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To the Edge of the Sky: A Story of Love Betrayal Suffering and the Strength of Human Courage

Anhua Gao
The Overlook Press (February 2003)
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From rubbing elbows with Ho Chih Minh to knitting for warmth in a Chinese prison, the author's life story parallels the highs and lows of Communist China-with all its warts.

As a neat coincidence that fits with her tale, Anhua Gao was born in 1949, the year that Mao Zedong finally rousted the Nationalists to Taiwan and declared mainland China to be The People's Republic of China. Because her parents loyally served the Communists during the years of civil war, Gao's childhood is sheltered behind a close society of high party cadres. When her parents die young as "revolutionary martyrs," though, Gao is forced to negotiate the ensuing years of turmoil with little more than her quick intelligence and family name to save her.

This book is meticulous in its historical detail, making it a standout among similar memoirs of twentieth-century China. Gao skillfully contextualizes the trials she and her family and friends face within the watersheds of Chinese history. One of Gao's uncles is exiled during the Great Leap Forward; Gao herself joins the PLA (People's Liberation Army) in her late teens to avoid the wholesale government-imposed exodus of intellectuals to the countryside during The Cultural Revolution. Even as Deng Xiaoping finds himself cycling between high positions and exile until he becomes head of the Communist party after Mao's death, Gao also is favored or persecuted according to the whims of political policy.

Though Gao is indoctrinated to believe that the capitalist countries-principally the United States and England-are hells on earth compared to the paradise that is Communist China, she eventually realizes that the Communist Party is corrupt and that Mao is the ringleader behind it all. While perspective gained over half a century of contemplation surely colors Gao's views, her descriptions of the torture and brutality the Chinese lived with under Mao justify her bitterness. Having little faith in a future free from persecution in China, in the mid-1990s Gao meets and marries an Englishman who takes her back to his country "at the edge of the sky," according to her childhood maps.

Subtitles often dramatically overstate the scope of a book, but To the Edge of the Sky is indeed "a story of love, betrayal, suffering and the strength of human courage." This book would be an excellent addition to a college course on modern Chinese history. It is also a reminder to all readers of ambition and power gone awry.
JOHANNA MASSÉ (March / April 2003)

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