

MY KIND OF TOWN ...

Party Like it's 1966

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Feast

THE PERFORMERS dressed as Red Guards descend from the stage and salute Yan Song'an on his 67th birthday. To Yan's four-year-old granddaughter the men and women appear to be in fancy dress. But to Yan they bring back surging memories. Burning candles from a cake briefly illuminate the table. The other hundred or so diners in the restaurant turn to face them, clapping or pointing. And then the moment is over and they turn back to the evening show.

Yan's daughter has brought him to The East is Red for a special family outing. The revolutionary-themed restaurant – one of a handful in Beijing cashing in on Mao Zedong's status as national hero and founder of the People's Republic – is located down a remote alley outside the Fifth Ring Road. Yan has had a long drive to reach it: beyond the choked city centre with its teeming cars and thrusting skyscrapers, down a dusty, unlit road illuminated by an occasional vehicle's headlights. Here, in an unremarkable, squat grey building, is a Mao-mania orgy. I arrive from central Beijing on a weekday evening a few days before the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, on July 1. It is blistering outside: a hot, dry, Beijing night. Beyond the heat, there is a heady madness condensing in the air. The Party, eager to consolidate its rule by glorifying Mao, is promoting a Red resurgence. State newspapers are stepping up a propaganda campaign lionising the glorious Communist past; Red singing competitions

are broadcast on Beijing subway television screens; and staff at The East is Red (the name directly translates from the Chinese as Red Classics Theme Restaurant) rehearse a special anniversary performance, for which they expect a full house of more than 600 customers eager to catch a dose of revolutionary fever.

Tonight, however, it is quiet. A friend and I walk up the concrete steps through a vast red star that frames the door, leading into the warehouse-sized restaurant. Inside, diners are greeted by statues of revolutionary heroes, murals of model workers brandishing Mao's Little Red Book and slogans in colossal red characters. "Serve the People", says one; "May Mao Zedong Thought Live Ten Thousand, One Hundred Million Years", reads another.

We order a bubbling vat of spicy bean curd skin with slices of salty bacon. The restaurant serves, among other things, rustic cuisine from Mao's home province Hunan, which is famed for its smoked pork and chillies. ("If you are scared of the chillies in your bowl," Mao once declared, "how on Earth will you dare to fight your enemies?") The food here, like the decor, is political: for only RMB20 diners can dig into a dish of corncobs and roasted sweet potatoes aptly named "The Peasant Family is Happy".

A young waitress in a green Red Guard uniform, her hair braided with red ribbons, a Red Guard band on her left arm and a Mao badge pinned over her heart, smiles bashfully as she takes our order. The bean curd tastes like rubber and is saturated with oil and grease. But people do not come here for the food. They visit to watch the daily presentations, a mixture of Cultural Revolution-era drama, song and dance. At intervals the waiting staff break into the Red Guard Dance; many of the older people jump up to join them, waving red flags and swaying with emotion. "Some even cry when they see the show," our waitress confides.

"I experienced the whole Cultural Revolution from beginning to end," says Yan, a retired mechanical engineer, as we talk at the end of the evening. Yan was a college student when the Cultural Revolution kicked off in 1966; a chaotic decade of Red Guard mob rule followed, with systematic violence, hunger and hardship leading to the deaths of anywhere from 750,000 to 1.5 million people.

How times have changed. The East is Red, which opened in 2005, may hark back to an age of wretched poverty, but today only the burgeoning middle classes dine there. Yan's table heaves with leftover food. His collapsed

cake sits half eaten: the white icing looks plastic, the sponge pasteboard. Eyeing me up and down, Yan's daughter, a wealthy white-collar worker, shovels the cake remains back into their box to take home. Despite renewed wealth in the capital, censorship and government crackdowns on dissidents and artists still create an atmosphere of caution.

"My daughter wants to make me happy on my birthday, coming here, to satisfy my preoccupation for the past," he adds, gesturing towards her. She leans over and whispers, "Careful what you say, you are a Party member, remember?" He waves off her concerns. "Now it has changed, after Deng Xiaoping's path, the 'Opening and Reform'. Now we have walked onto the road where 'all the people get wealthy'. The country is getting stronger and people richer."

He looks around to check on his granddaughter, a pretty, precocious child in pigtails, who is taunting off-duty performers dressed in blue dungarees and clambering around a fake red tractor that has "crashed" through a wall. "This place helps us to relive the scenes of the Cultural Revolution." He smiles. "Thirty-five years have passed. The page of history has been flipped over."

Like Yan, Huo Jinglin, 68, a buxom and motherly retired teacher, has travelled to The East is Red to reminisce about her youth. She has brought her husband, daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter. The restaurant, Huo believes, reveals China's resurgent greatness after a century of humiliation.

"Yes, we brought the whole family to show how good China has become," admits Huo with a worldly nod. I am curious about her thoughts on the past she is now celebrating. For some the revived interest in Red culture is a necessary tool to turn a brash, Western-facing Chinese youth, more interested in the latest mobile phones and Apple Macs than Mao, eastwards; for others it is a dark and dangerous throwback to a cruel moment in Chinese history.

Huo turns serious. Her hen-pecked husband stares glumly from his chair. "At that time [of the Great Famine] we didn't have enough to eat. We will never forget the difficulties in the past. We want to educate the next generation to treasure the good life we have today, not to waste," she says.

"Back then, we didn't feel it was hard or tiring. On the contrary, we loved the Party. Now some people who enjoy nice food and clothes are still unsatisfied. I think it is these people who don't know about history. There

are a lot of young people, young cadres, even some corruptionists, who stir up some unhealthy tendencies. I think they will get educated if they come here.”

And Mao? “We should pay attention to Chairman Mao’s major feats. But the Cultural Revolution was the biggest mistake he ever made.” Huo stops. “We should judge him 70-30,” she adds resolutely, referring to the conventional Party wisdom that Mao was 70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong.

The Great Helmsman still looms large in Beijing. During the summer Tiananmen Square swarms with domestic Chinese tourists – and Mao continues to stare down at them from his gargantuan portrait hanging over Tiananmen Gate.

Thousands of visitors queue daily for a glimpse of Mao’s embalmed corpse. I am astonished at the reverence still reserved for the Great Leader. “Hats off!” “Umbrellas down!” “No bags allowed!” bark the guards as our line shuffles past in single file. Despite these orders and the guards’ presence, excited chatter punctuates the air.

As we enter the severe, Soviet-style mausoleum, there is eerie silence. Young and old clutch bunches of yellow flowers and bow to a towering statue of the Chairman. We are herded into the next room where his body lies and, in a heartbeat, back out again, into the hazy air. Directly outside touts peddle Mao portraits, flashing cigarette lighters and cheap necklaces bearing his face engraved on heart pendants. People shove and shift, jostling for a tacky souvenir. Mao is now a brand, his image a reminder of the New China, the soaring ironic success of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Down a Beijing hutong threatened, like most, by the city’s incessant development, lies another restaurant milking Mao. The Red Capital Club is a Qing Dynasty siheyuan, or courtyard house, restored in the late 1990s to its former glory by craftsmen from the Forbidden City and painters from the Summer Palace.

The club is dedicated to China’s “burgeoning ‘red capitalists’”, according to the website, and foreign tourists with dollars to spend. Here, the values of revolution celebrated in the 1950s decor are supplemented by cocktails and cigars. It is fitting, however, that so-called Zhongnanhai state-banquet cuisine, referring to Beijing’s closed compound where Mao and his comrades retreated to plan China’s future, is served.

Parked outside in the dusty grey alley, where residents shuffle from their homes to the public toilets in pyjamas, or chat on makeshift stools, chewing fatty lamb kebabs known as chuanr, is a handsome Hong Qi, or Red Flag, limousine originally used by Madam Mao and today occasionally fired up for tourist trips around the city. (A second limousine, formerly at the disposal of Mao's entourage, is provided for guests to lounge in: there, they sip champagne while being blasted with recordings of the Chairman's speeches). In a neighbouring hutong at the Red Capital Residence, the hotel arm of the business, weighty crimson curtains, which once hung in Mao's private lodgings, adorn the hotel bar's windows.

Each dish at the Red Capital Club is served with a story. As well as the Chairman's Request (tart slices of cold bitter melon) and the Chairman's Bean-curd Wrap there is the ubiquitous Chairman's Favourite of hong shao rou or red roasted pork, succulent chunks of soft belly meat simmered with sugar, Shaoxing wine, chillies, anise and ginger. It is a dish served in Shaoshan, Mao's hometown, in the south-central province of Hunan, which has profited from a surge in Red tourism following a 2005 government drive to generate domestic tourism in China's former "revolutionary" towns. Its restaurants serve the hot, heavy and pungent fare Mao reportedly relished.

The club menu claims that the Great Leader "preferred to eat [hong shao rou] late at night as brain food when writing his many thoughts"; fittingly, an ornate taro carving of his head adorns the dish. Anything, it seems, can be done with Mao.

"State banquets tend to be based on Huaiyang cooking, which is delicate and acceptable to most people, so it is seen as being perfect for diplomacy," says fellow *Asia Literary Review* contributor Fuchsia Dunlop, author of the *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook*. To conduct research, Dunlop spent time with chef Shi Yinxiang, who cooked for Mao when he visited Hunan. "But Mao loved rustic things like little fire-baked fish with black beans, chilli, corncobs and sweet potatoes, the 'coarse grains' regarded as peasant food," she adds. "He seems to have had an antipathy towards the refinements of Chinese haute cuisine; he loved rough and ready, hearty cooking. His dietary preferences are interesting in light of the attack on elite culture during the Cultural Revolution."

Today, the circle has turned fully: many Beijing restaurants now offer peasant food, polished and re-dished for the urban palate. The Red Capital

Club serves a Long March Wild Tonic Soup, a dish whose genesis is described on the menu. Mao, it is said, craved his wife's comforting broth during the arduous journey, from which only 10 per cent of the force that set out returned. Because it was impossible to garner the ingredients, Mao's cooks foraged for wild mushrooms and uncultivated vegetables. They created a soup so delicious that Mao announced it had to be named after the Long March.

"What you find in these revolutionary-type restaurants is a nostalgia for wild vegetables, wild herbs and things once regarded as poverty foods," explains Dunlop. "Rice with sweet potatoes in it, corn on the cob – these were eaten only by those who couldn't afford enough rice. I have stayed in remote Hunan villages where people think it's hilarious that city dwellers will pay handsomely for wild vegetables, the kind of things they feed to their livestock and eat themselves out of desperation only."

Beijing rivals the sophisticated culinary scene of other international cities and today draws on a number of sources from across the country to create a diverse food culture. In London, foraged foods are now fashionable in high-end eateries such as the famed St. John Bar and Restaurant in Smithfield, which specialises in serving cheap cuts such as pig's cheek and chitterlings (pig's intestines). But in China, restaurants drumming up a "Maoist" experience, combined with unusual food types, offer not just a slick marketing gimmick or peculiar, rediscovered rural ingredients, but an opportunity for the shrewd, urban Chinese to connect with their countryside roots and what they imagine is a purer Communist past.

Famine

I meet Frank Dikötter, author of *Mao's Great Famine*, in Wangfujing, a soulless, pedestrianised shopping street in Beijing popular with domestic tourists. We slide behind a back table in a drab French restaurant that sits in a mediocre hotel, one of an international chain. Pop music seeps softly from the speakers; one other diner perches alone, picking at a salad.

Mao's Great Famine, winner of this year's BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, states that up to 45 million people died during the 1958-62 Great Famine (previous estimates stopped at 30 million). Six to eight per cent of the victims were buried alive, tortured or beaten to death, writes

Dikötter. As Mao attempted to overtake the world's industrialised nations in the disastrous Great Leap Forward, officials pursued bloated grain-production targets by browbeating farmers. In an atmosphere of heightened violence, death could be doled out for stealing a potato, millions of people were sent to labour camps and the man who wielded the canteen ladle in compulsory communes controlled who starved and who did not. To survive, people resorted to cannibalism or devoured tree bark or mud. And Mao – a crazed dictator who once claimed, “It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill” – confiscated grain from farmers to give to Beijing's allies rather than his own starving people.

“It should be called genocide,” Dikötter says in his clipped Dutch accent, swilling a large glass of red wine. “You think Pol Pot, you think of genocide. You multiply by 20 and you have close to what happened in this country. It wasn't just people starving to death of hunger, blandly. No. I was looking at how people survived hunger. I discovered people had to survive violence and not just lack of food, but food being used as a weapon to punish people: the sick being banned from the canteen, the weak being banned, the old being banned. There is something monstrous about that scale of mass murder.”

It is a grim conversation. We both stare out of the window at the moneyed world just beyond us, home to big brands and colossal shopping malls. China's hunger for luxury, for material goods, I venture, must partly be a reaction to this desperate deprivation in the country's dark history.

“Oh, definitely,” agrees Dikötter. “Just hunger. Hunger to succeed. To succeed at all costs. Those were the killing fields for the farmers, but the learning fields for the Party: they learned how to bend a rule, how to doctor statistics, how to be corrupt without attracting attention, how to curry favour.” He spits out the words. “How to make your way up the greasy ladder of the Party hierarchy.”

Fat

China's hunger for success has resulted in expanding waistlines and bank accounts. Food waste at banquets, with officials flaunting their power and wealth by walking away at the end of a meal, leaving food on the table, is flagrant. From famine to excess, it is predicted that an estimated 200 million

Chinese will be overweight by 2015, most members of the growing urban middle classes.

A few years ago I attended a casual meal for about 10 people hosted by a minor official visiting Beijing from another province. The restaurant is elegant, located in the embassy neighbourhood and serves gourmet fusion-European cuisine at New York prices. Starters were ordered to share; expensive French red and white wines were liberally poured to complement the steak tartare and tuna carpaccio.

As a discreet waiter set down my second course of rare rump of beef, I was surprised to see yet another set of main courses lining the middle of the table: our host had demanded double the dishes needed. The food congealed, barely picked at, but nevertheless, unable to resist, I mopped up some juices with a wedge of focaccia. My Chinese friend who had taken me along reddened. He leaned over and whispered loudly: "You look like a peasant!"

I wonder if Yan, decades after the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, would have agreed.