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Stalking the Free-range Mango in Yitian Cun

by A. D. Coleman

Thursday, June 21, 2007 — Along the streets of Yitian Cun, the Shenzhen apartment complex in which we live, the management long ago planted mango trees. They did this mostly to provide shade for pedestrians, since mango trees — though not evergreens — never lose their leaves all at once.

One by-product, of course, is a bountiful crop of mangoes, right around this time of year. Last year management harvested them and distributed them to any tenants who wanted a share; presumably they'll do that again soon.

Meanwhile, of course, as they ripen Shenzhen's famous entrepreneurial spirit shows its face. We've seen young men shinny up trees to loosen and drop the fruit to friends below. Schoolboys in uniform bounce their basketballs through the leaves. Women toss their shoes up into the branches in the hope of dislodging some. One inventive fellow from the sidewalk market nailed a large plastic cup to a long stick and collected what he could during the slow times between peak shopping hours. I have visions of dozens, even hundreds of our Yitian Cun neighbors all out at the same time in the cool of the early morning or the quiet of the evening, wandering around with baseball gloves, all staring up, like outfielders waiting for a high fly ball to drop.

Anna and I have developed a different method of hunting and gathering mangoes, which we gladly share with our Yitian Cun neighbors and our fellow Shenzhenites. We call this the Car-Alarm System for Stalking the Free-range

Mango.

Planted at the edge of the sidewalk, Yitian Cun's mango trees overhang the street. This apartment complex does not have enough underground and aboveground parking garages for all the residents' cars and other vehicles here, so people park on the streets. Which means that, by necessity, some of them park under the mango trees.

You can see the inevitable. Exactly. When the mangoes fall, some fall on the grass lawns in front of the buildings. Some fall on the sidewalks. Some fall on the street. And some fall on the cars, hitting the roofs, windshields, and hoods with a solid, resounding, and distinctive THUMP. (You can recognize the cars that have parked in the same place for a few days by the litter of mango pulp on top.)

Your recent-model car — and most of the cars in Yitian Cun are new or late-model, bespeaking the income level of its residents — comes equipped with an alarm system. Bump it and it emits a series of extremely loud sounds, as its lights begin flashing a warning. The fanciest ones even speak to you in a cautionary voice.

That's how we work the system. After dinner, in the easy warmth of a June evening in Shenzhen, Anna and I go strolling the streets of Yitian Cun, keeping our ears and eyes peeled. Soon enough we hear the telltale thump of a mango hitting a car, followed instantly by the familiar blaring alarm noises and — if the car involved is within our line of sight — the rhythmic blinking of its lights.

Yitian Cun has an excellent security team that patrols its streets 24/7. They respond to all car alarms, so they show up dependably very soon after one of these incidents. (Mango season must keep them especially busy; this happens dependably every 15 minutes.) If we can hear the alarm but can't see the flashing lights, Anna and I don't bother to check; by the time we get there a guard in his glowing LED vest will probably have reached the scene already, and will have arrested the offending fruit.

But if we hear the thump and the alarm and see the lights, we head straight for the spot. A quick scan of the car and the surrounding area usually reveals the culprit, stunned by the impact and easy to capture. Because the car breaks its fall,

the mango's often intact, or only lightly bruised or cracked. Ours for the taking! When we have bagged our quota for the night we head home, where we wash, cut up, and eat our catch.

Of course you can buy mangoes in the stores, at very affordable prices. (Anna favors those from Thailand or the Phillipines.) But there's nothing like a free-range mango that you've caught yourself, fresh from the tree.



Postscript: On Monday, June 25, with no announcement to the tenants, Yitian Cun's management contacted the *Shenzhen Daily*, inviting the paper to send its staff photographer to cover Yitian Cun's first-ever "Mango Festival." The resulting photo and caption appeared on page 3 of the June 26th issue. (See clipping below.) No notice of the availability of mangoes got posted in the lobbies of the complex buildings this year. When we inquired by phone on the 25th, management told us that they'd harvest the mangoes "soon" (though they were in fact doing so that very day).

Hearing nothing for the next several days, we inquired at the management office, where they told us to show up at 8 a.m. on Saturday, June 30. We did so, and got five mangoes out of a few baskets sitting on the table.

To date, no notice to the other tenants about any share of the crop has appeared in any of the buildings. Anna and I suspect collusion between the management team and Yitian Cun's Senior Citizens' Council, which joined in the harvesting. Hoarding. Under-the-counter sale of the crop to local merchants. In short, a *mango scandal!* Stay tuned. Further investigation may follow. (Or not.)

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Mangos harvested

Residents of Yitiancun and employees of the housing estate's management office display mangos they picked in the housing estate yesterday, the opening day of the housing estate's 2007 Mango Festival.

Wang Hongtao

Don't really my close friend

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