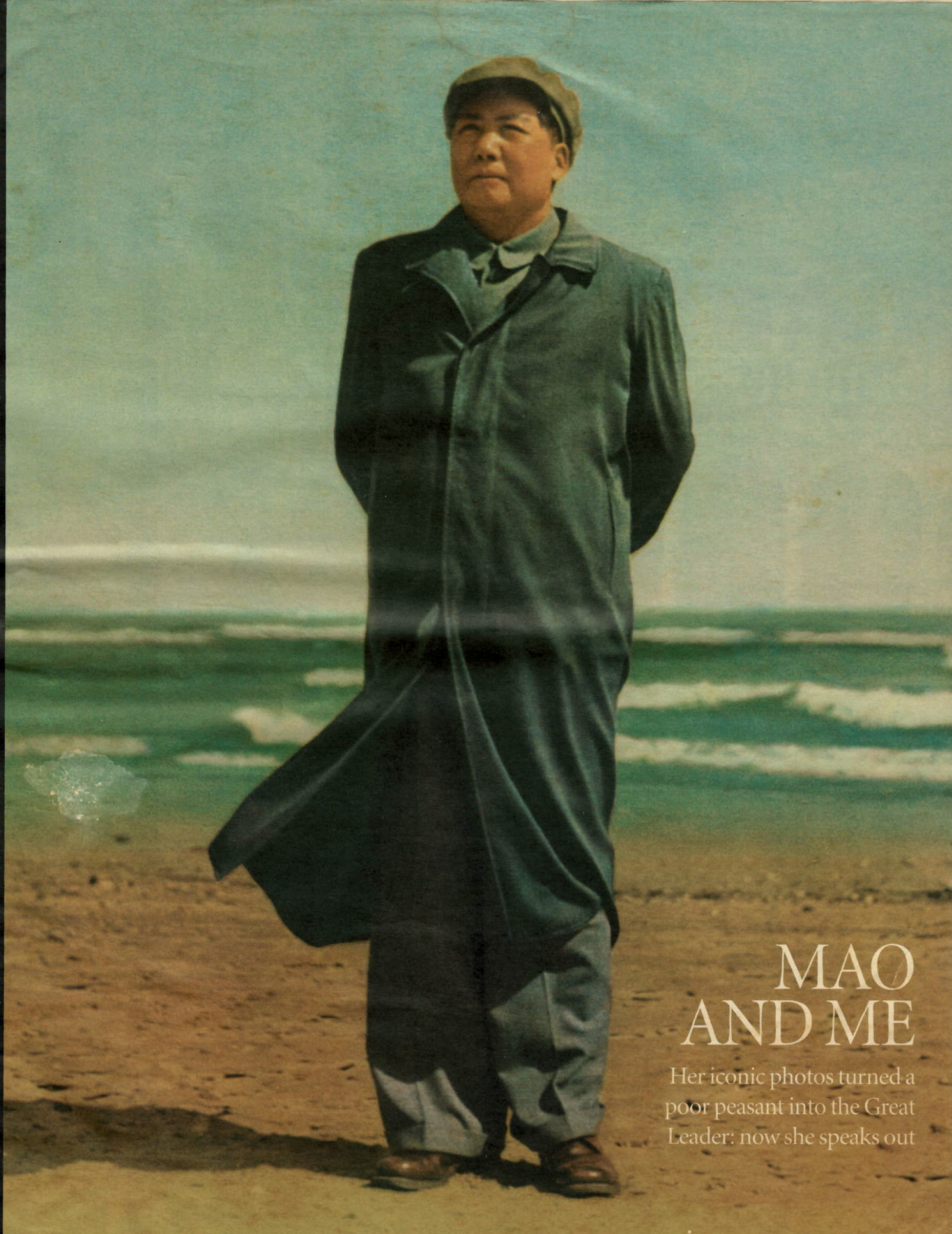


# THE SUNDAY REVIEW



THE  
INDEPENDENT  
ON SUNDAY



## MAO AND ME

Her iconic photos turned a  
poor peasant into the Great  
Leader: now she speaks out



This page, hand-tinted picture of Mao, Hangzhou, 1954. Opposite page, left: Hou Bo, having taken her first picture of her leader, stands between her husband – and fellow photographer – Xu Xiaobing, and Mao, Beijing, 1949. Far right: Mao with the Panchen Lama (left) and Dalai Lama at the 1st National People's Congress, 21 September, 1954







**H**ou Bo counts the 12 years that she spent as Chairman Mao's official photographer as the best of her life. Today, at the age of 80, and despite a personal history as tumultuous as China's own, she still adulates the man she recorded making history.

The colossal figure of Mao Zedong may no longer dominate China but, nearly 30 years after his death, his presence still looms in the hearts and homes of millions of Chinese people. Not many of them though have a giant black-and-white photograph of a young Mao standing with a fresh-faced couple in matching Mao suits in their living-room. "He was a great man," Hou Bo says, staring up at the picture of her and her husband with the man she considers China's greatest leader. "He may have made mistakes, but no one is perfect."

In 1949, her portrait of Mao raising the Red Flag over Tiananmen Square, to proclaim the foundation of the People's Republic, was flashed around the world. As official photographer to the leading figures of the Communist Party, Hou was responsible for showing Mao as a warm-hearted revolutionary with an adoring public. She shot some of the most iconic images of him: Mao swimming in the Yangtze, posing with children, or talking to workers. Hou and her photographer husband, Xu Xiaobing, alternated between portraying Mao as prophet, strategist, teacher and farm worker.

With her carefully staged photographs, Hou helped define the public image of the peasant who became Communist China's pre-eminent statesman. In a country where illiteracy was widespread, photographers were a vital instrument to educate the masses.

**Born in 1924 to a poor farming family,** Hou's father was beaten to death by his manager; and her mother and grandmother were murdered by Japanese troops in 1937. Orphaned, homeless and penniless, she and nine classmates ran away and joined an underground guerrilla force. After three months of revolutionary education, she was sent to Yan'an (the Communist Party's headquarters from the mid-1930s until 1947). This was where the Long March had ended in 1935, delivering over 80,000 men, women and children to a mountain bolthole.

"We lived in mud caves and were constantly being bombed by Japanese planes," says Hou, frail in the peaceful confines of her Beijing apartment. "The leadership was one with the masses. Material life was very bitter, but we had high spirits." She was sent to school and college by the party: "They turned into my family." →



# ME AND THE CHAIRMAN

He sent her to a forced-labour camp yet, every year, Hou Bo kneels in front of the body of Mao Zedong and recalls her 'lucky life' as official photographer to the Chinese leader. As a show of her revolutionary work opens in Britain, Helena Iveson visits the photographer in Beijing and hears how the Great Helmsman always controlled the big picture



Clockwise from top: Mao, his daughter Li Min (left) and daughter-in-law Liu Siqi, Beldai, 1954; Mao proclaims foundation of the People's Republic, Tiananmen Square, 1 October, 1949; and Mao, Henan, 1958



It was at Yan'an that Hou first became aware of Mao. "I only saw him at meetings when he was speaking on a stage and I was part of the audience who listened to his every word." She found herself fascinated by this charismatic man who organised resistance against the Japanese and enthused the crowds with his political teachings about the power of the people. It was also here that Hou's aptitude with the camera was noticed and, in 1946, the party arranged for her to train as a photographer.

"I was so nervous," she says, recalling the first time she was asked to photograph Mao. He asked who she was and "when it was explained, he asked me about my past involvements with the revolution and about my personal history," explains Hou. She told him how the Party had looked after her at Yan'an. "He said: 'You have eaten Yan'an rice, now you must try your very best to serve the party and the people.'"

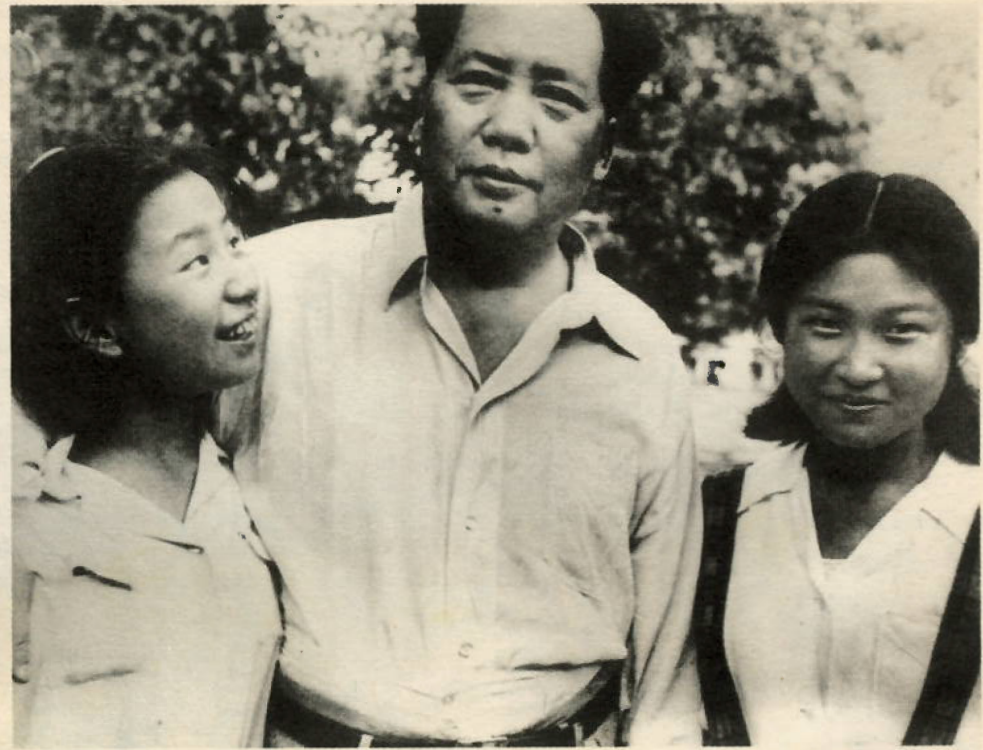
Hou says that Mao was easy to talk to. "I was nervous but when we started to talk I relaxed. He may have been like an emperor, but he treated people equally. I immediately felt close to him because, when I mentioned my hometown, he knew about the struggle we'd had against the Japanese."

**When the Communists seized power** in October 1949, Hou was again called upon. "After the party took over Beijing, there were not many people who could take photos, so I was assigned to record the leadership," she says. Hou later moved to the Communist Party's new headquarters where she was at the disposal of the leaders. This was the happiest time of her life: "We loved our leaders who treated us as their children," she reminisces, glancing back at the picture of Mao that dominates her room: "1949 to 1956 was a golden era." →



'I was nervous but when he started to talk I relaxed. He may have been like an emperor, but he treated people equally'





No matter how extreme Mao's policies became, Hou remains loyal to the Chairman – even if those policies lead to her downfall

From the hope and excitement of the founding of the new republic, to the disastrous Great Leap Forward which led to an estimated 30 million starving to death, to the purges of the Cultural Revolution when millions suffered or perished, Hou was there to show Mao as a successful and benign leader. "I was told to document their activities so my priority was to take pictures – I did not decide which ones were shown to the public."

Mao knew instinctively the importance of the right picture. "He liked to be photographed," Hou recalls, as she looks through one of her many albums of private photographs.

Hou is proud of the part she played in the creation of Mao's public image: "He was a great man and China owes him a great deal." No matter how extreme Mao's policies became, Hou remains loyal to the Chairman – even if those policies led to her downfall.

During the Cultural Revolution, Hou's pictures were veritable icons, brandished by the Red Guards. Yet, it was at this moment that, on the orders of Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and a future member of the Gang of Four, that Hou was sent to a *laogai*, one of the dreaded work camps.

"The people working closest to Mao suffered. I, my husband, Mao's secretary and his secretary were removed, and we were told we needed to have direct contact with the people." This meant assignment to one of the camps where intellectuals were "re-educated".

On her last day, Mao came to her office. "He told me that I had done a good job and that I had contributed to the cause." She never saw him again and spent the next few years in harsh conditions in rural China. Yet, even today, both Hou Bo and her husband Xu Xiaobing – now recognised as pioneering photographers – make a pilgrimage twice a year. "We, with others who worked for Mao, join together on the anniversaries of his birth and death and go to kneel before his body."

Her voice becomes stronger as she talks about the Great Helmsman: "I am so lucky: I was not just directly educated by Chairman Mao, but I had 12 years of being on the inside of history." ■

*Hou Bo & Xu Xiaobing: Mao's Photographers is at the Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, London WC2, tel: 020 7831 1772, from Thursday until 30 May. Entry is free*

Clockwise from top left: Mao, Shao Shan School, 1959; Mao with Li Min (left), his daughter by his second wife He Zizhen, and Li Na, a daughter by his third wife, Jiang Qing, Xiangshan, 9 August, 1957; Mao swims in the Yangtze, Wuhan, July 1955; Mao meets with the Political Bureau, April, 1960; and Hou Bo, 1992

