THE PRIVATE LIFE OF CHAIRMAN MAO

Dr. Li Zhisui

TRANSLATED BY TAI HUNG-CHAO

FOREWORD BY ANDREW J. NATHAN
Physician attended Mao for years

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OBITUARY / Li Zhisui

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Li Zhisui, who was the personal doctor of Mao Tse-tung and recently published memoirs that portrayed the Chinese leader as a manipulativ

ego maniac with little tolerance of dissent and scant care for hygiene, died on Tuesday at his home in suburban Chicago. He was 75.

The cause apparently was a heart attack, said Jason Epstein, Dr. Li’s editor at Random House.

Dr. Li was little known outside China until his book, The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao’s Personal Physician, was published in October, 1994. The book included sometimes racy anecdotes and unusual insights into the workings of the upper echelons of the Chinese government.

In the book’s foreword, Andrew Nathan, a professor of political science at Columbia University, said: “No authorized account offers a portrait of Mao that rings as true as Dr. Li’s. It is the most revealing book ever published on Mao, perhaps on any dictator in history.”

Dr. Li, who was born in Beijing in 1919, studied during the Second World War at the West Union University Medical School in the province of Sichuan in south-central China.

After the Communists took power in China in 1949, Dr. Li was given a job at a special clinic set up to treat China’s top leaders. Five years later, he was appointed Mao’s personal doctor. He lived with his wife, Lillian Wu, and their two sons in Zhongnanhai, a tightly guarded compound within the Forbidden City in Beijing where China’s top leaders lived and worked.

From then until Mao’s death in 1976 — after which Dr. Li supervised the efforts to preserve the body — Dr. Li stayed close to Mao, according to the book. Beyond the duties of a personal doctor, Dr. Li said he acted as a confidant, accompanying Mao on trips around the country and catering to Mao’s frequent late-night summonses.

In his book, Dr. Li said he was initially spellbound by Mao’s political acumen. But Dr. Li — who said he had to keep quiet to survive — gradually became disillusioned with what he said was Mao’s selfishness and cruelty.

Dr. Li described Mao as someone with a penchant for young women and fatty pork and a reluctance to bathe or brush his teeth, which Dr. Li said were covered by a green patina. Mao was also politically capricious, while demanding absolute loyalty.

After Mao’s death, Dr. Li became deputy vice-president of the Chinese Medical Association and the chief editor of the national medical journal of China.

Dr. Li immigrated to the United States in 1968 to seek medical treatment for his wife, who died later that year. He then settled in the suburban Chicago area with his sons, John and Erchong.
The weather that summer was spectacular, the best in years. It rained every night, and the days were sunny and mild, so there was no doubt that the fall harvest would be the best in China’s history. All of China was in a frenzy, bubbling with optimism and excitement.

We traveled first through Hebei province, visiting several newly formed communes. The optimism of the peasants was captured in the names of the new organizations, all of which promised a glorious and revolutionary future—the Communist Commune, Dawning, Morning Sunshine, Red Flag.

Then we went to Henan, where first party secretary Wu Zhifu—small, fat, and honest—escorted us by car through the dusty, unpaved back roads of his province. We traveled in a cavalcade of cars, tens of people in all—a contingent of armed guards from Zhongnanhai under the supervision of Wang Jingxian, a group of Wu Zhifu’s provincial security officers, reporters from the New China News Agency, and some journalists from the Henan party newspaper. Mao had cautioned me that the trip was secret, but the journalists made it public.

The August weather was scorchingly hot. We relied on big broad-brimmed straw hats to protect us from the sun and were greeted with wet
washcloths each time we stopped. The two truckloads of sweet, juicy watermelons that followed us from place to place were our best relief from the heat. Mao, as usual, was little bothered by the weather and seemed indifferent to the watermelons, but many of us in the entourage gorged ourselves on the succulent fruit.

Mao enjoyed himself. He liked being among rural folk again. When he stepped on a patch of dung, dirtying his shoes, he was delighted and refused to let anyone wipe it off. “It’s fertilizer—a useful thing,” he said. “Why wipe it off?” Only when he took off his shoes that night could one of his guards wipe them clean. The fields were lush with crops, crowded with peasants at work. In China north of the Yellow River women rarely work in the fields, but everywhere we looked women and girls, dressed in bright red and green, were laboring alongside the men.

In Lankao county, Mao wanted to swim in the legendary Yellow River and sent the faithful Sun Yong, who had encouraged him to take his first swim in the Yangtze, to test the waters. But the Yellow River suffers from oversilting and the water was a thick brown brew, only chest-deep. Sun and the other security officers sank in mud up to their knees at every spot they tested. Mao gave up his plan to swim.

On August 6, accompanied by the usual large entourage, Wu Zhifu took us to visit Seven Li village, in Xinxiang county. The fields en route were filled with chest-high cotton, and the white
round bulbs were the size of a fist. The harvest for Seven Li village was going to be abundant.

As our cars pulled into the village square, a big red banner strung across the front door of the village headquarters cried out in greeting: **SEVEN LI VILLAGE PEOPLE’S COMMUNE**. Mao grinned as he stepped from his car. The huge new collectives had a variety of names. This was the first time we had actually seen the word *people’s commune* associated with a place. “This name, ‘people’s commune,’ is great!” Mao said. “French workers created the Paris commune when they seized power. Our farmers have created the people’s commune as a political and economic organization in the march toward communism. The people’s commune is great!”

Three days later, in Shandong, Mao repeated his comment: “The people’s commune is great!” An attentive New China News Agency journalist had been standing nearby and immediately the words appeared on the front page of newspapers all over the country, instantaneously becoming a new slogan. It was treated by party secretaries at every level as a new imperial edict to transform China’s cooperatives into gigantic people’s communes, organizations that would combine government and agricultural production and become the foundation of Communist party power in the countryside.

People’s communes had already been established in most of the places we visited, and traveling from one to the other was an exciting experience. Something big was happening in the Chinese countryside, something new and never before seen.
History was being made. China had finally found the way from poverty to abundance. The salvation of the Chinese peasantry was at hand. I, too, supported the movement to establish people’s communes. Chairman Mao was right. People’s communes were great.

Returning by train to Beidaihe, Mao was still excited. I had never seen him so happy. He was convinced that the problem of food production in China had been solved, that the country was now producing more food than the people could possibly eat.

We arrived in Beidaihe on August 13, and four days later Mao convened an enlarged meeting of the politburo, which lasted until August 30, 1958. In the midst of the meetings, on August 23, Mao’s answer to Khrushchev became public. China began using those artillery shells Mao had said were wearing out and started a massive bombardment of Quemoy, an island just off the coast of Fujian province still held by the Guomindang. It was Mao’s challenge to Khrushchev’s bid to reduce tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, his demonstration of China’s importance in the triangular relationship among China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Seeing Khrushchev’s efforts at world peace as an attempt to control him and China, Mao deliberately tried to trip up the game. Mao was convinced that Chiang Kai-shek wanted the United States to drop an atom bomb on Fujian province, and Mao would not have minded
if it had. His shelling of Quemoy was a dare to see how far the United States would go. He shelled the island for weeks. Then on October 6, at Mao’s instruction, the Communist party announced a one-week cease-fire. On October 13, the cease-fire was extended for two more weeks. When the American fleet moved in to protect the Straits of Taiwan, Mao ordered the bombardment resumed. On October 25, a new policy was proclaimed. If American ships stayed away, the communists would give the cannons a rest on even-numbered days and bomb Quemoy, and the island of Matsu, on odd-numbered ones.

Mao knew that “comrades” like Khrushchev—and some within China, too—thought he wanted to retake Taiwan. But that was never Mao’s intention. He did not even want to take over Quemoy and Matsu. “Quemoy and Matsu are our link to Taiwan,” he said. “If we take them over, we lose our link. Doesn’t everyone have two hands? If we lose our two hands, then Taiwan is no longer in our grip. We let it slip away. The islands are two batons that keep Khrushchev and Eisenhower dancing, scurrying this way and that. Don’t you see how wonderful they are?”

For Mao, the shelling of Quemoy and Matsu was pure show, a game to demonstrate to both Khrushchev and Eisenhower that he could not be controlled and to undermine Khrushchev in his new quest for peace. The game was a terrible gamble, threatening the world with atomic war and risking the lives of tens of millions of ordinary Chinese.
Two momentous decisions were made during the enlarged politburo meetings that August. People’s communes—huge amalgamations of agricultural cooperatives—were to become the new form of economic and political organization throughout rural China. The movement to establish people’s communes was official. And China’s steel production was set to double within a single year. Most of the increase would come through backyard steel furnaces.

The country was in a frenzy. Mao had said that people’s communes were great, and suddenly the whole country had established people’s communes. The enlarged politburo had decided to double steel production by relying on small backyard steel furnaces, and immediately the whole country was building backyard steel furnaces. Mao wanted to see them.
On September 10, 1958, Mao set out again, traveling by plane, train, and boat, to see for himself the vast changes taking place in the country. His popular adulation grew at every stop we made.

We flew first to Wuhan. Two of Mao’s most enthusiastic admirers—“democratic personage” and Guomindang defector Zhang Zhizhong and Anhui’s first party secretary Zeng Xisheng—visited him there. Mao thrilled Zhang Zhizhong by inviting him to come along on his inspection tour, and Zhang obliged by showering Mao with flattery. “The condition of the country is excellent indeed,” he said to Mao. “The weather is favorable, the nation is at peace, and the people feel secure.”

Zeng Xisheng, too, was courting Mao’s favor. He wanted the Chairman to visit Anhui province. Zhang Zhizhong, a native of Anhui himself, joined Zeng in encouraging the visit. Mao agreed. We took a boat down the Yangtze to the city of Anqing, just on the border of Anhui, where first party secretary Zeng Xisheng escorted our party by car to Anhui’s capital, Hefei. There, we witnessed new miracles. “Backyard steel furnaces” were the local specialty.

I saw the first such furnace—a makeshift brick and mortar affair, four or five meters high—in the
courtyard of the offices of the Anhui provincial party committee. The fire was going full-blast, and inside were all sorts of household implements made of steel—pots, pans, doorknobs, and shovels—being melted down to produce what Zeng assured Mao was also steel. Zeng Xisheng picked up a hot nugget from the ground, plucked from the furnace only moments before, to show Mao the fruit of the mill, and nearby were samples of finished steel, indisputable evidence of the success of the backyard steel furnace. Mao had called upon the country to overtake Great Britain in steel production within fifteen years, by using methods that were quick and economical. Even now, I do not know where the idea of the backyard steel furnaces originated. But the logic was always clear: Why spend millions of dollars building modern steel plants when steel could be produced for almost nothing in courtyards and fields? The “indigenous,” or “backyard,” steel furnace was the result.

I was astounded. The furnace was taking basic household implements and transforming them into nuggets called steel, melting down knives into ingots that could be used to make other knives. I had no idea whether the ingots were of good-quality steel, but it did seem ridiculous to melt steel to produce steel, to destroy knives to make knives. The backyard steel furnaces were everywhere in Anhui, all producing the same rough-looking ingots. Toward the end of the visit, Zhang Zhizhong proposed that Mao ride through the streets in an open car so the citizens of Hefei could see their
great leader. In the summer of 1949, Mao had entered Beijing in an open jeep and the citizens lined the streets to welcome their liberation. In September 1956, during a visit by Indonesian president Sukarno, Mao had ridden in an open cavalcade. But he rarely appeared so openly before the masses. The Chairman’s provincial visits were almost always secret, and security was tight. When he visited factories, his exchanges with workers were carefully controlled. Mao’s face-to-face meetings were ordinarily confined to high-ranking party elite or leaders of the “democratic” parties. His twice-yearly appearances on the top of Tiananmen were not really exceptions. The crowds in the square were carefully chosen. The risk of appearing publicly before the masses was not only to Mao’s security. The Chairman did not want to be accused of fostering his own cult of personality.

Mao believed that the masses needed a great leader and that the chance to see him could have an inspirational, potentially transformative, effect. But he needed the illusion that the demand for his leadership came spontaneously from the masses themselves. He would not be guilty of having actively promoted his own cult of personality. “Democratic personage” Zhang Zhizhong, sensitive to Mao’s dilemma, was well suited to push Mao into the limelight. “You seem very concerned about the development of a personality cult,” Zhang said to Mao.

Zhang argued, though, that Mao was the Lenin, not the Stalin, of China. Mao, like Lenin, had led
the Communist party and the Chinese people to revolutionary victory, living on to lead in the construction of socialism, too. Unlike Lenin, who had died only eight years after the success of revolution, Mao would bless the people of China with his leadership for another thirty or forty years, they hoped. The difference between Mao and Stalin was that Stalin had promoted his own cult of personality. Mao had not. Mao, said Zhang, had a democratic style of leadership that stressed the “mass line” and avoided arbitrariness and dictatorship. “How can our country have a personality cult?” he wondered. “Progress is so fast, and the improvement in the life of the people so great that the masses spontaneously pour out their sincere, passionate feelings for you. Our people truly love their great leader. This is not a personality cult.” Mao loved Zhang’s flattery. The two were a perfect pair. The Chairman agreed to show himself to the citizens of Hefei.

On September 19, 1958, over 300,000 people lined the streets of Hefei hoping for a glimpse of Mao. He rode slowly through the city in an open car, waving impassively to the throngs, basking in their show of affection. I suspect that the crowds in Hefei were no more spontaneous than those in Tiananmen. The gaily colored clothes, the garlands of flowers around their necks, the bouquets they held aloft as the motorcade passed by, the singing, the dancing, the slogans they shouted—“Long Live Chairman Mao,” “Long Live the People’s Communes,” “Long Live the Great Leap Forward”—
suggested that Zeng Xisheng had left little to chance. These crowds had also been carefully chosen, directed by the Anhui bureau of public security. But the crowds were no less enthusiastic, no less sincere in their adulation, for having been carefully chosen. At the sight of their Chairman, they went wild with delight.

Mao was beginning to talk about establishing a free-food-supply system in the rural people’s communes, so people could eat all they wanted without having to pay. He talked about taking cadres off salaries and returning them to a free-supply system similar to the one that had existed until 1954—the same system that had depleted my foreign savings. Salaries would cease. Basic necessities would be provided by the state along with a small allowance to cover incidental expenditures. His idea was to revive the system first in Zhongnanhai’s General Office, starting with us in Group One.

On September 15, Zhang Chunqiao, the director of propaganda in the Shanghai party committee, had written an article promoting a free-food-supply system. Mao was so enthusiastic about it that when we stopped in Shanghai a few days later, he invited the city’s propaganda chief to meet with him on the train. It was the first time I met the man who would rise to such prominence during the Cultural Revolution and later become one of the Gang of Four. Zhang was a silent, unfriendly, and brooding type, and conversation with him was difficult. I
disliked him at once, and his proposal to reintroduce the free-supply system sent a chill down my spine. I opposed it. My entire savings had been dissipated two years after my return to China because of the free-supply system. The free supplies and petty allowance would not be enough to keep my family alive. In addition to my wife, mother, two small children, and my wife’s parents, I had been subsidizing several other relatives, too—two aunts and a cousin. Without my salary, we would all have to rely on my wife’s much smaller income. There was no way we could survive.

No one in Group One wanted a revival of the free-supply system. Ye Zilong, with us on the trip, was equally concerned. His salary was high, and he loved his life of luxury. Privilege gave him access to all sorts of free supplies, but he wanted his salary, too. When he discovered how I felt about the supply system, he encouraged me to raise my concerns with Mao. It was a clever suggestion. I might be successful in persuading the Chairman not to introduce the plan, in which case Ye’s generous salary would continue. If Mao was not convinced and introduced the system anyway, I would be the one to be labeled a backward element. Ye’s salary would be gone, but politically he would still be safe.

Mao’s mind was still not made up, and he really did want to hear the opinions of his staff before reaching a decision. But no one was willing to risk being seen as a backward element. The issue was a matter of my family’s survival. I had to tell Mao my
doubts.

Mao was lying in his bed reading when I went into his compartment.

“Any news?”

“We’ve been talking about the free-supply system.”

“Any brilliant ideas?”

I explained the difficulties I would face with no salary and so many family members to support.

Mao thought the problem could be solved by establishing communes in the cities, too. City residents, even the young and the old who had no work, could get their supplies from the commune. Children would be sent to public nurseries. This was the route to communism. “Wouldn’t that solve all your problems?” he asked.

I explained that my elderly relatives were not in good health and would be unable to work in a commune. But they also had great pride and would not want to live off the labor of others. Moreover, if the commune had to support them as well as my children, the cost to the government would surely be higher than my salary.

Mao agreed that this was a problem. “Before we decide, we will have to calculate carefully the amount of labor available to the urban commune and the commune’s capacity to support non-working people. If there are too many old or young, we really would have a problem.” He was prepared to wait if the time did not seem ripe.

Xiao Zhang, one of the bodyguards, had been eavesdropping on our conversation and gave me
thumbs-up as I left Mao’s compartment. He was no more willing than I to see the free-supply system introduced. I, too, was pleased with my conversation with Mao. He was exhilarated about the vast changes taking place but was still thinking reasonably then, willing to listen to voices of caution, weighing the consequences of the many changes being proposed. He even had doubts about the backyard steel furnaces and whether such small-scale mills were the way to catch up with Great Britain in fifteen years. “If these small backyard furnaces can really produce so much steel,” he wanted to know, “why do foreigners build such gigantic steel mills? Are foreigners really so stupid?”

Tian Jiaying was a voice of caution. He was distressed about Zhang Chunqiao’s call for a free-supply system and accused Zhang of writing irresponsibly in order to ingratiate himself with the Chairman. “We ought not to adopt these slogans lightly,” Tian argued. “We cannot ignore our low level of agricultural production or disregard the need to feed and clothe our hundreds of millions of people. It is absurd to think we can march into a communist society by dragging a naked and starving population along with us. In the past, our party has always sought truth from facts, but this isn’t what we are doing now. People are telling lies, boasting. They have lost their sense of shame. This is a violation of our party’s great tradition.” Some of the reports coming in from the provinces, Tian said, were claiming average grain yields per
mu* of ten thousand pounds. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “It is shameful.”

He blamed the deceit on the atmosphere created by Mao. “When the king of Chu was looking for a consort with a pretty figure, all his concubines starved to death trying to lose weight,” Tian remarked. “When the master lets his preference be known, the servants pursue it with a vengeance.” Mao’s plan for the Great Leap Forward 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. We returned to Beijing in time for the October first celebrations. Mao began believing the slogans, casting caution to the winds. Mini-steel mills were
being set up even in Zhongnanhai, and at night the whole compound was a sea of red light. The idea had originated with the Central Bureau of Guards, but Mao did not oppose them, and soon everyone was stoking the fires—cadres, clerks, secretaries, doctors, nurses, and me. 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.

Immediately after the October first celebrations, we set out again by train, heading south. The scene along the railroad tracks was incredible. Harvest time was approaching, and the crops were thriving. The fields were crowded with peasants at work, and they were all women and young girls dressed in reds and greens, gray-haired old men, or teenagers. All the able-bodied males, the real farmers of China, had been taken out of agricultural production to tend the backyard steel furnaces.

The backyard furnaces had transformed the rural landscape. They were everywhere, and we could see peasant men in a constant frenzy of activity, transporting fuel and raw materials, keeping the fires stoked. At night, the furnaces dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see, their fires lighting the skies.
Every commune we visited provided testimony to the abundance of the upcoming harvest. The statistics, for both grain and steel production, were astounding. “Good-news reporting stations” were being set up in communal dining halls, each station competing with nearby brigades and communes to report—red flags waving, gongs and drums sounding—the highest, most extravagant figures.

Mao’s earlier skepticism had vanished. Common sense escaped him. He acted as though he believed the outrageous figures for agricultural production. The excitement was contagious. I was infected, too. Naturally, I could not help but wonder how rural China could be so quickly transformed. But I was seeing that transformation with my own eyes. I allowed myself only occasional, fleeting doubts.

One evening on the train, Lin Ke tried to set me straight. Chatting with Lin Ke and Wang Jingxian, looking out at the fires from the backyard furnaces that stretched all the way to the horizon, I shared the puzzlement I had been feeling, wondering out loud how the furnaces had appeared so suddenly and how the production figures could be so high.

What we were seeing from our windows, Lin Ke said, was staged, a huge multi-act nationwide Chinese opera performed especially for Mao. The party secretaries had ordered furnaces constructed everywhere along the rail route, stretching out for ten li on either side, and the women were dressed so colorfully, in reds and greens, because they had been ordered to dress that way. In Hubei, party
secretary Wang Renzhong had ordered the peasants to remove rice plants from faraway fields and transplant them along Mao’s route, to give the impression of a wildly abundant crop. The rice was planted so closely together that electric fans had to be set up around the fields to circulate air in order to prevent the plants from rotting. All of China was a stage, all the people performers in an extravaganza for Mao.

The production figures were false, Lin Ke said. No soil could produce twenty or thirty thousand pounds per mu. And what was coming out of the backyard steel furnaces was useless. The finished steel I had seen in Anhui that Zeng Xisheng claimed had been produced by the backyard steel furnace was fake, delivered there from a huge, modern factory.

“This isn’t what the newspapers are saying,” I protested.

The newspapers, too, were filled with falsehoods, Lin Ke insisted, printing only what they had been told. “They would not dare tell the public what was really happening,” Lin said.

I was astonished. The People’s Daily was our source of truth, the most authoritative of all the country’s newspapers. If the People’s Daily was printing falsehoods, which one would tell the truth?

Our talk was dangerous, and my agitation was worrying Wang Jingxian. “Let’s not talk anymore,” he interrupted. “It’s time to go to bed.” He pulled me aside privately, as he had when I had come to Lin Ke’s defense before, and cautioned me against
speaking so freely. “You could get into trouble,” he warned.

I did not really believe Lin Ke. I was swept away by the drama of the Great Leap Forward, caught up in its delusions. I still trusted the party, Mao, the *People’s Daily*. But Lin’s revelations were distressing. The situation was troubling.

If Lin Ke was right, why was no one telling Chairman Mao? What about the Chairman’s advisers—men like Tian Jiaying, Hu Qiaomu, Chen Boda, Wang Jingxian, Lin Ke, and leaders like Zhou Enlai? If they knew the reality, why did they not inform the Chairman? But no one, not even those closest to him, dared to speak out.

I wondered whether Mao, despite his outward enthusiasm, had his own private doubts.

From my conversations with Mao, I doubted that he really knew. In October 1958, Mao’s doubts were not about the production figures or the miraculous increases in grain and steel production. There were exaggerations, perhaps, but he was worried most about the claims that communism was at hand. With the establishment of people’s communes, the introduction of public dining halls, and the abundant harvest soon to come, word was spreading that communism was just around the corner. The creative enthusiasm of the Chinese peasantry had finally been unleashed. Mao’s problem was how to maintain that mass enthusiasm while checking the belief that communism was upon us. “No one can deny the high spirits and
strong determination of the masses,” he said to me one night. “Of course, the people’s commune is a new thing. It will take lots of hard work to turn it into a healthy institution. Certain leaders, with good intentions, want to rush things. They want to jump into communism immediately. We have to deal with this kind of problem. But other people are still suspicious about the general line, the Great Leap Forward, and the people’s communes. Some hopelessly stubborn people even secretly oppose them. When they go to see God, they’ll probably take their marble heads with them.”

When Mao called central and local-level leaders to a conference in Zhengzhou, Henan, from November 2 to 10, 1958, the mood was still optimistic. Spirits were high. Mao stressed to the participants what he had already told me—that the general line, the Great Leap Forward, and the people’s communes had to be reaffirmed. For the transformation to communism, though, patience was required. China could not rush prematurely into the future. And the peasants were being worked too hard. Cadres at all levels had to pay attention to the well-being of the masses. Months earlier, Mao had been whipping and goading the cadres into action. Now he was trying to slow them down. He was putting a brake on the most fantastical claims. But about the production figures and the backyard furnaces, he had no complaints.

It was at Zhengzhou in November 1958 that the curtain that had prevented me from seeing Mao
clearly began to lift. In the ebullience of the Great Leap Forward, Mao was less secretive about his private activities. I could see for myself. Mao was staying on his train but going each night to the dances held in his honor at the Zhengzhou guesthouse. A young nurse who was also on the train accompanied Mao openly to the dances, and I knew that she was staying with him at night.

The last contingent of Chinese volunteers had just returned from Korea, and the Cultural Work Troupe from the Twentieth Army was in Zhengzhou to be welcomed back personally by Mao. The young girls from the troupe swarmed around Mao at the parties, lavishing attention on him, competing with each other for the honor of a dance—and then putting on quite a performance when Mao agreed. I still remember one young girl dancing in perfect step with Mao, becoming bolder and bolder, leaning her body this way and that, twisting and turning in rhythm to the music, loving every twist and turn. Mao was delighted, too, and he often stayed at the parties from nine in the evening until two in the morning.

After the Zhengzhou meetings, we went by train to Wuhan. The Twentieth Army Cultural Work Troupe came, too, and so did the young nurse. Mao’s spirits were still high. Wang Renzhong had made sure that Mao’s view from the train was of extravagantly abundant crops, thriving backyard steel furnaces, and gaily dressed women. Everyone, it seemed, was singing. As a doctor, I could not help but notice that many of the women were standing
in paddy fields with water up to their waists. Paddy fields are not ordinarily that deep, but deep planting was another innovation of the Great Leap Forward. For the women, though, the low-lying fields were an invitation to gynecological infections.

In Wuhan, Mao called the Sixth Plenum of the Eighth Party Central Committee into session. Wang Renzhong put the most capable of Hubei’s security staff in charge of security and logistics, and as usual the accommodations were excellent. The best local chefs were on hand to prepare sumptuous meals of the choicest delicacies, and our rooms were continually supplied with liquid refreshment and fruit. Mao was warning against believing that communism was at hand, but living as we were in a communist paradise, for us it had already arrived. Even as Hubei public security wrapped a tight cloak of secrecy around the Chairman’s activities on the train, Mao became more brazen about his female companions. The dances and lavish nightly entertainment continued, and Mao brought the young nurse openly to the nightly festivities.

Mao gave me and all his personal staff a few days’ leave to visit our families in Beijing, my only vacation in twenty-two years, so I was not in Wuhan for all the meetings. The Sixth Plenum was in session from November 28 to December 10 and continued the effort to bring more reality to the Great Leap Forward. Cadres and citizens were encouraged to be more realistic. China was not yet
on the verge of entering communism, and people were still to be paid on the basis of how much they worked. The enthusiasm that had swept the country was a good thing, but analyses had to be based on concrete facts. Mao had recognized that the claims for economic output were too high, so projections were scaled down and so were targets for future increases. Mao’s resignation as chairman of the republic finally became official. The Central Committee agreed that he would not serve as chairman when the next session of the National People’s Congress began.

But Mao resigned as chairman only to become emperor. He was still the supreme leader and coming to be seen as infallible and nearly omnipotent. The mood in Wuhan was still ebullient, and the problems, such as they were, were the type Mao liked—over-optimism, too much enthusiasm, daring, and verve. Mao’s enthusiasm for the people’s communes continued unabated. He was critical of the Soviet Union for insisting that mechanization had to precede collectivization. The people’s commune was the route to rural prosperity. The masses, at last, had become creators of history. If mistakes were to be made, better that they be leftist than rightist. Rightists lost their jobs, were imprisoned, sent to hard labor, suffered to the point of death. Leftists got only a gentle slap on the wrist.

I returned to Wuhan shortly before the meetings closed and was there for the celebration banquet Mao hosted for the other top leaders. Liu Shaoqi,
Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping attended, as did all the provincial party secretaries. The toasts were all tributes to Mao. Wang Renzhong, sycophantic as usual, effusively led the way. “The proclamations from this meeting are the Communist Manifesto of today,” he exclaimed. “Only under the brilliant leadership of the Chairman can such a red sun rise in the East.”

Zhou Enlai rose to add to the flattery. “Comrade Chen Boda has said that one day under a truly communist society equals twenty years in a non-communist one. Today, we have that kind of productive power.”

Ke Qingshi followed suit. “It is not correct to say that no one can outdo Marx,” he said. “Haven’t we already outdone Marx in both theory and practice?”

There were toasts in criticism of the Soviet Union. “For decades, the Soviet Union has tried to establish an advanced form of social development, but always they have failed. We have succeeded in less than ten years.”

Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping joined in the toasting and drinking, but neither proposed a toast himself.

Mao ordinarily drank very little, but as China’s leaders lifted their glasses in toast after toast, he joined them and his face turned a bright red. Then he turned the flattery to Zhou Enlai, his faithful servant, the most loyal of his lieutenants. “Premier Zhou can drink a lot,” he said. “Let’s toast the premier.”

I took the lead in toasting Zhou Enlai, standing
in front of him to clink glasses. “Bottoms up,” I said.

“Oh, we must celebrate,” Zhou replied loudly as others joined in toasting him. Zhou’s capacity for liquor was enormous, and his face never turned red. But that night Zhou got drunk, and he woke up in the middle of the night with a nosebleed. Luo Ruiqing blamed me, berating me the next morning for having started the round of toasts, arguing that a doctor should know better than to urge others to drink. I thought I had only been following Mao’s lead.

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. Even as China’s leaders drank to the brilliant leadership of Chairman Mao, the disaster that had been brewing unseen for months was finally bubbling to the surface.

In Wuhan, feted by Wang Renzhong, the party leadership remained sheltered from the unfolding crisis. But during my visit home in the middle of the meetings, I had discovered there was no meat or oil in Zhongnanhai. Rice and basic staples were hard to come by. Vegetables were few. Something had gone awry.

Much, in fact, had gone wrong. A large portion of the huge harvest lay uncollected in the fields. Massive numbers of able-bodied male peasants had been transferred from the fields to work in the backyard steel furnaces. The women and children
could not bring in the harvest. The labor was backbreaking, more than they could endure, and crops rotting in the fields.

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.

To minimize their losses and keep enough food to eat, communes were saying that they had been struck by natural disasters. Their harvest had been
abundant, but the weather had destroyed it. Such communes were thus able to keep the grain they would otherwise have owed in taxes. Or they were granted relief grain from the state.

The backyard steel furnaces were equally disastrous. As the drive to produce steel continued at an ever more frenetic pace, people were forced to contribute their pots and pans, their doorknobs, the steel from their wrought-iron gates, shovels, and spades. There was not enough coal to fire the furnaces, so the fires were fed with the peasants’ wooden furniture—their tables, chairs, and beds. But what came out of the furnaces was useless—nothing more than melted-down knives and pots and pans. Mao said that China was not on the verge of communism, but in fact some absurd form of communism was already in place. Private property was being abolished, because private property was all being given away to feed the voracious steel furnaces.

Still, Mao’s euphoria continued. I think at this point he was still being shielded from the impending crisis. I had misgivings. I could see disaster brewing. But I did not dare to speak. I worried that Mao was being deceived and no one was willing to tell him the truth. Of the men closest to Mao, Tian Jiaying was the best informed, the most skeptical, and the most honest. I thought he should be the one to inform Mao. But Tian Jiaying was in Henan, investigating the situation there. Realistic reports would have to await his return. Mao trusted him. Mao would believe what he said.
*One mu equals .16 acre.*
Everything had changed. The fires from the backyard furnaces were out, the brightly dressed peasant women gone. The fields were empty. No crops. No people. Wuhan, still under the direction of Mao’s friend Wang Renzhong, was in terrible shape. We stayed, as usual, in the Meiyuan guesthouse along East Lake, but there was little to eat. In the past, our rooms had been copiously stocked with tea and cigarettes, and every meal had been a banquet. Now there was no meat, because the cows and chickens had starved and the pigs were too skinny to eat. Occasionally, we were served fish. Vegetables were scarce. There were no cigarettes or matches anywhere in the province. The warehouses had been depleted. Everything had been consumed. Only months earlier, Wang Renzhong, Mao’s great sycophant, had been bragging that Hubei was producing ten or twenty thousand pounds of rice per mu. Now there was famine.

Wang Renzhong claimed that the famine was the result of natural disasters. But there had been no natural disaster in Hubei. The weather in 1958 and 1959 had been splendid. Much of the abundant crop had simply not been collected.

Changsha, in Mao’s home province of Hunan,
was different. Food was less plentiful than before, but no one was starving, and the small open-air restaurants were serving customers. We stayed in the magnificent Lotus Garden guesthouse, with beautiful modern buildings and lotus trees set among rolling lawns. The tea and cigarettes supplied to our rooms were stale. They had been taken out of storage in honor of our visit. But the warehouses had not been depleted and the tea and cigarettes were China’s best. We ate meat in Hunan, too—the tasty ham for which the province is famous.

The irony of the contrast between Hunan and Hubei was not lost on Zhou Xiaozhou, the first party secretary of Hunan, who had been so severely criticized by Mao in 1957 for his failure to implement double cropping and who had introduced Mao to Hai Rui. Wang Renzhong was accompanying Mao’s entourage to Changsha, and one day as Luo Ruiqing, Wang Renzhong, Zhou Xiaozhou, and I were chatting, Zhou could not resist needling Wang about the contrast. “Wasn’t Zhejiang praised for its high output last year?” he asked bitterly. “And Hunan was criticized for not having worked as hard. Now look at Hubei. You don’t even have stale cigarettes or tea. You used up all your reserves last year. Today, we may be poor, but at least we have supplies in storage.” Wang Renzhong stalked out without saying a word as the rest of us stood in embarrassed silence. But Zhou Xiaozhou was right. Even on the streets, the contrast was obvious. The province of Hunan still
had food.

Mao decided to return to Shaoshan, the Hunan village of his birth. He had not been back since 1927, thirty-two years before.

Mao’s trip to Shaoshan was his way of seeking to learn the truth. He did not believe the leading cadres. There could be no carefully staged performances for Mao in Shaoshan. He knew the place too well. He could see through any attempt to deceive him. Besides, the village folk would speak frankly to him. They were honest and simple, and Mao was one of them. He trusted them.
The day was sunny and hot when we set out by car from Changsha on June 25, and the country roads were unpaved and dusty. Our car had no air-conditioning, and the dust came floating in through our open windows. We were perspiring so heavily that by the time we arrived in the Xiangtan prefectural seat some two hours later, we must have looked as if we were made of mud.

The party secretary of Xiangtan prefecture, Hua Guofeng, welcomed us. It was the first time I had met the man who would become Mao’s successor some sixteen years later. We rested for a while in Xiangtan, chatting with Hua, but the prefecture chief did not accompany us on the final lap of our trip. Mao was afraid that the peasants of Shaoshan might speak less frankly with the head of their prefecture around.

Shaoshan village was a forty-minute drive from Xiangtan. Mao stayed on a hilltop in an old guesthouse once owned by Christian missionaries (even in as remote a village as Shaoshan, the missionaries had set up a church), and I stayed in a school at the bottom of the hill. The weather was hot and humid even at night, and the mosquito net covering my bed was stifling. I could not sleep.

Li Yinqiao phoned me at a little after five the
next morning. Mao had not slept either. He wanted me to join him now for a walk. I met Mao at his guesthouse, and we began walking down the back of the hill, with Luo Ruiqing, Wang Renzhong, Zhou Xiaozhou, and a host of bodyguards following. Partway down, in the middle of a small pine grove, Mao stopped before a burial mound. It was only when he bowed from the waist in the traditional manner of respect that I realized we were standing before his parents’ grave. Shen Tong, one of the security officers accompanying us, quickly gathered a bunch of wildflowers. Mao placed the flowers on the grave and bowed three times again. The rest of his entourage, standing behind him, bowed too. “There used to be a tombstone around here,” Mao said. “It has disappeared after all these years.” When Luo Ruiqing suggested that the site be repaired and restored, Mao demurred. “It’s good just to have found the place,” he said.

We continued walking down the hill, in the direction of the Mao clan ancestral hall. Again Mao stopped, puzzled, looking for something. We were standing on the spot where the Buddhist shrine Mao had referred to so often in our conversations once stood—the shrine his mother used to visit when he was sick, where she burned incense and fed the ashes to her son, certain of their curative powers. The tiny shrine, like the tombstone, had disappeared, torn down only months before with the establishment of the commune. The bricks were needed to build the backyard steel furnaces, and the wood had been used as fuel.
Mao had fallen silent on our walk. The destruction of the shrine had saddened him. “It’s such a pity,” he said. “It should have been left alone. Without money to see doctors, poor farmers could still come and pray to the gods and eat the incense ashes. The shrine could lift their spirits, give them hope. People need this kind of help and encouragement.” I smiled when he said this, but Mao was serious. “Don’t look down on incense ashes,” he said, repeating his admonition that medicine is good only for curable disease. “Incense ashes give people the courage to fight disease, don’t you think? You are a doctor. You should know how much psychology affects medical treatment.” People could not live without spiritual support, Mao believed.

My smile was not meant as disagreement. I have always believed that one’s state of mind has a profound effect on health.

We went then to visit Mao’s old family house. No one lived in it then. The personality cult surrounding Mao was still in its early stage, so the family house was still in its original state, old farming equipment neatly displayed on the porch. Only a wooden board above the entrance designated the place as Mao’s childhood home. The style of the house was typical of that area—simple mud walls and a thatched roof. There was nothing modern about it. But with eight rooms built around a courtyard, the home was obviously that of a wealthy peasant.

The land Mao’s father had once farmed, with
help from temporary laborers, was now part of the people’s commune. Just beyond the house was a pond lined with trees. “That’s where I used to go swimming and where the cattle drank water,” he said.

He began reminiscing about his childhood. “My father was tough,” he said. “He always beat us. Once when he tried to beat me, I ran away, and he chased me around this pond, cursing me for being an unfilial son. But I told him that an unkind father will have an unfilial son.”

Mao described his mother as kindhearted and always willing to help others. She, Mao’s younger brother, and Mao often formed a “united front” against Mao’s father. “My father died a long time ago, but had he lived to this day, he would have been classified a rich peasant and been struggled against,” Mao said.

Mao began contacting his relatives to learn firsthand how the Great Leap Forward had affected them. Only the women and children were at home. The men were away working on the backyard steel furnaces or water conservancy projects. Mao did not have to delve far to learn that life was hard for the families in Shaoshan. With the construction of the backyard steel furnaces, everyone’s pots and pans had been confiscated and thrown into the furnace to make steel—and nothing had been returned. Everyone was eating in the public mess halls. The families had no cooking equipment. Even if they still had had pots and pans, their earthen hearths had been destroyed so the mud could be
used as fertilizer.

When Mao took a swim in the newly constructed Shaoshan reservoir that afternoon, he talked to the local folk about the project. Everyone criticized it. The reservoir had been poorly built, one old peasant pointed out. The commune secretary was in such a rush to finish that it leaked. The reservoir’s capacity was too small, and when it rained, water had to be released to prevent flooding.

The commune directors called the menfolk back to meet with Mao in the evening, and Mao hosted a dinner party for them at his guesthouse—some fifty people in all. Everyone complained about the mess halls. The older people did not like them because the younger people always cut in and grabbed the food first. The younger people did not like the mess halls because there never was enough food. Fistfights often broke out, and much of the food was wasted when it ended up on the floor.

Mao asked about the backyard steel furnaces. Again he heard nothing but complaints. Indigenous raw materials were scarce. They used locally mined low-quality coal to fuel the furnaces, but there was not enough coal and no iron ore at all. The only way to comply with the directive to build the furnaces was to confiscate the peasants’ pots, pans, and shovels for iron ore and their doors and furniture for fuel. But the furnaces were producing iron nuggets that no one knew what to do with. Now, with no pots or pans, people couldn’t even boil drinking water at home, let alone cook. The
commune kitchens were no help with the water problem, because the cooks had to devote all their energies to preparing food.

When Mao’s questions stopped, the room fell silent. An air of gloom descended. The Great Leap Forward was not going well in Shaoshan. “If you can’t fill your bellies at the public dining hall, then it’s better just to disband it,” Mao said. “It’s a waste of food. As for the water conservancy project, I don’t think every rural community has to build a reservoir. If the reservoirs are not built well, there will be big problems. And if you cannot produce good steel, you might as well quit.”

With these words, Shaoshan probably became the first village in the country to abolish the public dining halls, halt its water conservancy project, and begin dismantling the backyard steel furnaces. Mao’s comments were never publicly released, but they spread quickly through word of mouth. Soon many areas were dismantling their projects.

Thus it was that I, and certainly Mao, began to be aware that the economic situation in the country had deteriorated. Mao’s return to Shaoshan awakened him to reality, shaking him into a growing awareness that trouble was brewing. When he returned to Wuhan, his previous ebullience had evaporated. But there was still no doubt in his mind that the programs themselves were basically sound, that they simply needed further adjustment. Mao still did not want to do anything to dampen the enthusiasm of the masses. The problem was how to bring the cadres back to
reality without crushing their spirit or spreading gloom to the people. It was a question of propaganda—how to mobilize cadres and peasants alike to the right level of realistic enthusiasm. Mao decided to call a propaganda meeting to discuss the issues. It would be held in Wuhan.

We arrived in Wuhan on June 28. The weather was scorchingly hot and would only become hotter as the summer progressed. Wang Renzhong thought the meeting would be best held in a more hospitable climate. He suggested Qingdao, the site of the meetings in the summer of 1957, but Mao remembered the month-long cold he had contracted during his stay and refused to return to Qingdao.

Shanghai mayor Ke Qingshi suggested Lushan, the famous mountain resort along the Yangtze River in Jiangxi province where Chiang Kai-shek used to convene meetings of the Guomindang. At nearly fifteen hundred meters’ elevation, the weather would be cool, and the facilities, built for Chiang and the Nationalist party elite, were excellent. There was even an auditorium for meetings. Besides, Lushan was not too far from Wuhan—just down the Yangtze by boat. Many of the party leaders had already begun gathering in Wuhan. Transporting them to Lushan would be easy.

Mao agreed. The party would convene in Lushan.
The situation in Mao’s native Shaoshan was good compared with the rest of China. A horrible famine was sweeping the country. The province of Anhui, where party secretary Zeng Xisheng had first shown Mao the backyard steel furnaces, had been badly hit, and so had Henan, where we had gone in August 1958 to see the new people’s communes. People in some of the more remote and sparsely populated places, like Gansu, were starving. Peasants were starving in Sichuan, too—the nation’s most populous province, larger than most countries and known as China’s rice bowl. During the meetings in Chengdu, Sichuan, in March 1958, Mao had pushed his plan to overtake Great Britain in fifteen years. In many provinces, tens of thousands were fleeing, just as Chinese peasants always had done in face of famine.

I never witnessed the terrible famine myself. Group One was protected from the awful realities. I learned about the famine on the way to Lushan, sailing down the magnificent Yangtze River with Mao, his staff, and several provincial leaders. Tian Jiaying was on board, and the memories of his six-month inspection tour of Henan and Sichuan were still fresh. I was standing on deck with him, Lin Ke, and Wang Jingxian, who had been put in charge of
Mao’s security after Wang Dongxing was sent away. Tian Jiaying described the famine in Sichuan. The government’s efforts to alleviate the crisis had been inadequate. The overly optimistic target for steel production in 1959 had been cut from 20 million tons to 13 million. But 60 million able-bodied peasants, strong and healthy men who ought to have been at work in the fields, were still working on the backyard steel furnaces. The dislocation of labor was disastrous. The fields were not being farmed. The problem was getting worse.

Tian Jiaying was distressed not only because so many people were starving but because so many in authority were lying. Falsehoods are flying and getting more absurd with every passing day, he said. But the people speaking falsehoods are being praised; the ones who tell the truth are being criticized.

The conversation turned first obliquely and then more directly to Mao. Mao was a great philosopher, a great soldier, and a great politician, but he was a terrible economist. He had a penchant for grandiose schemes. He had lost touch with the people, forgotten the work style that he himself had promoted—seeking truth from facts, humility, attention to details. This was the source of the country’s economic problems.

Wang Jingxian began telling us about Mao’s many girlfriends. The Chairman’s private life, Wang said, was shockingly indecent.

I was incredulous. I had known the economic situation was bad, but not that famine had swept
the country and that millions were starving. I was surprised at the criticisms against Mao. My friend Tian Jiaying was ordinarily cautious, but the forthrightness with which he was speaking was dangerous, even among so close and sympathetic a group. Wang Jingxian’s revelations were startling, too. Wang was charged with safeguarding the Chairman, and even among friends he should have been more careful. I remained silent and so did Lin Ke. Still grateful to Mao for having saved him during the Black Flag Incident, Lin Ke knew better than to criticize the Chairman.

Ke Qingshi, Wang Renzhong, and Li Jingquan, the first party secretary of Sichuan province, joined our conversation, wondering what we could be discussing with such intensity.

“We are talking about the famine,” Tian Jiaying replied. “People are dying of starvation.”

“China is a big country,” Li Jingquan responded. “Which dynasty has not witnessed death by starvation?” He was right. Episodic famine is part of China’s history. But in 1959, China was supposed to be in the middle of a Great Leap Forward. Even as people starved, official propaganda was making fantastic claims.

“The people are showing greater enthusiasm for work than ever before in our history,” Wang Renzhong said, mimicking the Chairman’s words. Both provincial secretaries were well tuned to Mao’s political line.

Ke Qingshi, too, followed Mao’s political lead. “Some people pay attention only to the minor
things and not the major ones,” he said. “They always see the negative side of things, complaining about everything. The Chairman says this kind of person could stand right in front of Mount Tai [Taishan] and still not see it.”

Even before we reached Lushan, the battle lines were being drawn. Wang Renzhong, Li Jingquan, and Ke Qingshi, under pressure from Mao to increase production or lose their jobs, sacrificed truth on the altar of Mao. They extolled the Great Leap and minimized their economic problems, feeding the central authority unrealistic economic statistics because they knew what the center wanted to hear. They were supported by central officials like Luo Ruiqing and Yang Shangkun, whose official responsibilities were unrelated to economic questions but who were attuned to Mao’s policy preferences, had been criticized by Mao in the past, and wanted to do nothing to anger him again. They supported Mao not out of conviction but for self-preservation, remaining, whether deliberately or naively, ignorant of the real extent of the country’s economic problems. They offered nothing but support for Mao.

Mao’s critics were generally of two types. One consisted of economic planners like Bo Yibo, the head of the State Economic Commission, and Li Fuchun, in charge of the State Planning Commission. Their offices were responsible for setting production targets and for working out the plans that would ensure that those targets could be
fulfilled. Early during the Great Leap Forward, Bo Yibo had resisted setting such unrealistic production targets, but later, under pressure from Mao, he had caved in and done everything he could to push his subordinates to meet them. When Bo realized how serious the economic crisis was, he instructed his staff to prepare an honest and comprehensive report detailing the problems. But sensing that Mao would not welcome criticism, he balked at submitting the report. In a telephone conference with his subordinates around the country, he instructed them to continue doing their utmost to fulfill the production plan and to press ahead to achieve the stated, still bloated, goals. He was uncomfortable with Mao’s economic audaciousness, certain that his plan would fail. But he dared not challenge Mao. He refused to speak out. Bo Yibo never publicly criticized the Great Leap. Nor did Li Fuchun.

The second type of critic consisted of those who had been on inspection trips to local areas and knew firsthand how bad the disaster was. They were neither economic planners nor responsible for implementing Mao’s grandiose schemes, but they had witnessed the deteriorating, chaotic conditions in the countryside. Mao’s political secretaries—Tian Jiaying, Hu Qiaomu, and Chen Boda—were among them. Their job was to report the truth.

But while the critics talked among themselves, as we did on the boat down the Yangtze, conversation with the people making the preposterous claims was almost impossible. Those who insisted on the
truth, and were thus willing to offend Mao, were rare indeed. Most trimmed their sails to the wind. Even people like Tian Jiaying, who had been on inspection tours and knew the truth, or provincial leaders like Zhou Xiaozhou, who knew the extent of the crisis and was privately critical of both the Great Leap and of Mao himself, were reluctant to challenge Mao directly. On the boat, Tian Jiaying was willing to talk with Lin Ke about the country’s problems. But when Mao’s close supporters—Ke Qingshi and Li Jingquan—joined us, he fell silent.

We docked at Jiujiang, Jiangxi province, on July 1, 1959. Wang Dongxing, still in Jiangxi for his “reform,” had become a vice-governor of the province and came on board to welcome Mao. He had been in close contact with the masses, truly educated by his experience, Wang assured Mao.

The Chairman was delighted. “People cannot always stay at the top,” he said. “Let’s make a new rule. Everyone who works at the central level should take turns working at lower-level organizations.”

The highway from Jiujiang to Lushan was well paved, and we reached the sprawling mountain resort in little more than an hour. Logistical arrangements for the party leaders were under the direction of first party secretary Yang Shangkui, chairman of the Jiangxi provincial people’s congress Fang Zhichun, who was married to Mao Yuanxin’s mother, and vice-governor Wang Dongxing. Wang was directing the security
arrangements for Mao, thus putting himself into immediate conflict with Wang Jingxian. Wang Jingxian ignored Wang Dongxing’s arrangements, claiming that Wang Dongxing had been out of touch with Mao for so long that he no longer understood the Chairman. It was an insult Wang Dongxing would never forget, and Wang Jingxian would pay for it later.

Mao stayed in Chiang Kai-shek’s two-story villa, and I was housed in a building nearby. The weather on the mountaintop was cool and damp, and we were so high up that when I left my windows open, clouds would float in through one window and out another.

When Mao opened the enlarged politburo meeting on July 2, the day after our arrival, he dubbed the gathering a “fairy [shenxian] meeting.” Fairies live in the heavens among the clouds, just as we were living then, and they have no cares and no limits on their behavior. Fairies can do whatever they please. Mao wanted no fixed agenda for the meeting. Party leaders could talk about whatever they wanted. Mao proposed nineteen possible topics for discussion, and the participants were encouraged to talk about them freely. When the meeting began, Mao knew there were problems with the Great Leap, and he believed measures were being taken to correct those problems. He had no reason to believe there would be trouble. In his short opening address, Mao praised the achievements of the Great Leap Forward, alluded to
the problems, and said he hoped that the participants would appreciate the energy and creativity of the Chinese people.

Mao’s confidence in the Great Leap Forward remained unshaken, and I do not know how much of the real situation Mao knew when he spoke then. His visit to Shaoshan had given him a clear sense that there were problems. He certainly knew that something had gone awry and that there were major shortages of food. He knew that in many places there was no rice to eat, and he was willing to discuss those problems and work to solve them. But I do not think that when he spoke on July 2, 1959, he knew how bad the disaster had become, and he believed the party was doing everything it could to manage the situation. The purpose of the “fairy meeting” was to discuss both how to solve the problems and how to retain the enthusiasm of the masses. But his solution was simply for people to work harder still.

My notes record him as saying that “some people have asked, ‘If our production is so high, why is our food supply so tight? Why can’t female comrades buy hairpins? Why can’t people get soap or matches?’ Well, if we cannot clearly explain the situation, let’s not explain it. Let’s just stick it out and carry on our work with even greater determination and energy. We will have more supplies next year. Then we will explain everything. In short, the situation in general is excellent. There are many problems, but our future is bright.”