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14. "Father Is Close, Mother Is Close, but Neither Is as Close as Chairman Mao"— The Cult of Mao

(1964–1965)

"Chairman Mao," as we always called him, began to impinge directly on my life in 1964, when I was twelve. Having been in retreat for some time after the famine, he was starting his comeback, and in March of the previous year he had issued a call to the whole country, particularly the young, to "learn from Lei Feng."

Lei Feng was a soldier who, we were told, had died at the age of twenty-two in 1962. He had done an awful lot of good deeds—going out of his way to help the elderly, the sick, and the needy. He had donated his savings to disaster relief funds and given up his food rations to comrades in the hospital.

Lei Feng soon began to dominate my life. Every afternoon we left school to "do good deeds like Lei Feng." We went down to the railway station to try to help old ladies with their luggage, as Lei Feng had done. We sometimes had to grab their bundles from them forcibly because some countrywomen thought we were thieves. On rainy days, I stood on the street with an umbrella, anxiously hoping that an old lady would pass by and give me an opportunity to escort her home—as Lei Feng had done. If I saw someone carrying water buckets on a shoulder pole—old houses still did not have running water—I would

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try unsuccessfully to summon up the courage to offer my help, although I had no idea how heavy a load of water was.

Gradually, during the course of 1964, the emphasis began to shift from boy scoutish good deeds to the cult of Mao. The essence of Lei Feng, the teachers told us, was his "boundless love and devotion to Chairman Mao." Before he took any action, Lei Feng always thought of some words of Mao's. His diary was published and became our moral textbook. On almost every page there was a pledge like: "I must study Chairman Mao's works, heed Chairman Mao's words, follow Chairman Mao's instructions, and be a good soldier of Chairman Mao's." We vowed to follow Lei Feng, and be ready to "go up mountains of knives and down seas of flames," to "have our bodies smashed to powder and our bones crushed to smithereens," to "submit ourselves unquestioningly to the control of the Great Leader"—Mao. The cult of Mao and the cult of Lei Feng were two sides of the same coin: one was the cult of personality; the other, its essential corollary, was the cult of impersonality.

I read my first article by Mao in 1964, at a time when two slogans of Mao's—"Serve the People" and "Never Forget Class Struggle"—dominated our lives. The essence of these two complementary slogans was illustrated in Lei Feng's poem "The Four Seasons," which we all learned by heart:

> Like spring, I treat my comrades warmly.
> Like summer, I am full of ardor for my revolutionary work.
> I eliminate my individualism as an autumn gale sweeps away fallen leaves,
> And to the class enemy, I am cruel and ruthless like harsh winter.

In line with this, our teacher said we had to be careful whom we helped on our do-good errands. We must not help "class enemies." But I did not understand who they were, and when I asked, neither the teachers nor my parents were keen to elaborate. One common answer was: "like the baddies in the movies." But I could not see anyone around me who looked like the highly stylized enemy characters in the movies. This posed a big problem. I no longer felt sure about seizing bags from old ladies. I could not possibly ask, "Are you a class enemy?"

We sometimes went to clean the houses in an alley next to our school. In one house there was a young man who used to lounge on a bamboo chair watching us with a cynical smile as we toiled away on his windows. Not only did he not offer to help, he even wheeled his bicycle out of the shed and suggested we clean that for him as well.

"What a pity," he once said, "that you are not the real Lei Feng, and that there are no photographers on hand to take your pictures for the newspapers." (Lei Feng's good deeds were miraculously recorded by an official photographer.) We all hated the lounger with the dirty bicycle. Could he be a class enemy? But we knew he worked at a machinery factory, and workers, we had been repeatedly told, were the best, the leading class in our revolution. I was confused.

One of the things I had been doing was helping to push carts on the streets after school. The carts were often piled high with cement blocks or chunks of sandstone. They were terribly heavy, and every step was an enormous effort for the men who pulled them. Even in cold weather, some would be bare-chested, and shiny beads of sweat trickled down their faces and backs. If the road was even slightly uphill, it was very hard for some of them to keep going. Whenever I saw them, I was attacked by a wave of sadness. Since the campaign to learn from Lei Feng had started, I had stood by a ramp waiting for carts to pass. I would be exhausted after helping to push just one of them. As I left off, the man pulling would give me an almost imperceptible sideways smile, trying not to break his stride and lose momentum.

One day a classmate said to me in a very serious tone of voice that most of the people pulling carts were class enemies who had been assigned to do hard labor. Therefore, she told me, it was wrong to help them. I asked my teacher, since I, in accordance with Chinese tradition, always turned to teachers for authority. But instead of her normal air of confidence, she looked unsettled and said she did not know the answer, which puzzled me. In fact, it was actually true that people pulling carts had often been assigned the job because they had Kuomintang links, or because they were victims of one of the political purges. My teacher obviously did not want to tell me this, but she did ask me to stop helping to push carts. From then on, every time I happened on a cart in the street, I averted my eyes from the bent figure trudging along and quickly walked away with a heavy heart.

To fill us with hatred for class enemies, the schools started regular sessions of "recalling bitterness and reflecting on happiness," at which older people would tell us about the miseries of pre-Communist China. Our generation had been born "under the red flag" in new China, and had no idea what life was like under the Kuomintang. Lei Feng had, we were taught, which was why he could hate the class enemies so deeply and love Chairman Mao with all his heart. When he was seven, his mother was supposed to have hanged herself after being raped by a landlord.

Workers and peasants came to give talks at our school: we heard of childhoods dominated by starvation, freezing winters with no shoes, and premature, painful deaths. They told us how boundlessly grateful they were to Chairman Mao for saving their lives and giving them food and clothing. One speaker was a member of an ethnic group called the Yi, who had a system of slavery until the late 1950s. He had been a slave and showed us scars from appalling beatings under his previous masters. Every time the speakers described the hardships they had endured the packed hall was shaken by sobs. I came out of these sessions feeling devastated at what the Kuomintang had done, and passionately devoted to Mao.

To show us what life without Mao would be like, every now and then the school canteen cooked something called a "bitterness meal," which was supposed to be what poor people had to eat under the Kuomintang. It was composed of strange herbs, and I secretly wondered whether the cooks were playing a practical joke on us—it was truly unspeakable. The first couple of times I vomited.

One day we were taken to an exhibition of "class education" about Tibet: on display were photos of dungeons crawling with scorpions, and horrific instruments of torture, including a tool for scooping out eyes and knives for cutting the tendons in the ankles. A man in a wheelchair who came to our school to give a talk told us he was a former serf from Tibet who had had his ankle tendons severed for some trivial offense.

Since 1964, large houses had also been opened as "museums of class education" to show how class enemies like landlords had lived in luxury on the sweat and blood of the peasants before Mao came. During the holiday for Chinese New Year in 1965, my father took us to a famous mansion two and a half hours' drive from home. Underneath the political justification, the journey was really an excuse for an outing to the countryside in early spring, in accordance with the Chinese tradition of "walking on the tender green" *(ta-qing)* to welcome the season. This was one of the few occasions that my family ever went on a trip out to the country.

As the car drove across the green Chengdu Plain along the eucalyptus-lined asphalt road, I looked intently out of the window at the lovely bamboo groves embracing the farmhouses, and the curving smoke lingering above the thatched cottages peeping between the bamboo leaves. Occasionally, a branch of early plum blossom was reflected in the streams that meandered around almost every thicket. My father had asked us all to write an essay after the trip, describing the scenery, and I observed everything with great care. There was one sight which

puzzled me: the few trees dotted around the fields were completely stripped of their branches and leaves except for the very top, and looked like bare flagpoles with a cap of green. My father explained that firewood was scarce on the densely cultivated Chengdu Plain, and that the peasants had cut off as many branches as they could reach. What he did not tell me was that there had been many more trees until a few years before, but most of them had been cut down to feed the furnaces to produce steel during the Great Leap Forward.

The countryside seemed extremely prosperous. The market town where we stopped for lunch was teeming with peasants in bright new clothes, the older ones wearing shiny white turbans and clean dark-blue aprons. Golden roast ducks glowed in the windows of the packed restaurants. Deliciously scented clouds burst out of the lids of huge bamboo steamers in the stalls on the crowded streets. Our car crawled through the market to the local government offices, which were in a mansion with two stone lions squatting outside the gate. My father had lived in this county during the famine in 1961, and now, four years later, the local officials wanted to show him how much had changed. They took us to a restaurant where a private room had been reserved for us. As we squeezed through the crowded restaurant the peasants stared at us, obvious outsiders ushered in respectfully by the local bosses. I saw that the tables were covered with strange, mouth-watering dishes. I had hardly ever eaten anything except what we were given in our canteen, and the food in this market town was full of lovely surprises. It had novel names too: "Pearl Balls," "Three Gun-shots," "Lions' Heads." Afterward the manager of the restaurant said goodbye to us on the pavement while the local peasants gawked at our entourage.

On the way to the museum, our car overtook an open truck with some boys and girls from my school in it. They were obviously going to the "class-education" mansion as well. One of my teachers was standing on the back. She smiled at me, and I shrank down in my seat with embarrassment at the difference between our chauffeur-driven car and the open truck on the bumpy road in the cold early spring air. My father was sitting in front with my youngest brother on his lap. He recognized my teacher and smiled back at her. When he turned around to attract my attention, he saw that I had completely disappeared. He beamed with pleasure. My embarrassment showed my good qualities, he said; it was good that I felt ashamed of privilege rather than flaunting it.

I found the museum incredibly shocking. There were sculptures of landless peasants having to pay exorbitant rent. One showed how the landlord used two different measures: a big one for collecting grain and a small one for lending it out—at crippling interest, too. There were also a torture chamber and a dungeon with an iron cage sitting in filthy water. The cage was too small for a man to be able to stand up straight, and too narrow for him to sit down. We were told the landlord used it to punish peasants who could not pay their rent. One room was said to have housed three wet-nurses who provided him with human milk, which he believed was the most nutritious kind. His number-five concubine was said to have eaten thirty ducks a day—not the meat, only the feet, which were considered a great delicacy.

We were not told that the brother of this allegedly inhuman landlord was now a minister in the government in Peking, having been given the post as a reward for surrendering Chengdu to the Communists in 1949. Throughout, while we were being instructed about the "man-eating days of the Kuomintang," we were reminded that we should be grateful to Mao.

The cult of Mao went hand in hand with the manipulation of people's unhappy memories of their past. Class enemies were presented as vicious malefactors who wanted to drag China back to the days of the Kuomintang, which would mean that we children would lose our schools, our winter shoes, and our food. That was why we had to smash these enemies, we were told. Chiang Kai-shek was said to have launched assaults on the mainland and tried to stage a comeback in 1962 during the "difficult period"—the regime's euphemism for the famine.

In spite of all this talk and activity, class enemies for me, and for much of my generation, remained abstract, unreal shadows. They were a thing of the past, too far away. Mao had not been able to give them an everyday material form. One reason, paradoxically, was that he had smashed the past so thoroughly. However, the expectation of an enemy figure was planted in us.

At the same time, Mao was sowing the seeds for his own deification, and my contemporaries and I were immersed in this crude yet effective indoctrination. It worked partly because Mao adroitly occupied the moral high ground: just as harshness to class enemies was presented as loyalty to the people, so total submission to him was cloaked in a deceptive appeal to be selfless. It was very hard to get behind the rhetoric, particularly when there was no alternative viewpoint from the adult population. In fact, the adults positively colluded in enhancing Mao's cult.

For two thousand years China had an emperor figure who was state power and spiritual authority rolled into one. The religious feelings

which people in other parts of the world have toward a god have in China always been directed toward the emperor. My parents, like hundreds of millions of Chinese, were influenced by this tradition.

Mao made himself more godlike by shrouding himself in mystery. He always appeared remote, beyond human approach. He eschewed radio, and there was no television. Few people, except his court staff, ever had any contact with him. Even his colleagues at the very top only met him in a sort of formal audience. After Yan'an, my father only set eyes on him a few times, and then only at large-scale meetings. My mother only ever saw him once, when he came to Chengdu in 1958 and summoned all officials above Grade 18 to have a group photo taken with him. After the fiasco of the Great Leap Forward, he had disappeared almost completely.

Mao, the emperor, fitted one of the patterns of Chinese history: the leader of a nationwide peasant uprising who swept away a rotten dynasty and became a wise new emperor exercising absolute authority. And, in a sense, Mao could be said to have earned his god-emperor status. He *was* responsible for ending the civil war and bringing peace and stability, which the Chinese always yearned for—so much that they said "It's better to be a dog in peacetime than a human being in war." It was under Mao that China became a power to be reckoned with in the world, and many Chinese stopped feeling ashamed and humiliated at being Chinese, which meant a tremendous amount to them. In reality, Mao turned China back to the days of the Middle Kingdom and, with the help of the United States, to isolation from the world. He enabled the Chinese to feel great and superior again, by blinding them to the world outside. Nonetheless, national pride was so important to the Chinese that much of the population was genuinely grateful to Mao, and did not find the cult of his personality offensive, certainly not at first. The near total lack of access to information and the systematic feeding of disinformation meant that most Chinese had no way to discriminate between Mao's successes and his failures, or to identify the relative role of Mao and other leaders in the Communists' achievements.

Fear was never absent in the building up of Mao's cult. Many people had been reduced to a state where they did not dare even to think, in case their thoughts came out involuntarily. Even if they did entertain unorthodox ideas, few mentioned them to their children, as they might blurt out something to other children, which could bring disaster to themselves as well as their parents. In the learn-from-Lei Feng years it was hammered into children that our first and only loyalty should be to Mao. A popular song went: "Father is close, Mother is close, but neither is as close as Chairman Mao." We were drilled to think that anyone, including our parents, who was not totally for Mao was our enemy. Many parents encouraged their children to grow up as conformists, as this would be safest for their future.

Self-censorship covered even basic information. I never heard of Yu-lin, or my grandmother's other relatives. Nor was I told about my mother's detention in 1955, or about the famine—in fact, anything that might sow a grain of doubt in me about the regime, or Mao. My parents, like virtually every parent in China, never said anything unorthodox to their children.

In 1965, my New Year resolution was "I will obey my grandmother" —a traditional Chinese way of promising to behave well. My father shook his head: "You should not say that. You should only say 'I obey Chairman Mao.' " On my thirteenth birthday, in March that year, my father's present was not his usual books of science fiction, but a volume containing the four philosophical works of Mao.

Only one adult ever said anything to me which conflicted with the official propaganda, and that was the stepmother of Deng Xiaoping, who lived some of the time in the apartment block next to ours, with her daughter, who worked in the provincial government. She liked children, and I was constantly in and out of her apartment. When my friends and I stole pickles from the canteen, or picked melon flowers and herbs from the compound garden, we did not dare to take them home for fear of being scolded, so we used to go to her apartment, where she would wash and fry them for us. This was all the more exciting because we were eating something illicit. She was about seventy then, but looked much younger, with tiny feet and a gentle, smooth, but strong face. She always wore a gray cotton jacket and black cotton shoes, which she made herself. She was very relaxed and treated us like equals. I liked sitting in her kitchen chatting with her. On one occasion, when I was about thirteen, I went to see her straight after an emotional "speak-bitterness" session. I was bursting with compassion for anyone who had had to live under the Kuomintang, and I said: "Grandma Deng, how you must have suffered under the evil Kuomintang! How the soldiers must have looted you! And the bloodsucking landlords! What did they do to you?" "Well," she answered, "they didn't always loot . . . and they were not always evil. . . ." Her words hit me like a bombshell. I was so shocked that I never told anyone what she had said.

At the time, none of us had any idea that the cult of Mao and the emphasis on class struggle were part of Mao's plans for a showdown with the president, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping, the general sec-

retary of the Party. Mao was unhappy about what Liu and Deng were doing. Since the famine they had been liberalizing both the economy and the society. To Mao, their approach smacked of capitalism rather than socialism. It especially galled him that what he called "the capitalist road" was proving successful, while his chosen way, the "correct" way, had turned out to be a disaster. As a practical man, Mao recognized this, and had to allow them to have their way. But he planned to impose his ideas again as soon as the country was in good enough shape to stand the experiment, and as soon as he could build up enough momentum to dislodge his powerful enemies in the Party.

Mao found the idea of peaceful progress suffocating. A restless military leader, a warrior-poet, he needed action—violent action—and regarded permanent human struggle as necessary for social development. His own Communists had become too tolerant and soft for his taste, seeking to bring harmony rather than conflict. There had been no political campaigns, in which people fought each other, since 1959!

And Mao was sore. He felt that his opponents had humiliated him by showing him up as incompetent. He had to take revenge, and, being aware that his opponents had widespread support, he needed to increase his authority hugely. To achieve this, he needed to be deified.

Mao bided his time while the economy was recovering. But as it improved, especially after 1964, he began to prepare the grand opening of his confrontation. The relative liberalization of the early 1960s began to fade.

The weekly dances in the compound stopped in 1964. So did the films from Hong Kong. Out went my mother's fluffy bobs; in came short, straight hair. Her blouses and jackets were no longer colorful or figure-hugging. They were made of plain quiet colors and looked like tubes. I was particularly sorry to see her skirts go. I remembered how, a short time before, I had watched her getting off her bicycle, gracefully lifting her blue-and-white check skirt with her knee. I was leaning against the mottled trunk of a plane tree that formed part of the glade covering the street outside the compound. Her skirt had been flowing like a fan as she rode toward me. On summer evenings, I had often pushed Xiao-fang there in his bamboo pram and waited for her to come home.

My grandmother, now in her mid-fifties, kept more signs of her femininity than my mother. Although her jackets—still in the traditional style—all became the same color of pale gray, she took particular care of her long, thick black hair. According to Chinese tradition, which the Communists inherited, hair had to be well above the shoulder for women of middle age, meaning over thirty. My grandmother kept her hair tied up in a neat bun at the back of her head, but she always had flowers there, sometimes a pair of ivory-colored magnolias, and sometimes a white Cape jasmine cupped by two dark-green leaves, which set off her lustrous hair. She never used shampoo from the shops, which she thought would make her hair dull and dry, but would boil the fruit of the Chinese honey locust and use the liquid from that. She would rub the fruit to produce a perfumed lather, and slowly let her mass of black hair drop into the shiny, white, slithery liquid. She soaked her wooden combs in the juice of pomelo seeds, so that the comb ran smoothly through her hair, and gave it a faint aroma. She added a final touch by putting on a little water of osmanthus flowers which she made herself, as perfume had begun to disappear from the shops. I remember watching her combing her hair. It was the only thing over which she took her time. She did everything else very swiftly. She would also paint her eyebrows lightly with a black charcoal pencil and dab a little powder on her nose. Seeing her eyes smiling into the mirror with a particular kind of intense concentration, I think these must have been among her most pleasurable moments.

Watching her doing her face was strange, even though I had been watching her do it since I was a baby. The women in books and films who made themselves up now were invariably wicked characters, like concubines. I vaguely knew something about my beloved grandmother having been a concubine, but I was learning to live with contradictory thoughts and realities, and getting used to compartmentalizing them. When I went out shopping with my grandmother, I began to realize that she was different from other people, with her makeup, no matter how discreet, and the flowers in her hair. People noticed her. She walked proudly, her figure erect, with a restrained self-consciousness.

She could get away with it because she lived in the compound. If she had been living outside, she would have fallen under one of the residents' committees, which supervised the lives of any adult who did not have a job and so did not belong to a work unit. The committees usually contained retired men and old housewives, and some of them became notorious for minding other people's business and throwing their weight around. Had my grandmother been under one of these, she would have received disapproving hints or open criticism. But the compound had no committee. She did have to go to a meeting once a week with other parents-in-law and maids and nannies from the compound, to be told about Party policies, but she was mainly left alone. Actually, she enjoyed the meetings; they were a chance to chat with

the other women and she always came home beaming with the latest gossip.

Politics invaded my life more and more after I went to middle school in the autumn of 1964. On our first day we were told we should thank Chairman Mao for being there, because his "class line" had been applied to our year's enrollment. Mao had accused schools and universities of having taken in too many children of the bourgeoisie. Now, he had instructed, priority should be given to sons and daughters of "good backgrounds" (*chu-shen hao*). This meant having workers, peasants, soldiers, or Party officials as parents, particularly as fathers. The application of this "class-line" criterion to the whole society meant that one's lot was more than ever determined by one's family and the accident of birth.

However, the status of a family was often ambiguous: a worker might once have been employed in a Kuomintang office; a clerk did not belong to any category; an intellectual was an "undesirable," but what if he was a Party member? How should the children of such parents be classified? Many enrollment officers decided to play it safe, which meant giving preference to children whose parents were Party officials. They constituted half the pupils in my class.

My new school, the Number Four Middle School, was the leading key school for the whole province and took students with the highest marks in the all-Sichuan entrance exams. In previous years, entrance had been decided solely on the basis of exam results. In my year, exam marks and family background were equally important.

In the two exam papers, I got 100 percent for math and an unusual 100 percent "plus" for Chinese. My father had constantly drummed it into me that I should not rely on my parents' name, and I did not like the suggestion that the "class line" had helped me get into the school. But I soon thought no more about it. If this was what Chairman Mao said, it must be good.

It was in this period that "high officials' children" (*gao-gan zi-di*) became almost a stratum of their own. They developed an air which identified them unmistakably as members of an elite group, exuding an awareness of powerful backing and untouchability. Many high officials' children now grew more arrogant and haughty than ever, and from Mao downward concern was constantly being expressed about their behavior. It became a recurrent theme in the press. All this only reinforced the idea that they were a special group.

My father frequently warned us against this air and against forming cliques with other children of high officials. The result was that I had

few friends, as I seldom met children from any other background. When I did come into contact with them, I found we had been so conditioned by the importance of family background and the lack of shared experience that we seemed to have little in common with each other.

When I entered the new school two teachers came to see my parents to ask which foreign language they wanted me to learn. They chose English rather than Russian, which was the only other option. The teachers also wanted to know whether I was going to take physics or chemistry in my first year. My parents said they would leave that up to the school.

I loved the school from the moment I walked in. It had an imposing gate with a broad roof of blue tiles and carved eaves. A flight of stone stairs led up to it, and the loggia was supported by six red-timber columns. Symmetrical rows of dark-green cypresses enhanced the atmosphere of solemnity leading into the interior.

The school had been founded in 141 B.C. It was the first school set up by a local government in China. At its center was a magnificent temple, formerly dedicated to Confucius. It was well preserved, but was not functioning as a temple any longer. Inside were half a dozen Ping-Pong tables, separated by the massive columns. In front of the carved doors, down a long flight of stairs, lay extensive grounds designed to provide a majestic approach to the temple. A two-story teaching block had been erected, which cut off the grounds from a brook crossed by three little arched bridges, with sculptures of miniature lions and other animals sitting on their sandstone edges. Beyond the bridges was a beautiful garden surrounded by peaches and plane trees. Two giant bronze incense burners were set at the bottom of the stairs in front of the temple, although there was no longer any blue smoke curling up and lingering in the air above them. The grounds on the sides of the temple had been converted into basketball and volleyball courts. Farther along were two lawns where we used to sit or lie in spring and enjoy the sun during lunch breaks. Behind the temple was another lawn, beyond which lay a big orchard at the foot of a small hill covered with trees, vines, and herbs.

Dotted around were laboratories where we studied biology and chemistry, learned to use microscopes, and dissected dead animals. In the lecture theaters, we watched teaching films. For after-school activities, I joined the biology group which strolled around the hill and the back garden with the teacher learning the names and characteristics of the different plants. There were temperature-controlled breeding cases for us to observe how tadpoles and ducklings broke out

of their eggs. In spring, the school was a sea of pink because of all the peach trees. But what I liked most was the two-story library, built in the traditional Chinese style. The building was encircled on both floors by loggias, and the outside of these was enclosed by a row of gorgeously painted seats which were shaped like wings. I had a favorite corner in these "wing seats" *(fei-lai-yi)* where I used to sit for hours reading, occasionally stretching my arm out to touch the fan-shaped leaves of a rare ginkgo tree. There was a pair of them outside the front gate of the library, towering and elegant. They were the only sight that could distract me from my books.

My clearest memory is of my teachers. They were the best in their field; many were grade one, or special grade. Their classes were sheer joy, and I could never have enough of them.

But more and more political indoctrination was creeping into school life. Gradually, morning assembly became devoted to Mao's teachings, and special sessions were instituted in which we read Party documents. Our Chinese-language textbook now contained more propaganda and less classical literature, and politics, which mainly consisted of works by Mao, became part of the curriculum.

Almost every activity became politicized. One day at morning assembly the headmaster told us we were going to do eye exercises. He said Chairman Mao had observed that there were too many schoolchildren wearing spectacles, a sign that they had hurt their eyes by working too hard. He had ordered something to be done about it. We were all terribly moved by his concern. Some of us wept in gratitude. We started doing eye exercises for fifteen minutes every morning. A set of movements had been devised by doctors and set to music. After rubbing various points around our eyes, we all stared intently at the rows of poplars and willows outside the window. Green was supposed to be a restful color. As I enjoyed the comfort the exercises and the leaves brought me, I thought of Mao and repledged my loyalty to him.

A repeated theme was that we must not allow China to "change color," which meant going from Communist to capitalist. The split between China and the Soviet Union, which had been kept secret at first, had burst into the open in early 1963. We were told that since Khrushchev had come to power after the death of Stalin in 1953 the Soviet Union had surrendered to international capitalism, and that Russian children had been reduced to suffering and misery again, just like Chinese children under the Kuomintang. One day, after warning us for the umpteenth time against the road taken by Russia, our politics teacher said: "If you aren't careful, our country will change color gradually, first from bright red to faded red, then to gray, then to

exactly the same pronunciation *(er-hong)* as my name. My classmates giggled, and I could see them stealing glances at me. I felt I must get rid of my name immediately. That evening I begged my father to give me another name. He suggested *Zhang*, meaning both "prose" and "coming into one's own early," which expressed his desire for me to become a good writer at a young age. But I did not want the name. I told my father that I wanted "something with a military ring to it." Many of my friends had changed their names to incorporate the characters meaning "army" or "soldier." My father's choice reflected his classical learning. My new name, Jung (pronounced "Yung"), was a very old and recondite word for "martial affairs" which appeared only in classical poetry and a few antiquated phrases. It evoked an image of bygone battles between knights in shining armor, with tasseled spears and neighing steeds. When I turned up at school with my new name even some teachers could not recognize the character 戎.

At this time Mao had called on the country to go from learning from Lei Feng to learning from the army. Under the defense minister, Lin Biao, who had succeeded Marshal Peng Dehuai in 1959, the army had become the trailblazer for the cult of Mao. Mao also wanted to regimentalize the nation even more. He had just written a well-publicized poem exhorting women to "doff femininity and don military attire." We were told that the Americans were waiting for a chance to invade and reinstate the Kuomintang, and that in order to defeat an invasion by them Lei Feng had trained day and night to overcome his weak physique and become a champion hand-grenade thrower. Physical training suddenly assumed vital importance. There was compulsory running, swimming, high jumping, working out on parallel bars, shot-putting, and throwing wooden hand grenades. In addition to the two hours of sports per week, forty-five minutes of after-school sports now became obligatory.

I had always been hopeless at sports, and hated them, except tennis. Previously this had not mattered, but now it took on a political connotation, with slogans like: "Build up a strong physique to defend our motherland." Unfortunately, my aversion to sports was increased by this pressure. When I tried to swim, I always had a mental picture of being pursued by invading Americans to the bank of a surging river. As I could not swim, my only choice was between being drowned or being captured and tortured by the Americans. Fear gave me frequent cramps in the water, and once I thought I was drowning in the swimming pool. In spite of compulsory swimming every week during the summer, I never managed to learn to swim all the time I lived in China.

obvious reasons. I was always at the bottom of the class. I could only throw the wooden hand grenades we practiced with a couple of yards. I felt that my classmates were questioning my resolve to fight the U.S. imperialists. Once at our weekly political meeting somebody commented on my persistent failure at hand-grenade throwing. I could feel the eyes of the class boring into me like needles, as if to say: "You are a lackey of the Americans!" The next morning I went and stood in a corner of the sports field, with my arms held out in front of me and a couple of bricks in each hand. In Lei Feng's diary, which I had learned by heart, I had read that this was how he had toughened up his muscles to throw hand grenades. After a few days, by which time my upper arms were red and swollen, I gave up, and whenever I was handed the wooden chunk, I became so nervous that my hands shook uncontrollably.

One day in 1965, we were suddenly told to go out and start removing all the grass from the lawns. Mao had instructed that grass, flowers, and pets were bourgeois habits and were to be eliminated. The grass in the lawns at our school was of a type I have not seen anywhere outside China. Its name in Chinese means "bound to the ground." It crawls all over the hard surface of the earth and spreads thousands of roots which drill down into the soil like claws of steel. Underground they open up and produce further roots which shoot out in every direction. In no time there are two networks, one aboveground and one belowground, which intertwine and cling to the earth, like knotted metal wires that have been nailed into the ground. Often the only casualties were my fingers, which always ended up with deep, long cuts. It was only when they were attacked with hoes and spades that some of the root systems went, reluctantly. But any fragment left behind would make a triumphant comeback after even a slight rise in temperature or a gentle drizzle, and we would have to go into battle all over again.

Flowers were much easier to deal with, but they went with even more difficulty, because no one wanted to remove them. Mao had attacked flowers and grass several times before, saying that they should be replaced by cabbages and cotton. But only now was he able to generate enough pressure to get his order implemented—but only up to a point. People loved their plants, and some flowerbeds survived Mao's campaign.

I was extremely sad to see the lovely plants go. But I did not resent Mao. On the contrary, I hated myself for feeling miserable. By then I had grown into the habit of "self-criticism" and automatically blamed myself for any instincts that went against Mao's instructions. In fact,

such feelings frightened me. It was out of the question to discuss them with anyone. Instead, I tried to suppress them and acquire the correct way of thinking. I lived in a state of constant self-accusation.

Such self-examination and self-criticism were a feature of Mao's China. You would become a new and better person, we were told. But all this introspection was really designed to serve no other purpose than to create a people who had no thoughts of their own.

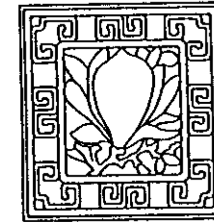
The religious aspect of the Mao cult would not have been possible in a traditionally secular society like China had there not been impressive economic achievements. The country had made a stunning recovery from the famine, and the standard of living was improving dramatically. In Chengdu, although rice was still rationed, there was plenty of meat, poultry, and vegetables. Winter melons, turnips, and eggplants were piled up on the pavements outside the shops because there was not enough space to store them. They were left outside overnight, and almost nobody took them; the shops were giving them away for a pittance. Eggs, once so precious, sat rotting in large baskets —there were too many of them. Only a few years before it had been hard to find a single peach—now peach eating was being promoted as "patriotic," and officials went around to people's homes and tried to persuade them to take peaches for next to nothing.

There were a number of success stories which boosted the nation's pride. In October 1964 China exploded its first atomic bomb. This was given huge publicity and touted as a demonstration of the country's scientific and industrial achievement, particularly in relation to "standing up to imperialist bullies." The explosion of the atomic bomb coincided with the ousting of Khrushchev, which was presented as proof that Mao was right again. In 1964 France recognized China at full ambassadorial level, the first leading Western nation to do so. This was received with rapture inside China as a major victory over the United States, which was refusing to acknowledge China's rightful place in the world.

In addition, there was no general political persecution, and people were relatively content. All the credit was given to Mao. Although the very top leaders knew what Mao's real contribution was, the people were kept completely in the dark. Over the years I composed passionate eulogies thanking Mao for all his achievements and pledging my undying loyalty to him.

I was thirteen in 1965. On the evening of 1 October that year, the sixteenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, there was a big fireworks display on the square in the center of Chengdu. To the north of the square was the gate to an ancient imperial palace,

which had recently been restored to its third-century grandeur, when Chengdu was the capital of a kingdom and a prosperous walled city. The gate was very similar to the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking, now the entrance to the Forbidden City, except for its color: it had sweeping green-tiled roofs and gray walls. Under the glazed roof of the pavilion stood enormous dark-red pillars. The balustrades were made of white marble. I was standing behind them with my family and the Sichuan dignitaries on a reviewing stand enjoying the festival atmosphere and waiting for the fireworks to begin. Below in the square 50,000 people were singing and dancing. *Bang! Bang!* The signals for the fireworks went off a few yards from where I stood. In an instant, the sky was a garden of spectacular shapes and colors, a sea of wave after wave of brilliance. The music and noise rose from below the imperial gate to join in the sumptuousness. After a while, the sky was clear for a few seconds. Then a sudden explosion brought out a gorgeous blossom, followed by the unfurling of a long, vast, silky hanging. It stretched itself in the middle of the sky, swaying gently in the autumn breeze. In the light over the square, the characters on the hanging were shining: "Long Live Our Great Leader Chairman Mao!" Tears sprang to my eyes. "How lucky, how incredibly lucky I am to be living in the great era of Mao Zedong!" I kept saying to myself. "How can children in the capitalist world go on living without being near Chairman Mao, and without the hope of ever seeing him in person?" I wanted to do something for them, to rescue them from their plight. I made a pledge to myself there and then to work hard to build a stronger China, in order to support a world revolution. I needed to work hard to be entitled to see Chairman Mao, too. That was the purpose of my life.



15. "Destroy First, and Construction Will Look After Itself"— The Cultural Revolution Begins

(1965–1966)

At the beginning of the 1960s, in spite of all the disasters Mao had caused, he was still China's supreme leader, idolized by the population. But because the pragmatists were actually running the country, there was relative literary and artistic freedom. A host of plays, operas, films, and novels emerged after long hibernation. None attacked the Party openly, and contemporary themes were rare. At this time Mao was on the defensive, and he turned more and more to his wife, Jiang Qing, who had been an actress in the 1930s. They decided that historical themes were being used to convey insinuations against the regime and against Mao himself.

In China, there was a strong tradition of using historical allusion to voice opposition, and even apparently esoteric allusions were widely understood as coded references to the present day. In April 1963 Mao banned all "Ghost Dramas," a genre rich in ancient tales of revenge by dead victims' spirits on those who had persecuted them. To him, these ghost avengers were uncomfortably close to the class enemies who had perished under his rule.

The Maos also turned their attention to another genre, the "Dramas of the Ming Mandarin," the protagonist of which was Hai Rui, a