

JUNG CHANG AND JON HALLIDAY

Mao

The Unknown Story

ALSO BY THE SAME AUTHORS

By Jung Chang

Wild Swans

By Jon Halliday

Silk on Silk

The Psychology of Gambling

(co-editor Peter Fuller)

The Artful Albanian

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reservations about him – not least from the way that his acolytes were denounced in the Red newspapers. He could also read the strength of the wind that was blowing against him in the startling degree of his own isolation. Hardly anyone came to visit him. His followers avoided him. Sometimes, his wife recalled, he did not exchange a word with anyone outside his family for days. Mao was to say decades later that it was as if he had been 'soaked in a piss barrel, and been sloshed up and down several times, so I really stank'.

A further indication of the way he had slipped in Moscow's favour came early in 1934, when he lost his position as 'premier' – while retaining the grander one of 'president'. The main duty of the premier was to run the administration, which Mao could not be bothered to do; and the Party wanted someone in the post who would actually do the job. An ambitious thirty-four-year-old called Lo Fu, who had been trained in Russia, took his place. Mao was compensated by being made a full member of the Politburo for the first time since 1923, but he did not get into the inner core of the Party, the Secretariat. He was not on the list approved by Moscow. Mao boycotted the Party plenum that implemented these decisions, claiming illness. Another 'diplomatic disorder', Po Ku remarked, but let him be.

Mao was still given a high profile and maximum exposure in CCP and Moscow publications. To the population in the Red area – and to the outside world, including the Nationalists – Mao was still 'the Chairman'. But in private, Po Ku compared him to Russia's figurehead president. 'Old Mao is going to be just a Kalinin now,' he told a friend. 'Ha, ha.'

II How Mao Got onto the Long March (1933–34; age 39–40)

IN September 1933, Chiang Kai-shek mobilised half a million troops for yet another 'annihilation expedition' – his fifth – against the Ruijin base. In May he had agreed a truce with the Japanese, acquiescing to their seizure of parts of north China, in addition to Manchuria, and this freed him to concentrate in strength against the Reds.

Over the previous months Chiang had been building solid roads that enabled his troops to mass in the area and bring up supplies. With this logistic preparation, Chiang was now able to close in on the Red area. The armies then pushed into the Red base slowly, pausing every couple of kilometres to construct small forts that stood so close together they could virtually be connected by machine-gun fire. The Reds were tightly encircled by these blockhouses. As their commander, Peng De-huai, described it, Chiang was forcing the Red area 'to shrink gradually: the tactics of drying the pond and then getting the fish'.

The Red Army had only one-tenth of Chiang's strength, and was far less well armed. Chiang's army, moreover, was now much better trained, thanks to the work of a large group of German military advisers. In particular, the Generalissimo had obtained the services of the man who had played the key role in re-constituting the German army in secret after the First World War, General Hans von Seeckt. So Moscow built up a 'German'

network of its own to help the Chinese Reds to counter Chiang's advisers. It dispatched a German-speaking military expert, Manfred Stern (later famous as General Kléber in the Spanish Civil War), to be the chief military adviser, based in Shanghai. And the German Otto Braun was sent to Ruijin in September, as *de facto* army commander on the spot.

In Ruijin, Braun settled in the barricaded area reserved for Party leaders, in a thatched house in the middle of rice paddies. He was asked to 'stay inside my house as much as possible for my safety as a "foreign devil", and in view of the constant [Nationalist] clamour about "Russian agents"'. He was given a Chinese name, Li De - 'Li the German' - and provided with a 'wife', whose one vital qualification was that 'she had to be big', and 'of very strong physique', the assumption being that foreigners needed strong women to cope with their sexual demands.

According to Mrs Zhu De (successor to the one executed by the Nationalists), whose information reflected the gossip of the day, 'no women comrades wanted to marry a foreigner who could not speak Chinese. So for a while they [the Party] could not find a suitable partner.' Eventually they lit on a good-looking country girl who had been a child bride and had escaped to join the revolution. However, in spite of high-level pressure, she refused. 'A few days later, she received an order: "Li De is a leading comrade sent to help the Chinese revolution. To be his wife is the need of the revolution. The Organisation has decided that you marry him." She obeyed, with great reluctance ... they did not get on.'

In this, her second arranged marriage, this woman bore Braun a son. The boy had dark skin - closer in colour to that of a Chinese than a white person's, which prompted Mao to crack a joke: 'Well, this defeats the theory of the superiority of the Germanic race.'

The man closest to Braun was Po Ku, the Party No. 1, who had worked with him in Shanghai, and could talk to him in Russian. They played cards with the interpreters and went horse-riding together. Chou En-lai, as the No. 2 and the senior military man, also saw Braun a lot. But Braun had little to do with Mao, whom he met only at official functions. On such occasions, Braun wrote, Mao 'maintained a solemn reserve'. Mao

spoke no Russian, and kept his guard up with Braun, regarding him as a threat.

By spring 1934, Chiang's expedition had been pressing in on the base for about six months. Neither Moscow's advisers nor any of the CCP leaders had a solution for countering Chiang's blockade war and overwhelming military superiority. Red leaders in Ruijin knew the base's days were numbered, and began to plan a pull-out. On 25 March, Moscow sent Ruijin a cable which was intercepted by British intelligence, saying that the prospects for the base were dire - even more dire, it said, than the CCP itself seemed to appreciate. As soon as Po Ku received this message, he started trying to get Mao out of the way. On 27 March, Shanghai wired Moscow to say that Ruijin 'communicates that Mao has been ill for a long time and [it] requests that he be sent to Moscow'. But Mao was not ill at all. Po Ku and his colleagues did not want him around, in case he made trouble again.

Ruijin's request to evacuate Mao was rejected. On 9 April Moscow cabled that it was 'against visit of Mao' because the journey, which would involve passing through White areas, would be too risky. 'He absolutely must be treated in the soviet region [i.e. Red area in China], even if that necessitates large costs. Only in the case of total impossibility of treating him on the spot and of danger of fatal outcome of illness can we agree to him coming to Moscow.'

Mao had no wish to be evicted. 'My health is good. I'm not going anywhere', he rejoined to Po Ku, who controlled communications with Moscow. But Po soon came up with another solution - to leave Mao behind to hold the fort. Keeping the head of state *in situ* would be a perfect way of proclaiming that the Red state lived on.

No one wanted to be left behind. Many who stayed lost their lives, either in battle, or captured and executed. Mao's youngest brother Tse-tan was one of them. Another was the friend Mao had brought to the CCP's 1st congress, Ho Shu-heng. Yet another was the former Party No. 1, Chu Chiu-pai. And resentment was strong among those who survived. The No. 2 stay-behind, Chen Yi, had a serious shrapnel wound in the hip. He had himself carried on a stretcher to Zhu De, and pleaded, in vain, to be taken along.

Two decades later he recalled with anger how the decision was broken to him (incidentally giving a rare insight into how CCP leaders viewed their colleagues' sophistry): 'I was given hot air: "You are a senior official, so we ought to carry you along on a stretcher. But because you have been working in Jiangxi for well over ten years [sic], you have influence and prestige ... Now that the Centre is going, we can't face the masses if we don't leave you behind."' The man spouting this hot air was Chou En-lai.

Mao knew that if he were left behind he would be far removed from the Party's centre and from the army – even if he happened to survive. He did not intend to be got rid of so easily. At this point, having been deprived of military command, Mao was not with any army. But as government chairman he was his own master and could choose what he wanted to do and where he wanted to be. Over the next half a year, he devoted himself to making sure that Po Ku and Co. could not leave him marooned when they left.

So he staked out a position on the escape route. The first place he camped out was the southern front, which at the time was the envisaged exit point. Here the Communists faced the Cantonese warlord who had been doing a lucrative trade with them in tungsten, and who hated Chiang. Unlike other fronts, where the Nationalists were pressing in deeper and deeper, here there was not much fighting. In late April, the Cantonese warlord began talking to the Reds about providing a corridor through which they could move out, and then on. As soon as Mao learned this, he descended on the HQ of the southern front in Huichang, right on the main road out of the Red area.

It was clear to local leaders that Mao had no official business to explain his presence, and moreover that he had time on his hands. He went hill-climbing for leisure, and would drop in on commanders, settling himself comfortably on their beds and chatting on and on. He even did things like correcting training programmes for local units, sometimes taking hours to correct one document.

In July, he left as abruptly as he had descended. He had learned that the exit point had been shifted to the west. That month, a unit 8,000-plus strong was dispatched to scout the route. Mao returned to Ruijin. A month later, as soon as the new exit point was confirmed – Yudu, a town 60 km west of Ruijin – Mao

turned up at local Party HQ with an entourage of some two dozen, including a secretary, a medic, a cook, a groom, and a squadron of guards. The HQ lay a stone's throw across the street from a river crossing which was just beyond a Sung-dynasty archway in the city wall, and this was the chosen breakout point. Mao squatted here to make sure he was taken along with the main force when the leadership left.

Before he left Ruijin, Mao decided to hand over to the Party his treasure hoard, the gold, silver and jewellery he had kept hidden in a cave for the past two years. He told his bank-manager brother Tse-min to give it to Po Ku. By concealing his haul until the eleventh hour, Mao had displayed a major lack of commitment to the Party, and to Moscow, and this level of disloyalty might be held against him by the Kremlin. Mao had broken many rules, including all three of the cardinal principles he himself had codified: always obey orders, do not take a needle or thread from the masses (i.e., no unauthorised looting), and, particularly, hand in all captured goods. But 'privatising' loot was uniquely unacceptable, as it showed that he had contemplated splitting from Moscow.

As the Nationalists were coming, it made no sense to leave the haul buried in a cave. Now was the time to cash it in – for a ticket on the evacuation. The Party was desperate for funds for the journey, and had been begging Moscow to send more money.* Mao delivered his cache and also promised Po Ku that he would behave. Po agreed to take him along. He may not have had much choice, as Mao had physically planted himself astride the departure point.

At the last minute Xiang Ying, the relatively moderate 'vice-president' of the Red state, was designated to head the stay-behinds. Xiang was the only person in the leadership from a working-class background, and he accepted the job without demur, demonstrating a spirit of self-sacrifice rare among his peers. He did, however, express grave concern about Mao going with the leadership. Xiang had had ample experience of Mao's character in the Red base, where he had arrived in 1931 at the height of Mao's slaughter of

* Moscow's monthly subsidy to the CCP for 1934 was 7,418 'gold dollars'. The Russians tried to send in arms direct, but the Chinese Red Army was unable to fulfil Moscow's recommendation to establish a foothold at a port, where 'contraband munitions and medicine could be transported'.

the Jiangxi Communists, and was convinced that Mao would stop at nothing in his pursuit of personal power. Xiang had tried, unsuccessfully, to protect the Jiangxi Reds. Mao loathed him, and had forced torture victims to denounce him. Chou En-lai told the Comintern that 'people arrested testified that [Xiang Ying] ... belonged to AB'. Aleksandr Panyushkin, later the Russian ambassador to China, said straight out that Mao had tried to get rid of Xiang Ying by labelling him 'AB'. 'Only the intervention of the Politburo prevented Mao from doing away with Xiang Ying.' At Ningdu in 1932, Xiang had been one of those most insistent on having Mao sacked from his army command. Mao's intense hatred was to lead to Xiang's death ten years later.

Xiang argued strongly against taking Mao along. Otto Braun recalled that Xiang 'made distinct allusions to the terrorist line of Mao Tse-tung and his persecution of loyal Party cadres in about 1930. He warned against underestimating the seriousness of Mao's partisan struggle against the Party leadership. His [Mao's] temporary restraint was due only to tactical considerations. He ... would avail himself of the first opportunity to seize exclusive control of Army and Party.' But Po Ku, according to Braun, seemed optimistic: 'He said ... [he] had talked this over with Mao and was positive that he would not consider provoking a crisis of leadership ...'

Mao had indeed begun to behave. Until July, when he was camping at the southern front, he had carped at the leadership's instructions at every turn, telling officers to disobey orders and issuing his own, countermanning the Party's. When one of Mao's acolytes told him that he had been appointed land minister in one place, Mao told him to go to a quite different place and do a different job: 'You are not going to be the land minister there. Go to Huichang County to be government chairman there.'

But, come September, everything changed. When Lin Biao, who had been used to Mao running down the leadership, paid him a visit, Lin's companion noticed that far from 'being engaged in factional activities on the sly', Mao was 'very disciplined'.

When the news reached him in Yudu that he was definitely going to be taken along, Mao sent for his wife. No children

could go, so their two-year-old son, Little Mao, had to be left behind. Mao never saw him again.

Little Mao had been born in November 1932, and was Mao's second child with Gui-yuan. Their first child, a daughter, had been lost. She had been born in June 1929, in the city of Longyan in Fujian, in a particularly lovely house. When the baby was shown to him, Mao had produced one of his characteristic cracks: 'Hey, this girl knows how to pick a good date: she wouldn't come out till she found a nice place!' Less than a month after she was born, Gui-yuan had to leave the town with Mao, and the baby was left with a local wet nurse. Mao's path then took the couple away from the city for nearly three years. When Gui-yuan finally returned, she was told the girl had died, but she could not bring herself to believe this, and after the Communists took power two decades later she began to look for her. The quest went on obsessively for decades until near the end of her life in 1984.

As Gui-yuan could not bring Little Mao along on the evacuation, she entrusted the boy to her sister, who was married to Mao's brother Tse-tan. The couple, as well as her brother and parents, were left behind. Gui-yuan wept bitterly at being parted from her son. (Her third child, a son, had died a few months earlier within days of being born.) Little Mao stayed with his wet nurse for a while. After the Nationalists took the Red territory, Tse-tan moved him secretly. But Tse-tan was killed in battle in April 1935 before he could tell his wife where.

Once Mao came to power, Gui-yuan, who had by then long ceased to be Mao's wife, tried desperately to find Little Mao, with tragic results. Her sister, who felt guilty about Little Mao being lost while in her care, was killed in a car accident in November 1949 as she set off one night to chase a lead, within days of the Reds taking the area. In 1952 a young man was found who might possibly have been Little Mao. Gui-yuan's brother recalled that Gui-yuan 'rushed to identify him. She mainly checked two things, whether the boy had oily ears, and whether he had armpit odour [uncommon for Chinese]. She was convinced her children all inherited these characteristics of Mao Tse-tung's. After inspecting him, she was convinced it was her Little Mao.'

But many other Communist women who had had to abandon their children had embarked on the same kind of quest, and one Red Army widow had already identified the boy as her son. The

Party adjudicated that the boy belonged to this other woman. Gui-yuan's brother went to see Mao, who had not been involved up to now, and showed him a photograph of the teenage boy, hinting that Gui-yuan would like Mao to intervene. But Mao declined, saying: 'It's awkward for me to interfere.' Mao told him to do what the Party decreed. Gui-yuan did not give up, and fought a painful – and tragic – battle for years. She and her brother kept in touch with the young man until his death from liver cancer in the 1970s, even taking care of his wedding arrangements.*

Mao showed no particular sadness about leaving Little Mao behind, and did not even say good-bye to his son. His sorrow was reserved for himself. Gong Chu, the commander of the Red Army at Yudu, left a telling account of the last weeks before Mao departed, when Mao was staked out in his HQ. In early September Gong was studying a map when

suddenly my bodyguard came in and announced: 'Chairman Mao is here!' I ... ran to the front gate, and saw Mao Tse-tung with two bodyguards dismounting ... He looked yellow and drained. I asked him: 'Is the

* This sort of tragedy was by no means uncommon. The revolution brought much heartache to its adherents. Before they took power, Communists were expected not just to make sacrifices vis-à-vis their children, but literally to sacrifice them, and selling one's children – or having them sold – to raise funds for the Party was not uncommon. The Party cell of Gui-yuan's friend Zeng Zhi in Amoy sold her baby son for 100 yuan; the buyer paid in advance and the Party spent the money before presenting her with a fait accompli. More than half a century later, she said: 'Of course, it was extremely painful. Before my son was delivered to [the buyer's] house, my husband and I carried him to Sun Yat-sen Park to play. He was such a cute baby, over 40 days, he smiled all the time. We gave him the name *Tie-niu* (Iron Ox). He never cried without a good reason, and rarely passed stool or water on himself. So we carried him there to play. He was really really happy. Then he was gone. And it was just unbearable. I managed to overcome the hurt. But my baby died 26 days later ... Our Party Secretary didn't dare to tell me, although I had heard. He kept quiet as I didn't say anything. Sometimes at night, it hurt so much I wept, but quietly, because it was embarrassing to let others know [that she was crying for her child]. Then one day, he saw I had been crying, and he guessed I knew, and he apologised to me.'

Chairman not well?' He answered: 'You are right. I have recently been suffering from ill health, but more of a pain is that I feel extremely down ...'

After he washed his face, he lit a cigarette and said: 'I'll be here for quite a while.'

Mao said to Gong that as they were old friends from the outlaw land, 'I hope you can come and have a chat whenever you have the time in the evenings.' ... Mao Tse-tung liked talking. Gong took Mao up on his invitation, and after Gui-yuan joined Mao, she would 'prepare delicious suppers. And the three of us would chat and drink and smoke, often ... till midnight ... From my observation, Mao's place was not visited by other people except me ... It really felt as if he was isolated and miserable.'

One day Gong bought a hen and some pigs' trotters for dinner. Mao was 'cheerful, and drank a lot'. He complained about the leadership, but more as a heart-to-heart between old friends than as sabotage. When Gong mentioned he had been given a reprimand for something, Mao 'said he had not been in agreement with the reprimand. It was all because Chou En-lai was too harsh ... Also, he said, [his Party foes] wanted all power in their hands ... He seemed deeply resentful of them.'

Mao became doleful from drink, and recounted the various punishments visited on him. At one point, lamenting that he was no longer the big boss, 'tears ran down his cheeks. He was coughing from time to time, and his face looked drawn and dried and sallow. Under the flicker of a tiny oil lamp, he was quite a picture of dejection.'

Neither the collapse of the Communist state nor the separation from his son could wound Mao like his loss of personal power. Then, just when everything seemed set, Mao's plans nearly fell apart. Days before the planned departure, his temperature shot up to 41°C and he grew delirious with malaria. It was the malaria season, and the mosquitoes in Yudu were so thick in the air that they flew right into people's nostrils. Even quinine failed to do the trick. It was vital for him to recover – and recover fast, so that he could leave with the others. The best doctor in the Red area, Nelson Fu, who had looked after Mao in the missionary hospital in winter 1932–3, raced over from Ruijin

and got him into good enough shape to travel. Patient and doctor both knew Fu had saved Mao's life – and his political fortunes.

Dr Fu became the overseer of Mao's physicians for decades. In 1966, in Mao's Great Purge, he wrote to Mao and brought up this episode in Yudu. 'I saved your life,' he said, 'I hope you can save mine now.' The then 72-year-old had been savagely beaten, his ribs broken and his skull fractured. Mao did lift a finger, but not very forcefully, by minuting on Fu's letter: 'This man . . . has not committed big crimes, perhaps he should be spared.' But then he heard that Fu had allegedly talked to other Party leaders about his (Mao's) health, which was a big taboo for Mao. Mao let Fu be thrown into prison. The septuagenarian doctor did not last two weeks, and died on the floor of his cell.

Meanwhile the Red Army kept up a fighting retreat as Chiang's army advanced, while preparations for the evacuation went on in secret. The move was forced, but it enabled the Reds to carry out a strategic shift towards the northwest, with the ultimate goal of reaching Russian-controlled borders, in order to receive arms – an operation later known as 'to link up with the Soviet Union'. It had been planned for years. Back in 1939 GRU chief Berzin had briefed Sorge that his mission was to try to get the Chinese Red Army to the Soviet border.

In July, one unit of 6,000 men was sent out in the opposite direction as a decoy. It carried 1.6 million leaflets, which filled 300 shoulder-pole loads, and adopted the grandiose name of 'Red Army Vanguard Northbound to Fight the Japanese'.^{*} Its movements were given maximum publicity, and the unit came to realise that it was a decoy, something that even its leaders had not been told. The men felt bitter, and doubly so because the task assigned was pointless: a small unit like theirs could not possibly fool the enemy or draw them away from Ruijin. Instead, they found themselves being relentlessly pursued by other Nationalist forces. Within a few months, virtually the entire decoy force was wiped out.

Part of the preparation for the evacuation was screening all

^{*} Red leaders acknowledged later that the name was only for propaganda. 'No one dreamed of a march north to fight the Japanese,' Braun observed.

proposed evacuees, a process run by Chou En-lai. Those rated unreliable were executed. They totalled thousands. Among those killed were most of the teachers in army schools, who were often captured former Nationalist officers. The executions took place in a sealed-off mountain valley, where a huge pit was dug. The victims were hacked to death with knives, and their bodies kicked down into the pit. When this pit was full, the rest were made to dig their own holes in the ground, and were then hacked to death, or buried alive.

The massacre was carried out by the state security system – although many security men had themselves by now lost faith in the regime and were being killed in their turn. One of those who had lost faith was the head of the team guarding the Military Council. In the confusion of leaving, he slipped away and hid in the hills. But the authorities found his hiding-place by arresting his girlfriend, a local peasant. After a gun battle, this expert marksman shot himself.

In October 1934, the rule of this brutal regime came to an end. At Yudu, pontoon bridges were set up across the river. At the prow and stem of each boat hung a barn lantern, and more lanterns and torches shone on both banks, glowing in the water's reflection. Families of the soldiers and organised peasants lined the banks to say goodbye. The badly wounded had been billeted on local families. As troops padded past on the cobblestone path underneath the city wall, down to the crossing point, in a corner house near the wall a twelve-year-old boy had his eyes glued to a crack in the door, holding his breath. His father, a small shopkeeper, had been killed four years before, at the height of Mao's AB slaughter, when people were being executed even for being 'active shop-assistants'. Like many others, he was glad to see the back of the Reds, as he made abundantly clear when we met him sixty years later.

At about 6 pm on 18 October, looking gaunt but composed, with his long hair combed back, Mao left the local Party HQ surrounded by bodyguards; crossed the street, passed the Sung-dynasty archway and stepped onto the pontoon bridge.

This rickety bridge did not just carry Mao across the water, it bore him into legend. His murderous past and that of the CCP

regime were about to be left behind. And Mao himself was about to create the most enduring myth in modern Chinese history, and one of the biggest myths of the twentieth century – 'the Long March'.

12 Long March I: Chiang Lets the Reds Go (1934; age 40)

SOME 80,000 people set off on the Long March in October 1934. The procession moved out over a ten-day period in three columns, with the two oldest and core units, under Lin Biao and Peng De-huai respectively, on each side of the HQ. The 5,000-strong HQ consisted of the handful of leaders and their staff, servants and guards. Mao was with the HQ.

They moved slowly due west, burdened by heavy loads. Arsenal machinery, printing machines and Mao's treasure were carried on shoulder-poles by thousands of porters, most of them recently press-ganged conscripts, watched over by security men. The chief of the administrators revealed that the heaviest burdens were carried by people 'who had just been released from the hard labour teams, and they were very weak physically ... some just collapsed and died while walking'. Numerous marchers fell sick. One remembered:

The autumn rain went on and on, making our paths nothing but mud ... and there was nowhere to escape the rain, and no good sleep to be had ... some sick and weak fell asleep and never woke up. Many suffered infected feet, which had to be wrapped in rotten cloth and produced unbearable pain when stepping on the ground ... As we left the base area further and further

behind, some labourers deserted. The more obedient ones begged in tears to be let go . . .

The bolder ones simply dropped their loads and fled when their minds were distracted. Soldiers, too, deserted in droves, as the vigilance of their increasingly exhausted bosses wavered.

The marchers faced the daunting prospect of four lines of blockhouses – the same blockhouses that had doomed their Red base. Yet these turned out to be no obstacle at all – seemingly inexplicably.

The first line was manned by Cantonese troops, whose warlord chief had been doing profitable business with the Reds and had promised to let them through. Which he did. This combat-free breakout, however, was not due just to the anti-Chiang Cantonese. The Generalissimo was well aware that the Reds intended to pull out by way of the Cantonese front, and moreover he knew that they were going to be let through. On 3 October, shortly before the breakout began, he had told his prime minister that the Cantonese were going to 'open up one side of the net' to the Reds. And yet Chiang explicitly rejected the idea of sending forces loyal to himself to the breakout sector. A close aide argued with him that to get Canton 'to carry out orders, we have to have our men on the spot'. Chiang told him not to worry.

The marchers reached the second line of blockhouses at the beginning of November. Although the columns offered an easy target, extending over tens of kilometres, they were not attacked. The Cantonese again made no trouble. And neither did the other force defending part of this second line, which was under General Ho Chien, the fiercely anti-Communist Hunanese who had executed Mao's ex-wife Kai-hui.

It was the same story at the third fortified line; yet Chiang not only did not reprimand Ho Chien for his apparent dereliction, on 12 November he promoted him to commander-in-chief of operations against the marchers. So it was this fierce anti-Communist who manned the fourth fortification line, situated at an ideal place to wipe out the Reds, on the west bank of the Xiang, the largest river in Hunan (which had inspired Mao's poetry in his youth). There were no bridges, and the Reds, who had no anti-aircraft guns, had to wade across the wide river,

easy targets from land and air. But again they went completely unmolested while they took four days to trudge across, spread along a stretch of river 30 km long. The commanding points on the banks were unmanned, and the troops under Ho Chien just looked on. Chiang's planes circled overhead, but only to reconnoitre, and there was no aerial bombing or even strafing. Mao and the HQ forded the river undisturbed on 30 November, and by the next day, 1 December, the 40,000-strong main Red force was over.

Only now did Chiang, who had been monitoring the crossing 'with total concentration', his aides observed, seal off the river and order heavy bombing. Part of the Red rearguard was cut off on the east bank. The marchers who got across were down to half their original number,* but included the main combat troops and the HQ. Chiang knew this. His commander Ho Chien wrote the following day: 'The main force of the bandits have all [crossed the river], and are fleeing to the west.'

There can be no doubt that Chiang let the CCP leadership and the main force of the Red Army escape.

Why should Chiang have done this? Part of the reason soon emerged when, after the crossing of the Xiang, Chiang's army drove the marchers further westward towards the province of Guizhou, and then Sichuan. Chiang's plan was to use the Red force for his own purposes. These two provinces, together with neighbouring Yunnan, formed a vast southwestern region covering well over 1 million sq km, with a population of about 100 million; they were virtually independent of the central government, as they kept their own armies and paid little tax to Nanjing. Sichuan was particularly important, being the largest, richest and most populous, with some 50 million people. It was shielded on all sides by almost inaccessible mountains, which made access 'more difficult than ascending to the blue sky', in the words of

* Of the other half (amounting to some 40,000), who did not make it past the river, 'over 3,000' were killed at the Xiang. The rest were either scattered at the Xiang, or had perished during the preceding six weeks' trek from illness or exhaustion, or had been casualties of small skirmishes, or had deserted.

the poet Li Po. Chiang envisaged it as 'the base for national revival', i.e., a safe rear for an eventual war against Japan.

Chiang could effect control only if he had his own army actually in the provinces, but they had rejected his army, and if he were to try to force his way in, there would be war. Chiang did not want to have to declare war openly on the warlords. His nation-building design was more Machiavellian – and cost-effective! He wanted to drive the Red Army into these hold-out provinces, so that their warlords would be so frightened of the Reds settling in their territory that they would allow Chiang's army in to drive the Reds out. This way, Chiang figured, his army could march in and he could impose central government control. He wanted to preserve the main body of the Red Army so that it would still pose enough of a threat to the warlords.

Chiang spelled out his plan to his closest secretary: 'Now when the Communist army go into Guizhou, we can follow in. It is better than us starting a war to conquer Guizhou. Sichuan and Yunnan will have to welcome us, to save themselves . . . From now on, if we play our cards right . . . we can create a unified country.' On 27 November, the very day the Reds started crossing the Xiang River and headed for Guizhou, Chiang issued his blueprint for nation-building, a 'Declaration on the division of powers between the central government and the provinces'.

This agenda remained secret throughout Chiang's life, and is still concealed by both Nationalist and Communist official histories. Both attribute the Communists' escape to regional warlords, with Chiang blaming the warlords, and the Communists praising them. Both share the same concern: not to reveal that it was the Generalissimo himself who let the Reds go. For the Nationalists, Chiang's methods for establishing his sway over the wayward provinces were too devious, and his miscalculation about using the Reds – which ultimately led to their triumph – too humiliating. For the Communists, it is embarrassing to acknowledge that the famed Long March was to a large extent steered by Chiang Kai-shek.

Letting the Reds go was also a goodwill gesture on Chiang's part towards Russia. He needed a harmonious relationship with

the Kremlin because he was under threat from Japan. And the CCP was Moscow's baby.

But there was another, more secret and totally private reason. Chiang's son Ching-kuo had been a hostage in Russia for nine years. Ching-kuo was Chiang Kai-shek's sole blood descendant, not by the famous Mme Chiang, but by his first wife. After Ching-kuo was born, Chiang seems to have become sterile through contracting venereal disease several times, and he adopted another son, Wei-guo. But Ching-kuo, as the only blood heir, remained the closest to his heart. Chiang was steeped in Chinese tradition, in which the central concern was to have an heir. To fail to carry on the family line was regarded as *the* disgrace, the greatest hurt one could inflict on one's parents and ancestors, whose dead souls could then never rest in peace. One of the worst curses in China was: 'May you have no heir!' And respect for one's parents and ancestors, filial piety, was the primary moral injunction dictated by tradition.

In 1925, Chiang had sent Ching-kuo, then fifteen years old, to a school in Peking. This was a time when Chiang's star was ascending in a Nationalist Party that was sponsored by Moscow. In no time, the Russians were onto Ching-kuo, and invited him to study in Russia. The young man was very keen. A few months after he arrived in Peking, Ching-kuo was taken to Moscow by a little-known but pivotal figure called Shao Li-tzu, who was a key Red mole inside the Nationalist Party.

Planting moles was one of the most priceless gifts that Moscow bequeathed to the CCP. Mostly these moles joined the Nationalists in the first half of the 1920s, when Sun Yat-sen, who was courting the Russians, opened his party to the Communists. Infiltration worked on several levels. As well as overt Communists working inside the Nationalist movement, as Mao did, there were also secret Communists, and then a third group, those who had staged fake defections from the CCP. When Chiang split from the Communists in 1927, a large number of these secret agents stayed as 'sleepers', to be activated at the appropriate time. For the next twenty years and more, they were not only able to give the Reds crucial intelligence, they were often in a position to have a substantial influence on policy, as many had meanwhile risen very high in the Nationalist system. Ultimately, the agents played a gigantic role in helping deliver China to Mao – probably a

Ching-kuo for two top Russian agents who had recently been arrested in Shanghai. Chiang turned the swap down. The arrest of the two agents was a public affair, and they had been openly tried and imprisoned. But Moscow's offer unleashed a torrent of anguish in Chiang, who thought his son might now be 'cruelly put to death by Soviet Russians'. On 3 December 1931 the Generalissimo wrote in his diary: 'In the past few days, I have been yearning for my son even more. How can I face my parents when I die [if Ching-kuo is killed]?' On the 14th: 'I have committed a great crime by being unfilial [by risking the death of his heir] ...'

Chiang continued to be consumed by anxiety about what might happen to his son, and his anguish and bitterness almost certainly explain an event that happened thousands of kilometres away. At exactly this time, December 1931, Shao Li-tzu's son was found shot dead in Rome. This son had been taken by Shao to Russia in 1925 as Ching-kuo's travelling companion. But, unlike Ching-kuo, Shao junior was later allowed to return to China. The Italian press covered this death as a lovers' tragedy, one paper running the story under the headline 'The tragic end of a Chinese who had wounded his lover' – a woman reported as Czech. But Shao and his family were convinced that the murder of his son, which has been covered up by both Nationalist and Communist parties, was carried out by Nationalist agents, and this could only have been done with Chiang's authorisation, as personal vengeance: a son for a son.

By the time the Long March began, Chiang had devised a carefully crafted swap: the survival of the CCP for Ching-kuo. It was not an offer that could be spelt out. He executed his plan in subtle ways. His scheme was to keep the Reds temporarily confined, and then use the Japanese to break them. Chiang regarded war with Japan as inevitable, and was well aware that Russia wanted this war. Stalin's most dreaded scenario was that

may endanger my activities ... in China in the near future. I place them before your consideration in the hope that you will advise me as to what course to pursue ... One of the points in her letter was complaints about the American Comintern agent Agnes Smedley, who, Mine Sun said, brought 'foreign sympathisers home, with the result that this special house which has been used for important purposes now has been ruined ... I forwarded your instructions to isolate her' to the CCP.

greater role in high-level politics than in any other country in the world. Many remain unexposed even today.

Shao Li-tzu was one of them. He was actually a founding member of the CCP, but on Moscow's orders he stayed away from Party activities, and his identity was kept secret even from most Party leaders. When Chiang turned against the Communists in Shanghai in April 1927, Shao wrote the Russians a telegram in Shanghai in April 1927, Shao wrote the Russians a telegram that was instantly forwarded to Stalin, asking for instructions: 'Shanghai disturbs me very much. I cannot be the weapon of counter-revolution. I ask for advice how to fight.'

For the next twenty-two years, Shao stayed with the Nationalists, occupying many key posts – until the Communist victory in 1949, when he went over to Mao. He died in Peking in 1967. Even under Communist rule, his true face was never revealed, and he is still presented today as an honest sympathiser, not a long-term sleeper.

It was undoubtedly on Moscow's instructions that Shao had brought Ching's son to Russia in November 1925. When Ching-kuo completed his studies there, in 1927, he was not allowed to leave, and was forced to denounce his father publicly. Stalin was keeping him hostage while telling the world that he had volunteered to stay. Stalin liked to hold hostages. Peggy Dennis, the wife of the US Communist leader Eugene Dennis, described a visit of the Comintern éminence grise Dmitri Manuilsky as she and her husband were about to leave Russia to return to America in 1935: 'The bombshell was dropped quietly ... Almost casually, Manuilsky informed us that we could not take Tim [their son] back, "... We will send him at some other time, under other circumstances." ... The Russians never did.'

The fact that Ching-kuo was a hostage was spelled out to his father in late 1931 – by none other than his own sister-in-law, Mme Sun Yat-sen (née Soong Ching-ling), who was another Soviet agent. * Speaking for Moscow, she proposed swapping

* She was the sister of Mme Chiang Kai-shek. The fact that she was a Russian agent remained a secret throughout her long life, and remains little-known to this day. But a secret letter she wrote on 26 January 1937 to Wang Ming, the head of the CCP delegation in Moscow, and her controller, shows her role beyond any doubt. The letter opens: 'To Comrade Wang Ming. Dear Comrade: It is necessary for me to inform you the following facts since they

Japan would conquer China, and then, with China's resources and a porous 7,000-kilometre border, would attack the Soviet Union. Chiang reckoned that once the Sino-Japanese war started, Moscow would be bound to order its Chinese clients to get active against Japan. Until that day, Chiang would allow the Reds to survive, which he hoped would be a big enough quid pro quo to get his son back.

Chiang did not want the Reds to cling on in the rich heartland of China. His aim was to drive them into a more barren and sparsely populated corner, where he could box them in. The prison he had in mind was the Yellow Earth Plateau in north-west China, mainly the northern part of Shaanxi province. To make absolutely sure that the Reds would walk into his fold, Chiang allowed a Communist base to flourish there, while vigorously stamping out the others elsewhere in China.

The main person Chiang used to implement this scheme was none other than Shao Li-tzu, the man who had taken Chiang's son to Russia. Shao was appointed governor of Shaanxi in April 1933. Though Chiang certainly knew Shao's true colours, he never exposed him, and continued to use him as if he were a bona fide Nationalist. Chiang's relationship with Shao, as with many other key moles, was an almost unbelievably complex web of intrigue, deceit, bluff and double-bluff that eventually was to spin out of his control and contribute to his downfall.

Chiang's calculation was that only a mole could foster a Red pocket, as any authentic Nationalist would destroy it. And, indeed, it was only after Shao was appointed to the area that what had hitherto been a tiny Red guerrilla operation began to grow in Shaanxi (and the edge of Gansu immediately to the west).^{*} At the exact moment the Long March began, in mid-October 1934, Chiang came to Shaanxi province for a visit. While publicly calling for the Red 'bandits' to be 'wiped out', he allowed the Red base to expand in an unprecedented manner; inside a few months, it had grown to cover 30,000 sq km, with a population of 900,000.

^{*} The Nationalist army commander in Shaanxi was a fellow traveller called General Yang Hu-cheng, who had earlier asked to join the Communist Party, and whose relationship to the Reds was known to Chiang. He collaborated well with Shao.

What Chiang had created was a corral into which he would herd all the different detachments of the Red Army as he drove them out of their various pockets in the heartland of China. His plan was to weaken them significantly along the way, but not kill them off entirely. Chiang later told an American emissary: 'I drove the Communists from Jiangxi to . . . northern Shaanxi, where their number was reduced to a few thousands and they were left unpursued.'

The way he steered them was by communicating his own deployments by radio, which he knew would be intercepted. The Reds found that 'enemy telegrams were constantly intercepted and decoded by us, and our army knew the intentions and movements of the enemy like the back of our hand'. But Chiang declined to change his codes. And the Reds went where there were no enemy troops, or very few.

In order to make sure that the Reds followed the route he had mapped out, and to rule out any change in their instructions, Chiang decided the eve of the Reds' departure was the moment to cash in a huge intelligence coup. In June the Nationalists had covertly raided the CCP's Shanghai radio station, which had been the link between Ruijin and Moscow. For several months, the Nationalists kept the station operating under their control, and then in October they shut it down altogether. The CCP tried to re-establish a link by sending a top radio operator to Shanghai, but he defected as soon as he arrived. Assassins were sent after him. They missed the first time, but managed to kill him in his bed in a German hospital at the second attempt. From now on, Shanghai became largely irrelevant to the CCP, although it remained an important base for Moscow's secret services.

The Long March was used by Chiang to initiate his Reds-for-son swap. Just before the breakout from the Ruijin base, he sent a request through diplomatic channels asking for his son to be returned. On 2 September 1934 he recorded in his diary that 'a formal representation has been made about getting Ching-kuo home'. During the crucial period of the breakout in October–November, Chiang found a way of emphatically telling the Russians he was closing his eyes and letting the Reds go,

by not merely absenting himself from the front line, but heading off a thousand kilometres in the opposite direction for a very long forty-day public tour of North China.

Moscow understood the message. During the precise period between Chiang requesting his son's release and the day Mao and Co. crossed the Xiang River and were free of Chiang's blockhouses, Moscow dramatically increased surveillance of its hostage. Ching-kuo, who had previously worked in a village and a Siberian gold mine, was now working in a machinery plant in the Urals. Then, as he later recounted, 'from August to November 1934, I was suddenly . . . placed under the close surveillance of the Russian NKVD [KGB]. Every day I was shadowed by two men.'

At the beginning of December, just after the Chinese Reds walked past the last blockhouses, Chiang asked for his son again (as the KGB informed Ching-kuo). But the Russians told Chiang that his son did not wish to return. 'There is no end to the Russian enemy's revolting deceit,' Chiang wrote in his diary, although he said he could 'cope with it calmly'. 'I feel I have indeed made progress since I can even shrug off this family calamity.' Chiang knew his son would be safe – if he did more for the Reds.

13 Long March II: The Power behind the Throne (1934–35; age 40–41)

By mid-December, Chiang had steered the Long March into Guizhou, the first province he wanted to bring under control. As he had foreseen, the arrival of a Red Army 40,000 strong threw the local warlord into a panic. Chiang 'has long wanted to take over Guizhou', the warlord recalled feeling at the time. 'Now, the Central Government Army is coming hot on the heels of the Red Army, and I could not possibly turn him down . . . I was really in turmoil. Under the circumstances, I decided to place myself under Chiang's command.' On 19 December, eight divisions of the Central Government Army marched into the provincial capital and at once started building an airport and roads. Soon afterwards, they took over key positions and, as the warlord put it, 'turned themselves from guests into masters'.

Chiang then funnelled the Red Army northwards to his next target, Sichuan, by blocking off other routes while leaving this passage wide open. Chiang's plan was to repeat his Guizhou takeover here, and then propel the Reds further north into Shaanxi. But here things began to deviate from the planned scenario, as Mao started to behave in ways Chiang could not have predicted. Mao was determined not to move into Sichuan. His motive, however, had nothing to do with Chiang, but with his struggle for power within his own Party.

Mao had started taking active steps to seize the leadership of

his Party once the marchers entered Guizhou. This required splitting his Party foes from within. In particular, he had been cultivating two key men with whom he had not previously been on the best of terms: Wang Jia-xiang, nicknamed the 'Red Prof', and Lo Fu, the man who had taken away his job as 'prime minister'. Mao had crossed swords with them in the past, but now he buttered them up, as they both had grudges against Party No. 1 Po Ku.

The two had been students in Moscow with Po, who was the younger man but had leapfrogged over both of them to become their boss, and had sometimes excluded them from decision-making. Po 'sidelined me', Lo Fu said years later, and this drove Lo into Mao's arms. 'I felt I was put in a position completely without power, which I resented bitterly,' Lo recalled. 'I remember one day before the departure, comrade Tse-tung had a chat with me, and I told him all my resentment without reserve. From then on, I became close to comrade Tse-tung. He asked me to stick together with him and comrade Wang Jia-xiang – so that way a trio was formed, headed by comrade Mao.'

The trio travelled together, usually reclining on litters. Bamboo litters were authorised for a few leaders, each of whom was also entitled to a horse, and porters to carry their belongings. For much of the Long March, including the most gruelling part of the trek, most of them were carried. Mao had even designed his own transportation. Mrs Lo Fu recalled him making preparations with the Red Prof, and showing off his ingenuity. 'He said: "Look, we have designed our own litters . . . we will be carried." He and Jia-xiang looked rather pleased with themselves showing me their "works of art": their kind of litter had very long bamboo poles so it would be easier and lighter to carry climbing mountains. It had a tarpaulin awning . . . so [the passenger] would be shielded from the sun and the rain.'

Mao himself told his staff decades later: 'On the March, I was lying in a litter. So what did I do? I read. I read a lot.' It was not so easy for the carriers. Marchers remembered: 'When climbing mountains, the litter-bearers sometimes could only move forward on their knees, and the skin and flesh on their knees were rubbed raw before they got to the top. Each mountain climber left a trail of their sweat and blood.'

Wafted on other men's shoulders, Mao plotted a coup with Po Ku's two jealous colleagues. When the road was wide enough,

they talked side by side; and on narrow paths, when they had to go in single file, they arranged their litters so that their heads were together. One meeting was held in an orange grove, golden with ripe fruit hanging among bright green leaves. The litter-bearers were taking a break, and had laid down their burdens next to each other. The trio decided to work together to 'throw out' Po, along with Braun, the German adviser, and give Mao control of the army. As Mao was still very unpopular, and was not even a member of the Secretariat, the core body, he did not shoot for the top Party slot at this stage. That position was earmarked for Lo Fu, the only member of the trio who was in the Secretariat. The Red Prof's reward would be full Politburo membership. The trio started to lobby for a meeting to discuss how the Reds had lost their state.

Po Ku consented to a post-mortem. In fact, he had been feeling so bad about the Reds' failure that his colleagues thought he might commit suicide, after seeing him repeatedly pointing a pistol at himself.

So a gathering of twenty men, the Politburo and selected military commanders, convened on 15-17 January 1935 in the city of Zunyi in north Guizhou. Much of the meeting was taken up with rehashing the question of responsibility for the collapse of the Red state. Mao's trio blamed everything on the key pre-Long March leaders, especially Po and Braun.

It is commonly claimed that Mao became the leader of the Party and the army at the Zunyi meeting – and by majority mandate. In fact, Mao was not made chief of either the Party or the army at Zunyi. Po Ku remained Party No. 1, endorsed by the majority; the consensus was that losing Ruijin could not be blamed on him. Braun, as the only foreigner, provided a convenient scapegoat and was removed from military command. But although Mao's two co-conspirators proposed that Mao take over, no one else seems to have supported this, and Chou En-lai was reconfirmed as military boss, with 'responsibility for final decision-making in military matters'. *

However, Mao did achieve one critical breakthrough at Zunyi:

* Lack of majority support for Mao is also clear from the fact that when he later referred to those who had supported him at Zunyi, he never produced more than two names – those of his two co-conspirators.

he became a member of the Secretariat, the decision-making core. The previous make-up of this group had been established by Moscow in January 1934. It had seven members, of whom four were on the March: Po Ku, Chou En-lai, Lo Fu, and a man called Chen Yun. The other three were Xiang Ying, Wang Ming, the CCP's representative in Moscow, and Chang Kuo-tao, leader of what was then the second-largest Red base. At Zunyi, the Red Prof proposed that Mao be brought into the Secretariat. Actually, the Red Prof had no right to make this nomination, as he was not a full Politburo member. But Po Ku was too guilt-ridden and demoralised to oppose Mao's promotion, and it went through. Moscow was not consulted, as radio contact had been severed.

Once inside the Secretariat, Mao was in a position to manipulate it. Of the four other members on the March, Lo Fu was already an ally, and Chen Yun took no interest in power, and was often physically absent, coping with logistics. That left Chou and Po. Mao's strategy towards Chou was to split him off from Po with a combination of carrots and sticks, of which the foremost was blackmail, by threatening to make him co-responsible for past failures. At Zunyi it was decided that a resolution should be produced about how the Red state had been lost, and Mao's co-conspirator Lo Fu contrived to get himself the job of drafting it, which would normally be done by the Party No. 1.

This document would be the verdict. It would be conveyed to the Party, and reported to Moscow. Lo Fu first produced a draft with the subtitle 'Review of military policy errors of Comrades Po Ku, Chou En-lai and Otto Braun' and naming Chou as a co-culprit in the loss of the Red state. After Chou agreed to cooperate, his name was dropped and the blame deleted.

As Braun drily put it, Chou 'subtly distanced himself from Po Ku and me, thus providing Mao with the desired pretext to focus his attack on us while sparing him'. That left Po as the only problem, and Mao could always put him in the minority. Indeed, as soon as the Zunyi meeting was over and most of the participants had rejoined their units, Mao secured from this new core group the unheard-of and decidedly odd-sounding title of 'helper to comrade En-lai in conducting military affairs'. Mao had shoved a foot back inside the door of the military leadership.

This new core then elevated the Red Prof to full Politburo

membership, and before long awarded him a high military post, even though he knew nothing about military matters. Most importantly, three weeks after Zunyi, on 5 February, in a village where three provinces met, called 'A Cock Crows Over Three Provinces', Lo Fu was catapulted into the No. 1 Party post in place of Po Ku. Mao and Lo Fu first got Chou to capitulate and then confronted Po Ku with a 'majority' in the core. Po agreed to surrender his post 'only as the result of numerous discussions and pressure', as he described it.

Lo Fu's rise to Party No. 1 was an underhand coup, and so it was kept secret from both Party members and the army for weeks. The change at the apex was only revealed when a military victory put the plotters in a stronger position. Po was now excluded from decision-making, and as Lo Fu was a rather feeble character, Mao called the shots.

The Zunyi meeting decided to move into Sichuan. Sichuan lay just north of Zunyi, and was the obvious place to head for, being large, rich and populous – and long since recommended by the Russians to the force from Ruijin. It was much closer to Soviet-controlled Mongolia, and to Xinjiang (which had by now become a virtual Soviet colony, garrisoned by Russian forces), two places to which Moscow had been preparing to ship arms for the CCP. The former chief Soviet military adviser in China, Stern, had been investigating ways to link Sichuan with locations where the Russians could even supply 'aeroplanes and artillery ... and enough weapons to arm 50,000 people'.*

But Mao did not want to go to Sichuan. To do so would mean joining up with Chang Kuo-tao, a veteran who headed a much stronger force numbering 80,000-plus. Once they linked up with this powerful army, there would be no hope of

* Soviet military attaché Lepin secretly advised on the best supply routes. The former CCP leader Li Li-san was sent from Moscow to a secret GRU base on the Chinese border, to try to establish radio contact. The US vice-consul in Yunnan, Arthur Ringwalt, spotted the danger, and warned Washington in early January 1935: 'The situation appears to be increasingly serious for China. Unless a miracle happens, the Communists will force an entry into Szechwan [Sichuan] by one route or another. [Then] it will (cont.)

involving torture. His victims were usually bayoneted or strangled to death; some were buried alive. As his military commander Xu put it, he would readily 'get rid of people who stood in his way, to establish his personal rule'.

With this daunting figure to contend with, Mao's prospects of coming out on top would be dim. Moreover, if he waged a power struggle against Kuo-tao, he might well be risking his own life. So far, Mao had been dealing with Party leaders whose devotion to the Party meant they would kill on its behalf but not for personal power. He had been perfectly safe with Po Ku or Chou En-lai even if he made trouble for them. He could not count on that much forbearance from Kuo-tao, so his overriding goal was to delay any move into Sichuan until he had an unbearably grip on the Party leadership.

But Mao could not spell out this goal. He had to go along with the plan to head for Sichuan. On 19 January 1935 the force with him set off from Zunyi, and on the 22nd they cabled Chang Kuo-tao, who was in north Sichuan, announcing they were coming and telling him to move south to link up with them. But Mao had a trick up his sleeve. Four days later he insisted that the Red Army should ambush an enemy force that was tailing their group. This force was from Sichuan, and had a tough reputation. Mao's unspoken private calculation was that the Red Army might well suffer a defeat, in which case he could argue that the Sichuan enemy was too fierce, and then demand to stay in Guizhou.

The idea of the ambush was absurd, as the enemy unit Mao picked to attack was not barring the way into Sichuan, but was *behind* the Reds, and was not even harassing them. In fact the original plan which had designated Sichuan as their destination had specifically ordered: 'keep well away from' pursuers, and 'not to tangle' with them. But Mao managed to win consent from Chou En-lai, who had the final say in military decisions, most probably by threatening Chou that if he failed to go along he would be named as co-responsible for losing the Red state in the 'resolution' Lo Fu was writing. It seems Chou had a mortal fear of disgrace - a weakness that Mao was to exploit repeatedly in the decades to come.

★

Lo Fu becoming Party leader - or of Mao becoming the power behind the throne.

Chang Kuo-tao had chaired the Party's 1st Congress in 1921, when Mao was a marginal participant and Lo Fu not even a Party member (Lo joined in 1925). He was a bona fide member of the Secretariat - unlike Mao, who had just squeezed his way in against the rules. In addition, Kuo-tao was a full member of the Comintern Executive Committee, which gave him considerable prestige, and he had influence in Russia, where he had lived for years, and met Stalin. After he returned from Moscow to China in January 1931, he was sent by Shanghai to head a Red enclave called Eyuwan, on the borders of the provinces of Hubei, Henan and Anhui in east-central China. There he built up a base comparable to Ruijin, which by summer 1932 had an area of over 40,000 sq km and a population of 3.5 million, with an army of 45,000 men. After he was driven out that autumn by Chiang Kai-shek, he moved to northern Sichuan, where he built a new and bigger base within a year, and expanded his army to over 80,000.★ Kuo-tao was undoubtedly the most successful of all the Communists. Once he joined the rest of the leadership, it seemed inevitable that he would be elected the new boss.

Nor could Mao expect to turn him into a puppet. Kuo-tao had no compunction about killing for power. In his bases he had carried out bloody purges of the original local commanders, who had opposed him. Like Mao, he personally chaired interrogations

be only a matter of time before the well-known plan . . . to establish communications with Soviet Russia will have been carried out. Then it will be useless to talk further about communist suppression.'

Another person who made the point was, surprisingly, a very important British spy for Russia, Kim Philby. In an article about Tibet published in Nazi Germany in 1936, Philby emphasised the strategic significance of the Chinese Reds linking up with the Russians in the northwest.

★ Chang Kuo-tao was so successful mainly because the part of Sichuan he entered was in the grip of some exceptionally heartless warlords who squeezed the population so hard that even in towns there were many people who could not afford clothing, and were walking round completely naked. There had been several peasant uprisings just before Kuo-tao's army arrived, and his forces had been able to enlist recruits en masse. He also had a military chief, Xu Xiang-qian, who was arguably the most talented of the Chinese Communist commanders.

On 28 January, Mao ordered his ambush set up to the east of a place called Tucheng, with a devastating outcome for the Reds. The enemy lived up to its fearsome reputation, and quickly seized the advantage, shattering the force that Mao had stationed with their backs against the turbulent Red River where it rushed between steep cliffs. Mao stood on a peak in the distance watching his troops being decimated, and only at the end of a whole day's bloody battle did he permit a withdrawal. It was raining hard and the retreating troops panicked, jostling to get ahead on the slippery mountain paths. The enemy women and wounded were pushed to the back. The enemy was so close behind that one pursuer grabbed Mrs Zhu De's backpack with one hand, while pulling at her gun with the other. She let go her backpack and ran. It was the only battle on the March when people in the HQ had had such a close brush with the enemy.

Four thousand Red Army men were killed or wounded – 10 per cent of the total. Tucheng was the biggest defeat on the Long March, and was remembered as such in private, while being completely suppressed in public – because Mao was responsible, having picked both the ground and the moment. In one day he brought about far greater casualties than had been incurred in the previous biggest loss, at the Xiang River (just over 3,000). The myth is that Mao saved the Red Army after Zunyi. The truth is the exact reverse.

The Communists crossed the Red River to the west in disarray over hastily constructed pontoons, abandoning heavy artillery and equipment like the X-ray machine. Zhu De personally covered the retreat, Mauser in hand. Normally calm, this day he lost his temper and yelled at his officers in frustration. The exhausted men had to carry or pull their wounded comrades along winding paths above vertiginous cliffs. Heavy snowfalls blanketed the dense forests and the valleys. The bitter cold, hunger, exhaustion, and the cries of pain from the wounded haunted many survivors for decades to come.

This tragic scene was exactly what Mao wanted in order to argue that the Sichuan army was too grim to tangle with, and that therefore the Reds should not make for Sichuan as the

original plan had laid down. But they were already inside the southeast corner of Sichuan, and many felt they had to push on northward.

The main military commanders, even Mao's old crony Lin Biao, supported pressing deeper into Sichuan. Furthermore, they all felt very unhappy about having let Mao dictate the Tucheng ambush. When Mao turned up at Lin Biao's to justify himself (and lay the blame on others), Braun noticed that Lin looked 'decidedly sour'. But Mao prevailed, with the backing of Lo Fu. Lo shared an interest with Mao in avoiding – or postponing – joining up with Chang Kuo-tao, as his own newly acquired position as Party No. 1 would be seriously endangered if they linked up with Kuo-tao this soon. On 7 February 1935 the new Lo Fu leadership announced that the original plan – to go into Sichuan – was scrapped, in favour of Mao's proposal to stay put in Guizhou.

The Communists turned round and crossed the Red River again. The thousands of wounded were dumped in the wintry wilderness, with little food and medicine. Within a few months most were dead.*

Mao's force reoccupied Zunyi on 27 February. Chiang wanted to harry the Reds into Sichuan, so he sent a feisty general with two divisions to retake the city, which he also bombed. The Reds managed to fend these troops off. Mao was hugely delighted, especially as these were crack troops, and this meant he might be able to stay – at least for time enough to enable him and his puppet Lo Fu to consolidate their power. He penned a poem to voice his satisfaction:

* Normal procedure on the March was to leave the wounded with local families, with some money. The fate of those left behind was a matter of luck. Chang Kuo-tao's branch left behind some women soldiers who were too ill and weak to go on. When Party historians went looking for them half a century later, they found they had endured atrocious experiences. The locals, whose families had suffered at the hands of the Reds, took it out on them, and tortured some of the women to death by driving wooden stakes into their vaginas and cutting off their breasts. To survive, some women married more affluent peasants. But when their own Party came to power they were designated as 'landlords', and denounced, humiliated and discriminated against for life. In 1985, in bitter November cold, the few seen by Party historians, by then in their sixties and seventies, were so poor that they did not wear shoes to the encounter, as these were considered too valuable to endanger for such a non-essential occasion.

Idle claim that the strong pass is a wall of iron,
 Today I crest the summit with one stride.
 Crest the summit,
 The rolling mountains sea-blue,
 The dying sun blood-red.

It was only now that Mao and Lo Fu informed the army, including Chang Kuo-tao, that Lo Fu was the new No. 1, and that Mao had joined the Secretariat. There was nothing Kuo-tao could do. Mao and Lo Fu had deliberately waited until they had a 'victory' under their belts before disclosing the changes. Once these were announced, and there was no open protest, Lo Fu appointed Mao as 'General Front Commander', a new post created specially for him, and his first formal military position for two and a half years.

The 'win' was in fact a Pyrrhic victory. Peng De-huai recorded 'great losses' in his corps. 'Only one regiment can maintain ... 50 to 60 men per company ... Now all the regiment headquarters and the corps HQ were empty as if they had been cleaned out by floods.' Another 'deeply worried' senior officer counselled: 'We have not many troops left; we should avoid having tough battles ... the Red Army can no longer stand such cost.'

Mao, however, was bent on taking on more of Chiang's forces. They now controlled Guizhou, and he needed to tackle them if he was to stand a chance of establishing a base in the province – essential for his plan to stay out of Sichuan. On 5 March he issued an order to 'eliminate two Central Government divisions'. This touched off a barrage of protest from the field commanders who had been infuriated by the way Mao had been squandering their troops. Lin Biao cabled 'most urgently' on the 10th against taking on these hard-bitten enemies.

At dawn that day Lo Fu called some twenty people to a council of war, with the field commanders present. Mao found himself completely isolated on the issue of attacking Chiang's crack forces. Even his ally Lo Fu disagreed. When Mao misplayed his hand and threatened to resign as Front Commander, the majority jumped at the offer. Peng De-huai was appointed in his place, and the council voted to steer clear of Chiang's forces. This time it seemed that Mao was really out. But he lost no

time in plotting to reverse the decisions. That night, kerosene lamp in hand, he walked over to see Chou En-lai, who theoretically still had the final say in military matters, and talked him into holding another meeting in the morning – crucially, without the field commanders, who had returned to their units.

Mao offered Chou an inducement. With the creation of the post of General Front Commander, Chou had become somewhat redundant. Mao now suggested scrapping the post of Front Commander and setting up a new body to be called the Triumvirate, consisting of Chou, himself and the Red Prof.

With the field commanders absent, Mao was able to manipulate the second meeting. The decisions to appoint Peng in Mao's place and to avoid Chiang's forces were both annulled. A clear ruling by a quorum was thus overturned by a rump, with the crucial complicity of Chou. Moreover, as a result of these underhand changes, from 11 March 1935 on, the top army command did not contain a single genuine officer.

The new Triumvirate immediately ordered an attack on Chiang's forces near Maotai, the home of the most famous Chinese liquor, where the enemy was well dug in. 'Disengage fast', Peng pleaded. 'Enemy fortifications are solid, and geography is bad for us. There is no possibility of breaking [this Chiang unit]! But the Triumvirate insisted: 'Throw in all our forces tomorrow ... absolutely no wavering.'

When the Reds launched a frontal offensive, Chiang's army was ready with heavy machine-guns, and routed the attackers, who suffered well over a thousand casualties. The routed Communists crossed the Red River once again and were forced into Sichuan.

Having got them where he wanted, Chiang blocked their way back into Guizhou. But Mao still spurned the obvious best option – to go on north – and ordered the Red Army to turn round and cross the river again and force its way back into Guizhou. This was so unreasonable and so unpopular that an unusual order was issued, for the eyes of the top commanders only, specially enjoining: 'This crossing to the east must not be announced and must be kept secret.'

For two months, the Red Army had been 'circling in an ever-contracting area, so that it passed through some districts two or three times', in 'exhausting and fruitless wandering', a perplexed

Braun observed, taking the whole thing to be 'erratic'. It had fought seemingly gratuitous battles, at horrendous cost. Moreover, Mao had not just brought disasters on the army under him, he was also placing Chang Kuo-tao's army in jeopardy, by obliging it to hang around and wait for him. Mao later shamelessly called this fiasco his 'tour de force'. The fact that these huge losses were due to his jockeying for personal power remains unknown to this day.

Chiang Kai-shek, too, was baffled to see the enemy 'wandering in circles in this utterly futile place'. Unaware of Mao's private agenda, Chiang had expected the Reds to go to Sichuan. Assuming that his own army would be following them in, on 2 March he had flown to Chongqing, the largest city in the province, to enforce central government rule. Chiang tried to terminate the quasi-independent fiefs; but the warlords put up dogged, though non-martial, resistance. He found himself powerless to subdue them, as his army was not on hand.

Chiang now redoubled his efforts to drive the Reds into Sichuan, subjecting them to heavy aerial bombardment, making it impossible for Mao to establish a foothold in Guizhou. At the same time Chiang very publicly transferred army units away from the Sichuan border as a way of signalling: There are no troops on that border. Go to Sichuan! But Mao determinedly led the exhausted Red Army in the opposite direction, southwards.*

Under non-stop aerial attack, 'forced marches of 40 to 50 km were the rule', Braun wrote.

The troops were showing increasing symptoms of fatigue... When planes buzzed over us, we simply threw ourselves down on the side of the road without looking for cover as we used to do. If bombs began falling in a village or farm where we slept, I no longer woke up. If one landed close to me, I just turned over...

The number of deaths, more from disease and exhaustion

* Chiang and his officers were so mystified that they thought Mao wanted to attack the capital of Guizhou, where Chiang was, to try to get Chiang himself. But the Reds sped past without stopping.

than battle wounds, increased daily. Although several thousand volunteers had been enlisted since the beginning of the year,* the ranks had visibly dwindled.

During this headlong rush, the Reds had to abandon more of their medical equipment, and disband the medical corps. Henceforth the wounded got virtually no treatment. As well as bullet and shrapnel wounds, many suffered severe and agonisingly painful foot infections.

The folly of Mao's manoeuvres is brought into focus by the experience of one unit, the 9th Corps, that got cut off at the River Wu, leaving its 2,000 men stranded north of the river. As a result, they were forced to move on into Sichuan. And, lo and behold, except for one or two skirmishes, they were totally unmolested. Unlike Mao's contingent, who had to go through weeks of depleting forced marches and bombing, these men strolled in broad daylight on main roads, and could even take days off to rest.

One victim of Mao's scheming was his wife. She had been travelling with the privileged wounded and sick in a special unit called the Cadres' Convalescent Company, which included thirty women, mainly top leaders' wives. After the battle at Tucheng, the Red Army had marched all day, about 30 km, in a downpour. At a place called White Sand, Gui-yuan left the litter which had been allocated to her two months before when she was too heavily pregnant to get on a horse, and lay down in a thatched hut. Several hours later she gave birth to a baby girl, her fourth child with Mao, on 15 February 1935. She was shown the baby, wrapped in a jacket, by her sister-in-law, Tse-min's wife. The army spent only one day in White Sand. As she had done twice before, Gui-yuan had to leave her baby behind. She wept when the litter carried her away and Mrs Tse-min took the baby, with a handful of silver dollars and some opium, which was used as currency, to find a family to take it in. Mrs Tse-min had asked Gui-yuan

* In Guizhou, where the population was dirt-poor, the Reds had recruited many thousands of young men.

to give the girl a name. Gui-yuan shook her head: she did not think she would ever see the girl again. Her instinct was right. The old lady to whom the baby was entrusted had no milk. Three months later, boils erupted all over the baby's body, and it died.

In later life, when Gui-yuan spent a great deal of time looking for the babies she had been forced to abandon, she never seriously tried to look for this daughter. She would say to people close to her: 'The girl born on the Long March, I didn't even get a good look at her. I wasn't even clear where exactly she was born, and who we gave her to . . .' But the child stayed on her mind. In 1984, the year of Gui-yuan's death, her former chief on the March visited her in hospital. He told us that while they were talking about something else, she suddenly asked him, out of the blue: 'Where, but where was it that I had that baby, do you remember?'

Mao did not come to see Gui-yuan, although they were in the same town. It was not till later, when their paths happened to cross, that she told him she had left the baby behind. Mao said blandly: 'You were right. We had to do this.'

Deep down, Gui-yuan was wounded by Mao's indifference. She would tell friends that the remark of his that pained her most was when he would say to other women with a grin: 'Why are you women so afraid of giving birth? Look at [Gui-yuan], giving birth for her is as easy as a hen dropping an egg.*' Two months after giving birth, while Mao led the Red Army on the hellish march southwards away from Sichuan, Gui-yuan was hit by a bomb and nearly died. Early one evening in mid-April, three planes appeared between terraced rice paddies on mountain slopes, flying so low that people on the ground could make out the pilots' faces. Machine-guns rattled, and bombs dropped along the path where Gui-yuan and her comrades were catching their breath. Limbs flew into trees, and blood and brains puddled the ground in crimson.

More than a dozen shrapnel splinters sliced into Gui-yuan's

* Giving birth on the March was a nightmare. One woman who had gone into labour had to walk to the night's destination with the baby's head dangling out. Next day before dawn, weeping at leaving her baby in a bundle of straw in the empty hut, she had to walk on, and fainted wading through an icy river. Her women comrades found a table to carry her on. The wife

skull and back, one ripping the right side of her back wide open. She was soaked in blood. A doctor picked out shrapnel splinters with tweezers and applied the wound-salve *baiyao* to stem the bleeding. Gui-yuan lay unconscious, with blood pouring out of her nose and mouth. The doctor who gave her an injection of cardiotonic thought that she might have two hours to live. Her company leaders decided to leave her behind with a local family. Mao, who was in the next village, was informed about her condition. He did not come to see her — he was 'tired'. He just said he did not want her left behind, and sent over a doctor and two of his own litter-bearers. Mao did not come to see her until the third day. By then she had recovered consciousness, but was still unable to speak, or even cry. Continuing the journey was agony; Gui-yuan kept on fainting, only to be woken up by stabs of excruciating pain. She begged her comrades to shoot her.

After two months of rushing further and further south with no end in view, everybody was asking: 'Where are we going?' Among the top echelon who knew about the plan to link up with the Red Army branch in Sichuan, and the long-term strategy of getting closer to Russia, a deep resentment grew towards Mao. Lin Biao clamoured: 'This way, the troops will be dragged to ruin! We absolutely cannot have him in command like this!' Lin wrote to the Triumvirate in April, calling on Mao to hand over command to Peng De-huai, and for the whole force to go straight to Sichuan. Everyone was furious with Mao, even Lo Fu, who had at first acquiesced in his scheme. The sacrifices were just too horrendous. Braun recalled: 'One day Lo Fu, with whom I normally had little contact . . . began talking of what he termed the catastrophic military predicament engendered by Mao's reckless strategy and tactics ever since Tsunyi [Zunyi]. Lo argued that if they were to avoid annihilation, the Triumvirate

of Teng Fa, the then head of the Chinese KGB, had a most painful delivery. Writhing in agony, she cursed her husband for making her pregnant. Teng Fa was felled, and stood uncomfortably in the little hut, hanging his head. Mrs Po Ku would say half jokingly: 'On the march, I prefer a donkey or a horse to an old Male!'

'had to be replaced by competent military leaders'.

Mao was livid about the change in Lo Fu. Braun noticed that when Mao once struck up a conversation with him, 'the name of Lo Fu brought a sharper tone to his voice. Lo Fu, he said, had panicked and was intriguing against him.' But Lo was no real threat, as he had laid himself open to blackmail by Mao from the moment he agreed to delay meeting up with Chang Kuo-tao to preserve his own position as Party No. 1. Mao also appealed to Lo's personal feelings: knowing that Lo was in love with a young woman, Mao arranged to have her transferred so that she could be with him.

In mid-April 1935, the Reds, still being pursued, entered Yunnan province, in the southwest corner of China. Mao ordered them to stay put and even to 'expand southwards' – i.e., even further away from the direction of Sichuan. But southwards lay Vietnam, which was occupied by the French, who were extremely hostile to the Reds. Besides, this corner of China was mainly inhabited by an ethnic group called the Miao, who had given the Reds some very hard times at the beginning of the March, and were extremely warlike. Everyone could see that this was a dead end.

The field commanders were enraged by Mao's order. The night they received it, 25 April, Lin Biao cabled to demand that they 'go immediately ... into Sichuan ... and be ready to join up' with Chang Kuo-tao. Peng concurred.

Mao could not drag his feet any longer. On 28 April he finally consented to head for Sichuan. Once the Red Army started northwards, their path was trouble-free. Even facilitated. That day they found a truck carrying twenty very detailed maps (scale 1:100,000), as well as a load of local goodies – tea, ham and the famed *baiyao* – parked by the roadside waiting to be captured. Chiang or the Yunnan authorities had clearly organised this bounty to hasten the Reds out of Yunnan into Sichuan. When the Reds got near the provincial border, the Golden Sand River (the name of the Yangtze in these upper reaches), three crossing towns opened their gates, offering zero resistance, even handing over money and food.

It took the Reds seven days and nights to cross the Golden Sand River at the beginning of May. Chiang's troops stood close, but did not interfere. None of the ferry points was defended.

Spotter planes wheeled overhead, but this time dropped no bombs. Long Marchers remembered 'a frightening number' of flies being more of a nuisance.

But once across the river, Mao tried to avoid going further north. He ordered a siege to be laid to a town just inside Sichuan called Huili, so it could be the centre of a new base. Surrounded by a moat, and with thick walls and battlements dating from the fifteenth century, Huili was held by a local warlord, whose home it was, and who was prepared to go to any lengths to keep it. He burned down all the houses outside the city walls so as to leave no shelter for the besiegers, and killed scores of his own soldiers suspected of harbouring Red sympathies. Chiang's planes now began bombing again, to drive the Reds on. Casualties were very high, and the Red Army, with no medicine, was unable to take care of them. Mao was indifferent, and never once visited the wounded.

For Peng De-huai, the level of casualties and failure to treat the wounded were the last straw. He decided to challenge Mao for the military leadership. Peng had wide support from other field commanders, not least Lin Biao, who pointed out that Mao had dragged the Red Army on a huge detour, and that they could have gone straight into Sichuan well over three months before. Lo Fu convened a meeting on 12 May, in a makeshift thatched shed.

With his back to the wall, Mao fought with fearsome willpower and enormous rage, condemning Peng with political labels like 'right-wing', and accusing him of stirring up Lin Biao. When Lin tried to reason, Mao just bellowed: 'You are a baby! You don't know a thing!' Lin could not compete with Mao in a shouting match, and was bludgeoned into silence. Peng was doomed by his own decency and decorum. Unlike Mao, he was shy about fighting for power for himself, even though his cause was good. Nor could he match Mao in mud-slinging and 'political' smearing.

Mao got support from the deeply compromised Party No. 1, Lo Fu, who stigmatised Peng and Peng's supporters as 'right-wing opportunists'. In doing so, he acted against his own feelings, under the shadow of blackmail by Mao. Others were silent. Taking on Mao was no small thing. Apart from the terrifying atmosphere he created on the spot, and the sense of urgency

and demoralisation created by being on the run for some eight months, a sustained fight could well have led to the Party and the army being split. So Mao kept his job. His hatred for Peng because of Huili lasted for the rest of Peng's life, and he started to take revenge immediately. After the meeting, a close friend of Peng's, who had also brought up the tremendous casualties in the battles initiated by Mao, and had opposed marking time in Guizhou, found himself denounced. He understood that Peng was the implicit target: 'it was inconvenient to denounce Peng De-huai by name, so I was denounced instead.'

Mao was astute enough to agree to a trade-off. He withdrew the order to take Huili, and agreed, finally and explicitly, to 'go north at once to join up with' Chang Kuo-tao. He had been putting this off for four months, and in doing so had lost some 30,000 men, more than half of the force with him. Because of him, the soldiers under him had walked at least an extra 2,000 km, often on lacerated feet.

But Mao had made tremendous headway towards achieving his goal. Not only did he now have a formal top military job, but his puppet Lo Fu had established himself as the *de facto* Party No. 1. These four months of ruthless sacrificial procrastination had made a critical difference. Mao had not entirely averted a power struggle with Chang Kuo-tao, but he had vastly improved his chances.

Mao at once began making preparations, and his most important step was to dispatch a reliable envoy to Moscow to establish his status. (Someone had to go in person as there was no radio communication.) The man he chose had no political ambitions of his own, was obliging, and senior enough to deal with any problems that might come up in Moscow. This was Chen Yun, a member of the Secretariat. Mao chose his spokesman well. In Moscow, Chen delivered a carefully crafted message which gave the impression that the majority of the high command had elected Mao as their leader at a proper meeting: 'an enlarged Politburo meeting . . . removed the [old] leadership and put comrade Mao Tse-tung in the leadership'.

Mao's group had now reached west-central Sichuan, near Tibet, marching straight north towards Chang Kuo-tao. This next stretch

provided the backdrop for the primal myth about the Long March – the crossing of the bridge over the Dadu River. This river constituted a formidable natural barrier. In late May, swollen with the Himalayan snows, it was a raging torrent, trapped between towering cliffs. Its rock-strewn bed concealed treacherous whirlpools that made wading or swimming across impossible.

There was no way round, and only one bridge, which had been built in the early eighteenth century as part of the imperial road connecting Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. It was a magnificent suspension bridge, 101 metres long and over 3 metres wide, carried by 13 thick iron chains, 9 on the bottom, with gaps a foot wide between each chain. Wooden planks paved the surface, and covered the gaps.

This bridge is the centre of the Long March myth, * fed to the journalist Edgar Snow in 1936. Crossing the bridge, Snow wrote, 'was the most critical single incident of the Long March'. As he describes it:

half this wooden flooring had been removed [by the Nationalists], and before them [the marchers] only the bare iron chains swung to a point midway in the stream. At the northern bridgehead an enemy machine-gun nest faced them, and behind it were positions held by a regiment of White troops . . . [W]ho would have thought the Reds would insanely try to cross on the chains alone? But that was what they did.

He described men being shot and falling into the river.

Paraffin was thrown on the [remaining] planking, and it began to burn. By then about twenty Reds were moving forward on their hands and knees, tossing grenade after grenade into the enemy machine-gun nest.

This is complete invention. There was no battle at the Dadu Bridge. Most probably the legend was constructed because of the site itself: the chain bridge over the roiling river looked a

* A picture of it features on the cover of the 1985 book, *The Long March*, by Harrison Salisbury, which purveys the official post-Mao version.

good place for heroic deeds. There were no Nationalist troops at the bridge when the Reds arrived on 29 May. The Communists claim that the bridge was defended by a Nationalist regiment under one Li Quan-shan, but cables to and from this regiment locate it a long way away, at a place called Hualinping. There had been a different Nationalist unit headquartered in Luding, the town at one end of the bridge, but this unit had been moved out of town just before the Reds arrived.* The numerous Nationalist communications make no mention of any fighting on the bridge or in the town, while they do mention skirmishes on the route to the bridge, and after the Communists crossed over it. Chiang had left the passage open for the Reds.

When the Red advance unit reached the area, it set up HQ in a Catholic church near the bridge, and shelled and fired across the river at Luding on the opposite side. A local woman, who was a sprightly 93-year-old when we met her in 1997, described to us what happened. In 1935 her family – all Catholics, like most locals in those days – was running a beancurd shop right by the bridge on the side held by the Reds, and Red soldiers were billeted in her house. She remembered the Communists firing as 'Only Yin a shell, and Yang a shot' – a Chinese expression for sporadic. She did not remember her side of the river being fired on at all.

Some planks of the bridge may have been removed or damaged. The 93-year-old remembered that the Reds borrowed her doors and those of her neighbours to put on the bridge, and after the troops had crossed over, the locals went to collect their doors. A few had even handed over precious coffin lids (people prepared their coffins long before their death). But the bridge was not reduced to its bare chains: the only time this happened was when Mao's regime made a propaganda film.

Central to the myth is the claim that part of the bridge was set on fire and soldiers had to crawl across on incandescent chains. This claim was explicitly denied by the curator of the museum at the bridge in 1983. The bridge did not burn.

The strongest evidence debunking the myth of 'heroic' fighting

* Nationalist plans on the 28th described the task of the unit, under Yu Songlin, as 'to defend Kangding', a city about 50 km away as the crow flies. The fact that Yu's troops were not at or near the bridge is demonstrated in a report of 3 June by the governor of the region.

is that there were no battle casualties. The Red Army crossed the bridge without incurring a single death. The vanguard consisted of twenty-two men, who, according to the myth, stormed the bridge in a suicide attack. But at a celebration immediately afterwards, on 2 June, all twenty-two were not only alive and well, they each received a Lenin suit, a fountain pen, a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Not one was even wounded.

After them, no one else died under fire. Chou En-lai's bodyguard described how Chou, having been upset when he heard that a horse had fallen into the river, went to check on human losses. 'No men lost?' Chou asked the commander of the unit that had taken the bridge, Yang Cheng-wu, to which Yang replied: 'None.*' Even the most hopeless defence would have inflicted at least one death.

Mao walked across the Dadu bridge on 31 May 1935. He was now only about 300 km away from the dreaded meeting with Chang Kuo-tao. Between him and Kuo-tao's advance unit coming to meet him was a mountain called the Big Snowy, in a largely Tibetan area. In spite of its name – and myth – there was no snow where they climbed, locals told us. But it was cold, with sleet and biting winds, made worse by the fact that many men had abandoned their warm clothes in the semi-tropical lowlands, in an effort to shed some weight. All they had to provide some warmth was boiling chili water.

* When Peng De-huai, the most honest of all the Communist leaders, was asked about the Dadu crossing by a British writer in 1946, he gently, but very clearly, refused to endorse the myth. 'It's a long time ago, and I cannot remember all of it. There were so many rivers – the Gold Sand river, the Hsiang river, the Wu and the Yangtze ... I cannot remember very much, but I remember the people falling into the water ...' He did not say one word about fighting, or a burning bridge. It seems that two or three people did die at the bridge, but only when they fell off while repairing it, when one old plank suddenly snapped, as Mrs Zhu De and the 93-year-old local we interviewed remembered. For good measure, the Reds constructed an ancillary myth about more heroism around the other crossing of the Dadu River, at Anshunchang, some 75 km to the south. Although this ferry crossing was extremely exposed and it took the troops a whole week to cross, with spotter planes circling overhead, there was not a single battle casualty here, either.

which they drank before they set off. Although it took only one day to cross, the mountain claimed many lives, partly because of the altitude (the pass was 10,000 feet high) but mainly because the marchers had been weakened by their privations.

They had been walking virtually non-stop for nearly eight months, half the time totally pointlessly from a military or survival point of view – though not from the point of view of Mao's ascent to power. In addition to being attacked by their enemies, they had been assailed by innumerable ailments. 'All of us were unbelievably lice-ridden,' Braun remembered. 'Bleeding dysentery was rampant; the first cases of typhus appeared . . . More and more, our route was lined with the bodies of the slain, frozen or simply exhausted.' It was hardest for those who had to carry the leaders in their litters and heavy loads. Some porters never got up again after they sat down to rest.

Mao climbed the mountain on foot, using a walking-stick. He fared far better than his young bodyguards, as he was much better nourished and rested.

Kuo-tao's men were waiting for them on the far side, in a Tibetan town of about 100 households, with a cornucopia of supplies – not only food, but clothes, shoes, woollen socks, blankets, gloves, and delicacies like preserved yellow peas, tea and salt. This army was well fed and well kitted-out, and even had supplies to spare. Mao and the other leaders got extra food, horses or donkeys, and woollen suits. A docile horse was chosen for Mao, who was also given a male doctor to serve as his nurse.

A week later, on 25 June, Kuo-tao, having ridden over three days through virgin forests and rocky gorges, arrived to meet Mao and his companions at a village called Fubian. The two biggest Red armies were now formally linked up.

Days later, on 4 July, Chiang Kai-shek's brother-in-law, H. H. Kung (vice-premier and finance minister), called on Soviet ambassador Dmitri Bogomolov, ostensibly to discuss Japan's moves in northern China. At the very end, Kung remarked that the Generalissimo very much wanted to see his son. This was Chiang saying to Stalin: I have allowed two major Red armies

to survive, and join forces, would you please let me have my son? 'We are not putting any obstacles in the way of him leaving,' Bogomolov replied, lying smoothly, 'but as far as I know, he does not want to go anywhere.'

Although he did not get his son back now, Chiang had achieved his goal of bringing the three southwestern provinces under the central government. The Guizhou warlord had been forced to resign, and left the province after being lavishly bought off. The Yunnan governor stayed on and maintained a good relationship with Chiang (for the time being). With his own army now in Sichuan, following at Mao's heels, Chiang returned there in May to assume control of this strategically important – and most populous – province. Here he spent months of intensive activity to build up Sichuan as his base for war against Japan.

Mao too had succeeded in his goal. The 2,000-kilometre detour he had forced upon the Red Army had bought the time to establish his grip on the Party leadership as the man behind the throne. Chang Kuo-tao's chances had been critically reduced. Mao's machinations had reduced the ranks under him by tens of thousands, to around 10,000 hungry and exhausted men in rags. But no matter to him. The army could be rebuilt.

As always, Mao regarded the Kremlin as his only hope if he was to conquer China. Now that he was nearer than ever to Russian-controlled territory, he began to talk about requesting 'matériel and technical assistance' from Soviet Central Asia. His paramount aim now was to ensure that Chang Kuo-tao, who outgunned him by about 8 to 1, did not gain access to Soviet arms – or the Kremlin's ear – before he did.

14 Long March III: Monopolising the Moscow Connection (1935; age 41)

The moment had arrived when Kuo-tao had to be given a job, and he had an extremely strong case for being made head of either the Party or the army. Mao did not want him to have either. It was showdown time. Mao seemed to be at an overwhelming disadvantage, and yet he emerged from the link-up with Kuo-tao as the victor, thanks to the three political figures who had been with him and formed the core Party leadership, the Secretariat - Lo Fu, Chou En-lai and Po Ku.

As far as Lo Fu was concerned, he had no hope of holding on to his position as Party No.1 without Mao. Moreover, when Mao had decided to drag the army off on a detour, Lo had given his consent rather than risk losing his newly-won position. Chou En-lai had colluded with Mao all the way. The one who on the face of it might seem to have had the least to lose by switching sides was Po Ku, who had been elbowed out of his No. 1 position by Mao and Lo Fu. But he too was heavily compromised in the destruction of the army; he had put up no effective struggle on its behalf, and was now very much a broken man.

So, although there was now a chance to gang up with Kuo-tao and ditch Mao, the top men chose not to do so, out of personal interest. If they now blamed Mao for everything that had gone wrong, this was bound to raise the question: Where were you? This would imply that there had been a better alternative which they had failed to grasp. It would make them seem unfit to be leaders. Out of self-protection, they stuck with a simple story-line: that the Central Army had been wrecked by more powerful Nationalist forces. To bolster the image of their own resilience, they tried to denigrate Kuo-tao's army, which had been highly successful, in spite of the heavy fighting it had faced. As they could hardly fault its military performance, they resorted to political smear tactics, saying it suffered from 'warlordism' and 'political backwardness', and had 'a bandit style'.

These accusations enraged Kuo-tao's army. The two camps descended into a mud-slinging contest, in which Kuo-tao's men had a virtual walkover. The wretched state of the Central Red Army was plain for all to see, and the scorn poured on it clung to the whole of the leadership.

'How can such a Centre and Mao Tse-tung lead us?' was the widely-voiced sentiment. This resentment was directed

WHEN the two Red armies joined up in June 1935, Mao's force, - known as the Central Red Army, as it came directly under the Party leadership - was in a state of ruin. It had started the Long March with 80,000 men. Now it was down to some 10,000 - one-eighth its original strength. The surviving remnant was on the verge of collapse. It had lost nearly all its heavy weapons, and its rifles had an average of only five bullets each. As Zhu De lamented to Chang Kuo-tao, who was an old friend, this army 'had been a giant before, but now it's only a skeleton. It can no longer fight'.

In contrast, Kuo-tao's army, 20,000 at the outset of their own march, had quadrupled to an impressive 80,000. They were well fed, well equipped with machine-guns and mortars and ample ammunition, and superbly trained.

It was thus from a position of considerable strength that Kuo-tao met his colleagues. He was 'a tall, stately man about forty', Otto Braun recalled, who 'received us as a host would his guests. He behaved with great self-confidence, fully aware of his military superiority and administrative power . . . His cadres . . . controlled most of the area's meagre resources, which were essential for the care of tens of thousands of Red Army soldiers . . . He was every bit as ambitious as Mao . . .'

against the entire Centre, not just Mao, and this was a key factor in throwing the three core leaders – Lo Fu, Chou En-lai and Po Ku – together with Mao, which gave him a majority in the Secretariat of 4 to 1 against Kuo-tao.

The trio felt it was 'sink or swim' with Mao as their own officers and soldiers started to vent their outrage as well. There was a flood of complaints about military 'incompetence' and indifference to the welfare of the rank-and-file. 'They didn't know where they were running . . . so aimlessly,' officers told Kuo-tao, and 'should have let the army rest and recover'. The rank-and-file, in turn, voiced bitter feelings about the way their leaders had abandoned the wounded, and turned ordinary soldiers into 'sedan-chair bearers' for the VIPs and their wives.

This charge – that Mao and the other leaders had 'sat in sedan chairs' all through the March – was the sorest issue of them all. A Long Marcher told us how angry the ordinary soldiers had felt: the leaders 'talked about equality, but they lounged about in litters, like landlords. We talked in whispers . . . The soldiers were told that the leaders have a very hard life. Although they don't walk, nor carry loads, their brains and everything have it much rougher than we do. We only walk and eat, we don't have cares.' Not surprisingly, this low-level sophistry failed to assuage the rank-and-file.

Not having to walk made the difference between life and death. Not a single one of the wounded or the weak with a high enough rank to qualify for the Cadres' Convalescent Company died on the March. Nor did any of the leaders who were carried, even those who were badly wounded. While the elite all survived, sheer exhaustion killed many of their much younger litter-carriers, nurses and bodyguards, who were often in their teens – and some as young as twelve or thirteen. One statistic reveals the stony-hearted hierarchy and privilege under Mao's dominion: the Central Red Army now had almost more officers than soldiers.

With the connivance of his three Party allies, Mao offered Kuo-tao only the token position of deputy chairman of the Military Council, which was now a hollow shell, not even a rubber stamp. Kuo-tao and his subordinates demanded that he

must lead the army. Mao responded with a stony silence. During the stand-off, the troops began to run out of food. The two armies, totalling about 90,000 men, were crowded into a Tibetan highland region that was just able to sustain its own population, but whose economy was completely thrown out of kilter by the advent of this huge force. 'We were reduced to fighting for food with the local population,' one Red Army officer recalled. Marchers cut down fields of barley, depriving the locals of their livelihood for the coming year. Mao, characteristically, treated this plundering – which probably made the difference between life and death for many thousands – as a joke: 'This is our only foreign debt,' he said to his American spokesman Edgar Snow, in a manner that Snow described as 'humorous'.

The Tibetans, not surprisingly, hated the Reds. Excellent marksmen, they launched guerrilla attacks from the forests. Long March diaries recorded: 'There were a lot of corpses along the way, mostly stragglers killed by the barbarians. "Came across three stragglers (cut down by barbarian cavalry)'.¹

In the end, Mao had to let Kuo-tao have the top army job. On 18 July, Kuo-tao was appointed Chief Commissar of the Red Army, 'directly commanding all the armies'. But Mao kept control of the Party leadership.

At the beginning of August 1935, a detailed plan was agreed for going north – in order, as Mao put it, to be 'close to the Soviet Union, where we can receive help . . . planes and artillery'. The plan envisaged going first to Gansu, and then sending a unit on to Xinjiang, which was a Soviet satellite, 'and building airports and arsenals'. It was during this operation to move north that Mao machinated to scupper Kuo-tao's chances of making contact with the Russians before he himself did.

The agreed plan involved dividing the army: the main force under Kuo-tao and Zhu De would seize the town of Aba and then go on north, while a smaller force, known as the Right Column, was to take a different route further east, via Banyou. By Mao's choice, he and the Centre went with the Right Column, which contained the bulk of his old troops, under Lin Biao and Peng De-huai, though these now answered to two of

the Long March. When I arrived in Banyou, I felt as if I had just returned to the human world from the world of death.

A night at Banyou, in a hut made of dried yak droppings plastered over wicker, able to dry one's clothes by a bonfire of the all-purpose dung, was the lap of luxury for those who survived. In Lin Biao's corps alone, 400 had died — some 15 per cent of its complement.

This was the ordeal that Mao was demanding that Kuo-tao's tens of thousands of troops should go through, instead of marching along proper roads on the route first assigned. Invoking the name of the Politburo, Mao kept piling on the pressure, urging Kuo-tao to 'move fast to Banyou'. In one cable written after he had emerged from the swampland and knew full well what it was like, Mao lied through his teeth: 'From Maoergai [where he had started] to Banyou, it is short in distance and plentiful in shelter.' He then advised Kuo-tao: 'Suggest you . . . bring all the wounded and sick who can manage to walk, plus the matériel and equipment . . .' On the surface, this seemed to be telling Kuo-tao: Don't abandon your wounded, but its real intention was to cause maximum suffering.

If Kuo-tao refused to obey, Mao could get him formally condemned and removed from command. Reluctantly, Kuo-tao agreed to come to Mao, and directed his huge army into the swampland. A couple of days' taste of what lay ahead made him even less keen than before. On 2 September his force reached a river in spate. He cabled Mao: 'We have reconnoitred 30 li [15 km] up and down the river, and cannot find anywhere we can ford. Difficult to find bridge-making material. Have food for only 4 days . . .'

A day later, he decided to go no further. 'Have reconnoitred 70 li [35 km] upstream, and still cannot ford or build a bridge,' he told Mao. 'There is food for only 3 days for all the units . . . The swampland looks boundless. Impossible to go forward, and seem to be waiting for our death. Cannot find guide. Sheer misery. Have decided to start back to Aba from tomorrow morning.' He barely hid his fury against Mao: 'The whole strategy is affected. Last time . . . the troops ran out of food and suffered great damage. This time, you force us to move to Banyou, and get us into this . . .' Kuo-tao turned back.

By now, Kuo-tao and the main body of the army had been shunted around for a month, thanks to Mao. Moreover, in these highlands, murderous weather was setting in. Kuo-tao now made a decision that was just the one Mao had been angling for: to suspend the journey north and stay put until spring the next year. 'The window of opportunity to go north has been lost,' he told Mao. Two-thirds of his troops had contracted foot infections and could hardly walk. If they were to embark on the long march north, nearly all the wounded and sick would have to be abandoned.

Mao, of course, knew all this; indeed, the whole point of hustling Kuo-tao's army from pillar to post was to reduce it to this state. Mao had now achieved his key objective: he had made sure he would get to the Russians first, knocking Kuo-tao out of the running by penning him up in the south till the following year.

Once Kuo-tao gave the order not to go on north, Mao faced a major problem. Kuo-tao had issued this order as military supremo. Mao could issue orders in the name of the Party, but he was not at all sure that he could take any of the army, even his own troops, with him, if they were allowed a choice. Crisis time came on 8 September when Kuo-tao ordered his two commanders with Mao to bring the Right Column down south to him.

Aware that he lacked prestige among the troops, Mao ducked a straight confrontation. He did not dare challenge Kuo-tao's order openly, even in the name of the Party. Instead, he kidnapped his own troops, using false pretences. On the night of 9–10 September, he and Lo Fu told a select few an egregious lie — that Kuo-tao had ordered his men to harm the Party leaders; so, Mao said, they must secretly muster their subordinates and decamp that night. * Mrs Lo Fu remembered being woken up

* At the time, the lie was told in very vague words to only a few people. Mao later embellished it into a vivid story about how Kuo-tao had sent a cable to his men ordering them to 'liquidate' him and the Centre. And this became the official version. But Mao did not produce this claim until eighteen months later, on 30 March 1937, when he was trying to purge Kuo-tao. Until then, although there had been a Party resolution denouncing Kuo-tao for 'splitting the Red Army', it did not include this charge. Nor was the accusation mentioned

in the middle of the night and told: "Get up! Get up! Set off at once!" We asked: "What happened?" "Where are we going?" [and were told]: "No questions, just get a move on and go! ... No noise, no torches ... follow me!" We rushed for about 10 li [5 km] and did not pause to catch our breath until after we crossed a mountain pass.

At the same time as he was abducting his own troops, Mao got one of his top men to extract the 2nd Bureau, which handled radio communications, from HQ, and steal the detailed maps.

On this occasion, Mao had help from a crucial new ally — Peng De-huai. Just over three months before, Peng had challenged Mao for the military leadership, and had been friendly towards Kuo-tao, who had tried to cultivate him. But now Peng sided with Mao. The reason was not only that Mao controlled the Party leadership, but that he had also grabbed pole position for the Russian connection.

At dawn on 10 September, Kuo-tao's commanders with the Right Column woke up to find Mao and Co. gone, as well as the maps. Moreover, they were told that the rearguard of Mao's escape party had their guns cocked and would open fire on any pursuers. Officers stationed along the route the escapers were taking rang to ask whether they should use force to stop Mao and his band, as it was obvious that they were leaving surreptitiously. Kuo-tao's commanders decided that 'Red Army must not shoot Red Army', so Mao was allowed to get away.

As Mao and his men went on their way, a propaganda team from Kuo-tao's army appeared and began to wave and shout: 'Don't follow Big Nose! Please turn back!' 'Big Nose' meant foreigner, in this case Otto Braun. Braun had also been told the lie that Kuo-tao had given an order 'to break the resistance of the Central Committee, by force if necessary'. The shouting disclosed for the first time to the rank-and-file that there was a split in the army, and caused great confusion and anxiety. Mao's political department immediately sent staff to urge the soldiers on, in case some took the opportunity to go with Kuo-tao.

in any of the many subsequent telegrams to Kuo-tao from Mao and his armies. Even Mao's cable to Moscow denouncing Kuo-tao as soon as radio links were restored in June 1936 did not have a word about it. All this proves that there was no order from Kuo-tao to harm Mao.

At this point, Mao had fewer than 8,000 troops, and they were desperately bewildered men, who had not chosen to take his side. Most unusually for him, he now appeared in front of the troops. He did not address them, but just stood in silence by the roadside, watching them go by, counting their strength, trying to gauge their mood. He made sure to have Peng stand beside him, to lend authority. For most, even quite senior officers, this was the only time they got this close to Mao, who preferred to wield power in the shadows.

Mao's next move was to make sure that Chiang Kai-shek gave his contingent no trouble. By now there could be no doubt that Chiang had been letting him through, but would allow only a weakened army to reach its destination. During the Long March, while Mao's force had been given little trouble, Kuo-tao's had had to fight every inch of the way — and the reason was that it was too large and too powerful.

It was thus to Mao's advantage for Chiang to know that only a small branch was now going north, and that the CCP leadership was with it. Sure enough, within hours of Mao's splitting, the Nationalists knew both these facts, and exactly which troops had gone with Mao, and how debilitated they were. On 11 September, the day after Mao bolted, Chiang told his governor in the area that he had 'received information that Mao, Peng, Lin and their bandits are fleeing north, and they are all totally starved and worn out ...'

Kuo-tao seems to have had no doubt that the information was deliberately leaked by Mao, as a cable he sent to Mao and Co. next day read: 'The morning after you left, [the enemy] knew straight away that Peng De-huai's unit had fled northward. Please beware of reactionaries ... leaking secrets. No matter what differences we have, we must not reveal military movements to our enemy.'

This leak ensured Mao a smooth run for himself all the way to his destination — the Yellow Earth Plateau. There in North Shanxi the only secure base in the whole of China awaited him, courtesy of Chiang Kai-shek. Mao and the core leaders had known about this base before the Long March, and Moscow had told them to expand it as far back as 3 May 1934, well before the March set off.

Mao enjoyed a helping hand from Chiang, and the next thousand kilometres were virtually obstacle-free, militarily. 'Except for native snipers,' Braun recorded, 'this stretch was void of enemies.'* Chiang's forces shadowed them, but only to prevent Mao straying back into the heartland of China.

This final stretch was a cakewalk compared with before. Instead of snow and hail, and Tibetans sniping from the woods, here in south Gansu the Reds saw golden ears of grain in glorious sunshine, sheep at pasture, and farmers tending fields. The locals were friendly, and Mao made an effort to keep them that way. He did not want another reception like the one from the Tibetans, and enjoined 'strict discipline'. Muslims made up 60 per cent of the population, and the Red Army was forbidden to slaughter or eat pigs, and ordered not to rob any Muslims, even the rich.

The locals allowed the Red Army into their homes, where the men had a hot bath for the first time in months, enjoyed a shave and a haircut, and ate hearty Muslim meals, with pancakes and noodles, mutton and chicken, garlic and pepper. The hospitality, Braun remembered, 'astonished me greatly'.

But this friendly atmosphere became the cause of a major headache for Mao, as desertions soared. A Nationalist report showed that while Mao's troops were in one county alone, Minxian, over 1,000 Red Army men gave themselves up. On 2 October Mao ordered the security forces to 'collect' stragglers. 'Collect' often meant execution. One senior officer (later army chief of staff in Communist China) recalled: 'During the march to north Shaanxi, there were continual stragglers. The army political security organisation . . . adopted cruel means of punishment again.' He was scared: 'I followed the troops carefully, worried all the time that I might fall behind and be dealt with as a straggler.' 'Deal with' was akin to the mafia's 'take care of', a euphemism for killing. One day, 'on the verge of collapse', he thought he might not make it:

* There was one small skirmish at a pass called Lazikou, on 17 September. Although this involved only a handful of men, it was later blown up into a major battle – and a major victory. The reason for this fabrication was that for Mao to validate his split from Kuo-tao, he had to show at least one feat of arms in the period after he broke away from him. In fact, Mao was simply let through at Lazikou.

'my heart only settled back to its place when I got to quarters at 11 o'clock at night.'

When Mao finally arrived at the Red area in north Shaanxi that was to be his base, his army was down to well below 4,000. In the last – and easiest – month of the journey, he actually lost more than half his remaining men, between deserters, stragglers, and deaths both from illness and at the hands of his own security men. His force was just about the same size as when he had left the outlaw land back in January 1929, seven years earlier. And the troops were in the worst possible shape. One officer recalled:

We were famished and exhausted. Our clothes, in particular, were in shreds. We had no shoes or socks, and many people wrapped their feet with strips of blanket . . . Wuqi [where they arrived] was already a very poor place, but even the . . . local comrades kept questioning me: how come you got into such a sorry state? You really looked like nothing but a bunch of beggars.

But Mao was not feeling at all defeated when he set foot in the Red territory on 18 October 1935. 'The darkest moment' in his life – as he described the threat from Kuo-tao – was over, and he was the winner. The Red Army might be on its last legs after a trek of some 10,000 km, lasting an entire year, of which four months were extra, thanks to him, but the Party was now, to all intents and purposes, his.

His envoy, Chen Yun, had reached Moscow, and delivered his message to the Comintern on 15 October. With Mao the clear winner on the ground, Moscow accepted, for the first time, that he was now the boss of the CCP. In November the Russians published a carefully edited version of Chen Yun's report, proclaiming Mao by name as 'the tried and tested political' leader of the Chinese Party. Two weeks later, *Pravda* published a feature article entitled 'The leader of the Chinese people, Mao Tse-tung', which portrayed Mao in florid, tear-jerking language as an almost Chekhovian invalid struggling heroically against illness and privation.

In mid-November a messenger arrived in North Shaanxi from

Moscow, the first direct liaison for well over a year. He had travelled through the Gobi Desert disguised as a trader wearing a sheepskin coat. In his head he carried codes for resuming radio contact with Moscow, and he brought a radio operator with him. Within a matter of months, the radio link with Moscow was restored, and the person who controlled it at the Chinese end was Mao.

The messenger brought Stalin's word that the Chinese Reds should 'get close to the Soviet Union' by making for the border with Russia's satellite, Outer Mongolia. The move 'to link up with the Soviet Union' could now start.

Chiang Kai-shek was less successful in achieving his private agenda. On 18 October, the day the Long March ended for Mao, Chiang saw Soviet ambassador Bogomolov for the first time since just before the March had started. Chiang proposed a 'secret military treaty' with Russia. This could only be aimed against Japan, which had stepped up its efforts to detach five provinces from northern China by offering them bogus 'independence'. The Russian response was that Chiang must first 'regulate relations with the CCP'. The Generalissimo's close associate and founder of the Chinese FBI, Chen Li-fu, began secret talks straight away with Bogomolov and Soviet military attaché Lepin on the nuts and bolts of a deal with the CCP – even referring to 'cooperation' with the Reds.

During these talks Chen Li-fu asked Bogomolov for the release of Chiang's son Ching-kuo. Chen told us: 'I said to him: We two countries are signing a treaty now, and we are on very good terms. Why do you still detain our leader's son? Why can't you release him?' (Loyally, Chen added that he was acting without telling Chiang – 'He would not have wanted me to make this request.' This remark reflects the understanding among the few people in on Chiang's Reds-for-son exchange that the deal must never be attributed to him, or allowed to leak out.)

But Stalin still refused to free his hostage. Ching-kuo had by now been separated from his parents for exactly ten years. In March that year, in his heavy machinery plant in the Urals, love had softened the young man's bleak life when he married a Russian technician called Faina Vakhreva. In December they

were to have their first child, born into the same captivity that Ching-kuo himself would endure for many more moons, as Mao's fortunes rose, and rose again.