

## THE MAOS AND THE LIUS

*Liu Shaoqi had been Mao Zedong's closest collaborator since the late 1930s. In 1957 Liu became Chairman (or President) of the People's Republic after Mao resigned from that position, and it was generally assumed that he would succeed Mao as chief of regime. Liu, however, was purged during the Cultural Revolution, accused of promoting a restoration of capitalism. He was abused and vilified, as were members of his family, and in 1969 he was allowed to die of neglect.*

*His widow, much younger than Liu, survived until 2006. She was the rather glamorous daughter of a big Tianjin capitalist whom Liu married shortly before the founding of the People's Republic. When Liu came under attack she was imprisoned and was not released until 1978, around the time when Liu's good name was restored by the Deng Xiaoping regime.*

*Kong Dongmei is the granddaughter of Mao Zedong, the daughter of Li Min, a child of Mao's marriage to He Zhishen. Her aunt, Li Na, is the daughter of Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing. The girls grew up with the surname Li, the birth name of Jiang Qing: this was not an unusual arrangement for the children of ranking officials of the founding generation: it was a way of concealing their parentage both as a security measure and to prevent favoritism toward them by teachers at school. Kong Dongmei has been working to promote what she calls a "New Red Culture," presenting a rather idealized, nostalgic picture of the years following Liberation, seen, prior to the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, as a time of hope and idealism.*

*The piece translated/paraphrased below seems to be part of that project. It shows the Maos and the Lius as two big happy families living in neighborly harmony, visiting back*

*and forth and generally enjoying life together. The children may have interacted frequently, but the actual impression is that Chairman Mao was very aloof:*

*“Grandfather would visit the homes of his comrades in arms for casual conversations. He visited the Liu house at least twice”—in 17 years!*

*The other “message” conveyed is that whatever the (glossed over) troubles of the past, the families of the state founders have reconciled and are all friends now: there has been a happy ending.*

Kong Dongmei

## GREAT LOVE WITHOUT WORDS

Mourning Lady Wang Guangmei

26 October 2006

When I received the brief letter from Uncle Liu Yuan with the news that Lady Wang had passed away, I realized that the one who had just left this world was not only a widely respected woman of legendary reputation but also an important witness to history. She had participated in and witnessed the stormy years of her great generation.

Among the wives of the five leaders who created the New China—Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Ren Bishi—Lady Wang Guangmei was the youngest. I remember that in February of this year we said farewell to the venerable Yu Ruomu, the wife of Chen Yun. My own mother Li Min said to herself through her sobs: “There are very few of these old ladies left...” Lady Wang Guangmei, a Party member of the same seniority, 85 years old, read through the tributes, which amounted to an endless account of legendary deeds. Thinking back on the decades of intercourse between Lady

Guangmei and the Mao household and remembering how stylishly she carried herself, Mama and I fell into deep thought.

Lady Guangmei met my grandfather Mao Zedong for the first time in 1948. That same year she married Grandfather Liu Shaoqi in Xibo, in Hebei. My grandfather was present to congratulate them. From what I know, Grandfather did not preside over many weddings; this may have been the only one. At that time Premier Zhou said to the Chairman: "Let's go together to Comrade Shaoqi's house and take a look at how he is getting along." Everybody went together to the new house, with great noise and celebration. The new bride served cake she and her companions had made themselves to the Chairman, the Premier, and her husband. The three leaders sat chatting happily while they ate cake. Grandfather also gave Auntie Li Na a piece of cake for her to take back home. In her later years Lady Guangmei would say with feeling: When Comrade Shaoqi and I got married, I don't know whether you could say whether or not there were any formalities; but both Chairman Mao and Comrade Zhou Enlai came in person to our house to give congratulations.

Not long after that Grandfather entered Beijing's Xiangshan. My mama, Li Na, was then able to see her father for the first time in many years. When I asked Mama whether she saw Lady Guangmei at Xiangshan, she said she was certain she had not. I think one reason was that at that time Lady Guangmei was undergoing one of her life's great events: she was becoming a mother. It was during this time that Lady Guangmei gave birth to her first child, whom I'd later know as Auntie Pingping. Auntie Pingping was a highly trained and educated technical worker responsible as well for important and trying leadership work. Alas, in 1998, at the golden age of 50 she was unable to recover from

illness. In her middle years Lady Guangmei lost her husband and in her old age she met this unhappiness. Despite these sad experiences she always kept her open and serene attitude, something one less great-hearted than she would be unable to do.

Granddad Shaoqi had nine children, boys and girls. One can only imagine how much hard work it was for Lady Guangmei to be mistress of such a large household. To be able to accomplish this, in addition to her cultivation and virtue and other personal strengths of character, perhaps her own family background is not without relevance. She was born to a household of 11 children. She had six older brothers (three of them born to her father's previous wife) and four younger sisters. All the children in the Wang family were trained to treat everyone alike and to share in all things. Over the decades Lady Guangmei and her siblings kept up warm family relations, something rarely seen during this past century of turbulent social changes in China.

On the eve of the founding of the New China, the Liu family moved into Zhongnanhai, living as neighbors to the Mao family. The Liu family lived in Building No. 1, known as Wanzilang, near to the Chrysanthemum Scent Library where Grandfather lived. Its name came from the porch (*lang*), which was in the shape of a swastika (*wanzi*). It was a stylish old mansion. Grandfather would come over as a guest. After entering Zhongnanhai, Grandfather would visit the homes of his comrades in arms for casual conversations. He visited the Liu house at least twice.

In 1950 the Jia Building was restored in Zhongnanhai. Originally it had been planned that Grandfather would live there, but he was comfortable in the Chrysanthemum Scent Library and he did not move. The Liu family moved into the Jia Building. Once when Grandfather was over for a visit, the Lius took him on a tour of all the rooms. He saw that

one wall in the office had lots of windows, and wondered, “How come there are so many windows?” Granddad Shaoqi answered, “I don’t know what they’re all for either.” The problem with having too many windows along a single wall is that the room is hot in summer and cold in winter. After that, Lady Guangmei and her husband switched offices, and she herself moved into that many-windowed room. Later on, as the children in Zhongnanhai gradually grew up, the mischievous boys liked to climb to the roof of Grandfather’s house, causing lots of worries for the responsible guard comrades. For reasons of safety the Liu family moved again, to the Fulu Building, which was also near the Mao household. The sad thing is that the Wanzilang and the Fulu Building were both torn down while Granddad Shaoqi was unjustly imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. However, I believe that happy memories and a history of justice will always remain at the bottom of my heart.

The Chunke Studio was next to Grandfather’s quarters. That was the place where the Central leaders held their dances. The Mao and Liu families saw each other there frequently. Once Grandfather asked Lady Guangmei to dance. Mama told me: The first time she formally met Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Comrade Wang Guangmei it was in the Chunke Studio. At that time Mama had gone together with Grandfather to a dance and Granddad Shaoqi and Lady Guangmei were there too. Mama was introduced to them by her older sister Li Min. Lady Guangmei took Mama’s hand and sat and chatted with her politely, asking her how old she was, how school was going. . .

Lady Guangmei once said: She learned to love to swim since 1954, when Grandfather taught her how at Beidaihe. Throughout her changing life, into her older years Lady Guangmei continued to swim; and she also taught her grandchildren how to swim.

Swimming became a symbol of endless self-strengthening for three generations of the Mao and Liu families.

Grandfather was very fond of Lady Guangmei's children. Uncle Liu Yuan once said: Whenever the children saw me and my brothers and sisters he would have hand signals for each of our names: If he held his palm out flat [*ping*], that would mean Pingping; if he put his thumb and index finger together, that would mean Yuanyuan [*yuan*: source; but is pronounced in the same way as the word for round]; he he would put both his hands together in the form of a room, that would mean Tingting. The most interesting sign was for the youngest, Xiaoxiao [Teeny], the daughter born to Lady Guangmei when she was more than 40 years old. She first saw my Grandfather when she was one year old; she stared at the Chairman in a most cute fashion. The Liu kids called Grandfather Uncle Mao, but the littlest called him Great Big Mao. When Grandfather heard this he said, "Ah, indeed; I'm Great Big, and you're Teeny-tiny."

Uncle Liu Yuan and Auntie Liu Ting were like a little brother and sister to Mama. Granddad Shaoqi's older children, Liu Yunbin and his oldest daughter Liu Aiqin, who were her schoolmates at the Moscow International Kindergarten, were like her big brother and sister. Mama and Auntie Liu Aiqin were especially close, always going back and forth between the two houses. As my cousin Xiaochi and I grew up, Uncle Liu Yuan and Auntie Liu Ting always were concerned about us and took care of us. When I returned from abroad and started my enterprise, they followed my every little step, giving me praise and encouragement, in the good-hearted hope that we of the later generations would be able to live peaceful and prosperous lives.

It was in the past few years that I had the closest contacts with Lady Guangmei. The most important time was at a family gathering of the Mao and Liu families held in May 2004 in the Xinyuan Restaurant in Beijing. As the only remaining widow of one of the founders of the state, then 83 years old, the elegant and stately Lady Guangmei was honored by all present. Since she had not seen the women of the Mao family for a long time, she could not help worrying about their health; and Mama and Auntie Li Na were also concerned about her health. Therefore the two families gathered together at Lady Guangmei's invitation. For the first time in their almost 80 years of acquaintanceship, the three generations of the two families were gathered together in a single place. The reunion of these two families who had such a special role in China's experience was of historical significance.

The banquet went on for more than two hours. Among those presiding, on the Liu side there were Lady Guangmei, Uncle Liu Yuan, Auntie Liu Ting, and Granny Zhao, the children's nurse who was as close to Lady Guangmei as a sister. The Mao side included Mama, Aunt Li Na, Uncle Wang Jingqing [Li Na's husband], Cousin Xiaochi, and myself. We talked about old times and good friendships, the ravages of time, the beautiful present; the conversation flowed pleasantly on. The storms around the Wanzilang and Fulu Building were over, leaving only a broad ocean of love and good feelings among the later generations. Uncle Liu Yuan recited to me the famous verse from the poet Su Shi: "It is always chilling to look back—there is neither rain nor sunshine." Lady Guangmei, gentle and dignified, sat among her children, beautiful in her happiness!

I now know that Lady Guangmei was already ill at that time. For years her weak body had been fighting with the demon of illness. On that day Lady Guangmei did not talk much, and she ate very little. Mama was worried and said to Uncle Liu Yuan: It can't be good that she doesn't eat! Uncle Liu Yuan said: When she gets home she'll eat a little of the oatmeal she likes so much; there's no need to worry. During the feast Mama and my aunt asked several times after her health. The Lady smiled and said, "You two are a bit weak and are no longer young. But you're both much younger than I am, so you need to worry about taking care of yourselves." She toasted the older ladies of the Mao family: "Take better care of yourselves!" Then she toasted the younger generation: "I wish you children to prosper!" This gathering of the Maos and the Lius fulfilled a long-held wish of the older folks of both families.

In October 2004, at the suggestion of Uncle Liu Yuan I gathered a collection of writings, taking as a theme a poem of Grandfather's: "*Friendship Blooming Like Flowers Covering a Mountainside*": *A Memoir of the Reunion of the Descendants of Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi*. After this was published, whether I was in China or abroad it seemed that all of those who had been through the experience of the founding of New China would want to talk about it. Once people were able to appreciate Lady Guangmei's transcendent love and the understanding and sympathy that existed between the later generations of the Maos and the Lius, they were happy of the prospects of the perpetuation of a harmonious China.

Not long after this gathering I accompanied Mama to the great commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Comrade Deng Xiaoping. This was the last time I saw Lady Guangmei. Her seat was to the front of ours, to the left. My first impression then



was: How thin she has become! Her hair was silver and she was wearing an elegant light green dress. As I took in the simple but elegant impression, I could not help but think: perhaps only a woman who has experienced such great and total historical changes during her lifetime can have that kind of air about her! I think that all of those present had the same profound sense about her.

As far as I know, Lady Guangmei's last public appearance was at the tenth anniversary celebration of "Project Happiness," in October 2005. This is something worth mentioning: At the age of 75 Lady Guangmei started her own enterprise, as director of Project Happiness, a poverty relief organization. In the past she had accompanied Granddaddy Shaoqi on foreign visits, but now she made arduous journeys to the poor areas in China's countryside. At every forum she spared no effort in publicizing Project Happiness. In order to raise funds she even sold the jewelry left her by her mother. In 10 years Project Happiness became one of China's most successful public programs. This was of great satisfaction to her. She attended the ceremony in a wheelchair and had no strength to express her feelings, but she saluted all those present and waved at them, showing her gratitude before she left. There was no one there who remained unmoved. This is the last impression that Lady Guangmei left on the people of this world: precious, unspoken gentleness. This was a great love that transcended kinship, political opinion, or status; it was a power to move people's hearts.

When I heard of the passing of Lady Guangmei I was very sad. I went to the funeral home with Mama and Auntie. They ordered Xiaozhi to come to the funeral home during each of the five and a half days before her funeral, both before work and after, in order to

show the deepest feelings for Lady Guangmei. On 21 October Mama, Auntie, Xiaozhi, and I arrived at Babaoshan early, to bid a last farewell to Lady Guangmei.

Lady Guangmei has departed from us and into history. But she has not really left us, because of the great love that was in her. She was both traditional and modern; she was part of the great heroic revolutionary generation and also part of the entirely different current age of peace and development. Her person held true love for Granddaddy Shaoqi and a profound friendship for Mao Zedong; and with her startling vitality she was able to launch a new enterprise to deal with problems of poverty that Grandfather and Granddaddy Shaoqi had not had the opportunity to deal with. Lady Guangmei, a truly outstanding woman; she has brought color and glory to history.

*Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 26 October 2006