Teaching Resources for China’s Great Leap Forward

By Clayton D. Brown

Many insightful narratives of the Great Leap Forward exist that work well in the classroom. Although its scope is broader than the Great Leap Forward, the film To Live depicts both the enthusiasm and tragic consequences of the campaign. Directed by Zhang Yimou, To Live was released in 1994 under the title Huozhe. Although it was banned in China, it received accolades abroad and is readily available with English subtitles, especially on YouTube.

For interested or advanced students, chapters thirty-one through thirty-nine of The Private Life of Chairman Mao gives readers a perspective of the Great Leap from within the highest ranks of the Party.

Chapter two of Judith Shapiro’s book Mao’s War Against Nature explores the environmental consequences of the campaign, including the mobilization of schoolchildren to exterminate sparrows.

Chapter eight from Jasper Becker’s landmark work Hungry Ghosts offers graphic descriptions of starvation and cannibalism in the countryside that contrast sharply with Mao’s decadent lifestyle in the same period as revealed by his personal physician in chapter forty-five of The Private Life of Chairman Mao.

These teaching resources accompany Clayton Brown’s article “China’s Great Leap Forward” in Education About Asia 17, no. 3 (2012): 29–34.