



Mao's Golden Mangoes

and the Cultural
Revolution

Museum Rietberg Zürich
Scheidegger & Spiess

② 1968:
My Story
of the
Mango

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By 16 August 1968 I was in my fourth year of working in Beijing No. 1 Machine Tool Plant. Shortly after the “Campaign to Purify the Class Ranks” ended, many of the activists were transferred to the Workers’ Propaganda Team, which the previous month had been sent to Qinghua University to try to end conflicts among Red Guard factions within the student body. For the time being, with the Propaganda Team gone, no one in the factory would be “exposed” as a counter-revolutionary; we were finally able to enjoy a little peace. Still, as I labored all day at my C620 tool lathe on a three-shift system, my mind remained unsettled.

In that sweltering August the workshop was equipped with standing fans about one meter in diameter. We wore long sleeves, gloves, goggles, and face masks to protect us from the hot iron filings and fragments that flew from the lathe as we worked. The breeze from the fan was welcome, but it churned up dust and filings that mixed with perspiration and clung to my skin in a disagreeably sticky layer.

That week I was on the morning shift, working from six a.m. until two p.m. But the plant usually required us to be on duty by five-thirty. By not quite ten o’clock I had already been standing for four hours and was feeling tired. I wanted to fetch a drink of water and at the same time to stretch my legs. Just as I took down my tea mug, I saw our team leader, Chen Wenlian, enter the shop. She approached the first row of tool shapers and started a conversation with my colleague Liu Songnian. Passing by, I overheard something about a factory-wide meeting to be held in the afternoon.

A meeting? It must be about the mango thing. Two days earlier I’d already gotten an earful over lunch: everyone was to receive a mango, a replica of the real fruit originally given to a member of our factory’s Workers’ Propaganda Team by Chairman Mao. Wax models had already been made, one for every person. What

is a “mango”? Nobody knew. Few had even heard the word, let alone seen one. Knowledgeable people said it was a fruit of extreme rarity, like Mushrooms of Immortality. It must be very delicious. Its appearance nobody could describe. To receive such a rare and exotic thing filled people with a surge of excitement. I did not participate in the discussion. A gift from Chairman Mao probably had nothing to do with me. For two years, since the start of the Cultural Revolution, I’d been used to getting out of the way when anything good happened. Since Chen Wenlian already notified us, the news seemed to be true. Still, it was none of my business. I’d better just go and fetch my water.

When I got back, Chen Wenlian was already by my lathe. She said that in the afternoon all the revolutionary workers should go to factory headquarters for a big meeting, a very important one to which we should not be late. I was told to clean up the lathe at eleven o’clock, go to lunch at eleven-thirty, and from there go immediately to headquarters. At that time our workshop was in Houchang Pingku Alley, off Nanxiao Street of Inner Xizhi Gate, in the area of today’s Chegongzhuang Bridge. Headquarters, located at Xisi Shuaifu Alley, was actually our second tool plant, but since the factory director’s office, the Workers Union office, and the Communist Youth League’s office were all there, it was also called “headquarters.” All the factory-wide meetings were held there. Usually we would walk over, which took about forty minutes. We could be there on time after lunch and a shower.

Me as well? Perplexed, I looked questioningly at Chen Wenlian. Because I was born to a family of the wrong social class, ever since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution I had doubted whether I belonged to the category of “revolutionary worker.” I started working in the factory in September 1964. Due to my bourgeois family background, the Beijing Municipal Gold Medal of Excellence that I had received on graduation

from secondary girls school did not guarantee me entrance to a university. On the day I received the rejections, my physics teacher, Gao Yuanhe, hugged me and cried her eyes out. I was only a little upset. Having started my schooling fairly early, I had finished high school at seventeen. At that time I was completely unaware of the outside world. All I cared about was reading. My limited understanding of life was derived almost entirely from books. No matter where I was, I was always able to conjure up a wonderful life. I had not yet realized how not going to university would affect my life. In fact, because of my family background, I couldn't even apply for a teaching post in an elementary school. My only route was to become a factory worker. I was recruited by Beijing No. 1 Machine Tool Plant.

Our factory, which was established in 1908, was big in both scale and reputation. When I started, all the rules and regulations were strictly observed. We began with a three-month training program on metallurgical technology, on how to read drawings, and so on. Both the trainers and the trainees were truly intent and dedicated. Spare-time activities were organized as well, such as playing on the basketball team, or rehearsing songs and dances. Every week we had "free time" to study technology or culture. We could also watch one or two movies per month. It felt like my high school internship in a factory. Life seemed quite interesting. After the training period I was assigned to a shop in the large-parts section, where I apprenticed at operating a vertical lathe. Because during the recruitment one of my teachers—I'm not sure which one—recommended me as a bright student, I was often assigned to organize public displays or other events. Later they simply put me in the office as a helping hand. At the same time I was also in charge of the plant's broadcasting room. Everyone said I was a good broadcaster. They said that my broadcasting sounded just like China National Radio. Encouraged, I worked even harder to please my audience. I bought many records of wonderful music.

After the noon broadcast devoted to “Good People and Exemplary Deeds,” I played a selection of music for everyone. At that time there were many young people in the factory who had started working at the same time as me. Every day after work we hung out together. Sometimes we read books together. With them for company, I led a happy life.

But then came the Cultural Revolution. Those ordinary, peaceful days were over. In June 1966 the revolutionaries denounced me. How could a person with a family background like hers work in the office? She should work in the plant! A girl with whom I had had some issues in the past told me to immediately hand over the key to the broadcasting room and get out. The mouthpiece for the revolution should not be controlled by some bitch like me. I went back to the lathe. I was still young, so manual labor did not bother me.

Over time the Cultural Revolution became increasingly fierce. In the beginning “capitalist roaders” were targeted. A huge number of big-character posters were needed, and there were countless criticism and denunciation rallies. Due to my writing skills and fairly good calligraphy, I was reassigned to copy posters and to help to draft denunciation speeches. I had, however, already entered “the other register.” I could write the posters and compose the denunciation speeches, but I was not allowed to speak during the rallies. Two factions of Cultural Revolutionaries declared war but then allied again, forming a unit of Red Guards and establishing a “Factory Protection Team” and a “Revolutionary Committee.”

Obviously I was not included in either of them. The only thing I could do was to labor obediently at the lathe. Many a time while working in the plant, I would happen to look up over my lathe and I’d see many machines with no operators. Those revolutionaries had gone to meetings to chart the course of revolution, leaving a few “sinister heads” (literally “black heads”) and me to keep working. “Sinister heads” was yet

another pejorative for those “ox-headed devils and serpent spirits” ferreted out from the plant staff. They included the former factory director, the chief of the design department, and those who had been previously labelled Rightists. Incidentally, on joining the plant, I was told that a number of talented people working there were all Rightists. In 1958 our brilliant factory director, Deng Xiao, had cannily recruited thirty-two Rightists from illustrious universities and colleges, including Beijing University of Aeronautics, the Institute of Posts and Telecommunications, and People’s University. They played leading roles in the Design Department, Technical Development Department, and Training Department. In the early 1960s their contributions indeed gave Beijing No. 1 Machine Tool Plant a considerable reputation for technological innovation. But once the Cultural Revolution was launched, these thirty-two people were turned into “ox-headed devils and serpent spirits.” After the “Campaign to Purify Class Ranks” started in 1968, the factory’s Red Guards exposed more people, labelling them “cursed secret agents” and “bad elements.” Those accused of “serious mistakes” were beaten in front of the rest of us to the point that they could not move. They were locked up in a factory room and not allowed to go home. Better off were those who were just made to work in the plant, enlarging the group of “sinister heads.”

At that time I was in an ambiguous position, neither a sinister head nor a member of the revolutionary masses, but something in between, quite marginal.

Now the mangoes are to be distributed. Am I a member of the revolutionary masses? Chen Wenlian was resolute in her decision to include me in the meeting. I might as well show her some respect and get ready to go. In fact, Chen had been quite nice to me; ordinarily she was unwilling to embarrass me. Even when she treated me harshly, it was to fulfill the expectations of the revolutionaries. She was also a book lover. Personally we got along well.

The meeting was scheduled to start at two in the afternoon. Only when I arrived at the site did I discover that anyone who had not been exposed as a capitalist roader was allowed to attend and was counted among the revolutionaries. I noticed that other workers of my dubious type were also present. Having been excluded from so many activities, some of them were deeply grateful just to be included in this event.

That was indeed a rousing, enthusiastic meeting. Wang Qingshan, the military representative of the revolutionary committee, announced, "There are two pieces of great good news for Beijing No. 1 Machine Tool Plant. One is that Chairman Mao received representatives of workers from the capital on 15 August. Comrade Zhang Kui from our factory enjoyed the privilege of mounting the rostrum and shaking hands with the great leader Chairman Mao. This is the highest honor and a source of endless pride for all the workers of our factory. The other good news is that on 5 August Pakistan's President Ayub Khan sent a crate of mangoes to the great leader Chairman Mao, who said, 'We will not eat them. Have Comrade Wang Dongxing take them to Qinghua University for the comrades in the eight Worker-Peasant Propaganda Teams.' On 27 July, a big truckload of workers from our factory marched into Qinghua University as part of the Worker-Peasant Propaganda Teams who were putting an end to factional fighting. The vice director of the revolutionary committee of our factory, Zhang Kui, is the Vice Commander of the Machinery Bureau's Propaganda Team. Therefore a mango was bestowed on our factory. This is glorious for the entire factory. According to the decision of the revolutionary committee, the real mango has been delivered to Shanghai Machine Tool Works by Li Shuhua, the representative of senior workers, via a special plane. Because comrades there have invented China's first Numerical Controlled Machine Tool and won honor for the Chinese working class, we are sharing this glory with them. Now, in order to let everyone share

the pride evoked by the fruit, the factory authorities have commissioned wax models of the mango to be distributed to each member of the revolutionary masses as a lifelong keepsake.”

That day was indeed a festive one for the factory. People were wild with joy. They shouted “Long Live Chairman Mao!” and “Long Live the Proletarian Cultural Revolution!” A few senior female workers mounted the platform, so excited that they wept and sniffled. They vowed to be loyal to Chairman Mao forever and to support the Proletarian Cultural Revolution through to the end. Attendants surged forward to shake hands with Zhang Kui, who had kept his hands unwashed for a day because they were imprinted with Mao Zedong’s blessings. I was only an observer. Not having a sufficiently high rank to shake hands with Comrade Zhang, I just stood outside the crowd and watched.

The next day, wax mangoes were distributed. I got one. It lay in a rectangular glass box, gold colored and kidney shaped. Everyone held their wax model of the sacred fruit solemnly and reverently. Someone was even admonished by senior workers for not holding the fruit securely, which was a sign of disrespect to the Great Leader. Hearing this, the senior female workers’ eyes again brimmed over with tears. The mangoes were said to have been placed in the most conspicuous place in everyone’s home.

But I really thought it beautiful, and felt duly grateful because it allowed me to be a member of the revolutionary masses for a few days. I really wanted to know whether the real fruit was edible, what it tasted like. Unfortunately, we had only wax facsimiles.

About thirty years later, in the late 1990s, mangoes could be seen in Beijing’s markets in such profusion that they were unceremoniously piled on the ground. But by then almost everyone’s wax mango had disappeared.

In the spring of 2011 I vacationed with some younger colleagues in Vietnam. We all loved the drink called “mango shake.” I was so enchanted by its sweetness and by the unique flavor of fresh mango that at every stop we had to find a juice shop and buy a drink. I felt genuinely happy as I watched the golden mangoes being crushed in the blender, mixed with crushed ice cubes, and made into a delicacy for our pleasure. Suddenly it occurred to me that if we had treated mangoes like that forty years earlier, we would have been severely punished. I told my story of the mango to my younger colleagues, who were in their twenties. Incredulously they responded, “It’s only a piece of fruit! People of your time! Really!”

Written on the morning
of 14 August 2011
in Jiuxianqiao (Beijing).



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Wang Xiaoping (far right), with
Zhang Kui and Wang Qingzhu,
an old colleague from Beijing No.1
Machine Tool Plant, at Alfreda
Murck's home, Summer 2010,
photo: A. Murck.