

Dwarkesh Podcast #88 - Sarah Paine EP 3: How Mao Conquered China

(Lecture & Interview)

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What I'm about to say are my ideas, they don't necessarily represent those of the US government, the US Navy Department, the US Department of Defense, or the Naval War College, you got that clear? Complain to me if you got problems.

All right, I'm going to talk about Mao. He's an incredibly consequential figure. For the 20th century, he's one of the most consequential political or military figures, and he's also one of the most important figures in Chinese history of any century. And he's also a terribly significant military-political theorist.

And this is not an endorsement of Mao. It is rather just an accurate description of his global and enduring importance.

Think about China historically: it's represented - I don't know - a third of the world's population, a third of the world's trade. That's a big slice of humanity. Moreover, Mao's theories have been used by many enemies of the United States to take over failing states from within in order to assert dictatorial rule. He is also probably the most brilliant and most famous psychopath in human history, and that is saying a lot.

So here we go. This presentation is based on the first eight volumes of Stuart Schram's *Collected Works of Mao*. What Schram did is he compared Mao's complete works, as published in the 1950s, to whatever he could find as the earliest version of whatever it was. Then he reinserted whatever had been cut in italics.

So tonight, watch the italics. Mao didn't put all of his best ideas in one place; he scattered them all over the place.

And so what I've done for you all is prepared a jigsaw puzzle of all of these different ideas. In order to make it comprehensible to you, of all these random little tidbits, you have to have like a coat rack to hang all the hangers, and that's called a simple framework, and I'll get there, but in your own lives, when you've got all kinds of complicated things to transmit to others, you can look at what I'm doing tonight, and you can do it for other things as well. So here we go with good old Mao.

And oh, by the way, a lot of those 8,000, 7,000 pages weren't that interesting, so in a way, you owe me.

All right, these are major military theorists, just to run you through them. Clausewitz is the West's major military theorist of bilateral conventional land warfare. Sun Tzu is Han civilization's great theorist of how you maintain power in a continental empire, multilateral world using coercion and deception.

The two fellows on the right are maritime theorists. In a way, they're writing the missing chapters of Clausewitz that doesn't talk about naval warfare at all.

The top one is Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Naval War College's finest. And what he's writing about are the prerequisites for and strategic possibilities for maritime power.

And the Briton underneath him there, Sir Julian Corbett, is writing about how a maritime power, i.e. Britain, can defeat a continental power, i.e. Germany or France. But all of them are writing about warfare between states, and Mao is a different event.

Mao has to do with triangle building. The term "triangle building" comes from Clausewitz. Clausewitz has this nice little passage here where he's talking about these abstractions: passion, creativity, and rationality as being mainly but not exclusively associated respectively with the people, military, and government.

A state has full-up military and civil institutions that have some connection to their people, but an insurgent is going to be building these things from the ground up. So that's what Mao is doing, is he's actually taking over the host from within by building a shadow government and eventually taking power.

Many of the decolonizing world after World War II were really sick of the West. They'd been colonized, didn't want to hear anything about them. But it seemed as if the Soviets or the Chinese perhaps offered a better model, the Communists, and many thought that the Chinese, Mao, offered the better model.

Why? Because the decolonizing parts of the world were also agricultural and underdeveloped, unlike Russia, which had quite a military—excuse me, an industrial base. They thought Mao was the more relevant guy. All right, here's Mao at his iconic moment. He's proclaiming the victory of the Communists in the Chinese Civil War.

China had been a broken state basically since 1911, when the last dynasty had fallen and the country had broken out into a multilateral civil war that he eventually wins. I'm going to be talking tonight about Mao's theories from the 1920s and 30s when he had the time to write, but there's a lot more to Mao than just that. He had quite a track record.

Once he won the civil war, he imposed a social revolution. What's that? It's more than a political revolution. You're not just replacing the government; you're going to wipe out entire social classes. And I don't mean then, "Hey, here's your one-way ticket out of here" kind of way. No, no, a social revolution is, "Here's a mass grave, dig it, and then you're in it" kind of way.

So, if you look at these statistics of Chinese deaths in many of their wars—this is from much of the Maoist period, I think it's '45 to '75—what you'll notice, the figures in white, I believe, are civilian deaths, not military deaths. And it gets really quite ugly. There are more Chinese civilian deaths here than all deaths in World War II.

And then for those of you who think the Chinese are all great long-term strategists, you need to ponder these numbers. How is it possible to kill so many of your own? That's generally not a mark of good strategy.

Moreover, most of them died during the Great Famine, which was the only nationwide famine in Chinese history. Why? Because it's not caused by the weather. It's caused by policies set in Beijing. During the Great Leap Forward, Mao put all the peasants on communes.

That meant the party was in control of the food supply: i.e, who lives and who dies. You don't get a meal, you're very dead. In addition, he decentralized industry, and you can see these backyard furnaces pictured here. As a result of this, production collapses—agricultural and industrial. But Mao keeps exporting food. Why?

Because that's his pocket change. That is a major source of government income if he wants to be able to do anything, so they keep exporting food. As a result, 40 million Chinese starved to death, primarily in rural areas, and disproportionately peasant girls, the least valued members of society.

The statistic of 40 million deaths comes from this book by Yang Jisheng, who has written the definitive work. The English translation is but one volume; the Chinese original is three. Yang worked as a journalist for many years, which gave him access to provincial archives, where he surreptitiously investigated the statistics of people who were starving to death, including his father, for whom he wrote this book to serve as an eternal tombstone.

So, on the one hand, Mao is the military genius who puts Humpty Dumpty back together again when nobody else could, and they tried for the previous 40 years. On the other hand, he is the psychopath incapable of running an economy in peacetime.

Yet many Chinese revere him as a national hero. Why? Because in their minds, certainly of the Han, the preponderant group in China, one of the key things that their country should and must be is a great power. And Mao, by reunifying China under the banner of communism and then fighting the coalition of all the major capitalist powers to a stalemate in the Korean War, or in their mind a victory, that constitutes ending what they consider the era of humiliations that started in the mid-19th century and ended with the Communist Revolution.

So he's a hero at home. All right, to understand Mao's theories, I need to put it in the context of the wars that he fought.

So in 1911, Qing Dynasty collapses. The country shatters into a multilateral warfare among warlords, these provincial leaders. On this map, you can see the different colors and shadings; those are different warlord areas.

But the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party form a united front in 1923 in order to eliminate these warlords. And so Chiang Kai-shek, who is the head of the Nationalist Party, a generalissimo, not just a general, has a nice artwork on his portrait.

He is the man who's leading the northern expedition to fight off all the warlords. Except he stops midway near his power base in Shanghai, and he turns on the communists, massacres them in droves. This is the White Terror.

Why? Because he thinks that while he's away fighting, they're trying to take over his government while he's away. He's correct. So he keeps on moving there.

There's a nominal unification of China under Nationalist rule when this takes place. In addition, once he's done with that, then he wants to eliminate the Communists for good. And so he runs a series of five encirclement campaigns around their base areas that are scattered in South China.

The primary base area - a base area is also called a Soviet, is the Jiangxi Soviet. And on the fifth encirclement campaign, Chiang Kai Shek is finally successful. He sends them off on the long march up to, way up north in desolate Yenan.

Long march is a real misnomer. It's the Long Rout. The Communists lose 95% of their forces.

I believe in English "decimate" means to lose 10%. Losing 95%, I think you need a whole new verb for what's happened to you. But Chiang Kai Shek doesn't wipe them out, because he's suffering from divided attentions.

When the West did the original - well it was both the United States and Europe, the United States does its original America first thing with a Hawley-Smoot tariff, putting tariffs up to historic highs. And then everybody, of course, retaliates. And now everybody's got high tariffs.

Well, here's trade dependent Japan, that's always cooperated with everybody and suddenly they're toast. And so their solution is autarky and they need an empire large enough to be autarchic. And so then that's when they invade Manchuria in 1931.

So Chiang Kai Shek has all of a sudden lost this area from China that's greater than Germany and France combined. It's a mess. And so he has to, he's trying to balance what to do about Japanese versus Communists.

The Japanese don't quit with Manchuria. They stabilize the place, they make massive infrastructure developments, they transform it into the most developed part of Asia outside of the home islands, but they keep on going. And it gets so bad that the Communists and the Nationalists form a second united front because they're facing this lethal threat called Japan.

And they organized that in December 1936 in what's known as the Xi'an Incident. And the Japanese react viscerally because they look at it, and the Nationalists have gone over to the dark side because they've joined up with the Communists. And this is when the Japanese escalate in 1937, go down the Chinese coast up the Yangtze River.

Uh, and well, but then they wind up stalemating. Once they get beyond the Chinese railway system, which isn't that great in this period, the Japanese can't stabilize the place and the Soviets start adding more aid, and we add more aid. It's a mess.

So the Japanese decide they're going to cut Western aid to the Chinese. And that's where Pearl Harbor comes in. That's what the attack of Pearl Harbor is all about, is telling Americans to stay out of Asia, which of course, you know, we did just the opposite.

And then the Nazis interpret their alliance with the Japanese broadly to declare war on the United States. So when that happens, you have a regional war that had already been going on over Poland in Europe and this other war that had been going on since '31 in Asia, they unify into a global World War. Mao understood that he was dealing with three layers of warfare, nested wars, that he was fighting a civil war against the Nationalists within a regional war against Japan.

And then after Pearl Harbor, there's going to be a global war that will eventually morph into a global Cold War. Most of his writings are written before Pearl Harbor. So he's going to focus on the first two layers of what's going on here.

So after the World War II is over, Mao goes after the Nationalists full bore, and the Japanese have already very much weakened the Nationalists and Mao wins the civil war. Okay, these are the wars.

Now, I promised you a simple framework. Here's the simple framework. Simple framework should have three to five things because that's all about any of us could really handle on short notice. And so I got four here.

And I'm going to use Clausewitz's definition of great leadership to analyze Mao. According to Clausewitz, in a general, two qualities are indispensable. First is an intellect that even in the darkest hour – and Mao had many of those – retains some glimmering of inner light, which leads to truth.

And second, the courage to follow that faint light wherever it may lead. The first of these qualities is described by the French term, *coup d'oeil*. *Coup* is a glance, *d'oeil* is an eye, taking in a situation with a glance of an eye. And the second is determination.

Well, Mao had these things in numerous areas. I'm going to first discuss Mao the propagandist, that's how he starts out. And then I've got what I say here is Mao the social scientist.

But what he was really good is data analysis, data collection and analysis. He truly understood the countryside because he collected all sorts of data about it and analyzed it. And then I will go on to Mao, the operational military leader, winning and fighting battles.

And then at the end, I'll talk about Mao the grand strategist, integrating all elements of national power. So that's my game plan. That's the simple framework. And away we go.

All right. Mao began his public service career as a propagandist. And if you look at his early biography, he's born in 1893 to a prosperous but not particularly well-educated father who tilled his own land.

Mao hated his father and he hated farming, so he left as soon as possible. After the 1911 revolution for a little while he worked as a soldier, didn't like that.

He joined and then dropped out of a series of vocational schools. He tried being a, what was it? A merchant, a lawyer, I'm missing something else, a soap maker. Imagine Mao, three stages of personal hygiene, whatever.

It was not to be. But he eventually gets an Ed degree, so he can go off and be a primary school principal. Okay, imagine setting your child off to the psychopath doing show and tell.

And then he joins the Communist Party. And it's during the First United Front so he also joins the Nationalist Party. And he has very important positions. If you look at, he's in the National Party, he's at their central headquarters, and he's the minute taker. So he's the fly on the wall listening to everything.

And then he's a stand in for the head of the propaganda department, which is probably where he learned a great deal about the importance of propaganda. And here's what he says

early on, "the Communist Party can overthrow the enemy only by holding propaganda pamphlets in one hand and bullets in the other".

And if you look at the original organization chart of the shadow Communist government, you'll see there are only what, six departments there? One of them is a propaganda department. If you have no power, words are, is, your initial way into gaining power. I'm now going to use a framework from my wonderful colleagues, Mark Genest and Andrea Dew, this is theirs, about analyzing strategic communication in terms of messenger, message and medium. And I'll go through each three, all three.

What you see here is a propaganda poster. It's a woodblock print. That's the medium. And it's a very easy way to reproduce pictures back in the day.

The message is about a model laborer, this "always emulate Wu Man Yo", lucky us. And to do all the nice things he does with whatever is going on there. So that's what that is.

Now, messengers were the delivery system, the broadcasting system for the Communist Party. So you've got the Communist Party, but you've got to reach an audience. And that's what these messengers are doing.

And so they go into local areas and they identify local grievances for attention by the Communist Party, which when it fixes them or fixes somebody, that will generate loyalties and allegiance. So these propaganda personnel would be identifying local bullies to come in and deal with them, organize mass rallies. During battles they're going to double as medics, after battles, they're going to propagandize POWs, between battles, they are helping on troop morale. But what they're really doing is reporting back to Communist Central exactly what's going on.

And civil and military messengers differ. For civil messengers, they would be activists, maybe in the local government, labor unions, peasant organizations, women organizations, any number of these things. And it's there, it's your broadcasting system to reach a population and mobilize it.

Military messengers are a little different. Every single military unit had about a 20-member propaganda team. That's a lot of people. According to Mao, the propaganda work of the Red Army is therefore first-priority work of the Red Army. This is very different from soldiering in the West. This is not how it would work.

Also, Mao had his international broadcasting system. These would be foreign journalists. While Mao was holding court up in Yen-an, he invited many of these journalists up there. Edgar Snow was by far the most famous. Why? Because he was the first one in and the last one out. He had really long interviews with Mao, and Edgar Snow, this is when he was an old

man, but when he was a young man he never asked, "Why does this A-list political leader spending so much time with me?" That never occurred to Edgar. But it's hours.

And he was a very fine writer, Edgar Snow. What Edgar Snow writes, *Red Star Over China*, you can probably go to Barnes and Noble and pick up a copy there. It's been in print ever since, and it's the original footnote in Chinese history because no one knew anything about Mao.

And so then everybody starts citing Edgar Snow, and then we cite everybody and everybody and everybody. But actually, it only goes back to Edgar Snow. So, Mao got his word out.

Mao thought, "You want to keep the message simple. You want to make it epigrammatic so that people can understand it rapidly." In his day, this meant having matching slogans, the equivalent of newspaper headlines, to provide a lens for people to understand events, rather like tweets in our own day. So, when the White Terror occurred, when Chiang Kai-shek is turning on the Communists in the first United Front, the slogan was, "Arm the peasants."

And then, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931, the new slogan is, "Down with imperialism and the Nationalist Party too," because you want to smear your enemy in the civil war while you're at it there. But there are a whole series of these slogans. And here, Mao is one of the most popular poets in China, certainly, of the 20th century.

He could write really simple couplets. If you look here, I think it's a total of eight characters so that someone who's semiliterate can make their way through this poem.

On the other hand, he wrote really complicated things because he needed to garner the support of intellectuals initially before he'd educated enough peasants and workers to take over. Intellectuals prize poetry, and they also prize what's called grass writing, which is that unintelligible Chinese stuff that's under there. But if Mao set these poems to tunes that everybody knew, people could sing them on the Long March and elsewhere and learn them that way.

So, he's an incredibly accomplished man. He also understood you have to manage the message, and the way he did that is through political mobilization. Part of that is you've got to tell people what the policy objective is, which for him was abolishing imperialism, feudalism, and the landlord class, and then presenting a strategy for how to get there.

And here are the media that he used: not only the written and spoken word but also the dramatic arts in order to get the message out. He also used an institutional medium of education. And here is Mao, the primary school teacher, in his element.

Most of the people in his armies were illiterate, but Mao knew all about how to reach them. And if you can see in this slide, there are a lot of political commissars. What are they?

Political and military commissars come in a pair. Military commissar is the military professional who actually knows about the fighting. The political commissar is the one with the direct line to the secret police who will cap the military commissar if there are any problems whatsoever.

So, Mao's got an elaborate network to get the message out, offering all kinds of social services to people, not only medical but also education for peasant children. And he also educated their parents. This is for the first time in Chinese history.

He did it during the winter slack season. Now, the Nationalists had also tried to improve education, but once the Japanese invaded full bore, they had to drop it because the Nationalist conventional armies are the ones that are fighting off the Japanese conventional armies. The Communists are a guerilla movement, and they're operating behind enemy lines.

So, as the Nationalists are dragooning people into their armies, the Communists are busy offering social services, and I'll get to land reform. And so for the peasants, before too long, it becomes a no-brainer whom they're going to support. Mao also emphasized professional military education because he needs to turn peasants to cadres, to guerillas, to conventional soldiers.

And there's got to be an educational pipeline to do this. And if you look at this Northwest Counter-Japan Red Army University, of the first original departments, political work is one of them. This is not professional military education the way it's done in the West, it's a separate thing.

Okay, part one over: Mao the propagandist, I've covered that. Now I'm going to go about Mao the social scientist.

And here, he says, "The peasant problem is the central problem of the national revolution. If the peasants do not rise up and join and support the national revolution, the national revolution cannot succeed." And if you look at his, further along in his biography, while the first United Front was still operative, he's heading the Nationalist Party's Peasant Institute in Guangzhou and also their Central Commission on the Peasant Movement, learning a great deal about it.

But once the White Terror hits, he needs to get out of Dodge fast, or they'll kill him. And that's where he flees to Jiangxi Province, to the Jiangxi Soviet, where he is going to become

the political commissar of the 4th Army. He's also going to be in charge of land reform as he figures out how to calibrate that to make it work.

All right, for Mao, he's doing data-driven survey after data-driven survey, does a whole series of them between 1926 and 1933. And he's trying to figure who owns what, who works for whom, who tills where, and inventories down to the last pitchfork and last chicken, as he's trying to establish what is really going on on the countryside, and he does. What he concludes is that 6% of the rural population owns 80% of the land, and 80% of the population owns only 20% and his solution is going to be revolution.

And he goes further into the statistics and he identifies 70% as poor peasants, 20% who are like his father—they till their own land, they're middle peasants—and then there are the exploitative 10% who don't get their hands dirty with anything. And what Mao is trying to figure out is how you can incentivize 80% of those people into actively taking part in the revolution. This is the key.

And what he wants to do is take the bottom of the social pyramid and mobilize it to crush the top of the pyramid. The way he's going to do this is by determining class status through a land investigation movement, which he says is a violent and ruthless thing. We're going to talk about class, approval of class status, confiscation of land, and redistribution of land in order to invert the social pyramid.

He's got a real plan for doing it. He argues that land reform is just essential for peasant allegiance. This is how you're going to get it, to draw these hundreds of millions into supporting the communists. But you got to do it sequentially: you've got to propagandize first, and then you're going to distribute land later. A little bit later. He had a very bureaucratic way of redistributing land, the approval of class status, he said, it's a life-and-death decision for the person in question.

It starts out with a vote at the local level, and then it goes through many layers of party approval before being sent back to the local level to announce who's going to get the land and who's going to take a bullet. And then Mao leverages the enthusiasm of this movement for the people who are going to get the land, the other people, not so much. He's going to leverage this enthusiasm to get people to join the party and also to join the army.

Mao is planning to collectivize all land. That's what the Communists are going to do. But he says, "Look, the system of landlords and tenants cannot be completely destroyed yet."

Because he needs the peasants to join him, and the peasants desperately want land. So, Mao gives it to them, and he gets a great deal of support for doing this. But he also keeps the rich peasants around, too.

This is a deleted portion in the collected works: "because rich peasant production is indispensable". Until he wins the civil war and can then turn the guns on them. And he's also got a duplicitous program for the middle peasants. It's a big bait and switch.

It looks like you're going to get - see, you got the land? Well, now you do, and now you don't, because at the end, they're all going to lose their land.

In order to reform, to get the land, Mao is talking about a red terror to get it. And while he was still with the Nationalists, he wrote a report on the peasant movement in Hunan, where he's talking about taking all the land from the landlord class and shooting them. And that won't cut it with the Nationalist army because their officers are landlords. So, as part of his program, it's not just land reform and educating people, warm and cuddly. It's also coercion.

Okay, that's Mao the social scientist. Enough of him. Now, we're going to do Mao the military leader.

You've probably heard this chestnut from Mao: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Mao spent his - it's still part of his early career - being right but being a minority view. That he had certain views about military operations that were not shared by Communist Central. And Mao kept following that dim light wherever it may lead, and events eventually vindicated him. He survived a variety of encirclement campaigns, but then he had some troubles. And here are his critics.

Li Lisan was a labor organizer, he was the de facto head of the Communist Party from 1928 to 1930. And after the white terror on the Northern Expedition, Moscow had told its communist buddies in China that the next thing to do was to take the cities.

And so Li Lisan tries to, with the Nanchang uprising in 1927. It was a total disaster. And he tries it again in 1930 with the Changsha uprising, another disaster.

That got him into exile in Russia and according to Mao, Comrade Li Lisan did not understand the protracted nature of the Chinese Civil War. Li Lisan is trying to fight a decisive, war-winning battle far too early. You try to do that, and you can get yourself ruined.

Here's another critic, Xiang Ying. Mao is in the Jiangxi Soviet, and he thinks a smart strategy is to lure the enemy into your own terrain, which is favorable to you, let them get exhausted, then you spring the trap and you annihilate them.

Communist Central in Shanghai thought this was nuts, that you shouldn't be ceding territory at all. So Mao, for the longest time, he's off in Jiangxi, they were off in Shanghai, they were a long way apart, and so Communist Central can't do anything about it - Mao does his own thing.

So the communist Central sent Xiang Ying to Jiangxi Soviet to fire Mao personally, and you can imagine how this works for his later career - not well. He fires Mao and this is where his strategy winds up producing the Long March, the Long Retreat, in which they lose 95% of their people by trying to defend territory, so people began to get it, that Mao may have known what he was doing.

Then, on the Long Retreat, Mao chose as his terminal point of retreat, like where you're going to wind up, as up in Yenon, way up north, deep in Muslim and Mongol lands, but near the Soviet border.

Mao thought that was essential because they're the big benefactor. Whereas this gentleman, Zhang Guotao, who was the military commissar of the Fourth Army, thought, "Nonsense, we're Han Chinese, we want to be in Han lands." So he wanted to go into western Sichuan, which he did.

And he suffered a series of defeats over 1935, and as a result, he was never as important ever again, and eventually defected to the Nationalists. So, Mao had proven himself prescient and right and determined. He had kudo and determination, and people eventually recognized that.

All right, Mao and Clausewitz define war somewhat differently. Clausewitz has this famous line, "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will." Mao says, "No, no, war is politics by other means. It is something that is used to achieve political ends." So far that's not incompatible.

But then here's Mao's twist: "A revolution is an uprising, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows the power of another." Clausewitz is not about class warfare at all. In fact, his wife is always trying to wine and dine the aristocrats, so completely different in that department.

Mao is looking at the world, and he believes the linchpin of the social order are landlords. He's going to detonate them and try to destroy them.

He talks about the violence of all of it, that you're going to get the peasant masses to overthrow these landlords, and that this will require terror in rural areas, but this is absolutely necessary and of course this is what the Nationalists absolutely would not tolerate. Mao also understood he was operating in a period of nested wars, and that the ones that were ongoing were the civil war with the Nationalists and then the regional war with Japan. Pearl Harbor comes a little later. And he talked about defeating Japan in three stages.

He said "defeating Japan requires three conditions: first is progress by China", i.e, the civil war, "which is the basic and primary thing; the second is difficulties for Japan", i.e, the regional war, "and the third is international support", the big friend. I'm going to talk about each of these three things in turn.

So, in order to win the civil war, Mao believes you need base areas, these Soviets, where are they located? Often on the boundaries of provinces, in very difficult terrain, where provincial authority, let alone national authority, simply does not extend.

Mao thought that there were certain prerequisites for a good base area. One is strategic terrain. It's got to be defensible so that the weaker communist forces can defend it against conventional nationalist or conventional Japanese armies. So that's key, pick your terrain carefully.

Also, you need to have a strong Red Army presence there to make it work. You need numerous organized workers and peasants. You've got to have some local support there. And then you need a good party organization.

This is Mao's idea of what you need for a base area. He believed that you needed to match your military unit, the type of military unit, to the territory. He said there are three kinds of territory: there's base areas, there is enemy-controlled areas, and then there is the interface in between, which is where guerilla forces are going to be roaming.

So he was all about deploying the Red Army to the comparatively safe base area, they'll protect that. You might send guerilla detachments to some of the guerilla areas, but really only really small things would you ever send into enemy territory. Moreover, he has prerequisites to fight. There are six possible prerequisites; you've got to have at least two before you fight. The most important one is that people have to actively support you. You probably need a base area to pull this off.

He said that the last three things about enemy weak points, enemy exhaustion, enemy mistakes, those things could appear quite rapidly. But you better choose your terrain very carefully; terrain is immutable.

He also said that if you're weak the way the Communists were, you had to follow a strategy of annihilation. What you do is you annihilate one small enemy unit at a time, and the cumulative effects will eventually change the balance of power. Only someone who is really strong can tough out an attrition strategy.

He's also about triangle building in these areas. So, little guerilla detachments go out into the interface. If it works out well and it looks like they can start either a new base area or expand an existing one, that's what they're going to be up to.

So, these guerilla forces are either a disposal force, which you could send them out to do risky things, and if they get wiped out, it doesn't endanger base area defense, or they can become a nucleus of a new base area. So in small guerilla groups, party members are toughened, cadres trained, the party government, mass organizations are consolidated. If they're successful, then you bring in the Red Army to do higher-level institution building and either greatly expand an existing base area, or you're forming a new one, is what's going on.

Mao had two military services, we always think of army, navy, air force—that's not what it was for him. It was guerilla forces versus conventional forces.

And guerilla forces are operating in the rear of the enemy so that there's no stability or security. In fact, there isn't even a front line; it's just so amorphous. And so what guerilla forces are supposed to be doing is exterminating small enemy forces, weaken larger ones, attack enemy lines of communications, establish bases, and force the enemy to disperse, but they're doing all this in combination with conventional forces. Because here's the thing: you think about Mao and his guerillas, well, actually, here's what Mao really says: "Regular forces are of primary importance because it is they who alone are capable of producing the decision," like winning the war.

"There is in guerilla warfare no such thing as a war-winning battle". The relationship of the two is really important. Mao also thought that you needed to establish a fire escape if you had a base area, like, if it all goes south, where do you go? And his terminal point of retreat for the Long March was up in Yen-an. He thought it was important to figure those things out in advance.

Mao also cultivated an unprecedented group of allies, never before assembled in Chinese history: not only peasants, but women, minorities, youth, intellectuals, and the enemy army, most creatively. For cultivating the allegiance of peasants, it wasn't just education and land reform, it was also army discipline. This is where the three rules, six points for attention, and a couple of additional points were enforced through 1949, when the Communists win the civil war. Why? You don't want to alienate the peasantry.

These are the people that are forming your cadres, your guerrillas, everything. So, maintain army discipline. Don't mess with it.

Mao also took an incredibly forward-looking view about women. Here he is with his fourth wife, the actress. The other three had suffered, respectively, abandonment, execution by

the nationalists, and commitment to a Soviet psychiatric ward. Not fates for the faint-hearted.

But Mao calculated that women are about half the population. They're miserably treated, so they're naturals for wanting a revolution. They're a force that will decide the success or failure of the revolution.

He calculated correctly, and he was way ahead of his times. He also understood that in a guerrilla war, you're sending all the guys off to be fighting, and you've got to be building base areas and things. This is where women came in to do those activities.

As a result, he offered women the unthinkable, which is "men and women are absolutely equal. Women have the right to vote, be elected, and participate in the work of the government". He's just way ahead of his times.

Mao also offered minorities the previously unofferable, which was self-determination. What the minority people didn't get is that a promise made in a really desperate civil war, with a regional war overlaid, once you win those things and you can turn your guns on those trying to secede, that promise may be unenforceable. You can ask the Tibetans and Uyghurs how it all worked out.

All right, so Mao's strategy: he had a strategy of disintegrating the enemy army and let me tell you how that one worked.

In every county, you select a large number of workers and peasant comrades, people below the radar, and then you insinuate them into the enemy army to become soldiers, porters, and cooks. You can use women to do this as well. Talk about people who are below the radar.

You're creating a nucleus of a Communist Party to erode them from within, and eventually, it'll have a shattering effect. He said, also, part of this disintegrating the enemy has to do with leniency.

Sun Tzu advocates: never put your enemy on death ground. Death ground means that you just have no hope, that you're a dead person if you don't fight. So, your only hope is to fight.

If you put someone on death ground, they tend to fight with incredible willpower. And Mao is: don't do that.

So, what he did when you capture people, propagandize a little, recruit the willing, but release the unwilling, so that the comparison of communist leniency and nationalist brutality becomes absolutely stark in this otherwise pitiless war.

Okay, that's the civil war. Now, we're going to go to the second problem, which was Japan, the regional war. Mao made a really thoughtful assessment of what were the key characteristics of China that would determine what kind of military strategy would use. And this is his assessment.

He said, "Okay, China is a large, semi-colonial country. It's an undeveloped country." Point one. "Second, its enemy is really strong." Point two. "Thirdly, the Red Army is weak. And fourthly, there's an agrarian revolution going on." And from this, he concluded that revolution was definitely possible, but it's going to take a long time. So he didn't kid himself about quick wins.

He's going to come up with a strategy for protracted warfare. And he thought that Japan had certain weaknesses that the communists could leverage. For instance, the Japanese had inadequate manpower to garrison a country the size of China.

This meant that guerrillas could roam far and wide behind Japanese lines. Also, the Japanese were brutal, just gratuitously brutal, and they're outsiders. This means that the peasantry are naturally going to gravitate towards the communists, just simply regardless of what the communists do, but based on what the Japanese are doing, they're going to gravitate towards the communists.

Also, the Japanese had grossly underestimated the Chinese. And as a result of underestimating the Chinese, they made errors. When they made errors, they started quarreling among themselves and making more errors and the communists could leverage these things.

All right, Mao's most famous paradigm theory is his three stages of people's war. The first stage is the strategic defensive. It's the "prevent defeat" phase.

The last phase, phase three, is the strategic offensive, the "delivery victory" phase. In the first phase, you're focusing on the peasantry. In the last phase, you're annihilating the enemy army.

And if you look at activities that go on in each phase, the activities of phase one and two never cease. Rather, you add additional activities as competence increases. So, in phase one, you're doing popular mobilization, base area building, triangle building, guerrilla warfare.

And then, as you get more of these things, then you can start engaging in mobile warfare, try your hand at a little conventional warfare, reach out with diplomacy. And then if you go further in stage three, then you're talking positional warfare, and you're going to have the war-winning battle. And how do you get from the phases?

Well, the transition from phase one to two is basically you have a critical mass of base areas, cadres, armed forces that you can move into phase two. But the problem of being in phase two is what had looked like isolated acts of banditry in phase one to the incumbent government, now the incumbent government gets it, that they're facing an insurgency bent on regime change, and the regime changes strategy.

So the communists are no longer under the radar, but they're in the crosshairs. And it's dangerous because they're weak and the enemy is strong. So when you transition to phase two, initially it is quite dangerous.

And here's Mao writing about these problems and saying, "Look, in these stages one and two, the enemy is trying to have us concentrate our main forces for a decisive engagement," i.e. decisive in their favor, they'll win the war because they'll annihilate us. And of course, this is what General Westmoreland was trying to do in the Vietnam War, getting the North Vietnamese to concentrate so he could blow them off the map. And of course, they'd read their Mao and didn't do that nonsense.

Mao was saying you only fight when you're sure of victory. Also, in order to get to phase three, you need a big friend. Why? Because phase three is conventional warfare, which requires infinite supplies of conventional armaments that requires an industrial base to produce it, and somewhere like China lacks this industrial base.

So, good old Soviet Union played this role the world over. And so this is the secret sauce of people's war: if you want to get to phase three, you need a big buddy. That's where the Soviet Union came in.

And so this is why Mao determines that Yan'an is going to be his terminal point of retreat. He's fighting his way through to the Soviet Union. No kidding, you've got to have the conventional arms. To fight this stuff.

What's interesting about Mao's description of people's war is it actually applied not so much to the war with Japan, which he claimed it applied to, but rather to the civil war with the Nationalists. And here is the key. Mao didn't actually fight the regional war against Japan. The Nationalists did.

The Nationalists did every bit of the conventional fighting, except one, and that's the Hundred Regiments campaign that Mao fought in North China in 1940, and he was smeared. The Japanese responded with a "three alls" campaign, which is "kill all, burn all, loot all," which is what they did. And it wiped out loads of communist base areas in North China.

So, Mao never tried that ever again, and he certainly didn't write about it in his collected works. Don't talk about failures there. So, it's interesting. What he's talking about really applies to the civil war.

And Mao understands these different layers. So, as the Nationalists are busy fighting the Japanese and actually being destroyed by them, the communists are pretending that they're fighting the Japanese. They're later going to take credit for it and say, "We won against the Japanese," which is nonsense.

There was also the United States in that as well. Because he's using that to strengthen the communists during all of this rural mobilization. So, when Japan's defeated and the communists, when the civil war resumes full bore, he's in a good situation.

Okay, that's it on Mao, the operational military leader at the operational level. Now let's put it all together as Mao the grand strategist, of linking all elements of national power into a coherent strategy. These are Mao's instruments of national power: the peasantry, propaganda, land reform, base areas, institution building, warfare, and diplomacy.

The US military, when they're thinking about elements of national power, love this little framework: DIME. D is for diplomacy, I is intelligence, M for military, E for economics, as being critical elements of national power.

It's better than only looking at the military elements, at least you got three more things. But if you look at Mao, this is not a cookie-cutter event. This is a different society, different national elements of national power are available. You've got to get to the other side of the tennis court net to see what the other team is doing.

Mao is famous for all these reasons, but also for his sinification of Marxism, where he makes all the things that I've told you about, makes his version of Marxism much more applicable to these countries, the newly independent countries after World War II, of how they put things together. He positions himself to replace Stalin, who dies in 1953, as the leader of communism.

Mao was prescient on numerous levels. He was certainly prescient about the centrality of the peasantry. He was way ahead of his times on the importance of women.

He was calculating and cunning on how he was going to use minorities and POWs. He had proven his kudo and determination with his military strategy.

He also anticipated when the Japanese war in China would stalemate, and he also anticipated, more or less, when the United States was going to get into the war in Asia. He's the great sinifier of Marxism.

Mao produced all kinds of concepts and paradigms that are useful for insurgents who are trying to take over the host from within. I've listed a variety of them here, and I'm going to go through them in turn. These are the things that the counterinsurgent then has to counter.

All right, rural mobilization. This is obviously a big deal in Mao. If you compare—and I'm going to be doing a lot of comparisons with the Vietnam War and the Korean War because they're communists and all these things—you can see Mao's rural mobilization was very successful in China. The North Vietnamese rural mobilization was also really good. South Korea, not so much.

Why? The leader of North Korea was trying to mobilize the peasantry in the south, that wasn't so successful. And why? Syngman Rhee, the leader of South Korea, immediately did land reform, and this gives loyalty of soldiers to the leadership doing this. Maybe that is not the only factor, but an important factor for why the Korean War turns out differently.

Base areas. Mao says those are really important. The North Vietnamese used them to great effect. They had all kinds of areas in the south and then on the borders of South Vietnam. North Korea, not so much. It couldn't form base areas in the South.

Why? It's a peninsula which the US Navy cut off. It's also cold. So where are you going to flee if you want to do a base area? I think it's up a mountain in South Korea, and that will get cold in the winter, and you'll probably freeze to death.

I believe "Al Qaeda" means "the base." I believe that's the correct translation. So if you're thinking about ISIS or whatever's left of it, you can go back to Mao's ideas about base areas, that you need a particular kind of geography that's good for the defensive. You've got to have a big party organization, a lot of local support, and you have to have military forces there.

Does Al Qaeda—well, it's going to be ISIS or something—do they have all four of these things or can you remove any one of them?

Another idea from Mao is luring the enemy in deep. Mao had done that very successfully in the first three encirclement campaigns, and then he was removed from command, so he wasn't doing that anymore. Again, in the final phases of the Chinese Civil War, the '45 to '49 event, Mao lures the Nationalists deep into Manchuria.

The Nationalists are a South China phenomenon. I showed you the map. Chiang Kai-shek starts in the south and he goes way up north, so he's weakest in the north. Mao lures him way up there in Manchuria, and then he springs a trap and destroys Chiang Kai-shek's armies up there. Then the entire civil war wraps up within a year of that.

Mao also lured good old General MacArthur, who fancied himself a great Asianist in the Korean War. MacArthur goes all the way up to the Yalu River, right on the Chinese border in the Korean War, and Mao springs a trap. MacArthur didn't realize that 350,000 Chinese troops had been infiltrated around him. Oops, missed that.

It did not work out well. But for the US Navy, now, it needs to think about, what about being lured into the South and East China Seas and then the Chinese pulling the trap. There are places you don't need to go. The Chinese may have to go there, but maybe you don't have to.

Another one is terminal point of retreat. I've talked about Yan'an being a really good one, and that worked. Then when the Manchurian campaign initially wasn't going well for Mao, he retreated up to Siping, which is a little bit north, and that worked well enough. But when Chiang Kai-shek tried to pick these Manchurian cities as a place to retreat in Manchuria, bad news.

There's only one railway system that gets you south out of Manchuria. You suppose the Communists don't know about it? They encircled the Nationalists in these cities and destroyed them there.

So when you're thinking about insurgents and things, think about, well, if you knock them out of one area, where might they go next? Another concept from Mao is disintegrating enemy forces, which is what happens to the Nationalists. Think about it: Chiang Kai-shek had been fighting since the 1920s, forever and ever, and he fought the Japanese, they're brutal. The United States had trouble fighting the Japanese, and Chiang Kai-shek fought them alone for a long time before we joined the war.

And yet, he loses a battle in '48 in Manchuria, and that's it. The rest of the country wraps up. So what was going on there? Or the South Vietnamese: they'd been fighting forever.

And then the whole place just wraps up. And the same thing happened with Japan in World War II. They'd been fighting all over the place forever, fighting us brutally. And then in 1945, we don't even have to invade the home islands.

Think how unusual that is. The Germans fought every street on the way to Berlin; the Japanese quit. This is about disintegrating the enemy and why it happens.

But what you can say in all those three cases is the warfare had been going on for an incredibly long time, and it was ruinous. The places in question were ruined, so don't expect that to happen too fast.

Of course, Mao's big contribution was his three stages of people's war. Mao presents them as sequential: you go from one to two to three, and tada, you win. And they're cumulative, right?

You do certain things, and then you get to phase two, and you've had this cumulative effect of destroying enemy forces. You get even more accumulating casualties on the other side, and finally, you win.

A student of mine said that's actually not a great way to look at it, or there's an even better way to use it. It's like a metric of how an insurgency goes up and down, so that ISIS may be on the cusp of going into stage three. I don't know that they ever really—well, possibly, with all the equipment they got initially—or whether then they get knocked back to stage one, where you wonder whether they still exist anymore, and come back and forth. Anyway, that was that person's take. I thought I'd pass it along to you.

All right. I have one last thing to talk about. Mao, when you read these 7,000 pages—and I don't recommend it—one is struck by all these dualities. I think it goes back to Yin and Yang analysis, which is very prominent in traditional Chinese thinking.

I got a little abbreviated Yin and Yang list of opposites here of these coexisting opposites constantly changing. So, if you look at Mao discussing triangle building, it's in terms of the presence or absence of factors, presence and absence being opposites.

So you're going from the absence of political power to the seizure of political power, from the absence of the Red Army to the creation of the Red Army. It goes on and on. Studying the differences and connections between dualities is a task of studying strategy, and it's really everything.

To defend in order to attack, to retreat in order to advance. It goes on and on, and it's all about correctly orienting yourself between these opposites.

So, "oppose protracted campaigns and the strategy of a short war. Uphold the strategy of a protracted war in a short campaign" and I'm starting to lose it.

You've got to put everything in the context of each other: losses, replacements, fighting, resting, concentration, and dispersion and I'm thinking, "I don't get this. Mao's bipolar disorder."

So I turned, and then you look at the diagram. Okay, they're opposites, and it's either one or the other, but even - they're not even true to themselves.

Each opposite is a dab of the other. I was having trouble figuring it out, so I went to this gentleman, Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith.

He is the only translator into English of Sun Tzu who has a distinguished military career, and also, he went on to get a DPhil—it's like a PhD—from Oxford in military history.

If you look at his career, he's in China during the Japanese escalation of the Sino-Japanese War. He's back in China, does another tour at the end of the Chinese Civil War. He gets top marks in the military's Chinese language exam.

Oh, look at these details: Navy Cross, Purple Heart, Distinguished Service Cross. He's a distinguished man, and for retirement, he decides he's going to go get the Oxford degree, and he writes the translation of Sun Tzu. He is the only translator of Sun Tzu who translates "死地" as "death ground." Other people, it's like, oh, I don't know, I can't remember the words, like, I don't know, "contested ground," something else.

But I'm guessing that when he chose those words, "death ground," it's because when he was thinking about it, it might well have conjured up his memories of what exactly it was like to be on Guadalcanal or New Georgia. He has provided insights - oh also the other thing to mention about him is he's really modest.

I had to dig around to find these biographical details. They're not on the cover of his book which is where they should be. And his service to his country continues to this day.

Because it's his translation that continues to educate officers over 40 years after his death. But here's his take: "In every apparent disadvantage, some advantage is to be found. The yin is not wholly yin, and the yang is not wholly yang. It is only the wise general," said Sun Tzu, "who is able to recognize this fact and turn it to good account." And of course, Mao could, and he did. But in peacetime, choices are not binary, they're graduated, and evolution is much more conducive to economic development than revolution.

So that's what I have to say about Mao's bipolar disorder and other things about him, and thank you very much for bearing with me.

[Interview]

Dwarkesh Patel

Okay, so here's something I'm confused by. You were talking about Mao as a shrewd commander, somebody who had studied not only the military but had also compiled these rigorous records of farm life and agriculture. And then you fast forward to when he's in power, and you go to the Great Leap Forward, and some of the things that he was doing, you just can't imagine that somebody thought this was a good idea: that peasants would take

off the harvest, wouldn't attend to the crops, but they're going to make iron in their backyards. They're going to shoot the sparrows and have a locust infestation.

How do we square this shrewdness in the beginning and these idiocracy-level ideas in the Great Leap Forward?

Sarah Paine

Well, first of all, you need to think about what his objective is, which number one is to stay in power, right? And number two is probably Communist Party in power and pursue his visions of revolution. So that's one thing.

Then you're worried about the welfare of people as if that's the primary objective. It most certainly is not. And then he may have assumed that it came along with these things, and that's a whole problem with communist ideology is people don't believe it because they know it's wrong, they believe it because it's right. There's a whole problem with that about labor theories of value and things. It turns out there are things called services that are also valuable.

So the basic theory that he's implementing is incorrect. It just takes the communists a little while—some of them haven't figured it out—but it takes them a little while to figure out there are parts that don't work. But there's a whole other piece to him, if you think about our own world, how much expertise does any individual have? It's amazing the man reunited a continent, and he did all those things. Then to expect him to run a peacetime economy is crazy.

But of course he wants to do it so he stays there. Or if you think about like in Britain, Winston Churchill: a great wartime leader, but he's booted out of office right after that war. If you think about different capabilities of people, don't expect one individual to do everything.

So that's a whole other problem. When Mao is running stuff from afar—this is a country with how many people? It hadn't hit a billion then, but it's hundreds of millions and it's been shattered by warlord rule forever. And so how are you going to extend central control to the countryside? Really tricky. I suspect that's why he puts them on communes, because it lines up with communism, but it also lines up with party control.

Because if you put all this vast population—because most people are peasants—on communes, then you control whether they eat or don't. You truly control them. So it's those factors. It's so big when you start putting a policy in place from Beijing. And then how that actually fans out over the whole country, it's got to be a mess. Different localities and things.

Dwarkesh Patel

But when I compare him to other, even other communist leaders.

Sarah Paine

Which ones?

Dwarkesh Patel

So if you look at Stalin, for example, yes, he causes the Holodomor, right? Three million people die, but -

Sarah Paine

Uh, details, yeah.

Dwarkesh Patel

But that was an intentional famine where he was trying to root out the kulaks. The Great Leap Forward was - he wasn't trying to kill tens of millions of Chinese. And there's instances in the 20s where Stalin threatens to resign, and people close to him, Molotov and others, say, "You can't do it because nobody else can run the government like you can."

Sarah Paine

Yeah, right. [gun gesture]

Dwarkesh Patel

True, but the level of...

Sarah Paine

[noose gesture] Yeah?

Dwarkesh Patel

Stalin was a devoted communist, and that led to many deaths. But he didn't seem deluded in the same kind of way that Mao was.

Sarah Paine

Well, first of all, Russia is quite a developed country compared to China. And if you think about it, Russia had been industrializing since the late 19th century, and China's a much later event. Russia also has all sorts of institutions and things that China was lacking.

So already, Stalin has many more tools at his disposal than what the Chinese communists are going to have. Also, the kind of warfare. Think about the warfare in China. You got the Taiping Rebellion, only the biggest of the peasant rebellions of the 19th century, and I can't remember if it was 20 or 30 million people.

That's a large number, right? Because I think World War II is supposed to be like 55 million. So there are a whole series of these peasant rebellions in the 19th century that go on for, I don't know, 25, 50 years, one's here, one's there. By the end of it, they've basically devastated parts of every province. Then you overlay this with the Warlords coming in and all of that. Overlay that with the communist-nationalist thing. Overlay that with the Japanese.

You're talking about a massively trashed country. And think about it. I'll give you another example. For Americans in the room. And for others who aren't Americans, you'll have to, based on your dealings with Americans.

This country had a civil war. It ran, what, four or five years? It was mostly in the South. Northerners came, joined armies, and then went to the South. The institutions of government didn't change in Washington. They certainly did in the Confederacy. But those were new things, right? Because they were trying to secede.

And the losing side of that war still hasn't gotten over it. Right? So if that's what's going on here, and that thing wasn't nearly as brutal as the civil wars... At the end of the Civil War, who gets... Lee's army is allowed to go home. They aren't shot on sight.

Which would be the kind of thing that went on in the Russian Civil War, Chinese Civil War. So, if that kind of bitterness and unsettledness is still present in this highly institutionalized, wealthy country, this one, you better believe China's a mess. So then when you're wondering why Mao can't surf that wave, no one can.

Dwarkesh Patel

Just to linger on this...

Sarah Paine

Uh-oh. New exit strategy.

Dwarkesh Patel

Even if he's not a specialist on agriculture, and even if China is a hard country to govern, he was somebody who was shrewd in the sense of, when these battles were happening, I imagine if somebody came up to him and said, "We're winning these battles," and it's a total fabrication, they're in fact losing these battles, he would have been quick enough to realize, "Listen, this is just wishful thinking. I realize you're just trying to make me feel good, but this is a lie and I'm not going to stand for it."

Whereas, if you go to the Great Leap Forward, millions of Chinese are dying, and they come to him and say, "The grain harvests have never been higher." And he's like, "Great, let's export

our grain." And there's this ability to have this basic discernment of what is actually going on. That situational awareness is gone.

Sarah Paine

Okay, there's, no. Mao doesn't become canonized as Mao, or - I'm mixing metaphors - the Emperor of China until victory in the Korean War. So in the early period...

Oh, Mao is supposed to have written this book called On Guerrilla Warfare. It is not written by Mao. It took time to figure it out, for outsiders. It's written by Peng Dehuai and others, his generals. And so there were many people's ideas that went into winning the civil war. It is not just Mao. And then he winds up purging these people later.

And so it's not until after the... During the Korean War, he's busy purging everybody massively because you can use it as a big excuse, right? We got this war, we don't want to hear from these people. And so he has purged more and more and more and more people, so that there are fewer and fewer counterarguments. It's a real case against dictatorship. For all the chaos of party politics, you're at least forced to confront the counterargument. It is a healthier situation to be in.

Dwarkesh Patel

Let's go back to the end of World War II.

Sarah Paine

Okay.

Dwarkesh Patel

So if you look at basically all the main actors, none of them get even most of what they want. Some of them get the exact opposite of what they want.

Germany and Japan initiate to expand their territory. Both of them end up with the smallest territory they've had in a long time. Britain starts the war - or not starts, but enjoins the war - in order to defend Poland. Poland ends up in totalitarian occupation afterwards, and the British Empire disintegrates.

But Stalin ends up with the borders of the Soviet Union vastly expanded. China becomes Communist. How do we make sense? Is Stalin just a master strategist here?

Sarah Paine

I believe there's a detail of how many tens of millions of Russians died on that thing.

So great, it's a personal success for him. The numbers of Russians who were destroyed in that are incredible. So, okay, for dictators, yeah, they can have personal successes, I think

more, it's in these horrible wars that dictators can rise. Also, Great Depressions provide hothouse conditions for dictators.

I think the lesson is the last thing you want to do is fight a world war, but as Britain discovered in World War II, if Hitler's insistent, you're stuck. It might be a lesson for our own day. Isn't this Ukraine's problem? They didn't want to fight a war. What are you going to do? Putin launched.

We don't exactly want to fight a war. Well, what are you going to do? Let Putin do whatever he wants forever, however long he wants? The reason you all are prosperous is there's a global maritime order in which people obey rules because it is so much cheaper to obey rules. Because what do you do when people break the rules? You hire a lawyer.

It's not protection money or starting to blow up each other's buildings and destroying wealth at an incredible clip, which is what you're seeing going on in Ukraine. So these things are consequential, none of us makes all the choices, and when other people make bad choices, you're stuck responding to them.

Dwarkesh Patel

Before Mao, before the Communists completely won the civil war, did people anticipate truly how terrible the communist power would end up being in China?

Sarah Paine

I doubt it. I think Communism was a new thing, right? So you've got it going on with the Russians. I mean the Nationalists were telling us that it would be like this, and we looked at them and go, "What could be worse than the Nationalists?"

Because they were in a desperate situation with all that the Japanese were doing, and then they get blamed for it all. Yeah there can be something worse than that, which we call communists.

But I don't know that anyone could have predicted... Can anyone do a crystal ball what the world's going to be like in 10 years? It seems when you read the history books that it had to be that way, and yet in our own lives, we know it's contingency, of why things turn out as the aggregate of all of our choices. How would you ever calculate that?

Dwarkesh Patel

I wonder if there's a lesson in there that America should be more open about supporting corrupt, somewhat autocratic regimes because, especially when they're facing fanatical ideologues, because things really can get much, much, much worse.

Sarah Paine

I think Americans need to worry about overextension. Any country has to worry about overextension. We have finite resources. Also, you're talking about sending your fellow Americans to go get themselves killed, and that's quite something to ask someone to make that kind of sacrifice. It had better be worth it.

There are 300 million Americans, while the world's got 8 billion. Uh, be cautious. What's key on this maritime order, the big insurance policy of it all, is our allies and institutions. This is the great gift of the Greatest Generation, of having created the UN, which is how many millions of lives have been saved from polio vaccines and other things that come through the UN? Do not dismiss these organizations, they've done a lot. Or the EU.

Work through these things, and listen to your allies. They will have insights, and there is power in allies. Tell me, who China's allies are? The crazy man in Korea who can't even feed people in the 21st century. Although he certainly feeds himself, but that's a whole -

It's incredible. Who are China's friends? I mean, Iran, a theocracy? I mean, talk about passé. Who does theocracies anymore? Okay, the Iranians. Good on them.

Dwarkesh Patel

After World War II, the Soviets are giving the communists in China tremendous amounts of leftover weapons from the Japanese and a bunch of other goods, supporting them tremendously. At the same time, Truman is wishy-washy and does an actual arms embargo on Chiang Kai-shek in 1946. The Marshall Plan for Europe is \$13 billion to help build up defenses against communist appeal.

At the same time, Truman has to be forced in 1948 by Congress to give a couple hundred million to China, literally one-hundredth of what was given to Europe. And by that time, it's too late for Chiang Kai-shek.

If you look at that record, it seems like we abysmally messed up after World War II in helping the Nationalists stay in power, right?

Sarah Paine

Do not exaggerate the capabilities of any one country for openers. But I think it's really important to distinguish between nation-building and nation rebuilding. If you're rebuilding, which is what happens in Japan and Germany, they already had full-up institutions, modern economies before the war.

They had no problems with educational institutions going all the way up, judicial institutions, they had competent police forces, competent... They had parliaments and other things. So that when you give Germans some cash, and Japanese as well, they know

exactly how to recreate things and rapidly produce modern institutions. You're talking about China. They never had these institutions. There is no indigenous expertise.

Oh, and by the way, what's the illiteracy rate in China compared to Japan? Whoa. No one reads in China, and everyone reads in Japan. It's not quite that bad.

And we've had this problem in Iraq and Afghanistan. So we decide we're going to do the de-Ba'athification thing, and then we think the police are going to still show up and work. Except no, that's not how it works, they haven't got these institutions. And so it's not feasible. A Marshall Plan in China would not have worked.

And also, we had really competent foreign service officers in China in this period. Why? They're the children of missionaries. And so they spoke fluent Chinese and had a deep understanding of China.

And they were saying it's hopeless, that there is no way Chiang Kai-shek's going to win this thing because he's hated by the peasantry, which he was, because for the reasons I've told you. If he's busy dragooning them into his armies because he feels he has no choices, whereas the Communists are giving them land and educating them, you better believe who the peasants are supporting.

And the missionaries, they were then caught up in the McCarthy purges and were just about ruined. Lost their jobs in the State Department and elsewhere, only to be exonerated 10, 15, 20 years later when they've already lost their careers and who knows how they raised their families?

Dwarkesh Patel

I thought it was the case that George Marshall, who was the envoy to China, the diplomat. I thought it was a case that later on they realized it was hopeless and so then they stopped supporting Chiang, but, but-

Sarah Paine

It's at the time, different people realized it at different times.

Dwarkesh Patel

But the reason they didn't support Chiang as much as they should have was because they thought he was - I mean, the Communists almost seemed like hopeless underdogs.

It was just thought that Chiang is going to win and therefore we don't have to support him.

Sarah Paine

No, no, no, no.

Dwarkesh Patel

They were constantly goading the Nationalists to form some sort of ceasefire, do some sort of coalition government, when in fact what it should have done is like, no, you have to make sure that you keep China.

Sarah Paine

No, it was considered hopeless. This is called making a net assessment of not what you want it to be, but an accurate one. They believed it was not feasible.

Dwarkesh Patel

Even in 1945, 46?

Sarah Paine

You're talking hundreds of millions of people. We can't even deal with Afghanistan today. With what, 20 million people? It's not feasible. It's at the end of World War II. American GIs are sick of it, and as are their parents, of fighting more wars.

Dwarkesh Patel

We didn't have to send GIs, we just had to not cut off support.

Sarah Paine

Europe has been leveled and there's this absolute fear that the Communists are going to move into Europe, which actually counts for Western economies in those days. The Italian and French Communist parties were incredibly strong, so all the focus of limited resources is going to make sure that Europe settles out. We don't have infinite resources.

Dwarkesh Patel

I feel like you could do better than 1/100th of the Marshall Plan to keep China from turning Communist. And look what the consequences were: Vietnam, we had to fight, Korea, we had to fight, Cambodia, the genocide there.

Sarah Paine

But you can't solve all these things. There are things that are not feasible.

Dwarkesh Patel

I'm going to linger on this because...

Sarah Paine

You're an optimist. But anyway, maybe you're right, but anyway you've got my take on it and I can't prove I'm right. That would be my take.

Dwarkesh Patel

I remember in your book, which is to your right, *The War for Asia*, there's a passage where you say there are so many sort of individual, contingent things that led to the Communists taking power.

Sarah Paine

Yes.

Dwarkesh Patel

If any of these factors was off...

Sarah Paine

Yes.

Dwarkesh Patel

The outcome might have been different.

Sarah Paine

Yes.

Dwarkesh Patel

Of all these factors, the fact that American support, or lack thereof, was not one of them, it just seems like it was a super contingent thing. But also, America not being as strong as it should have just didn't matter.

Sarah Paine

I don't know – it's just not politically feasible. I mean, talk about it?

Put yourself back in those days. You've already done a three-year tour in World War II because, in those days, you started serving whenever it was in the war, and you weren't coming home until the war was over. It was none of this nine-month tour, a year tour here and there. You were there for the duration.

So you get home. And then you're told, "Go make nice to the Chinese and go get yourself killed there." How is that going to fly in your family? Probably poorly.

Dwarkesh Patel

I mean, again, you don't have to send the GIs there. You can just not do an arms embargo on them.

Sarah Paine

I think it was so minor, by then it's too late. The great question is, some would argue that in 1946 when Marshall tells Chiang Kai-shek to halt his advance—this is when he's doing quite well—and when I mentioned that the terminal point of retreat for the Communists was up in Siping, Manchuria, some would argue that Marshall should never have done that, he should have let the Nationalists go all the way up, and that would have changed the outcome of the Chinese Civil War. You could make an argument that that might be true. Here's the counterargument, and I don't know the answer.

If you look at a map of China, or imagine one, Manchuria is way up, it's like a salient into Communist territory because it's bordering all the Soviet Union. And then it's got quite a coastline, but the Soviets had blockaded that, so nothing's getting in that way. The only way, given the Chinese railway system, is that literally one train line connects Manchuria to South China.

So, it means Chiang Kai-shek's movements are incredibly predictable. So one argument you could make, and people have, and I don't know the answer, none of us does, is that, hey, that was the big error. So if that's the big error, the mistake - and this is a common one that Americans make so this is worth talking about - is Americans often don't look at warring parties to understand if they are primary adversaries there is no way you're going to make them make nice. So the United States had trouble for years trying to get Pakistanis and Indians to cooperate, and it would want to give aid to both of them and just didn't get it.

As long as they're primary adversaries, you aid one, it infuriates the other, and they're never going to cooperate the two of them. Or I suspect what was going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, so you want to have a democracy, and you want to have all the parties represented.

Well, if they all want to obliterate each other, the last thing they want to do is have representation of the other side, right? So, if you have parties that want to exterminate each other, the idea of getting them to cooperate is impossible. So don't try it.

That would be the lesson from this thing. We kept trying to do a coalition government with the communists and the nationalists. It's a non-starter.

But the United States was a very isolationist country and didn't have the attitude of a great power until after World War II. In World War I, we felt dragged into it, and these horrible wars, and being quite irresponsible during the Great Depression, and just ignoring everybody else's problems, didn't want to hear about it. And then we get a World War II out of that, and then we rethink that whole proposition.

Dwarkesh Patel

If you had to speculate, suppose the Nationalists win. In Taiwan, because they're forced to, they have a very pro-American policy. But if they had won in the mainland China, would it have been similar where mainland China just turns into Taiwan, or would it have been different?

Sarah Paine

No, I'm sure it would be different. One of the reasons Taiwan is Taiwan is after they lost the civil war and they are on the island of Taiwan, they did a big after-action analysis of what went wrong and they decided it was corruption and that it was land reform that they needed to fix those things. But they couldn't do land reform on the mainland because that's their officer corps. But when they come to Taiwan, they can more than redistribute Taiwanese land, which they do and it's bloody. Because the Taiwanese don't want their land redistributed. The Taiwanese were given bonds, and they thought those bonds would be like the pieces of paper that were issued in the mainland, i.e. worth nothing, but actually after time they became quite valuable.

Land reform was bloody in Taiwan, but today Taiwan has a very equal income distribution.

Dwarkesh Patel

And what is the explanation for – you just had these tallies of numbers up of how many deaths through different events. The famine obviously makes sense, a lot of people would die.

But you just go down the list, and there are so many things where a couple million people die, and it's like one out of ten items that happen within a span of a couple of decades.

Sarah Paine

It's famine. If you have warfare, you have famine. It's not mostly bang, bang, you're dead. That goes on too, but it's starvation when you disrupt things in this way.

Dwarkesh Patel

Why didn't the Communists have the same troubles that the Kuomintang had in terms of not being able to pay its soldiers? I mean, it was the same China, right? It wasn't a developed economy. So why didn't they have trouble paying their soldiers and retaining them?

Sarah Paine

Oh, I think it's because everyone's on board. The peasants have got their land, the only way they're ever going to keep it, they think, is by supporting the Communists and Mao isn't living any kind of luxurious life, there's no – that was another thing. You have these rich officer corps and the Nationalists flaunting their wealth among absolutely starving people. And that's another reason why they're hated.

Whereas the Communists never had those people, so no one's flaunting their wealth. You saw the pictures of Mao and his beloved there in the incredibly baggy clothing. No one's got luxury wear or anything.

Dwarkesh Patel

Although after they won, Mao is famously a fan of luxury and has - right? In a way that I think Stalin would sleep on his couch in his office.

Sarah Paine

Yeah, I don't know the details on Mao. Mao had other things that had to do with little girls, but anyway.

Dwarkesh Patel

Okay, you were just mentioning China, this period of turmoil, constantly there's insurgencies and chaos, and then we go to all the turmoil that Mao causes, all the people, when he gets into power, tens of millions of people are dying. And yet, there's never a major insurgency after he takes power. There's never a coup that works.

Sarah Paine

Oh, communists are good at this. When the North Vietnamese won, what do they promptly get? Famine. And in Vietnam, I think you have kind of three harvests, like how do you ever have famine in that place? But yeah, they did.

This is the "brilliance" of communism is this commissar system and the party system, and how they set up their government, it's incredibly effective about maintaining power. It's very effective about seizing power during warfare, maintaining it thereafter, but it does not deliver prosperity, it delivers compounding poverty, take a look at North Korea. It's a mess, but the man's in power.

Dwarkesh Patel

Why don't the high-level officials in the CCP, after they see the impact of the Great Leap Forward, the Liu Shaoqis and the Deng Xiaopings, why don't they -

Sarah Paine

They did.

Dwarkesh Patel

Well they - he wasn't running day-to-day affairs. But in terms of making sure he's never in a position to, in the future, do something like the Cultural Revolution?

Sarah Paine

They try. This is when you get Peng Dehuai, who – he was the general in charge of forces during the Korean War, and also Long March generation. He had lost several of his siblings to starvation over the course of these civil wars. And he and Liu Shaoqi pulled the plug on Mao, and then Mao is demoted from one of his positions, and that's when you get the Cultural Revolution because Mao is on his way out of power from these guys.

So what does Mao do? He gets out of Beijing, and he rallies the youth, the Red Guards. These are the children who've been educated in communist education about how wonderful the communists are and how beloved Chairman Mao is. So Chairman Mao tells the teenagers that they should be in charge.

Think about teenagers: not much life experience, but telling them they're in charge. And then they start out by killing off their teachers, right? They have teachers they probably don't like, and it's incredibly empowering. Then they start working their way up the educational system and fan outward.

And it's like a semi-civil war. And then this is when Lin Biao comes in, who is a military leader, and Mao is going to use him to restore order, but after he's ousted all the people who are going to get rid of him, that's what the Cultural Revolution is about.

And it is ruinous for production, right? Doing all this. And you're gutting your educational system. All the people who gave the hard grades, who may have actually known something, they're gone.

Dwarkesh Patel

From Mao's perspective, didn't the Cultural Revolution work extremely well? Because –

Sarah Paine

For him, yeah. Not for China.

Dwarkesh Patel

He launches it because he sees Khrushchev's speech in 1956 denouncing Stalin and what he had done, and didn't want the same thing to happen to him after he dies. And today, look, the portrait of Mao hangs in the square, and he's revered in a way that Hitler or Stalin aren't revered in their countries, despite killing more people.

Sarah Paine

Well, though I think Stalin's having a bit of a comeback with Vladimir Putin. And Vladimir Putin is starting to mimic more of the centralized... He's going to recentralize his economy in ways that start looking like the old one.

Dwarkesh Patel

When people say things like, "Xi Jinping is acting like Mao," how do you react knowing how Mao actually behaved?

Sarah Paine

Oh, Xi Jinping apparently reveres Mao. My understanding about Xi Jinping's education is his dad was a very high-level Communist leader who was purged but not killed, and sent to sort of interior north somewhere in China.

And so when Xi was on the, what is it, the "down to the countryside" movement, where a lot of kids were sent to really horrible places, he was sent, I think, where his dad was. Or where protectors who liked his dad were. So it wasn't as bad as it could be.

But he was not well-educated because he couldn't be in that period, right? It's during the... He may have degrees from places, but the institution in question during the Cultural Revolution wasn't delivering an education.

So he's a believer in communism. Don't ever kid yourself that the Communist Party of China doesn't believe in communism now. They think they've modified some of the economic stuff under Deng Xiaoping, but now they're recentralizing it right back the way it was.

Dwarkesh Patel

Given the fact that he personally suffered during the Cultural Revolution... I think there's a story that at some point, because his dad is announced, he was announced and he tried to come back to their home to get fed by his mother, and his mother had to turn him away. This happens to him during the Cultural Revolution.

How do you explain these CCP officials who personally suffered during the Cultural Revolution being pro-Mao?

Sarah Paine

I mean, Stalin was abused as a child, and then he's incredibly abusive. Hitler was abused as a child. Why would you expect... I use the word sociopath or psychopath, both apply to him. Don't think he's going to have any tender mercies for anyone.

I mean his own son is... Oh, he abandoned various sets of kids who starved to death and died and one son, he put him right up in Korea where he could get killed, and he promptly did, so.

Oh and Stalin, that was another great one - the Nazis captured Stalin's son and wanted to trade him for something. Stalin said, "Nah nah nah."

Dwarkesh Patel

How do people in China today think about Mao? Why aren't they more pissed off, you know, you look at these numbers?

Sarah Paine

I'm guessing, I'm not Chinese, but I think all of us need to be proud of things. Of course, one thing to be very proud of if you're Chinese is Chinese civilization. These enormous achievements in philosophy, in the sciences, all kinds of arts, it's incredible.

But many Chinese also want to feel proud of their leaders, and so Mao is incredibly consequential. I think it's also really hard to look at the dark side of your own country. This country has slavery; it is our original sin. We have not gotten over it.

And the part of the United States where slavery was most deeply embedded to this day has the deepest problems dealing with that. So if Americans who are rich and have everything have trouble with these things, why would we think - and this country has so much that's just obvious to be proud of, the wealth and innovation and things, a recent innovation and then we claim we won all these wars all by our lonesome, and of course we had allies, come on.

But I think that's part of it, is understanding the... Chinese history has been so sad. If you ever go to a Chinese movie you hear the erhu, whatever the instrument is, it's just so sad and melancholy. Whereas American movies are all happy. Millions of people die, but the good guys live, right?

It's always a happy ending, and what is it, in Arnold Schwarzenegger in True Lies, he says, "Oh, honey. They were all bad."

Dwarkesh Patel

I want to try out an idea on you.

Sarah Paine

You've tried many, what's the latest?

Dwarkesh Patel

One could claim that Mao, being so terrible and being this strong counterexample, is what the reformers needed in order to create China's post-Mao growth. In the sense that, if you were to really abandon communism and pursue pro-growth policies, you needed, viscerally, the cultural revolution as a counterexample, the Great Leap Forward, to say, "No, we've got to try something else."

Sarah Paine

Possible. Definitely possible, because of all the people who were ruined by it.

But I think there's another one. You should give the Taiwanese great credit. Taiwan did an after-action report. They're one of the four Asian tigers that went from a very poor country to an absolutely wealthy country. I think it's around 1990-ish where Taiwan is—I think this statistic is right, I'll try this—it's got 1/50th the population of the mainland, it's got 1/250th of the land mass of the mainland, and it has about 40% of the GNP.

And if you're PRC mainland looking at this, how embarrassing. The losers of the war have won the peace and put you to shame for how incompetently brutal you are.

And that's Taiwan's problem to this day, is that they are a rebuke to everything the Communist Party is. There used to be this racist notion that "Oh, Han Chinese and democracy, incompatible, can't do that." Well, China—Taiwan has proven that wrong. And look at Taiwan. They have, what is it, their chip foundry? Incredible. No one can duplicate it. Right?

Impressive. Tell me something that China has that can't—that no one can duplicate—except for crazy stuff.

Dwarkesh Patel

What I find disturbing about communism in comparison to—I mean, maybe even especially Chinese communism— is.. when Hitler is killing the Jews, he doesn't make them first say, "Listen, you know, we were responsible for World War I," which he falsely claimed, "and we renounce our Semitic ways," or something.

And with the Cultural Revolution, with Chinese communism, there's a very important aspect where the victim must participate in their own victimization. They must be the one to say, "I'm guilty," in a way that didn't seem necessary in other kinds of regimes.

Sarah Paine

Oh, well, Hitler's just trying to annihilate people, so he didn't care what they were going to tell him. He's just going to kill them all. So that's just complete—he's into destroying every last Jew there is, right? Plus Gypsies and some other people. So that's a separate thing. China has a long tradition of education.

I mean, what's Confucianism about? It's the scholars at the top, right? It's—in Japan, it's the general, the shoguns at the top. In China, the soldiers at the bottom of the social pyramid, and it's all about educating people. And then the entire imperial system, how did you get mobility? There was a way to mobility: take the imperial exams and if you pass them and do

well, you're off and running. So, and there's also a tradition of re-educating people. You could shoot everybody, you could, but that's not the Chinese tradition.

The loads of people dying is, a lot of it's starvation. So, people like Deng Xiaoping, who, if you'd been in Russia, they'd just - Stalin killed all the old Bolsheviks, right? There was no chance to come back, whereas the Chinese will put people in prison and try to re-educate them, and then you let them out afterwards. It's a tradition of educating people, different culture, different approaches to these things.

Dwarkesh Patel

If you look at, you were mentioning Chiang Kai-shek's purge of the Communists, where he just massacred thousands of them.

Sarah Paine

Oh, yes.

Dwarkesh Patel

Whereas -

Sarah Paine

He's a soldier.

Dwarkesh Patel

Whereas other people, even other nationalists, wanted to accommodate the Communists more, especially early on, and he has one quote that "the Japanese are a disease of the flesh, but the Communists are a disease of the soul". So, what was the nature of his anti-communism? Because in retrospect, obviously the means we don't endorse, but he was right about that understanding of what would happen with the Communists in power.

Sarah Paine

He was interested in communism, and he sent his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, to Russia to study. Actually, his son was a hostage up there. He married a Russian.

That's one of the reasons you don't have a Chiang dynasty because these children are not 100% Han, right? Because their mom's Russian. However, as he learned more about it, because initially he's interested in that, he's interested in playing fascism as well, and how you organize society.

He studied in Japan, knew a great deal about how the Japanese had done things. I think he had military education there as well. But then he starts realizing how dangerous they are. He was accurate. He did not want to fight the Japanese at all.

And he was forced to by Chinese students, among others, and a lot of the urban elite that he depended on, who were horrified with what Japan was doing. But Chiang Kai-shek knew you only take on one enemy at a time. You'll become overwhelmed if you do, and he believed that really he needed to kind of accommodate or put the Japanese aside, fight the Communists, get rid of them, and then he's hoping the United States will get in or something that then he could deal with the Japanese separately.

But he faced so much popular pressure that that's when the Xi'an incident takes place at the end of '36, where he agrees to form the second United Front. He realizes he'll be overthrown by popular hatred of the Japanese, thinking they have to fight the Japanese. So he didn't have his choices on military strategies at the end there.

Dwarkesh Patel

When you read Western journalists who are covering the communists in China sympathetically, people like Edgar Snow, and this is not just true of China, Walter Duranty covering up the Holodomor in Russia, what's going on psychologically? How do you understand their naivety here?

Sarah Paine

Oh I don't know about the other guy, but I do know about Edgar Snow. So Edgar Snow is in the Depression. He's from the Midwest. He was a bored young man. He wants an adventure, so he goes off to China. This is typical.

And he's in these cities where he's seeing nationalist corruption, and it's evident there. Mao is looking for a foreign journalist. There had been a guy, Jack Reed, who'd written however many days of the Russian Revolution, back during the Russian revolution he'd really popularised it and I suspect, but I don't know, that Mao probably needed his own Jack Reed, and Edgar Snow seemed the perfect guy because he's a very good writer. You want someone who could write well, and he's young and naive.

So what was it? Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of China, is married to one of the Soong sisters. Another one of the Soong sisters is married to Chiang Kai-shek. And there's a third one who's married to a banker. But anyway, it's the communist one who puts Mao on, I think, to Edgar Snow. So someone goes to Edgar and says "Hey, you want to come up to Yanan to interview the big man?" And Edgar goes, "Sure." They infiltrate him through Japanese lines and all the rest of it. And there's Mao, the busy man, who's spending hours with the 30-year-old, or I don't even know if he was 20-year-old. I can't remember how old he was.

And Edgar Snow doesn't get it. Like, why is he spending all this time with me? And he's taken by it. And Mao's, of course, showing him all the good stuff, right? So Edgar Snow's seeing all the happy peasants who've got the land, and they're cooperating in the guerilla this and that.

And he is the last person to get out of Ye'nan. And then the Japanese in the war just shuts it down so nobody's got any more information about Mao ever.

So Edgar Snow writes his book, Red Star Over China. He gives the drafts to Mao - oh yeah, he does the Mao interviews and then he has Mao correct them. And his translator corrected them back and forth, which isn't the normal thing. And then over the different editions of Red Star Over China, because I've actually read them and followed the changes, more and more of it gets eliminated. The original version has all kinds of pictures of people that Mao subsequently purges, so those pictures go away. All references to those people go away, and they're no longer in the index.

And Edgar Snow goes along with this. And for the rest of his life, he is publishing books that are a variation on a theme on this book because it's the only thing that makes him important.

Dwarkesh Patel

Before he dies, is he discredited?

Sarah Paine

No. Mao wanted him - it was right when Nixon was reopening China - Mao desperately wanted Edgar Snow to cover that, and Edgar Snow got pancreatic cancer, and he was living in Switzerland. He'd run into trouble with the McCarthy era, as you can well imagine, for good reasons, actually.

And so Mao sent his personal physician to attend to Edgar Snow. But pancreatic cancer still kills, and it killed him. So, no, and this was even though people Edgar Snow knew had been purged during these various campaigns and also the great famine. He denied all of it till the very end because this is what made him important and so that's what he was to the end of his life: me, me, me, me, me.

Dwarkesh Patel

When you had the slogans up about what Mao is telling the peasants or the different slogans he would come up with, it's not tremendously sophisticated stuff. It's like one line that's catchy or something.

Sarah Paine

Like a tweet.

Dwarkesh Patel

Yeah.

Sarah Paine

Still works.

Dwarkesh Patel

Why was this enough? You can just write one line and that's -

Sarah Paine

It's not enough. I think if you're talking about someone who has no power, the one thing they've got are words. And so this is how it turns out "strategic communication", or whatever the jargon is for it, is terribly important. And we're finding it now, right? We're wondering on what is actually fake news, what's disinformation, what's accurate, what's not. What's deliberately inaccurate? Who's posting it? Where? It's powerful.

You can see in the current election how important information is. Mao and the Communists play it well, and the Russians absolutely understand how to do this, this is their - they're really good at understanding both sides fighting, and then you feed information both ways so that they're just at each other's throats, and being more and more dysfunctional. Oh, yeah.

Dwarkesh Patel

When was the last time you were allowed to go into the archives in China?

Sarah Paine

Oh, it wasn't a question of being allowed. I got a fellowship right - it was supposed to happen right after Tiananmen, and that got closed down. That was, Tiananmen was in June of '89. So the fellowship was delayed for half a year, and then we went for all of 1990. And so I used different archives, but then I did other things, like I had two children and I stayed at home with them.

I was the spouse that didn't travel so that there would be stability in little people's lives. And now I would no more visit China you've got to be kidding. The archives have shut down now. And then the Russian archives it was, again, it was early Gorbachev when the archives were opening. They're slammed shut now.

Dwarkesh Patel

It's funny to hear you say I wouldn't visit China now. So in two weeks, I'm going to go to China. My next question -

Sarah Paine

Have fun.

Dwarkesh Patel

My next question was going to be: What is your advice?

Sarah Paine

Keep your mouth shut. Be a good guest. And don't bring any computer equipment that you ever intend to use ever again and link with anything.

Dwarkesh Patel

Yeah. When you're in these archives and you're studying all these atrocities that happen, if you look at the numbers themselves, it might be fair to call it genuinely the worst thing that ever happened in human history in terms of pure number of deaths.

That's a hard record to match if you look at everything else that's happened in human history. Viscerally, what's the reaction just going through record after record of this kind of...

Sarah Paine

Oh, it's just tragedy. It's the human condition.

And don't think that China is unique in this. The West has butchered itself, westerners have butchered each other. In fact, it's the West that industrializes warfare. So instead of - before you had to go at it with spears, and that slowed people down. With industrial equipment...

So it's human, sadly. Humans have great capacity for creativity and doing wonderful things, and then they have great capacity to do awful things. So let's do one and not the other.

Dwarkesh Patel

That seems like a pretty good place to close. Sarah, this was... I mean, I don't want to say "fun" because we're talking about Mao here. But it...

Sarah Paine

Great topic.

Dwarkesh Patel

It was interesting.

Sarah Paine

You want to save your reputation.

Dwarkesh Patel

Great, thank you.

Sarah Paine

You're welcome. Thank you for coming.