status was at its peak. When Khrushchev proposed that the Soviet Union could "surpass the United States in the shortest historical period in peaceful competition" (Khrushchev 1957: 6), Mao responded by declaring that "in 15 years, we [China] may be able to catch up with or surpass Great Britain." He articulated this ambition in his improvisatory speech on November 18, 1957:

"The Chinese people are striving hard. China is a great country politically and demographically, but economically it is still a small country. They want to work hard to turn China into a truly great country. Comrade Khrushchev told us that in 15 years, the Soviet Union can surpass the United States. I can also say that in 15 years, we may be able to catch up with

or surpass Great Britain... Thus, in 15 years, within our bloc, the Soviet Union surpasses the United States, and China surpasses Great Britain.” (Mao [1957] 1992: 635)

Mao’s secretary, Ye Zilong, later described the direct impact of the Moscow experience:

“I very obviously felt that after 1957, especially after returning from the Soviet Union, his temper became impatient and agitated. It was evident that his pressure was very great. He once told me: ‘Is economic construction during peacetime more difficult than defeating Chiang Kai-shek’s 8 million troops? I don’t believe it!’” (Ye 2000: 214)

Returning to China, Mao immediately announced the “catch up with Britain and surpass America” (赶英超美) slogan and demanded revised plan targets. Faced with Mao’s strong will, the GET faction—whose leaders continued to push for budget adherence—fell silent. Li Fuchun also reiterated the guiding principle of comprehensive balance and appropriate arrangement in his report to the 8th National Congress of Trade Unions (Chronicle 1987: 111–112). Mao decided to use his charismatic authority to bypass the central leadership, mobilizing local leaders to criticize anti-adventurism at the Hangzhou, Chengdu, and Nanning meetings. This local pressure forced the technocrats to capitulate, with Zhou Enlai performing a self-criticism at the Nanning Conference, admitting: “I must bear the main responsibility for this anti-adventurism error” (Zhou [1958] 1998: 1368–1369).

The final actualization of elite conflict and the outbreak of GLF—a political–economic experiment rooted in the structural tension of the two temporalities—was thus triggered by the dramatic and favorable shift of the social conjuncture in 1957–1958.

Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, my case study demonstrates that the elite conflict over economic policy (MMES vs. GET) between Maoists and technocrats was structurally rooted in the dual temporalities confronting the early PRC: the tension between a post-revolutionary state’s weak infrastructural capacity and strong Party organizational power, coupled with intense pressure for rapid catch-up development. These dynamics constituted the politicized structural origins of the elite cleavage. The actualization of this conflict, however, was contingent upon the dramatic shift of the social conjuncture between 1955 and 1958, which altered the actors’

interpretations and imaginations about the situation, ultimately triggering the elite conflict and the outbreak of the GLF.

The 1955–1956 social conjuncture saw the economic disruption caused by the socialist upsurge in the countryside (endogenous change) and the democratizing impulse of the Soviet 20th Party Congress (exogenous shock), which led Mao to perceive the situation as unfavorable. He temporarily withdrew from the economic arena, allowing the GET faction to gain the upper hand in the elite conflict and implement the moderate anti-adventurism policy. The 1957–1958 social conjuncture presented a decisive reversal. The Hungarian/Polish events (exogenous shock) precipitated the shift from Party rectification to the Anti-Rightist Movement (endogenous change), fundamentally changing Mao’s perception and driving him back to the class struggle-centered MMES. Simultaneously, the Moscow Conference (exogenous shock) maximized Mao’s prestige and intensified his awareness of the pressure for the PRC—a minor economic power—to match its political great power status. This prompted him to decisively criticize the GET faction’s anti-adventurism policy (actualization of elite conflict), ultimately launching the GLF and implementing his MMES strategy.

This dissertation offers significant contributions to the fields of elite conflict theory, comparative historical sociology, and 20th-century Chinese studies across two primary dimensions. First, theoretically, I conceptualize the politicized structural origins and social conjuncture as core analytical concepts. This develops a structure–agency framework for analyzing elite conflict, one that moves beyond the Weberian literature’s limitations by focusing on macro-political factors and the agentic mechanisms that translate cleavage into action. Second, empirically, this research reinterprets and reconstructs the GLF’s historical narrative through the elite conflict lens, addressing the shortcomings of prior exogenous explanations that focused narrowly on meso-level institutions or individual factors of leadership. In doing so, this study “seeks to bridge gaps and break boundaries between sociological inquiry and area-specific knowledge,” which Zhang (2025) describes as utilizing a “theory-informed China studies” approach to contribute theoretical and empirical insights to comparative historical sociology. Ultimately, my work portrays the historical landscape of

Lachmann in the GLF, akin to “Tocqueville meets Fei Xiaotong, Goffman rocks in Tiananmen, and Bourdieu comes to Chongqing” (Zhang 2025).

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