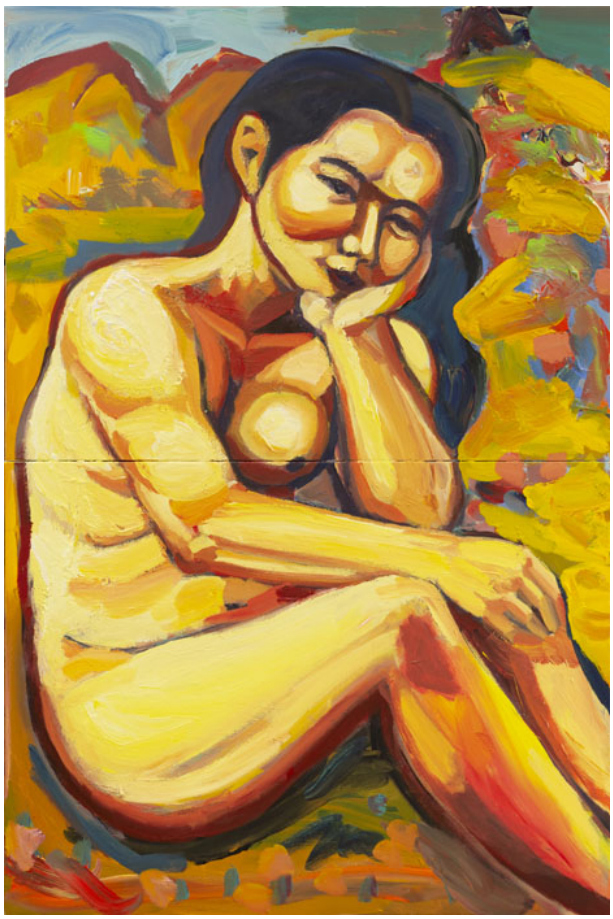
FLASH NONFICTION

The Holy Mango

by Zoë S. Roy



"ChunIX" by Chunbum Park

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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One day, when I walked past Spadina Avenue in Toronto, mangos in yellow and orange piled high on a fruit stand caught my eye. A memory of a sacred mango from almost half a century earlier came flooding back to me.

It was in 1968, two years after the Cultural Revolution had started. Mao Zedong had dispatched the Workers' Propaganda Team to manage colleges and universities across the country and reform the so-called "rotting intellectuals" as well. My family lived on one of these university campuses.

One evening when I was washing up bowls and chopsticks from our supper, a high volume loudspeaker suddenly blasted: "Revolutionary faculty and staff! A golden mango bestowed on our respected WPT by the reddest sun in our hearts, Chairman Mao, has arrived on campus."

Listening to the inflaming announcement, I imagined a gold fruit full of glowing spikes, based on the word "golden" and the Chinese words for "mango." I'd never seen such a fruit in my life, let alone this one, the gift to Mao from an African president across mountains and seas.

I stopped the washing as the speaker shouted: "Revolutionary family members including children are allowed to pay respects to the most beloved mango, invited by our great WPT!" In those years, the word "invite" was used whenever one spoke of anything related to Mao Zedong. For example, when you bought a portrait of Mao, you had to say you had "invited" it from the bookstore. To say you bought it was politically incorrect and would lead to criticism.

Unlike the Red Guards who had been to Beijing and actually seen Chairman Mao, I'd missed the boat, but now I had my opportunity to see the golden mango from Mao! Quickly drying my hands, I hurried out to join a curious crowd in order to admire this VIP fruit.

The auditorium where the wondrous object was displayed was already full, so we had to wait in the lobby. The members of the WPT, identifiable by their red armbands, arranged the people into rows. They were the authorities at the university. Based on the revolutionary theory, landlords, the well-off, anti-revolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, traitors, special agents, and "capitalist roaders" were eight "black" categories: the enemies of the revolution. After them came with the "stinking number nines" — the teaching staff.

As the daughter of a Stinking Number Nine, I belonged to a group that had been described in a revolutionary song as "flowers of our motherland." However, at that moment, we were all like silent and colourless blossoms, moving gradually after the last adult group along an aisle between the empty rows. Then, following the crowd, I climbed a short flight of stairs toward

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the stage. A large red banner with the black words of “Solute Chairman Mao’s Mango!” slightly fluttered over us.

I squinted in the glare of the stage lights and looked at a glass box on a large, rectangular table covered with red silk cloth. A football-shaped brown fruit lay inside the box. It didn’t have any spikes, but had wrinkled skin. A young boy leapt toward the table, but before his hand reached it, he was pulled back by his grandmother under the baleful eye of a member of the WPT. I moved along the line; a tall, white-haired man was to leave the table, but he suddenly turned around and bent over at the waist to the mango. He was a carpenter with the Maintenance Section. To my understanding, like many other people, he didn’t have the chance to see Mao, but bowing to the mango was his greatest salutation to Mao. Before I decided whether I should follow suit, I was pushed away by other teens behind me.

Out of the auditorium on that starless night, I didn’t dare to think that the idolized mango was pretty ugly and that the loyal bow was silly; neither did I realize that I myself was also a character in a piece of absurdist fiction.

Decades later, standing at a fruit stand in the bustling Chinatown in Toronto, I envisioned the decayed godly mango fading away in the sunlight while the street noise buried my wry chuckle.

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