China in Ten Words

People 人民

Leader 领袖

Reading 阅读

Writing 写作

Lu Xun 鲁迅

Revolution 革命

Disparity 差距

Grassroots 草根

Copycat 山寨

Bamboozle 忽悠

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First published in the UK in 2012 by
Duckworth Overlook
90-93 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6BF
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www.ducknet.co.uk

Published in 2011 in the USA by Pantheon Books

This work, originally written in Chinese, was first published in France as *La Chine en Dix Mots* by Actes Sud, Arles, France, in 2010. French translation copyright © 2010 by Actes Sud.
A Chinese edition of this work was published in Taiwan as *Shige cihui li de Zhongguo* by Rye Field Publications, Taipei.

A portion of this work was originally published in different form in *The New York Times.*

Jacket design by Peter Mendelsund, Brian Barth, and Linda Huang

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

eISBNs
Mobi 9780715643921
ePub 9780715643914
Library PDF 9780715643907

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introduction

In 1978 I got my first job—as a small-town dentist in south China. This mostly involved pulling teeth, but as the youngest staff member I was given another task as well. Every summer, with a straw hat on my head and a medical case on my back, I would shuttle back and forth between the town's factories and kindergartens, administering vaccinations to workers and children.

China during the Mao era was a poor country, but it had a strong public health network that provided free immunizations to its citizens. That was where I came in. In those days there were no disposable needles and syringes; we had to reuse ours again and again. Sterilization too was primitive: The needles and syringes would be washed, wrapped separately in gauze, and placed in aluminum lunch boxes laid in a large wok on top of a briquette stove. Water was added to the wok, and the needles and syringes were then steamed for two hours, as you would steam buns.

On my first day of giving injections I went to a factory. The workers rolled up their sleeves and waited in line, baring their arms to me one after another—and offering up a tiny piece of red flesh, too. Because the needles had been used multiple times, almost every one of them had a barbed tip. You could stick a needle into someone's arm easily enough, but when you extracted it, you would pull out a tiny piece of flesh along with it. For the workers the pain was bearable,

although they would grit their teeth or perhaps let out a groan or two. I paid them no mind, for the workers had had to put up with barbed needles year after year and should be used to it by now, I thought. But the next day, when I went to a kindergarten to give shots to children from the ages of three through six, it was a different story. Every las t one of them burst out weeping and wailing. Because their skin was so tender, the needles would snag bigger shreds of flesh than they had from the workers, and the children's wounds bled more profusely. I still remember how the children were all sobbing uncontrollably; the ones who had yet to be inoculated were crying even louder than those who had already had their shots. The pain that the children saw others suffering, it seemed to me, affected them even more intensely than the pain they themselves experienced, because it made their fear all the more acute.

This scene left me shocked and shaken. When I got back to the hospital, I did not clean the instruments right away. Instead, I got hold of a grindstone and ground all the needles until they were completely straight and the points were sharp. But these old needles were so prone to metal fatigue that after two or three more uses they would acquire barbs again, so grinding the needles became a regular part of my routine, and the more I sharpened, the shorter they got. That summer it was always dark by the time I left the hospital, with fingers blistered by my labors at the grindstone.

Later, whenever I recalled this episode, I was guilt-stricken that I'd had to see the children's reaction to realize how much the factory workers must have suffered. If, before I had given shots to others, I had pricked my own arm with a barbed needle and pulled out a blood-stained shred of my own flesh, then I would have known how painful it was long before I

heard the children's wails.

This remorse left a profound mark, and it has stayed with me through all my years as an author. It is when the suffering of others becomes part of my own experience that I truly know what it is to live and what it is to write. Nothing in the world, perhaps, is so likely to forge a connection between people as pain, because the connection that comes from that source comes from deep in the heart. So when in this book I write of China's pain, I am registering my pain too, because China's pain is mine.

The arrow hits the target, leaving the string," Dante wrote, and by inverting cause and effect he impresses on us how quickly an action can happen. In China's breathtaking changes during the past thirty years we likewise find a pattern of development where the relationship between cause and effect is turned on its head. Practically every day we find ourselves surrounded by consequences, but seldom do we trace these outcomes back to their roots. The result is that conflicts and problems—which have sprouted everywhere like weeds during these past decades—are concealed amid the complacency generated by our rapid economic advances. My task here is to reverse normal procedure: to start from the effects that seem so glorious and search for their causes, whatever discomfort that may entail.

"We survive in adversity and perish in ease and comfort."[1] Such were the words of the Confucian philosopher Mencius, citing six worthies in antiquity who suffered untold hardship before achieving greatness. Man is bound to make mistakes, he believed, and it is in the unceasing correction of his errors that human progress lies. Viewed in this light, he suggested, adversity has a way of enhancing our endurance, while ease

and comfort tend to hasten our demise—whether as individuals or as a nation. When I write in these pages of personal pain and of China's pain, it is with that same conviction that we survive in adversity. So in this quest to follow things back to their source, we cannot help but stumble upon one misfortune after another.

If I were to try to attend to each and every aspect of modern China, there would be no end to this endeavor, and the book would go on longer than *The Thousand and One Nights.* So I limit myself to just ten words. But this tiny lexicon gives me ten pairs of eyes with which to scan the contemporary Chinese scene from different vantage points.

My aim is to stay brief and concise, beginning this narrative journey from the daily life we know so well. Daily life may seem trivial and routine, but in fact it contains a multitude of incidents, at once rich, expansive, and touching. Politics, history, society, and culture, one's memories and emotions, desires and secrets—all reverberate there. Daily life is a veritable forest and, as the Chinese saying goes, "Where woods grow deep, you'll find every kind of bird."

For me, as for a bus driver who drives back and forth along the same route, my starting point is also my last stop. My busload of stories sets off from daily life, pulls over when it reaches junctions with politics, history, society, and culture—or with memories and emotions, desires and secrets—and sometimes it pauses at outlying stops that may not even have a name. Some stories disembark along the way, while others board; and eventually, after all this bustle to and fro, my bus returns to where it started.

My goal, then, is to compress the endless chatter of China today into ten simple words; to bring together observation, analysis, and personal anecdote in a narrative that roams

freely across time and space; and finally to clear a path through the social complexities and staggering contrasts of contemporary China.

China in Ten Words

人民

people

As I write these characters I have to look a second time to make sure I have them right. That's the thing about this word: it feels remote, but it's so familiar, too.

I can't think of another expression in the modern Chinese language that is such an anomaly—ubiquitous yet somehow invisible. In China today it's only officials who have "the people"[2] on their lips every time they open their mouths, for the people themselves seldom use the term—perhaps they hardly recall its existence. We have to give those voluble officials some credit, for we rely on them to demonstrate that the phrase still has some currency.

In the past this was such a weighty phrase. Our country was called the People's Republic of China. Chairman Mao told us to "serve the people." The most important paper was the *People's Daily.* "Since 1949 the people are the masters," we learned to say.

In my childhood years "the people" was just as marvelous an expression as "Chairman Mao," and when I first began to read, these were the first words I mastered; I could write them even before I could write my own name or the names of my parents. It was my view then that "the people are Chairman Mao, and Chairman Mao is the people."

That was during the Cultural Revolution, and I marched about proudly sharing this insight with everyone I met. They responded with dubious looks, apparently finding something problematic about my formulation, although nobody directly contradicted me. In those days people walked on eggshells, fearful that if they said anything wrong, they might be branded a counterrevolutionary, endangering their whole family. My parents, hearing of my discovery, looked equally doubtful. They eyed me warily and told me in a roundabout way that they couldn't see anything wrong with what I'd said but I still had better not say it again.

But since this was my greatest childhood insight, I couldn't bear to hush it up and continued sharing it with the world at large. One day I found supporting evidence in a popular saying of the time, "Chairman Mao lives in our hearts." I took this to its logical conclusion: "Chairman Mao lives in everyone's heart, so what lives in Chairman Mao's heart? It has to be the entire people." Therefore: "The people are Chairman Mao, and Chairman Mao is the people."

Those doubtful looks among the residents of my little town gradually dissipated. Some people began nodding in approval, and others began to say the same thing—my little playmates first, and then grown-ups, too.

But I felt threatened when lots of people started saying, "The people are Chairman Mao, and Chairman Mao is the people." In a revolutionary era one cannot claim a patent for anything, and I found my status as inventor was being steadily eroded. "I was the first one to say that," I would declare. But no adults set any store by my claim of authorship, and in the end even my young companions refused to accept that I deserved credit. Faced with my strenuous arguments or pathetic pleas, they would shake

their heads: "No, everybody says that."

I was upset, regretting bitterly that I had made my discovery public. I should have stored it forever in my own mind, safe from anybody else, keeping it for myself to savor my whole life through.

These days the West is astonished by the speed of China's makeover. With the flick of a wrist Chinese history has utterly changed its complexion, much the way an actor in Sichuan opera swaps one mask for another. In the short space of thirty years, a China ruled by politics has transformed itself into a China where money is king.

Turning points in history tend to be marked by some emblematic event, and the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 was one such moment. Stirred by the death that April of the reform-minded Hu Yaobang, college students in Beijing poured out of their campuses to gather in Tiananmen Square, demanding democratic freedoms and denouncing official corruption. Because of the hard line the government took in refusing to engage in a dialogue, in mid-May the students began a hunger strike in the square and the locals marched in the streets to support them. Beijing residents were actually not so interested in "democratic freedoms"—it was the attacks on profiteering by officials that drew them into the movement in such huge numbers. At that time Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy had entered its eleventh year, and although the reforms had triggered price increases, the economy was growing steadily and the standard of living was rising. Peasants had benefited from the changes. Factories had yet to close, and workers were yet to become victims. Contradictions were not as acute then as they are now, when society simmers with rage. All we heard then were grumbles

and complaints about the way the children of high officials had made themselves rich on our national resources, and those sentiments found a focus in the protests. Compared with today's large-scale, multifarious corruption, the diversion of funds by a minority back then didn't really amount to anything. Since 1990, corruption has grown with the same astounding speed as the economy as a whole.

The mass movement that had begun to sweep across the country quickly subsided amid the gunfire on the morning of June 4. In October of that year, when I visited Peking University, I found myself in a different world, where engagement with affairs of state was nowhere to be found. After nightfall, courting couples appeared by the lakeside and the clatter of mahjong tiles and the drone of English words being memorized were the only sounds that wafted from dorm windows. In the short space of one summer everything had changed so much that it seemed as though nothing at all had happened that spring. Such a huge contrast demonstrated one point: that the political passions that had erupted in Tiananmen—political passions that had accumulated since the Cultural Revolution—had finally expended themselves completely in one fell swoop, to be replaced by a passion for getting rich. When everyone united in the urge to make money, the economic surge of the 1990s was the natural outcome.

After that, new vocabulary started sprouting up everywhere—netizens, stock traders, fund holders, celebrity fans, laid-off workers, migrant laborers, and so on—slicing into smaller pieces the already faded concept that was "the people." During the Cultural Revolution, the definition of "the people" could not have been simpler, namely "workers, peasants, soldiers, scholars, merchants"—"merchants"

meaning not businessmen but, rather, those employed in commercial ventures, like shop clerks. Tiananmen, you could say, marked the watershed between two different conceptions of "the people"; or, to put it another way, it conducted an asset reshuffle, stripping away the original content and replacing it with something new.

In the forty-odd years from the start of the Cultural Revolution to the present, the expression "the people" has been denuded of meaning by Chinese realities. To use a current buzzword, "the people" has become nothing more than a shell company, utilized by different eras to position different products in the marketplace.

Beijing in the spring of 1989 was anarchist heaven. The police suddenly disappeared from the streets, and students and locals took on police duties in their place. It was a Beijing we are unlikely to see again. A common purpose and shared aspirations put a police-free city in perfect order. As you walked down the street you felt a warm, friendly atmosphere all around you. You could take the subway or a bus for free, and everyone was smiling at one another, barriers down. We no longer witnessed arguments in the street. Hard-nosed street vendors were now handing out free refreshments to the protestors. Retirees would withdraw cash from their meager bank savings and make donations to the hunger strikers in the square. Even pickpockets issued a declaration in the name of the Thieves' Association: as a show of support for the students, they were calling a moratorium on all forms of theft. Beijing then was a city where, you could say, "all men are brothers."

If you live in a Chinese city, there's one feeling you never shake off: what a lot of people there are! But it was only with

the mass protests in Tiananmen Square that it really came home to you: China is the world's most populous nation. Every day the Square was a sea of people. Students who had poured into Beijing from other parts of the country would stand in the square or on a street corner, giving speeches day after day until their throats grew hoarse and they lost their voices. Their audience—whether wizened old men or mothers with babies in their arms—greeted the speakers with respect, nodding repeatedly and applauding warmly, however immature the students' faces or naive their views.

There were comical moments, too. One afternoon I took my place in a dimly lit conference room in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for a meeting of the Capital Intellectual Coalition, a newly formed association of liberal intellectuals in Beijing. As we awaited the arrival of a prominent political scientist named Yan Jiaqi I noticed that some people were taking a newspaper editor to task. His paper had just published a statement by the coalition, and these people were unhappy because their names were low on the list of signatories, beneath the names of less well-known individuals. Why had these nobodies been given a higher ranking? The hapless editor said it wasn't his fault but apologized anyway, nevertheless failing to mollify his critics. This farcical episode came to an end only with the arrival of Yan Jiaqi.

I remember the moment clearly; it was the first and last time I saw him. This distinguished scholar—a close associate of Zhao Ziyang, the general secretary of the Communist Party, who favored a conciliatory line toward the demonstrators—walked in with a somber expression on his face. People quieted down as he delivered a piece of bad news. "Ziyang is in the hospital," he said in a low voice.

In the political context of 1989, for a government leader to be hospitalized could mean only that he had lost power or that he had gone into hiding. Everyone immediately understood the implications. Some began to slip away quietly, and soon they had scattered far and wide, like falling leaves in an autumn gale.

After Tiananmen Zhao Ziyang disappeared from view, and nothing more was heard of him until his death in 2005. Only then did the New China News Agency issue a brief statement: "Comrade Zhao had long suffered from multiple diseases affecting his respiratory and cardiovascular systems, and had been hospitalized for medical treatment on multiple occasions. In recent days his condition deteriorated, and efforts to revive him proved unsuccessful. He died in Beijing on January 17, aged 85."

In China, even if it's just a retired minister who dies, the official announcement will usually be a lot more detailed than this. The statement said nothing about the career of a man who had once been leader of the party and the nation, nor did it mention the date of his memorial service. But word leaked out to a group of petitioners—or "judicial refugees," as they have come to be known—who lived in Beijing South Station. I have no idea through what channels these most disadvantaged of all "people" in China got hold of this information, but they organized themselves and went off to pay their final respects to Zhao Ziyang. They were not authorized to attend, so the police naturally blocked them from entering, but they unfurled a commemorative inscription all the same.

These petitioners had sought legal redress for injustice and oppression in their home districts, only to find themselves stymied at every turn by bias and corruption in the judicial

system. China's extralegal appeals procedure—a remnant of its hallowed tradition of humane government—offers a slender hope that some honest official might dispense justice where law has failed. Petitioners exhaust all their resources as they roam from place to place in search of a fair-minded administrator, and ultimately they make their way to Beijing in the hope that someone in the central government will respond to their pleas. In 2004 the official total of such cases reached 10 million. Their desperate plight almost defies imagination: fighting hunger, they sleep in the streets, only to be harried by the police, driven like beggars hither and yon, and written off by some well-heeled intellectuals as mentally deranged. It was precisely such "people" who went to bid farewell to Zhao Ziyang in January 2005. They felt that he was "the biggest fall guy in China," a bigger victim of injustice than even they themselves. However much they had suffered, they at least had a chance to petition, but Zhao Ziyang, they said, "had nowhere to take his complaint."

I made a trip back to my home in Zhejiang at the end of May 1989, and after I'd attended to family affairs, I boarded the train back to Beijing on the afternoon of June 3. I lay on my bunk listening to the rumble of the wheels on the tracks; when lights came on in the compartment, I knew that night was falling. At that moment the student protests seemed as long and protracted as a marathon, and I could not imagine when they would end. But when I woke in the early morning, the train was approaching Beijing and the news was coming over the radio that the army was now in Tiananmen Square.

After the gunfire on June 4, the students—from Beijing and from out of town—began to abandon the city. I vividly recall the surging throngs filling the station that morning: just as people were fleeing the capital in droves, I was making an ill-

timed reentry. With my bag over my shoulder I stumbled, dazed, into the station plaza. As I collided with people swarming in from the other direction, I realized I would soon be doing exactly the same thing.

When I left again on June 7, service between Beijing and Shanghai had been suspended because a train in Shanghai had been set on fire, so my plan was to take a roundabout route: by train to Wuhan and by boat from there to Zhejiang. Some classmates and I hired a flatbed-cart driver to take us down Chang'an Avenue to the railroad station. Beijing, seething with activity a few days earlier, now looked desolate and abandoned. There was hardly a pedestrian to be seen, only smoke rising from some charred vehicles and a tank stationed at the Jianguomen overpass, its barrel pointing at us menacingly as we crossed. After pushing our way through the scrum outside the ticket office, we finally managed to buy tickets, though it was impossible to reserve seats. As we entered the station we were scrutinized minutely by the soldiers on duty; I was waved in only when they were sure I didn't look like any of the fugitives whose photos appeared on their wanted list.

Never before or since have I traveled on such a crowded train. The compartment was filled with college students fleeing the capital, and everyone was so crammed together there was not an inch of space between one person and the next. An hour out of Beijing, I needed to use the toilet. It took all my strength to squeeze any distance through the throng, and before I was halfway there I realized that my cause was hopeless. I could hear someone yelling and banging on the door, but the toilet itself was full of people—"We can't open it!" they shouted back. I just had to hold on for the full three hours until we got to Shijiazhuang. There I disembarked and

found a toilet, then a pay phone, to appeal for help from the editor of the local literary magazine. "Everything's in such chaos now," he said after hearing me out. "Just give up on the idea of going anywhere else. Stay here and write us a story."

So I spent the next month holed up in Shijiazhuang, but I had a hard time writing. Every day the television broadcast shots of students on the wanted list being taken into custody, and these pictures were repeated again and again in rolling coverage—something I've never seen since, except when Chinese athletes have won gold medals in the Olympics. Far from home, in my cheerless hotel room, I saw the despairing looks on the faces of the captured students and heard the crowing of the news announcers, and a chill went down my spine.

Suddenly one day the picture on my TV screen changed completely. Gone were the shots of detained suspects, and gone was the jubilant commentary. Although manhunts and arrests carried on as before, broadcasts now reverted to the old familiar formula: scenes of prosperity throughout the motherland. A day earlier the announcer had been passionately denouncing the crimes of the captured students, and now he was cheerfully lauding our nation's thriving progress. From that day on, just as Zhao Ziyang disappeared from view, so too Tiananmen vanished from the Chinese media. I never saw the slightest mention of it afterward, as though it had never happened. And memories seemed to fade even among those who took part in the protests of spring 1989; the pressures of life, perhaps, allowed little room to revisit the past. Twenty years later, it is a disturbing fact that among the younger generation in China today few know anything about the Tiananmen Incident, and those who do say vaguely, "A lot of people in the streets then, that's what I

heard."

Twenty years may have gone by in a flash, but historical memory, I am certain, does not slip away so quickly. No matter how they currently view the events of 1989, I think everyone who participated in them will find those experiences etched indelibly profoundly in their minds when one day they have occasion to look back at that chapter of their lives.

In my case, the thing that has left the deepest mark on me is a realization of what "the people" means.

Sometimes one needs an opportunity to truly encounter a certain word. We encounter all kinds of words in the course of our lives, and some we understand at first glance and others we may rub shoulders with but never fully understand. "The people" belongs in that second category. It's one of the first phrases I learned to read and write, and it has clung to me in my travels through life, constantly appearing before my eyes and sounding in my ears. But it did not truly penetrate my inner being until my thirtieth year, when an experience late one night finally allowed me to understand the term in all its potency. It was only when I had a real-life encounter with it—disengaged from all linguistic, sociological, or anthropological theories and definitions—that I could tell myself: "the people" is not an empty phrase, because I have seen it in the flesh, its heart thumping.

It was not the enormous rallies in Tiananmen Square that imparted this understanding, but an episode in another part of town one night in late May 1989. Martial law had been declared by that time; students and residents alike gathered spontaneously to defend every major intersection in Beijing as well as all overpasses and subway exits, to block armed

troops from entering Tiananmen Square.

I was then studying at the Lu Xun Literary Institute in Shilipu, on the east side of the city. Practically every lunchtime I would ride my rickety old bike to Tiananmen Square, lingering there through the evening and into the early hours, when I would cycle back to the institute.

Beijing in May can be hot at midday but cold at night. I remember I was wearing only a short-sleeved shirt when I set off after lunch, and by late that evening I was chilled to the bone. As I cycled back from the square an icy wind blew in my face, making every part of me shiver—and every part of my bicycle, too. The streetlights were dark, and only the moon pointed the way ahead. The farther I rode, the colder I felt. But as I approached Hujialou, a current of warm air suddenly swept over me, and it only got warmer as I rode on. I heard a song drifting my way, and a bit later I saw lights gleaming in the distance. Then an astonishing scene appeared before me. Now bathed in warmth, I could see the intersection flooded with light; ten thousand people must have been standing guard on the bridge and the approach roads beneath. They were fervid with passion, lustily singing the national anthem under the night sky: "With our flesh and blood we will build a new great wall! The Chinese people have reached the critical hour, compelled to give their final call! Arise, arise, arise! United we stand. . . ."

Although unarmed, they stood steadfast, confident that with their bodies alone they could block soldiers and ward off tanks. Packed together, they gave off a blast of heat, as though every one of them was a blazing torch.

This was a key moment in my life. I had always assumed that light carries farther than human voices and voices carry farther than body heat. But that night I realized it is not so,

for when the people stand as one, their voices carry farther than light and their heat is carried farther still. That, I discovered, is what "the people" means.

领袖

leader

The leader[3] I have in mind here is one who enjoys a special prerogative. When reviewing the National Day parade from Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, he alone can wave to the marchers as they pass; other members of the ruling elite can only stand at his side and clap their hands. There is just one leader, of course, who fits this description. His name is Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution years Mao would wear a military uniform when he stood on Tiananmen and—maybe because he was happy or maybe just because he was hot—would often take off his cap and wave it at the assembled multitude in the square below.

At the outset of the Cultural Revolution "big-character posters" started to appear. Political screeds rendered in clumsily handwritten characters—and now and again some elegantly written ones, too—these were the first acts of the disenfranchised masses in challenging the power of officialdom. Written on broadsheets as big as decentsized windows and posted on the walls that ran alongside city streets, shorter versions took the form of two sheets of paper mounted one on top of the other, while longer ones involved five or six sheets set out in a horizontal row. In the years to follow, these big-character posters would become the largest

exhibition of calligraphy China has ever seen: all across the country, in cities and towns, big streets and small, walls were decorated with them. People would gather in the streets and read the posters with undisguised relish, for although they all employed much the same revolutionary rhetoric, they began to criticize officials and their high and mighty ways.

In Mao a politician's grasp of the historical moment was coupled with a poet's whimsy, and it was often through some improvised flourish that he would unveil his program. When the Communist Party Central Committee and the top brass in Beijing tried to clamp down on popular protests, Mao did not use his supreme authority as party chairman to set his colleagues straight. Instead, he employed the very same approach as the masses by writing a big-character poster of his own, entitled "Bombard the Headquarters," protesting that "some leading comrades" had adopted "the reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie . . . encircling and suppressing revolutionaries" and "stifling opinions different from their own." You can imagine people's reaction: what can it mean when the great leader Chairman Mao has gone so far as to write a big-character poster? It can mean only one thing—that Chairman Mao is in the same boat as ordinary people like themselves! No wonder, then, that the great proletarian Cultural Revolution soon engulfed China with the speed of an unquenchable wildfire.

Historically, emperors have always cut the kind of figure and spoken the kind of language expected of an emperor, no matter how exalted or how humble their origins. Mao was the only exception. After he became leader, he often acted quite out of keeping with accepted norms, taking his comrades in the Communist Party leadership completely by surprise. Mao understood very well how to whip the masses into a frenzy,

and by appearing on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution and greeting fanatical "revolutionary students" and "revolutionary masses" there, he impelled the high tide to ever greater heights.

The Yangtze swim was a fine example of our leader's distinctive style. On July 16, 1966, Mao appeared unexpectedly at a mass swimming event in Wuhan. Cheered on by the ecstatic roars of the spectators lining the banks, with the strains of the revolution's anthem, "The East Is Red," blaring from the loudspeakers, Mao, then seventy-two years old, braved the wind and waves in the company of several thousand other swimmers, who, carried away with delight, shouted "Long Live Chairman Mao" at the top of their voices as the Yangtze swirled around them. The water they gulped down as they shouted must have been quite filthy, but when they returned to shore, they were unanimous in pronouncing it "unbelievably sweet." At the end of his swim Mao clambered onto a boat, hitched up his swimming trunks, and waved majestically to the dense throngs lining the banks. After a brief wave he ducked into the cabin to change. In the newsreel documentary released after the event, the scene of him waving was edited in such a way that Mao appeared to be waving to the people for a good couple of minutes. If you count the propaganda posters that freeze-framed this famous moment and reproduced it endlessly during the Cultural Revolution, then Mao's wave lasted a full ten years.

The next day the *People's Daily* had this to say: "It is the greatest joy of the Chinese people—and of the revolutionary peoples of the entire world—that our revered leader, Chairman Mao, is in such excellent health!" Mao himself wrote about swimming the Yangtze in one of his lyric poems: "Let the wind blow and waves beat / Better far than idly

strolling in a courtyard."[4] With such offhand gestures this leader of ours propelled the Cultural Revolution forward into the madness that would follow.

The film of Mao's swim was shown repeatedly inside China and out, and posters commemorating the event lined the walls of Chinese cities and villages. They showed Mao in his swimsuit, smiling and waving his hand, surrounded by a throng of beaming workers, peasants, soldiers, students, and shop clerks, all striking eager, attentive poses. What other political figure would make a point of waving to his people in a swimsuit? Only Mao could carry this off.

It was a style that, in fact, preceded his becoming China's leader, for we see evidence of it during the War of Resistance Against Japan, when he was living a hardscrabble life in the caves of Yan'an. During an interview with an American reporter Mao groped around in the crotch of his pants, catching lice, as he confidently predicted China's victory over the Japanese.

Once the Cultural Revolution was launched, Mao kept on waving, but the party officials around him stopped clapping. Instead, their right hands would be doing a little wave of their own, because they would be clutching copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao.* The Little Red Book, as it was called, had given them a chance to wave as well, though they never dared raise their hands as high as Mao or swing them in as wide an arc.

In the Cultural Revolution, even when Mao was not present, the party officials would wave the Little Red Book as a way of greeting the revolutionary masses. Just as today no famous actress would ever appear in public without makeup, the leadership in those days would never show their faces without the Little Red Book in hand. It was their political

makeup kit.

Today the Chinese Communist Party takes the form of a collective leadership, and when the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee attend a news conference, they wave simultaneously to reporters, their hands at the same height, waving in the same arc. This always makes me think of Mao on Tiananmen, and of how impressive it was that he waved and everyone else clapped. Reflecting on the past in the light of the present, I have a sense that in today's China we no longer have a leader—all we have is a leadership.

Many years after the 1976 death of a genuine leader, ersatz leaders are sprouting up everywhere in China. Since 1990, as beauty contests have swept across the country, competitions to select different kinds of leaders have followed hot on their heels—contests to decide fashion leaders and elegance leaders, leaders in charm and leaders in beauty.

Although there are many varieties of beauty contests, they ultimately are all somewhat confined in scope. For example, there's the Silver-haired Beauty Contest for women over sixty, the Tipsy Beauty Contest for pretty girls who have knocked back a few shots, and the Artificial Beauty Contest for veterans of plastic surgery.

Contests for leaders, on the other hand, are not subject to any particular limitations, and so leaders from every walk of life are emerging thick and fast. Youth leaders, child leaders, future leaders, innovation leaders, real estate leaders, IT leaders, media leaders, commercial leaders, and enterprise leaders—their numbers make one's head spin. With so many leaders on the loose, there are naturally lots of summit meetings to go along with them—summits that make practically as many claims for themselves as does the G8.

Leadership contests even extend to geography and technology, so that now we have leaders in natural scenery and leaders among elevators. Such is China in the post-Mao era: even elevators have leaders. When the sun comes up tomorrow, who knows in what corner of the land we'll find a new pack of leaders sprouting up. If we were to hold a contest to choose the word that has lost the most value the fastest during the past thirty years, the winner would surely have to be "leader."

In the Cultural Revolution, however, "leader" was a powerful, sacred word, a synonym for "Chairman Mao"—Mao's exclusive property, one might say. Nobody then would have had the temerity to claim that they were a leader, not even in their dreams. "Sacred and inviolable is the motherland" was a line much favored in those days, and "sacred and inviolable" could equally well have applied to the word "leader"—and to the surname Mao as well.

In the little town where my wife grew up there was a workers' union whose branch chairman was named Mao. "Chairman Mao" was what the locals called him, naturally enough, and it was a name he answered to quite readily. But as a result he became a target in the Cultural Revolution: he had set himself up as a second Chairman Mao, and there was hell to pay. Stung by the charge, he tried strenuously to defend himself, tears streaming down his face. "That's what other people call me," he cried. "It's not what I call myself!" But the revolutionary masses would have none of it. "Other people can call you that if they want," they said, "but you shouldn't have answered them. By acknowledging the title, you were counterrevolutionary."

When I was little, I thought it very unfortunate that I had the surname Yu and wished there had been a Mao on either

my father's or my mother's side of the family, not realizing that for ordinary folk like us Mao was a name that projected authority but could be dangerous, too.

Another figure of speech was much in vogue in those days: the Communist Party was "mother of the people." If there's a mother, I thought to myself, then there has to be a father, so who is the people's father? The answer was obvious: Chairman Mao. Logically, the Communist Party was Mao's first lady, but where did that leave Madame Mao, Jiang Qing? Being a junior Red Guard, I knew only of monogamy and the equality of the sexes, not realizing that men in the old society used to have concubines and never imagining that in two or three decades it would be common for men to have mistresses and second wives. Much as I racked my brains, I never found a solution that could reconcile the legitimate claims of both Mao's partners.

Apart from Mao I was aware of four other leaders, all foreign. In my first-grade classroom Mao's portrait hung on the blackboard, and on the wall behind were arrayed the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—the first foreigners I ever saw. For us, Lenin's and Stalin's hairstyles fell within the normal range of men's haircuts, but we didn't know what to make of Marx and Engels, whose hair was long even by women's standards, for women in our town—like Chinese women everywhere then—cropped their hair short below the ear. Hair length was the established yardstick for distinguishing the sexes, and so Marx and Engels left us baffled, especially Marx—his curly hair practically covered his ears, much like the women of our town, whose ears revealed themselves only occasionally beneath their thick heads of hair. Marx's bushy beard, of course, tended to deter us from further speculation about his gender. One of my

classmates, however, brushed aside this evidence and went so far as to publicly declare, "Marx was a woman."

For that he almost ended up being branded as a little counterrevolutionary. He wouldn't have been the first, of course. One girl in second grade had folded a portrait of Mao in such a way that a cross had appeared on his face; somebody informed on her, and we all called her "the little counterrevolutionary." She broke down in tears at the school assembly where her crime was reported, and she blubbered so much when making her confession that we could hardly follow what she was saying.

Afterward our first-grade teacher called our class together and asked us to expose other little counterrevolutionaries who might have burrowed their way into our ranks. Fingers of suspicion were pointed at two young children. The first had a name unknown to us, and it took some time for the teacher to establish that he was the three-year-old son of the informer's neighbor, guilty late one afternoon of a reactionary comment. "The sun went down," he had been heard to say. In those days Mao was commonly compared to a bright red sun, so the sun was not something to be talked of lightly, and at nightfall the most one could say was "It's getting dark." For him to say "The sun went down" was tantamount to saying "Mao Zedong went down."

The second suspect was the classmate who had identified Marx as a woman. White as a sheet, he completely fell to pieces under the teacher's questioning. Tears streamed from his eyes and snivel dripped from his nose when he was asked whether he had indeed uttered such a reactionary remark. "I think maybe"—he gave a cough—"I—I did say that."

Our teacher offered him a chance to rephrase his statement: "You think maybe you said it, or you think maybe

you didn't say it?"

The panic-stricken boy responded with a welter of sobbing and confusion, one minute saying he thought maybe he'd said it, the next minute saying he thought maybe he hadn't. Right to the end of the denunciation meeting he was still going back and forth between one answer and the other. By sowing doubt in the minds of his listeners, "I think maybe" turned out to be his salvation, for in the end nothing came of it.

For a brief period when I was small, I was under the impression that Chairman Mao was our leader's full name. "Chairman Mao" was on everyone's lips, and one said it unthinkingly, with even more warmth than when one said "Grandpa" or "Daddy." With time, because people were always chanting "Long Live Mao Zedong Thought!" and singing "The east is red, the sun is rising, / China has brought forth a Mao Zedong," I came to understand that Chairman Mao was actually a combination of surname and official rank and that Mao Zedong was his true name. To refer to him in that way in normal conversation, of course, would have been the height of disrespect.

During the Dragon Boat Festival of 2009 the following text message began to circulate:

> New China News Agency, May 28: The Chinese Academy of Sciences has successfully cloned Mao Zedong; the clone's physical indicators match those of Mao in his prime. This announcement has elicited a powerful reaction internationally. U.S. President Obama has declared that within three days the United States will repeal the Taiwan Relations Act and withdraw all military forces stationed in Asia. The prime minister of Japan has ordered the demolition of the Yasukuni Shrine, acknowledged that the Senkaku Islands are

Chinese territory, and approved reparations for the 1937 invasion of China to the tune of 13 trillion dollars. The European Union has lifted its ban on arms sales to China. Russia's President Medvedev has conceded China's claim to a million square miles in eastern Siberia. Mongolia has signaled to the United Nations that it has always been part of China. Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou has promised to abide by all arrangements proposed by the mainland regarding reunification and has applied to be a scholar at the National Archives. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has sent instructions to his representative at the Six Party Talks to handle things according to Chairman Mao's directives. There has been a rapid turnaround in domestic affairs: in just twenty-four hours officials from the county level and up have returned their ill-got ten gains, to the tune of 980 trillion yuan;[5] privately run businesses have converted to public ownership; 25 million sex hostesses have become honest women overnight; the stock market has soared; house prices have declined by 60 percent; the Chinese people once more are singing the anthem of the age: "The east is red, the sun is rising, / China has brought forth another Mao Zedong."

By changing "China has brought forth a Mao Zedong" to "China has brought forth another Mao Zedong," popular humor has resurrected this long-dead leader, imagining how his comeback would awe the world, strike fear into the hearts of China's corrupt bureaucrats, and solve at one fell swoop the historical problems, diplomatic issues, and domestic crises that plague China today. What, I wonder, are the wider implications of this overheated fantasy? A sign of discontent with contemporary realities? Evidence of neo-nationalist fervor? Or is it just a joke, a wry reflection on the time and place in which we live? All of these, perhaps, and probably other things as well.

In the thirty-odd years since Mao's death China has fashioned an astonishing economic miracle, but the price it has paid is even more astounding. When I left South Africa at the end of a visit during the 2010 World Cup, the duty-free shop at Johannesburg's airport was selling vuvuzelas—Chinese-made plastic horns—for the equivalent of 100 yuan each, but on my return home I learned that the export price was only 2.6 yuan apiece. One company in Zhejiang manufactured 20 million vuvuzelas but ended up making a profit of only about 100,000 yuan. This example gives a sense of China's lopsided development: year after year chemical plants will dump industrial waste into our rivers, and although a single plant might succeed in generating a thirty-million-yuan boost to China's GDP, to clean up the rivers it has ruined will cost ten times that amount. An authority I respect has put it this way: China's model of growth is to spend 100 yuan to gain 10 yuan in increased GDP. Environmental degradation, moral collapse, the polarization of rich and poor, pervasive corruption—all these things are constantly exacerbating the contradictions in Chinese society. More and more we hear of mass protests in which hundreds or even thousands of people will burst into a government compound, smashing up cars and setting fire to buildings.

Many Chinese have begun to pine for the era of Mao Zedong, but I think the majority of them don't really want to go back in time and probably just feel nostalgic. Although life in the Mao era was impoverished and restrictive, there was no widespread, cruel competition to survive, just empty class struggle, for actually there were no classes to speak of in those days and so struggle mostly took the form of sloganeering and not much else. People then were on an

equal level, all alike in their frugal lifestyles; as long as you didn't stick your neck out, you could get through life quite uneventfully.

China today is a completely different story. So intense is the competition and so unbearable the pressure that, for many Chinese, survival is like war itself. In this social environment the strong prey on the weak, people enrich themselves through brute force and deception, and the meek and humble suffer while the bold and unscrupulous flourish. Changes in moral outlook and the reallocation of wealth have created a two-tiered society, and this in turn generates social tensions. So in China today there have emerged real classes and real class conflict.

After Mao, Deng Xiaoping drew on his own personal prestige to implement reforms and pursue an open-door policy, but in his final years he came to reflect on the paradox that even more problems had emerged after development than existed before it. Perhaps this is precisely why Mao keeps being brought back to life. Not long ago a public opinion poll asked people to anticipate their reaction if Mao were to wake up today. Ten percent thought it would be a bad thing, 5 percent thought it would have no impact on China or the world, and 85 percent thought it would be a good thing. I am unclear about the sample's demographics, but since the respondents were all Internet users, I suspect they were mostly young people. Chinese youth today know very little about Mao Zedong, so their embracing the idea of Mao's resurrection tells us something about the mood of the age. Gripped by the zeitgeist, people of diverse backgrounds and disparate opinions find a common channel for their discontent and—half in earnest, half in jest—act out a ritual of restoring the dead to life.

In an online discussion of this scenario, someone cracked the following joke:

> Mao rises from his glass coffin and walks out on to the steps of his mausoleum as morning sunshine bathes Tiananmen Square. A bunch of tourists dash to his side. "Gu Yue," they cry. "Give us your autograph, will you?"

Gu Yue, you see, is an actor famous for playing Mao.

When I was in primary school, I firmly believed China to be the greatest country in the world. I had two reasons for thinking that way. The first was that we had a great leader in Chairman Mao, whereas the four foreign leaders on my classroom wall—Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—had all died, so other countries did not have any great leaders. The second reason was that China had the biggest population, and Chairman Mao had said the more the people, the greater their strength.

When Chairman Mao's Three-World Theory appeared in the newspapers and on the radio, I was shaken to the core. It had never occurred to me that the American imperialists and the Soviet revisionists would be the first world, Japan and European countries the second, and our great nation of China would be lumped together in the third world with the little countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

But how could an ignorant little boy like me appreciate Mao Zedong's grand vision? After the victory of the Chinese revolution Mao was never content with what he had gained, never satisfied with just being leader of his own nation. He wanted to become the leader of all exploited and oppressed peoples. "Wherever there are contradictions, there will be oppression," he said loftily, "and wherever there is

oppression, there will be resistance." As his attention shifted to a global agenda, he developed an urge to liberate all the proletarians of the world—and acted on this impulse by exporting revolution.

Many years have passed since then. Putting aside for the moment the question of Mao's impact, positive and negative, on China, one thing is clear: Mao Zedong Thought has not perished just because his life came to an end. On the contrary, his influence beyond our borders is undiminished. For many people in many parts of the world, I have found, what Mao did in China is not so important—what matters is that his ideas retain their vitality and, like seeds planted in receptive soil, "strike root, flower, and bear fruit."

A couple of years ago Austrians raised aloft huge portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao at a big May Day parade in Vienna. Similar sights can be observed in other European cities, making one wonder whether the Mao revival is not just a mentality peculiar to China but more of a global phenomenon. If so, what does this mean? The simplest answer might be this: when the world is ailing, revolutionary impulses are stirred, just as when the body is ailing, inflammation ensues.

In November 2008 I visited Nepal as a member of a writers' delegation. The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) had claimed victory in the spring legislative elections and its leader, Prachanda, had recently become prime minister in the new government. During our visit we traveled through a United Nations peacekeepers' base to visit a camp of the Nepalese Communist (Maoist) Liberation Army. Its facilities were primitive, and the troops lacked guns and ammunition, but this unarmed army maintained strict discipline. A memorable sight greeted us as we entered one of their huts:

just as in my primary school classroom, on the wall were portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao—along with Prachanda, of course. The increase of faces from five to six seemed simply to demonstrate that revolution shows no signs of abating. That evening we had a get-together with the army members, and after several rounds of toasts we all stood up and sang "Long March," a Cultural Revolution anthem inspired by one of Mao's poems. We sang in Chinese, and the soldiers sang in Nepali. I doubt we were thinking about the same things, but when we sang the anthem in our two languages, it seemed as though we were all singing in one.

During the Cultural Revolution it wasn't just Mao's poems that were put to music; his quotations were, too. They were sung by adults and children, by scholars and illiterates, by politically correct masses and by landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists. Seen in that light, Mao must be rated the most influential author in Chinese history.

Mao's poems and quotations were everywhere, then. From city to village, on brick walls and mud walls, interior walls and outside walls, every space was covered with them, along with the gleaming image of Mao Zedong. On the bowls out of which we ate our rice was printed Mao's maxim "Revolution is not a dinner party," and the mugs out of which we drank our water were embellished with lines from Mao's lyric on swimming in the Yangtze: "I have just drunk the waters of Changsha / And now I come to eat the fish of Wuchang." In our daily encounters with Mao's pronouncements, the most ordinary things would take on weighty meaning: as we got ready for bed, on our pillowcases we would read "Never forget class struggle" and, on our sheets, "Advance bravely

through wind and waves." Mao's image was stenciled inside toilets, and sayings of his decorated our spittoons. Now I realize that these were two places where Mao clearly did not belong, but in those days, strange as it seems, this point escaped us. "Chairman Mao is at our side," people used to say, and I believed that, too. I was certain he'd be happy if I did something good and disappointed if I did something bad.

The most blissful moments in my childhood were when I dreamed of Mao. This happened three times. In one of the dreams he came up to me, ruffled my hair affectionately, and favored me with a few words. What elation I felt! I went off, pleased as punch, to tell my little companions about my audience with Chairman Mao. To my dismay, not one of them believed me. "How could you possibly have seen Chairman Mao?" they snorted. "How could he possibly have come to talk to you?" They were right, of course. "Chairman Mao is at our side" was just one of those flights of fancy typical of the Cultural Revolution, conjured into being by the very ubiquity of those golden busts of Mao and those quotations in bold red script. The Mao Zedong of down-to-earth reality was hazy and distant; he existed only in symbolic terms. Mao was so remote that, as my childhood playmates said, there was no chance of our ever meeting him, not even in a dream.

During the Cultural Revolution one of the locals returned from a trip to Beijing claiming he had shaken hands with Mao Zedong. Crying tears of joy, he told everyone how warmly the chairman had greeted him—even asking him his name! Chairman Mao had shaken his hand for a good four seconds before somebody else had displaced him. "It would have been five if not for that other guy!" he lamented.

This man naturally became a hero in our town, and I would often see him striding proudly down the street with a faded

green military satchel on his back. Because his right hand had held Mao's hand, he did not wash it once in the year that followed, and somehow it looked bigger than his left hand—as well as black and grimy as a bear's paw. Everyone in our town who knew him would make a point of shaking this bear paw of his. "I shook the hand that Chairman Mao has shaken," they would tell their neighbors ecstatically.

When I grew up and exchanged stories about the Cultural Revolution with friends from other parts of China, I would often mention this man, only to find they knew of similar individuals in their home districts—sometimes more than one. So I began to suspect that our small-town hero just made it all up, for surely it wasn't so easy to shake Mao's hand. I think our man was probably squeezed into a thick scrum of people packed together on Tiananmen Square during one of the chairman's grand inspections, watching Mao in the far, far distance as he stood on the Gate of Heavenly Peace and waved his hand in greeting. He dimly saw Mao's hand and imagined himself shaking it—and when everyone in our town became convinced this had happened, he became convinced of it, too.

In those days Mao Zedong's portrait shimmered like the sun on the Gate of Heavenly Peace, its dimensions quite out of proportion to the size of the gate. Almost every day I would see his awe-inspiring image on one wall or another of our little town, and almost every day we would sing a song that went:

I love Beijing's Tiananmen
Splendid under morning sun.
Our Great Leader Chairman Mao
Leads us forward, on and on.

I used to have a photograph of myself when I was fifteen, standing in the middle of Tiananmen Square with Mao's huge portrait visible in the background. It was taken not in Beijing but in the photography studio of our town a thousand miles away. The room in which I was standing cannot have been more than twenty feet wide, and the square was just a theatrical backdrop painted on the wall. When you looked at the photo, you might almost have believed I was really standing in Tiananmen Square—except for the complete absence of people in the acres of space behind me.

This photograph crystallized the dreams of my childhood years—and, indeed, the dreams of most Chinese children who lived in other places than Beijing. Almost all studios then were equipped with this same tableau of Tiananmen, designed to satisfy our vicarious desires, for to us in the provinces the Gate of Heavenly Peace might just as well have been Mao Zedong's front door. Hence that picture—now lost, I regret to say—of me standing at the entrance to Mao's imagined home.

My yearning for the Gate of Heavenly Peace was simply an extension of my eagerness to see Mao. During the Cultural Revolution a documentary featuring Mao and Tiananmen would be filmed every year on National Day, October 1. Often by the time the newsreel made it to our little town it would be well into winter. I would head off down the street in my lumpy padded jacket as a bitter night wind blew in my face, then sit down in the unheated cinema and watch the grainy images of autumnal Tiananmen, where Mao was waving to the marchers.

What left the deepest impression on me from the National Day newsreels was the pyrotechnics display that took place after nightfall, when Mao and his colleagues sat down at a

table so groaning with fruits and pastries it made my mouth drool. Fireworks illuminated the square as brightly as day: for me as a boy this was the most exhilarating scene of all. In our town major holidays were celebrated by letting off a few firecrackers at most, and to see so many fireworks explode in the sky for so many minutes, even if it was only on the screen, was enough to leave me speechless with wonder.

In later documentaries Prince Sihanouk, then recently deposed as ruler of Cambodia, appeared, smiling infectiously at Mao's side, along with the prince's onetime prime minister, Penn Nouth, who would cock his head and nod obsequiously as they spoke. Already well into my fantasy-rich adolescence by this time, I became quite besotted with Sihanouk and Penn Nouth's lovely young wives; every time they showed up in National Day footage, I thought to myself, "Now things are getting interesting!" The daytime parade and the after-dark fireworks had lost their appeal; Sihanouk and Penn Nouth had become the two men I envied most in the world, particularly the latter—clearly over the hill, I thought, and not even capable of holding his head up straight, but still with a lissome beauty at his beck and call.

I owe my most lasting memories of Mao to the ceiling of my house. We would have seen right up to the roof tiles if every year my father hadn't pasted a new layer of newspapers over them to prevent dust, to make our ceiling more presentable, and to give us a feeling of insulation. My childhood was spent under this canopy of newsprint: I could read all the headlines from my bed, although the text itself was impossible to make out. When Mao first appeared on my ceiling, he had Liu Shaoqi standing next to him, but before long Liu had disappeared, to be replaced by Lin Biao, who soon performed a vanishing trick as well; finally Mao was joined by a young

Cultural Revolution militant named Wang Hongwen.[6] In the National Day photo spread, the people by Mao's side kept changing; Mao alone remained constant from one year to the next. As the newspapers were refreshed annually, I was witness to Mao's physical decline; his increasing senility on my bedroom ceiling was brought to an abrupt halt when the paper stopped printing a photograph of Mao on National Day and replaced it with the generic image displayed everywhere in the country.

One morning in September 1976, when I was in my second year of high school, we all stood to attention as usual before the start of class and barked in chorus to the official image of Mao above the blackboard: "We wish Great Leader Chairman Mao eternal long life!" Then we sat down and began to read aloud a paragraph in our textbook. In those days all essays used the exact same phrases to describe Mao: "Glowing with health, radiating vigor." This language had been introduced in the textbook during my first year of elementary school, and it appeared without the slightest alteration in the one we used ten years later. No sooner had we finished reciting these lines than the school's PA system interrupted us with a sudden blare. It instructed all staff and students to assemble at once in the auditorium; an important broadcast would follow at 9 a.m.

We picked up our chairs, all one thousand of us, and shuffled into the auditorium, where we sat down and waited. Half an hour passed, and at nine o'clock funereal music sounded. I instantly had a grim sense of foreboding. Two senior leaders of the Communist Party had died that year—first Zhou Enlai, then Zhu De, just a few days before—so we knew what was coming.

The long dirge came to an end, and a grief-stricken voice

began to intone a slow litany of titles: "The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party, the State Council of the People's Republic of China, the National People's Congress, the National Political Consultative Conference. . . ."

It seemed to take forever to get to the obituary notice issued by these supreme organs of power. Another ponderous, doleful recitation began: "Great Leader, Great Teacher, Great Commander, Great Helmsman. . . ." Finally, after this long string of epithets, came the real substance: Chairman Mao Zedong had passed away after a long illness. Even before the final words, "aged eighty-two," the auditorium was already seething with moans and wails.

Our leader was dead. My eyes too filled with tears, and I wept like the thousand others. I heard heartrending screeches and earthshaking howls, people gasped for breath and choked in anguish—and then my mind began to wander. Grief no longer held me in its sway; my thoughts started moving in another direction entirely. If it had been just a few people weeping, I would certainly have felt sad, but a thousand people all weeping at the same time simply struck me as funny. I had never in my life heard such a cacophony. Even if every living variety of beast were to send a delegate to our auditorium and they were all to bellow in unison, I thought to myself, they surely could not make a stranger chorus than the din of a thousand people crying their heads off.

This untimely fancy might have been the death of me. I couldn't help but smile, and then I had to fight back the laugh that was pushing its way out. If anybody were to see me laughing, I would be labeled a counterrevolutionary on the

spot and life would not be worth living. Hard as I tried to bottle up my laughter, it insisted on spilling forth, and knowing I couldn't stifle it any longer, I desperately threw myself forward, hugging the back of the chair in front of me, and buried my head in my folded arms. Amid the weeping of a thousand people I was in the throes of uncontainable mirth, my shoulders heaving, and the more I tried to stop myself from laughing, the more the laughs kept coming.

My classmates, through a curtain of tears, saw me sprawled over a chair, racked by agonizing spasms of grief. They were deeply moved by my devotion to our fallen leader, and later they would say, "Yu Hua was more upset than anyone—you should have seen the way he was crying."

阅读

reading

Since I grew up in a time and a place where there were no books, it's hard to say just how I began to read. But sorting through my memories, I find my earliest reading[7] experiences fall into four sequences.

The first dates back to the summer following my graduation from elementary school, in 1973. By then we were into the seventh year of the Cultural Revolution, and the bloody street battles and savage house lootings were now well behind us. Cruelties perpetrated in the name of the revolution seemed to have worn themselves out, leaving life in our small town in a quiescent state, stifled and repressed. People had become more timid and circumspect than before, and although the newspapers and radio broadcasts carried on promoting class struggle day after day, it seemed ages since I had seen a class enemy.

At this point the town library, which had been mothballed for so long, finally reopened. My father managed to wangle a reader's card for my brother and me, to give us something to do during the tedious vacation. Thus began my reading of fiction. In China then, practically all literary works were labeled "poisonous weeds." Works by foreign authors such as

Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Balzac were poisonous weeds; works by Chinese authors like Ba Jin, Lao She, and Shen Congwen were poisonous weeds; and with the falling-out between Mao and Khrushchev, revolutionary literature of the Soviet era had become poisonous weeds, too. Since the bulk of the library's holdings had perished in all the Red Guard book burning, there was very little left to read. The fiction shelf featured only twenty-odd titles, all so-called socialist revolutionary literature of the homegrown variety. I read all these books in turn: *Bright Sunny Skies, The Golden Road, Ox-field Strand, Battle Song of Hongnan, New Bridge, Storm over Mine Shaft Hill, Spring Comes to the Land of Flying Snow, Glittering Red Star. . .* . My favorites were *Glittering Red Star* and *Storm over Mine Shaft Hill,* for the simple reason that their protagonists were children.

This kind of reading has left no traces on my life, for in these books I encountered neither emotions nor characters nor even stories. All I found was grindingly dull accounts of class struggle. This did not stop me from reading each book through to the end, because my life at the time was even more grindingly dull. "A starving man isn't picky," we say in Chinese, and that sums up my reading in those days. So long as it was a novel, so long as there were still some pages to go, I would keep on reading.

A few years ago two retired professors of Chinese in Berlin told me about their experience during the Great Famine of 1959–62. They were studying at Peking University at the time, and the husband had to return home early to deal with a family emergency. Two months later he received a letter from his wife. "Things are awful here," it said. "The students have eaten all the leaves off the trees." Just as the famished students stripped the campus trees bare, so I devoured every

one of those grim, unappetizing novels on the library shelf.

The librarian was a middle-aged woman very dedicated to her profession. Every time my brother, Hua Xu, and I returned a book, she would inspect it meticulously and not let us borrow another until she had satisfied herself that the returned volume had suffered no damage at our hands. Once she noticed an ink spot on the cover of the book we were returning and held us responsible. No, we had nothing to do with that, we told her—the ink spot had been there all the time. She stuck to her guns, insisting she always checked every book and there was no way she would have missed such a glaring stain. We began to argue, an activity known at the time as "civil struggle." Hua Xu was a Red Guard, and he saw civil struggle as a wimpy sort of activity; "martial struggle" was more the Red Guard style. So he picked up the book and threw it in her face, then gave her a clip across the ear for good measure.

After that we all went to the local police station, where the librarian sat in a chair for a long time, drenched in tears, while Hua Xu strolled back and forth in a show of calm indifference. The station chief did his best to console the woman, at the same time cursing out my brother and telling him to sit down and behave. So Hua Xu sat down and crossed his legs nonchalantly. The station chief was a friend of my father's, and I had once asked his advice about what to do in a fight. He had sized me up briefly—I was a puny little boy—and then given me the following tip: nip in before your adversary is ready and kick him in the balls. "What if it's a girl?" I asked.

"Boys don't fight with girls," he told me sternly.

My brother's demonstration of Red Guard fighting prowess lost us our reader's card. But I found this no cause for regret, because by then I had read all the novels in the library. The

problem was that the summer vacation was far from over and my appetite for reading was sharper than ever.

At home all we had was the dozen or so medical books my parents had acquired in the course of their professional training, plus the four-volume set of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao*—the Little Red Book, a compilation of sayings culled from *Selected Works.* I fingered these books listlessly, waiting for some chemistry to develop, but even after much turning of pages I found I had not the slightest inclination to read them.

So I had no choice but to leave the house and, like a man with a rumbling stomach on a search for food, I went off on a hunt for books. Dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, with flip-flops on my feet, I roamed the sunbaked streets and greeted every boy I knew with the call, "Hey, got any books at home?"

The other boys, all dressed exactly like me, gave a start when they heard my inquiry, for it was most likely the first time they had ever been asked such a question. They would nod their heads: "Yeah, we do." But when I ran to their houses, full of excitement, all I saw was that familiar four-volume edition of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*—always a new, unopened set. This taught me a lesson, and so the next time one of my respondents told me he had books at home I stuck out four fingers. "Four books, you mean?" When he nodded, my hand would drop to my side. "New books, right?" I would ask. When he nodded once more, I could not conceal my disappointment. "Oh, not *Selected Works* again!"

Later I changed my opening question. "Got old books?" I would ask.

The boys I met shook their heads—with one exception. This boy blinked, then nodded. "I think so," he said.

"Four books?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just one, I think."

But that could mean the Little Red Book. "Has it got a red cover?"

He thought for a moment. "Gray, I think."

Now I was getting somewhere. His threefold iteration of "I think" raised my confidence enormously. I clapped my sweaty hand on his sweaty shoulder and treated him to such an endless stream of compliments that he was practically purring with pleasure by the time we got to his house. There he bustled about, moving a stool in front of the wardrobe, then groping around on top of the wardrobe until he finally got his hand on a small book caked with dust, which he presented to me. I immediately felt uneasy, for it was a pocketbook much the same size as *Quotations from Chairman Mao.* When I scraped away the thick layer of dust that coated the jacket, my heart sank at the sight of a red plastic cover—it was the Little Red Book.

All my efforts outside having proved fruitless, I had no choice but to try to tap latent potential at home—to "increase internal demand to stimulate growth," to borrow today's catchphrase. I had a cursory glance through the medical books and then put them right back on the shelf, completely failing to notice the wonders concealed inside their covers and so postponing by two years my discovery of their secrets. After that, all that was left was a brand-new set of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* and a dog-eared copy of the Little Red Book. That was the situation typical of every household then: *Selected Works* was simply political ornamentation, and it was the Little Red Book that was taken up for study on a daily basis.

I passed over the Little Red Book and opted for *Selected*

Works instead. This time I began to read it carefully and in so doing found something I had missed before, which opened up a whole new world. From then on *Selected Works* was seldom out of my hands.

In summertime then everyone ate outdoors. First we would splash a few basins of cold water on the ground, in part to cool things off, in part to keep the dust in place, and then we would bring out a table and stools. Once dinner was served, we children would walk back and forth with our rice bowls in our hands, inspecting the dishes on other tables as we ate up the food in our own bowls. I was always quick to finish my meal; then, after putting down bowl and chopsticks, I would pick up *Selected Works* and read it avidly by the light of the setting sun.

The neighbors all sighed in wonder, impressed that at such a tender age I was already so assiduous in my study of Mao Zedong Thought. My parents brimmed with pride on hearing so much praise. Privately they began in hushed voices to discuss my future, lamenting that the Cultural Revolution had restricted my educational opportunities, for otherwise their younger son would surely be well on his way to becoming a university professor.

In reality Mao Zedong Thought had completely failed to engage me. What I liked to read in *Selected Works* was simply the footnotes, explanatory summaries of historical events and biographical details about historical figures, which proved to be much more interesting than the novels in our local library. Although there was no emotion to be found in the footnotes, they did have stories, and they did have characters.

The second phase of my early reading dates to my high school years, when I began to read poisonous weeds. Some

books had somehow managed to escape the bonfires—spirited away, perhaps, by true literature lovers—and these fortunate survivors began surreptitiously to circulate among us. Every one of these books must have passed through the hands of a thousand people or more before they reached me, and so they were in a terrible state of disrepair, with easily a dozen or more pages missing from the beginning and the same number missing at the end. So I knew neither the books' titles nor their authors, neither how the stories began nor how they ended.

To not know how a story began was not such a hardship, but to not know how it ended was a painful deprivation. Every time I read one of these headless, tailless novels I was like an ant on a hot wok, running around everywhere in search of someone who could tell me the ending. But everybody was in the same boat, for the versions other people had read were also missing pages at the beginning and end, and though sometimes I met people who had read a few more pages than I had and could brief me on developments in that portion of the book, they still did not know the final denouement. Such was our experience of reading: our books were constantly losing pages as they passed through the hands of several—or several dozen—readers. It left me disconsolate, mentally cursing those earlier readers who had been able to finish the book but never bothered to stick the pages that had fallen out back in.

How these stories without resolutions made me suffer! Nobody could help me, so I began to think up endings for myself. "The Internationale" puts it well:

No one will grant us deliverance
Neither god nor emperor

To create happiness for man
We depend on our own labor.

Every night when I went to bed and turned off the light, my eyes would blink as I entered the world of imagination, creating endings to those stories that stirred me so deeply tears would run down my face. It was, I realize now, good training for things to come, and I owe a debt to those truncated novels for sparking creative tendencies in me.

The first foreign novel I ever read was another headless, tailless thing, without author or title, beginning or end. In it for the first time I encountered sexual descriptions; they made me anxious and fearful. When I reached one of these passages, I would raise my head in alarm and glance all around. Only when I was sure nobody was watching would I continue reading, my heart in my mouth.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, literature staged a comeback, and bookstores were packed with new editions of literary works. I must have bought countless Western novels then, and one night I picked out Maupassant's *Une Vie* for bedtime reading. Well into the story I suddenly shouted, "So this is the one!" It was the same book that, years earlier in headless, tailless form, had me shaking like a leaf.

Of the poisonous weeds I was exposed to as a boy only one appeared to be fully intact, and that was Dumas' *La dame aux camélias.* I was in the second year of high school by then, and the Cultural Revolution was on its last legs. *La dame aux camélias* came to us in manuscript form. Later, when I got to read a printed edition, I realized that the manuscript was actually an abridged version.

At that point Great Leader Mao Zedong had just died and his chosen successor, Wise Leader Hua Guofeng, was enjoying

his short spell in the limelight, before the reemergence of Deng Xiaoping. I remember a classmate calling me over and telling me in a low voice that he had borrowed a gem of a book. He glanced around nervously. "It's a love story," he confided. When I heard that, my heart pounded. We burst into a trot and ran all the way to his house. As we gasped for breath my friend pulled from his satchel a manuscript wrapped in glossy white art paper. When I turned the paper over, I gave a start, for *La dame aux camélias* turned out to be wrapped in an official portrait of Wise Leader Hua Guofeng. "You counterrevolutionary, you!" I cried.

He was just as startled as I was, for he hadn't noticed the wrapping; he said it wasn't he but another counterrevolutionary who was responsible, the one who'd lent him the book. Then we conferred about how to deal with the now crumpled portrait of Hua Guofeng. "Let's toss it in the river," he said.

"Better not," I said. "Safer to burn it." So we disposed of the picture and then turned our attention to the manuscript. It was written in neat characters inside a notebook with a brown paper cover. My friend said he had it for one day only; it had to be returned the next morning. We sat with our heads together—an exciting way to read—and before we were a third of the way through, we were already sighing in wonder. "I had no idea there was such a great novel in the world!" we agreed. But this made us worry about losing it—we wanted to keep it for ourselves. Seeing that the book was not so very long, we decided to stop reading and begin copying, so that we could finish the transcription before the deadline ran out.

My classmate found a notebook his father had never used, and we took turns copying the novel. I started things off, and

when my wrist began to ache, he at once took over; when he got tired, I took over. In the late afternoon, knowing that my parents would soon be coming home, we needed to pull up stakes and go somewhere safer. After some discussion we decided that a school classroom was the best bet.

High school classes were on the second floor, middle school classes on the first. Although the classroom doors were locked, there were always windows not securely latched, so we walked along outside until we found a room whose window would open. We clambered in and continued our copying in this unfamiliar room; when it got dark, we turned on the fluorescent ceiling lights and carried on.

As hunger gnawed at our bellies and our eyes and arms grew weary, we pushed some desks together; while one of us copied, the other lay down on this makeshift bed. We kept going until dawn, one copying, one sleeping, with roles changing more and more frequently. At the start each of us could copy for half an hour or more, but later we needed to take a rest every five minutes or so. He would lie down on the desk, and no sooner had he started snoring than I would get up and give him a shake. "Hey, wake up, it's your turn."

And as soon as I was asleep, he would be shaking me: "Hey, get up."

And so, by constantly denying each other sleep, we finally completed our marathon copying mission. We climbed out through the window and headed down the road, yawning all the way. As we parted my friend glanced at the red glow in the eastern sky and handed me our copy. He was going to return the original manuscript and then go straight home to bed.

I got home before my parents were up, hastily gobbled down the cold rice and cold dishes left over from their

dinner, and fell asleep right away. Almost at once, it seemed, I was woken by my father's angry roar: he was demanding to know where I had spent the night. I mumbled an ambiguous answer, then turned over and went back to sleep.

I slept till noon that day, skipping school and staying at home to read our copy of *La dame aux camélias.* When we'd begun the transcription, our handwriting had been quite neat and regular, but our characters had become progressively more slipshod the longer the book went on. My own careless handwriting I could read well enough, but I could make neither head nor tail of my classmate's. Frustrated by all the illegible words, I worked myself into a towering rage. When I could stand it no longer, I slipped the notebook inside my jacket and left home in search of my friend.

I found him on the school basketball court, about to shoot a basket. I bellowed out his name, giving him such a start that he turned and looked at me in astonishment. "Come over here!" I cried. "Get over here right now!"

Bristling at my aggressive tone, he flung the ball on the ground. He marched over with fists clenched, sweaty from his game. "What's up with you?" he yelled.

I took the book out of my jacket, waved it under his nose, then slipped it back under my arm. "I can't make out what you've written, you idiot!"

Now he understood. Mopping his face, he followed me with a chuckle into the copse next to the school. There I had him stand by my side as I pulled out the notebook and picked up the story from where I had left off. At frequent intervals I had to break off from my reading to ask him in exasperation, "What the hell are these characters?"

Thus my reading stuttered along until finally I reached the end of *La dame aux camélias.* Despite all the fits and starts, the

story and the characters made my heart ache, and it was with great reluctance that I surrendered the notebook to him, my cheeks wet with tears.

That evening I was already asleep when he arrived outside our house, shouting my name furiously. He had found my cursive hand just as illegible as I had found his. So I got out of bed and accompanied him to a spot beneath a streetlamp where, as the rest of the town slept, he read away, utterly absorbed, while I leaned against the pole, yawning incessantly but always on call, faithfully deciphering scrawl after scrawl of misshapen calligraphy.

The third stage in my early reading career opened with street reading—big-character posters, in other words, a unique spectacle bequeathed to us by the Cultural Revolution. In those days, to tear big-character posters off the walls would have counted as counterrevolutionary activity, so new posters had to be stuck on top of old ones and walls became thicker and thicker, as though our town were swathed in an oversized padded jacket.

I didn't get to read big-character posters in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, for I had only just entered elementary school, at the age of seven, and with my limited recognition of Chinese characters I could read only the titles of posters—and those with a certain degree of difficulty. My interest lay in the fierce street battles that were taking place. I watched with stunned fascination as the adults in our town waved clubs and shouted, "Defend to the death Great Leader Chairman Mao," battering each other until they had blood streaming down their faces. This left me mystified. If everyone was out to defend Chairman Mao, I thought, why were they so intent on beating each other up?

I was a timid creature then, watching the battles from a safe distance. When a group of attackers charged, I ran away at once, making sure I was well out of slingshot range. My brother, two years older than me, preferred to observe the hostilities close up and would stand with his arms folded, insouciance personified.

Every day we would hang out in the streets, watching the fights that frequently broke out as appreciatively as if we were watching black-and-white films in the cinema; "watching movies" became, indeed, our term for hanging out in the street. A few years later, when wide-screen films in color appeared in the cinema, our slang was updated accordingly. If one boy asked, "Where are you going?" the boy heading out to the street would say, "Off to watch a wide-screen."

It was in middle school that I became enamored of big-character posters. This must have been around 1975, in the closing stages of the Cultural Revolution, when bloody battles had given way to a glum apathy. Although there was no change to the streets themselves, what was happening in the streets was different. To us street kids, wide-screens were not nearly so much fun to watch as the earlier black-and-whites, when the streets were full of uproar and activity, like animated films from Hollywood. In the final years of the Cultural Revolution the streets were silent and subdued, like modernist European art-house movies. As we grew from street urchins to street youths our lives shifted from one idiom to the other. The rhythm of our lives in the mid-1970s had a lot in common with the protracted, static scenes and the slow pans and long shots of art-house cinema.

If I close my eyes now, I can see myself thirty-odd years ago, a schoolboy walking home in patched clothes, wearing

khaki gym shoes bleached white from use, a worn satchel slung carelessly across my back, wandering aimlessly down the street past walls covered with big-character posters.

There, caught in that camera frame, that younger version of me was coming to appreciate the pleasure of reading. Just as enjoyment of an art-house movie requires a certain aesthetic perseverance, life in the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution needed to be carefully savored; only then could one discover the wonders hidden behind an unprepossessing exterior.

By 1975 people had been numbed into indifference by big-character posters and seldom read the new exposés that sprouted up overnight. Now well on their way to losing all relevance, posters were becoming merely wallpaper. People would walk right past them without looking, and I did the same—until one day when I noticed a poster with a cartoon attached. Years after stumbling upon the footnotes to *Selected Works of Mao Zedong,* my reading had finally discovered another new continent.

The cartoon took the form of a crudely drawn bed on which a man and a woman were reclining; gaudy colors had been applied to make the picture stand out more. This unusual illustration made my heart thump with excitement. On propaganda posters I was used to seeing revolutionary masses —men and women alike—sticking out their chests in heroic poses, but for a bed to appear alongside them was a complete novelty. Here, on a big-character poster espousing revolutionary values, this clumsy sketch of a couple on a bed had obvious sexual implications. I was all agog.

It was the first poster I had ever seriously spent time reading. Sandwiched between revolutionary slogans and frequent quotations of Chairman Mao were exquisite little

passages that told the story of a pair of fornicators in our small town. Although I failed to find very explicit sexual details, the associations it conjured up in my mind were enough to set my heart racing, like a little boat bobbing about on the sea.

The names of the adulterous couple were written right above the garish cartoon. I related the story—with further embellishment and gratuitous details thrown in—to my best friends, who listened spellbound. After that we set off in high spirits to find out where the couple lived and worked.

It did not take more than a few days to track them down. The man lived in an alley on the west side of town. We had to wait outside his house for quite some time before he came back from work. Having been apprehended in flagrante delicto, the man was in no mood for further humiliation. He greeted us with a dark scowl and quickly scuttled into his house. The woman worked in a department store in a town three or four miles away. My friends and I agreed on a particular Sunday to make the trip, undeterred by the distance involved, and we soon found the store. It cannot have been more than a few hundred square feet in size. Inside stood three female shop assistants, and it was not clear to us which of them was the man's bedmate. We stood in the doorway and debated which of the women was the most attractive, before agreeing in the end that not one of them was a looker. Then we yelled the name I'd seen on the poster. One of the women answered at once, turning to look at us in surprise, and we dashed off, whooping with glee.

Such was the barren aridity of that time: to see in the flesh the people featured in a wall-poster love affair was enough to put us in a good mood for days.

As this example suggests, although big-characters posters

at this point were as crammed full as ever with sayings of Chairman Mao, passages from the left-wing writer Lu Xun, and revolutionary catchwords of the day, there had been a gradual change in the topics they addressed. As rivalry between factions festered and conflicts grew personal, gossip, insult, and muckraking were the new weapons of choice. Sexual innuendoes were beginning to show up in the poster exposés, for improper sexual relations were popular material when people indulged in character assassination and abuse. Thus I developed a taste for reading the posters and made a point of stopping on the way home from school to see whether any new posters had appeared and any juicy new revelations had emerged.

This kind of reading entailed a great deal of effort for very meager returns, and often several days of poster perusal would turn up absolutely nothing of interest. At first my classmates joined me, infected by my enthusiasm, but it didn't take them long to write off this activity as way too unprofitable; their two days of eager reading had unearthed only a handful of anemic phrases—not nearly as stirring, they said, as my more colorful, enhanced versions. But they urged me to persist in my search, and every morning on the way to school they would sidle up to me expectantly and ask, "Anything new?"

The most earthshaking moment in my poster-reading career came when I discovered an account of a girl's affair with a married man. It featured by far the most detailed content I had ever encountered, with certain passages citing verbatim the confessions written by the lovers after their capture.

This episode had elements of a concert program, beginning with a prelude, when the man took a basket of dirty clothes