

THE YEAR OF THE MOUSE
by Norman Spinrad

"Mess not with the Mouse."

"Mess not with the Mouse? We fly you to California business class and install you in a luxurious hotel in Anaheim and when you are summoned to give an account of the situation, you spout degenerate Taoist crypticisms?"

Xian Bai managed to resist the impulse to tug at the tight collar of his dress shirt, so uncomfortable after two weeks in Southern California, where even high level executives felt free to attend meetings in casual attire.

"This is not a Taoist epigram," he explained. "It is a precept common in high American corporate circles, where it is thought highly unwise to arouse the ire of the Disney Corporation."

Had the Deputy Minister for Overseas Cultural Relations been a Long Nose, his pale white skin would no doubt have turned crimson with rage. Despite the handicap of the lack of this Caucasian ability, he managed to make his displeasure clear enough by banging his hand on the desk with sufficient force to rattle the tea service.

"And what is the People's Republic of China, some Banana Republic owned by the United Fruit Corporation?" the Deputy Minister shouted. "We are a billion and a quarter people! We are the largest and fastest growing market in the world! We have the world's largest army! We have nuclear missiles! How dare the Mouse presume so outrageously to mess with us!"

He calmed himself with a sip of tea and regarded Xian Bai with a colder species of outrage. "You did make this clear with sufficient force?"

"Indeed I did!" Xian Bai was constrained to reply firmly.

But he was dissembling. Two weeks in Anaheim to obtain a meeting with a Vice President in charge of overseas marketing and the results of that conversation had been enough to convince him that such force did not exist.

"Get real, Xian," that individual had advised him. "The idea that the Yellow Peril was gonna storm the beaches at Orlando went out with Ronald Reagan. What are you gonna do, nuke Pirates of the Caribbean?"

"But China is the largest consumer market in the world--"

"And you guys have been screwing us out of it since that Dalai Lama film dust-up that cost Ovitz his job and us a bundle for the golden parachute! You guys made a real bad career move."

The Disney Vice President glanced heavenward.

"You pissed Michael off."

"And this film is your vengeance?"

The Disney Vice President grinned like the Lion King.

"The bottom line," he said, "is always the best revenge."

The minions of the Mouse had not been reticent in allowing Xian Bai to attend a preview screening of THE LONG MARCH, though at the reception afterward--white wine, simple dim sum, lo mein noodles, barbecued spare ribs--a disgruntled American reporter had complained that this was the "B-list" screening, those privileged to enjoy "A-list" prerogatives being treated to lobster, caviar, and champagne.

This mattered not to Xian Bai, since the film itself had quite destroyed his appetite--being an animated cartoon version of the heroic Long March of the Chinese Revolution, dripping with syrupy music, festooned with Busby Berkley choreography, and featuring Chou En Lai as a fox, Chiang Kai Shek as a mongoose, the People's Army as

happy ants, and starring Chairman Mao himself as a grinning and rather overweight panda.

"You do realize that the premiere of this atrocity in the United States will result in the immediate and permanent closure of the Chinese market to all your enterprises," Xian Bai informed the Disney Vice President as he was instructed to do.

"No problem, guy, you want us to premiere THE LONG MARCH in China, you've got it."

"You cannot seriously expect to ever release this film in China!"

"Better inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in, in the immortal words of Lyndon Johnson."

"This means what...?"

"It means that one way or the other, we will crack open the Chinese market, but we don't need it to make the numbers golden. THE LONG MARCH cost less than fifty million to make, negative and promo costs still keep the total under a hundred, and we've already layed off twice that on the merchandising rights! So the film's in the money before we even release it. We figure Mao the stuffed Panda alone will gross enough this Christmas to cover the whole production budget!"

"You...you plan to market Chairman Mao as stuffed panda?" Xian Bai considered himself an apolitical modern Chinese pragmatist, but this was too much even for him.

"The kids we ran the marketing tests on loved it. Mao Tze Tung's gonna be ten times more popular as a panda doll than he ever was in the flesh."

The Disney Vice President leaned closer. "If I let you in on something really hot, can you keep a secret?" he said conspiratorially.

"I can make no such commitment...."

The Disney Vice President shrugged. "Well, what the hell, it's a fait accompli anyway. We've decided to stop renting out our characters to front other people's fast food franchises, and get into the business ourselves. Mickey and Donald and the old gang are tied up in long term contracts, but Mao the Panda--"

"You cannot be serious!"

"I know what you're thinking, dumb move, the market's oversaturated with hamburger and pizza and taco and fried chicken chains already. But...nobody's doing Chinese! Panda Pagodas in every shopping mall in the world! Fronted by Mao the Panda himself! We'll hang poor Ronald McDonald from his own Golden Arches!"

Even the edited and explicated version of this conversation was difficult for the Deputy Minister for Overseas Cultural Relations to comprehend.

"How can they expect to get away with this affront to the Middle Kingdom?" he demanded. "How can the American government permit this? You did make it clear that we may retaliate against other American corporations as well?"

Xian Bai nodded miserably.

"And?" demanded the Deputy Minister.

Xian Bai took a deep breath, fixed his gaze upon the desktop.

"They...they issued their own ultimatum."

"An ultimatum?" whispered the Deputy Minister, clearly dumbfounded.

"The People's Republic of China must allow THE LONG MARCH to open simultaneously in no less than one thousand theaters nationwide with Disney to retain sixty percent of the gross, must cede the necessary real estate for the establishment of no less than one thousand Panda Pagodas, plus Disneyworlds in Shanghai, Peking, and Hong Kong, and grant a one hundred percent tax abatement for a period of fifty years

on these properties, or..."

"Or?"

"Or, I was told, the Mouse shall roar, Uncle Scrooge will dip into his money bin, Dumbo will fly, and the Big Bad Wolf will huff and puff and blow our house down!"

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At first, it appeared that vast black storm-fronts were approaching China from several directions, then trepidation turned to bemused delight as the black clouds resolved into thousands upon untold thousands of kites.

Black kites. All identical.

All in the form of the happily grinning face of the world-famous Mouse.

No, not kites--

"Balloons!" shouted the Deputy Minister For Overseas Cultural Affairs. "Millions upon millions of them floating gently down from the skies all over China!"

"Amusing," said Xian Bai, "but I don't--"

"Amusing!" screamed the Deputy Minister, reaching into a pocket and extracting a deflated version of the apparently offending item. "They deflate in a moment to the size of a poor man's wallet! They reinflate with a few puffs of air!"

This ability he then proceeded to demonstrate, producing an example of the head of the famous Mouse somewhat larger than a soccer ball.

"Do you realize what this is, you imbecile?" he demanded.

Xian Bai regarded the grinning balloon face in perplexity. All seemed quite ordinary, except for the bulb at the end of the long white rodent's muzzle, which, instead of the traditional black ball, seemed to be a small silvery packet of some sort of electronic circuitry....

"This," said the Deputy Minister, poking Xian Bai's nose with that of Mickey, "is a satellite television antenna!"

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If somewhere the spirit of Chairman Mao might be scowling down unhappily on this spectacle, surely that of Deng Shao Ping would approve, Xian Bai told himself, and at any rate Mao the Panda smiled down benignly on his enterprise from atop the steeped entrance as he cut the ribbon to open his fifth Panda Pagoda.

After all, as Lenin himself had pointed out, you can't make a revolution without breaking eggs, though in this case the standard recipes supplied in MAO THE PANDA'S LITTLE RED BOOK were admirably parsimonious with this relatively expensive ingredient.

Xian Bai, partly as punishment, and partly because there was no one more experienced to dispatch, had been sent back to Anaheim to confront the minions of the Mouse. This time, however, it was a cut-rate charter flight and a grim motel in Santa Ana, and when he finally found himself dealing with the legal department, with what the natives called a "Suit," a hard-eyed fellow replete with tie and wire-rim glasses.

"No international laws, treaties, or conventions were violated," Xian Bai was told firmly. "The balloon antennas were released in international airspace."

"And just happened to drift en mass over China?"

The Suit shrugged. "An act of God," he said. "You could try suing the Pope, I suppose--I could give you my brother-in-law's card--but you'll get nowhere with us."

"Even though the only channel the balloon antennas will receive is the Disney Channel? Which just happens to have begun broadcasting in Mandarin and Cantonese?"

"The satellite is in geosynchronous orbit which is international territory. We have a legal right to broadcast whatever we like in whatever languages we choose."

"But it's illegal for Chinese citizens to own satellite dishes. It's illegal for Chinese citizens to watch foreign broadcasts!"

The Suit displayed a porcelain crocodile grin that was a perfect example of the Beverly Hills dentist's art. "That's your problem," he said. "Our problem is your refusal to allow us to release THE LONG MARCH in China and rake in the profits from the merchandising tie-ins and Panda Pagodas."

The grin vanished, but the crocodile remained.

"And unless our problem evaporates by the film's international release date," said the Suit, "your problem is going to get a lot worse."

"Worse...?" stammered Xian Bai.

How could it get worse? There was no way to confiscate the millions of balloon antennas, at the approach of the police, they were just deflated and hidden away, to be redeployed the moment it was safe. Million upon millions of Chinese were watching broadcasts from the Disneyworlds, cartoons and feature-length animated films, endless trailers for THE LONG MARCH, endless commercials for the tie-in merchandising, endless promotions for the Panda Pagodas. The demand for the opening of China to the minions of the Mouse was building to a frenzy.

According to the latest public opinion polls, 41 million Chinese people already believed that Mao Tze Tung had been born with black and white fur.

"Much worse," said the Suit. "We could give free air time to the Dalai Lama. We could broadcast clips of the Tien An Mien massacre with music by Nine Inch Nails. We could subject your people to reruns of old Charlie Chan movies. And if none of that worked, there's always the ultimate weapon..."

"The...ultimate weapon...?"

"We broadcast the first twenty minutes of THE LONG MARCH in clear, scramble the rest of it, force everyone in China to buy expensive decoders to see it, and blame the Communist Party."

The crocodile grin returned.

"Do you really believe any government could retain the Mandate of Heaven after that?"

"Mess not with the Mouse..." sighed Xian Bai.

"Not a good career move at all," agreed the Suit. "On the other hand, in return for say five percent of the gross, I could aid you in making a sweet one. In the words of Mao the Panda, one hand washes the other."

Well, the Chinese people had not survived several thousand years of turbulent history without paying due attention to the sacred bottom line. Indeed one might argue that the bottom line, like most else, had been a Chinese invention. Especially when there was rich profit to be made in convincing yourself that it was true.

And for those Panda Pagoda franchisees who had trouble swallowing that one, MAO THE PANDA'S LITTLE RED BOOK, in return for the Mouse's 30% of the gross, provided more than standard recipes and accounting procedures, it provided an ideological rationale.

Fast food was, after all, a Chinese invention itself. Dim sum, wonton soup, noodles, and stir-fried vegetables with a bit of meat, were quicker to make, tastier, ecologically more benign, and far more nutritious than hamburgers, pizzas, and greasy fried chicken parts.

And since the ingredients were much cheaper, the profit margin was higher too.

Today China, tomorrow the world, promised Chairman Mao the Panda.

And what did it matter if MAO THE PANDA'S LITTLE RED BOOK had appropriated the epigram from Confucius or Lao Tze or the Buddha himself if Chairman Mao the Panda's words had the ring of truth?

The wise man does well by doing good.

It was enough to keep Xian Bai smiling all the way on his frequent visits to the bank.

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