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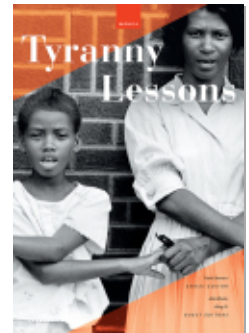
Chairman Mao Is Dead!

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Chairman Mao Is Dead!

Translator's Note: Mao died two months after the 1976 Tangshan earthquake killed anywhere from 240,000 to 779,000 in the northeastern port city of Tianjin (the far lower official estimate conflicts with the initial numbers reported by the Hebei Province Revolutionary Committee), and the "feudal" notion still lingered that natural disaster means the ruler has lost the Mandate of Heaven. As an "heir to the revolution," Tang wasn't aware of such portent, and as a child, her greatest lament was that the earthquake didn't amount to much at home in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. The link between disaster and death had not yet revealed itself to her, nor to her peers. Decades later, in 2008, the Wenchuan earthquake would strike not far from her hometown, killing 70,000 and leaving another 18,000 missing. Over 5,000 of the dead were children, crushed under the rubble of their flimsy school buildings.

Tang writes in a deceptively simple style. I laughed out loud while translating some of the passages in this story. Sadly, most of Tang's puns didn't make it in translation. Her story opens with her staring at caterpillars, which in Mandarin are called máomaochóng 毛毛虫, literally "hairy bugs." The character for hair, máo 毛, is the same as Mao Zedong's surname, and being a bug (chóng) can also refer to obsession—giving máomaochóng a third meaning, "Mao fanatic." I played with using "maomao bugs" instead of "caterpillars," but decided it was too confusing. There's a second beastly allusion toward the end of the story, when Tang's aunt recounts how a woman from the country mourned Lord Mao (Máo Zhǔ) with such a thick rural twang that it sounded like máozhū (wild boar). I did my best to preserve this pun by having the woman lament "Chairman Sow." I don't know if "Mao" could really be misheard as "sow," but I liked the rhyme. AH

When Chairman Mao died, I was looking at caterpillars.

Here's what was going on when it happened: every summer break, my terrifying father went to the Aba Valley to collect botanical specimens and research the cultivation of the native yellow Himalayan fritillary. It was just my mother and me at home. As my parents used to say, when the cat's away, the mice come out to play. I always liked summer best, but that summer was especially great, because everywhere it was all about the earthquake. Everyone was anxious. An "earth wind" even tore through Chengdu, and we all had to move into earthquake tents. So kids all sat around waiting for the ground to

move, not wanting to miss the chance for a good show. Finally the earthquake came to Songpan and Pingwu, and then the earth winds were done, and it was decided that all the children “might as well” be moved back into their houses. They wailed, “That was it? We didn’t even feel anything!”

I was happy, though, because my dad was in Songpan, which was the epicenter of the quake. He wrote a letter home that sounded like his last will and testament. He said he had to stay and suffer with the people, that he couldn’t abandon them at a time like this. If something should happen, he wanted my mom to raise me to be an heir to the revolution. Looking back on all their petty arguments about me, about my strengths and weaknesses, he told my mother that he had concluded I was like a rotten piece of wood—I could still be carved. While my mom tearfully read the letter to me, I thought, *The “earth winds” are long gone, and everyone’s living in tents. Besides, the earthquake is over, and Dad can’t die. What’s there to cry about?* At the time I thought they were just being dramatic. But when I heard that he would be coming home later than planned, I was secretly overjoyed! I also remember that the letter didn’t end with “I hereby salute the revolution” like I’d just learned to write in school, but with a strange character I hadn’t learned yet: “吻 you and Danhong.” 吻 looks like 勿, *without*, so I asked my mom, “What does ‘without you and Danhong’ mean?” My mother’s eyes bulged. “He wrote ‘kissing you and Danhong.’”

Speaking of letters, I once appointed myself representative of the people. When we were learning how to write letters, our teacher assigned us to write to the children in Taiwan. I racked my brains for every detail I’d seen in picture books. Brimming with sympathy, I described the miserable conditions of “you, the children in Taiwan”: empty stomachs, tattered clothes, bags of bones begging in the streets with broken bowls. Buffeted by wind and snow, corpses lying all around them as they struggled on the brink of death . . . At the same time, I wondered with regret, if the People’s Liberation Army had liberated the entire country, why couldn’t they liberate Taiwan? Then I solemnly swore to them that we would liberate the treasured island! We would plant the red flag at the summit of Ali Mountain, and it would wave over Sun Moon Lake! I hereby salute the revolution! Then, with a flourish of my pencil, I signed it “from all the children of China”! My mother and teacher both praised my florid letter, but they asked why I hadn’t signed it with my own name. How could I represent all the children of China? *Hmph*, I thought, indignant. *Do you really think there’s a child in China who doesn’t want to liberate Taiwan?*

I didn’t go to school on September 9. I don’t know why. It was just like any other day I didn’t go to school. My mom carried me to work on her bike and locked me in the break room. She was afraid I would “learn from bad examples.” Starting in kindergarten, I was often locked up.

I was bored stupid in the empty break room. Eventually, I found a stack of Soviet books piled under the cot. One was about “physiological knowledge,” and another was about “proper romantic love between Communist Youth League Members,” or something like that. I knew about “periods” from signs I sometimes saw posted in the ladies room. It was a grownup thing. That is

to say, when you are grown, you have your period, or maybe that when you have your period, you're grown. As for Komsomolets falling in love, I confidently read the character for *romantic* 恋, as *wild* 蛮. The book gave a lot of examples of the "wild love" between Mr. Kov and Ms. Nya. Kov or Nya, ever vigilant, would discover that the other had a negative or backward thought, or had strayed from the guidance of the Party. Nya or Kov would then deliver a sermon on Leninism and Stalinism, whereupon the partner would reform. It was so obvious. Why did I insist on misreading that character?

I vaguely understood that "wild love" was a phase of life. First you went to kindergarten. Then you went to elementary school and wore a red scarf. When you were done wearing the red scarf, you went to middle school and became a Red Guard. By the time you joined the Communist Youth League, you had pretty much reached "wild love." During wild love, you had to strive to enlighten someone. You inspected the other person for backward thoughts, and then you taught them morals. This point was clear to me. My dad was the more advanced one, and again and again his lectures moved my mother, heart and soul. When the backward one had finally reformed, you got married. After you got married, you had a baby. After you had a baby, you hit her and scolded her so that she wouldn't learn to be bad. After that, there was nothing left for you to do. This didn't seem like any way to live. Maybe during wild love, it would be kind of fun to compete for most advanced person; maybe it was more fun when you hit your baby, because if a grownup hits a baby, naturally the baby is bad, and grownups are always right. When you're a baby, you get hit a lot, and when you grow up, you're finally a good person. Then you can hit bad babies and feel righteous, too. That sounded about right. When I grew up, I would have to hit my baby, too. To confirm what I had learned, I asked my mother politely, "What is wild love?" She blinked and blinked until she finally understood what I was asking her. She looked at me sternly and said, "You're too little to know about that!" She still didn't correct my misreading right away, though, so I read it as "wild love" for a long time.

By the time Chairman Mao died, I was already fed up with those Soviet books. All I could do is stand on the chair by the window and look outside. There were only two things to look at. The first was under the parasol tree, where I could watch the kindergarteners snorting and screeching during their breaks. There was a grapevine there, dripping with emerald grapes. The children looked up at the grapes and jumped for them with all their might—just like I had done back then—but they could never reach them. The other was to look at the parasol tree itself, which was covered with puffy leaves like umbrellas. They fluttered gently in the early autumn breeze. And on every fat, fan like leaf lay one or two fiendish caterpillars.

These caterpillars were ferocious, about as long as a playing card. You couldn't see the body, just a fire-red line down its back and dense black hairs that jutted like steel barbs from its two sides. If it weren't for the fiery little sesame-seed eyeballs, you wouldn't be able to tell the head from the tail. The caterpillars nodded their heads as they gnawed away at the enormous parasol

leaves, which soon dissolved into thin air. That day, the solemn voice of a China National Radio announcer blared from a loudspeaker on a nearby pole: "Our great lead-er, head of the pro-le-tar-i-at re-vol-u-tion . . . Chair-man of the Chinese Com-mu-nist Par-ty, Com-rade Mao-Ze-dong has died." This isn't exactly what he said. Actually, I didn't listen that closely. It was just from his intonation of "great leader" and "head of the revolution" and from the gluey oozing of his words, and the dirge at the very end, that I suddenly realized, *He's dead?!*

Dead?! I asked myself, stunned, as my eyes withdrew from the caterpillars and I collapsed into the chair. *I haven't even had my period yet, never mind wild love. How can Chairman Mao be dead?* As these thoughts swirled in my head, I started to cry. I felt I had been gravely wronged. I hadn't grown up yet. I was just in fourth grade, and I would have to suffer the second persecution and endure the revival of capitalism. I'd have to beg for food just like the little kids in Taiwan. I thought the enemy planes would bomb us soon. Chairman Mao had kept watch on them. Now what were we supposed to do? Images of bombers, artillery fire, and chaos from war movies filled my head. There I'd be, a broken bowl in one hand and a stick to defend myself from stray dogs in the other as shells exploded all around, and no idea where my parents had gone . . .

My mind buzzed with recollections from kindergarten: as a child in the top class, I knew clearly from the portraits everywhere and the instruction of grownups that Grandpa Mao, with the big mole at the corner of his mouth, was a beloved wise man whom none should offend. I had high standards as a child. For instance, once a neighbor teased me, "Who do you love more, your dad or your mom?" I almost blurted out "mom," but then I had a clever little thought and said instead that I loved Chairman Mao the most, then the Central Party leadership, and then finally my dear mother. I chanted "Love Chairman Mao, love the Party" as if it were an incantation, until it felt real. I couldn't tell if it was love or fear.

I also recalled some times when I had stooped low. Like the time when Li Qing's and my parents didn't pick us up from kindergarten right away. It was just us in the schoolyard, climbing a low-hanging tree branch and chatting. I asked Li Qing a lot of questions, proceeding step by step. Usually as soon as I started to ask grownups these questions, they would shut me up. When I asked Li Qing, I didn't really expect her to answer. She was a few months younger than me. I asked her mainly because I'd kept these questions stuffed in my brain.

I asked, "Why does Chairman Mao have a mole on his face?"

Li Qing didn't know.

I asked again, "Can Chairman Mao die?"

"No way!" Li Qing said.

I asked again, "Does Chairman Mao poop?"

Li Qing hesitated. "Um . . . no?"

"Hey, do you think Chairman Mao has a wee-wee?"

The air froze. Li Qing scratched at the tree limb like a clumsy cat and fell. She pointed at my nose and said, "Ooooh, you're so reactionary, reactionary, reactionary! I'm telling on you!"

At first I was terrified and begged her not to tell. But then I realized I had something on her! Two days earlier she had eaten half of my banana. Before she did, she made me promise not to tell her parents. Every time she ate someone else's leftovers, she always said the same thing. She said her dad didn't let her beg and would beat her if he found out. Actually, I thought asking discreetly if Chairman Mao had a wee-wee was much worse than eating half of my banana. If Li Qing took advantage of my reactionary behavior and told the teacher or my dad on me, my dad would beat me to death.

My words spilled forth like water. The rice had been cooked. You can only cure a dead horse when it's still alive. So I pretended to be relaxed and said, "Fine, go tell on me. Hmph, you ate half my banana the other day, so I'm telling on you, too!" She went on muttering "reactionary" in defiance, so I struck while the iron was hot and went through her old debts: the day she ate someone else's walnut; the time she knocked over someone else's soy sauce bottle. Li Qing went silent.

I learned early on that thoughts are not things you can control. They ran around wildly inside my head. If I pinned one down here, it would pop up over there. And a lot of my thoughts were fairly "reactionary." The more ashamed and guilty you felt, the more tricks your thoughts would play. I assumed everyone else could control their thoughts, or that they were all better than me, and that I was just pretending to be a good person, pretending that I never had a "bad" idea. I took great care not to let people know what was in my head. I often thought how lucky I was: lucky that thoughts don't project in midair like movies. Otherwise I would have been revealed as a counter-revolutionary long ago.

For instance, now Chairman Mao was dead. I should have earnestly cried. It was improper not to. Well, I had a pretty standard cry for the first two minutes because I was afraid we'd be beaten back to the way things were before liberation. But while I cried and cried, my mind drifted, and I thought of something else. I held this secret close. I was determined to let it fester inside me.

The short version of the story is this: I wrote a "reactionary slogan."

At first I didn't know anything about "reactionary slogans." One day when I came home from kindergarten, my parents were whispering about something. They often spoke furtively to each other. Asking them was no use, so I would get bored and entertain myself with a toy. Maybe that day my mom thought this was something major, that she ought to teach me about it sooner rather than later. She pulled me close and said gravely, "Danhong, something happened in our building today!" All of a sudden, my mother thought I would "understand." I was rather proud of myself.

A "reactionary slogan" had appeared on our building's veranda. It was written in chalk, each character as big as a bowl. The handwriting wasn't bad, my dad said. Gao Xiaoming, the neighbor boy two years older than me, saw it first. My dad didn't go to work that day. Gao Xiaoming had gone to play on the veranda. When he saw the reactionary slogan, he went to tell my dad, who put Xiaoming on his bicycle and hurried to the People's Public Security Office.

The people from Public Security came and took photos and filed a report. They commended Xiaoming on his revolutionary vigilance and his good deed.

"What's a reactionary slogan?" I asked. Reactionary speech, my mother said.

"What speech? What did it say?"

My mother couldn't take it. She lowered her voice and sputtered, "It said, 'Down with Chair—'"

"Chairman Mao?" I blurted. She nodded.

"Oh. Can they figure out who wrote it?"

"I don't know. Public Security is investigating it."

"How?"

"Handwriting. They're going to check everyone's handwriting in the building. And fingerprints."

"What's handwriting? What are fingerprints?"

"Handwriting is . . . Fingerprints are . . ."

"What happens if they find out who it was?"

"I don't know. Maybe the firing squad."

This is how I learned what a "reactionary slogan" was. My first response was to rush to the veranda and see this reactionary slogan, but nothing was there. My heart sank. I had missed all the action. I had missed the thing that had shocked everyone and that stirred my childish heart!

A few days later, I asked my mom if Public Security had found anyone yet. She lowered her voice again. "Yes, they did. It was the boy next door, Gao Xiaoming. He wrote it and reported it himself so he could show off that he'd done a good deed."

"Then will they put Xiaoming in front of the firing squad?" I asked.

"Children don't understand," my mother replied. "Xiaoming wanted to be praised, so Public Security sent his parents to be educated." She didn't want to say any more on the subject, and didn't want me to say any more, either. She ended with what sounded like a threat. "What a shameful thing, to do that for praise. He's lucky he didn't get the firing squad." But from the faraway land of childhood, I understood Xiaoming's logic completely. It seemed like a big thing had been whittled down to nothing. The kids in the building kept away from Xiaoming for a few days. Whenever they saw him, they shouted, "You wrote it, you reported it!" sort of like saying he had dug his own grave. Xiaoming was very well behaved after that. Later on, the neighbors whispered that Xiaoming's mother had gone crazy.

Soon after, I started first grade. Our first lesson was "Long live Chairman Mao!" The second was "Long live the Chinese Communist Party!" The third was "Down with American imperialism!" I could write all three of these.

One Sunday afternoon, I was wandering around by the common faucet in front of our building. I had a piece of pressed talcum powder jammed into my pocket, a precious thing we children called a "drawing stone." It was about the size of an eraser, perfect for making a hopscotch board. I drew a few squares on the ground. Then I drew the cartoon character Old Mr. Ding. Everyone else

was napping. It was dead quiet, and I was bored out of my mind. Suddenly, a terrible thought wriggled into my head, a powerful urge. I had to write a reactionary slogan.

I'd been brooding ever since I missed all the excitement over Xiaoming's reactionary slogan. I had to know: if they found a reactionary slogan, how would all the kids in the building react? What's it like when the people from Public Security take photos? How would they remove the slogan? How do you inspect someone's handwriting? What's it like when they shoot the bad guy? And on and on. I wanted badly to see it all for myself. No one was around. I took out the drawing stone. My heart was jumping. I went up to the front door and wrote on the peeling paint of the doorframe the words I'd learned in school: "Down with Chairman Mao! Long live American imperialism!"

At first I was only going to write "Down with Chairman Mao," but in the middle I realized I also knew how to write "American imperialism" and blithely added that, too. Who knows why kids do the things they do? When it was done, I groped my way back to the faucet and washed my hands so that there wouldn't be any fingerprints.

A little while later my mother took me with her to run errands. I didn't want to go at first, but my mother said she would buy me a meat pie. Then I asked if I could get a sugarcane, too, and she agreed. I forgot about the reactionary slogan for the moment, and off we went. While we were out, I fretted that everyone would wake up and see the reactionary slogan and call Public Security... We'd get back too late, and I'd miss the excitement all over again.

We stayed out for a few hours. I got my meat pie. When I had eaten half of it, a beggar knocked it out of my hands, picked it up off the ground, and ran off. I remember my mother said, "Oh well, at least he didn't spit on it." She said she'd once seen a beggar spit into the steamed bun someone had just bought. He also spit all over that person's hand. Afterward, she bought me a sugarcane, and we carried it home together.

Everything was as usual. The grownups were washing rice and vegetables at the faucet. The kids had added squares to my hopscotch board, and another Old Man Ding next to my Old Man Ding, and also airplanes and missiles. I had wanted to wait for someone to find my reactionary slogan, but I'd written it the same size as in my school workbook, so nothing had happened. It looked like I'd have to find it myself.

Mother told me to go wash my hands at the faucet or she wouldn't let me have the sugarcane. I scrubbed my "fingerprints" until they were pink and raw. Then I turned around and walked slowly to the door, where I "happened" across the reactionary slogan, and yelped in surprise, "What's this? Hey, everybody, come and look!"

My mother came over, and the color drained from her face. "Look! Look!" People came and crowded around the mottled doorframe. There was the slogan.

The commotion I'd missed, and for which I had felt so aggrieved, turned out to be like any other commotion: in a burst of shouts the entire building

crowded around the doorframe. The grownups turned stonefaced as they leaned in to read the slogan. They argued. Naturally, someone asked who had found it. "Danhong," my mother said, "after we came back from shopping. She's short and sharp eyed, that's how she saw it." Someone said whoever wrote the slogan was clever to write it so small. Who knew how many days it had already been there? "Class struggle isn't simple." One of our neighbors was a Rightist, a "pre-liberation counter-revolutionary." He went to wash his rice for dinner as a pretext to hang around and see the slogan. He was sheepish, as if he'd been caught in a suspicious position.

Everyone agreed that a child couldn't have pulled off this prank. How would they know about American imperialism, let alone to wish it long life? My dad was enthusiastic, too. He bent down to get a good, long look, then stood up and declared, "Look at this handwriting. It's pretty good. Whoever wrote this is highly cultured..." This appraisal exceeded my expectations. I felt rather proud of myself.

The children tried to imitate the seriousness of the grownups, but they couldn't hide their excitement. Their eyes shining, their voices piercing the air, they shouted, "Woah, a reactionary slogan! So reactionary!" Their elation was so infectious that I almost forgot I had written it. I gnawed on my sugarcane while I jumped in among the children, spit flying as I huffed, "Yeah, so reactionary!" I made myself dizzy with excitement.

I don't know who called Public Security. The on-duty officer came. He was the father of Liao Jun, my kindergarten classmate, and lived nearby. The crowd parted. Liao Jun's dad looked sternly at the writing. He brought out a Kodak 120 and took photos. Then he asked someone to bring him a red letter seal, which he used to stamp over the slogan. Twilight came. The officer and the chattering crowd exchanged a few words. I didn't pay attention. I just waited for the next wave, when they caught someone and shot them. For some reason, I was convinced that no one would figure out it was me. In the scene that played over and over in my mind, it was the neighbor kid Wu Zihua. They would tie him up and stand him on the red honeycomb brick in our building's front yard. The Public Security people would raise their guns, and *bang bang!* To this day, as I sit recounting these events, I still don't know why I thought of Wu Zihua. He was my friend. He was gentle, a bit dull. His mother was friends with my nanny, so we often played together. We never bickered or fought, unlike other kids. Why, in my heartless imagination, was he the one who faced the firing squad?

In the end, they never solved this case. My analysis goes something like this: they suspected Gao Xiaoming because he had already committed an offense, but the scene of his crime had been clean. There weren't any other children playing on the veranda that day, so the writing had to be his. My motivation, on the other hand, was "pure." I just wanted to see what would happen. I hadn't planned to report the slogan, but was forced to "find" it myself. Too many people had scribbled their Old Man Dings and airplanes and missiles nearby before I "found" it. The scene of my crime roiled with the comings and goings

of children. Even if someone suspected a child, who wouldn't protect their baby? Even Liao Jun's father, the Public Security officer, would spare his son. So it was left a mystery.

That's what was in my head as I howled over Chairman Mao's death.

In the days after, every one of the living wore a white paper flower on their breast and a black armband over their sleeve. On every door (except for the doors to the toilets) hung a big white paper flower, or a big black silk flower. On every wall hung banners with words of mourning. On every electric pole and every tree were scrolls filled with tears, grief, and hopes for immortality... Black words, white paper, yellow paper fluttering in the breeze and catching the sunlight, so you couldn't tell if they were signs of mourning or joy.

Funeral music played from dawn to dusk. I heard it so much that it stuck to my eardrums and squeezed in behind my forehead, so much that when I hummed, I unwittingly hummed dirges: I hummed them washing dishes, I hummed them emptying the chamber pot, I hummed them washing my face and my feet, and when it was dark and I went to use the public toilet, I hummed a dirge to drum up my courage.

The children made up a new rule: no laughing. If someone laughed, we would point at the tip of her nose and shout, "Oh, so reactionary! Chairman Mao has left this earth and you still dare to laugh!" Whoever had laughed would quickly take it back or deny it. Then everyone would keep a straight face while they played Chinese jump rope, a long face for playing guess-fingers and tossing beanbags, a straight face for hopscotch, a long face for hide-and-seek... But the most fun game of all was to catch someone laughing.

On the morning of the memorial, I carried a basket of paper flowers to school in my arms. They were yesterday's homework assignment. Everyone had to make twenty and bring them to class to add to the wreath we had made for Chairman Mao.

As we went down the road, plastered with memorial speeches and funeral scrolls, a few classmates and I ran into the "little Tibetan savage." His mother had come from Garze for training at West China School of Medicine, and they lived in a one-story house along our route to school. He looked to be about three years old. He would run into the street and try to get the other children to play with him. We often heard the grownups say that "Tibetan savages" were uncivilized and dirty, so we avoided the boy and didn't play with him. As soon as we saw him, we would run off. He seemed like a little wolf ready to bite. On this day, he again ran giggling into the middle of the road, crying with joy as he came at us with open arms.

When we saw him, we screamed in our customary surprise, stomping our feet and hissing at him as if he were a dog. We were a little panicked, but very excited. My classmates deftly avoided him, running off; but because I was carrying the basket of paper flowers for Chairman Mao, I couldn't run, and suddenly he caught me! In that instant, I don't know why, I was scared to death. Hysterical, I threw the basket at him. It landed on top of his plump little head, the paper flowers rolling out onto the ground. The giggling "little

Tibetan savage” stood there, stunned. His grandmother came running out, hair braided and up on her head, apron tied around her waist. She gathered him in her arms and ran off, dodging the funeral scrolls dancing in the wind.

I picked up the white paper flowers folded for Chairman Mao. They were flecked with mud and dirt. While I tried to wipe off the dirt, a thought flashed through my head: *He is so small, and I’m so much older; didn’t I just bully him?* It didn’t feel good.

The memorial went like this: the teachers and students all sat in their respective classrooms and followed the instructions coming from the school loudspeaker. Mao’s portrait graced the blackboard. The wreath we had made stood on the dais, the twenty paper flowers I had thrown at the little Tibetan boy squeezed in among the others. From the loudspeaker came the memorial proceedings of the Central Party Committee, with Wang Hongwen leading. Whatever Wang Hongwen said, we did. If he said to have a moment of silence, we had a moment of silence. If he said to bow, we bowed. But children forget quickly. It was during the moment of silence that my wickedness came out.

As I bowed my head in silence, a feeling started to brew inside me, and I feared I wouldn’t be able to cry. But children are allergic to solemnity, including silent tributes: as I stood motionless, head bowed as if admitting guilt, I suddenly felt the urge to laugh; I suspected there must be other students who wanted to laugh, too. I furtively glanced left and right, then suddenly locked eyes with my deskmate, Fatty Peng. Startled, we both quickly turned away from each other. It should be fairly easy to suppress a laugh when mourning in silence, because it’s hard to laugh when you’re bowing; in ancient times people got used to bowing when they were young, so maybe they didn’t think it was funny. But for us elementary school students, educated after the destruction of feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism, this was probably the first time in our lives that we had bowed. The way we hinged at the waist and hunched our backs was absurd. It reminded me of when I was a baby and the grownups wiped my butt after I had done my business. I looked around again at everyone’s butt held up high. Even the teacher, who was usually so fearsome, had her butt out like a giant patch on tattered cloth. We all looked ready to have our butts wiped clean. I struggled to stifle the laugh, but it came out in a snort. I heard a similar sound from another corner of the classroom . . . Mercifully, we bowed three times and then were done with it. Otherwise, the consequences would have been too terrible to contemplate.

Chairman Hua Guofeng droned on too long for a child to take, but none of us dared say anything or show we were restless. We had to stay silent. I have no idea how I endured it. At last, the central leadership said their final farewells, and the funeral music blared from the loudspeaker. As soon as the music started, the classroom erupted in tears and wailing, as if on cue. I didn’t dare neglect my duty. I quickly bent over my desk, covered my face, and made crying sounds. Stealing a glance from under my armpit, I saw that some of the class leaders hadn’t bent over and were crying real tears; others fell onto their desks, their backs heaving with indeterminate sorrow. In fact, I wanted

badly to squeeze a few tears from my eyes, but I couldn't get anything out. I thought of the terrible things that would happen without Chairman Mao, but I had thought of them so often I was numb; besides, there had been no sign of enemy planes and bombs the past few days. I even tried to feel sad about my father yelling at me. Unfortunately, he'd yelled at me so often that it didn't hurt anymore. So naturally, I thought of spit . . .

With pretend tearful eyes, I slowly looked up and showed my face. By chance, I glimpsed my deskmate again. This time, Fatty Peng didn't notice me. With head bent, he carefully extruded a thread of bubbly spit from his lips, wiped it on his eyelids with his pudgy hands, then lifted up his own tearful eyes. For a moment, I compared our spitty eyes. He didn't know I had looked, but I felt like he didn't believe my tears. We both choked down laughter, and since we now had tears, I looked confidently around the room. I hadn't noticed it when my head was buried in the crook of my arm, but with my head now raised, I caught the distinct scent of spittle wafting through the classroom. I assumed more than a few students were looking around, protected by spit. Just then, Class Monitor Wang Ping bolted up. She was really crying. She raised a fist into the air as if making a vow, then rushed, sobbing, towards Chairman Mao's portrait to say a few words. I could barely hear her over the reverberating music and the beastly wails rising in the room. "Great Leader . . . I will carry out your final requests . . . and be a successor to the revolution." Or something like that.

The last time Chairman Mao's death was mentioned was six months later, when my aunt came to Chengdu to find a husband for her daughter. She had just "removed her Rightist hat." Otherwise, she wouldn't have been allowed to stay with us. My mother had cut off contact with her nearly twenty years earlier. When I heard my mother's Rightist sister was coming, I asked, "Wait, isn't she a bad person?"

"She just made a mistake," my mother replied. "She's changed. She's no longer a Rightist." I couldn't have imagined that this bad person would be the kindest adult I ever met, and the only one with a sense of humor.

When the sun went down and we'd had our dinner, we gathered with a few other relatives to chat. While my aunt wiped my face and washed my hands, she said, "When we mourned Chairman Mao at our work unit, that greasy old woman in the mess hall who feeds the pigs was just awful." The woman must have been surnamed You 尤, but back then there wasn't enough to eat and I was always hungry, so as soon as I heard "mess hall," my childish ear heard *you* 油, "greasy," and so in my mind she became Greasy Old Woman.

My aunt said, "Greasy Old Woman is from the countryside. She feeds the pigs. She has no culture. During the memorial service, everyone cried, including her. Ay, if you're going to cry, cry to your heart's content, but she followed her village custom of wailing in song at funerals. She suddenly started belting out, 'Chair-man Mao, oh my Chair-man Mao, you left too soon, Old Man . . .'" She sang and cried, but she didn't enunciate, so her song became 'Chairman

Sow, oh Chairman Sow, how can you just leave us now? Chairman Sow, oh Chairman Sow, how can I live without you now?' Think about it. She feeds the pigs, and here she was wailing about 'Chairman Sow.' We had all been so sad, but when she sang like that, we were all dying as we tried to keep from laughing! Isn't that just awful?"

My father, ashen, glared at my aunt. My relatives smirked. My mother, stuck in the middle, was in shock. But it seemed my aunt hadn't noticed. She was only concerned with producing a perfect imitation of Greasy Old Woman's song. As she wailed a string of "Chairman Sows," I heard a loud, honking laugh burst out of my childish mouth.

One day during the past few years, I asked my mother if she remembered the reactionary slogan I had found. "Of course I remember," she said. I told her I had written it. She was shocked. "Ah, you monster! Didn't you know the consequences? Luckily no one figured out it was you, or we'd have been done for! Your father had been declared guilty of involvement with the Capital 516 Red Guards and their opposition to Zhou Enlai. Of course he had nothing to do with them, but they were looking to catch him. If someone knew you had written it, they would have claimed your father had incited you to do it! Terrible, terrible, did you want your father dead? Oh, we got lucky... terrible, terrible..."

Today, Li Qing is the mother of two American devils and lives in the American imperialist city of Seattle. Her garden is a riot of flowers. When she wants to eat a banana, she eats a banana. When she wants to knock over the soy sauce, she knocks over the soy sauce.

Gao Xiaoming projects films at a movie theater. He does a little art in his spare time. I last saw him twenty years ago. He also sent me one of his woodcuts.

I heard that Liao Jun followed in his father's footsteps and went into security. Wu Zihua has a stall where he sells cigarettes.

Class Monitor Wang Ping and I went to secondary school together. She liked to write letters to her teachers as if they were her mother. At the time, I thought it was weird. Now I know she did it because her mother passed away when she was just a few years old. The last time she saw me was before she left for Shenzhen, and the last thing I heard was that she had gone crazy.

My deskmate Fatty Peng, whose real name is Peng Tao, is still my good friend. He grew out of his pudgy and is now quite handsome. He is a cameraman for a TV station and was the videographer for a documentary I made in China a few years ago. After the Sichuan earthquake, I called all my friends to make sure they were alright. Peng Tao picked up his cellphone and said he was filming in the disaster zone. His voice didn't have its usual good cheer. He sounded exhausted and melancholy. Before I could ask him anything, he said, "Don't ask me about it right now. Wait until you come back and see what I've filmed. All I can say is that it's hell on earth."

Translation from Chinese by Anne Henochowicz