

Dr. Li on Chairman Mao

(The Private Life of Chairman Mao, by Dr. Li Zhisui, translated by Tai Hung-Chao, with the editorial assistance of Anne F. Thurston, Random House, 1994, pages xviii, 76-7, 120-2, 124-7, 276-7, 282-3, 313-7, 319, 321, 334, 507-8, 637-8.)

In 1954, ...I was appointed personal physician to Mao Zedong and later director of the medical team for Mao. From then until Mao's death in 1976, for a period of twenty-two years, I was in charge of Mao's health, at his side almost constantly, whether in Beijing or elsewhere...

Mao was a peasant and he had simple tastes. He dressed only when he absolutely had to and spent most of his day in bed, wearing a robe and nothing on his feet. When he did get dressed, he wore old clothes and worn-out cloth shoes, donning the "Mao suit" and leather shoes only for formal, public occasions. He had someone else—one of his bodyguards, usually—break in his new cloth shoes. The photographs showing him neatly dressed, working in his office, were staged. He conducted virtually all his business from his bedroom or from the side of his indoor pool.

But he still lived an imperial life. His compound was located in the heart of Zhongnanhai, in the center of the old imperial grounds, just between the Middle and South lakes and facing south, in the manner of emperors. It must have been the best-protected place on earth. Foreigners visiting Mao would notice the absence of armed guards, but in fact they were everywhere in Zhongnanhai, discreetly placed, fanning out in a series of concentric circles with Mao at the center...

It is true, though, that Mao had no friends and was isolated from normal human contact. He spent little time with his wife and even less with his children. So far as I could tell, despite his initial friendliness at his first meetings, Mao was devoid of human feeling, incapable of love, friendship, or warmth...

I never understood his apparent callousness. Perhaps he had seen so many people die that he had become inured to human suffering. His first wife...had been executed by the Guomindang, and so had his two brothers. His elder son had been killed during the Korean War. Several other children had been lost during the Long March in the mid-1930s and never found. But I never saw him express any emotion over those losses. The fact that he had lived while so many others died seemed only to confirm his belief that his life would be long. As for those who had died, he would simply say that "lives have to be sacrificed for the cause of revolution."

...What fascinated him most and absorbed much of his time was Chinese history. "We have to learn from the past to serve the present," he often said. He had read the twenty-four dynastic histories—the series of official chronicles compiled by each new dynasty for the one it had just defeated and covering the years from 221 B.C. to A.D. 1644—numerous times.

But Mao's view of history was radically different from that of most Chinese. Morality had no place in Mao's politics. I was shocked to learn not only that Mao identified with China's emperors but that his greatest admiration was reserved for the most ruthless and cruel of our country's tyrants. He was willing to use the most brutal and tyrannical means to reach his goal...

Not only were Mao's views of history astonishing, they revealed a great deal about him. He used the stories of China's past both to understand and to manipulate the present and saw himself in terms of his own contributions to the country's ongoing history. I am convinced that the intrigues in China's ancient imperial courts were a far more powerful influence on his thought than Marxism-Leninism. True, Mao was a revolutionary. His aim was to transform China, to make it rich and powerful again. But he turned to the past for instruction on how to rule, for guidance on how to manipulate the conspiracies that plagued those in the highest reaches of power.

But Chinese history was little help in the type of transformation Mao sought. Chinese culture, Mao believed, was moribund and stagnant. His goal was to reinvigorate it, and this necessitated learning from abroad, adapting foreign ideas to the Chinese situation. He often said that the result would be "neither Chinese nor foreign, neither a donkey nor a horse, but a mule."

Socialism was Mao's means to unleash the creative energies of the Chinese people and thus to recapture China's ancient glory. He had to turn to the Soviet Union for inspiration because the Soviet Union was the preeminent socialist state, and from the very establishment of the People's Republic, Mao insisted that China "lean to one side." The Soviet Union was the model for China's new government to follow. But his vision of socialism was always socialism with Chinese characteristics, socialism for the wealth and glory of China, for the reawakening of Chinese culture, socialism creatively adapted to the Chinese case. Wholesale importation of foreign things without digestion and re-creation is no good, he often said. He never intended the Soviet model to be adapted uncritically, without modification.

Moreover he retained, from the first day I met him, an admiration for the technology, dynamism, and science of the United States and the West. His propensity to "lean to one side" was always tempered by a recognition that the Soviet Union was not the only potential source of lessons in revitalization.

Mao had grandiose ideas of his own place in history. He never had any doubt about his own role. He was the greatest leader—the man who had unified the country and would then transform it, the man who was restoring China to its original greatness. Mao never used the word *modernization* with me. He was not a modern man. Instead, he talked about making the country rich and returning it to its original glory. A rebel and iconoclast, he would dare to transform China and make it great. He would build his own Great Walls. His own greatness and China's were intertwined. All of China was Mao's to experiment with as he wished. Mao *was* China, and he was suspicious of anyone who might challenge his place

or whose vision differed from his. He was ruthless in disposing of his enemies. The life of his subjects was cheap.

I did not immediately understand, because it was so hard to accept, how willing Mao was to sacrifice his own citizens in order to achieve his goals. I had known as early as October 1954, from a meeting with India's prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, that Mao considered the atom bomb a "paper tiger" and that he was willing that China lose millions of people in order to emerge victorious against the so-called imperialists. "The atom bomb is nothing to be afraid of," Mao told Nehru. "China has many people. They cannot be bombed out of existence. If someone else can drop an atomic bomb, I can too. The deaths of ten or twenty million people is nothing to be afraid of." Nehru was shocked.

In 1957, in a speech in Moscow, Mao said he was willing to lose 300 million people—half of China's population. Even if China lost half its population, Mao said, the country would suffer no great loss. We could produce more people.

It was not until the Great Leap Forward, when millions of Chinese began dying during the famine, that I became fully aware of how much Mao resembled the ruthless emperors he so admired. Mao knew that people were dying by the millions. He did not care.

During our early, shocking conversations about Chinese history, the lessons I drew were more immediate and personal. Mao's view of history held lessons for me as well. Mao was the center around which everything else revolved. His will reigned supreme.

Loyalty, rather than principle, was the paramount virtue. From his subordinates—his wife and female companions, his household staff, the political leaders with whom he ostensibly shared power—he demanded total and indivisible loyalty.

That loyalty was based less on trust than on dependence. Incapable himself of affection for others, Mao expected no such feelings toward him. Repeatedly in my years with Mao I watched him win loyalty from others in the same way he had won it from me.

He would begin by charming people, winning their trust, getting them to open up, to confess their faults... Mao would then forgive them, save them, and make them feel safe. Thus redeemed, they became loyal.

His loyalists, in turn, would become dependent upon him, and the longer they depended on him, the more they had to depend on him, the more impossible life outside his circle became. From the outside looking in, it was inconceivable that anyone serving the Chairman would want to leave, so greatly was Mao worshiped, so glorious was working for him considered to be. Only those who were not absolutely loyal to Mao could want to leave his circle; only those who were not loyal would be expelled. No one anywhere in China would dare shelter anyone suspected of being less than loyal to the party chairman.

Some were genuinely loyal, both because Mao had personally saved them and made them feel secure and because they saw him as the savior of all of China. But others were mere

sycophants. Mao basked in the flattery, even when he suspected it was not sincere, knowing that over time he would be able to distinguish the genuine political loyalists from the sycophants. Those could be discarded when their usefulness was gone.

...Later I would see that just as Mao condoned emperors who had been ruthless in dispensing with ministers who had not fully agreed with their views, so Mao could be ruthless in dispensing with those who did not fully agree with him. It is true that in the early years, top officials sometimes disagreed with Mao without being purged. But Mao harbored grudges, and when he convinced himself that an underling's loyalty had waned, when the political time was ripe, he could cast an old revolutionary aside without a second thought. Men like Zhou Enlai seemed to know this and were completely loyal to Mao. Others, like Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao, did not and thus were cast aside. Whenever a leader became too independent of Mao, he was purged.

When Mao suspected that members of his staff were becoming too close to other leaders—whether Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, or Liu Shaoqi—he would dismiss them immediately. “Disaster,” Mao warned me, “comes by way of the mouth.” Thus I knew that my survival depended on my silence. In the political campaigns that would sweep China over the next two decades, I took Mao's lessons to heart, confining myself to looking after the Chairman's health. I was his doctor. Even as I became aware of his ruthlessness, I protected myself by watching in silence. There was no independent will but his. I still worshiped Mao. He was China's guiding star, our country's savior, our tallest mountain, the leader of us all. I thought of China as one huge family and believed we needed a head. Chairman Mao was the chief. I would serve him and, through him, serve the Chinese people.

...Mao's plan for the Great Leap Forward [1958-1962] was grandiose, utopian—to catch up with Great Britain in fifteen years, to transform agricultural production, using people's communes to walk the road from socialism to communism, from poverty to abundance. Mao was accustomed to sycophancy and flattery. He had been pushing the top-level party and government leaders to embrace his grandiose schemes. Wanting to please Mao, fearing for their own political futures if they did not, the top-level officials put pressure on the lower ones, and lower-level cadres complied both by working the peasants relentlessly and by reporting what their superiors wanted to hear. Impossible, fantastical claims were being made. Claims of *per-mu* grain production went from 10,000 to 20,000 to 30,000 pounds.

Psychologists of mass behavior might have an explanation for what went wrong in China in the late summer of 1958. China was struck with a mass hysteria fed by Mao, who then fell victim himself. ...The rare voices of caution were being stilled. Everyone was hurrying to jump on the utopian bandwagon. Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and Chen Yi, men who might once have reined the Chairman in, were speaking with a single voice, and that voice was Mao's. What those men really thought, we never will know. Everyone was caught in the grip of this utopian hysteria...

Agricultural production in the fall of 1958 was the highest in China's history. But by mid-December, the nation was seriously short of food...

In fact, I did not know it then, but China was tottering on the brink of disaster. The leading cadres of the party and first party secretaries in the provinces were ingratiating themselves with Mao, disregarding the welfare of hundreds of millions of peasants. The preposterous claims of vastly increased production were taken seriously by the upper-level leaders, to whom they were made. But how could one *mu* of land produce fifty, one hundred, or two hundred thousand pounds of rice? Rural areas were taxed on a percentage of what they produced, and areas that falsely claimed gigantically high yields were taxed according to their faked reports. Some places were delivering all they had produced to the state. Other places were giving so much there was little left for their inhabitants to eat. Peasants were beginning to go hungry. Soon they would starve. The greater the falsehoods, the more people died of starvation.

Ironically, much of the grain that was sent to the state as taxes was exported. China was still repaying its debts to the Soviet Union and much of the grain went there. It was a question of face. Mao could not admit that the communes Khrushchev had so vigorously opposed were anything less than a success... [Soviet leader Khrushchev had told Mao that peasant communes would fail miserably, as they had in the Soviet Union under Stalin.]

On July 10 [1959], eight days into the Lushan meetings, Mao convened a meeting of the regional leaders... The general line, he argued, referring to the policy of the Great Leap Forward and catching up with Great Britain in fifteen years, was completely correct. The achievements of the past year were great. There had been failures, to be sure, but those failures were relatively minor...

His speech had served as a warning to criticize no more.

Peng Dehuai [the Minister of National Defense], though, continued the debate. He did so discreetly, in a private, handwritten letter that he delivered to Mao on July 14. It was a long letter, and while I did not know at first what it said, I knew that Mao was unhappy. He did not sleep the night after receiving it.

...[Peng's] letter, which I read later... He thought the losses [from the Great Leap Forward] were greater than the gains...

He argued that the Leap had fostered leftist tendencies—that production claims had been greatly inflated... He concluded with a plea that the party differentiate clearly between right and wrong... It was a mild and honest letter, thoughtful and well balanced. Peng Dehuai was not a politician. He was a simple and honest man, a soldier incapable of political intrigue. But he was exceptionally courageous. He was telling the truth when many others were lying, and unlike most other party leaders, he had no fear of Mao.

...[Mao responded by telling] the party leaders that rightists outside the party had already criticized the Great Leap Forward and that now some people within the Communist party

were criticizing it, too, saying that the Great Leap Forward had done more harm than good. Peng Dehuai was one such person, as evidenced in his letter to Mao...

Peng's letter was distributed to the small group meetings for discussion. Few people dared to agree with Peng...

On July 23 Mao called another plenary session of the enlarged politburo... Mao refuted the Peng letter point by point...

While Mao spoke, Peng Dehuai was sitting quietly in the last row of the auditorium. He was already angry. Even before Mao spoke, Peng had confronted the Chairman privately, demanding to know why Mao had taken a private letter addressed to him and distributed it to the conference participants without his permission. Mao had responded disingenuously that Peng had not instructed him not to distribute the letter. Peng was so angry he could not continue the conversation.

...Mao's opening speech to the Central Committee [on August 2] set the tone for the meetings that followed. By calling upon the participants to criticize the divisive activities of the "anti-party group," Mao had turned Peng into an enemy, and no amount of talk or exchange of opinions could save him. ...The meaning of the incident was being transformed, blown out of proportion. There was in fact nothing anti-party or anti-Mao about Peng's letter. But under Mao's direction, the letter was coming to be seen as part of a conspiracy.

...I knew Peng was not an enemy of the party. I knew him to be a good and honest man.

...My faith in the Chairman had been shattered by the purge of Peng Dehuai... I felt only revulsion for the man I had once revered.

...The party leaders who had not been purged were preparing to convene the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969, and they were badly divided. The guiding principles of the Eighth Party Congress, which had convened thirteen years before, in September 1956, had never been officially reversed. Those principles—supporting the idea of a collective leadership, promising that China would never have a cult of personality, removing Mao's thought as the country's guiding ideology, and criticizing Mao's "adventurism"—had long been anathema to Mao, and so had the men he held responsible for propagating them—Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

In the intervening years, Mao had maneuvered to reverse those principles, and his efforts had culminated in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution [1966-1976]. As the party prepared for the Ninth Party Congress, the mere mention of collective leadership would have been a counterrevolutionary crime, and the cult of Mao was at its height. All China was wearing Mao buttons and carrying his little red book and reciting his quotations, and even the simplest transaction in a shop had to include a recitation from Mao's words. His

portrait was everywhere. Tens of millions of people throughout the country began each day by bowing before a picture of Mao and asking it for their day's instructions. They ended the day by bowing again, reporting to Mao and confessing their mistakes. Every workday began and ended with collective recitations of Mao's thoughts. Chairman Mao's thought was not just the country's guiding ideology, it was its collective mantra.

And adventurism? Mao's Great Leap Forward had resulted in the worst famine in human history. We know today that at least 25 or 30 million people died. (Some put the figure as high as 43 million.) His Cultural Revolution had plunged the country into chaos, destroying lives, families, friendships, the whole fabric of Chinese society...

[Deng Xiaoping, who had been purged twice but never killed, became China's next main leader after Mao's death in 1976.] With Deng's new "open door" policy, I was given several opportunities to travel abroad. Thus there was nothing very unusual in the summer of 1988 when I requested permission to visit my two sons in the United States. ...But, really, my permission to leave was a fluke. Had the proper authorities been informed, my request would not have been granted.

I came to the United States for Lillian [Dr. Li's wife]. Our years of tribulation had taken their toll. In February 1988, her health had begun to fail, and the treatment she was receiving in China was doing little good. That August, I brought her and our granddaughter, Lili, to join our two sons and their wives in Chicago. We hoped that with advanced medical care in the United States, Lillian's life could be saved. But the medical treatment failed. Lillian died on January 12, 1989, of chronic renal failure.

Friends in China had often suggested that I write about my life with Mao. Tian Jiaying, knowing that I kept a diary, had suggested it as early as 1960. In 1977, when Ye Jianying visited me at the 305 Hospital, he too encouraged me to write. He thought that after twenty-two years at Mao's side, I had a contribution to make to our understanding of history. After that, many newspaper and magazine editors urged me to write. Always, I refused. I could not write the truth in China, and I did not want to tell lies.

Lillian finally convinced me to write. In her last days in the hospital, before she slipped into a coma, she urged me to write this book as a record for our children, grandchildren, and the generations to follow and as a history of life in Mao's imperial court. I have paid for this book with my life. My dream of becoming a neurosurgeon never came to pass, and my hopes for a new China were dashed. My family life was destroyed, and now Lillian is dead...

I devoted my professional life to Mao and China, but now I am stateless and homeless, unwelcome in my own country. I write this book in great sorrow for Lillian and for everyone who cherishes freedom. I want it to serve as a reminder of the terrible human consequences of Mao's dictatorship and of how good and talented people living under his regime were forced to violate their consciences and sacrifice their ideals in order to survive.