

**P**resident Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China reached the end of his earthly journey this week. I find it interesting to contemplate how he might be remembered by a world where more people than not, reviled him. I had no reason to either like or dislike him, but I do have something to remember him by.

**Z**emin made a series of both State and Commerce oriented visits across the world not long after rising to office. Vancouver was one such stop (memory fails and there seem to be no records, but I think it was 1993) and the Vancouver Board of Trade rose to the occasion with a near regal reception and luncheon at the Waterfront Fairmont. As 'Sculptor in Residence' for the Board, I was commissioned to create a suitable presentation gift to be awarded after the speechifying. It was to be a dancing polar bear in white marble, a thing I've often done for presentations, often enough that it's almost a cliché—but I duly gave it my best shot for Jiang. In preparation, I had a tidy contemporary plinth made upon which to stand the bear. I was directed to create a commemorative plaque that would be affixed to the

## ***A Moment with President Jiang . . .***

plinth, the format of which was left up to me, Board management trusting that I would cobble up the right words. It was early days for me in learning how to apply my new computer graphics program but I struggled through it, drawing up a decent rendition of crossed China/Canada flags and creating brief, appropriately smarmy words to fit below the flags. As an added flourish, I thought it appropriate that those words should be translated and rendered in Chinese script. There was just such a service handily there in Chinatown at the time in the form of a gentlemanly artisan who called his little business Dragon Arts. Leaving the wording I had created with him, I picked it up a few days later, beautifully rendered in Chinese script. Now I had only to get it back to the computer to impose that script below the flags on the plaque and take the resultant copy to friend Craig, a trusted local engraver, known to almost everyone who ever commissioned a bowling trophy. On the very day of the ceremonial luncheon, the snazzy new brass plaque was delivered by courier and with great satisfaction, I stripped the tape off the adhesive underside and

pressed the plaque onto the waiting plinth. It was a tidy thing, just bigger than a playing card.

**G**etting the sculpture in to the great ballroom at the Fairmont was somewhat of a challenge. My methodology for getting everything in place for the ceremony was to place the bear with its pin and marble base all heavily wrapped in a strong cloth handbag onto a two-wheel hand-truck alongside the plinth, then cart the whole business up the elevator to the convention floor and on down to the stage. There it would sit under a white cloth in readiness for a dramatic unveiling at the appropriate time. Transporting it down into the parking underground at the Fairmont went well enough in my innocuous little Datsun pickup though it became quickly apparent the place was overrun with security gooks. Our own RCMP plainclothes guys, identifiable by their characteristic brush cuts, swarmed my truck like a troop of boy scouts no sooner was I was parked in the underground. However, finding my story believable, they owlshly waved me on. Getting my cargo to the ballroom was more problematic. I was summarily accosted by a phalanx of faultlessly dressed but serious and malevolent looking Chinese security agents immediately upon exiting the elevator. Ringing me in tightly against the wall, they turned their attention

to the hand-cart, for this was a thing that portended great danger to the man they were paid to protect. As mentioned, he was a man who over half the world's population would like to have seen extinguished—a concealed bomb was a very real possibility. They immediately unpacked the handbag and appeared visibly relieved when it turned out to be but a marble bear. This they could understand. The plinth, however, was a thing of intense suspicion. They regarded it very circumspectly as they surrounded it, none even touching it until their apparently main man was summoned by walkie-talkie to appraise what was happening here. He showed up in seconds, an obviously authoritative man to whom they all showed great deference. He directed that the plinth be carefully laid on the floor whence one of the squad gingerly got down on his knees and with a little flashlight that magically appeared, peered at length into its open bottom. Thank the Powers that for once, my cabinet maker friend Eddie, perhaps in haste, had not closed the bottom, for he usually did. Satisfied the plinth did not contain anything more malevolent than sawdust, and having been given an explanation of what I was all about, the main man stood thoughtfully for a moment, then uttered curtly in accentless English 'I will take responsibility for this—please proceed.'

**T**he luncheon and requisite greetings and speeches proceeded with uncustomary but palpable haste; seemingly the good President's personage was expected elsewhere—there was little time for niceties. President Zemin stood politely by as the shroud was removed from the bear, whence he gave it a polite but faint nod; handshakes were given; photographs were taken. There was no further ceremony. A subdued applause rippled across the audience as he was urgently led away by his waiting retinue. Throughout the ballroom, one could sense the disappointment that pervades an anti-climax.

**T**he assemblage was heavily weighted by our Chinese members and when it was polite to do so, half a dozen of them made their way onto the stage to examine the presentation gift. Among them was good friend Philip Cheng, who, after studying the plaque for a moment, turned to me in horrified consternation

*'George! How come the writing is upside down. . . . ???!*

Jesus. For sure enough, he pointed out that while the flags were properly waving as they should be, the beautifully calligraphed text below was exactly topsy-turvy. Jesus again. How could I have known this, I've since kept telling myself? The error was simple enough to ascribe—Chinese script might as well have

been Sumerian hieroglyphics to me, a 'gwai lo'. It was a revealing testament to an amateur with his brand new Mac horning in on the world of typography—a world best left, then and now, to professionals.

**I** simply did not know what to do. Luckily, that is a condition that has never hampered me for long. In a burst of brilliance, fuelled by having witnessed the apparent detachment with which our esteemed Chinese guests had treated my creation, I whipped out my ever-handly jackknife, pried up a corner of the plaque and stripped the whole thing off and into my jacket pocket in seconds. Not a minute later, President Zhang's fart-catchers arrived to carry sculpture and plinth away for shipment back to wherever they show off such souvenirs in China.

**I**'ve searched high and low through my trivia collection to find that plaque that I might photograph it as an adjunct to this anecdote; but I have not been able to immediately find it. Still, I know it is there and one day when I'm gone and they set about sifting through my worldly goods, they will surely say 'I wonder what this was about?' If they can read Chinese script upside down, they will learn that it said nothing anybody would ever remember—but its very existence is perhaps the most illustrative memento of the event it was intended to commemorate.

