Books

Comrade Chiang Ch’ing tells it like it was, and maybe is

Conversations With the Late Empress

Ralph Buultjens

Sixty years after the establishment of the first Marxist regime in the Soviet Union, Communists govern one-third of the world’s population. While these governments have a vital impact on international politics and on the lives and future of most nations, glimpses of the inner dynamics of power and policymaking in Communist societies are rare. They are generally confined to secondary-source studies by informed outsiders or to information from relatively low-level defectors from Marxist countries.

There are two reasons for this insufficiency, one ideological, the other practical. Marxism tends to downplay the role of personality in history and to extol the interaction of masses, classes, and economic forces. Political salvation springs from group organization and action rather than from individual inspiration. History acceptable to Marxists is often written in this way. Personal prudence also restricts the publication of autobiographies, memoirs, and reminiscences. Where penalties for transgressions are high, financial rewards for unauthorized literary output do not exist and leaders do not voluntarily retire from office; incentives and time are not available for those who can provide detailed insights into life at the political pinnacle. What does get published is officially approved biographical data, the publicly proclaimed contributions by leaders of the “March to Socialism,” and sterilized editions of their speeches and formal writings. These tell little, if anything, of the inner workings of government.

Three exceptions have enabled us to look behind this information curtain and see something of the complex coils of Communist power. In a political world where shadows often become substance, where propaganda and reality converge and confuse, each of these efforts has clarified the outsider’s limited vision. Yet, taken as a whole, their contribution is disappointing. Khrushchev’s memoirs confirmed much of what was already known about the bestialities of the Stalin era, filled in many details of the post-Stalin decompression, and contained recollections about his management of foreign policy. Unique as this was in the context of revelations about communism, it was still discursive recapitulations by an aging, deposed dictator seeking to justify his past. Khrushchev’s once agile intellect appears slightly blurred by retirement and, unfortunately, the inaccessibility of any records other than those in his mind.

Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, has written of life in her father’s land and of her troubled passage from crown princess to exile. While close to the center of supreme power in the Soviet Union, she was not part of it—this sad, lovely, and loved child of a brutal despot who largely excluded his family from his principal preoccupations. Svetlana gives us colorful portraits of her father’s henchmen and their life-styles; many of her observations authenticate parts of Khrushchev’s memoirs. Ultimately, her story is more personal than political, indicating one of the paradoxes of power: Stalin was, as other dreaded public figures have been, an affectionate parent who could be socially likeable and personally pleasant. Official brutality need not exclude personal amiability.

Thirty years before Svetlana and Khrushchev told their histories in the late 1960s Edgar Snow had journeyed to the guerrilla strongholds of North China. There, in the midst of the war against both Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists and Japanese invaders, Snow interviewed Mao Tse-tung. This is the only autobiographical data available on Mao, published as part of Snow’s classic on the Chinese Revolution, Red Star Over China (1937). Huddled in a rudely furnished cave lighted by dim candles, Mao recounts his early life, his struggles, and his adventures on the recently completed Long March. As he talks, with Snow recording diligently, his political concepts and hopes slowly come alive. Many of these details were then unknown to Mao’s comrades, and they

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form an invaluable and primary source of the forces and relationships that shaped the thought and personality of Mao. Here is Mao at the midpoint of his life, forty-three years old and married to his third wife, Ho Tzu-Chen, seeking perhaps to use these autobiographical sessions to provide a perspective on his past and give it some coherence. But Mao in 1936 was only a partially successful revolutionary, relatively new to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. He was not the towering historic figure of later times; his greatest triumphs and defeats still lay ahead. Consequently, the Snow interviews tell us much about Mao the man, but not about power in Communist China, and little about those who struggled for that power in later decades.

Now we are afforded our fourth look at the interior womb of politics in a major Communist state. In a series of interviews given to another American scholar, Roxane Witke, Mao Tsetung’s fourth wife, Chiang Ch’ing, tells about her life and political career with vigor and apparent candor (Comrade Chiang Ch’ing; Little Brown & Co.; 549 pp.; $15.00). These revelations are immensely different and incomparably more relevant to current affairs than those of Khrushchev, Svetlana, or the early Mao; they are the expressions of a leader at the height of personal power, “the most powerful woman in the world,” as Witke calls her. This setting is important. By 1972 Chiang Ch’ing had emerged as a major public figure and as a victor of the Cultural Revolution. She was both the consort and the political cutting edge of China’s deified ruler, vanquishing powerful enemies such as President Liu Shao-ch’i and Defense Minister Lin Piao, both of whom had tried to unseat Mao. Her cohorts were established in strategic positions, her control over culture, the arts, and key segments of the media was absolute. Almost twenty years younger than Mao, having proven herself during and after the crises of the Cultural Revolution, she enjoyed Mao’s confidence. Chiang Ch’ing’s star burned brightly over China; she could well have expected to rise further, perhaps even succeeding her husband as his political legatee. And so we witness a personality in full command, momentarily unrestrained, and enjoying the relative status and opulence of an empress. What she has to say had an immediate and scorching political momentum.

Chiang Ch’ing’s story is one of high drama, intrigue, moral darkness, and revolutionary light as seen through her life experiences. Poor child, struggling and moderately successful actress, obscure spouse and follower, radical activist, comrade-in-arms of Chairman Mao, forceful leader, and today the publicly denigrated, power-hungry widow—all this cast against the immense backdrop of revolutionary China. In itself this is material of considerable importance. As it unfolds, however, an even greater significance emerges—Chiang Ch’ing’s testament reshapes the often repeated and widely accepted stereotypic view of Chinese politics and changes carefully cultivated images that China has assiduously promoted abroad. These disclosures were a major factor in her own downfall. Thus, this book is both an unusual inside history and an explosive document; its impact continues to reverberate in the vortex of Chinese politics.

Compiling and reconstructing this record from her notes and memories is Roxane Witke. But Witke is no Boswell; much to her credit she is not an uncritical scribe; she refuses to regurgitate faithfully the prepackaged ideological and biographical feed. Combining analytical scholarship with a rare elegance of style, she has produced a work of exceptional clarity and, as we can best judge, unusual accuracy. She does present Chiang Ch’ing as Chiang Ch’ing presented herself, and self-perception is not the most reliable guide to personal motivations and viewpoints. Yet Witke has a talent for the vivid insight and the telling phrase that reduce extravagant claims and radical pretensions to an appropriate scale. From the interaction between two remarkable women, the revolutionary leader and the scholar-writer, comes information and opinion that illumines three dark and critical corners of the political landscape of modern China—the personality and impulses govern-
The unremitting struggles of her life center around two themes: the need for recognition as an individual of historic importance (possibly one reason why she engaged in these exchanges with Roxane Witke) and the need to balance the conflicting demands of her role as woman with those of her role as revolutionary politician. Neither theme is easily fulfilled in the male-dominated arena of Chinese politics, and each upward lurch on the ladder of power created an increasing enmity toward her. Chiang Ch’ing was shrewd enough to appreciate the weakness of her friends. Mistaking the usefulness of power in the body politic, she was never able to penetrate the institutional bastions of power—the army, the party cadres, and the government bureaucracy. From the shrill and vindictive tone of her assertions we can understand why this was so and why their suspicion of her was so deep. She shared in Mao’s dislike of these institutions and those who ran them, but the sources of her distaste appear to spring more from thwarted ambitions and personal resentments than from a belief in Mao’s philosophic antipathies. Eventually, the institutional establishment destroyed her—perhaps before she destroyed them. The Chiang Ch’ing of Roxane Witke’s book is lively and intelligent but lacks the historical vision and intellectual breadth of Chairman Mao; the more she reveals herself the easier it is to believe that she made a serious bid to capture power when Mao died in September, 1976. The shadowy allegations made by her opponents in the present regime begin to ring true in the context of her personality.

There are surprises in many of Chiang Ch’ing’s monologues. Although the leader of the left wing in Chinese politics, her relationship with the extreme left does not seem too comfortable, and her denunciations of Lin Piao undermine this impression. Contrary to conventional assumptions, she did have a genuine respect and effective working arrangement with Premier Chou En-lai; even her hostility to a past and yet-to-be antagonist—that formidable surviving vice-premier, Teng Hsiao-p’ing—appears somewhat muted. An unanswered question haunts these ambiguities: Was Chiang Ch’ing a radical of sincere conviction or did she seize on the radicalism and the opportunity of the Cultural Revolution to escape from her political obscurity? Was this her only route to making that mark on history she so greatly desired?

Truth or tactics, Chiang Ch’ing’s political career disintegrated as Mao died. The Chairman was the umbilical cord of radicalism, linking the left to the center of Chinese politics. With his passing Chiang Ch’ing’s worst fears were confirmed, and forces she had fought against and declaimed at now submerged her. Although she appears confident in her sessions with Witke, there is a hint of insecurity, perhaps a premonition of the future. Her protector gone, her support proven shallow, Chiang Ch’ing was exposed for what she always was—the handmaiden of her husband, Madame Mao in mufti.

Roxane Witke’s work also gives us unique insights into the uses of power in the People’s Republic. There is a marked difference between the gracious life-style of Chiang Ch’ing, amply described in this book, and the exhortations of revolutionary simplicity for the masses. Mao himself did not apparently join in or endorse these personal indulgences, yet he was unable or unwilling to prevent them. Allegations of opulent living are features of the denunciations against other disgraced Chinese leaders—they now are leveled against Chiang Ch’ing, indicating that power may bring private perquisites far beyond those publicly visible. A contrary image of personal rectitude, sacrifice for the commonweal, and austerity among the powerful has been carefully fostered by the Chinese Government. One wonders about the potential impact of Witke’s book if it ever was made available to the people of China.

Chiang Ch’ing’s observations disclose other remarkable elements of life on the political highwire in China. Politicians there are as hungry for promotion and power as they are elsewhere—often using more dastardly methods, if we can believe their own testimony, like poison, murder, and armed thuggery. Is Maoism, then, only a philosophy for the people and not for their leaders? There are some evidences of this in Chiang Ch’ing’s proclamations about making judgments for the masses and censoring their entertainment, while she regularly and enthusiastically witnessed movies from abroad. One of the carefully concealed benefits of position in China appears to be a personal intellectual liberty that is denied the less fortunate. Mao’s lifelong struggle to change human nature seems to have had its least impact on those closest to him, a fact that could have scarcely escaped his notice.

Other stereotypes of China fall before Chiang Ch’ing’s rhetoric. Purposeful public administrators are seen spending much of their time in Byzantine intrigue and strenuous conflict. The tensions and the stresses of the system are accentuated at the higher reaches of politics, for all politics in China is compressed within a small leadership group, with the masses occasionally mobilized to provide applause and the mask of legitimacy for one faction or the other. The suddenness of victory or defeat can convulse the system and endanger the careers of able and dedicated workers. The hostility between China and the Soviet Union is seen as not only political but also intensely personal and possibly tinged with elements of racism. What the outside world perceives as stable attitudes and entrenched programs are often uncertain compromises bridging fundamental political differences; awareness of this fragility will help other nations to assess and form their policy toward China. Yet in the midst of this continuing disruption the
regime has impressive social and economic gains to its credit. The ability to insulate the principal tasks of government from the turbulence of ideological and power politics was the great skill of Chou En-lai, chief executive of the People's Republic during this period. How much more he and those around him could have achieved in more serene circumstances, and how much ideological conflict has cost the Chinese people in material well-being! From her own account Chiang Ch'ing bears a large share of the responsibility.

The omissions in Chiang Ch'ing's statements are often as important as the sentiments expressed. She projects no significant understanding of the philosophy of history and only limited recognition of the ultimate toll taken on a large nation by hectic campaigns of struggle. There is little mention of her personal relationship with Mao. He appears more important to Chiang Ch'ing as the Chairman than as her husband or as a personality. Antagonism to American policies is vigorously stated, but there is no adequate explanation of the dramatic rapprochement with the United States made around the time of the interviews. In focusing on what or how things have taken place she seems strangely unaware or unable to explain why they occur. On both foreign and domestic events Chiang Ch'ing's judgment is peculiarly one-sided; this provokes concern at the extent to which these insular views are shared by other contemporary Chinese leaders. For China's sake one must rejoice that Madame Mao could not rise to the apex of power. Yet we owe this singular woman an immense debt of gratitude—her concern for historical vindication has provided a document of transcending value, enabling us to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of the intimacies of Communist governments. Her testament is enriched by the beauty and honesty of Roxane Witke's prose. This is Witke's first major, independent work. Its promise suggests a literary career far more enduring and eminent than that of the meteoric political life of her subject.

What of Chiang Ch'ing's future? She is now officially disgraced and reviled by China's new leader, Hua Kuo-feng, a political back-bencher when she was granting these quasi-regal audiences to Roxane Witke. It is difficult to imagine the resourceful and vibrant Chiang Ch'ing in permanent obscurity. Perhaps, as is not uncommon in the People's Republic, she will be rehabilitated. If this occurs, a recantation of these interviews that have contributed to her downfall will surely follow. In any case, one recalls the threat Stalin used to control Krupskaya Lenin: "the party will appoint someone else as Lenin's widow."

The Fall of Public Man
by Richard Sennett
(Knopf: 373 pp.; $15.00)

Edward J. Curtin, Jr.

Richard Sennett undermines the prevailing ethos of our society in a radically conservative way. As a result he will be criticized and praised for all the wrong—and right—reasons, depending on the reader's intellectual, emotional, and political allegiances. This is a complex book written by a sophisticated leftist. It overflows with brilliantly handled historical and theoretical material, and yet, despite the dazzle, there is a pure simplicity to its central theme. In its own way it is a kind of moral tale—similar to the way Sennett views Weber's "Protestant Ethic"—describing the ironic consequences of the human failure to learn the paradoxical logic of reversed effort.

Over the course of two centuries, Sennett argues, in the name of spontaneity, people became too self-conscious to be spontaneous. Self-absorbed in the newly revered phenomenon of personality and obsessed with validating the self, we discovered nothing to validate but amorphous feelings in search of a substantive self. That is Sennett's version of the vicious circle. In glorifying the isolated personality at the expense of a public life comprised of strangers and codes of impersonal meanings, the modern person suffocates himself in the name of fulfillment. All this has its roots. Sennett tells us, in the lost ability to play, which is the power to be sociable. It is in playful reality that one acquires the freedom from self that is necessary for self-gratification. The power of play allows for civility—"treating others as though they were strangers and forging a social bond upon that distance." Such civility is most likely in the public geography of a city. But in our serious search for psychological palliatives we have abandoned the public world of strangers in the cosmopolitan cities and have become less civilized, further distanced from each other and ourselves, and more and more anxious about individual feeling. The more we try to validate ourselves the more our self-absorption denies us personal gratification. And all the while our real self-interests are ignored as the forces of social domination maintain their power and the public world grows more dangerous.

Today's imbalance between public and private life did not exist in the eighteenth-century city. Sennett catalogues the forces at work over the past two centuries that changed the public world of the ancien régime capitals of London and Paris into our present intimate society. Sennett details the fascinating ways the eighteenth-century Parisians and Londoners invented sociability in public. Public expression was antisymbolic: There was no hidden reality behind the obvious; the body was treated as a mannequin, speech was a sign. A clear distinction was maintained