LESSONS FROM THE LIN BIAO INCIDENT

BY QUI JIN

What is history? How do people remember their experiences? And how do governments and society create a believable history based on distorted facts in the eyes of those who actually experienced historical events?
As an individual, I have found myself transformed from an eyewitness of history anxious to convey what she believes is a true story, to a scholar who can somewhat detach herself from her personal experiences to put events, even highly emotional ones, in a larger historical perspective. It has been a difficult but, I believe, a necessary process.

The events of which I write occurred on the night of September 13, 1971, and changed the lives of many people in China, including my own. Many suffered in the aftermath; many continue to suffer the consequences today.

My father disappeared two weeks later, and for 10 years we did not hear a word from him and didn't even know whether he was still alive or not. My mother and brother were put under house arrest and subsequently sent to a remote farm to work as laborers. My elder sister and I also spent years on the farm to “reform” ourselves through hard labor. My younger sisters, only 11 and 13 at the time, were left to endure the humiliation of their immediate family’s relocation, their father’s disappearance and, somehow, survive on their own.

Personally and professionally, I see it as my responsibility to bear witness to history as it really happened. For the same reason, however, I have put myself in a no-win situation. As a historian, I can be criticized for an interpretation that is at once too personal, too subjective, too speculative and too biased. As a member of a family which suffered so much, I can be accused of not having done enough to redeem those who were mistreated. To officials in the Chinese government, I have no doubt that I am seen as a blasphemer.

The defendants at the open trial of the Lin Biao and Jiang Qing counter-revolutionary cliques all were found guilty. Many, including Madame Mao (center), were sentenced to death but had their sentences commuted to life in prison. Courtesy of the Library of the Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, Berkeley.
To Brook No Dissent

M any have asked me why I came to the United States to study Chinese history. My answer has always been the same — to study the Lin Biao Incident. It is impossible, even dangerous, for me to conduct similar research in China. Even today, nearly 30 years later, the Incident remains highly sensitive, a topic that the Chinese government absolutely refuses to revisit. Therefore, after I came to the United States in 1989, I spent seven years in school, focusing both my master’s thesis and Ph.D. dissertation on this event before finally publishing the results in a recent book.

Why is this particular occurrence so important to me that I would spend years of my life to study it?

People who experienced the 1960s and the 1970s may have some memory about the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the name of Lin Biao. As Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s “best student,” “closest comrade-in-arms” and heir apparent, Lin became politically prominent in China on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. After Mao ousted Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in 1966, Lin was promoted to the position of sole vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Thereafter, Lin accompanied Mao on every public occasion, always clutching a copy of Mao’s “little red book” of quotations.

When Mao used Lin to promote Mao’s own cult of personality, Mao inadvertently created an image of Lin Biao closely related to his own. In the period 1966-1971, when millions of Chinese sang in chorus to promote Mao’s longevity, they also wished eternal good health for their “beloved” vice chairman Lin Biao. Because of this public adulation, tension rose between Mao and Lin, specifically after the Second Plenum of the Ninth Party Congress in August 1970. I believe it was Mao’s insecurities which eventually sent Lin Biao and his family on their way to death.

Lin’s family spent their last days at Beidaihe, a famous sea resort in China, nervously waiting for Mao’s impeding purge of Lin. On the early evening of September 12, 1971, Lin’s family was celebrating the engagement of their daughter and entertaining themselves with movies. Things suddenly changed after nine o’clock that night.

It was then that Lin Liguo, the son, returned from Beijing and told his mother about certain comments Mao made about Lin Biao and his family during a trip Mao undertook to south China between mid-August and early September. In his speech, Mao made it clear that he was very unhappy about Lin’s dispute with Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, at the Second Plenum at Lushan in 1970. Mao believed that Lin no longer followed his instructions uncon-
denly attempt an ill-conceived coup? Why, when the alleged coup failed, would he defect to the Soviet Union when Taiwan and the United States were safer havens? And exactly why and how did Lin’s plane crash?

What motivated me to do research on this event was not political, but familial and personal. My father, who was the commander-in-chief of the Air Force, was one of the top casualties of Mao’s purge after the Lin Biao Incident. His disappearance and subsequent silence left us not knowing whether he was alive or dead. Suddenly, in 1981, my father was put on a political “trial” together with Mao’s wife, Madame Mao, and charged with the responsibility for the disastrous Cultural Revolution. He was sentenced to 17 years in jail by the “judges.”

In China, if one family member is politically guilty, the whole family also is guilty. That is why my mother, sisters, brother and I were put under house arrest and exiled to the countryside. I also saw many of my friends and their families suffer physically and emotionally due to Mao’s purge. Many of them would never recover from the trauma they experienced.

Setting The Record Straight

I came to the United States with strong motivation to find out what really happened to Lin Biao. I never believed what I had been told about Lin and my father. It would be horribly unfair to my family, my friends and the hundreds of thousands of victims of Mao’s purges if I were to simply accept what has become a “standard interpretation” of the Incident, which, I believe, was not just an excuse for purges but a typical example of Chinese officials’ manipulation of the interpretations of historical events.

The Lin Biao Incident raises important questions about the nature of Chinese politics and the study of Chinese history, especially about the interaction between familial and national politics. The Incident perfectly illustrates that under certain circumstances, a family crisis can directly trigger a national crisis.

The study of the event also raises disturbing questions about political control and the distorting forces active in
modern China. It gives a clear example how the Chinese government tries to manipulate public thinking. Government officials have created a false narrative, a completely different picture, using almost the same evidence; forced those involved to “confess” their crimes by using only partial evidence against them; and implanted, without public complaint, the “official story” into the public record. Most Chinese don’t know enough to object to the government’s version of the Lin Biao Incident.

When I was in Hangzhou, China, last summer, I actually visited a “museum” that purports to be Lin Biao’s headquarters when he allegedly plotted against Mao. I took pictures in the “office” and “bedroom” of Lin Biao, as well as the front of a building named “Building of the Generals,” where my father and other generals supposedly conspired with Lin Biao against Mao in 1971. I am sure that Lin Biao, as well as my father, never set foot in these buildings, but to everyday visitors, who must pay admission to know more about Lin Biao’s “plots,” these buildings and exhibitions provide “hard evidence” to reconfirm the government version of the Incident.

Can anyone, even with the strongest motivation, ever set the historical record straight? What of the visitors who will come to visit this “museum” 500 years hence? I find it perverse that the Incident, which caused the suffering of so many, has become a source of wealth to others in today’s China.

This is a story of personal and professional tragedy, from the point of view of those who actually experienced history and suffered the consequences. As a writer, I let the readers judge. As a historian, I trust that truth will have its own say.