

Grace for Mao

by Mathew Paust

Initially I thought I had attained a new level, a realm that would prove I was in fact the god I'd devoted my life to become. But my efforts to jump up and down with joy soon disabused that notion.

No matter how fierce the determination I brought to bear--climaxing in a fury that would have effected the deaths in hideous agony of all who displeased me until that moment--my body stubbornly refused to obey. This is when I at least should have suspected I was on the cusp of death, especially as I'd long been unable to deny I was terminally enfeebled. Physically, that is. My mind never wavered. In fact it was what I now know to have been an acceleration of brain activity that lifted my ego to what seemed a breakout dimension.

I'd been weeping. I knew I was nearing death, and I was feeling sorry for myself. I was a failure. China had not become the great creature of my will as I'd intended, the first step in my grand plan to subjugate the entire world. It was too late for that, too late, and I knew it, and I wept profusely, hour after hour, day after day. I subsisted on hatred and soups, preferring the wonton because I greatly enjoyed imagining each wonton was one of my personal enemies and then biting it in half and pretending I could hear it screaming piteously as I chuckled and dragged out the chewing. I demanded my wontons be filled with pork, raw and with fat and gristle.

I was about to swallow what was left of the first half of Deng Xiaoping when it happened. I sneezed. Rather, I half-sneezed, spewing out bits of the screaming wonton and thinking at first how fortunate I'd been not to have inhaled any and thus choked to death on what was then my most hated adversary. It started as one of those delayed sneezes that arrive subtly, with a vague itch in the nasal passages that quickly builds in urgency the way magma pushes toward the snout of a volcano. But then it stopped, short of eruption, lodged just beneath the blow hole, neither relenting its persistence

nor exhibiting the necessary commitment to consummate its unmistakable intention.

"C'mon, dammit!" I shrieked silently, interrupting my concentration on the mastication of Deng's upper or lower half--it no longer matters which--from which the emotional irritation likely joined with the visceral to provide enough impetus to partially blast Deng's pieces on the jet stream of my life's breath into a cloud of mist, pork fragments and doughy particles that ballooned out in front of my face and hovered there, denying gravity, longer than I sensed was explainable. When it refused to disperse at all after what seemed like several minutes I shifted my attention to breathing, as the yogis say to do. That's when I realized my breathing had stopped. After the sneeze there was no gasp for air.

The possibility I was having a stroke popped to mind, instantly denied by an ego unwilling to consider such nonsense. Then it popped back as I started wigwagging frantically between terrifying notions of stroke and euphoria of superbrain until I reached a compromise that included both. I could accept stroke by believing it kicked my thoughts into a warp acceleration that left all interactive consciousness behind, as if frozen in perceived time. This understanding came incrementally, with the biggest hurdle my determination to will my body into motion. Brute strength of will is my strongest suit, always has been.

I'd never spent much time on philosophical questions of mind over matter. Although I've always read voraciously everything I could get my hands on, the subject seemed irrelevant, as I rarely had much trouble making matter dance to my tune. It was not easy for me to receive with grace such powerful evidence the tune now was no longer strictly mine, that is a composition of pure ego. Other facets of mind as yet beyond my direct control were part of the orchestration. Apprehensive at first of learning about more of me I yielded with grave caution to the notion I likely would never again be able to will my physical self to motion and that any jumping up and down with joy henceforth could be only virtual.

Don't get me wrong. I haven't thrown in the towel on that one. Not by a long shot. Ever the instinctive guerrilla fighter, I had many useful tricks in my tactical bag. I knew when and how to pull back, how to lure adversaries into thinking they'd won, how to wait until I could strike with tactical brilliance and vanquish them. And vanquish them I did, invariably. I permitted no one whom I so much as sensed even vaguely to be a threat to me to escape my wrath alive. I never forgave and never forgot. If there's a way for a powerful mind to will the paralysis out of its body, and I'm still alive, mine will do so. Bet on it--unless it's obvious I'm dead. I'm quite aware this warp acceleration of thought could be my perception alone, undetectable by anyone looking at my inert, cadaverous, drooling octogenarian corpus which might well be aborting its final wheezing gasp. Thus what may seem an eternity to me could have taken place in a microsecond of real time and as you read this my mummified remains might have been on display in Tiananmen Square for decades.

I have no way of knowing if you are in fact reading this, if in fact the lethal dispersion of my will has managed to impregnate the cerebrum of a living person with my thoughts sufficiently clarified to enable accurate transcription. It pleases me to imagine this is so, and so long as my extra-normal consciousness continues I will keep at it with the presumption at some point I will succeed. Probability is with me, as I have succeeded on my own terms in almost everything I have tried.

Using my facile mind and aggressive nature I quickly learned to outsmart and overpower anyone who stood in my way. As my experience and reputation grew I came to rely more and more on intimidation, and as my successes continued to accumulate I came to believe I was the one, the only one who could lead China from its feudal past into modernity. My reasoning, I believed, was sound: if I could so easily triumph over the best and the brightest I came up against should I not then be the one to take charge over them all? And once in charge would it not be negligent of me not to obliterate all who dared challenge my dominance? If I was indeed the future of

China, and at some point I harbored not one scintilla of doubt that I was, did I not deserve, nay, require the deference, the security, unlimited sex, trappings and creature comforts accorded every emperor in history? To allow any less would imply weakness. If nothing else, I held, an emperor must appear invulnerable.

The Revolution, you ask? The Communist Party? Indeed, the societal flux of the time, in a fragmented population largely agrarian, illiterate and poor, enabled me room to maneuver with virtually no authoritarian structure to interfere. And, oh yes, I used both to my advantage at every turn. At the same time I held ideology, any ideology, in utter contempt, knowing instinctively real power resided in personality. We humans have evolved no further than a pack of wolves in this regard, despite the appearance in some societies of a subtler natural selection.

Why then, after attaining a supremacy that swayed over a billion people, some 70 million of them dead due to my whims, do I believe I failed? I see now, way too late, the irresponsibility, the sheer idiocy of some of those whims. Although I knew then, I disregarded the willful ignorance with which I ordered agrarian measures that led to what came to be known as The Great Famine, killing millions of my subjects. Some who starved to death were found with straw in their stomachs. Yet, I dared not acknowledge my mistake. The purges, one of the worst known as The Cultural Revolution, caused the beatings, torture, murders and suicides of additional millions. Because they knew I wanted them to, Chinese turned on Chinese, accusing each other of being "capitalist roaders", a term I made up to equate to vague class distinctions. Students turned on their teachers, neighbors used my poisonous innuendos as excuses for avenging personal grudges. This often meant horrible deaths for the victims.

You could call me a narcissistic sociopath, and I would be hard pressed to disagree. I could argue that such was my sacrifice for the betterment of China. My empathy for the kingdom, if you like. At one time I might have blithely bought that argument had I been able to agree with the premise I was in fact sociopathic, and had this

happened I might have recognized a new perspective a jig off dead center of my vanity enabling me to move closer to my goal of bettering China.

Might have been might have been might have... Goal? Oops. I neutered Chou En-lai, the only man I knew who might have been able to bring that off. Deng Xiao-ping could still do it. He's the one I was chewing half of when I sneezed. I was never strategically inclined beyond my personal interests. Until this moment I never gave a big cahoot what happened to China or anyone else after I was gone. Now, with the time to reflect, armed with only the notion I might yet reach minds with thought alone, I see how blindly selfish I'd become.

I have no friends. No one loves me, or did. I ruled through fear alone. Toadying, grudging obeisance and impotent hatred were my rewards. No one loved me. I loved no one. Love was never in the cards. The deck was stacked and it was mine. For China's sake...oh, for China's sake, my ass. So much yakshit. China's worse off than...

My God! Is this Hell? Am I damned? I feel nothing. My mind seems stronger than ever but...it's turned against me. Devouring me. Memory offers...no solace...

Oh...Kai-hui!

