Dwarkesh Podcast #65 - Jung Chang (Wild Swans author) - Living Through History's Largest Man-Made Famine

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Dwarkesh Patel
Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Jung Chang. Her first book, 'Wild Swans', has sold over 15 million copies worldwide. The U.S. diplomat George Cannon described the Gulag Archipelago. He said, "This is the greatest and most powerful single indictment of a political regime ever leveled in modern times." And when I read that quote, I realized that this is exactly how I describe your books, 'Wild Swans', obviously, but also your biography of Mao titled 'Mao: The Unknown Story', both of which we'll talk about today. It is a true honor to speak with you.

Jung Chang
Thank you very much for having me.

Dwarkesh Patel
So we will get to Mao and his atrocities in a second. But let us begin by: would you mind laying the scene for us? What was it like growing up in China, under Mao? Let's begin there. What was it like as you started to grow up during this time?

Jung Chang
I was born in China in Sichuan in 1952, so I grew up under Mao. When I was a child, I led quite a privileged life because both my parents were communist officials, and we lived in this compound with servants, cooks, drivers. It was a very class-ridden society. And I grew up so much taking class and privilege for granted, that when I first came to Britain, I thought Britain was wonderfully classless. And of course, my views were slightly modified over the years.

And then, in 1966, when I was 14, Mao launched his Cultural Revolution, which was his Great Purge. And my father spoke up against Mao's policies. So as a result, he was arrested, tortured, driven insane. He was exiled to a camp and died tragically and prematurely. My mother was under tremendous pressure to denounce my father. She refused. As a result, she went through over a hundred of these ghastly denunciation meetings, which were everyday features in China at the time. And basically, the victims were put on the stage, and their arms were ferociously twisted to the back, and their heads were pushed down. They were kicked and beaten. And my mother was once made to kneel on broken glass. She was paraded in the streets, where children spat at her and threw stones at her. But she survived, and today she still lives in Chengdu, age 92. My family was scattered, and I was exiled to the edge of the Himalayas and worked as a peasant and then as a barefoot doctor, which was a doctor, basically, without any training because Mao had said, "The more books you read, the more stupid you become." So schools were closed, books were burned. I mean, China was literally a cultural desert without books, cinemas, theaters, museums for ten years. And then I became an electrician, and again, there was no training, so I had five electric shocks in one month.

And then in 1973, partly after Nixon's visit to China, but more so because of the internal political reasons, universities began to reopen, and I was able to get into Sichuan University to learn English. But our teachers had never seen foreigners themselves because China had been closed to the outside world after the Communists took power in 1949. So our textbooks were written by these teachers who'd never been abroad. I remember the first lesson was "Long live Chairman Mao," and the second lesson was greetings. Because in those years, when we bumped into each other, we said "Ni chi fan le ma?" which means "Where are you going? Have you eaten?" So those were the English greetings I learned. So when I first came to London, I used to go around and ask people where they were going and whether they had eaten.

The only foreigners I had spoken to were some sailors in a port in South China where we, as English language students, were sent to practice our English. And that was when I was 23. But of course, we were at the port eagerly awaiting our sailors, and we had no idea what must be on their minds, how different this must be from their expectation of port life. In 1976, Mao died and China began to change. And in 1978, there was a national exam to select people to go abroad for the first time under Communist rule. Going abroad was based on an academic basis, so I did very well in the exam. So I became one of the first 14 people to come to Britain. And as far as I know, I was the first person to get out of Sichuan Province, a province then, of 90 million people to come and study in the west.

So when I got my doctorate in linguistics at the University of York in 1982, I became the first person from Communist China ever to get a doctorate from a British university. Okay, so I was in Britain, and for ten years, I didn't want to think about the past because it was too painful, and my father died, my grandmother, who brought us up, died, and I just wanted to spend time enjoying the west.

I had actually always wanted to be a writer. When I was a child, I loved writing. But when I was growing up under Mao, it was impossible to dream of even becoming a writer, because nearly all writers were condemned, sent to the Gulag, driven to suicide. Some were even executed. Even writing for oneself was dangerous. I wrote my first poem when I was 16. On the 16th birthday in 1978, I was lying in bed polishing my poem when I heard the door banging and some Red Guards had come to raid our flat. And if they had seen my poem, I would get into trouble and my family would get into trouble. So I had to quickly rush to the bathroom to tear up my poem and flush it down the toilet. And so that ended my first venture in writing.

But the desire to write never left me. So in the following years, when I was working as a peasant and as a barefoot doctor, as a steel worker and an electrician, and when I was spreading manure on the paddy fields and checking electricity supplies on top of the electricity poles, I was always writing in my head with an imaginary pen. But I couldn't write in China.

When I came to Britain, for ten years, I didn't want to write. And then my mother came to stay with me in 1988, and for the first time, she told me the stories of her life and stories of my grandmother. And then while I was listening to my mother, I thought, I must write all this down. And then I realized how much I wanted to be a writer and how much I had always wanted to be a writer. And so after my mother left, I transcribed the tapes. She left for me 60 hours of tape recordings. And then I wrote 'Wild Swans', which was published in 1991 first. And I became a writer.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yes. Saying you became a writer is understating it. The global impact of 'Wild Swans' has been tremendous. A former guest of mine, Sarah Payne, recommended it to me, and I read it. And it's the most moving book I've ever read. It's truly tremendous. Let me begin by asking, what it was like growing up there in terms of the psychology of living in a totalitarian system? You mentioned in the book that until very late, you could not even bring yourself to question Mao, despite seeing the consequences of his policies and the cult of personality that was there. Tell me about the psychology of living in a system like that.

Jung Chang
Well, when I was growing up in China, we were all subject to intense brainwashing and indoctrination. When we were children, Mao was - we were - sorry, Mao was like our God. If we wanted to say what I say is true, we would say, "I swear to Chairman Mao." So Mao had been given this godlike status. And also, at the same time, we could see how dangerous it was to question Mao. In China, there were these periodical political campaigns, and many people were victimized. And the biggest crime was to question Mao. And my father, in the Cultural Revolution, suffered tremendously, and it was also because he questioned Mao.

So when I wrote my poem when I was 16 years old, I'd already started to doubt and to dread the society I was in. We were always told socialist China was paradise on Earth. And I thought, on that day, actually if this is paradise, what then is hell? Because my parents were away being detained, my grandmother was weeping next door because she'd heard these ghastly things that were being done to my mother. So I questioned the society, but Mao never entered my mind, and he was beyond questioning.

This may be difficult for people to understand, maybe in the West, but in China in those days, there were two most important things that enabled this brainwashing. One is the complete isolation of the society from the outside world, from alternative information, and from any other information. Even parents never told the children things that were different from the Party line because they were worried about the future of their children. And they were worried that if children blabbed, it would be disastrous for the children as well as for the family. So no alternative information.

And the other is terror, this intense terror, which really scared people into suppressing any unorthodox thoughts. So I was living in that kind of society, and it took me a long time to question Mao since my birthday, my 16th birthday thought in 1988. For many years, I blamed what was happening in China on Madame Mao and the so-called Gang of Four, which were basically assistants of Mao's. But I never dared to question Mao. And then I remember very well in 1976, I had learned a little English, and a friend showed me a copy of Newsweek, and there was an article about Mao. And there were two little pictures with the caption "Madame Mao is Mao's eyes on Earth." And suddenly, Mao's name was spelled out for me. And I suddenly realized, of course, it was Mao. Without Mao, none of this could have happened. And Mao was responsible. And I'm an intelligent person, but it took me eight years, even from the moment I said to myself, "I dislike this society," to the moment that I felt Mao was responsible.

Dwarkesh Patel
You mentioned that your father was purged because of his criticism of the government at the time. And in fact, your father's story throughout the book is a sort of tragic tale. But what I found interesting was that the way he criticized the party was to go through the official mechanism. He wrote a letter to Mao, which suggests that he even then still believed that the mechanism of the party worked, and then it would be imagining, like, somebody has a problem with the North Korean government today. And then he writes a letter to Kim Jong Un, which is, obviously, you're going to get in trouble for that. So tell me about how your father thought about that. And in retrospect, how should a high official like your father - he was the governor of Sichuan Province, which you said 90...

Jung Chang
Million people wasn't governor. Sorry. My father was the governor of a region initially, and then by the time of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he was the head of a department, oh, I see, of the Sichuan Party government, whatever they were the same.

Dwarkesh Patel
A high official.

Jung Chang
A high official.

Dwarkesh Patel
What should he have done when he realized things were going wrong?

Jung Chang
There was nothing one could do. I mean, if you tried to, say, spell out your thoughts to other people, you would be instantly denounced and probably executed. I mean, nobody was allowed to say anything against Mao. And theoretically, in the charter of the Communist

Party, a party member had the right to write to the leadership. So my father was using that theoretically permitted way to voice his dissent. That's why he wrote to Mao. And in any case, all these things, the atrocities, the violence - I mean, only Mao could stop them. So writing to Mao was the only way he could express his opinion. And, of course, he also said something in the context of the denunciation meetings, but there were outbursts at denunciation meetings rather than his well-thought-out expression of dissent.

Dwarkesh Patel
So this is something I thought was confusing when reading accounts about the Cultural Revolution. China is a society - they've rebelled in the past. They rebelled against the emperors, they rebelled against the Japanese occupation. The Nationalists were at one point in charge of lots of parts of China; the communists rebelled against them. How was Mao able to instill a regime where that became unthinkable, despite the fact that it was an incredibly chaotic and destabilizing time? How did the Chinese, who have a great sense of history, allow this to happen?

Jung Chang
Well, that's a very good question. That is the key of a Communist society, of a totalitarian society, is the control, the organization. I mean, neither the emperors nor any other rulers under the Nationalists, under Chiang Kai-shek, was China so thoroughly organized down to the grassroots, controlled by layers of party organizations? It was totally thorough. That's why the 20th-century totalitarianism was very different from the previous authoritarianism. I mean, the key was the control, this total control of a society. I mean, the power highly concentrated at the very top.

Dwarkesh Patel
It's interesting because Mao is obviously a person who doesn't understand economics, and we'll talk about that more moving forward and the disastrous consequences it had because of his complete ignorance when it came to economics and industry and things like that. But what he did seem to have an incredible sense for, like Stalin and other totalitarian leaders as well, is the psychology of people and how to organize a society that has 800 million people, how to organize it so that - every society has petty, sadistic, arrogant, and cowardly people and how to elevate them to use them to your advantage. So that there is no nook and cranny in the entire society where a single person can have a dissenting voice or even have an independent life. Maybe you can talk about commune life and the way in which how can you possibly have a society of 800 million people where each person is under such strict, totalitarian control? How is that even possible?

Jung Chang
The thing is that in the Cultural Revolution, Mao used young people and their bad traits. They're prone to violence, destructive, sadistic. Any society has these people, but they were given license to indulge their bad instincts in the Cultural Revolution. Now, this took place

for a couple of years. Then, Mao reigned them in by using the army. The Red Guards, particularly the most militant, most aggressive, and most violent ones, were dispersed and sent to the villages, sent to the mountains. The disobedient ones condemned themselves and became the targets of a second round of purges. Mao made sure that he controlled the army, so he needed someone to make sure he could wreak havoc and maintain control. Until 1970, Lin Biao was completely cynical. He came to Mao's rescue when there was dissent from Mao's other colleagues, like during the famine and when Mao started the Cultural Revolution. Until the day he fell out with Mao, which was why Mao was suddenly a bit lost because he lost the means to control the army. That's why in 1972, after Lin Biao died trying to flee China, things suddenly became better. Mao had to rely on another person to control the army, Deng Xiaoping. Suddenly universities began to reopen. Things were much better from 1972.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah. This is a great instance of, as soon as Mao dies, the Gang of Four is rounded up and arrested, and the Cultural Revolution stops. This shows that this was Mao's doing. This is also an interesting example where, whether it's Stalin in Russia or Mao in China, when the tyrant dies, the system automatically improves because nobody else is as crazy as that guy. What does this show us about if Kim Jong Un died? Should we expect a reversion to a more sane set of things? Tyrants die, and things are not as bad as they used to be.

Jung Chang
I haven't studied North Korea, so I don't know the inner workings of that society. So much depends on one person. The Kim Dynasty arranged succession. The first Kim Il-sung died, then his son succeeded, then the grandson. It seems the grandson is looking into succession by grooming perhaps his daughter. Stalin couldn't do the family dynasty thing. His children were not like the Kim children. Mao only cared about enjoying life while alive, indulging in power. He didn't care what came after. He was completely materialistic. When he visited Lenin's tomb, he said, "It's all very well visiting Lenin's tomb, but Lenin can't feel anything. He's dead, so it doesn't matter." Mao didn't leave a well-structured legacy.

Dwarkesh Patel
I thought the entire purpose of the Cultural Revolution was to protect his legacy, especially after the Great Leap Forward and the way Khrushchev denounced Stalin.

Jung Chang
That may be a factor, but the main one was Mao's policy that led to the Great Famine with nearly 40 million deaths. It was so unpopular. His number two, Liu Shaoqi, then spoke up against him. There was no way, even for Mao's number two, to topple him. Under this tyrant, his colleagues couldn't get organized, which was necessary to topple him. They couldn't get control of the army. Liu Shaoqi used a party congress to speak against Mao's policy of exporting food in exchange for arms to build a superpower and dominate the world. The

vast majority were against Mao's policies. So, they found Liu Shaoqi as their champion. Together they managed to stop Mao's policy, which is how the famine stopped from 1962. Mao was furious. This is why he launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, to punish Liu Shaoqi and the party officials. That's how this great purge took place. For Mao, it was less calculated and more about revenge. He wanted revenge on his number two, who died in a most appalling way.

Dwarkesh Patel
If this question sounds naive, but if you have somebody like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping and these other party officials who see what is happening, if they knew they were going to be purged but still had power, why didn't they control the army or go to the People's Daily, publish an article about what Mao is like, or organize a coup? Why didn't that happen?

Jung Chang
It did happen. In the biography, there are a couple of chapters about Liu Shaoqi. I'm going to expand it in my next book. In 1962, he knew Mao was going to purge him after the Congress. So he started building his power base by stopping the famine, making himself popular among the party officials. Liu Shaoqi had been powerful enough to put up resistance. There was horse trading with Lin Biao and support for Mao. Mao used the Red Guards to create violence and terror from 1966 to silence Liu Shaoqi. His first victims were school teachers. I saw teachers being beaten up, denounced, driven to suicide. Mao didn't dislike teachers. He said to Edgar Snow that he'd like to be known as a great teacher. He was a school teacher in his youth. He used them because teachers were an obvious target to arouse the violence in young Red Guards. He spent years before the atmosphere was ripe for purging Liu Shaoqi.

Dwarkesh Patel
Maybe for context, let's talk about the Great Leap Forward. You mentioned around 40 million deaths. It's easy to see this as just a number. Can you make it concrete, describing the months-long agony of starvation and peasant life during the Great Leap Forward?

Jung Chang
During the Great Leap Forward, my family was privileged, so I didn't starve, but there was starvation around us. For example, a boy snatched bread from my mouth on my way to school. My father told me I was lucky; other children were starving. Our domestic help's family, classified as a landlord, suffered. Her entire family died, except for her. I remember her stories and the sight of her mother, skeletal and weak, expressing gratitude for her daughter being saved. My grandmother and the domestic help both cried. It conflicted with my indoctrination about the Communists. My father, feeling guilty, volunteered to stay in a village. He witnessed agonizing deaths, including a man collapsing in a paddy field. My father returned from the village seriously famished. Even in my privileged family, we all drank water infused with a seed grown in urine, supposed to provide nutrition. The adults

starved to feed the children. Now, memoirs of China's super rich often mention their hunger during childhood in the villages. That hunger partly drove the desire for change.

Well, first of all, China, as you said, is still a Communist regime. For many years, that was underplayed, partly because the memory is fresh. In the 1980s and 90s, particularly, the memories were fresh. I think that was probably the main reason. And gradually, after that, the memories of pain were gradually fading. And particularly a generation, two generations, have grown up without suffering.

Given that there is no religion for people to worship, unlike any time in Chinese history, and before Mao, there was Confucianism. You could have something to hang on to. And then there was, I mean, which didn't obviously openly endorse violence and atrocities. It could sound quite attractive, which was why Mao's Little Red Book was invoked for a period in the West. So people hang on to that.

In the post-Mao time, money was the god. A lot of people made money, but a lot of people also lost money. Not only lost money but were disadvantaged in this "money is god" society. In a society where there were no proper regulations and law, people who were not very savvy with money lost out. They were conned and so on. So there were some people who probably yearned for a simpler life where you were given what you were given. They wouldn't like to be starved, and they wouldn't like to be a political victim, but a lot of people could live a very simple life, more of just being fed. I mean, there may be a certain nostalgia, but the most important thing, of course, is the promotion of the regime, particularly since Xi came to power. You were taught from school all these lies about Mao. And so people grew up with this, regarding Mao as godlike. Back to my childhood.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah. What has been the impact of your books? You know, Wild Swan sold 50 million copies. Your biography, Mao, is also a bestseller. I know they're banned in China, but have they secretly been able to access how, has that revised their understanding of their own history?

Jung Chang
Well, when these books were first published in the 1990s and the early 2000s, there were lots and lots of ways to get them into China. Hong Kong, for example, and Taiwan had pirated editions, of which there were many. But now, particularly since Mr. Xi came to power in 2012, 2013, China has a total clampdown on banned literature, and you could go to jail. For an official to possess these books, including mine, you could face ghastly punishment, which you don't want. And for the general population as well. When you enter China now, you see on the screen warnings of not to bring banned literature and particularly not books that say unflattering things about the previous revolutionary leaders or revolutionary martyrs. So a total clampdown forbidding people from doing research on history, trying to understand history, which created another generation of brainwashed people.

There was also one very important thing: the Chinese are very pragmatic, and they don't want trouble. They're very different from a lot of other peoples. Parents who had bad experiences under Mao tend not to tell their children. So there are a lot of children who were just genuinely not getting any alternative information from the official line.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah, I do want to get back to the actual Great Leap and Cultural Revolution in a second. But on this theme, Xi Jinping's own daughters studied at Harvard. Chinese elites, their kids are studying in America. When they take power in a generation or two, will they still be devoted Marxist-Leninists? I can't imagine them having come back from Harvard and then still...

Jung Chang
Believing? Well, I mean, in the West, in American universities, there are a lot of people, if they're interested in the subject, sure. They come to the West to have their views confirmed. For example, there were Maoists who, when our Mao biography was published, published a book, a collection of their criticisms against our book. The title was "Was Mao Really a Monster?" The preface was written by a senior lecturer in LSE, the London School of Economics. The language was Maoist language, praising him as a great revolutionary, a great Marxist-Leninist. So the West would certainly not put off a potential Mao successor.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up, actually, because I read that book, actually, in preparation for this interview, to see if there were criticisms that I should be aware of. Honestly, while there were certain quibbles about the part before Mao got into power about the Long March and such, which I don't know enough about to comment, when they start talking about the important things, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, they are not at all contesting the facts. It's the most sort of excusatory language. It is the same sort of stuff, by the way, that is said about Cuba and Stalinist Russia, like "the literacy went up," and what about North Korea? North Korea today has high literacy. Are you going to say that North Korea is okay?

Actually, can you talk about this? What do you think explains some parts of the left who want to find excuses for these regimes? Whether it's Venezuela or whether it's Edward Snow writing his book about Mao, there's a need to excuse these communist regimes and socialist regimes. What explains this?

Jung Chang
From what I know, I think there were people who had illusions about these regimes, and a lot of academics who were kind of controlling the faculties to do with Mao and universities probably had got their sort of illusions because they had access to Edgar Snow's book. They were radicals in the 1960s. They want to hang on to their own now. Sorry, let me just... not get into the subject. Sorry, I'm faltering on this because I don't know. I don't know why, but I

don't know why, I don't know why they are like that. They don't know the facts. They don't care to know the facts. And also, I think probably some people think China has always been awful under the emperors and so on, and so somehow the Orientals must feel differently today.

I know when Deng Xiaoping visited America in 1979 and established diplomatic relations with America with Carter, he was at the banquet with some deluded film star or something, and then people were saying to him that when they visited China, they'd seen professors who'd been subject to forced labor. But they were told that they enjoyed it because all these hardships and being in the labor camp had turned them into the new men. And Deng Xiaoping just said they were... I mean, they were mean to the Westerners who didn't know the truth, just took their word for it. They didn't know people couldn't tell them the real truth.

Dwarkesh Patel
Even in the case of Stalin in Russia, there was a famous New York Times reporter who was doing the Russian coverage for The New York Times, and reports would come in about the Ukrainian famine or these other atrocities, and he would write, knowing that no, this is not happening. I think there's a famous headline that says "Russians are hungry but not starving."

So actually, let's talk about Deng Xiaoping. And I want to ask about, so, during the Cultural Revolution, he is exiled and purged. And his son because he is known as, I don't know what exactly, the black...

Jung Chang
But basically the blacks. That's one of the racist side of Chinese society. Black is bad. So the son was one of the five blacks.

Dwarkesh Patel
His son is chased out of a window by Red Guards. The doctors refuse to operate on him because he's Deng Xiaoping's son. So he's paralyzed for life and is forced to do manual labor. This guy who was basically kind of running China under Mao, he's doing manual labor out in the countryside. When he comes back into power after the Cultural Revolution, from the outside, I don't understand how he doesn't immediately denounce Mao. Talk about the horrible things he did. How did he allow—there's a quote from him—he says, "we must be careful not to overemphasize the crimes of Mao or something." For somebody who is so personally harmed by Mao, how is he not immediately condemning him?

Jung Chang
This is something I don't understand. And I also think he made a big mistake. If he had dissociated from Mao like Khrushchev had with Stalin, I mean, it would not have just been the right thing to do, but it would have been the popular thing to do because there was a

great groundswell of sentiment for denouncing Mao or at least dissociating from him. Not just from the population, from the victims, which virtually everybody was in China, but from the leading elite, from most of his closest colleagues. I mean, for the few elders who were in favor of Mao, he could easily have dealt with them like Khrushchev had dealt with the Stalinists, but he chose not to. What got into his mind? I haven't studied him very carefully, but I think he was probably thinking that if you reject Mao, it's inevitable that Communism will collapse in China. Unlike Khrushchev's time in 1956, he could denounce Stalin without endangering Communist rule in Russia, but Deng at his time could not. Well, at least probably he thought he could not have denounced Mao without endangering the rule of the party because we're talking about the 1980s, late '70s, '80s now, near Gorbachev's time. So I think that's probably his devotion to the party.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah, but I think he might have been right. And obviously, the point is that he would have been right to say that. Well, this is actually inherent in the communist regime in Russia in the '80s when they have glasnost and perestroika, and they talk openly about the gulag system. That is one of the main contributing factors. And people say, well, how can a regime that allowed this to happen be allowed to exist anymore? How can this be our governing regime? And that does lead to the—yes, exactly.

Jung Chang
Which is why, by the way, Mr. Xi's argument, because he was against Gorbachev, against perestroika and glasnost. And exactly that, the communist regime would—know. In today's terms, that is the wealth, the money that is associated with power.

Dwarkesh Patel
In the book, you point out that Mao is acting in his self-interest and selfishly doing all these things. But it seems to me that a strong, if not motivation, at least enabling factor and organizing factor is definitely provided by the ideologies of communism and socialism, which sort of organizes society. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense to collectivize farms and to close down shops. And it also necessitates the purges. Because communism is a science, it has to work. And if it doesn't work, there must be internal capitalist saboteurs who must be condemned, brought out and killed. Isn't it the communism and socialism at the heart of the issue here?

Jung Chang
I think some people would undoubtedly think that way. But having researched Mao for twelve years, my conclusion about him was he was highly pragmatic, and the communist ideology suited him. He joined the Communist Party not because he was a passionate believer, but because it gave him a livelihood. I mean, he was asked to open a left-wing bookshop selling Communist and left-wing literature, and that started his life. But the few things about the ideology that you just mentioned - for example, the collectivization, it's

highly conducive to what Mao wanted, which was food. If they had been private farmers, they would've farmed their food first and paid taxes, so to speak. But it's far more difficult to control hundreds of millions of peasants than to organize them into units, into communes.

Mao said that the great advantage of collectivization was easier control. This was not just ideology, but reality for what he wanted to get.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah, but then at least we can say one of the problems with the ideology is that it attracts and is highly conducive to opportunists like Mao and Stalin and the Kim family. But so let's go back to the Great Leap Forward and these communes. These communes were really what it is like. To be a peasant is like chattel slavery. Can you talk about the working conditions, how hard they worked without being given food, the punishment?

Tell us more about the peasant life.

Jung Chang
Well, I was working in the commune for several years during the Cultural Revolution in two places, and our lives consisted mainly of work. There were fixed hours you were allocated food and fuel and other things depending on how many hours you worked. So your life was centered around work. The commune controlled everything. If you wanted to travel somewhere, you needed the commune to give you a note, a kind of passport, to allow you to travel. If you wanted to get married, you had to get permission from the commune.

During the famine, this is how Mao ensured that the peasants didn't rise up in arms because of the control from the commune. Every now and then, the regime would issue stiff orders to stop peasants from fleeing their villages. If they did manage to flee into the cities to beg, for example, the communes were told to bring them back. The commune is the organization, in some ideology, but in reality, it's how the party controls China's 500 million peasants. There were only a few tens of thousands of communes, imagine that highly concentrated organization. So people were no longer individual farmers like they were before communist rule.

Well, basically, Mao's ambition after he took power in China was to build a superpower to dominate the world. He needed to buy these machines, military-industrial complexes, mainly from Russia and from Eastern Europe. But he didn't have the money to pay. China wasn't rich as today, so he exported food, and he needed a lot of food. Whereas in China, traditionally, we never produced enough food to feed the population. The emperors banned food export and brought a lot of food into China. So traditionally, China was a food importer for a few hundred years, and Mao stopped that.

So to start with, there was always a food problem throughout his and now the Great Leap is basically to import vast quantities of technology and equipment, mainly from Russia. That's why it's called the Great Leap. He wanted to build an industrialized system in a few years to be fast. That's what he said. I mean, that's why his demand for food was vastly elevated, Mao's demand for food. And this food had to come from the peasants. So he basically seized this food to export to Russia and Eastern Europe, knowing his people would die of starvation.

There was a time Mao kept saying, seemingly philosophically, "death is a good thing. If we don't have death, the Earth..." These seemingly philosophical things were taken at face value by some academics. But what he really said these things to his officials in order to harden their heart when they went to seize the food from the peasants, seeing how pitiful their conditions were. And that's the origin of the famine. It's as simple as that. It's food export.

I mean, Liu Shaoqi, his number two and his main target in the Cultural Revolution. It was thanks to a visit back to his old village that made up his mind to stop Mao's policies, because he went back to his village. His brother-in-law had died of starvation. His sister was on the edge of dying of starvation. He saw the villages, saw the just heart-rending things, and he opened the lid of a work saucepan and saw there was nothing, just water, a few drops of grain, and he did a very unusual thing and he bowed to the peasants and said, "I'm very sorry." It was after this, in 1961, he made up his mind to stop Mao's policies which led to the Cultural Revolution and his tragic death.

Dwarkesh Patel
And then you also talk in the book about how these peasants, not only was all this grain being exported which caused them to starve, but they weren't even allowed to harvest their grain because they had to talk about turning their own woks and their own stuff into iron and spending time doing that instead of farming.

Jung Chang
So Mao was partly defeated by his own ignorance about the economy, because when you want to build a modern super industry, you needed the steel, and steel was the most important thing. And China's steel-producing capacities in the 1950s were very low. So he had this idea of making the whole population make steel. I mean, it really is quite ridiculous because I was in primary school. I was six years old, and my main occupation was somehow my contribution to steel, which is every day we walked on the street trying to find the little nails, the cogs, something steel, and to hand in to our teachers.

Because there was a backyard furnace in our school, all the teachers had to feed things into the furnace. The furnace also had to be kept going 24 hours a day. It couldn't go off. I mean, to feed that furnace consumed everything in my village. We struggled every day to find a

little fuel. Fast forwarding to 1960s, and because the mountains, which used to be covered with great trees, have been laid bare for the fuel to feed the backyard furnaces. And the teachers were exhausted in my school. And so we were organized to babysit for them. When I was a child. It was hugely wasteful, hugely wasteful. Because for all this effort, this was 1958, actually, most of what the backyard furnaces produced were completely useless. So Mao died, thinking of himself as a failure because China was still poverty-stricken at the time of his death. And he felt himself a failure, but he was partly sabotaged by his own ignorance about the economy.

The other thing about Mao's ignorance was because food was so important, and because sparrows eat food. So he ordered the whole population to Kill the sparrows. So as a child, I sat with other people in our courtyard. We beat gongs to make a tremendous noise. So the sparrows would drop to the ground, and so all these people would go and catch the sparrows. And it was just a catastrophe because it not only killed the sparrows but many other birds. Other birds as well. And of course, the worms, the pests, insects, they flourished without their natural enemy. So it's an unbelievable situation that consumed China for more than two decades.

Dwarkesh Patel
Just the complete lack of sense here. It would honestly be a joke if obviously you didn't know it led to 40 million deaths.

Jung Chang
But the thing is, in the West, I indirectly know somebody who was a steel magnate, a great steel producer, and he thought Mao's backyard furnaces were a brilliant idea. I mean, talking about people in the West, not just the academics, but many other people, completely irrational. And I think maybe in their eagerness to find an alternative to Western capitalist democracy.

Dwarkesh Patel
So say more about that. I know we did touch on that earlier when we were discussing why are people still defending Mao, but what motivated at the time and even still now, people were so disillusioned with Western capitalism that they thought they would rather have Mao.

Jung Chang
I think there were a lot of people like that with a young generation. I mean, they grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. A lot of facts have come out. So people are no longer probably so starry-eyed and so wishful thinking about the communist regimes. But there was a time in those years when communism seemed to be going strong in so many countries. There were a lot of wishful thinking. Westerners, as I said, they may be pursuing for alternative to a society they have a lot of discontent with. So they so wanted for such

miracle to happen, and they believed in what in there otherwise might have rejected as fantasy.

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah. Speaking of which, tomorrow I'm interviewing Neil Ferguson, who has written volume one of his biography of Kissinger, and volume two, which will cover this period, will come out later. He's writing it right now. What should Kissinger have done differently? Should they not have tried to open up China under Mao? What should have been the policy of the United States at the time?

Jung Chang
China was not opened up by Kissinger and Nixon. I lived in China then. I knew after Nixon and Kissinger's visit 1971-72, China was not opened up. I mean, all the liberalization seemed, you know, relaxation after Nixon's visit was mainly because of the collapse of Lin Biao and Mao lost his arm with which he controlled the army. So I think to say Nixon and Kissinger opened up China is wrong. That's not the case. Kissinger, I think, is a very, very smart person. I think he probably was too fascinated with power. I mean, Mao had the kind of power he could turn the lives upside down of a quarter of the world's population. I think he was very fascinated with Mao. I mean, he said nice things about Mao. And even after Mao died, with the regime was reviving Mao. There were a few people reviving Mao, like the current Mr. Xi and his political rival, Mr. Bo, with whom Kissinger seemed to be very close. He attended these rallies to eulogize Mao, big rallies, and lending his status he had to the Chinese regime's effort to stick with Mao's legacy. I think that's unforgivable. That's one thing. And the other thing is China's opening up to the West. And that happened only after Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping came to power. I knew this very well because I was one of the first Chinese to be able to leave China in 1978. That's the very beginning of the opening up. I think it's a good thing. I mean, China has ditched Mao's economic lunacy and the ideology that has wrecked China. And the Chinese people are leading a much better life today. And all this could not have happened if the country had not opened up. And also through all this contact with the West, any attempt to go back to the Maoist time would be futile because people knew what the West was like. The people really don't want to be isolated again to lead a life of Mao's time, no matter how they may say they worship the Mao no matter how they make pilgrimages to Mao's birthplace and so on. But deep down, I think nobody wants to go back. So I think that's a very good thing, this opening up. But of course, then it country may grow into a menace to the world. I mean, that's another matter. It's a challenge that the world needs to face now, but it's certainly not to make it's not certainly not true to say China shouldn't have the West shouldn't have allowed China to open up.

Dwarkesh Patel
I mean, you can't just dismiss a billion people coming out of poverty. It's the best thing that's ever happened in history.

Jung Chang
Exactly.

Dwarkesh Patel
So let's go back to the Cultural Revolution. One thing that I find really interesting about communism, especially in China, is the need for the victims to then incriminate themselves to confess. Even Hitler wouldn't have the Jews in Auschwitz talk about renouncing their semitic ways. And "I've been an enemy to Germany in World War I." Explain why it was important that the victims of these purges had to then talk, you know, "I'm guilty, I'm complicit." Why couldn't they just be ostracized?

Jung Chang
I think Mao knows people's psychology very well, and I think he uses this as a weapon to break people. I mean, to humiliate them and to break them. So even his opponents then started to grow doubt about their own opposition. So I think that's the main thing. I tell you, it's not very nice. I mean, in China, when I lived in China, I wasn't denounced, but we all had to attend criticism and self-criticism meetings. I mean, it really stirs up some very basic discomfort and unsettling, upset feelings if you have to criticize yourself, I mean, not do it cynically because you have to win our days, you couldn't do it cynically because nobody has reason to understand the whole thing in order to be cynical. So you were starting with being quite sincere. It certainly breaks people. And also it makes people turn people against each other because when people are criticizing each other, you create a lot of animosities among the people, which is one reason why no opposition can get organized. I mean, people don't dare to talk to each other in case they were denounced. It's a psychological warfare against his own population, which is quite effective.

Dwarkesh Patel
So meaning that it wasn't just a campaign against political opposition, it was literally every part of your life. I think even in the book you talk about embracing your family is anti-Maoist because it shows you're closer to your family than you are to Mao.

Jung Chang
Exactly. It's this warm feeling I was constantly criticized of because of my feelings for my family. And Deng Xiaoping, when he wrote to Mao about his son, the son you talked about who was crippled, he wrote to Mao to ask Mao to allow his son to join him so he could look after his son. He and his wife, who was so heartbroken seeing his son, she wanted to kill herself anyway, Deng had to preface his appeal with "I'm afraid I'm committing warm feelingism, but could you allow my son to join me to be looked after?"

Dwarkesh Patel
Yeah.

Jung Chang
It's a device that really separates society, making people against each other and being on guard against each other. Earlier you were talking about why can't people get together? Because this other person at the next criticism or self-criticism meetings could well say, "So-and-so had said this to me, and I hadn't reported to the party, therefore I'm guilty."

Dwarkesh Patel
Talk about the way in which it forced good people to be immoral. You have these quota systems where if you're in charge of a department or something, the Mao says 5% are rightists, 5% are capitalist roaders. And so if you don't give 5% of names who are capitalists, who are going to get denounced, then you must be a rightist yourself. Talk about that aspect of the system.

Jung Chang
Well, the result is you are in a tremendous dilemma of either sacrificing you, your family, and other people, which is another way of breaking these people. These are all his weapons, psychological weapons to force people to do what he ordered them to do.

Dwarkesh Patel
Why was there such a big reservoir of support for communist ideas and also the personality cult that formed around Mao? In China, people give different explanations of Emperor worship beforehand led to this, or peasant rice farming. What explains why China got taken over by this ideology?

Jung Chang
It's again, not an ideology.

Dwarkesh Patel
Right.

Jung Chang
And Mao himself said in 1923 he didn't believe that the Chinese would go for Communism. I mean, he thought Communism could only be brought to China by the Russian Red Army. And he was right. In earlier years, the know the Moscow's representatives to China, and to other countries, said it was China was a lost course. People didn't were the last people to go for communism. I mean, much easier in India, for example. Somal was wise because after the Second World War, the Russian Army, Red Army invaded China and occupied the north and northeast of China, a large hunk of land that was more than the entire Eastern Europe. So with this land, Stalin then supported Mao to fight a war against mean Mao. Of course, Mao was the main man who ensured his success because during the war against Japan, all his colleagues wanted to fight Japan. And Mao was the only person who was against it and tried everything he could to take advantage of the war which destroyed Chiang Kai-shek's

government. Whereas Mao grew, the Red Army grew during the war. So Mao was very smart. And this is one reason why Deng Xiaoping and a lot of other communist leaders were so totally devoted to Mao. Because they realized if it were not for Mao, they would never have come to power.

Dwarkesh Patel
Right. By the way, what do you make of the analogies people make when they say what happened in the US and other countries a couple of years ago with the BLM movement?

Jung Chang
Of course, it's not at all mean. I think maybe people just saw statues being toppled, I don't know, a few things, superficial things. The Cultural Revolution was nothing like Know. You couldn't even comprehend the horror of the Cultural Revolution. In the society, the fear, the know. China is really totally destroyed. I mean, there was no antiquity in the private hands wiped out, taken by the regime. It's nothing like that. For ten years there were no books, no cinemas, no theaters. Cinemas and theaters were turned into prisons and torture chambers. And my mother was imprisoned in one. And I knew how to get a hold of one book. It was how difficult and how impossible that was. And that was the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. It's nothing like what happened in the west.

Dwarkesh Patel
Hey, everybody. I hope you enjoyed that episode. As always, the most helpful thing you can do is just share the podcast, send it to people you think might enjoy it, put it in Twitter, your group chats, etc. Just blitz the world. Appreciate you listening. I'll see you next time. Cheers.