

The Day Mao Died

It was around 3 PM on September 9, 1976.

I was sitting thoughtfully on an old sofa, the springs of which were already broken. In fact I had sunk into the sofa, and felt as if I had sunk into a sand-pit. But that didn't hinder my brooding.

Since 1970 I had the habit of spending at least an hour brooding over my past on that particular day to commemorate the anniversary of my release from jail. I just can't forget the time and date (3:05 PM, September 9, 1969) when they told me I was free to go home. At the same time on the same day in 1970, I wrote a poem entitled "3:05 PM" I think the time is already eternalized in my mind.

"Pu Ning, get out your luggage!" Juan, a section chief at the jail, opened the small window over the black door of my cell and gave me the order in a low tone. I looked at his pale face, and felt his command was like the thunder which forebodes the opening of a black coffin in a tale of horror.

God! I had waited for that command for 432 days! What could I say then except "Hallelujah!?" And what could I do except get out my baggage and prepare to leave the "black coffin?"

Forty minutes later I was running frantically to the street to call a rickshaw. I wished to reach home as soon as possible and with dignity. If I had walked home, the two pieces of baggage I carried would have crushed me like two big boulders.

Thirty more minutes later, I appeared in the barbershop near my house. That was the first time in fourteen months that I saw myself in a mirror. But that first impression of myself was everlastingly bad. I found that I did have a thin pale face like a ghost's. I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror for long. "I've just come back from a hospital. I had a long serious illness. I almost died." I lied. I thought I owed the barber a

decent explanation for my preposterous state and was wary of what would happen if I told him I had just been released from prison.

Year after year, the same scene flashes itself into my memory and unfolds sort of like a film. And to watch the film at the same time every year has become a ritual which I must observe without fail. The film length varies each year but usually lasts about one and a half to two hours, like any ordinary movie. In 1976 however, the film was shorter. My yearly ritual was abruptly interrupted a few minutes before four o'clock in the afternoon.

I was sitting at a table by a window which had two movable windowpanes, the upper one being transparent and the lower one opaque. I remember that it was an especially sultry day. On a day like that I would open both panes of the window unless I was writing. (I opened the entire window to let others see that I, as a released "anti-revolutionary," was not misbehaving. And I kept the lower part of the window closed while writing, no matter how hot it was, because I did not want others to suspect me of being "anti-revolutionary" again.) As I was then not writing but ruminating over a book of literature, the window was entirely open as usual.

A glance outside toward the left revealed Mr. Sun listening to the radio attentively and apparently with nervous tension.

What made him so? I strained my ears to listen. But I heard nothing clear because the radio was not turned up loud enough.

Then a strange thing happened. He suddenly stopped listening, leaped up and walked toward me. Soon I heard him knocking at my door.

I have a poem (poetic manuscripts collected out of jail) which describes my house as being in "the depth of the mountains where neither man nor beast ever reach." Indeed, even after 1972 when I had finally lost the stigma of being an anti-revolutionary, I had very few visitors. The only ones who came to my house were the few close friends I had. Their coming was like the chance falling of some leaves on a distant old pond. Old Sun, though my neighbor, had never paid me a

visit before. If he had something (of special concern) to tell me, he often spoke with me in the common yard, never venturing near my house. We often let our conversation be broadcast by the wind to every door in the community. We thought we could thus prove we were guilty of nothing "anti-revolutionary."

The reason why Old Sun and I behaved so gingerly was that both he and I belonged to the "five black categories" of people. In the Hindu caste system, people of the lower castes can still sit together and eat together. But under the government of the Chinese Communists, people belonging to the "black categories" cannot act as freely, because the cadres are everywhere spying on these unfortunates. One suspicious word or act could easily send a member of a "black category" to jail. It is therefore no exaggeration that a man and a woman from a "black category" could live in the same place like husband and wife but never talk to each other for two or three years.

But that day Old Sun broke the unwritten rule. He came over to tell me some big news. But before he gave me the news, he said, "Old Pu, close the lower part of the window." He was still acting prudently.

After I did what he bid, he whispered into my ear, "Mao Zedong is dead!"

"What?" I couldn't believe it.

"Mao is dead. I've just heard it on the radio. He died early this morning."

I came to realize why Old Sun had acted so strangely and cautiously. He asked me to close the window because he was afraid that the news might get me so excited that I'd behave imprudently. He was also afraid, I think, that the news might have just been the product of a broadcaster's madness. Anyway, he wished to tell me the big news secretly without being spied on by others.

To tell the truth, I was really overjoyed to hear the news. I felt like dancing "The Rapid Waltz of the Southern Rose." But before I let things get out of control, I wished to listen to the radio myself.

As soon as I turned on the transistor, I heard the International Anthem and then the news. Meanwhile, I noticed a bright light shining in the common yard. Some people were playing with firecrackers. Mao, the "reddest, reddest, red sun"¹ was like their flames, which could not shine eternally bright.

I rushed back to my own room. I lit a cigarette and lay down smoking it on a rattan couch. I felt as if I were tasting a most delicious fruit. The tidings made me even happier than my marriage in 1965.

It was indeed noteworthy that all Chinese people (and perhaps many foreigners as well), had been concerned about Mao's health and had been anxious to know when he would cease to be. Since the 1950's, people had been talking about the possibility of his sudden decease. Some said, "Fortune-teller Li has just had a close look at his recent photo. He said Mao could hardly survive the winter because his 'yintang'² was turning pitch black." Others said, "Astrologer Wang saw an evil star largely dimmed in the sky. He thought Mao might pass away soon." In the spring of 1966, as soon as I entered a friend's house at Hung Kou, he asked me, "Do you know Mao is in East China Military Hospital? They say his case is serious." It was the year the Cultural Revolution broke out. Later that year I saw in the newspaper a photo in which Mao was posing with Lin Biao, Deng Xiaoping, and a visiting political head of Albania. Judging from that photo, Mao was indeed unhealthy, but he didn't seem mortally ill. Afterwards, there were rumors that he had had an apoplexy. But the most interesting rumor was spread by a math teacher who said, "Mao recently passed out all of a sudden while he was in bed with his mistress." In 1975, Mao was still living, for all the rumors (or rather, people's wishes). But judging from the photo in which he posed with Premier Li of Singapore, he was already as disabled as a dead man. That made me decide that he was on his way to see Marx very soon.

¹ A saying popular with the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. The actual phrasing goes like "Chairman Mao is the reddest, reddest, red sun in our hearts."

² The space between the eyebrows.

I had thought that even if Mao could have lived for five more years, I would be able to survive him. If only I survived him, there was hope for a change in my fortune. Now he was gone four years sooner than expected. How could I help but get ecstatic over it?

At five o'clock, I heard the loudspeaker of a nearby factory pronounce the news. I thought I had better go out and see how the people reacted when they heard what was in my opinion the biggest news in the whole history of China.

I stepped out. The first man I saw was Limpy Wu. He sat in the door of his room waving a broken palm-leaf fan. He had a serious face, and was seemingly always in a solemn mood. Yet I could feel with my sixth sense that he was overjoyed like me.

But we did not converse. We communicated in silence. In the meantime, Mrs. Wu commented in a thin voice, "This is the only true equality. No matter who you are, you cannot but take that road."

I glanced around, seeing nobody else in the common yard except Little Wang, who sat on a bamboo chair near his door to cool himself. Little Wang was a worker, noted for his outspoken character. He made a grimace and added, "One should live like that, to live a full life."

Just then, I saw some other people walk into the yard. I immediately pretended to have heard nothing and walked quickly down the street toward the Fish Market Bridge.

From the subtle facial expressions of the people I saw on the street, I knew the news had already spread throughout the city. However, I noticed nobody shed tears, nor appeared really sad. The children were sporting on the sidewalks as usual though the adults appeared still afraid to reveal any mirth.

Many people were indeed astonished to hear the news. But many more had no response at all; they seemed to have been numbed, body and soul, from the long years of ceaseless movements and anti-movements. I believed some had sighed inwardly. But most of them, I believed, had consoled themselves

by thinking that now they could say that they had truly tided over the horrible period of the Great Cultural Revolution.

I walked on the street for nearly an hour. But I did not see a single drop of moisture on anyone's face.

The next day I gazed at Mao's picture in the newspaper for ten long minutes. I think I still didn't dare to accept the fact that he was gone and my good fortune was to come. In effect, I was still afraid that the news might only be the result of another rumor. Perhaps the idea that Mao was a great great figure and thus should be deified was still in many ignorant minds. But did it come to my mind at that moment?

In the newspaper picture, Mao was lying in a big glass case, his big body showing its bigness as a dinosaur does. In my cold eyes, that colossal lump still held an-awe-inspiring power. If it rose up again, I thought, it could still trample all of China and shed a torrent of blood as long as the Yellow River. But now his eyes had closed. And it was a consolation to see those two eyes closed so surely tight while his body lay so motionless in the glass coffin. "For all the dread you commanded over the past sixty years, you are come to this, Amen!" I said to him in my heart.

I lit a cigarette and continued to gaze at the picture while smoking. I enjoyed seeing him come to this just as I "enjoyed eating a favorite food." It was a pleasure you could "chew with zest."

No one outside of China, I believed, could imagine how a billion people had been living under the "charm" of that man now lying lifeless in that coffin. "But you are come to this!" I said loudly again to him in my heart.

All the people were commanded to wear crape.³ But a young worker resisted the orders by saying, "This is sheer nonsense!" He was arrested at once.

Not long after, I heard a rumor that Mao had actually lain speechless on bed for many months before he died. They said he

apparently still had his sense of hearing and could only issue commands by pen and paper.

Some more hearsay which came out still later said that Mao wouldn't have died on that day if his wife Jiang Qing hadn't come to see him. They said she had turned him over in bed to express her tender wifely care, and that had made him expire on the spot, drawing upon herself the suspicion that she had planned to kill "our Great Leader."

Most people were concerned about the future political changes. One of my young friends said, "Jiang Qing might become chairperson of the Party." I thought him naive and said to him scornfully, "You fool, just wait and see." Her days of power, I thought, were numbered as soon as her "great husband" was encased.

My prediction proved true, of course. Today we know the Gang of Four (of whom the leader was Jiang Qing) soon collapsed after Mao's death. Jiang Qing received a death sentence after she was arrested, though the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment.

But I do not care about the fate of that head of the Gang. For me the day of Mao's death signifies my release from prison, and for many many more Chinese it meant a release from a long insufferable period of pain and terror. It was significant day that every year the arrival of September 9 finds me brooding in my room.

(Translated by Richard J. Ferris Jr.)

³ A piece of black crepe as a sign of mourning, often worn as band around the arm.