https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-57101248

# AI emotion-detection software tested on Uyghurs

By Jane Wakefield  
Technology reporter



image copyright Reuters

image caption A gate of what is officially known as a "vocational skills education centre" in Xinjiang

**A camera system that uses AI and facial recognition intended to reveal states of emotion has been tested on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the BBC has been told.**

A software engineer claimed to have installed such systems in police stations in the province.

A human rights advocate who was shown the evidence described it as shocking.

The Chinese embassy in London has not responded directly to the claims but says political and social rights in all ethnic groups are guaranteed.

Xinjiang is home to 12 million ethnic minority Uyghurs, most of whom are Muslim.

Citizens in the province are under daily surveillance. The area is also home to highly controversial "re-education centres", called high security detention camps by human rights groups, where it is estimated that more than a million people have been held.

Beijing has always argued that surveillance is necessary in the region because it says separatists who want to set up their own state have killed hundreds of people in terror attacks.



image copyright Getty Images

image caption Xinjiang is believed to be one of the most surveilled areas in the world

The software engineer agreed to talk to the BBC's Panorama programme under condition of anonymity, because he fears for his safety. The company he worked for is also not being revealed.

But he showed Panorama five photographs of Uyghur detainees who he claimed had had the emotion recognition system tested on them.

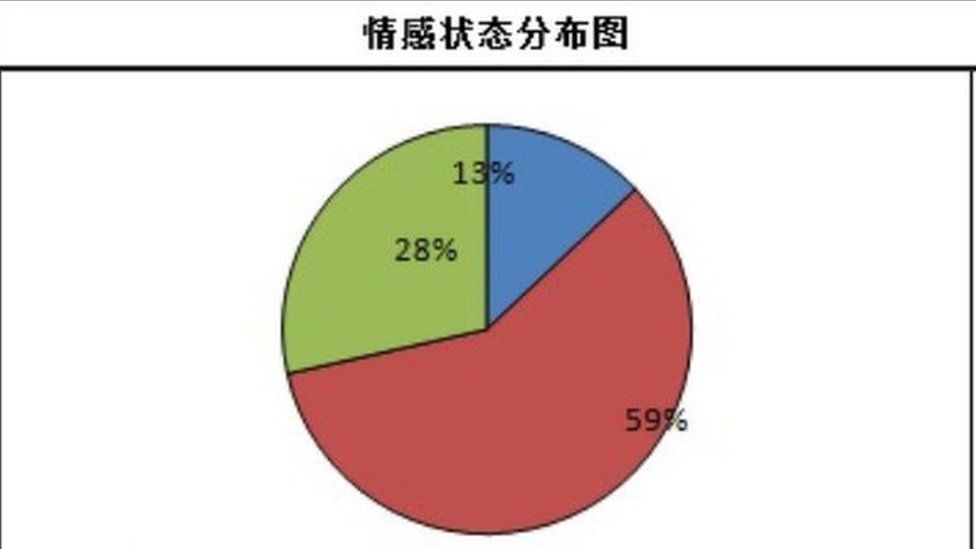


image caption Data from the system purports to indicate a person's state of mind, with red suggesting a negative or anxious state of mind

"The Chinese government use Uyghurs as test subjects for various experiments just like rats are used in laboratories," he said.

And he outlined his role in installing the cameras in police stations in the province: "We placed the emotion detection camera 3m from the subject. It is similar to a lie detector but far more advanced technology."

He said officers used "restraint chairs" which are widely installed in police stations across China.

"Your wrists are locked in place by metal restraints, and [the] same applies to your ankles."

He provided evidence of how the AI system is trained to detect and analyse even minute changes in facial expressions and skin pores.

According to his claims, the software creates a pie chart, with the red segment representing a negative or anxious state of mind.

He claimed the software was intended for "pre-judgement without any credible evidence".

The Chinese embassy in London did not respond to questions about the use of emotional recognition software in the province but said: "The political, economic, and social rights and freedom of religious belief in all ethnic groups in Xinjiang are fully guaranteed.

"People live in harmony regardless of their ethnic backgrounds and enjoy a stable and peaceful life with no restriction to personal freedom."

The evidence was shown to Sophie Richardson, China director of Human Rights Watch.

"It is shocking material. It's not just that people are being reduced to a pie chart, it's people who are in highly coercive circumstances, under enormous pressure, being understandably nervous and that's taken as an indication of guilt, and I think, that's deeply problematic."

## Suspicious behaviour

According to Darren Byler, from the University of Colorado, Uyghurs routinely have to provide DNA samples to local officials, undergo digital scans and most have to download a government phone app, which gathers data including contact lists and text messages.

"Uyghur life is now about generating data," he said.

"Everyone knows that the smartphone is something you have to carry with you, and if you don't carry it you can be detained, they know that you're being tracked by it. And they feel like there's no escape," he said.

Most of the data is fed into a computer system called the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, which Human Rights Watch claims flags up supposedly suspicious behaviour.

"The system is gathering information about dozens of different kinds of perfectly legal behaviours including things like whether people were going out the back door instead of the front door, whether they were putting gas in a car that didn't belong to them," said Ms Richardson.

"Authorities now place QR codes outside the doors of people's homes so that they can easily know who's supposed to be there and who's not."

## Orwellian?

There has long been debate about how closely tied Chinese technology firms are to the state. US-based research group IPVM claims to have uncovered evidence in patents filed by such companies that suggest facial recognition products were specifically designed to identify Uyghur people.

A patent filed in July 2018 by Huawei and the China Academy of Sciences describes a face recognition product that is capable of identifying people on the basis of their ethnicity.

Huawei said in response that it did "not condone the use of technology to discriminate or oppress members of any community" and that it was "independent of government" wherever it operated.

The group has also found a document which appears to suggest the firm was developing technology for a so-called One Person, One File system.

"For each person the government would store their personal information, their political activities, relationships... anything that might give you insight into how that person would behave and what kind of a threat they might pose," said IPVM's Conor Healy.



image copyright VCG

image caption Hikvision makes a range of products including cameras

"It makes any kind of dissidence potentially impossible and creates true predictability for the government in the behaviour of their citizens. I don't think that [George] Orwell would ever have imagined that a government could be capable of this kind of analysis."

Huawei did not specifically address questions about its involvement in developing technology for the One Person, One File system but repeated that it was independent of government wherever it operated.

The Chinese embassy in London said it had "no knowledge" of these programmes.

IPVM also claimed to have found marketing material from Chinese firm Hikvision advertising a Uyghur-detecting AI camera, and a patent for software developed by Dahua, another tech giant, which could also identify Uyghurs.

Dahua said its patent referred to all 56 recognised ethnicities in China and did not deliberately target any one of them.

It added that it provided "products and services that aim to help keep people safe" and complied "with the laws and regulations of every market" in which it operates, including the UK.

Hikvision said the details on its website were incorrect and "uploaded online without appropriate review", adding that it did not sell or have in its product range "a minority recognition function or analytics technology".

Dr Lan Xue, chairman of China's National committee on AI governance, said he was not aware of the patents.

"Outside China there are a lot of those sorts of charges. Many are not accurate and not true," he told the BBC.

"I think that the Xinjiang local government had the responsibility to really protect the Xinjiang people... if technology is used in those contexts, that's quite understandable," he said.

The UK's Chinese embassy had a more robust defence, telling the BBC: "There is no so-called facial recognition technology featuring Uyghur analytics whatsoever."

## Daily surveillance



image caption Hu Liu feels his life is under constant surveillance

China is estimated to be home to half of the world's almost 800 million surveillance cameras.

It also has a large number of smart cities, such as Chongqing, where AI is built into the foundations of the urban environment.

Chongqing-based investigative journalist Hu Liu told Panorama of his own experience: "Once you leave home and step into the lift, you are captured by a camera. There are cameras everywhere."

"When I leave home to go somewhere, I call a taxi, the taxi company uploads the data to the government. I may then go to a cafe to meet a few friends and the authorities know my location through the camera in the cafe.

"There have been occasions when I have met some friends and soon after someone from the government contacts me. They warned me, 'Don't see that person, don't do this and that.'

"With artificial intelligence we have nowhere to hide," he said.

***Find out more about this on Panorama's Are you Scared Yet, Human? -*** [available on iPlayer](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000wft2) ***from 26 May***

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# Covid: China hits back as US revisits Wuhan lab leak theory

Published

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image copyright Reuters

image caption China has rejected any link between Covid-19 and a virus research lab in Wuhan

**China has denounced US efforts to further investigate whether Covid-19 came from a Chinese lab.**

US President Joe Biden has called on intelligence officials to "redouble" their work to find out how the virus was first transmitted to humans.

China's foreign ministry accused the US of "political manipulation and blame shifting".

It has rejected any link between Covid-19 and a virus research lab in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Covid-19 was first detected in Wuhan in late 2019. Since then, more than 168 million cases have been confirmed worldwide and about 3.5 million deaths reported.

Authorities linked early Covid cases to a seafood market in Wuhan, leading scientists to theorise that the virus had first passed to humans from animals.

* [Wuhan: City of silence](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/ewsu2giezk/city-of-silence-china-wuhan)
* [Wuhan marks its anniversary with triumph and denial](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-55765875)
* [Covid map: Where are cases the highest?](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-51235105)

But recent US media reports have suggested growing evidence the virus could instead have emerged from a laboratory in China, perhaps through an accidental leak.

## Why is this dispute happening now?

In a statement on Wednesday, President Biden said he had asked for a report on the origins of Covid-19 after taking office, "including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident". On receiving it this month, he asked for "additional follow-up".

Mr Biden said the majority of the intelligence community had "coalesced" around those two scenarios, but "do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other".

He said he had now asked agencies to "redouble their efforts to collect and analyse information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion".

The announcement angered Chinese officials.

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said it showed the US "does not care about facts or truth, and has zero interest in a serious science-based study of origins".

"Their aim is to use the pandemic to pursue stigmatisation, political manipulation and blame shifting. They are being disrespectful to science, irresponsible to people's lives and counter-productive to the concerted efforts to fight the virus," he said.

The spokesman also said US intelligence agencies had a "dark history" of spreading misinformation.

A statement from the Chinese embassy in the US, which did not directly refer to Mr Biden's order, said "smear campaigns and blame shifting are making a comeback".



Readers now long used to articles dismissing the lab-leak theory as a dangerous, fringe conspiracy may be slightly bemused to find it suddenly front-page, presented as an entirely plausible possibility.

The truth is, there's always been plenty of circumstantial evidence to support both competing theories. A zoonotic origin, in which the virus passes naturally from bat to humans, is supported by the fact that coronaviruses have crossed the species barrier in exactly this way before.

There are also plenty of precedents for lab leaks in which researchers get accidentally infected by the virus they're working on. The Wuhan outbreak happens to be on the doorstep of the world's leading laboratory for the collection, study and experimentation on bat coronaviruses.

What's changed is not the evidence - of which there is none so far to prove either scenario - but the politics. The lab-leak theory, born into an environment poisoned by disinformation, was undermined not so much by China's denials, but by the fact it was being pumped by former US President Donald Trump.

My own attempts to look seriously at the lab-leak theory in May last year ran into long and fraught editorial discussions before the report finally made it to publication.

The prevailing narrative has also loomed large over the science. Despite the dominant voices of some leading virologists insisting that only a zoonotic origin needed be investigated, a determined group of scientists has continued to argue that both scenarios should remain on the table.

It may be too late, of course. Wherever the debate goes now, China is extremely unlikely to allow another investigation on its soil.

## What do we know about the lab theory?

Speculation about the Wuhan Institute of Virology - one of China's top virus research labs - began last year and was propagated by Mr Trump.

US state department cables came to light in April 2020 that showed [embassy officials were worried about biosecurity there.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-52318539)

Earlier this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report written jointly with Chinese scientists on the origins of Covid-19 which said the chances of it having started in a lab were "extremely unlikely".

It said the virus had probably jumped from bats to humans via another intermediary animal, but that more research was needed.

A WHO spokesperson on Thursday reiterated to the BBC that further studies were needed "in a range of areas, including on the early detection of cases and clusters, and the potential roles of animal markets, transmission via the food chain and the laboratory incident hypothesis".



image copyright Getty Images

image caption The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan was linked to early Covid cases

The laboratory theory has received increased public attention in the US amid recent reports attributed to intelligence sources that say three members of the Wuhan Institute of Virology were admitted to hospital in November 2019, several weeks before China acknowledged the first case of the new disease in the community.

Anthony Fauci, President Biden's chief medical adviser, has maintained he believes the virus was passed from animals to humans, though he conceded this month he was no longer confident Covid-19 had developed naturally.

Mr Biden's order for further investigations came the day after Xavier Becerra, US secretary for health and human services, urged the WHO to ensure a "transparent" investigation into the virus's origins.

"Phase 2 of the Covid origins study must be launched with terms of reference that are transparent, science-based and give international experts the independence to fully assess the source of the virus and the early days of the outbreak," he said.

While there is still no evidence to suggest it is man-made, Facebook on Thursday said that in light of the ongoing investigations and in consultation with public health experts it would "no longer remove the claim that Covid-19 is man-made from our apps".

"We're continuing to work with health experts to keep pace with the evolving nature of the pandemic and regularly update our policies as new facts and trends emerge," it said.

Wild Swans Three daughters of China

by

Jung Chang

Publisher: Flamingo An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers , 77-85

Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

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Winner of the 1992 NCR Book Award and the 1993 British Book of the Year

Award.

Burps:

"It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this book."

Wesley

Mary

"Of all the personal histories to have emerged out of China's

twentieth-century nightmare, WILD SWANS is the most deeply thoughtful

and the most heart-rending I've read. It moves, in part, like a

ghastly oriental fairytale, but the authority and the reticent passion

with which Jung Chang speaks her memories and those of others is

unmistakable." Colin Thubron, SPECTATOR

"WILD SWANS' is a very unusual masterpiece. Everything about it is

extraordinary. Not only has it been a popular bestseller, because it

is impossible to put down; it has also received the most serious

critical attention. The book arouses all the emotions, such s pity and

terror, that great tragedy is supposed to evoke, and also a complex

mixture of admiration, despair and delight at seeing a luminous

intelligence directed at the heart of darkness." - Minette Marrin,

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

"Mesmerising. Like all great stories of survival, no matter what

tragedies and horrors are encountered along the way, WILD SWANS is

ultimately an uplifting book: it is the courage and spirit of this

family which will, I believe, be my abiding impression (even if

memories of the horrors endured will take

(even if memories of the horrors endured will take a long time to

fade)." Antonia Fraser. THE TIMES

Immensely moving and unsettling: an unforgettable portrait of the

brain-death of a nation." J.G. Ballard: SUNDAY TIMES

Jung Chang was born in Yib'm, Sichuan Province, China, in 1952. She

was a Red Guard briefly at the age of fourteen and then worked as a

peasant, a 'barefoot doctor," a steelworker, and an electrician before

becoming an English-language student and, later, an assistant lecturer

at Sichuan University. She left China for Britain in 1978 and was

subsequently awarded a scholarship by York University, where she

obtained a PhD in Linguistics the first person from the People's

Republic of China to receive a doctorate from a British university.

Jung Chang lives in London and teaches at the School of Oriental and

African Studies, London University.

"A quite exceptional book. Jung Chang is the classic storyteller,

describing in measured tones the almost unbelievable."

1PENELOPE FITZGERALD, London Review of Books "Wild Swans has stayed in

my mind all year. Quite unforgettable."

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF, Times Literary Supplement

"An extraordinary story, popular history at its most compelling.

Her readiness to record life's small pleasures as well as its looming

horrors is not only an index of Jung Chang's honesty and good humour,

it is a part of what makes Wild Swans so fascinating. To compare

Wild Swans to sagas of the kind that fill the bestseller lists may seem

to trivialise the real and deadly seriousness of its subject matter,

but the book offers many of the pleasures of good historical fiction."

LUCY HUGHES-HAL LET Independent

"Remarkable.

A truly splendid book."

CLARE HOLLINGWORTH, Dai~ Telegraph "Wild Swans made me feel like a

five-year-old. This is a family memoir that has the breadth of the

most enduring social history."

MARTIN Aais, Independent on Sunday

"Riveting, an extraordinary epic. A work of true, living history

drawing deep on family memories, an un matchable insight into the

making of modern China and the impact of war and totalitarianism on the

destinies of a quarter of the human race."

RICHARD HELLER~ Mail on Sunday

"An extraordinary tale, a loving family saga told against a background

of chaos and death rarely equalled in this century. Wild Swans is

about how people cope with the unimaginable, and how some, in spite of

the horror, manage to remain human. It is a remarkable book." CAROLINE

MOORE HEAD Ntw Startsman "This real-life saga of a Chinese family over

three generations contains more domestic drama than Dynast, more

violence than any film noir, more heart-rending tragedy than Little

Dottit and more ironic twists and turns and villains on the make than

any Balzacian fresco. Almost casually, Jung Chang introduces us to a

world where personal insecurity, sudden ruin and the possibility of

torture and violent death are as perfunctorily taken for granted as

tomorrow's thunderstorm. There has never been a book like this."

EDWARD BEHI~ Los Angeles Times

"If you care at all about the history of China in the twentieth century

or even if you don't, come to think of it Wild Swans is riveting.

It's blindingly good: a mad adventure story, a fairy tale of courage, a

tall tale of atrocities and incidentally a meditation on how men will

never understand women and vice versa. This is calm and measured

history, but it reads like a bestseller. You can't, as they say, put

it down." CAROLYN SEE, New York Newsday

"If there remains the slightest doubt about the tragic quality of life

in the China of this century, this memoir should put it definitively to

rest." JUDITH SHAPIRO, Washington Post

"Makes visible, intimate and immediate the pain and horror that are

cloaked in the silence of China's recent history."

2HOWARD CHUA-EOAN, Time

"A huge tour de force."

DEREK DAVIES, Financial Times

WILD

SWANS

Three Daughters of China

Jung Chang

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other than that in which it is published and without a similar

condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent

purchaser.

To my grandmother and my father who did not live to see this book

,"{~ II/F:

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My name "Jung' is pronounced "Yung."

The names of members of my family and public figures are real, and are

spelled in the way by which they are usually known. Other personal

names are disguised.

Two difficult phonetic symbols: X and Q are pronounced, respectively,

as shand chIn order to describe their functions accurately, I have

translated the names of some Chinese organizations differently from the

Chinese official versions. I use 'the Department of Public Affairs'

rather than 'the Department of Propaganda' for xuan-chuan-bu, and 'the

Cultural Revolution Authority' rather than 'the Cultural Revolution

Group' for zhong-yang-well-ge.

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Jon Halliday has helped me create Wild Swans. Of his many

contributions, polishing my English was only the most obvious.

Through our daily discussions, he forced me into greater clarification

of both the stories and my thoughts, and helped me search the English

language for the exact expressions. I felt safer under his historian's

knowledgeable and meticulous scrutiny, and relied on his sound

judgment.

Toby Eady is the best agent anyone could possibly hope for.

push me, gently, into taking up the pen in the first place.

He helped

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as Alice Mayhew, Charles Hayward, Jack McKeown and Victoria Meyer at

Simon & Schuster in New York and Simon King, Carol O'Brien and Helen

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Li-qun, Y. H. Zhao, Michael Fu, John Chow, Clare Peploe, Andri Deutsch,

Peter Simpkin, Ron Sarkar, and Vanessa Green. Clive Lindley has played

a special role through his valuable advice from the beginning.

My brothers and sister and my relatives and friends in China have

generously allowed me to tell their stories, without which

Wild Swans would not have been possible.

sufficiently.

I can never thank them

Much of the book is the story of my mother.

justice.

I hope I have done her

JUNGCHANG

London May 199x

1. "Three-Inch Golden Ulies'-Concubine to a Warlord General

(1gOg-1955)

At the age of fifteen my grandmother became the concubine of a warlord

general, the police chief of a tenuous national government of China.

The year was 1924 and China was in chaos. Much of it, including

Manchuria, where my grandmother lived, was ruled by warlords. The

liaison was arranged by her father, a police official in the provincial

town of Yixian in southwest Manchuria, about a hundred miles north of

the Great Wall and 250 miles northeast of Peking.

Like most towns in China, Yixian was built like a fortress. It was

encircled by walls thirty feet high and twelve feet thick dating from

the Tang dynasty (AD 618-9o7), surmounted by battlements, dotted with

sixteen forts at regular intervals, and wide enough to ride a horse

quite easily along the top. There were four gates into the city, one

at each point of the compass, with outer protecting gates, and the

fortifications were surrounded by a deep moat.

The town's most conspicuous feature was a tall, richly decorated bell

tower of dark brown stone, which had originally been built in the sixth

century when Buddhism had

28 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' been introduced to the area. Every night

the bell was rung to signal the time, and the tower also functioned as

a fire and flood alarm. Yixian was a prosperous market town.

The plains around produced cotton, maize, sorghum, soybeans, sesame,

pears, apples, and grapes. In the grassland areas and in the hills to

the west, farmers grazed sheep and cat He

8My great-grandfather, Yang Ru-shan, was born in 1894, when the whole of

China was ruled by an emperor who resided in Peking. The imperial

family were Manchus who had conquered China in 1644 from Manchuria,

which was their base. The Yangs were Han, ethnic Chinese, and had

ventured north of the Great Wall in search of opportunity.

My great-grandfather was the only son, which made him of supreme

importance to his family. Only a son could perpetuate the family name

without him, the family line would stop, which, to the Chinese,

amounted to the greatest possible betrayal of one's ancestors. He was

sent to a good school. The goal was for him to pass the examinations

to become a mandarin, an official, which was the aspiration of most

Chinese males at the time. Being an official brought power, and power

brought money. Without power or money, no Chinese could feel safe from

the depredations of officialdom or random violence. There had never

been a proper legal system. Justice was arbitrary, and cruelty was

both institutionalized and capricious. An official with power was the

law. Becoming a mandarin was the only way the child of a non-noble

family could escape this cycle of injustice and fear. Yang's father

had decided that his son should not follow him into the family business

of felt-making, and sacrificed himself and his family to pay for his

son's education. The women took in sewing for local tailors and

dressmakers, toiling late into the night.

To save money, they turned their oil lamps down to the absolute

minimum, causing lasting damage to their eyes.

The joints in their fingers became swollen from the long hours.

Following the custom, my great-grandfather was married young, at

fourteen, to a woman six years his senior. It was considered one of

the duties of a wife to help bring up her husband.

The story of his wife, my great-grandmother, was typical of millions of

Chinese women of her time. She came from a family of tanners called

Wu. Because her family was not an intellectual one and did not hold

any official post, and because she was a girl, she was not given a name

at all.

Being the second daughter, she was simply called "Number Two Girl'

(Er-ya-tou). Her father died when she was an infant, and she was

brought up by an uncle. One day, when she was six years old, the uncle

was dining with a friend whose wife was pregnant. Over dinner the two

men agreed that if the baby was a boy he would be married to the

six-year-old niece. The two young people never met before their

wedding. In fact, falling in love was considered almost shameful, a

family disgrace. Not because it was taboo there was, after all, a

venerable tradition of romantic love in China but because young people

were not supposed to be exposed to situations where such a thing could

happen, partly because it was immoral for them to meet, and partly

because marriage was seen above all as a duty, an arrangement between

two families. With luck, one could fall in love after getting

married.

At fourteen, and having lived a very sheltered life, my

great-grandfather was little more than a boy at the time of his

marriage. On the first night, he did not want to go into the wedding

chamber. He went to bed in his mother's room and had to be carried in

to his bride after he fell asleep. But, although he was a spoiled

child and still needed help to get dressed, he knew how to 'plant

9children," according to his wife. My grandmother was born within a

year of the wedding, on the fifth day of the fifth moon, in early

summer 19o9. She was in a better position than her mother, for she was

actually given a name: Yufang. Yu, meaning 'jade," was her generation

name, given to

30 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' all the offspring of the same generation,

while J~ng means 'fragrant flowers."

The world she was born into was one of total unpredictability. The

Manchu empire, which had ruled China for over 260 years, was tottering.

In x894-95 Japan attacked China in Manchuria, with China suffering

devastating defeats and loss of territory. In 19OO the nationalist

Boxer Rebellion was put down by eight foreign armies, contingents of

which had stayed on, some in Manchuria and some along the Great Wall.

Then in 19o4-5 Japan and Russia fought a major war on the plains of

Manchuria.

Japan's victory made it the dominant outside force in Manchuria. In

1911 the five-year-old emperor of China, Pu Yi, was overthrown and a

republic was set up with the charismatic figure of Sun Yat-sen briefly

at its head.

The new republican government soon collapsed and the country broke up

into fiefs. Manchuria was particularly disaffected from the republic,

since the Manchu dynasty had originated there. Foreign powers,

especially Japan, intensified their attempts to encroach on the area.

Under all these pressures, the old institutions collapsed, resulting in

a vacuum of power, morality, and authority. Many people sought to get

to the top by bribing local potentates with expensive gifts like gold,

silver, and jewelry. My great grandfather was not rich enough to buy

himself a lucrative position in a big city, and by the time he was

thirty he had risen no higher than an official in the police station of

his native Yixian, a provincial backwater. But he had plans.

And he had one valuable asset his daughter.

My grandmother was a beauty. She had an oval face, with rosy cheeks

and lustrous skin. Her long, shiny black hair was woven into a thick

plait reaching down to her waist.

She could be demure when the occasion demanded, which was most of the

time, but underneath her composed exterior she was bursting with

suppressed energy. She was petite, about five feet three inches, with

a slender figure

Concubine to a Warlord General 3 l and sloping shoulders, which were

considered the ideal.

But her greatest assets were her bound feet, called in Chinese

'three-inch golden lilies' (san-tsun-gin-lian). This meant she walked

'like a tender young willow shoot in a spring breeze," as Chinese

connoisseurs of women traditionally put it. The sight of a woman

teetering on bound feet was supposed to have an erotic effect on men,

partly because her vulnerability induced a feeling of protectiveness in

the onlooker.

My grandmother's feet had been bound when she was two years old. Her

mother, who herself had bound feet, first wound a piece of white cloth

about twenty feet long round her feet, bending all the toes except the

big toe inward and under the sole. Then she placed a large stone on

10top to crush the arch. My grandmother screamed in agony and begged her

to stop. Her mother had to stick a cloth into her mouth to gag her. My

grandmother passed out repeatedly from the pain.

The process lasted several years. Even after the bones had been

broken, the feet had to be bound day and night in thick cloth because

the moment they were released they would try to recover. For years my

grandmother lived in relentless, excruciating pain. When she pleaded

with her mother to untie the bindings, her' mother would weep and tell

her that unbound feet would ruin her entire life, and that she was

doing it for her own future happiness.

In those days, when a woman was married, the first thing the

bridegroom's family did was to examine her feet. Large feet, meaning

normal feet, were considered to bring shame on the husband's household.

The mother-in-law would lift the hem of the bride's long skirt, and if

the feet were more than about four inches long, she would throw down

the skirt in a demonstrative gesture of contempt and stalk off, leaving

the bride to the critical gaze of the wedding guests, who would stare

at her feet and insultingly mutter their disdain. Sometimes a mother

would take pity on her daughter and remove the binding cloth; but when

the child

grew up and had to endure the contempt of

her husband's family and the disapproval of society, she would blame

her mother for having been too weak.

The practice of binding feet was originally introduced about a thousand

years ago, allegedly by a concubine of the emperor. Not only was the

sight of women hobbling on tiny feet considered erotic, men would also

get excited playing with bound feet, which were always hidden in

embroidered silk shoes. Women could not remove the binding cloths even

when they were adults, as their feet would start growing again. The

binding could only be loosened temporarily at night in bed, when they

would put on soft-soled shoes. Men rarely saw naked bound feet, which

were usually covered in rot ling flesh and stank when the bindings were

removed. As a child, I can remember my grandmother being in constant

pain. When we came home from shopping, the first thing she would do

was soak her feet in a bowl of hot water, sighing with relief as she

did so. Then she would set about cutting off pieces of dead skin. The

pain came not only from the broken bones, but also from her toenails,

which grew into the balls of her feet.

In fact, my grandmother's feet were bound just at the moment when

foot-binding was disappearing for good. By the time her sister was

born in 1917, the practice had virtually been abandoned, so she escaped

the torment.

However, when my grandmother was growing up, the prevailing attitude in

a small town like Yh~a was still that bound feet were essential for a

good marriage but they were only a start. Her father's plans were for

her to be trained as either a perfect lady or a high-class courtesan.

Scorning the received wisdom of the time that it was virtuous for a

lower class woman to be illiterate he sent her to a girl's school that

had been set up in the town in 19o5. She also learned to play Chinese

chess, mahjongg, and go. She studied drawing and embroidery. Her

favorite design was mandarin ducks (which symbolize love, because they

always swim in pairs), and she used to embroider them onto the tiny

shoes she made for herself. To crown her list of accomplishments, a

tutor was hired to teach her to play the qin, a musical instrument like

a zither.

11My grandmother was considered the belle of the town.

The locals said she stood out 'like a crane among chickens."

In 1924 she was fifteen, and her father was growing worried that time

might be running out on his only real asset and his only chance for a

life of ease. In that year General Xue Zhi-heng, the inspector general

of the Metropolitan Police of the warlord government in Peking, came to

pay a visit.

Xue Zhi-heng was born in i876 in the county of Lulong, about a hundred

miles east of Peking, and just south of the Great Wall, where the vast

North China plain runs up against the mountains. He was the eldest of

four sons of a country schoolteacher.

He was handsome and had a powerful presence, which struck all who met

him. Several blind fortune-tellers who felt his face predicted he

would rise to a powerful position.

He was a gifted calligrapher, a talent held in high esteem, and in 1908

a warlord named Wang Huai-qing, who was visiting Lulong, noticed the

fine calligraphy on a plaque over the gate of the main temple and asked

to meet the man who had done it. General Wang took to the thirty

two-year-old Xue and invited him to become his aide de -camp.

He proved extremely efficient, and was soon promoted to quartermaster.

This involved extensive traveling, and he started to acquire food shops

of his own around Lulong and on the other side of the Great Wall, in

Manchuria.

His rapid rise was boosted when he helped General Wang to suppress an

uprising in Inner Mongolia. In almost no time he had amassed a

fortune, and he designed and built for himself an eighty-one-room

mansion at Lulong.

In the decade after the end of the empire, no government established

authority over the bulk of the country.

34 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' Powerful warlords were soon fighting for

control of the central government in Peking. Xue's faction, headed by

a warlord called Wu Pei-fu, dominated the nominal government in Peking

in the early 1920s. In 1911 Xue became inspector general of the

Metropolitan Police and joint head of the Public Works Department in

Peking. He commanded twenty regions on both sides of the Great Wall,

and more than 10,000 mounted police and infantry. The police job gave

him power; the public works post gave him patronage.

Allegiances were fickle. In May 1923 General Xue's faction decided to

get rid of the president, Li Yuan-hong, whom it had installed in office

only a year earlier. In league with a general called Feng Yu-xiang, a

Christian warlord, who entered legend by baptizing his troops en masse

with a firehose, Xue mobilized his 10,000 men and surrounded the main

government buildings in Peking, demanding the back pay which the

bankrupt government owed his men. His real aim was to humiliate

President Li and force him out of office. Li refused to resign, so Xue

ordered his men to cut off the water and electricity to the

presidential palace. After a few days, conditions inside the building

became unbearable, and on the night of 13 June President Li abandoned

his malodorous residence and fled the capital for the port city of

12Tianjin, seventy miles to the southeast.

In China the authority of an office lay not only in its holder but in

the official seals. No document was valid, even if it had the

president's signature on it, unless it carried his seal. Knowing that

no one could take over the presidency without them, President Li left

the seals with one of his concubines, who was convalescing in a

hospital in Peking run by French missionaries.

As President Li was nearing Tianjin his train was stopped by armed

police, who told him to hand over the seals. At first he refused to

say where he had hidden them, but after several hours he relented. At

three in the morning

General Xue went to the French hospital to collect the seals from the

concubine. When he appeared by her bedside, the concubine at first

refused even to look at him:

"How can I hand over the president's seals to a mere policeman?" she

said haughtily. But General Xue, resplendent in his full uniform,

looked so intimidating that she soon meekly placed the seals in his

hands.

Over the next four months, Xue used his police to make sure that the

man his faction wanted to see as president, Tsao Kun, would win what

was billed as one of China's first elections. The 804 members of

parliament had to be bribed. Xue and General Feng stationed guards on

the parliament building and let it be known that there would be a

handsome consideration for anyone who voted the right way, which

brought many deputies scurrying back from the provinces. By the time

everything was ready for the election there were 555 members of

parliament in Peking. Four days before the election, after much

bargaining, they were each given 5,000 silver yuan, a rather

substantial sum. On 5 October 1923, Tsao Kun was elected president of

China with 480 votes. Xue was rewarded with promotion to full general.

Also promoted were seventeen 'special advisers' all favorite mistresses

or concubines of various warlords and generals. This episode has

entered Chinese history as a notorious example of how an election can

be manipulated. People still cite it to argue that democracy will not

work in China.

In early summer the following year General Xue visited Yixian. Though

it was not a large town, it was strategically important. It was about

here that the writ of the Peking government began to run out. Beyond,

power was in the hands of the great warlord of the northeast, Chang

Tso-lin, known as the Old Marshal. Officially, General Xue was on an

inspection trip, but he also had some personal interests in the area.

In Yixian he owned the main grain stores and the biggest shops,

including a pawnshop which doubled as the bank and issued its own

money, which circulated in the town and the surrounding area.

36 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies'

For my great-grandfather, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, the

closest he was ever going to get to a real V.I.P.

He schemed to get himself the job of escorting General Xue, and told

his wife he was going to try to marry their daughter off to him. He

did not ask his wife for her agreement; he merely informed her. Quite

apart from this being the custom of the day, my great-grandfather

despised his wife. She wept, but said nothing. He told her she must

13not breathe a word to their daughter. There was no question of

consulting his daughter. Marriage was a transaction, not a matter of

feelings. She would be informed when the wedding was arranged.

My great-grandfather knew that his approach to General

Xue had to be indirect. An explicit offer of his daughter's hand

lower her price, and there was also the possibility that he might

turned down. General Xue had to have a chance to see what he was

offered. In those days respectable women could not be introduced

strange men, so Yang had to create an opportunity for General Xue

see his daughter. The encounter had to seem accidental.

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In Yixian there was a magnificent 9o0-year-old Buddhist temple made of

precious wood and standing about a hundred feet high. It was set

within an elegant precinct, with rows of cypress trees, which covered

an area of almost a square mile. Inside was a brightly painted wooden

statue of the Buddha, thirty feet high, and the interior of the temple

was covered with delicate murals depicting his life.

It was an obvious place for Yang to take the visiting V.I.P.

And temples were among the few places women of good families could go

on their own.

My grandmother was told to go to the temple on a certain day. To show

her reverence for the Buddha, she took perfumed baths and spent long

hours meditating in front of burning incense at a little shrine. To

pray in the temple she was supposed to be in a state of maximum

tranquillity, and to be free of all unsettling emotions. She set off

in a , rented horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by a maid. She wore a

duck-egg-blue jacket, its edges embroidered in gold thread to show off

its simple lines, with butterfly buttons up the right-hand side. With

this she wore a pleated pink skirt, embroidered all over with tiny

flowers. Her long black hair was woven into a single plait. Peeping

out at the top was a silk black-green peony, the rarest kind. She wore

no makeup, but was richly scented, as was considered appropriate for a

visit to a temple. Once inside, she knelt before the giant statue of

the Buddha. She kowtowed several times to the wooden image and then

remained kneeling before it, her hands clasped in prayer.

As she was praying, her father arrived with General Xue.

The two men watched from the dark aisle. My great grandfather had

planned well. The position in which my grandmother was kneeling

revealed not only her silk trousers, which were edged in gold like her

jacket, but also her tiny feet in their embroidered satin shoes.

When she finished praying, my grandmother kowtowed three times to the

Buddha. As she stood up she slightly lost her balance, which was easy

to do with bound feet.

She reached out to steady herself on her maid's arm.

her father had just begun to move forward.

General Xue and

She blushed and bent her head, then turned and started to walk away,

which was the right thing to do. Her father stepped forward and

introduced her to the general. She curtsied, keeping her head lowered

all the time.

As was fitting for a man in his position, the general did not say much

14about the meeting to Yang, who was a rather lowly subordinate, but my

great-grandfather could see he was fascinated. The next step was to

engineer a more direct encounter. A couple of days later Yang risking

bankruptcy, rented the best theater in town and put on a local opera,

inviting General Xue as the guest of honor. Like most Chinese

theaters, it was built around a rectangular space open to the sky, with

timber structures on three sides; the fourth side formed the stage,

which was completely bare:

it had no curtain and no sets.

The seating area was more

like a cafe than a theater in the West. The men sat at tables in the

open square, eating, drinking, and talking loudly throughout the

performance. To the side, higher up, was the dress circle, where the

ladies sat more demurely at smaller tables, with their maids standing

behind them. My great-grandfather had arranged things so that his

daughter was in a place where General Xue could see her easily.

This time she was much more dressed up than in the temple. She wore a

heavily embroidered satin dress and jewelry in her hair. She was also

displaying her natural vivacity and energy, laughing and chatting with

her women friends. General Xue hardly looked at the stage.

After the show there was a traditional Chinese game called

lantern-riddles. This took place in two separate halls, one for the

men and one for the women. In each room were dozens of elaborate paper

lanterns, stuck on which were a number of riddles in verse. The person

who guessed the most answers won a prize. Among the men General Xue

was the winner, naturally. Among the women, it was my grandmother.

Yang had now given General Xue a chance to appreciate his daughter's

beauty and her intelligence. The final qualification was artistic

talent. Two nights later he invited the general to his house for

dinner. It was a clear, warm night, with a full moon a classic setting

for listening to the qin. After dinner, the men sat on the veranda and

my grandmother was summoned to play in the courtyard. Sitting under a

trellis, with the scent of syringa in the air, her performance

enchanted General Xue. Later he was to tell her that her playing that

evening in the moonlight had captured his heart. When my mother was

born, he gave her the name Bao (~I'm, which means "Precious Zither."

Before the evening was over he had proposed not to my grandmother, of

course, but to her father. He did not offer marriage, only that my

grandmother should become his concubine. But Yang had not expected

anything else.

The Xue family would have arranged a marriage for the general long

before on the basis of social positions. In any case, the Yangs were

too humble to provide a wife. But it was expected that a man like

General Xue should take concubines. Wives were not for pleasure that

was what concubines were for. Concubines might acquire considerable

power, but their social status was quite different from that of a wife.

A concubine was a kind of institutionalized mistress, acquired and

discarded at will.

The first my grandmother knew of her impending liaison was when her

mother broke the news to her a few days before the event. My

grandmother bent her head and wept.

She hated the idea of being a concubine, but her father had already

made the decision, and it was unthinkable to oppose one's parents. To

15question a parental decision was considered un filial and to be un

filial was tantamount to treason. Even if she refused to consent to

her father's wishes, she would not be taken seriously; her action would

be interpreted as indicating that she wanted to stay with her parents.

The only way to say no and be taken seriously was to commit suicide. My

grandmother bit her lip and said nothing. In fact, there was nothing

she could say. Even to say yes would be considered unladylike, as it

would be taken to imply that she was eager to leave her parents.

Seeing how unhappy she was, her mother started telling her that this

was the best match possible. Her husband had told her about General

Xue's power: "In Peking they say, "When General Xue stamps his foot,

the whole city shakes." In fact, my grandmother had been rather taken

with the general's handsome, martial demeanor. And she had been

flattered by all the admiring words he had said about her to her

father, which were now elaborated and embroidered upon. None of the

men in Yixian were as impressive as the warlord general. At fifteen,

she had no idea what being a concubine really meant, and thought she

could win General Xue's love and lead a happy life.

General Xue had said that she could stay in Yixian, in a house which he

was going to buy especially for her. This

40 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' meant she could be close to her own

family, but, even more important, she would not have to live in his

residence, where she would have to submit to the authority of his wife

and the other concubines, who would all have precedence over her. In

the house of a potentate like General Xue, the women were virtual

prisoners, living in a state of permanent squabbling and bickering,

largely induced by insecurity. The only security they had was their

husband's favor.

General Xue's offer of a house of her own meant a lot to my

grandmother, as did his promise to solemnize the liaison with a full

wedding ceremony. This meant that she and her family would have gained

a considerable amount of face. And there was one final consideration

which was very important to her: now that her father was satisfied, she

hoped he would treat her mother better.

Mrs. Yang suffered from epilepsy, which made her feel undeserving

towards her husband. She was always submissive to him, and he treated

her like dirt, showing no concern for her health. For years, he found

fault with her for not producing a son. My great-grandmother had a

string of miscarriages after my grandmother was born, un61 a second

child came along in 1917 but again, it was a girl.

My great-grandfather was obsessed with having enough money to be able

to acquire concubines. The 'wedding' allowed him to fulfill this wish,

as General Xue lavished betrothal gifts on the family, and the chief

beneficiary was my great-grandfather. The gifts were magnificent, in

keeping with the general's station.

On the day of the wedding, a sedan chair draped with heavy, bright-red

embroidered silk and satin appeared at the Yangs' house. In front came

a procession carrying banners, plaques, and silk lanterns painted with

images of a golden phoenix, the grandest s3nnbol for a woman. The

wedding ceremony took place in the evening, as was the tradition, with

red lanterns glowing in the dusk. There was an orchestra with drums,

cymbals, and piercing wind

Concubine to a Warlord Genera/ 4 I instruments playing joyful music.

16Making a lot of noise was considered essential for a good wedding, as

keeping quiet would have been seen as suggesting that there was

something shameful about the event. My grandmother was splendidly

dressed in bright embroidery, with a red silk veil coveting her head

and face. She was carried in the sedan chair to her new home by eight

men. Inside the sedan chair it was stuffy and boiling hot, and she

discreetly pulled the curtain back a few inches. Peeping out from

under her veil, she was delighted to see people in the streets watching

her procession. This was very different from what a mere concubine

would get a small sedan chair draped in plain cotton of the unglamorous

color of indigo, borne by two or at the most four people, and no

procession or music. She was taken right around the town, visiting all

four gates, as a full ritual demanded, with her expensive wedding gifts

displayed on cans and in large wicker baskets carried behind her. After

she had been shown off to the town, she reached her new home, a large,

stylish residence. My grandmother was satisfied. The pomp and

ceremony made her feel she had gained prestige and esteem. There had

been nothing like this in Yixian in living memory.

When she reached the house General Xue, in full military dress, was

waiting, surrounded by the local dignitaries.

Red candles and dazzling gas lamps lit up the center of the house, the

sitting room, where they performed a ceremonial kowtow to the tablets

of Heaven and Earth. After this, they kowtowed to each other, then my

grandmother went into the wedding chamber alone, in accordance with the

custom, while General Xue went off to a lavish banquet with the men.

General Xue did not leave the house for three days. My grandmother was

happy. She thought she loved him, and he showed her a kind of gruff

affection. But he hardly spoke to her about serious matters, in

keeping with the traditional saying: "Women have long hair and short

intellio

42 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' gence." A Chinese man was supposed to

remain reticent and grand, even within his family. So she kept quiet,

just massaging his toes before they got up in the morning and playing

the qin to him in the evening. After a week, he suddenly told her he

was leaving. He did not say where he was going and she knew it was not

a good idea to ask.

Her duty was to wait for him until he came back.

years.

She had to wait six

In September 1924, fighting erupted between the two main warlord

factions in North China. General Xue was promoted to deputy commander

of the Peking garrison, but within weeks his old ally General Feng, the

Christian warlord, changed sides. On 3 November, Tsao Kun, whom

General Xue and General Feng had helped install as president the

previous year, was forced to resign. The same day the Peking garrison

was dismissed, and two days later the

Peking police office was disbanded. General Xue had to leave the

capital in a hurry. He retired to a house he owned in Tianjin, in the

French concession, which had extraterritorial immunity. This was the

very place to which President

Li had fled the year before when Xue had forced him out of the

presidential palace.

17In the meantime my grandmother was caught up in the renewed fighting.

Control of the northeast was vital in the struggle between the warlord

armies, and towns on the railway, especially junctions like Yixian,

were particular targets. Shortly after General Xue left, the fighfng

came right up to the walls of the town, with pitched battles just

outside the gates. Loofng was widespread. One Italian arms company

appealed to the cash-strapped warlords by advertising that it would

accept loo table villages' as collateral. Rape was just as

commonplace. Like many other women, my grandmother had to blacken her

face with soot to make herself look filthy and ugly. Fortunately, this

time

Yixian emerged virtually unscathed.

and life returned to normal.

The fighfng eventually moved south

For my grandmother, 'normal' meant finding ways to kill time in her

large house. The house was built in the typical North Chinese style,

around three sides of a quadrangle, the south side of the courtyard

being a wall about seven feet high, with a moon gate which opened onto

an outer courtyard, which in turn was guarded by a double gate with a

round brass knocker.

These houses were built to cope with the extremes of a brutally harsh

climate, which lurched from freezing winters to scorching summers, with

virtually no spring or autumn in between. In summer, the temperature

could rise above 95 F, but in winter it fell to minus 2o F, with

howling winds which roared down from Siberia across the plains.

Dust tore into the eyes and bit into the skin for much of the year, and

people often had to wear masks which covered their entire faces and

heads. In the inner courtyard of the houses, all the windows in the

main rooms opened to the south to let in as much sunshine as possible,

while the walls on the north side took the brunt of the wind and the

dust. The north side of the house contained a sitting room and my

grandmother's chamber; the wings on the two sides were for the servants

and for all other activities.

The floors of the main rooms were tiled, while the wooden windows were

covered with paper. The pitched roof was made of smooth black files.

The house was luxurious by local standards and far superior to her

parents' home but my grandmother was lonely and miserable. There were

several servants, including a doorkeeper, a cook, and two maids. Their

task was not only to serve, but also to act as guards and spies. The

doorkeeper was under instructions not to let my grandmother out alone

under any circumstances. Before he left, General Xue told my

grandmother a cautionary tale about one of his other concubines. He

had found out that she had been having an affair with a male servant,

so he had her tied to a bed and stuffed a gag into her mouth. Then raw

alcohol was dripped onto the cloth, slowly choking her to death.

"Of course, I could not give her the pleasure of

44 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' dying speedily. For a woman to betray

her husband is the vilest thing possible," he said. Where infidelity

was involved, a man like General Xue would hate the woman far more than

the man.

"All I did with the lover was have him shot," he added casually. My

grandmother never knew whether or not all this had really happened, but

at the age of fifteen she was suitably petrified.

18From that moment she lived in constant fear. Because she could hardly

ever go out, she had to create a world for herself within the four

walls. But even there she was not the real mistress of her home, and

she had to spend a great deal of time buttering up the servants in case

they invented stories against her which was so common it was considered

almost inevitable. She gave them plenty of presents, and also

organized mahjongg parties, because the winners would always have to

tip the servants generously.

She was never short of money. General Xue sent her a regular

allowance, which was delivered every month by the manager of his

pawnshop, who also picked up the bills for her losses at the mahjongg

parties.

Throwing mahjongg parties was a normal part of life for concubines all

over China. So was smoking opium, which was widely available and was

seen as a means of keeping people like her contented by being doped and

dependent. Many concubines became addicted in their attempts to ape

with their loneliness. General Xue encouraged my grandmother to take

up the habit, but she ignored him.

Almost the only time she was allowed out of the house was to go to the

opera. Otherwise, she had to sit at home all day, every day. She read

a lot, mainly plays and novels, and tended her favorite flowers, garden

balsam, hibiscus, common four-o'clock, and roses of Sharon in pots in

the courtyard, where she also cultivated dwarf trees. Her other

consolation in her gilded cage was a cat.

She was allowed to visit her parents, but even this was frowned upon,

and she was not permitted to stay the night with them. Although they

were the only people she could talk to, she found visiting them a

trial. Her father had been promoted to deputy chief of the local

police because of his connection to General Xue, and had acquired land

and property. Every time she opened her mouth about how miserable she

was, her father would start lecturing her, telling her that a virtuous

woman should suppress her emotions and not desire anything beyond her

duty to her husband. It was all right to miss her husband, that was

virtuous, but a woman was not supposed to complain. In fact, a good

woman was not supposed to have a point of view at all, and if she did,

she certainly should not be so brazen as to talk about it. He would

quote the Chinese saying, "If you are married to a chicken, obey the

chicken; if you are married to a dog, obey the dog."

Six years passed. To begin with, there were a few letters, then total

silence. Unable to burn off her nervous energy and sexual frustration,

unable even to pace the floor with a full stride because of her bound

feet, my grandmother was reduced to mincing around the house. At

first, she hoped for some message, going over and over again in her

mind her brief life with the general. Even her physical and

psychological submission was mulled over nostalgically.

She missed him very much, though she knew that she was only one of his

many concubines, probably dotted around China, and she had never

imagined that she would spend the rest of her life with him. Still she

longed for him, as he represented her only chance to live a sort of

life.

But as the weeks turned into months, and the months into years, her

longing became dulled. She came to realize that for him she was a mere

plaything, to be picked up again only when it was convenient for him.

19Her restlessness now had no object on which to focus. It became forced

into a straitjacket. When occasionally it stretched its limbs she felt

so agitated she did not know what to do with herself. Sometimes, she

would fall to the floor un con 46 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' sc ious

She was to have blackouts like these for the rest of her life.

Then one day, six years after he had walked casually out of the door,

her 'husband' reappeared. The meeting was very unlike what she had

dreamed of at the beginning of their separation. Then she had

fantasized that she would give herself totally and passionately to him,

but now all she could find in herself was restrained dutifulness. She

was also racked with anxiety in case she might have offended one of the

servants, or that they might invent stories to ingratiate themselves

with the general and ruin her life.

But everything went smoothly. The general, now past fifty, seemed m

have mellowed, and did not look nearly as majestic as before. As she

expected, he did not say a word about where he had been, why he had

left so suddenly, or why he was back, and she did not ask. Quite apart

from not wanting to be scolded for being inquisitive, she did not

care.

In fact, all this time the general had not been far away at all. He

had been leading the quiet life of a wealthy retired dignitary,

dividing his time between his house in Tianjin and his country mansion

near Lulong. The world in which he had flourished was becoming a thing

of the past. The warlord and their fief system had collapsed and most

of China was now controlled by a force, the Kuomintang, or

Nationalists, headed by Chiang Kai-shek.

To mark the break with the chaotic past, and to try to give the

appearance of a new start and of stability, the Kuomintang moved the

capital from Peking ("Northern Capital') to Nanjing ("Southern

Capital'). In 19z8, the ruler of Manchuria, Chang Tso-lin, the Old

Marshal, was assassinated by the Japanese, who were becoming

increasingly active in the area. The Old Marshal's son, Chang

Hsueh-liang (known as the Young Marshal), joined up with the Kuomintang

and formally integrated Manchuria with the rest of China- though

Kuomintang rule was never effectively established in Manchuria.

General Xue's visit to my grandmother did not last long.

Just like the first time, after a few days he suddenly announced he was

leaving. The night before he was due to leave, he asked my grandmother

to go and live with him at Lulong. Her heart missed a beat. If he

ordered her to go, it would amount to a life sentence under the same

roof as his wife and his other concubines. She was invaded by a wave

of panic. As she massaged his feet, she quietly pleaded with him to

let her stay in Yixian. She told him how kind he was to have promised

her parents he would not take her away from them, and gently reminded

him that her mother was not in good health: she had just had a third

child, the longed-for son. She said that she would like to observe

filial piety, while, of course, serving him, her husband and master,

whenever he graced Yixian with his presence. The next day she packed

his things and he left, alone. On his departure, as on his arrival, he

showered jewels on my grandmother gold, silver, jade, pearls, and

emeralds. Like many men of his kind, he believed this was the way to a

woman's heart. For women like my grandmother, jewelry was their only

insurance.

A short time later, my grandmother realized she was pregnant.

On the

20seventeenth day of the third moon, in spring 193i, she gave birth to a

baby girl my mother.

She wrote to General Xue to let him know, and he wrote back telling her

to call the gift Bao Q~m and to bring her to Lulong as soon as they

were strong enough to travel.

My grandmother was ecstatic at having a child. Now, she felt, her life

had a purpose, and she poured all her love and energy into my mother. A

happy year passed. General Xue wrote many times asking her to come to

Lulong, but each time she managed to stall him. Then, one day in the

middle of summer 1932, a telegram arrived saying that General Xue was

seriously ill and ordering her to bring their daughter to see him at

once. The tone made it clear that this time she should not refuse.

Lulong was about 200 miles away, and for my grandmother, who had never

traveled, the journey was a major undertaking. It was also extremely

difficult to travel with bound feet; it was almost impossible to carry

luggage, especially with a young child in one's arms. My grandmother

decided to take her fourteen-year-old sister, Yulan, whom she called

"Lan," with her.

The journey was an adventure. The area had been convulsed yet again.

In September 193I Japan, which had been steadily expanding its power in

the area, had launched a full-scale invasion of Manchuria, and Japanese

troops had occupied Yixian on 6 January 1932. Two months later the

Japanese proclaimed the founding of a new state, which they named

Manchukuo ("Manchu

Country'), covering most of northeast China (an area the size of France

and Germany combined). The Japanese claimed that Manchukuo was

independent, but in fact it was a puppet of Tokyo. As its head they

installed Pu

Yi, who as a child had been the last emperor of China.

At first he was called Chief Executive; later, in 1934, he was made

emperor of Manchukuo. All this meant little to my grandmother, who had

had very little contact with the outside world. The general population

were fatalistic about who their rulers were, since they had no choice

in the matter. For many, Pu Yi was the natural ruler, a Manchu emperor

and proper Son of Heaven.

Twenty years after the republican revolution there was still no unified

nation to replace the rule of the emperor, nor, in Manchuria, did the

people have much concept of being citizens of something called

"China."

One hot summer's day in 1932 my grandmother, her

took the train south from Yixian, passing out of

of Shanhaiguan, where the Great Wall sweeps down

the sea. As the train chugged along the coastal

the landscape changing: instead of the bare,

sister, and my mother

Manchuria at the town

from the mountains to

plain, they could see

brown-yellow soil of the plains of Manchuria, here the earth was darker

and the vegetation denser, almost lush compared with the northeast.

Soon after it passed the Great Wall, the train turned inland, and about

an hour later it stopped at a town called Changli where they

disembarked at a green-roofed building which looked like a railway

station in Siberia.

21My grandmother hired a horse-drawn cart and drove north along a bumpy,

dusty road to General Xue's mansion, which lay about twenty miles away,

just outside the wall of a small town called Yanheying, which had once

been a major military camp frequently visited by the Manchu emperors

and their court. Hence the road had acquired the grand name of 'the

Imperial Way." It was lined with poplars, their light-green leaves

shimmering in the sunlight. Beyond them were orchards of peach trees,

which flourished in the sandy soil. But my grandmother scarcely

enjoyed the scenery, as she was covered in dust and jolted badly by the

rough road. Above all, she was worrying about what would greet her at

the other end.

When she first saw the mansion, she was overwhelmed by its grandeur.

The immense front gate was guarded by armed men, who stood stiffly at

attention beside enormous statues of reclining lions. There was a row

of eight stone statues for tying up horses: four were of elephants, and

four of monkeys. These two animals were chosen for their lucky sounds:

in Chinese the words 'elephant' and 'high office' have the same sound

(xiang), as do 'monkey' and 'aristocracy' (hou).

As the cart passed through the outer gate into an inner yard my

grandmother could see only a huge blank wall facing her; then, off to

one side, she saw a second gate.

This was a classic Chinese structure, a concealing wall so that

strangers could not see into one's property, also making it impossible

for assailants to shoot or charge directly through the front gate.

The moment they passed through the inner gate, a

50 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' servant materialized at my grandmother's

side and peremptorily took her child away. Another servant led my

grandmother up the steps of the house and showed her into the sitting

room of General Xue's wife.

As soon as she entered the room, my grandmother went down on her knees

and kowtowed, saying, "I greet you, my mistress," as etiquette

demanded. My grandmother's sister was not allowed into the room, but

had to stand outside like a servant. This was nothing personal: the

relatives of a concubine were not treated as part of the family. After

my grandmother had kowtowed for a suitable length of time, the

general's wife told her she could get up, using a form of address which

immediately established my grandmother's place in the hierarchy of the

household as a mere sub mistress closer to a higher form of servant

than to a wife.

The general's wife told her to sit down. My grandmother had to make a

split-second decision. In a traditional Chinese household, where one

sits automatically reflects one's status. General Xue's wife was

sitting at the north end of the room, as befitted a person in her

position. Next to her, separated by a side table, was another chair,

also facing south: this was the general's seat. Down each side of the

room was a row of chairs for people of different status. My

grandmother shuffled backwards and sat on one of the chairs nearest the

door, to show humility. The wife then asked her to come forward just a

little. She had to show some generosity.

When my grandmother was seated, the wife told her that from now on her

daughter would be brought up as her (the wife's) own daughter and would

call her, not my grandmother, "Mama'; my grandmother was to treat the

child as the young mistress of the house, and was to behave

22accordingly.

A maid was summoned to lead my grandmother away.

She felt her heart was breaking, but she forced back her sobs, only

letting herself go when she reached her room. Her eyes were still red

when she was taken to meet General

Concubine to a Warlord General 5 I Xue's number-two concubine, his

favorite, who ran the household. She was pretty, with a delicate face,

and to my grandmother's surprise she was quite sympathetic, but my

grandmother restrained herself from having a good cry with her. In

this strange new environment, she felt intuitively that the best policy

was caution.

Later that day she was taken to see her 'husband." She was allowed to

take my mother with her. The general was lying on a kang, the type of

bed used all over North China, a large, flat, rectangular surface about

two and a half feet high heated from underneath by a brick stove. A

pair of concubines or maids were kneeling round the prostrate general,

massaging his legs and stomach. General Xue's eyes were closed, and he

looked terribly sallow. My grandmother leaned over the edge of the

bed, calling to him softly. He opened his eyes and managed a kind of a

half smile My grandmother put my mother on the bed and said: "This is

Bao Odin." With what seemed a great effort, General Xue feebly stroked

my mother's head and said, "Bao Odin takes after you; she is very

pretty." Then he closed his eyes.

My grandmother called out to him, but his eyes remained shut. She

could see that he was gravely ill, perhaps dying. She picked my mother

off the bed and hugged her tight. But she had only a second to cuddle

her before the general's wife, who had been hovering alongside, tugged

impatiently at her sleeve. Once outside, the wife warned my

grandmother not to disturb the master too often, or indeed at all. In

fact, she should stay in her room unless she was summoned.

My grandmother was terrified. As a concubine, her whole future and

that of her daughter were in jeopardy, possibly even in mortal peril.

She had no rights. If the general died, she would be at the mercy of

the wife, who had the power of life and death over her. She could do

anything she wanted sell her to a rich man, or even into a brothel,

which was quite common. Then my grandmother

52 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' would never see her daughter again.

knew she and her daughter had to get away as fast as possible.

She

When she got back to her room, she made a tremendous effort to calm

herself and begin planning her escape. But when she tried to think,

she felt as though her head were flooding with blood. Her legs were so

weak she could not walk without holding on to the furniture. She broke

down and wept again par fly with rage, because she could see no way

out. Worst of all was the thought that the general might die at any

moment, leaving her trapped forever.

Gradually she managed to bring her nerves under control and force

herself to think clearly. She started to look around the mansion

systematically. It was divided into many different courtyards, set

within a large compound, surrounded by high walls. Even the garden was

designed with security rather than aesthetics in mind. There were a

few cypress trees, some birches and winter plums, but none near the

walls. To make doubly sure that any potential assassin would have no

23cover, there were not even any large shrubs. The two gates leading out

from the garden were padlocked, and the front gate was guarded around

the clock by armed retainers.

My grandmother was never allowed to leave the walled precincts. She

was permitted to visit the general each day, but only on a sort of

organized tour with some of the other women, when she would file past

his bed and murmur, "I greet you, my lord."

Meanwhile, she began to get a clearer idea of the other personalities

in the household. Apart from the general's wife, the woman who seemed

to count most was the number-two concubine. My grandmother discovered

that she had instructed the servants to treat her well, which made her

situation much easier. In a household like this, the attitude of the

servants was determined by the status of those they had to serve. They

fawned on those in favor, and bullied those who had fallen from

grace.

The number-two concubine had a daughter a lime older than my mother.

This was a further bond between the two women, as well as being a

reason for the concubine's favor with General Xue, who had no other

children apart from my mother.

After a month, during which the two concubines became quite friendly,

my grandmother went to see the general's wife and told her she needed

to go home to fetch some clothes. The wife gave permission, but when

my grandmother asked if she could take her daughter to say goodbye to

her grandparents, she refused. The Xue bloodline could not be taken

out of the house.

And so my grandmother set off alone down the dusty road to Changli.

After the coachman had dropped her off at the railway station, she

started asking around among the people hanging about there. She found

two horsemen who were prepared to provide her with the transportation

she needed. She waited for nightfall, and then raced back to Lulong

with them and their two horses by a shortcut. One of the men seated

her on a saddle and ran in front, holding the horse by the rein.

When she reached the mansion, she made her way to a back gate and gave

a prearranged signal. After a wait that felt like hours but was in

fact only a few minutes, the door in the gate swung open and her sister

emerged in the moonlight, holding my mother in her arms. The door had

been unlocked by the friendly number-two concubine, who had then hit it

with an axe to make it look as though it had been forced open.

There was hardly time for my grandmother to give my mother a quick hug

besides, she did not want to wake her, in case she made a noise and

alerted the guards. She and her sister mounted the two horses while my

mother was fled onto the back of one of the horsemen, and they headed

off into the night. The horsemen had been paid well, and ran fast. By

dawn they were at Changli, and before the alarm could be given, they

had caught the train

54 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' north. When the train finally drew into

Yixian toward nightfall, my grandmother fell to the ground and lay

there for a long time, unable to move.

She was comparatively safe, 200 miles from Lulong and effectively out

of reach of the Xue household. She could not take my mother to her

house, for fear of the servants, so she asked an old schoolfriend if

she could hide my mother. The friend lived in the house of her

24father-in-law, a Manchu doctor called Dr. Xia, who was well known as a

kindly man who would never turn anyone away or betray a friend.

The Xue household would not care enough about my grandmother, a mere

concubine, to pursue her. It was my mother, the blood descendant, who

mattered. My grandmother sent a telegram to Lulong saying my mother

had fallen ill on the train and had died. There followed an agonizing

wait, during which my grandmother's moods oscillated wildly. Sometimes

she felt that the family must have believed her story. But then she

would torment herself with the thought that this might not be the case,

and that they were sending thugs to drag her, or her daughter, back.

Finally she consoled herself with the thought that the Xue family was

far too preoccupied with the impending death of the patriarch to expend

energy worrying about her, and that it was probably to the women's

advantage not to have her daughter around.

Once she realized the Xue family was going to leave her alone, my

grandmother settled back quietly into her house in Yixian with my

mother. She did not even worry about the servants, since she knew that

her 'husband' would not be coming. The silence from Lulong lasted over

a year, until one autumn day in 1933, when a telegram arrived informing

her that General Xue had died, and that she was expected at Lulong

immediately for the funeral.

The general had died in Tianjin in September. His body was brought

back to Lulong in a lacquered coffin covered with red embroidered silk.

Accompanying him were two other coffins, one similarly lacquered and

draped in the same red silk as his own, the other of plain wood with no

covering. The first coffin contained the body of one of his

concubines, who had swallowed opium to accompany him in death. This

was considered the height of conjugal loyalty. Later a plaque

inscribed by the famous warlord Wu Pei-fu was put up in her honor in

General Xue's mansion. The second coffin contained the remains of

another concubine, who had died of typhoid two years before. Her

corpse had been exhumed for reburial alongside General Xue, as was the

custom. Her coffin was of bare wood because, having died of a horrible

illness, she was considered ill fortune. Mercury and charcoal had been

placed inside each of the coffins to prevent the corpses rotting, and

the bodies had pearls in their mouths.

General Xue and the two concubines were buried together in the same

tomb; his wife and the other concubines would eventually be interred

alongside them. At a funeral, the essential duty of holding a special

flag for calling the spirit of the deceased had to be performed by the

dead man's son. As the general had no son, his wife adopted his

ten-year-old nephew so he could carry out the task. The boy also

enacted another ritual kneeling by the side of the coffin and calling

out "Avoid the nails!" Tradition held that if this was not done, the

dead person would be hurt by the nails.

The tomb site had been chosen by General Xue himself according to the

principles of geomancy It was in a beautiful, tranquil spot, backing

onto distant mountains to the north, while the front faced a stream set

among eucalyptus trees to the south. This location expressed the

desire to have solid things behind on which to lean mountains and the

reflection of the glorious sun, symbolizing rising prosperity, in

front.

But my grandmother never saw the site: she had ignored her summons, and

was not at the funeral. The next thing that happened was that the

manager of the pawnshop failed

2556 "Three-Inch Golden Lilies' to turn up with her allowance. About a

week later, her parents received a letter from General Xue's wife. My

grandfather's last words had been to give my grandmother her freedom.

This, for its time, was exceptionally enlightened, and she could hardly

believe her good fortune.

At the age of twenty-four, she was free.

2. "Even Plain Cold Water Is Sweet'

My Grandmother Marries a

Manchu Doctor (lg$$-1938)

The letter from General Xue's wife also asked my grandmother's parents

to take her back. Though the point was couched in the traditional

indirect manner, my grandmother knew that she was being ordered to move

OUt.

Her father took her in, but with considerable reluctance.

By now he had abandoned any pretense of being a family man. From the

moment he had arranged the liaison with General Xue, he had risen in

the world. As well as being promoted to deputy chief of the Yixian

police and entering the ranks of the well-connected, he had become

relatively rich, and had bought some land and taken up smoking opium.

No sooner had he been promoted than he acquired a concubine, a

Mongolian woman who was presented to him by his immediate boss. Giving

a concubine as a present to an up-and-coming colleague was a common

practice, and the local police chief was happy to oblige a protege of

General Xue. But my great-grandfather soon began casting around for

another concubine; it was good for a man in his position to have as

many as possible they showed a man's status. He did not have to look

far: the concubine had a sister.

When my grandmother returned to her parents' house, the setup was quite

different from when she had left almost a decade before. Instead of

just her unhappy, downtrodden mother, there were now three spouses. One

of the concubines had produced a daughter, who was the same age as my

mother. My grandmother's sister, Lan, was still unmarried at the

advanced age of sixteen, which was a cause of irritation to Yang.

My grandmother had moved from one cauldron of intrigue into another.

Her father was resentful of both her and her mother. He resented his

wife simply for being there, and he was even more unpleasant to her now

that he had the two concubines, whom he favored over her. He took his

meals with the concubines, leaving his wife to eat on her own. My

grandmother he resented for returning to the house when he had

successfully created a new world for himself.

He also regarded her as a jinx (kc), because she had lost her husband.

In those days, a woman whose husband had died was superstitiously held

responsible for his death.

My great-grandfather saw his daughter as bad luck, a threat to his good

fortune, and he wanted her out of the house.

The two concubines egged him on. Before my grandmother came back, they

had been having things very much their own way. My great-grandmother

26was a gentle, even weak person. Although she was theoretically the

superior of the concubines, she lived at the mercy of their whims.

In 193o she gave birth to a son, Yu-lin. This deprived the concubines

of their future security, as on my great grandfather's death all his

property would automatically go to his son. They would throw tantrums

if Yang showed any affection at all to his son. From the moment Yu-lin

was born, they stepped up their psychological warfare against my

great-grandmother, freezing her out in her own house.

They only spoke to her to nag and complain, and if they looked at her

it was with cold stony faces. My great grandmother got no support from

her husband, whose contempt for her was not pacified by the fact that

she had given him the son. He found new ways to find fault with her.

My grandmother was a stronger character than her mother, and the misery

of the past decade had toughened her up. Even her father was a little

in awe of her. She told herself that the days of her subservience to

her father were over, and that she was going to fight for herself and

for her mother. As long as she was in the house, the-concubines had to

restrain themselves, even presenting a toadying smile occasionally.

This was the atmosphere in which my mother lived the formative years

from two to four. Though shielded by her mother's love, she could

sense the tension which pervaded the household.

My grandmother was now a beautiful young woman in her mid-twenties. She

was also highly accomplished, and several men asked her father for her

hand. But because she had been a concubine, the only ones who offered

to take her as a proper wife were poor and did not stand a chance with

Mr. Yang.

My grandmother had had enough of the spitefulness and petty

vengefulness of the concubine world, in which the only choice was

between being a victim and victimizing others. There was no halfway

house. All my grandmother wanted was to be left alone to bring up her

daughter in peace.

Her father was constantly

dropping unkind hints, at

take herselfoffhis hands.

had no place to live, and

time, unable to stand the

badgering her to remarry, sometimes by

other times telling her outright she had to

But there was nowhere for her to go. She

she was not allowed to get a job. After a

pressure, she had a nervous breakdown.

A doctor was called in. It was Dr. Xia, in whose house my mother had

been hidden three years before, after the escape from General Xue's

mansion. Although she had been a friend of his daughter-in-law, Dr.

Xia had never seen my grandmother in keeping with the strict sexual

segregation prevalent at the time. When he first walked into her room,

he was so struck by her beauty that in his confusion he backed straight

out again and mumbled to the servant that he felt unwell. Eventually,

he recovered his composure and sat and talked to her at length. He was

the first man she had ever met to whom she could say what she really

felt, and she poured out her grief and her hopes to him although with

restraint, as be fitted a woman talking to a man who was not her

husband. The doctor was gentle and warm, and my grandmother had never

felt so understood. Before long, the two fell in love, and Dr. Xia

proposed. Moreover, he told my grandmother that he wanted her to be

his proper wife, and to bring my mother up as his own daughter. My

grandmother accepted, with tears of joy. Her father was also happy,

although he was quick to point out to Dr. Xia that he would not be

27able to provide any dowry.

irrelevant.

Dr.

Xia told him that was completely

Dr. Xia had built up a considerable practice in traditional medicine

in Yixian, and enjoyed a very high professional reputation. He was not

a Han Chinese, as were the Yangs and most people in China, but a

Manchu, one of the origin aI inhabitants of Manchuria. At one time his

family had been court doctors for the Manchu emperors, and had been

honored for their services.

Dr. Xia was well known not only as an excellent doctor, but also as a

very kind man, who often treated poor people for nothing. He was a big

man, over six feet tall, but he moved elegantly, in spite of his size.

He always dressed in traditional long robes and jacket. He had gentle

brown eyes, and a goatee and a long drooping mustache. His face and

his whole posture exuded calm.

My Grandmother Marries a Manchu Doctor 61 The doctor was already an

elderly man when he proposed to my grandmother. He was sixty-five, and

a widower, with three grown-up sons and one daughter, all of them

married. The three sons lived in the house with him.

The eldest looked after the household and managed the family farm, the

second worked in his father's practice, and the third, who was married

to my grandmother's schoolfriend, was a teacher. Between them the sons

had eight children, one of whom was married and had a son himself.

Dr. Xia called his sons into his study and told them about his plans.

They stole disbelieving, leaden glances at one another. There was a

heavy silence. Then the eldest spoke:

"I presume, Father, you mean she will be a concubine." Dr. Xia

replied that he was going to take my grandmother as a proper wife.

This had tremendous implications, as she would become their stepmother,

and would have to be treated as a member of the older generation, with

venerable status on a par with her husband. In an ordinary Chinese

household the younger generations had to be subservient to the older,

with suitable decorum to mark their relative positions, but Dr. Xia

adhered to an even more complicated Manchu system of etiquette. The

younger generations had to pay their respects to the older every

morning and evening, the men kneeling and the women curtsying. At

festivals, the men had to do a full kowtow. The fact that my

grandmother had been a concubine, plus the age gap, which meant they

would have to do obeisance to someone with an inferior status and much

younger than themselves, was too much for the sons.

They got together with the rest of the family and worked themselves up

into a state of outrage. Even the daughterin-law who was my

grandmother's old schoolfriend was upset, as her father-in-law's

marriage would force her into a radically new relationship with someone

who had been her classmate. She would not be able to eat at the same

table as her old friend, or even sit down with her; she

would have to wait on her hand and foot, and even kowtow to her.

Each member of the family sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, even

the great-grandson went in turn to beg Dr. Xia to 'consider the

feelings' of his 'own flesh and blood." They went down on their knees,

they prostrated themstelves in a full kowtow, they wept and screamed.

They begged Dr.

Xia to consider the fact that he was a Manchu, and

28that according to ancient Manchu custom a man of his status should not

marry a Han Chinese. Dr. Xia replied that the rule had been abolished

a long time before.

His children said that if he was a good Manchu, he should observe it

anyway. They went on and on about the age gap.

Dr. Xia was more than twice my grandmother's age. One of the family

trotted out an ancient saying: "A young wife who has an old husband is

really another man's woman."

What hurt Dr. Xia more was the emotional blackmail especially the

argument that taking an ex-concubine as a proper wife would affect his

children's position in society.

He knew his children would lose face, and he felt guilty about this.

But Dr. Xia felt he had to put my grandmother's happiness first. If

he took her as a concubine, she would not merely lose face, she would

become the slave of the whole family. His love alone would not be

enough to protect her if she was not his proper wife.

Dr.

Xia implored his family to grant an old man's wish.

But they and society took the attitude that an irresponsible wish

should not be indulged. Some hinted that he was senile. Others told

him: "You already have sons, grandsons, and even a great-grandson, a

big and prosperous family. What more do you want? Why do you have to

marry her?"

The arguments went on and on. More and more relatives and friends

appeared on the scene, all invited by the sons. They unanimously

pronounced the marriage to be an insane idea. Then they turned their

venom against my grandmother.

"Marrying again when her late husband's body and bones are not yet

cold!"

"That woman has it all worked out: she is refusing to accept concubine

status so that she can become a proper wife. If she really loves you,

why can't she be satisfied with being your concubine?"

They attributed motives to my grandmother: she was scheming to get Dr.

Xia to marry her, and would then take over the family and ill-treat his

children and grandchildren.

They also insinuated that she was plotting to lay her hands on Dr.

Xia's money. Underneath all their talk about propriety, morality, and

Dr. Xia's own good, there was an unspoken calculation involving his

assets. The relatives feared my grandmother might lay her hands on Dr.

Xia's wealth, as she would automatically become the manageress of the

household as his wife.

Dr. Xia was a rich man. He owned 2,000 acres of farmland dotted

around the county of Yixian, and even had some land south of the Great

Wall. His large house in the town was built of gray bricks stylishly

outlined in white paint. Its ceilings were whitewashed and the rooms

were wallpapered, so that the beams and joints were concealed, which

was considered an important indicator of prosperity.

He also owned a flourishing medical practice and a medicine shop.

29When the family saw they were getting nowhere, they decided to work on

my grandmother directly. One day the daughter-in-law who had been at

school with her paid a call. After tea and social chitchat, the friend

got around to her mission. My grandmother burst into tears, and took

her by the hand in their usual intimate manner. What would she do if

she were in her position, she asked. When she got no reply, she

pressed on: "You know what being a concubine is like. You wouldn't

like to be one, would you?

You know, there is an expression of Confucius: "Jiang-xinbi-xin Imagine

my heart was yours"!" Appealing to someone's better instincts with a

precept from the sage sometimes worked better than a direct no.

The friend went back to her family feeling quite guilty,

and reported her failure. She hinted that she did not have the heart

to push my grandmother anymore. She found an ally in De-gui, Dr. Xia's

second son, who practiced medic Me with his father, and was closer to

him than his brothers. He said he thought they should let the marriage

go ahead. The third son also began to weaken when he heard his wife

describe my grandmother's distress.

The ones who were most indignant were the eldest son and his wife. When

she saw that the other two sons were wavering, the eldest son's wife

said to her husband: "Of course they don't care. They've got other

jobs. That woman can't take those away from them. But what have you

got? You are only the manager of the old man's estate and it will all

go to her and her daughter! What will become of poor me and our poor

children? We have nothing to fall back on. Perhaps we should all die!

Perhaps that is what your father really wants! Perhaps I should kill

myself to make them all happy!" All this was accompanied by wailing

and floods of tears. Her husband replied in an agitated manner: "Just

give me fill tomorrow."

When Dr. Xia woke the next morning he found his entire family, with

the sole exception of De-gui, fifteen people in all, kneeling outside

his bedchamber. The moment he emerged, his eldest son shouted

"Kowtow!" and they all prostrated themselves in unison. Then, in a

voice quaking with emotion, the son declaimed: "Father, your children

and your entire family will stay here and kowtow to you till our deaths

unless you start to think of us, your family and, above all, your

elderly self."

Dr. Xia was so angry his whole body shook. He asked his children to

stand up, but before anyone could move the eldest son spoke again: "No,

Father, we won't- not unless you call off the wedding!" Dr. Xia tried

to reason with him, but the son continued to hector him in a quivering

voice. Finally Dr. Xia said: "I know what is on your minds. I won't

be in this world much longer. If you are worried about how your future

stepmother will behave, I

b have not the slightest doubt that she will treat you all very well.

I know she is a good person. Surely you can see there is no other

reassurance I can give you except her character..."

At the mention of the word 'character," the eldest son gave a loud

snort: "How can you mention the word "character" about a concubine! No

good woman would have become a concubine in the first place!" He then

started to abuse my grandmother. At this, Dr. Xia could not control

himself. He lifted his walking stick and began thrashing his son.

30All his life Dr. Xia had been the epitome of restraint and calm. The

whole family, still on their knees, was stunned. The great-grandson

started screaming hysterically. The eldest son was dumbstruck, but

only for a second; then he raised his voice again, not only from

physical hurt, but also for his wounded pride at being beaten in front

of his family. Dr. Xia stopped, short of breath from anger and

exertion. At once the son started bellowing more abuse against my

grandmother. His father shouted at him to shut up, and struck him so

hard his walking stick broke in two.

The son reflected on his humiliation and pain for a few seconds.

he pulled out a pistol and looked Dr. Xia in the face.

Then

"A loyal subject uses his death to remonstrate with the emperor. A

filial son should do the same with his father. All I have to

remonstrate with you is my death!" A shot rang out. The son swayed,

then keeled over onto the floor. He had fired a bullet into his

abdomen.

A horse-drawn cart rushed him to a nearby hospital, where he died the

next day. He probably had not intended to kill himself, just to make a

dramatic gesture so the pressure on his father would be irresistible.

His son's death devastated Dr. Xia. Although outwardly he appeared

calm as usual, people who knew him could see that his tranquillity had

become scarred with a deep sadness. From then on he was subject to

bouts of melancholy, very much out of character with his previous

imperturbability.

Yixian was boiling with indignafon, rumor, and accusations. Dr. Xia

and particularly my grandmother were made to feel responsible for the

death. Dr. Xia wanted to show he was not going to be deterred. Soon

after the funeral of his son, he fixed a date for the wedding. He

warned his children that they must pay due respect to their new mother,

and sent out invitations to the leading townspeople. Custom dictated

that they should attend and give presents. He also told my grandmother

to prepare for a big ceremony. She was frightened by the accusations

and their unforeseeable effect on Dr. Xia, and was desperately trying

to convince herself that she was not guilty. But, above all, she felt

defiant. She consented to a full ceremonial ritual. On the wedding

day she left her father's house in an elaborate carriage accompanied by

a procession of musicians. As was the Manchu custom, her own family

hired the carriage to take her halfway to her new home, and the

bridegroom sent another to carry her the second half of the way. At

the han dover point, her five year-old brother, Yu-lin, waited at the

foot of the carriage door with his back bent double, symboli?ing the

idea that he was carrying her on his back to Dr. Xia's carriage. He

repeated the action when she arrived at Dr. Xia's house. A woman

could not just walk into a man's house; this would imply a severe loss

of status. She had to be seen to be taken, to denote the requisite

reluctance.

Two bridesmaids led my grandmother into the room where the wedding

ceremony was to take place. Dr. Xia was standing before a table

draped with heavy red embroidered silk on which lay the tablets of

Heaven, Earth,

Emperor, Ancestors, and Teacher. He was wearing a decorated hat like a

crown with a tail-like plumage at the back and a long, loose,

embroidered gown with bell-shaped sleeves, a traditional Manchu

garment, convenient for riding and archery, deriving from the Manchus'

31nomadic

past. He knelt and kowtowed five times to the tablets and then walked

into the wedding chamber alone.

Next my grandmother, still accompanied by her two attendants, curtsied

five times, each time touching her hair with her right hand, in a

gesture resembling a salute. She could not kowtow because of the mass

of her elaborate headdress. She then followed Dr. Xia into the

wedding chamber, where he removed the red cover from her head.

The two bridesmaids presented each of them with an empty gourd-shaped

vase, which they exchanged with each other, and then the bridesmaids

left. Dr. Xia and my grandmother sat silently alone together for a

while, and then Dr. Xia went out to greet the relatives and guests. My

grandmother had to sit, motionless and alone, on the kang, facing the

window on which was a huge red 'double happiness' paper cut, for

several hours. This was called 'sitting happiness in," symbolizing the

absence of restlessness that was deemed to be an essential quality for

a woman. After all the guests had gone, a young male relative of Dr.

Xia's came in and tugged her by the sleeve three times. Only then was

she allowed to get down from the kang. With the help of her two

attendants, she changed out of her heavily embroidered outfit into a

simple red gown and red trousers. She removed the enormous headdress

with all the clicking jewels and did her hair in two coils above her

ears.

So in 1935 my mother, now age four, and my grandmother, age twenty-six,

moved into Dr. Xia's comfortable house. It was really a compound all

on its own, consisting of the house proper in the interior and the

surgery, with the medicine shop, facing onto the street. It was

customary for successful doctors to have their own shops. Here Dr. Xia

sold traditional Chinese medicines, herbs and animal extracts, which

were processed in a workshop by three apprentices.

The facade of the house was surmounted by highly decorated red and gold

eaves. In the center was a rectangular plaque denoting the Xia

residence in gilded characters. Behind the shop lay a small courtyard,

with a number of rooms opening off it for the servants and cooks.

Beyond that the compound opened out into several smaller courtyards,

where the family lived. Farther back was a big garden with cypresses

and winter plums. There was no grass in the courtyards the climate was

too harsh. They were just expanses of hard, bare, brown earth, which

turned to dust in the summer and to mud in the brief spring when the

snow melted. Dr. Xia loved birds and had a bird garden, and every

morning, whatever the weather, he did qigong, a form of the slow,

graceful Chinse exercises often called tai chi, while he listened to

the birds singing and chirping.

After the death of his son, Dr. Xia had to endure the constant silent

reproach of his family. He never talked to my grandmother about the

pain this caused him. For

Chinese men a stiff upper lip was mandatory. My grandmother knew what

he was going through, of course, and suffered with him, in silence. She

was very loving toward him, and attended to his needs with all her

heart.

She always showed a smiling face to his family, although they generally

treated her with disdain beneath a veneer of formal respect. Even the

32daughter-in-law who had been at school with her tried to avoid her. The

knowledge that she was held responsible for the eldest son's death

weighed on my grandmother.

Her entire lifestyle had to change to that of a Manchu.

She slept in a room with my mother, and Dr. Xia slept in a separate

room. Early every morning, long before she got up, her nerves would

start to strain and jangle, anticipating the noise of the family

members approaching. She had to wash hurriedly, and greet each of them

in turn with a rigid set of salutations. In addition, she had to do

her hair in an extremely complicated way so that it could support a

huge headdress, under which she had to wear a wig. All she got was a

sequence of icy "Good morning's, virtually the only words the family

ever spoke to her. As she watched them bowing and scraping, she knew

they had hate in their hearts. The ritual grated all the more for its

insincerity.

On festivals and other important occasions, the whole family had to

kowtow and curtsy to her, and she would have to jump up from her chair

and stand to one side to show that she had left the chair empty, which

symbolized their late mother, to acknowledge their respect. Manchu

custom conspired to keep her and Dr. Xia apart. They were not

supposed even to eat together, and one of the daughters-in-law always

stood behind my grandmother to serve her. But the woman would present

such a cold face that my grandmother found it difficult to finish her

meal, much less enjoy it.

Once, soon after they had moved into Dr. Xia's house, my mother had

just settled down into what looked like a nice, comfortable, warm place

on the kang when she saw Dr. Xia's face suddenly darken, and he

stormed over and roughly pulled her off the seat. She had sat in his

special place. This was the only time he ever hit her. According to

Manchu custom, his seat was sacred.

The move to Dr. Xia's house brought my grandmother a real measure of

freedom for the first time but also a degree of entrapment. For my

mother it was no less ambivalent. Dr. Xia was extremely kind to her

and brought her x~p as his own daughter. She called him "Father," and

he gave her his own name, Xia, which she carries to this day and a new

given name, "De-hong," which is made up of two characters: Hong,

meaning 'wild swan," and De, the generation name, meaning 'virtue."

Dr. Xia's family did not dare insult my grandmother to her face that

would have been tantamount to treason to one's 'mother." But her

daughter was another matter. My mother's first memories, apart from

being cuddled by her mother, are of being bullied by the younger

members of Dr. Xia's family. She would try not to cry out, and to

hide her bruises and cuts from her mother, but my grandmother knew what

was going on. She never said anything to Dr. Xia, as she did not want

to upset him or create more problems for him with his children. But my

mother was miserable. She often begged to be taken back to her

grandparents' house, or to the house General Xue had bought, where

everyone had treated her like a princess. But she soon realized she

should stop asking to 'go home," as this only brought tears to her

mother's eyes.

My mother's closest friends were her pets. She had an owl, a black

myna bird which could say a few simple phrases, a hawk, a cat, white

mice, and some grasshoppers and crickets which she kept in glass

bottles. Apart from her mother, her only close human friend was Dr.

33Xia's coachman, "Big Old Lee." He was a tough, leathery-skinned man

from the Hinggan mountains in the far north, where the borders of

China, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union meet.

He had very dark skin, coarse hair, thick lips, and an upturned nose,

all of which are very unusual among Chinese. In fact, he did not look

Chinese at all. He was tall, thin, and wiry. His father had brought

him up as a hunter and trapper, digging out ginseng roots and hunting

bears, foxes, and deer. For a time they had done very well selling the

skins, but they had eventually been put out of business by bandits, the

worst of whom worked for the Old Marshal, Chang Tso-lin. Big Old Lee

referred to him as 'that bandit bastard." Later, when my mother was

told the Old Marshal had been a staunch anti-Japanese patriot, she

remembered Big Old Lee's mockery of the 'hero' of the northeast.

Big Old Lee looked after my mother's pets, and used to take her out on

expeditions with him. That winter he taught her to skate. In the

spring, as the snow and ice were melting, they watched people

performing the important annual ritual of 'sweeping the tombs' and

planting flowers on the graves of their ancestors. In summer they went

fishing and

My Grandmother Marries a Manchu Doctor 71 gathering mushrooms, and in

the autumn they drove out to the edge of town to shoot hares.

In the long Manchurian evenings, when the wind howled across the plains

and the ice froze on the inside of the windows, Big Old Lee would sit

my mother on his knee on the warm kang and tell her fabulous stories

about the mountains of the north. The images she took to bed were of

mysterious tall trees, exotic flowers, colorful birds singing tuneful

songs, and ginseng roots which were really lit He girls after you dug

them out you had to tie a red string around them, otherwise they would

run away.

Big Old Lee also told my mother about animal lore.

Tigers, which roamed the mountains of northern Manchuria, were

kind-hearted and would not hurt human beings unless they felt

threatened. He loved tigers. But bears were another matter: they were

fierce and one should avoid them at all costs. If you did happen to

meet one, you must stand still until it lowered its head. This was

because the bear has a lock of hair on his forehead which falls over

his eyes and blinds him when he drops his head. With a wolf you should

not turn and run, because you could never outrun it. You should stand

and face it head-on, looking as though you were not afraid. Then you

should walk backwards very, very slowly. Many years later, Big Old

Lee's advice was to save my mother's life.

One day when she was five years old my mother was in the garden talking

to her pets when Dr. Xia's grandchildren crowded around her in a gang.

They started jostling her and calling her names, and then began to hit

her and shove her around more violently. They forced her into a corner

of the garden where there was a dried-up well and pushed her in. The

well was quite deep, and she fell hard on the rubble at the bottom.

Eventually someone heard her screams and called Big Old Lee, who came

running with a ladder; the cook held it steady while he climbed in. By

now my grandmother had arrived, frantic with worry. After a few

minutes, Big Old Lee resurfaced carrying my mother, who was half

unconscious and covered with cuts and bruises. He put her in my

grandmother's arms. My mother was taken inside, where Dr. Xia

examined her.

34One hipbone was broken. For years afterward it sometimes became

dislocated and the accident left her with a permanent slight limp..

When Dr. Xia asked her what had happened, my mother said she had been

pushed by "Number Six [Grandson]."

My grandmother, ever attentive to Dr. Xia's moods, tried to shush her

up because Number Six was his favorite.

When Dr. Xia left the room, my grandmother told my mother not to

complain about "Number Six' again, so as not to upset Dr. Xia. For

some time my mother was confined to the house because of her hip. The

other children ostracized her completely.

Immediately after this, Dr. Xia began to go away for several days at a

time. He went to the provincial capital,

Jinzhou, about twenty-five miles to the south, looking for a job. The

atmosphere in the family was unbearable, and my mother's accident,

which might easily have been fatal, convinced him that a move was

essential.

This was no small decision. In China, to have several generations of a

family living under one roof was considered a great honor. Streets

even had names like "Five

Generations Under One Roof' to commemorate such families. Breaking up

the extended family was viewed as a tragedy to be avoided at all costs,

but Dr. Xia tried to put on a cheerful face to my grandmother, saying

he would be glad to have less responsibility.

My grandmother was vastly relieved, although she tried not to show it.

In fact, she had been gently pushing Dr. Xia to move, especially after

what happened to my mother. She had had enough of the extended family,

always glacially present, icily willing her to be miserable, and in

which she had neither privacy nor company.

Dr. Xia divided his property up among the members of his family. The

only things he kept for himself were the gifts which had been bestowed

on his ancestors by the Manchu emperors. To the widow of his eldest

son he gave all his land. The second son inherited the medicine shop,

and the house was left to his youngest son. He saw to it that Big Old

Lee and the other servants were well taken care of. When he asked my

grandmother if she would mind being poor, she said she would be happy

just to have her daughter and himself: "If you have love, even plain

cold water is sweet."

On a freezing December day in 1936 the family gathered outside the

front gate to see them off. They were all dry eyed except De-gui, the

only son who had backed the marriage. Big Old Lee drove them in the

horse-drawn carriage to the station, where my mother said a tearful

goodbye to him. But she became excited when they got on the train.

This was the first time she had been on a train since she was a year

old and she was thrilled, jumping up and down as she looked out the

window.

Jinzhou was a big city, with a population of almost 100,000, the

capital of one of the nine provinces of Manchukuo. It lies about ten

miles inland from the sea, where Manchuria approaches the Great Wall.

Like Yixian, it was a walled town, but it was growing fast and had

35already spread well beyond its walls. It boasted a number of textile

factories and two oil refineries; it was an important railroad

junction, and even had its own airport.

The Japanese had occupied it in early January 1932, after heavy

fighting. Jinzhou was in a highly strategic location, and had played a

central role in the takeover of Manchuria, its seizure becoming the

focus of a major diplomatic dispute between the United States and Japan

and a key episode in the long chain of events which ultimately led to

Pearl Harbor ten years later.

when the Japanese began their attack on Manchuria in September 193 i,

the Young Marshal, Chang Hsueh-liang, was forced to abandon his

capital, Mukden, to the Japanese. He decamped to Jinzhou with some

200,000 troops and set up his headquarters there. In one of the first

such attacks in history, the Japanese bombed the city from the air.

When the Japanese troops entered Jinzhou they went on a rampage.

This was the town where Dr. Xia, now age sixty-six, had to start again

from the bottom. He could only afford to rent a mud hut about ten by

eight feet in size in a very poor part of town, a low-lying area by a

river, under a levee. Most of the local shack owners were too poor to

afford a proper roof: they laid pieces of corrugated iron over their

four walls and put heavy stones on top to try to stop them from being

blown away in the frequent high winds. The area was right on the edge

of the town on the other side of the river were sorghum fields. When

they first arrived in December, the brown earth was frozen solid and so

was the river, which was about thirty yards wide at this point. In the

spring, as the ice thawed, the ground around the hut turned to a

quagmire, and the stench of sewage, kept down in winter because it

immediately froze, permanently lodged in their nostrils. In the summer

the area was infested with mosquitoes, and floods were a constant worry

because the river rose well above the level of the houses and the

embankments were poorly maintained.

My mother's overwhelming impression was of almost unbearable cold.

Every activity, not just sleeping, had to take place on the kang, which

took up most of the space in the hut, apart from a small stove in one

corner. All three of them had to sleep together on the kang. There

was no electricity or running water. The toilet was a mud shack with a

communal pit.

Right opposite the house was a brightly painted temple dedicated to the

God of Fire. People coming to pray in it would tie their horses up in

front of the Xias' shack. When it got warmer, Dr. Xia would take my

mother for walks along the riverbank in the evenings and recite

classical poetry to her, against the background of the magnificent

sunsets. My grandmother would not accompany them:

there was no custom of husbands and wives taking walks together, and in

any case, her bound feet meant that walking could never be a pleasure

for her.

They were on the edge of starvation. In Yixian the family had had a

supply of food from Dr. Xia's own land, which meant they always had

some rice even after the Japanese had taken their cut. Now their

income was sharply down and the Japanese were appropriating a far

greater proportion of the available food. Much of what was produced

locally was forcibly exported to Japan, and the large Japanese army in

Manchuria took most of the remaining rice and wheat for itself. The

local population could occasionally get hold of some maize or sorghum,

36but even these were scarce.

and smelled revolting.

The main food was acorn meal, which tasted

My grandmother had never experienced such poverty, but this was the

happiest time of her life. Dr. Xia loved her, and she had her

daughter with her all the 6me. She was no longer forced to go through

any of the tedious Manchu rituals, and the tiny mud hut was filled with

laughter. She and Dr. Xia sometimes passed the long evenings playing

cards. The rules were that if Dr. Xia lost, my grandmother would

smack him three times, and if she lost, Dr. Xia would kiss her three

times.

My grandmother had many women friends in the neighborhood, which was

something new for her. As the wife of a doctor she was respected, even

though he was not well off. After years of being humiliated and

treated as chattel, she was now truly surrounded by freedom.

Every now and then she and her friends would put on an old Manchu

performance for themselves, playing hand drums while they sang and

danced. The tunes they played consisted of very simple, repetitive

notes and rhythms, and the women made up the lyrics as they went along.

The married women sang about their sex lives, and the virgins asked

questions about sex. Being mostly illiterate, the women used this as a

way to learn about the facts of life.

Through their singing, they also talked to each other about their lives

and their husbands, and passed on their gossip.

My grandmother loved these gatherings, and would often practice for

them at home. She would sit on the kang, shaking the hand drum with

her left hand and singing to the beat, composing the lyrics as she went

along. Often Dr. Xia would suggest words. My mother was too young to

be taken along to the gatherings, but she could watch my grandmother

rehearsing. She was fascinated and parfcularly wanted to know what

words Dr. Xia had suggested.

She knew they must be great fun, because he and her mother laughed so

much. But when her mother repeated them for her, she 'fell into clouds

and fog." She had no idea what they meant.

But life was tough.

Every day was a battle just to survive.

Rice and wheat were only available on the black market, so my

grandmother began selling off some of the jewelry

General Xue had given her. She ate almost nothing herself, saying she

had already eaten, or that she was not hungry and would eat later. When

Dr. Xia found out she was selling her jewelry, he insisted she stop:

"I am an old man," he said.

"Some day I will die, and you will have to rely on those jewels to

survive."

Dr. Xia was working as a salaried doctor attached to another man's

medicine shop, which did not give him much chance to display his skill.

But he worked hard, and gradually his reputation began to grow. Soon

he was invited to go on his first visit to a patient's home. When he

came back that evening he was carrying a package wrapped in a cloth. He

winked at my mother and his wife and asked them to guess what was

inside the package. My mother's eyes were glued to the steaming

bundle, and even before she could shout out "Steamed rolls!" she was

37already tearing the package open. As she was devouring the rolls, she

looked up and met Dr. Xia's twinkling eyes. More than fifty years

later she can still remember his look of happiness,

My Grandmother Mama a Manchu Doctor 77 and even today she says she

cannot remember any tbod as delicious as those simple wheat rolls.

Home visits were important to doctors, because the families would pay

the doctor who made the call rather than his employer. When the

patients were happy, or rich, the doctors would often be given handsome

rewards.

Grateful patients would also give doctors valuable presents at New Year

and on other special occasions. After a number of home visits, Dr.

Xia's circumstances began to improve.

His reputation began to spread, too. One day the wife of the

provincial governor fell into a coma, and he called in Dr. Xia, who

managed to restore her to consciousness.

This was considered almost the equivalent of bringing a person back

from the grave. The governor ordered a plaque to be made on which he

wrote in his own hand:

"Dr. Xia, who gives life to people and society." He ordered the

plaque to be carried through the town in procession.

Soon afterward the governor came to Dr. Xia for a different kind of

help. He had one wife and twelve concubines, but not one of them had

borne him a child. The governor had heard that Dr. Xia was

particularly skilled in questions of fertility. Dr. Xia prescribed

potions for the governor and his thirteen consorts, several of whom

became pregnant.

In fact, the problem had been the governor's, but the diplomatic Dr.

Xia treated the wife and the concubines as well.

The governor was overjoyed, and wrote an even larger plaque for Dr. Xia

inscribed: "The reincarnation of Kuanyin' (the Buddhist goddess of

fertility and kindness). The new plaque was carried to Dr. Xia's

house with an even larger procession than the first one. After this,

people came to see Dr. Xia from as far away as Harbin, 400 miles to

the north. He became known as one of the 'four famous doctors' of

Manchukuo.

By the end of 1937, a year after they had arrived in Jinzhou, Dr. Xia

was able to move to a bigger house just outside the old north gate of

the city. It was far superior to the shack by the river. Instead of

mud, it was made of red brick. Instead of one room, it had no fewer

than three bedrooms. Dr. Xia was able to set up his own practice

again, and used the sitting room as his surgery.

The house occupied the south side of a big courtyard which was shared

with two other families, but only Dr. Xia's house had a door which

opened directly into it. The other two houses faced out onto the

street and had solid walls on the courtyard side, without even a window

looking onto it. When they wanted to get into the courtyard they had

to go around through a gate from the street. The north side of the

courtyard was a solid wall. In the courtyard were cypresses and

Chinese ilex trees on which the three families used to hang up

clotheslines. There were also some roses of Sharon, which were tough

38enough to survive the harsh winters. During the summer my grandmother

would put out her favorite annuals: white-edged morning glory,

chrysanthemums, dahlias, and garden balsam.

My grandmother and Dr. Xia never had any children together. He

subscribed to a theory that a man over the age of sixty-five should not

ejaculate, so as to conserve his sperm, which was considered the

essence of a man. Years later my grandmother told my mother, somewhat

mysteriously, that through qigong Dr. Xia developed a technique which

enabled him to have an orgasm without ejaculating.

For a man of his age he enjoyed extraordinary health. He was never

ill, and took a cold shower every day, even in temperatures of minus io

F. He never touched alcohol or tobacco, in keeping with the injunctions

of the quasi religious sect to which he belonged, the Zai-li-hui

(Society of Reason).

Although he was a doctor himself, Dr. Xia was not keen on taking

medicine, insisting that the way to good health was a sound body. He

adamantly opposed any treatment which in his opinion cured one part of

the body while doing damage to another, and would not use strong

medicines because of the side effects they might have. My mother and

grandmother often had to take medicines behind his back. When they did

fall ill, he would always bring in another doctor, who was a

traditional Chinese doctor but also a shaman and believed that some

ailments were caused by evil spirits, which had to be placated or

exorcized by special religious techniques.

My mother was happy. For the first time in her life she felt warmth

all around her. No longer did she feel tension, as she had for the two

years at her grandparents', and there was none of the bullying she had

undergone for a whole year from Dr. Xia's grandchildren.

She was particularly excited by the festivals which came around almost

every month. There was no concept of the workweek among ordinary

Chinese. Only government offices, schools, and Japanese factories had

a day off on Sunday. For other people only festivals provided a break

from the daily routine.

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth moon, seven days before the

Chinese New Year, the Winter Festival began.

According to legend, this was the day when the Kitchen God, who had

been living above the stove with his wife, in the form of their

portraits, went up to Heaven to report on the behavior of the family to

the Celestial Emperor. A good report would bring the family abundant

food in the kitchen in the coming year. So on this day every household

would busily kowtow to the portraits of Lord and Lady Kitchen God

before they were set ablaze to signify their ascent to Heaven.

Grandmother would always ask my mother to stick some honey on their

lips. She would also burn lifelike miniature horses and figures of

servants which she made out of sorghum plants so the royal couple would

have extra special service to make them happier and thus more inclined

to say many nice things about the Xias to the Celestial Emperor.

The next few days were spent preparing all sons of food.

Meat was cut into special shapes, and rice and soybeans were ground

into powder and made into buns, rolls, and dumplings. The food was put

into the cellar to wait for the New Year. With the temperature as low

as minus 2o F, the cellar was a natural refrigerator.

39At midnight on Chinese New Year's Eve, a huge burst of fireworks was

let off, to my mother's great excitement.

She would follow her mother and Dr. Xia outside and kowtow in the

direction from which the God of Fortune was supposed to be coming. All

along the street, people were doing the same. Then they would greet

each other with the words "May you run into good fortune."

At Chinese New Year people gave each other presents.

When dawn lit up the white paper in the windows to the east, my mother

would jump out of bed and hurry into her new finery: new jacket, new

trousers, new socks, and new shoes. Then she and her mother called on

neighbors and friends, kowtowing to all the adults. For every bang of

her head on the floor, she got a 'red wrapper' with money inside. These

packets were to last her the whole year as pocket money.

For the next fifteen days, the adults went round paying visits and

wishing each other good fortune. Good fortune, namely money, was an

obsession with most ordinary Chinese. People were poor, and in the Xia

household, like many others, the only time meat was in reasonably

abundant supply was at festival time.

The festivities would culminate on the fifteenth day with a carnival

procession followed by a lantern show after dark.

The procession centered on an inspection visit by the God of Fire. The

god would be carried around the neighborhood to warn people of the

danger of fire; with most houses partly made of timber and the climate

dry and windy, fire was a constant hazard and source of terror, and the

statue of the god in the temple used to receive offerings all year

round. The procession started at the temple of the God of Fire, in

front of the mud hut where the Xias had lived when they first came to

Jinzhou. A replica of the statue, a

My Grandmother Marries a Manchu Doctor 8 I giant with red hair, beard,

eyebrows, and cloak, was carried on an open sedan chair by eight young

men. It was followed by writhing dragons and lions, each made up of

several men, and by floats, stilts, and yangge dancers who waved the

ends of a long piece of colorful silk tied around their waists.

Fireworks, drums, and cymbals made a thundering noise. My mother

skipped along behind the procession.

Almost every household displayed tantalizing foods along the route as

offerings to the deity, but she noticed that the deity jolted by rather

quickly, not touching any of it.

"Goodwill for the gods, offerings for the human stomachs!"

her mother told her. In those days of scarcity my mother looked

forward keenly to the festivals, when she could satisfy her stomach.

She was quite indifferent to those occasions which had poetic rather

than gastronomic associations, and would wait impatiently for her

mother to guess the riddles stuck on the splendid lanterns hung at

people's front doors during the Lantern Festival, or for her mother to

tour the chrysanthemums in people's gardens on the ninth day of the

ninth moon.

During the Fair of the Town God's Temple one year, my grandmother

showed her a row of clay sculptures in the temple, all redecorated and

40painted for the occasion.

They were scenes of Hell, showing people being

My grandmother pointed out a clay figure whose

out at least a foot while simultaneously being

with spiky hair standing on end like hedgehogs

frogs.

punished for their sins.

tongue was being pulled

cut up by two devils

and eyes bulging like

The man being tortured had been a liar in his previous life, she said

and this was what would happen to my mother if she told lies.

There were about a dozen groups of statues, set amid the buzzing crowds

and the mouth-watering food stalls, each one illustrating a moral

lesson. My grandmother cheerfully showed my mother one horrible scene

after another, but when they came to one group of figures she whisked

her by without any explanation. Only some years later did my mother

find out that it depicted a woman being sawed in half by two men. The

woman was a widow who had remarried, and she was being sawed in half by

her two husbands because she had been the property of both of them. In

those days many widows were frightened by this prospect and remained

loyal to their dead husbands, no matter how much misery that entailed.

Some even killed themselves if they were forced by their families to

remarry.

My mother realized that her mother's decision to marry Dr.

been an easy one.

Xia had not

3. "They All Say What a Happy Place Manchukuo Is' Life under the

Japanese

(1938-1945)

Early in 1938, my mother was nearly seven. She was very bright, and

very keen to study. Her parents thought she should begin school as

soon as the new school year started, immediately after Chinese New

Year.

Education was tightly controlled by the Japanese, especially the

history and ethics courses. Japanese, not Chinese, was the official

language in the schools. Above the fourth form in elementary school

teaching was entirely in Japanese, and most of the teachers were

Japanese.

On 11 September 1939, when my mother was in her second year in

elementary school, the emperor of Manchukuo, Pu Yi, and his wife came

to Jinzhou on an official visit. My mother was chosen to present

flowers to the empress on her arrival. A large crowd stood on a gaily

decorated dais, all holding yellow paper flags in the colors of

Manchukuo. My mother was given a huge bouquet of flowers, and she was

full of self-confidence as she stood next to the brass band and a group

of VIPs in morning coats. A boy about the same age as my mother was

standing

84 "They All Say What a Happy Place Manchukuo Is' stiffly near her with

a bouquet of flowers to present to Pu Yi. As the royal couple appeared

the band struck up the Manchukuo national anthem. Everyone sprang to

attention. My mother stepped forward and curtsied, expertly balancing

her bouquet. The empress was wearing a white dress and very fine long

white gloves up to her elbows.

My mother thought she looked extremely beautiful.

She managed to

41snatch a glance at Pu Yi, who was in military uniform.

thick spectacles she thought he had 'piggy eyes."

Behind his

Apart from the fact that she was a star pupil, one reason my mother was

chosen to present flowers to the empress was that she always filled in

her nationality on registration forms as "Manchu," like Dr. Xia, and

Manchukuo was supposed to be the Manchus' own independent state. Pu Yi

was particularly useful to the Japanese because, as far as most people

were concerned, if they thought about it at all, they were still under

the Manchu emperor. Dr. Xia considered himself a loyal subject, and

my grandmother took the same view. Traditionally, an important way in

which a woman expressed her love for her man was by agreeing with him

in everything, and this came naturally to my grandmother. She was so

contented with Dr. Xia that she did not want to turn her mind even

slightly in the direction of disagreement.

At school my mother was taught that her country was Manchukuo, and that

among its neighboring countries there were two republics of China one

hostile, led by Chiang Kai-shek; the other friendly, headed by

WangJingwei (Japan's puplSet ruler of part of China). She was taught

no concept of a "China' of which Manchuria was part.

The pupils were educated to be obedient subjects of Manchukuo.

the first songs my mother learned was'

One of

Red boys and green gifts walk on the streets, They all say what a happy

place Manchukuo is.

LiE under the Japanese You are happy and I am happy, Everyone lives

peacefully and works joyfully free of any worries.

The teachers said that Manchukuo was a paradise on earth.

But even at her age my mother could see that if the place could be

called a paradise it was only for the Japanese.

Japanese children attended separate schools, which were well equipped

and well heated, with shining floors and clean windows. The schools

for the local children were in dilapidated temples and crumbling houses

donated by private patrons. There was no heating. In winter the whole

class often had to run around the block in the middle of a lesson or

engage in collective foot stamping to ward off the cold.

Not only were the teachers mainly Japanese, they also used Japanese

methods, hitting the children as a matter of course. The slightest

mistake or failure to observe the prescribed rules and etiquette, such

as a girl having her hair half an inch below her earlobes, was punished

with blows. Both gifts and boys were slapped on the face, hard, and

boys were frequently struck on the head with a wooden club. Another

punishment was to be made to kneel for hours in the snow.

When local children passed a Japanese in the street, they had to bow

and make way, even if the Japanese was younger than themselves.

Japanese children would often stop local children and slap them for no

reason at all. The pupils had to bow elaborately to their teachers

every time they met them. My mother joked to her friends that a

Japanese teacher passing by was like a whirlwind sweeping through a

field of grass you just saw the grass bending as the wind blew by.

Many adults bowed to the Japanese, too, for fear of offending them, but

the Japanese presence did not impinge greatly on the Xias at first.

42Middle- and lower-echelon positions were held by locals, both Manchus

and Han

Chinese, like my great-grandfather, who kept his job as deputy police

chief of Yixian. By 1940, there were about 15,000 Japanese in Jinzhou.

The people living in the next house to the Xias were Japanese, and my

grandmother was friendly with them. The husband was a government

official. Every morning his wife would stand outside the gate with

their three children and bow deeply to him as he got into a rickshaw to

go to work. After that she would start her own work, kneading coal

dust into balls for fuel.

For reasons my grandmother and my mother never understood, she always

wore white gloves, which became filthy in no time.

The Japanese woman often visited my grandmother. She was lonely, with

her husband hardly ever at home. She would bring a little sake, and my

grandmother would prepare some snacks, like soy-pickled vegetables. My

grandmother spoke a little Japanese and the Japanese woman a little

Chinese. They hummed songs to each other and shed tears together when

they became emotional. They often helped in each other's gardens, too.

The Japanese neighbor had very smart gardening tools, which my

grandmother admired greatly, and my mother was often invited over to

play in her garden.

But the Xias could not avoid hearing what the Japanese were doing. In

the vast expanses of northern Manchuria villages were being burned and

the surviving population herded into 'strategic hamlets." Over five

million people, about a sixth of the population, lost their homes, and

tens of thousands died. Laborers were worked to death in mines under

Japanese guards to produce exports to Japan for Manchuria was

particularly rich in natural resources. Many were deprived of salt and

did not have the energy to run away.

Dr. Xia had argued for a long time that the emperor did not know about

the evil things being done because he was a virtual prisoner of the

Japanese. But when Pu Yi changed the way he referred to Japan from

'our friendly neighbor

Life under the Japanese ~7 country' to 'the elder brother country' and

finally to 'parent country," Dr. Xia banged his fist on the table and

called him 'that famous coward." Even then, he said he ~sas not sure

how much responsibility the emperor should bear for the atrocities,

until two traumatic events changed the Xias' world.

One day in late 194x Dr. Xia was in his surgery when a man he had

never seen came into the room. He was dressed in rags, and his

emaciated body was bent almost double. The man explained that he was a

railway coolie, and that he had been having agonizing stomach pains.

His work involved carrying heavy loads from dawn to dusk, 365 days a

year. He did not know how he could go on, but if he lost his job he

would not be able to support his wife and newborn baby.

Dr. Xia told him his stomach could not digest the coarse food he had

to eat. On 1 June 1939, the government had announced that henceforth

rice was reserved for the Japanese and a small number of collaborators.

Most of the local population had to subsist on a diet of acorn meal and

sorghum, which were difficult to digest. Dr. Xia gave the man some

medicine free of charge, and asked my grandmother to give him a small

bag of rice which she had bought illegally on the black market.

43Not long afterward, Dr. Xia heard that the man had died in a forced

labor camp. After leaving the surgery he had eaten the rice, gone back

to work, and then vomited at the railway yard. A Japanese guard had

spotted rice in his vomit and he had been arrested as an 'economic

criminal' and hauled off to a camp. In his weakened state, he survived

only a few days. When his wife heard what had happened to him, she

drowned herself with their baby.

The incident plunged Dr. Xia and my grandmother into deep grief. They

felt responsible for the man's death. Many times Dr. Xia would say:

"Rice can murder as well as save!

A small bagful, three lives!"

tyrant."

He started to call Pu Yi 'that

Shortly after this, tragedy struck closer to home. Dr. Xia's youngest

son was working as a schoolteacher in Yixian. As in every school in

Manchukuo, there was a big portrait of Pu Yi in the office of the

Japanese headmaster, which everyone had to salute when they entered the

room.

One day Dr. Xia's son forgot to bow to Pu Yi. The headmaster shouted

at him to bow at once and slapped him so hard across the face he

knocked him off balance. Dr. Xia's son was enraged: "Do I have to

bend double every day?

Can I not stand up straight even for a momenff I have just done my

obeisance in morning assembly .... The headmaster slapped him again and

barked: "This is your emperor! You Manchurians need to be taught

elementary propriety!" Dr. Xia's son shouted back: "Big deal! It's

only a piece of paper? At that moment two other teachers, both locals,

came by and managed to stop him from saying anything more

incriminating. He recovered his self-control and eventually forced

himself to perform a bow of sorts to the portrait.

That evening a friend came to his house and told him that word was out

that he had been branded a 'thought criminal' an offense which was

punishable by imprisonment, and possibly death. He ran away, and his

family never heard of him again. Probably he was caught and died in

prison, or else in a labor camp. Dr. Xia never recovered from the

blow, which turned him into a determined foe of Manchukuo and of Pu

Yi.

This was not the end of the story. Because of his brother's 'crime,"

local thugs began to harass De-gui, Dr. Xia's only surviving son,

demanding protection money and claiming he had failed in his duty as

the elder brother. He paid up, but the gangsters only demanded more.

In the end, he had to sell the medicine shop and leave Yixian for

Mukden, where he opened a new shop.

By now, Dr.

Xia was becoming more and more successful.

He treated Japanese as well as locals.

Sometimes after

Life under the Japanese So treating a senior Japanese officer or a

collaborator he would say, "I wish he were dead," but his personal

views never affected his professional attitude.

"A patient is a human being," he used to say.

"That is all a doctor should think about.

He should not mind what kind

44of a human being he is."

My grandmother had meanwhile brought her mother to Jinzhou. When she

left home to marry Dr. Xia, her mother had been left alone in the

house with her husband, who despised her, and the two Mongolian

concubines, who hated her. She began to suspect that the concubines

wanted to poison her and her small son, Yu-lin. She always used silver

chopsticks, as the Chinese believe that silver will turn black if it

comes into contact with poison, and she never touched her food or let

Yu-lin touch it until she had tested it out on her dog. One day, a few

months after my grandmother had left the house, the dog dropped dead.

For the first time in her life, she had a big row with her husband; and

with the support of her mother-in-law, old Mrs. Yang, she moved out

with Yu-lin into rented accommodation. Old Mrs. Yang was so disgusted

with her son that she left home with them, and never saw her son again

except at her deathbed.

In the first three years, Mr. Yang reluctantly sent them a monthly

allowance, but at the beginning of 1939 this stopped, and Dr. Xia and

my grandmother had to support the three of them. In those days there

was no maintenance law, as there was no proper legal system, so a wife

was entirely at the mercy of her husband. When old Mrs. Yang died in

1942 my great-grandmother and Yu-lin moved to Jinzhou, and went to live

in Dr. Xia's house. She considered herself and her son to be

second-class citizens, living on charity. She spent her time washing

the family's clothes and cleaning up obsessively, nervously obsequious

toward her daughter and Dr. Xia. She was a pious Buddhist and every

day in her prayers asked Buddha not to reincarnate her as a woman.

"Let me become a cat or a dog, but

9o "They All Say What a Happy Place Manchukuo Is' not a woman," was her

constant murmur as she shuffled around the house, oozing apology with

every step.

My grandmother had also brought her sister, Lan, whom she loved dearly,

to Jinzhou. Lan had married a man in Yixian who turned out to be a

homosexual. He had offered her to a rich uncle, for whom he worked and

who owned a vegetable-oil factory. The uncle had raped several female

members of the household, including his young granddaughter. Because

he was the head of the family, wielding immense power over all its

members, Lan did not dare resist him. But when her husband offered her

to his uncle's business parmer she refused. My grandmother had to pay

the husband to disown her (x/u), as a woman could not ask for a

divorce. My grandmother brought her to Jinzhou, where she was

remarried, to a man called Pei-o.

Pei-o was a warder in the prison, and the couple often visited my

grandmother. Pei-o's stories made my mother's hair stand on end. The

prison was crammed with political prisoners. Pei-o often said how

brave they were, and how they would curse the Japanese even as they

were being tortured. Torture was standard practice, and the prisoners

received no medical treaunent. Their wounds were just left to rot.

Dr. Xia offered to go and treat the prisoners. On one of his first

visits he was introduced by Pei-o to a friend of his called Dong, an

executioner, who operated the garrote.

The prisoner was tied to a chair with a rope around his neck.

was then slowly tightened. Death was excruciatingly slow.

The rope

45Dr. Xia knew from his brother-in-law that Dong's conscience was

troubled, and that whenever he was due to garrote someone, he had to

get himself drunk beforehand.

Dr. Xia invited Dong to his house. He offered him

that perhaps he could avoid tightening the rope all

he would see what he could do. There was usually a

trusted collaborator present, but sometimes, if the

gifts and suggested

the way. Dong said

Japanese guard or a

victim was not

Lip under the Japanese 9I important enough, the Japanese did not bother

to show up.

At other times, they left before the prisoner was actually dead. On

such occasions, Dong hinted, he could stop the garrote before the

prisoner died.

After prisoners were garroted, their bodies were put into thin wooden

boxes and taken on a cart to a stretch of barren land on the outskirts

of town called South Hill, where they were tipped into a shallow pit.

The place was infested with wild dogs, who lived on the corpses. Baby

gifts who had been killed by their families, which was common in those

days, were also often dumped in the pit.

Dr. Xia struck up a relationship with the old cart driver, and gave

him money from time to time. Occasionally the driver would come into

the surgery and start rambling on about life, in an apparently

incoherent way, but eventually he would begin talking about the

graveyard: "I told the dead souls it was not my fault they had ended up

there. I told them that, for my part, I wished them well.

"Come back next year for your anniversary, dead souls. But in the

meantime, if you wish to fly away to look for better bodies to be

reincarnated in, go in the direction your head is pointed. That is a

good path for you." Dong and the cart driver never spoke to each other

about what they were doing, and Dr. Xia never knew how many people

they had saved. After the war the rescued 'corpses' chipped in and

raised money for Dong to buy a house and some land. The cart driver

had died.

One man whose life they helped save was a distant cousin of my

grandmother's called Han-chen, who had been an important figure in the

resistance movement.

Because Jinzhou was the main raiiway junction north of the Great Wall,

it became the assembly point for the Japanese in their assault on China

proper, which started in July 1937. Security was extremely tight, and

Han-chen's organization was infiltrated by a spy, and the entire group

was arrested. They were all tortured. First water with hot chiles was

forced down their noses; then their faces were slapped

with a shoe which had

sharp nails sticking out of the sole.

Then most of them were executed. For a long time the Xias thought

Han-chen was dead, until one day Uncle Pei-o told them that he was

still alive but about to be executed. Dr. Xia immediately contacted

Dong.

On the night of the execution Dr. Xia and my grandmother went to South

Hill with a carriage. They parked behind a clump of trees and waited.

They could hear the wild dogs rummaging around by the pit, from which

46rose the sickly stench of decomposing flesh. At last a cart appeared.

Through the darkness they could dimly see the old driver climbing down

and tipping some bodies out of wooden boxes. They waited for him to

drive off and then went over to the pit. After groping among the

corpses they found Han-chen, but could not tell if he was dead or

alive.

Eventually they realized he was still breathing. He had been so badly

tortured he could not walk, so with great effort they lifted him into

the carriage and drove him back to their house.

They hid him in a tiny room in the innermost corner of the house. Its

one door led into my mother's room, to which the only other access was

from her parents' bedroom. No one would ever go into the room by

chance. As the house was the only one which had direct access to the

courtyard, Han-chen could exercise there in safety, as long as someone

kept watch.

There was the danger of a raid by the police or the local neighborhood

committees. Early on in the occupation the Japanese had set up a

widespread system of neighbor hood control. They made the local big

shots the heads of these units, and these neighborhood bosses helped

collect taxes and kept a round-the-clock watch for 'lawless elements."

It was a form of institutionalized gangsterism, in which 'protection'

and informing were the keys to power.

The Japanese also offered large rewards for turning people in. The

Manchukuo police were less of a threat than ordinary civilians. In

fact, many of the police were quite anti

Lip under the Japanese 93 Japanese. One of their main jobs was to

check people's registration, and they used to carry out frequent

house-to house searches. But they would announce their arrival by

shouting out "Checking registrations! Checking registrations!" so

that anyone who wanted to hide had plenty of time. Whenever Han-chen

or my grandmother heard this shout she would hide him in a pile of

dried sorghum stacked in the end room for fuel. The police would

saunter into the house and sit down and have a cup of tea, telling my

grandmother rather apologetically, "All this is just a formality, you

know .... '

At the time my mother was eleven. Even though her parents did not tell

her what was going on, she knew she must not talk about Han-chen being

in the house. She learned discretion from childhood.

Slowly, my grandmother nursed Han-chen back to health, and after three

months he was well enough to move on. It was an emotional farewell.

"Elder sister and elder brother-in-law," he said, "I will never forget

that I owe my life to you. As soon as I have the chance, I will repay

my great debt to you both." Three years later he came back and was as

good as his word.

As part of their education, my mother and her classmates had to watch

newsreels of Japan's progress in the war. Far from being ashamed of

their brutality, the Japanese vaunted it as a way to inculcate fear.

The films showed Japanese soldiers cutting people in half and prisoners

tied to stakes being torn to pieces by dogs. There were lingering

close-ups of the victims' terror-stricken eyes as their attackers came

at them. The Japanese watched the eleven and twelve-year-old

schoolgirls to make sure they did not shut their eyes or try to stick a

47handkerchief in their mouths to stifle their screams.

nightmares for years to come.

My mother had

During 1942, with their army stretched out across China, Southeast

Asia, and the Pacific Ocean, the Japanese found themselves running

short of labor. My mother's whole class was conscripted to work in a

textile factory, as were the Japanese children. The local girls had to

walk about four miles each way; the Japanese children went by truck.

The local girls got a thin gruel made from moldy maize with dead worms

floating in it; the Japanese girls had packed lunches with meat,

vegetables, and fruit.

The Japanese girls had easy jobs, like cleaning windows.

But the local girls had to operate complex spinning machines, which

were highly demanding and dangerous even for adults. Their main job

was to reconnect broken threads while the machines were running at

speed. If they did not spot the broken thread, or reconnect it fast

enough, they would be savagely beaten by the Japanese supervisor.

The girls were terrified. The combination of nervousness, cold,

hunger, and fatigue led to many accidents. Over half of my mother's

fellow pupils suffered injuries. One day my mother saw a shuttle spin

out of a machine and knock out the eye of the girl next to her. All

the way to the hospital the Japanese supervisor scolded the girl for

not being careful enough.

After the stint in the factory, my mother moved up into junior high

school. Times had changed since my grandmother's youth, and young

women were no longer confined to the four walls of their home. It was

socially acceptable for women to get a high school education. However,

boys and girls received different educations. For girls the aim was to

turn them into 'gracious wives and good mothers," as the school motto

put it. They learned what the Japanese called 'the way of a woman'

looking after a household, cooking and sewing, the tea ceremony, flower

arrangement, embroidery, drawing, and the appreciation of art. The

single most important thing imparted was how to please one's husband.

This included how to dress, how to do one's hair, how to bow, and,

above all, how to obey, without question. As my grandmother put it, my

mother seemed to have 'rebellious bones," and learned almost none of

these skills, even cooking.

Some exams took the form of practical assignments.

such as preparing a particular dish or arranging flowers.

The examination board was made up of local officials, both Japanese and

Chinese, and as well as assessing the exams, they also sized up the

girls. Photos of them wearing prett3' aprons they had designed

themselves were put up on the notice board with their assignments.

Japanese officials often picked fiances from among the girls, as

intermarriage between Japanese men and local women was encouraged. Some

girls were also selected to go to Japan to be married to men they had

not met. Quite often the girls or rather their families were willing.

Toward the end of the occupation one of my mother's friends was chosen

to go to Japan, but she missed the ship and was still in JMzhou when

the Japanese surrendered. My mother looked askance at her.

In contrast with their Chinese Mandarin predecessors, who shunned

physical activity, the Japanese were keen on sports, which my mother

loved. She had recovered from her hip injury, and was a good runner.

48Once she was selected to run in an important race. She trained for

weeks, and was all keyed up for the big day, but a few days before the

race the coach, who was Chinese, took her aside and asked her not to

try to win. He said he could not explain why. My mother understood.

She knew the Japanese did not like to be beaten by the Chinese at

anything. There was one other local girl in the race, and the coach

asked my mother to pass on the same advice to her, but not to tell her

that it came from him. On the day of the race my mother did not even

finish in the first six. Her friends could tell she was not trying.

But the other local girl could not bear to hold back, and came in

first.

The Japanese soon took their revenge. Every morning there was an

assembly, presided over by the headmaster, who was nicknamed "Donkey'

because his name when read in the Chinese way (Mao-h) sounded like the

word for donkey (mao-h). He would bark out orders in harsh,

guttural tones for the four low bows toward the four designated points.

First, "Distant worship of the imperial capital!" in the direction of

Tokyo. Then, "Distant worship of the national capital!" toward

Hsinking, the capital of Manchukuo. Next, "Devoted worship of the

Celestial Emperor!" meaning the emperor of Japan. Finally, "Devoted

worship of the imperial portrait!" this time to the portrait of Pu Yi.

After this came a shallower bow to the teachers.

On this particular morning, after the bowing was completed, the girl

who had won the race the day before was suddenly dragged out of her row

by "Donkey," who claimed that her bow to Pu Yi had been less than

ninety degrees. He slapped and kicked her and announced that she was

being expelled. This was a catastrophe for her and her family.

Her parents hurriedly married her off to a petty government official.

After Japan's defeat her husband was branded as a collaborator, and as

a result the only job his wife could get was in a chemical plant. There

were no pollution controls, and when my mother went back to Jinzhou in

1984 and tracked her down she had gone almost blind from the chemicals.

She was wry about the ironies of her life: having beaten the Japanese

in a race, she had ended up being treated as a kind of collaborator.

Even so, she said she had no regrets about winning the race.

It was difficult for people in Manchukuo to get much idea of what was

happening in the rest of the world, or of how Japan was faring in the

war. The fighting was a long way away, news was strictly censored, and

the radio churned out nothing but propaganda. But they got a sense

that Japan was in trouble from a number of signs, especially the

worsening food situation.

The first real news came in summer 1943, when the newspapers reported

that one of Japan's allies, Italy, had surrendered. By the middle of

1944 some Japanese civilians staffing government offices in Manchukuo

were being conscripted. Then, on 19July 1944, American B-29s appeared

in the sky over Jinzhou for the first time, though they did not bomb

the city. The Japanese ordered even household to dig air-raid

shelters, and there was a compulsory air-raid drill every day at

school. One day a girl in my mother's class picked up a fire

extinguisher and squirted it at a Japanese teacher whom she

particularly loathed.

Previously, this would have brought dire retribution,-but now she was

allowed to get away with it. The fide was turning.

49There had been a long-standing campaign to catch flies and rats. The

pupils had to chop off the rats' tails, put them in envelopes, and hand

them in to the police. The flies had to be put in glass bottles. The

police counted every rat tail and every dead fly. One day in 1944 when

my mother handed in a glass bottle full to the brim with flies, the

Manchukuo policeman said to her: "Not enough for a meal." When he saw

the surprised look on her face, he said: "Don't you know? The Nips

like dead flies. They fry them and eat them!" My mother could see

from the cynical gleam in his eye that he no longer regarded the

Japanese as awesome.

My mother was excited and full of anticipation, but during the autumn

of 1944 a dark cloud had appeared: her home did not seem to be as happy

as before. She sensed there was discord between her parents.

The fifteenth night of the eighth moon of the Chinese year was the

Mid-Autumn Festival, the festival of family union. On that night my

grandmother would place a table with melons, round cakes, and buns

outside in the moonlight, in accordance with the custom. The reason

this date was the festival of family union is that the Chinese word for

'union' (yuan) is the same as that for 'round' or 'unbroken'; the full

autumn moon was supposed to look especially, splendidly, round at this

time. All the items of food eaten on that day had to be round too.

In the silky moonlight, my grandmother would tell my mother stories

about the moon: the largest shadow in it was a giant cassia tree which

a certain lord, Wu Gang, was spending his entire life trying to cut

down. But the tree was enchanted and he was doomed to repeated

failu/e. My mother would stare up into the sky and listen,

fascinated.

The full moon was mesmerizingly beautiful to her, but on that night she

was not allowed to describe it, because she was forbidden by her mother

to utter the word 'round," as Dr. Xia's family had been broken up. Dr.

Xia would be downcast for the whole day, and for several days before

and after the festival. My grandmother would even lose her usual flair

for storytelling.

On the night of the festival in 1944, my mother and my grandmother were

sitting under a trellis covered with winter melons and beans, gazing

through the gaps in the shadowy leaves into the vast, cloudless sky. My

mother started to say, "The moon is particularly round tonight," but my

grandmother interrupted her sharply, then suddenly burst into tears.

She rushed into the house, and my mother heard her sobbing and

shrieking: "Go back to your son and grandsons! Leave me and my

daughter and go your own way!" Then, in gasps between sobs, she

said:

"Was it my fault or yours that your son killed himself?

Why should we have to bear the burden year after year? It isn't me who

is stopping you seeing your children. It is they who have refused to

come and see you .... Since they had left Yixian, only De-gui, Dr.

Xia's second son, had visited them. My mother did not hear a sound

from

Dr.

Xia.

From then on my mother felt there was something wrong. Dr. Xia became

increasingly taciturn, and she instinctively avoided him. Every now

and then my grandmother would become tearful, and murmur to herself

50that she and Dr. Xia could never be completely happy with the heavy

price they had paid for their love. She would hug my mother close and

tell her that she was the only thing she had in her life.

Li.~ under the Japanese 99

My mother was in an uncharacterisfically melancholy mood as winter

descended on Jinzhou. Even the appearance of a second flight of

American B-29s in the clear, cold December sky failed to lift her

spirits.

The Japanese were becoming more and more edgy. One day one of my

mother's school friends got hold of a book by a banned Chinese writer.

Looking for somewhere quiet to read, she went off into the countryside,

where she found a cavern which she thought was an empty air-raid

shelter.

Groping around in the dark, her hand touched what felt like a light

switch. A piercing noise erupted. What she had touched was an alarm.

She had stumbled into an arms depot. Her legs turned to jelly. She

tried to run, but got only a couple of hundred yards before some

Japanese soldiers caught her and dragged her away.

Two days later the whole school was marched to a barren, snow-covered

stretch of ground outside the west gate, in a bend of the Xiaoling

River. Local residents had also been summoned there by the

neighborhood chiefs.

The children were told they were to witness 'the punishment of an evil

person who disobeys Great Japan." Suddenly my mother saw her friend

being hauled by Japanese guards to a spot right in front of her. The

girl was in chains and could hardly walk. She had been tortured, and

her face was so swollen that my mother could barely recognize her. Then

the Japanese soldiers lifted their rifles and pointed them at the girl,

who seemed to be trying to say something, but no sound came out. There

was a crack of bullets, and the girl's body slumped as her blood began

to drip onto the snow.

"Donkey," the Japanese headmaster, was scanning the rows of his pupils.

With a tremendous effort, my mother tried to hide her emotions. She

forced herself to look at the body of her friend, which by now was

lying in a glistening red patch in the white snow.

She heard someone trying to suppress sobs.

Japanese woman teacher whom she liked.

It was Mi~s Tanaka, a young

In an instant "Donkey' was on Miss Tanaka, slapping and

kicking her. She fell to the ground, and tried to roll out of the way

of his boots, but he went on kicking her ferociously.

She had betrayed the Japanese race, he bawled. Eventually "Donkey'

stopped, looked up at the pupils, and barked the order to march off.

My mother took one last look at the crooked body of her teacher and the

corpse of her friend and forced down her hate.

4. "Slaves Who Have No Country of Your Own' Ruled by Different

Masters

(1945-1947)

51In May 1945 the news spread around Jinzhou that Germany had surrendered

and that the war in Europe was over. US planes were flying over the

area much more often:

B-19s were bombing other cities in Manchuria, though Jinzhou was not

attacked. The feeling that Japan would soon be defeated swept through

the city.

On 8 August my mother's school was ordered to go to a shrine to pray

for the victory of Japan. The next day, Soviet and Mongolian troops

entered Manchukuo. News came through that the Americans had dropped

two atom bombs on Japan: the locals cheered the news. The following

days were punctuated by air-raid scares, and school stopped. My mother

stayed at home helping to dig an air-raid shelter.

On 13 August the Xias heard that Japan was suing for peace. Two days

later a Chinese neighbor who worked in the government rushed into their

house to tell them' there was going to be an important announcement on

the radio. Dr. Xia stopped work and came and sat with my grandmother

in the

courtyard. The announcer said that the Japanese emperor had

surrendered. Immediately afterward came the news that Pu Yi had

abdicated as emperor of Manchukuo. People crowded into the streets in

a state of high excitement. My mother went to her school to see what

was happening there. The place seemed dead, except for a faint noise

coming from one of the offices. She crept up to have a look: through

the window she could see the Japanese teachers huddled together

weeping.

She hardly slept a wink that night and was up at the crack of dawn.

When she opened the front door in the morning she saw a small crowd in

the street. The bodies of a Japanese woman and two children were lying

in the road. A Japanese officer had committed hara-kiri; his family

had been lynched.

One morning a few days after the surrender, the Xias' Japanese

neighbors were found dead. Some said they had poisoned themselves. All

overJinzhou Japanese were committing suicide or being lynched. Japanese

houses were looted and my mother noticed that one of her poor neighbors

suddenly had quite a lot of valuable items for sale.

Schoolchildren revenged themselves on their Japanese teachers and beat

them up ferociously. Some Japanese left their babies on the doorsteps

of local families in the hope that they would be saved. A number of

Japanese women were raped; many shaved their heads to try to pass as

men.

My mother was worried about Miss Tanaka, who was the only teacher at

her school who never slapped the pupils and the only Japanese who had

shown distress when my mother's schoolfriend had been executed. She

asked her parents if she could hide her in their house. My grandmother

looked anxious, but said nothing. Dr. Xia just nodded.

My mother borrowed a set of clothes from her aunt Lan, who was about

the teacher's size, then went and found Miss Tanaka, who was barricaded

in her aparunent. The

Ruled by Different Masters I o3 clothes fit her well. She was taller

than the average Japanese woman, and could easily pass for a Chinese.

In case anybody asked, they would say she was my mother's cousin.

52The Chinese have so many cousins no one can keep track of them.

moved into the end room, which had once been Han-chen's refuge.

She

In the vacuum left by the Japanese surrender and the collapse of the

Manchukuo regime the victims were not just Japanese. The city was in

chaos. At night there were gunshots and frequent screams for help. The

male members of the household, including my grandmother's

fifteen-year-old brother Yu-lin and Dr. Xia's apprentices, took turns

keeping guard on the roof every night, armed with stones, axes, and

cleavers. Unlike my grandmother, my mother was not scared at all. My

grandmother was amazed: "You have your father's blood in your veins,"

she used to say to her.

The looting, raping, and killing continued until eight days after the

Japanese surrender, when the population was informed that a new army

would be arriving the Soviet Red Army. On 23 August the neighborhood

chiefs told residents to go to the railway station the next day to

welcome the Russians. Dr. Xia and my grandmother stayed at home, but

my mother joined the large, high-spirited crowd of young people holding

colorful triangle-shaped paper flags. As the train pulled in, the

crowd started waving their flags and shouting' Wula' (the Chinese

approximation of Ura, the Russian word for "Hurrah'). My mother had

imagined the Soviet soldiers as victorious heroes with impressive

beards, riding on large horses. What she saw was a group of shabbily

dressed" pale-skinned youths.

Apart from the occasional fleeting glimpse of some mysterious figure in

a passing car, these were the first white people my mother had ever

seen.

About a thousand Soviet troops were stationed in Jinzhou, and when they

first arrived people felt grateful to them for helping to get rid of

the Japanese. But the

104 "Slaves Who Have No Country of Your Own' Russians brought new

problems. Schools had closed down when the Japanese surrendered, and

my mother was getting private lessons. One day on her way home from

the tutor's, she saw a truck parked by the side of the road:

some Russian soldiers were standing beside it handing out bolts of

textiles. Under the Japanese, cloth had been strictly rationed. She

went over to have a look; it turned out the cloth was from the factory

where she had worked when she was in primary school. The Russians were

swapping it for watches, clocks, and knickknacks. My mother remembered

that there was an old clock buried somewhere at the bottom of a chest

at home. She rushed back and dug it out. She was a bit disappointed

to find it was broken, but the Russian soldiers were overjoyed and gave

her a bolt of beautiful white cloth with a delicate pink flower pattern

on it. Over supper, the family sat shaking their heads in disbelief at

these strange foreigners who were so keen on useless old broken clocks

and baubles.

Not only were the Russians distributing goods from the factories, they

were also dismantling entire factories, including Jinzhou's two oil

refineries, and shipping the equipment back to the Soviet Union. They

said these were 'reparations," but for the locals what this meant was

that industry was crippled.

Russian soldiers would walk into people's homes and simply take

anything they fancied watches and clothes in particular. Stories about

53Russians raping local women swept Jinzhou like wildfire. Many women

went into hiding for fear of their 'liberators." Very soon the city

was seething with anger and anxiety.

The Xias' house was outside the city walls, and was very poorly

protected. A friend of my mother's offered to lend them a house inside

the city gates, surrounded by high stone walls. The family decamped

immediately, taking my mother's Japanese teacher with them. The move

meant that my mother had to walk much farther about thirty minutes each

way- to her tutor's. Dr. Xia insisted on taking her there and

collecting her in the afternoon. My mother did not want him to walk so

far, so she would walk part of the way back on her own and he would

meet her. One day a jeep-load of laughing Russian soldiers skidded to

a halt near her and the Russians jumped out and started running in her

direction. She ran as fast as she could, with the Russians pounding

after her. After a few hundred yards she caught sight of her

stepfather in the distance, brandishing his walking stick. The

Russians were close behind, and my mother turned into a deserted

kindergarten she knew well, which was like a labyrinth. She hid there

for over an hour and then sneaked out the back door and got home

safely. Dr. Xia had seen the Russians chasing my mother into the

building; to his immense relief they soon came out again, obviously

baffled by the layout.

just over a week after the Russians arrived, my mother was told by the

chief of her neighborhood committee to attend a meeting the following

evening. When she got there she saw a number of shabby Chinese men and

a few women making speeches about how they had fought eight years to

defeat the Japanese so that ordinary people could be the masters of a

new China. These were Communists Chinese Communists. They had entered

the city the previous day, without fanfare or warning. The women

Communists at the meeting wore shapeless clothes exactly like the men.

My mother thought to herself: How could you claim to have defeated the

Japanese? You haven't even got decent guns or clothes. To her, the

Communists looked poorer and scruffier than beggars.

She was disappointed because she had imagined them as big and handsome,

and superhuman. Her uncle Pei-o, the prison warder, and Dong, the

executioner, had told her that the Communists were the bravest

prisoners: "They have the strongest bones," her uncle often said.

"They sang and shouted slogans and cursed the Japanese until the very

last minute before they were strangled," said Dong.

The Communists put up notices calling on the population to keep order,

and started arresting collaborators and people who had worked for the

Japanese security forces.

Among those arrested was Yang, my grandmother's father, still deputy

police chief of Yixian. He was imprisoned in his own jail and his

boss, the police chief, was executed.

The Communists soon restored order and got the economy going again. The

food situation, which had been desperate, improved markedly. Dr. Xia

was able to start seeing patients again, and my mother's school

reopened.

The Communists were billeted in the houses of local people. They

seemed honest and unpretentious, and would chat with the families: "We

don't have enough educated people," they used to say to one friend of

my mother's.

54"Come and join us and you can become a county chief."

They needed recruits. At the time of the Japanese surrender, both

Communists and Kuomintang had tried to occupy as much territory as they

could, but the Kuomintang had a much larger and better-equipped army.

Both were maneuvering for position in preparation for renewing the

civil war which had been partly suspended for the previous eight years

in order to fight the Japanese. In fact, fighting between Communists

and Kuomintang had already broken out. Manchuria was the crucial

battleground because of its economic assets. Because they were nearby,

the Communists had got their forces into Manchuria first, with

virtually no assistance from the Russians.

But the Americans were helping Chiang Kai-shek establish himself in the

area by ferrying tens of thousands of Kuomintang troops to North China.

At one point the Americans tried to land some of them at Huludao, the

port about thirty miles from Jinzhou, but had to withdraw under fire

from Chinese Communists. The Kuomintang troops were forced to land

south of the Great Wall and make their way north by train. The United

States gave them air cover.

Altogether, over 50,000 US Marines landed in North China, occupying

Peking and Tianjin.

The Russians formally recognized Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang as the

government of China. By 11 November, the Soviet Red Army had left the

Jinzhou area and pulled back to northern Manchuria, as part of a

commitment by Stalin to withdraw from the area within three months of

victory. This left the Chinese Communists alone in control of the

city. One evening in late November my mother was walking home from

school when she saw large numbers of soldiers hurriedly gathering their

weapons and equipment and moving in the direction of the south gate.

She knew there had been heavy fighting in the surrounding countryside

and guessed the Communists must be leaving.

This withdrawal was in line with the strategy of the Communist leader

Mao Zedong not to try to hold cities, where the Kuomintang would have

the military advantage, but to retreat to the rural areas.

"To surround the cities with our countryside and eventually take the

cities' was Mao's guideline for the new phase.

On the day after the Chinese Communists withdrew from Jinzhou, a new

army entered the city the fourth in as many months. This army had

clean uniforms and gleaming new American weapons. It was the

Kuomintang.

People ran out of their houses and gathered in the narrow mud streets,

clapping and cheering. My mother squeezed her way to the front of the

excited crowd. Suddenly she found she was waving her arms and cheering

loudly. These soldiers really look like the army which beat the

Japanese, she thought to herself. She ran home in a state of high

excitement to tell her parents about the smart new soldiers.

There was a festival atmosphere inJinzhou. People competed to invite

troops to stay in their homes. One officer came to live with the Xias.

He behaved extremely respectfully, and the family all liked him. My

grandmother and Dr. Xia felt that the Kuomintang would maintain law

and order and ensure peace at last.

55But the goodwill people had felt toward the Kuomintang soon turned to

bitter disappointment. Most of the officials

came from other parts of China, and talked down to the local people,

addressing them as Wang-guo-nu ("Slaves who have no country of your

own') and lecturing them about how they ought to be grateful to the

Kuomintang for liberating them from the Japanese. One evening there

was a party at my mother's school for the students and Kuomintang

officers. The three-year-old daughter of one official recited a speech

which began: "We, the Kuomintang, have been fighting the Japanese for

eight years and have now saved you, who were the slaves of Japan ....

My mother and her friends walked out.

My mother was also disgusted by the way the Kuomintang rushed to grab

concubines. By early 1946 Jinzhou was filling up with troops. My

mother's school was the only girls' school in town, and officers and

officials descended on it in droves in search of concubines or,

occasionally, wives. Some of the girls got married willingly, while

others were unable to say no to their families, who thought that

marrying an officer would give them a good start in life.

At fifteen, my mother was highly marriageable. She had grown into a

very attractive and popular young woman, and she was the star pupil at

her school. Several officers had already proposed, but she told her

parents she did not want any of them. One, who was chief of staff of a

general, threatened to send a sedan chair to carry her off after his

gold bars had been refused. My mother was eavesdropping outside the

door as he put this proposal to her parents.

She burst in and told him to his face that she would kill herself in

the sedan chair. Fortunately, not long afterward his unit was ordered

out of the city.

My mother had made up her mind to choose her own husband. She was

disenchanted with the treatment of women, and hated the whole system of

concubinage. Her parents supported her, but they were harassed by

offers, and had to deploy intricate, nerve-racking diplomacy to find

ways of saying no without unleashing reprisals.

One of my mother's teachers was a young woman called

Miss Liu, who liked her very much. In China, if people are fond of

you, they often try to make you an honor an member of their family. At

this time, although they ~'ere not so segregated as in my grandmother's

days, there were not many opportunities for boys and girls to mix, so

being introduced to the brother or sister of a friend was a common way

for young people who did not like the idea of arranged marriages to get

to know each other. Miss Liu introduced my mother to her brother. But

first Mr. and Mrs. Liu had to approve the relationship.

Early in 1946, my mother was invited to spend the Chinese New Year at

the Lius' house, which was quite grand. Mr. Liu was one of the

biggest shop owners in Jinzhou. The son, who was about nineteen,

seemed to be a man of the world; he was wearing a dark-green suit with

a handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket, which was

tremendously sophisticated and dashing for a provincial town like

Jinzhou. He was enrolled in a university in Peking, where he was

reading Russian language and literature. My mother was very impressed

with him, and his family approved of her. They soon sent a go-between

to Dr. Xia to ask for her hand, without, of course, saying a word to

56her.

Dr. Xia was more liberal than most men of his time, and asked my

mother how she felt about the matter. She agreed to be a 'friend' to

young Mr. Liu. At that time, if a boy and a girl were seen talking to

each other in public, they had to be engaged, at the minimum. My

mother was longing to have some fun and freedom, and to be able to make

friends with men without committing herself to marriage.

Dr. Xia and my grandmother, knowing my mother, were cautious with the

Lius, and declined all the customary presents. In the Chinese

tradition, a woman's family often did not consent to a marriage

proposal immediately,-as they should not appear too keen. If they

accepted presents, this implicitly indicated consent. Dr. Xia and my

grandmother were worried about a misunderstanding.

x xo "Slaves Who Have No Country of Your Own'

My mother went out with young Liu for a while. She was rather taken

with his urbanity, and all her relatives, friends, and neighbors said

she had made a good match. Dr. Xia and my grandmother thought they

were a handsome couple, and had privately settled on him as their

son-inlaw. But my mother felt he was shallow. She noticed that he

never went to Peking, but lounged around at home enjoying the life of a

dilettante. One day she discovered he had not even read The Dream of

the Red Chamber, the famous eighteenth-century Chinese classic, with

which every literate Chinese was familiar. When she showed how

disappointed she felt, young Liu said airily that the Chinese classics

were not his forte, and that what he actually liked most was foreign

literature. To try to reassert his superiority, he added: "Now, have

you read Madame Bovary? That's my all-time favorite. I consider it

the greatest of Maupassant's works."

My mother had read Madame Bovary and she knew it was by Flaubert, not

Maupassant. This vain sally put her off Liu in a big way, but she

refrained from confronting him there and then to do so would have been

considered 'shrewish."

Liu loved gambling, particularly mahjongg, which bored my mother to

death. One evening soon afterward, in the middle of a game, a female

servant came in and asked: "Which maid would Master Liu like to serve

him in bed?" In a very casual way, Liu said "So-and-so." My mother

was shaking with anger, but all Liu did was to raise his eyebrow as

though he was surprised at her reaction.

Then he said in a supercilious way: "This is a perfectly common custom

in Japan. Everybody does it. It's called si-qin ("bed with

service")." He was trying to make my mother feel she was being

provincial and jealous, which was traditionally regarded in China as

one of the worst vices in a woman, and grounds for a husband to disown

his wife. Once again my mother said nothing, even though she was

boiling with rage inside.

My mother decided she could not be

happy with a husband who regarded flirtations and extramarital sex as

essential aspects of 'being a man." She wanted someone who loved her,

who would not want to hurt her by doing this sort of thing. That

evening she made up her mind to end the relationship.

A few days later Mr. Liu senior suddenly died. In those days a

spectacular funeral was very important, particularly if the dead person

57had been the head of the family. A funeral which failed to meet the

expectations of the relatives and of society would bring disapproval on

the family.

The Lius wanted an elaborate ceremony, not simply a procession from the

house to the cemetery. Monks were brought in to read the Buddhist

sutra of' putting the head down' in the presence of the whole family.

Immediately after this, the family members burst out crying. From then

to the day of the burial, on the forty-ninth day after the death, the

sound of weeping and wailing was supposed to be heard nonstop from

early morning until midnight, accompanied by the constant burning of

artificial money for the deceased to use in the other world. Many

families could not keep up this marathon, and hired professionals to do

the job for them. The Lius were too filial to do this, and did all the

keening themselves, with the help of relatives, of whom there were

many.

On the forty-second day after his death, the corpse which had been put

in a beautifully carved sandalwood coffin was placed in a marquee in

the courtyard. On each of the last seven nights before his interment

the dead man was supposed to ascend a high mountain in the other world

and look down on his whole family; he would only be happy if he saw

that every member of his family was present and taken care of.

Otherwise, it was believed, he would never find rest. The family

wanted my mother to be there as the intended daughter-in-law.

She refused. She felt sad for old Mr. Liu, who had been kind to her,

but if she attended, she would never be able to get out of marrying his

son. Relays of messengers from the Liu family came to the Xia house.

Dr. Xia told my mother that breaking her relationship at this moment

was tantamount to letting Mr. Liu senior down, and that this was

dishonorable. Although he would not have objected to my mother

breaking up with young Mr. Liu normally, he felt that under the

circumstances her wishes should be subordinated to a higher imperative.

My grandmother also thought she should go. In addition she said, "Who

ever heard of a girl rejecting a man because he got the name of some

foreign writer wrong, or because he had affairs? All rich young men

like to have fun and sow their wild oats. Besides, you have no need to

worry about concubines and maids. You're a strong character; you can

keep your husband under control."

This was not my mother's idea of the life she wanted, and she said so.

In her heart, my grandmother agreed. But she was frightened about

keeping my mother at home because of the persistent proposals from

Kuomintang officers, "We can say no to one, but not to all of them,"

she told my mother.

"If you don't marry Zhang, you will have to accept Lee.

Think it over: isn't Liu much better than the others? If you marry

him, no officer will be able to bother you anymore. I worry day and

night about what may happen to you. I won't be able to rest until you

leave the house." But my mother said she would rather die than marry

someone who could not give her happiness and love.

The Lius were furious with my mother, and so were Dr. Xia' and my

grandmother. For days they argued, pleaded, cajoled, shouted, and

wept, to no avail. Finally, for the first time since he had hit her as

a child for sitting in his seat on the kang, Dr. Xia flew into a rage

with my mother.

58"What you are doing is bringing shame on the name of Xia. I don't want

a daughter like you!" My mother stood up and flung back the words:

"All right, then, you won't have a daughter like me. I'm leaving!" She

stormed out of the room, packed her things, and left the house.

Ruled by Different Masters I 13 In my grandmother's time, leaving home

like this would have been out of the question. There were no jobs for

women, except as servants, and even they had to have references. But

things had changed. In 1946 women could live on their own and find

work, like teaching or medicine, although working was still regarded as

the last resort by most families. In my mother's school was a teacher

training depariment which offered free board and tuition for girls who

had completed three years in the school. Apart from an exam, the only

condition for entry was that the graduates had to become teachers. Most

pupils in the depa,uuent were either from poor families who could not

afford to pay for an education or people who did not think they had a

chance to get into a university, and therefore did not want to stay on

at the normal high school. It was only since 1945 that women could

contemplate getting into a universiF; under the Japanese, they could

not go beyond high school, where they were mainly taught how to run a

family.

Up till now my mother had never considered going to this department,

which was generally looked down on as second best. She had always

thought of herself as university material. The depariment was a lit He

surprised when she applied, but she persuaded them of her fervent wish

to join the teaching profession. She had not yet finished her

obligatory three years in the school, but she was known as a star

pupil. The depa~uuent gladly took her after giving her an exam which

she passed with little difficulty. She went to live in the school. It

was not long before my grandmother rushed over to beg her to come home.

My mother was glad to have a reconciliation; she promised she would go

home and stay often. But she insisted on keeping her bed on the

campus; she was determined not to be dependent on anyone, however much

they loved her. For her, the deparunent was ideal. It guaranteed her

a job after graduation, whereas university graduates often could not

find jobs. Another advantage was that it was free and

Dr. Xia was already beginning to suffer the effects of the

mismanagement of the economy.

The Kuomintang personnel put in charge of the factories those that had

not been dismantled by the Russians were conspicuously unsuccessful at

getting the economy moving again. They got a few factories working at

well below full capacity, but pocketed most of the revenue

themselves.

Kuomintang carpetbaggers were moving into the smart houses which the

Japanese had vacated. The house next door to the Xias' old house,

where the Japanese official had lived, was now occupied by an official

and one of his newly acquired concubines. The mayor ofJinzhou, a Mr.

Han, was a local nobody. Suddenly he was rich from the proceeds of

property confiscated from the Japanese and collaborators. He acquired

several concubines, and the locals began to call the city government

'the Han household," as it was bulging with his relatives and

friends.

When the Kuomintang took Yixian they released my great-grandfather,

Yang, from prison or he bought his way out. The locals believed, with

good reason, that Kuomintang officials made fortunes out of the

59ex-collaborators.

Yang tried to protect himself by marrying off his remaining daughter,

whom he had had with one of his concubines, to a Kuomintang officer.

But this man was only a captain, not powerful enough to give him any

real protection.

Yang's property was confiscated and he was reduced to living as a

beggar 'squatting by open drains," as the locals called it. When she

heard about this, his wife told-her children not to give him any money

or do anything to help him.

In 1947, a little more than a year after his release from jail, he

developed a cancerous goiter on his neck. He realized he was dying and

sent word to Jinzhou begging to see his children. My great-grandmother

refused, but he kept sending messages entreating them to come. In the

end his wife relented. My grandmother, Lan and Yu-lin set off for

Yixian by train. It was ten years

since my grandmother had seen her father, and he was a crumpled shadow

of his former self. Tears streamed down his cheeks when he saw his

children. They found it hard to forgive him for the way he had treated

their mother and themselves and they spoke to him using rather distant

forms of address. He pleaded with Yu-lin to call him Father, but

Yu-lin refused.

Yang's ravaged face was a mask of despair.

brother to call him Father, just once.

My grandmother begged her

Finally he did, through gritted teeth. His father took his hand and

said: "Try to be a scholar, or run a small business.

Never try to be an official. It will ruin you, the way it has ruined

me." These were his last words to his family.

He died with only one of his concubines at his side. He was so poor he

could not even afford a coffin. His corpse was put in a battered old

suitcase and buried without ceremony. Not one member of his family was

there.

Corruption was so widespread that Chiang Kai-shek set up a special

organization to combat it. It was called the "Tiger-Beating Squad,"

because people compared corrupt officials to fearsome tigers, and it

invited citizens to send in their complaints. But it soon became

apparent that this was a means for the really powerful to extort money

from the rich.

"Tiger-beating' was a lucrative job.

Much worse than this was the blatant looting. Dr. Xia was visited

every now and then by soldiers who would salute punctiliously and then

say in an exaggeratedly cringing voice: "Your honor Dr. Xia, some of

our colleagues are very short of money. Could you perhaps lend us

some?" It was unwise to refuse. Anyone who crossed the Kuomintang was

likely to be accused of being a Communist, which usually meant arrest,

and frequently torture. Soldiers would also swagger into the surgery

and demand treatment and medicine without paying a penny. Dr. Xia did

not particularly mind giving them free medical treatment he regarded it

as a doctor's duty to treat anyone but the

soldiers would sometimes just take the medicine

without asking, and sell it on the black market. Medicines were in

desperately short supply.

60As the civil war intensified the number of soldiers in Jinzhou rose.

The troops of the central command, which came directly under Chiang

Kai-shek, were relatively well disciplined, but the others received no

pay from the central government and had to 'live off the land."

At the teacher training department my mother struck up a close

friendship with a beautiful, vivacious seventeen year-old girl called

Bai. My mother admired her and looked up to her. When she told Bai

about her disenchantment with the Kuomintang, Bai told her to 'look at

the forest, not the individual trees': any force was bound to have some

shortcomings, she said. Bai was passionately pro-Kuomintang, so much

so that she had joined one of the intelligence services. In a training

course it was made clear to her that she was expected to report on her

fellow students. She refused. A few nights later her colleagues in

the course heard a shot from her bedroom. When they opened the door,

they saw her lying on her bed, gasping, her face deathly white. There

was blood on her pillow. She died without being able to say a word.

The newspapers published the story as what was called a 'peach-colored

case," meaning a crime of passion. They claimed she had been murdered

by a jealous lover. But nobody believed this. Bai had behaved in a

very demure manner where men were concerned. My mother heard that she

had been killed because she had tried to pull out.

The tragedy did not end there. Bai's mother was working as a live-in

servant in the house of a wealthy family which owned a small gold shop.

She was heartbroken at the death of her only daughter, and incensed by

the scurrilous suggestions in the papers that her daughter had had

several lovers who had fought over her and eventually killed her.

A woman's most sacred possession was her chastity, which she was

supposed to defend to the death. Several days after

Bai's death, her mother hanged

herself. Her employer was visited by thugs who accused him of being

responsible for her death. It was a good pretext to extort money, and

it did not take long for the man to lose his gold shop. One day there

was a knock on the Xias' door and a man in his late thirties, dressed

in Kuomintang uniform, came in and bowed to my grandmother, addressing

her as 'elder sister' and Dr. Xia as 'elder brother-in-law." It took

them a moment to realize that this smartly dressed, healthy, well fed

man was Han-chen, who had been tortured and saved from the garrote, and

whom they had hidden in their old house for three months and nursed

back to health. With him, also in uniform, was a tall, slender young

man who looked more like a college student than a soldier. Hanchen

introduced him as his friend Zhu-ge. My mother immediately took to

him.

Since their last encounter Han-chen had become a senior official in

Kuomintang intelligence, and was in charge of one of its branches for

the whole of Jinzhou. As he left, he said: "Elder sister, I was given

back my life by your family. If you ever need anything, anything at

all, all you have to do is say the word and it will be done."

Han-chen and Zhu-ge came to visit often, and Hanchen soon found jobs in

the intelligence apparatus for both Dong, the former executioner who

had saved his life, and my grandmother's brother-in-law Pei-o, the

former prison warder.

Zhu-ge became very friendly with the family. He had been studying

science at university in Tianjin and had fled to join the Kuomintang

when the city had fallen into Japanese hands. On one of his visits my

61mother introduced him to Miss Tanaka, who had been living with the

Xias.

They hit it off, got married, and went to live in rented rooms. One

day Zhu-ge was cleaning his gun when he accidentally touched the

trigger and the gun went off. The bullet passed straight through the

floor and killed the landlord's youngest son, who was in bed

downstairs. The family did not dare to bring a charge against Zhu-ge

because they were frightened of intelligence men, who could accuse

anyone they chose to of being a Communist. Their word was law, and

they had the power of life and death. Zhu-ge's mother gave the family

a large sum of money as compensation. Zhu-ge was distraught, but the

family did not even dare show any anger toward him. Instead, they

showed exaggerated gratitude, out of fear that he might anticipate that

they would be angry, and harm them. He found this hard to bear, and

soon moved out.

Lan's husband, Uncle Pei-o, prospered in the intelligence system and

was so delighted with his new employers that he changed his name to

"Xiao-shek' ("Loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek'). He was a member of a

three-man group under Zhu-ge. Initially their job was to purge anyone

who had been pro-Japanese, but very soon this slid into watching out

for students showing pro-Communist sympathies. For a while, "Loyalty'

Pei-o did what was asked of him, but his conscience soon began to

trouble him; he did not want to be responsible for sending people to

prison or choosing victims for extortion. He asked for a transfer and

was given a job as a watchman at one of the city checi/points. The

Communists had left the city of Jinzhou but had not gone very far. They

were engaged in constant battles with the Kuomintang in the surrounding

countryside. The Jinzhou authorities were trying to keep. tight

control over the most vital commodities to stop the Communists from

getting hold of them.

Being in intelligence gave "Loyalty' power, which brought him money.

Gradually he began to change. He started smoking opium, drinking

heavily, gambling, and frequenting brothels, and soon contracted a

venereal disease. My grandmother offered him money to try to get him

to behave, but he carried on as before. However, he could see that

food was becoming increasingly scarce for the Xias, and often invited

them to good meals at his house. Dr. Xia would not let my grandmother

go.

"Those are ill-gotten

Ruled by Different Masters l 19 gains and we don't want to touch them,"

he said. But the thought of some decent food was sometimes too strong

a temptation for my grandmother and occasionally she would sneak off to

the Pei-o house with Yu-lin and my mother for a square meal.

When the Kuomintang first came to Jinzhou Yu-lin was fifteen years old.

He had been studying medicine with Dr. Xia, who thought he had a

promising future as a doctor.

By now my grandmother had taken on the position of the female head of

the family as her mother, sister, and brother were all dependent on her

husband for a living, and she felt it was time Yu-lin got married. She

soon settled on a woman who was three years older than him and came

from a poor family, which meant she would be hard-working and capable.

My mother went with my grandmother to see the prospective bride; when

she came in to bow to the visitors in the sitting room, she was wearing

a green velvet gown which she had had to borrow for the occasion. The

62couple were married in a registry office in 1946, the bride wearing a

rented Western-style white silk veil. Yu-lin was sixteen and his wife

was nineteen.

My grandmother asked Han-chen to find Yu-lin a job.

One of the vital commodities was salt, and the authorities had

forbidden selling it to the countryside. Of course, they were running

a salt racket themselves. Han-chen got Yulin a job as a salt guard,

and several times he was almost involved in serious skirmishes with

Communist guerrillas and other Kuomintang factions who were trying to

capture the salt. Many people were being killed in the fighting.

Yu-lin found the job frightening, and was also tormented by his

conscience. Within a few months he quit.

By this time, the Kuomintang was gradually losing control of the

countryside, and was finding it harder and harder to get recruits.

Young men were increasingly unwilling to become 'bomb ashes' (pao-hul).

The civil war had become much more bloody, with enormous casualties,

and the danger of being conscripted or simply impressed into the army

was growing. The

only way to keep Yu-lin out of uniform was to buy him some form of

insurance, so my grandmother asked Han-chen to find him a job in

intelligence. To her surprise, he refused, telling her it was no place

for a decent young man.

My grandmother did not realize that Han-chen was in deep despair about

his work. Like "Loyalty' Pei-o he had become an opium addict, and was

drinking heavily and visiting prostitutes. He was visibly wasting

away. Han-chen had always been a self-disciplined man, with a strong

sense of morality, and it was most unlike him to let himself go in this

way. My grandmother thought that the ancient remedy of marriage might

pull him around, but when she put this to him he said he could not take

a wife, because he did not want to live. My grandmotfier was shocked,

and pressed him to tell her why, but Han-chen only started weeping and

said bitterly that he was not free to tell her, and that she could not

help anyway.

Han-chen had joined the Kuomintang because he hated the Japanese. But

things had turned out differently from what he had envisaged. Being

involved in the intelligence system meant that he could hardly avoid

having innocent blood of his' fellow Chinese on his hands. But he

could not get out. What had happened to my mother's college friend Bai

was what happened to anyone who tried to quit.

Han-chen probably felt that the only way out was to kill himself, but

suicide was a traditional gesture of protest and might bring trouble to

his family. Han-chen must have come to the conclusion that the only

thing he could do was to die a 'natural' death, which was why he was

going to such wild extremes in abusing his body and why he refused to

take any treatment.

On the eve of Chinese New Year 1947 he returned to his family home in

Yixian to spend the festival period with his brother and his elderly

father. As if he felt that this was to be their last meeting, he

stayed on. He fell gravely ill, and died in the summer. He had told

my grandmother that the only regret he would have in dying was not

being able to fulfill his filial duty and hold a grand funeral for his

father.

63But he did not die without fulfilling his obligation to my grandmother

and her family. Even though he refused to take Yu-lin into

intelligence work, he acquired an identity card for him which said he

was a Kuomintang intelligence official. Yu-lin never did any work for

the intelligence system, but his membership guaranteed him against

being conscripted, and he was able to stay and help Dr. Xia in the

medicine shop.

One of the teachers at my mother's school was a young man named Kang,

who taught Chinese literature. He was very bright and knowledgeable,

and my mother respected him tremendously. He told her. and some other

girls that he had been involved in anti-Kuomintang activities in the

city of Kunming in southwest China, and that his girlfriend had been

killed by a hand grenade during a demonstration.

His lectures were clearly pro-Communist, and made a strong impression

on my mother.

One morning in early 1947 my mother was stopped at the school gate by

the old porter. He handed her a note and told her that Kang had gone.

What my mother did not know was that Kang had been tipped off, as some

of the Kuomintang intelligence agents were secretly working for the

Communists. At the time my mother did not know much about the

Communists, or that Kang was one of them. All she knew was that the

teacher she most admired had had to flee because he was about to be

arrested.

The note was from Kang, and consisted of only one word: "Silence." My

mother saw two possible meanings in this word. It could refer to a

line from a poem Kang had written in memory of his girlfriend, "Silence

in which our strength is gathering," in which case it might be an

appeal not to lose heart. But the note could also be a warning against

doing something impetuous. My mother had by then established quite a

reputation for fearlessness, and she commanded support among the

students. The next thing she knew a new headmistress arrived. She was

a delegate to the National Congress of the Kuomintang, reputedly with

ties to the secret services. She brought with her a number of

intelligence men, including one called Yao-han, who became the

political supervisor, with the special task of keeping a watch on the

students.

The academic supervisor was the district party secretary of the

Kuomintang.

My mother's closest friend at this time was a distant male cousin

called Hu. His father owned a chain of department stores in Jinzhou,

Mukden, and Harbin, and had a wife and two concubines. His wife had

produced a son, Cousin Hu, while the concubines had not. Cousin Hu's

mother therefore became the object of intense jealousy on their part.

One night when her husband was out of the house the concubines drugged

her food and that of a young male servant, then put them into the same

bed. When Mr. Hu came back and found his wife, apparently blind

drunk, in bed with the servant, he went berserk; he locked his wife up

in a tiny room in a remote corner of the house, and forbade his son to

see her again. He had a sneaking suspicion that the whole thing might

have been a plot by his concubines, so he did not disown his wife and

throw her out, which would have been the ultimate disgrace (to himself

as well as to her). He was worried that the concubines might harm his

son, so he sent him away to boarding school in Jinzhou, which is how my

mother met him, when she was seven and he was twelve. His mother soon

went mad in her solitary confinement.

64Cousin Hu grew up to be a sensitive boy who kept to himself. He never

got over what had happened, and occasionally talked to my mother about

it. The story made my mother reflect on the blighted lives of women in

her own family and on the numerous tragedies that had happened to so

many other mothers, daughters, wives, and concubines. The

powerlessness of women, the barbarity of the age-old customs, cloaked

in 'tradition' and even 'morality," enraged her. Although there had

been changes, they were buried by the still overwhelming prejudice. My

mother was impatient for something more radical.

In her school she learned that one political force had openly promised

change the Communists. The information came from a close friend of

hers, an eighteen-year old girl called Shu who had broken with her

family and was staying in the school because her father had tried to

force her into an arranged marriage with a boy of twelve.

One day Shu bade farewell to my mother: she and the man she was

secretly in love with were running away to join the Communists.

"They are our hope," were her parting words.

It was about this time that my mother became very close to Cousin Hu,

who had realized that he was in love with her when he found that he was

very jealous of young Mr. Liu, whom he regarded as a dandy. He was

delighted when she broke up with Liu, and came to see my mother almost

every day.

One evening in March 1947 they went to the cinema together.

two kinds of tickets: one for a seat;

There were

the other, which was much cheaper, for standing only.

Cousin Hu bought my mother a seat, but a standing ticket for himself,

saying he did not have enough money on him.

My mother thought this was a bit odd, and so she stole a glance in his

direction every now and then. Halfway through the film she saw a

smartly dressed young woman approach him, slide by him slowly, and

then, for a split second, their hands touched. She got up at once and

insisted on leaving. When they got outside she demanded an

explanation. At first Cousin Hu tried to deny that anything had

happened; when my mother made it clear she was not going to swallow

this, he said he would explain later. There were things my mother

could not understand, he said, because she was too young. When they

reached her house, she

refused to let him in. Over the next few days he called repeatedly,

but my mother would not see him.

After a while, she was ready for an apology and a reconciliation, and

would keep looking out toward the gate to see if he was there. One

evening, when it was snowing hard, she saw him coming into the

courtyard accompanied by another man. He did not make for her part of

the house, but went straight to where the Xias' tenant, a man called

Yu-wu, was living. After a short time Hu reemerged and walked briskly

over to her room. With an urgent edge to his voice, he told her he had

to leave Jinzhou immediately, as the police were after him. When she

asked him why, all he said was, "I am a Communist," and disappeared

into the snowy night.

It dawned on my mother that the incident in the cinema must have been a

65clandestine mission of Cousin Hu's. She was heartbroken, as there was

now no time to make up with him. She realized that their tenant,

Yu-wu, must also be an underground Communist. The reason Cousin Hu had

been brought to Yu-wu's quarters was to hide there.

Cousin Hu and Yu-wu had not known each other's identity until this

evening. Both of them realized it was out of the question for Cousin

Hu to stay there, as his relationship with my mother was too well

known, and if the Kuomintang came to the house to look for him Yu-wu

would be discovered as well. That same night Cousin Hu tried to make

for the Communist-controlled area, which lay about twenty miles beyond

the city boundaries. Some time later, as the first buds of spring were

bursting out, Yu-wu received news that Hu had been captured as he left

the city. His escort had been shot dead. A later report said Hu had

been executed.

My mother had been turning more and more strongly against the

Kuomintang for some time. The only alternative she knew was the

Communists, and she had been particularly attracted by their promises

to put an end to

injustices against women. Up to now,

at the age of fifteen, she had not felt ready to commit herself fully.

The news of Cousin Hu's death made her mind up. She decided to join

the Communists.

5. "Daughter for Sale for 10 Kilos of Rice'

In Battle for a New China

(1947-1948)

Yu-wu had first appeared at the house some months earlier bearing an

introduction from a mutual friend. The Xias had just moved from their

borrowed residence into a big house inside the walls near the north

gate, and had been looking for a rich tenant to help with the rent.

Yu-wu arrived wearing the uniform of a Kuomintang officer, accompanied

by a woman whom he presented as his wife and a young baby. In fact,

the woman was not his wife but his assistant. The baby was hers, and

her real husband was somewhere far away in the regular Communist

army.

Gradually this 'family' became a real one. They later had two children

together and their original spouses remarried.

Yu-wu had joined the Communist Party in 1938. He had been sent to

Jinzhou from the Communists' wartime headquarters, Yan'an, shortly

after the Japanese surrender, and was responsible for collecting and

delivering informarion to the Communist forces outside the city. He

operated under the identity of a Kuomintang military bureau chief for

one of the districts of Jinzhou, a position the Communists had bought

for him. At the time, posts in the Kuomintang, even in the

intelligence system, were virtually

In Battle ybr a New China 127 for sale to the highest bidder. Some

people bought posts to protect their families from being forced into

the army and from harassment by thugs, others to be able to extort

money. Because of its strategic importance, there were a great many

officers in Jinzhou, which facilitated the Como munist infiltration of

the system.

Yu-wu played his part to perfection.

He gave a lot of gambling and

66dinner parties, par fly to make connections and partly to weave a

protective web around himself.

Mingled with the constant comings and goings of Kuomintang officers and

intelligence officials was an unending stream of 'cousins' and

'friends." They were always different people, but nobody asked any

questions.

Yu-wu had another layer of cover for these frequent visitors. Dr.

Xia's surgery was always open, and Yu-wu's 'friends' could walk in off

the street without attracting attention, and then go through the

surgery to the inner courtyard. Dr. Xia tolerated Yu-wu's rowdy

parties without demur, even though his sect, the Society of Reason,

forbade gambling and drinking. My mother was puzzled, but put it down

to her stepfather's tolerant nature. It was only years later when she

thought back that she felt certain that Dr. Xia had known, or guessed,

Yu-wu's real identity.

When my mother heard that her cousin Hu had been killed by the

Kuomintang she approached Yu-wu about working for the Communists.

turned her down, on the grounds that she was too young.

He

My mother had become quite prominent at her school and she was hoping

that the Communists would approach her. They did, but they took their

time checking her out.

In fact, before leaving for the Communist-controlled area, her friend

Shu had told her own Communist contact about my mother, and had

introduced him to her as 'a friend'.

One day, this man came to her and told her out of the blue to go on a

certain day to a railway tunnel halfway between the Jinzhou south

station and the north station.

128 "Daughter JSr Sale Jbr i o Kilos of Rice' There, he said, a

good-looking man in his mid-twenties with a Shanghai accent would

contact her. This man, whose name she later discovered was Liang,

became her controller.

Her first job was to distribute literature like Mao Zedong's On

Coalition Government, and pamphlets on land reform and other Communist

policies. These had to be smuggled into the city, usually hidden in

big bundles of sorghum stalks which were to be used for fuel. The

pamphlets were then repacked, often rolled up inside big green

peppers.

Sometimes Yu-lin's wife would buy the peppers and keep a lookout in the

street when my mother's associates came to collect the literature. She

also helped hide the pamphlets in the ashes of various stoves, heaps of

Chinese medicines, or piles of fuel. The students had to read this

literature in secret, though left-wing novels could be read more or

less openly: among the favorites was Maksim Gorky's Mother.

One day a copy of one of the pamphlets my mother had been distributing,

Mao's On New Democracy, ended up with a rather absent-minded

schoolfriend of hers, who put it in her bag and forgot about it. When

she went to the market she opened her bag to get some money and the

pamphlet dropped out. Two intelligence men happened to be there and

identified it from its flimsy yellow paper. The girl was taken off and

interrogated. She died under torture.

67Many people had died at the hands of Kuomintang intelligence, and my

mother knew that she risked torture if she was caught. This incident,

far from daunting her, only made her feel more defiant. Her morale was

also boosted enormously by the fact that she now felt herself pan of

the Communist movement.

Manchuria was the key battleground in the civil war, and what happened

in Jinzhou was becoming more and more critical to the outcome of the

whole struggle for China. There was no fixed front, in the sense of a

single

In Battle For a New China i 2~ battle line. The Communists held the

northern part of Manchuria and much of the countryside; the Kuomintang

held the main cities, except for Harbin in the north, plus the seaports

and most of the railway lines. By the end of 1947, for the first time,

the Communist armies in the area outnumbered those of their opponents;

during that year they had put over 300,000 Kuomintang troops out of

action. Many peasants were joining the Communist army, or swinging

their support behind the Communists. The single most important reason

was that the Communists had carried out a land-to-the-filler reform and

the peasants felt that backing them was the way to keep their land.

At the time the Communists controlled much of the area around Jinzhou.

Peasants were reluctant to enter the city to sell their produce because

they had to go through Kuomintang checkpoints where they were harassed:

exorbitant fees were extorted, or they simply had their products

confiscated. The grain price in the city was rocketing upwards almost

day by day, made worse by the manipulation of greedy merchants and

corrupt officials.

When the Kuomintang first arrived, they had issued a new currency known

as the "Law money." But they proved unable to control inflation. Dr.

Xia had always been worried about what would happen to my grandmother

and my mother when he died and he was now nearly eighty. He had been

putting his savings into the new money because he had faith in the

government. After a time the Law money was replaced by another

currency, the Golden Yuan, which soon became worth so little that when

my mother wanted to pay her school fees she had to hire a rickshaw to

carry the huge pile of notes (to 'save face' Chiang Kai-shek refused to

print any note bigger than 10,000 yuan). Dr. Xia's entire savings

were gone.

The economic situation deteriorated steadily through the winter of

1947-48. Protests against food shortages and price gouging multiplied.

Jinzhou was the key supply base for the large Kuomintang armies farther

north, and in x3o "Daughter for Sale Jbr I o Kilos of Rice'

mid-December 1947 a crowd of 20,000 people raided two well-stocked

grain stores.

One trade was prospering: trafficking in young girls for brothels and

as slave-servants to rich men. The city was littered with beggars

offering their children in exchange for food. For days outside her

school my mother saw an emaciated, desperate-looking woman in rags

slumped on the frozen ground. Next to her stood a girl of about ten

with an expression of numb misery on her face. A sack was poking up

out of the back of her collar and on it was a poorly written sign

saying "Daughter for sale for io kilos of rice."

Among those who could not make ends meet were the teachers. They had

been demanding a pay rise, to which the government responded by

increasing tuition fees. This had lit He effect, because the parents

68could not afford to pay more. A teacher at my mother's school died of

food poisoning after eating a piece of meat he had picked up off the

street. He knew the meat was rotten, but he was so hungry he thought

he would take a chance.

By now my mother had become the president of the students' union. Her

Party controller, Liang, had given her instructions to try to win over

the teachers as well as the students, and she set about organizing a

campaign to get people to donate money for the teaching staff. She and

some other girls would go to cinemas and theaters and before the

performances started they would appeal for donations. They also put on

song-and-dance shows and ran rummage sales, but the returns were paltry

people were either too poor or too mean.

One day she bumped into a friend of hers who was the granddaughter of a

brigade commander and was married to a Kuomintang officer. The friend

told her there was going to be a banquet that evening for about fifty

officers and their wives in a smart restaurant in town. In those days

there was a lot of entertaining going on among Kuomintang officials. My

mother raced off to her school and contacted as many people as she

could. She told them to gather at 5 p.m. in front of the city's most

prominent landmark, the sixty-foot-high eleventh-century stone drum

tower. When she got there, at the head of a sizable contingent, there

were over a hundred girls waiting for her orders. She told them her

plan. At around six o'clock they saw large numbers of officers

arriving in carriages and rickshaws.

The women were dressed to the nines, wearing silk and satin and

jingling with jewelry.

When my mother judged that the diners would be well into their food and

drink, she and some of the girls filed into the restaurant. Kuomintang

decadence was such that security was unbelievably lax. My mother

climbed onto a chair, her simple dark-blue cotton gown making her the

image of austerity among the brightly, embroidered silks and jewels.

She made a brief speech about how hard up the teachers were, and

finished with the words: "We all know you are generous people. You

must be very pleased to have this opportunity to open your pockets and

show your generosity."

The officers were in a spot. None of them wanted to look mean.

fact, they more or less had to try to show off.

In

And, of course, they wanted to get rid of the unwelcome intruders. The

girls went round the heavily laden tables and made a note of each

officer's contribution. Then, first thing next morning, they went

round to the officers' homes and collected their pledges. The teachers

were enormously grateful to the girls, who delivered the money to them

right away, so it could be used before its value was wiped out, which

would be within hours.

There was no retribution against my mother, perhaps because the diners

were ashamed of being caught like this, and did not want to bring

further embarrassment on themselves although, of course, the whole town

knew about it at once. My mother had successfully turned the rules of

the game against them. She was appalled by the casual extravagance of

the Kuomintang elite while people were

starving to death in the streets and this made her even more

committed to the Communists.

As food was the problem inside the city, so clothing was in desperately

69short supply outside, as the Kuomintang had placed a ban on selling

textiles to the countryside. As a watchman on the gates, "Loyalty'

Pei-o's main job was to stop textiles being smuggled out of the city

and sold to the Communists. The smugglers were a mixture of black

marketeers, men working for Kuomintang officials, and underground

Communists.

The usual procedure was that

the carts and confiscate the

hope that he would come back

seize. Sometimes they had a

percentage.

"Loyalty' and his colleagues would stop

cloth, then release the smuggler in the

with another load which they could also

deal with the smugglers for a

Whether they had a deal or not, the guards would sell the cloth to the

Communist-controlled areas anyway.

"Loyalty' and his colleagues waxed fat.

One night a dirty, nondescript cart rolled up at the gate where

"Loyalty' was on duty. He performed his customary charade, poking the

pile of cloth on the back while he swaggered around, hoping to

intimidate the driver and soften him up for an advantageous deal. As

he sized up the value of the load and the likely resistance of the

driver, he was also hoping to engage him in conversation and find out

who his employer was.

"Loyalty' took his time because this was a big consignment, more than

he could get out of the city before dawn.

He got up beside the driver and ordered him to turn around and take the

consignment back into the city. The driver, accustomed to being on the

receiving end of ~irbitrary instructions, did as he was told.

My grandmother was sound asleep in bed when she heard banging on the

door at about 1 a.m. When she opened it, she found "Loyalty' standing

there. He said he wanted to leave the cartload at the house for the

night. My grandmother had to agree, because the Chinese tradition made

it virtually impossible to say no to a relation. The obligation to

one's family and relatives always took precedence over one's own moral

judgment. She did not tell Dr. Xia, who was still asleep.

Well before daybreak "Loyalty' reappeared with two cans; he transferred

the consignment onto them and drove off just as dawn was beginning to

light up the sky. Less than half an hour later armed police appeared

and cordoned off the house. The cart driver, who had been working for

another intelligence system, had informed his patrons.

Naturally, they wanted their merchandise back.

Dr. Xia and my grandmother were quite put out, but at least the goods

had disappeared. For my mother, though, the raid was almost a

catastrophe. She had some Communist leaflets hidden in the house, and

as soon as the police appeared, she grabbed the leaflets and raced to

the toilet, where she pushed them down her padded trousers which were

tightened round the ankles to conserve heat, and put on a heavy winter

coat. Then she sauntered out as nonchalantly as she could, pretending

she was on her way to school. The policemen stopped her and said they

were going to search her. She screamed at them that she would tell her

"Uncle' Zhu-ge how they had treated her.

Up to that moment the policemen had had no idea about the family's

70intelligence connections. Nor had they any idea who had confiscated

the textiles. The administration of Jinzhou was in utter confusion

because of the enormous number of different Kuomintang units stationed

in the city and because anyone with a gun and some sort of protection

enjoyed arbitrary power. When "Loyalty' and his men had appropriated

this load the driver did not ask them who they were working for.

The moment my mother mentioned Zhu-ge's name, there was a change in the

attitude of the officer. Zhu-ge was a friend of his boss. At a

signal, his subordinates lowered their guns and dropped their

insolently challenging manner. The officer bowed stiffly and muttered

profuse apologies for

disturbing such an august family. The rank and-file police looked even

more disappointed than their commander no booty meant no money, and no

money meant no food. They shambled off sullenly, dragging their feet

as they went.

At the time there was a new university, the Northeast Exile University,

in Jinzhou, formed around students and teachers who had fled

Communist-occupied northern Manchuria. Communist policies there had

often been harsh: many landowners had been killed. In the towns, even

small factory owners and shopkeepers were denounced and their property

was confiscated. Most intellectuals came from relatively well-to-do

families, and many had seen their families suffer under Communist rule

or been denounced themselves.

There was a medical college in the Exile University, and my mother

wanted to get into it. It had always been her ambition to be a doctor.

This was partly Dr. Xia's influence and partly because the medical

profession offered a woman the best chance of independence. Liang

endorsed the idea enthusiastically. The Party had plans for her. She

enrolled in the medical college on a part-time basis in February

1948.

The Exile University was a battleground where the Kuomintang and the

Communists competed fiercely for influence. The Kuomintang could see

how badly it was doing in Manchufig and was actively encouraging

students and intellectuals to flee farther south. The Communists did

not want to lose these educated people. They modified their land

reform program, and issued an order that urban capitalists were to be

well treated and intellectuals from well to-do families protected.

Armed with these more moderate policies, the Jinzhou underground set

out to persuade the students and teachers to stay on. This became my

mother's main activity.

In spite of the Communists' policy switch, some students and teachers

decided it was safer to flee. One shipload of students sailed to the

city of Tianjin, about 25o miles to the southwest, at the end of June.

When they arrived there they found that there was no food and nowhere

for them to stay. The local Kuomintang urged them to join the army.

"Fight back to your homeland!"

they were told.

This was not what they had fled Manchuria for. Some Communist

underground workers who had sailed with them encouraged them to take a

stand, and on 5 July the students demonstrated in the center of Tianjin

for food and accommodations. Troops opened fire and scores of students

were injured, some seriously, and a number were killed.

When the news reached Jinzhou, my mother immediately decided to

organize support for the students who had gone to Tianjin. She called

71a meeting of the heads of the student unions of all the seven high and

technical schools, which voted to set up the Jinzhou Federation of

Student Unions. My mother was elected to the chair. They decided to

send a telegram of solidarity to the students in Tianjin and to stage a

march to the headquarters of General Chill, the martial law commander,

to present a petition.

My mother's friends were waiting anxiously at school for instructions.

It was a gray, rainy day and the ground had turned to sticky mud.

Darkness fell and there was still no sign of my mother and the other

six student leaders. Then the news came that the police had raided the

meeting and taken them away. They had been informed on by Yao-han, the

political supervisor at my mother's school.

They were marched to the martial law headquarters.

After a while, General Chill strode into the room. He faced them

across a table and started to talk to them in a patient, paternalistic

tone of voice, apparently more in sorrow than in anger. They were

young and liable to do rash things, he said. But what did they know

about politics? Did they realize they were being used by the

Communists? They should x36 "Daughter Jbr Sale for l o Kilos of Rice'

stick to their books. He said he would release them if they would sign

a confession admitting their mistakes and identifying the Communists

behind them. Then he paused to watch the effect of his words.

My mother found his lecturing and his whole attitude insufferable.

stepped forward and said in a loud voice:

She

"Tell us, Commander, what mistake have we made?" The general became

irritated: "You were used by the Communist bandits to stir up trouble.

Isn't that mistake enough?"

My mother shouted back: "What Communist bandits? Our friends died in

Tianjin because they had run away from the Communists, on your advice.

Do they deserve to be shot by you? Have we done anything

unreasonable?" After some fierce exchanges the general banged his fist

on the table and bellowed for his guards.

"Show her around," he said, and then, turning to my mother, "You need

to realize where you are!" Before the soldiers could seize her, my

mother leaped forward and banged her fist on the table:

"Wherever I may be, I have not done anything wrong!"

The next thing my mother knew she was held tight by both arms and

dragged away from the table. She was pulled along a corridor and down

some stairs into a dark room.

On the far side she could see a man dressed in rags.

sitting on a bench and leaning against a pillar.

He seemed to be

His head was lolling to one side. Then my mother realized that he was

tied to the pillar and his thighs were tied to the bench. Two men were

pushing bricks under his heels.

Each additional brick brought forth a deep, stifled groan.

My mother felt her head was filled with blood, and she thought she

heard the cracking of bones. The next thing she knew she was looking

into another room. Her guide, an officer, drew her attention to a man

72almost next to where they were standing. He was hanging from a wooden

beam by his wrists and was naked from the waist upward.

His hair hung down in a tangled mess, so that my mother could not see

his face. On the floor was a brazier, with a man sit ling beside it

casually smoking a cigarette. As my mother watched, he lifted an iron

bar out of the fire; the tip was the size of a man's fist and was

glowing red-hot With a grin, he plunged it into the chest of the man

hanging from the beam. My mother heard a sharp scream of pain and a

horrible sizzling sound, saw smoke coming from the wound, and could

smell the heavy odor of burned flesh.

But she did not scream or faint. The horror had aroused in her a

powerful, passionate rage which gave her enormous strength and overrode

any fear.

The officer asked her if she would now write a confession. She

refused, repeating that she knew of no Communists behind her. She was

bundled into a small room which contained a bed and some sheets. There

she spent several long days, listening to the screams of people being

tortured in rooms nearby, and refusing repeated demands to name

names.

Then one day she was taken to a yard at the back of the building,

covered with weeds and rubble, and ordered to stand against a high

wall. Next to her a man who had obviously been tortured and could

barely stand was propped up. Several soldiers lazily took their

positions. A man blindfolded her. Even though she could not see, she

closed her eyes. She was ready to die, proud that she was giving her

life for a great cause.

She heard shots, but felt nothing. After a minute or so her blindfold

was removed and she looked around, blinking. The man who had been

standing next to her was lying on the ground. The officer who had

taken her down to the dungeons came over, grinning. One eyebrow was

raised in surprise that this seventeen-year-old girl was not a

gibbering wreck. My mother told him calmly that she had nothing to

confess.

She was taken back to her cell. Nobody bothered her, and she was not

tortured. After a few more days she was set free. During the previous

week the Communist underground had been busy pulling strings. My

grandmother had been to the martial law headquarters every day, weep

x38 "Daughter Jbr Sale Jbr l o Kilos of Rice' ing, pleading, and

threatening suicide. Dr. Xia had visited his most powerful patients,

bearing expensive gifts. The family's intelligence connections were

also mobilized.

Many people had vouched for my mother in wrifng, saying that she was

not a Communist, she was just young and impetuous.

What had happened to her did not daunt her in the slightest. The

moment she came out of prison she set about organizing a memorial

service for the dead students in Tianjin. The authorities gave

permission for the service.

There was great anger in Jinzhou about what had happened to the young

people who had, after all, left on the government's advice. At the

same time, the schools hurriedly announced an early end to the term,

scrapping examinations, in the hope that the students would go home and

disband.

73At this point the underground advised its members to leave for the

Communist-controlled areas. Those who did not want to, or could not

leave, were ordered to suspend their clandestine work. The Kuomintang

was clamping down fiercely, and too many operatives were being arrested

and executed. Liang was leaving, and he asked my mother to go too, but

my grandmother would not allow it. My mother was not suspected of

being a Communist, she said, but if she left with the Communists she

would be. And what about all the people who had vouched for her? If

she went now they would all be in trouble.

So she stayed. But she was longing for action. She turned to Yu-wu,

the only person left in the city who she knew was working for the

Communists. Yu-wu did not know Liang or my mother's other contacts.

They belonged to different underground systems, which operated

completely separately, so that if anyone was caught and could not

withstand torture they could only reveal a limited number of names.

Jinzhou was the key supply and logistic center for all the Kuomintang

armies in the northeast. They numbered over half a million men, strung

out along vulnerable railway lines and concentrated in a few shrinking

areas around the main cities. By the summer of 1948 there were about

200,000 Kuomintang troops in Jinzhou, under several different commands.

Chiang Kai-shek had been squabbling with many of his top generals,

juggling the commands, which created severe demoralization. The

different forces were badly coordinated and often distrusted one

another.

Many strategists, including his senior American advisers, thought that

Chiang should abandon Manchuria completely. The key to any pullout,

'voluntary' or forced, by sea or by rail, was the retention of Jinzhou.

The city was only a hundred miles north of the Great Wall, quite near

to China proper, where the Kuomintang position still seemed relatively

secure, and it was easily reinforced from the sea Huludao was only

about thirty miles to the south, and was linked by a seemingly secure

railway.

In spring 1948 the Kuomintang had begun to construct a new defense

system around Jinzhou, made of cement blocks encased in steel frames.

The Communists, they thought, had no tanks and poor artillery, and no

experience attacking heavily fortified positions. The idea was to ring

the city with self-contained fortresses, each of which could operate as

an independent unit even if it was surrounded.

The fortresses were to be connected by trenches six feet wide and six

feet deep, protected by a continuous fence of barbed wire. The supreme

commander in Manchuria, General Wei Li-huang, came on an inspection

visit and declared the system impregnable.

But the project was never finished, par fly due to lack of materials

and poor planning, but mainly because of corruption. The man in charge

of the construction work siphoned off building materials and sold them

on the black market;

the workers were not paid enough to eat. By September, when the

Communist forces began to cut the city off, only a third of the system

had been completed, much of it small,

x4o "Daughter for Sale Jbr ~ o Kilos of Rice' unconnected cement forts.

Other parts had been has lily assembled from mud taken from the old

city wall.

74It was vital for the Communists to know about this system and about the

disposition of the Kuomintang troops. The Communists were building up

enormous forces about a quarter of a million men for a decisive battle.

The commander in chief of all the Communist armies, Zhu De, cabled the

commander on the spot, Lin Biao: "Take Jinzhou ... and the whole

Chinese situation is in our hands." Yu-wu's group was asked to provide

up-to-date information before the final attack.

He urgently needed more hands, and when my mother approached him asking

for work, he and his superiors were delighted.

The Communists had sent some officers into the city in disguise to

reconnoiter, but a man wandering around the outskirts alone would

immediately attract attention. An amorous couple would be much less

conspicuous. By then, Kuomintang rule had made it quite acceptable for

young men and women to be seen together in public. Because the

reconnaissance officers were male, my mother would be ideal as a

'girlfriend."

Yu-wu told her to be at an appointed place at a particular time. She

was to wear a pale-blue gown and a red silk flower in her hair. The

Communist officer would be carrying a copy of the Kuomintang newspaper,

the Central Daily folded into a triangle, and would identify himself by

wiping sweat three times off the left side of his face and then three

times off the right.

On the appointed day, my mother went to a small temple just outside the

old north wall but within the defense perimeter. A man carrying the

triangular newspaper came up to her and gave the correct signals. My

mother stroked his right cheek three times with her right hand, then he

stroked her left cheek three times with his left hand. Then my mother

took his arm, and they walked off.

My mother did not understand fully what he was doing,

In Battle for a New China x4x and she did not ask. Most of the time

they walked in silence, only talking when they passed someone. The

mission passed off without incident.

There were to be more, around the city outskirts and to the railway,

the vital communications artery.

It was one thing to obtain the information, but it was another to get

it out of the city. By the end of July the checkpoints were firmly

shut, and anyone trying to enter or leave was thoroughly searched.

Yu-wu consulted my mother, whose ability and courage he had grown to

trust.

The vehicles of senior officers could go in and out without being

searched, and my mother thought of a contact she might be able to use.

One of her fellow students was the granddaughter of a local army

commander, General Ji, and the girl's brother was a colonel in their

grandfather's brigade.

The Jis were a Jinzhou family, with considerable influence. They

occupied a whole street, nicknamed "Ji Street," where they had a large

compound with an extensive, well groomed garden. My mother had often

strolled in the garden with her friend, and was quite friendly with her

brother, Hui-ge.

75Hui-ge was a handsome young man in his mid-twenties who had a

university degree in engineering. Unlike many young men from wealthy,

powerful families, he was not a dandy. My mother liked him, and the

feeling was mutual.

He began to pay social calls on the Xias and to invite my mother to tea

parties. My grandmother liked him a lot; he was extremely courteous,

and she considered him highly eligible.

Soon Hui-ge started to invite my mother out on her own. At first his

sister accompanied him, pretending to be a chaperone, but soon she

would disappear with some flimsy excuse. She praised her brother to my

mother, adding that he was their grandfather's favorite. She must also

have told her brother about my mother, because my mother discovered

that he knew a lot about her, including the fact x42 "Daughter for Sale

for zo Kilos of Rice' that she had been arrested for her radical

activities. They found they had much in common. Hui-ge was very frank

about the Kuomintang. Once or twice he tugged at his colonel's uniform

and sighed that he hoped the war would end soon so he could go back to

his engineering. He told my mother he thought the Kuomintang's days

were numbered, and she had the feeling that he was baring his innermost

thoughts.

She was certain he was fond of her, but she wondered if there might be

political motives behind his actions. She deduced that he must be

trying to get a message across to her, and through her to the

Communists. The message had to be: I don't like the Kuomintang, and I

am willing to help you.

They became tacit conspirators. One day my mother suggested that he

might surrender to the Communists with some troops (which was a fairly

common occurrence). He said he was only a staff officer and did not

command any troops. My mother asked him to try to persuade his

grandfather to go over, but he replied sadly that the old man would

probably have him shot if he even suggested it.

My mother kept Yu-wu informed, and he told her to cultivate Hui-ge.

Soon Yu-wu told her to ask Hui-ge to take her for a trip outside the

city in his jeep. They went on such trips three or four times, and

each time, when they reached a primitive mud toilet, she said she had

to use it.

She got out and hid a message in a hole in the toilet wall while he

waited in his jeep. He never asked any questions.

His conversations became more and more centered on his worries about

his family and himself. In a roundabout way, he hinted that the

Communists might execute him: "I'm afraid I'll soon just be a

disembodied soul outside the western gate?" (The Western Heaven was

supposed to be the destination of the dead, because it was the site of

eternal peace. So the execution ground in Jinzhou, like most places in

China, was outside the western gate.) When

In Battle for a New China i 43 he said this, he would look

questioningly into my mother's eyes, clearly inviting contradiction.

My mother felt certain that because of what he had done for them the

Communists would spare him. Although everything had been implicit, she

would say confidently:

"Don't think such gloomy thoughts?"

or "I'm sure that won't happen to

76you!"

The Kuomintang position continued to deteriorate through the late

summer- and not only because of military action. Corruption wreaked

havoc. Inflation had risen to the unimaginable figure of just over

100,000 percent by the end of 1947 and it was to go to 2,870,000

percent by the end of 1948 in the Kuomintang areas. The price of

sorghum, the main grain available, increased seventy fold overnight in

Jinzhou. For the civilian population the situation was becoming more

desperate every day, as increasingly more food went to the army, much

of which was sold by local commanders on the black market.

The Kuomintang high command was divided over strategy. Chiang Kai-shek

recommended abandoning Mukden, the largest city in Manchuria, and

concentrating on holding Jinzhou, but he was unable to impose a

coherent strategy on his top generals. He seemed to place all his hope

on greater American intervention. Defeatism permeated his top staff.

By September the Kuomintang held only three strongholds in Manchuria

Mukden, Changchun (the old capital of Manchukuo, Hsinking), and Jinzhou

and the 3o0 miles of railway track linking them. The Communists were

encircling all three cities simultaneously, and the Kuomintang did not

know where the main attack would come. In fact it was to be Jinzhou,

the most southerly of the three and the strategic key, because once it

fell the other two would be cut off from their supplies. The

Communists were able to move large numbers of troops around undetected,

but the Kuomintang were dependent on the railway,

which was under constant

attack, and, to a lesser extent, on air transport.

The assault on Jinzhou began on 11 September 1948.

An American diplomat, John F. Melby, flying to Mukden, recorded in his

diary on 23 September: "North along the corridor to Manchuria the

Communist artillery was systematically making rubble out of the

airfield at Chinchow [Jinzhou]." The next day, 24 September, the

Communist forces moved closer. Twenty-four hours later Chiang Kaishek

ordered General Wei Li-huang to break out of Mukden with fifteen

divisions and relieve Jinzhou. General Wei dithered, and by 26

September the Communists had virtually isolated Jinzhou.

By 1 October the encirclement of Jinzhou was completed. Yixian, my

grandmother's hometown twenty-five miles to the north, fell that day.

Chiang Kai-shek flew to Mukden to take personal command. He ordered

seven extra divisions to be thrown into the Jinzhou battle, but he was

unable even to get General Wei to move out of Mukden until 9 October,

two weeks after the order had been given and even then with only eleven

divisions, not fifteen. On 6 October Chiang Kai-shek flew to Huludao

and ordered troops there to move up to relieve Jinzhou.

Some did, but piecemeal, and they were soon isolated and destroyed.

The Communists were getting ready to turn the assault on Jinzhou into a

siege. Yu-wu approached my mother and asked her to undertake a

critical mission: to smuggle detonators into one of the ammunition

depots the one supplying Hui-ge's own division. The ammunition was

stored in a big courtyard, the walls of which were tolaped with barbed

wire which was reputed to be electrified.

Everyone who went in and out was searched. The soldiers living inside

the complex spent most of their time gambling and drinking. Sometimes

77prostitutes were brought in and the officers would hold a dance in a

makeshift club. My mother told Hui-ge she wanted to go and have a look

at the dancing, and he agreed without asking any questions.

The detonators were handed to my mother the next day by a man she had

never seen. She put them into her bag and drove into the depot with

Hui-ge. They were not searched. When they got inside, she asked

Hui-ge to show her around, leaving her bag in the car, as she had been

instructed. Once they were out of sight, underground operatives were

supposed to remove the detonators. My mother strolled at a

deliberately leisurely pace to give the men more time. Hui-ge was

happy to oblige.

That night, the city was rocked by a gigantic explosion.

Detonations went off in chain reactions and the dynamite and shells lit

up the sky like a spectacular fireworks display.

The street where the depot had been was in flames.

Windows were shattered within a radius of about fifty yards. The next

morning, Hui-ge invited my mother over to the Ji mansion. His eyes

were hollow and he was unshaven. He had obviously not slept a wink. He

greeted her a little more guardedly than usual.

After a heavy silence, he asked her whether she had heard the news. Her

expression must have confirmed his worst fears that he had helped to

cripple his own division.

He said there was going to be an investigation.

"I wonder whether the explosion will sweep my head from my shoulders,"

he sighed, 'or blow a reward my way?" My mother, who was feeling sorry

for him, said reassuringly: "I am sure you are beyond suspicion. I'm

certain you will be rewarded." At this, Hui-ge stood up and saluted

her in formal fashion.

"Thank you for your promise!"

he said.

By now, Communist artillery shells had begun to crash into the city.

When my mother first heard the whine of the shells flying over, she was

a lit He frightened. But later, when the shelling became heavier, she

got used to it. It became like permanent thunder. A kind of

fatalistic indifference deadened fear for most people. The siege also

broke down Dr. Xia's rigid Manchu ritual; for the first time the whole

household ate together, men and women,

x46 "Daughter Jbr Sale for I o Kilos of Rice' masters and servants.

Previously, they had been eating in no less than eight groups, all

having different food. One day, as they were sitting around the table

preparing to have dinner, a shell came bursting through the window over

the kang, where Yu-lin's one-year-old son was playing, and thudded to a

halt under the dining table. Fortunately, like many of the shells, it

was a dud.

Once the siege started there was no food to be had, even on the black

market. A hundred million Kuomintang dollars could barely buy a pound

of sorghum. Like most families who could afford to do so, my

grandmother had stored some sorghum and soybeans, and her sister's

husband, "Loyalty' Pei-o, used his connections to get some extra

supplies. During the siege the family's donkey was killed by a piece

78of shrapnel, so they ate it.

On 8 October the Communists moved almost a quarter of a million troops

into attack positions. The shelling became much more intense. It was

also very accurate. The top Kuomintang commander, General Fan Han-jie,

said that it seemed to follow him wherever he went. Many artillery

positions were knocked out, and the fortresses in the uncompleted

defense system came under heavy fire, as did the road and railway

links. Telephone and cable lines were cut, and the electricity system

broke down.

On 13 October the outer defenses collapsed. More than 100,000

Kuomintang troops retreated pell-mell into the center of the city. That

night a band of about a dozen disheveled soldiers stormed into the

Xias' house and demanded food. They had not eaten for two days. Dr.

Xia greeted them courteously and Yu-lin's wife immediately started

cooking a huge saucepan of sorghum noodles.

When they were ready, she put them on the kitchen table and went into

the next room to tell the soldiers. As she turned her back, a shell

landed in the saucepan and exploded, spattering the noodles all over

the kitchen. She dived under a narrow table in front of the kang. A

soldier was ahead of her, but she grabbed him by the leg and

pulled him out.

My grandmother was terrified.

"What if he had turned around and pulled the trigger?"

he was out of earshot.

she hissed once

Until the very final stage of the siege the shelling was amazingly

accurate; few ordinary houses were hit, but the population suffered

from the terrible fires which the shelling ignited, and there was no

water to douse the flames.

The sky was completely obscured by thick, dark smoke and it was

impossible to see more than a few yards, even in daytime. The noise of

the artillery was deafening. My mother could hear people wailing, but

could never tell where they were or what was happening.

On 14 October, the final offensive started. Nine hundred artillery

pieces bombarded the city nonstop. Most of the family hid in an

improvised air-raid shelter which they had dug earlier, but Dr. Xia

refused to leave the house. He sat calmly on the kang in the corner of

his room by the window and prayed silently to the Buddha. At one point

fourteen kittens ran into the room. He was delighted: "A place a cat

tries to hide in is a lucky place," he said. Not a single bullet came

into his room and all the kittens survived. The only other person who

would not go down into the shelter was my great-grandmother, who just

curled up under the oak table next to the kang in her room. When the

bat He ended the thick quilts and blankets covering the table looked

like a sieve.

In the middle of one bombardment, Yu-lin's baby son, who was down in

the shelter, wanted to have a wee-wee.

His mother took him outside, and a few seconds later the side of the

shelter where she had been sitting collapsed.

My mother and grandmother had to come up and take cover in the house.

My mother crouched next to the kang in the kitchen, but soon pieces of

shrapnel started hitting the brick side of the kang and the house began

79to shake.

She ran out into the back garden. The sky was black with smoke.

Bullets were flying through the air and ricocheting all over the place,

spattering against the walls; the sound

was like mighty rain pelting down, mixed with screams

and yells.

In the small hours of the next day a group of Kuomintang soldiers burst

into the house, dragging about twenty terrified civilians of all ages

with them the residents of the three neighboring courtyards. The

troops were almost hysterical. They had come from an arfllery post in

a temple across the street, which had just been shelled with pinpoint

accuracy, and were shouting at the civilians that one of them must have

given away their position. They kept yelling that they wanted to know

who had given the signal.

When no one spoke up, they grabbed my mother and shoved her against a

wall, accusing her. My grandmother was terrified, and hurriedly dug

out some small gold pieces and pressed them into the soldiers' hands.

She and Dr. Xia went down on their knees and begged the soldiers to

let my mother go. Yu-lin's wife said this was the only time she ever

saw Dr. Xia looking really frightened. He pleaded with the soldiers:

"She's my little girl. Please believe me that she did not do it ....

'

The soldiers took the gold and let my mother go, but they forced

everyone into two rooms at bayonet point and shut them in so they would

not send any more signals, they said. It was pitch-dark inside the

rooms, and very frightening. But quite soon my mother noticed that the

shelling was decreasing. The noises outside changed.

Mixed with the whine of bullets were sounds of hand grenades exploding

and the clash of bayonets. Voices were yelling, "Put down your weapons

and we'll spare your life!"

there were blood-curdling shrieks and screams of anger and pain. Then

the shots and the shouts came closer and closer, and she heard the

sound of boots clattering on the cobblestones as the Kuomintang

soldiers ran away down the street.

Eventually the din subsided a bit and the Xias could hear banging on

the side gate of the house. Dr. Xia went warily to the door of the

room and eased it open: the Kuomintang soldiers had gone. Then he went

to the side gate of the house and asked who was there. A voice

answered: "We are the people's army. We have come to liberate you."

Dr. Xia opened the gate and several men in baggy uniforms entered

swiftly. In the darkness, my mother could see that they were wearing

white towels wrapped around their left sleeves like armbands and held

their guns at the ready, with fixed bayonets.

"Don't be afraid," they said.

"We won't harm you. We are your army, the people's army."

they wanted to check the house for Kuomintang soldiers.

They said

It was not a request, though it was put politely. The soldiers did not

turn the place upside down, nor did they ask for food or steal

anything. After the search they left, bidding the family a courteous

farewell.

80It was only when the soldiers entered the house that it sank in that

the Communists had really taken the city. My mother was overjoyed This

time she did not feel let down by the Communist soldiers' dust covered

torn uniforms.

All the people who had been sheltering in the Xias' house were anxious

to get back to their houses to see if they had been damaged or looted.

One house had in fact been leveled, and a pregnant woman who had

remained there was killed.

Shortly after the neighbors left there was another knock on the side

gate. My mother opened it: half a dozen terrified Kuomintang soldiers

stood there. They were in a pitiable state and their eyes were gnawed

by fear. They kowtowed to Dr. Xia and my grandmother and begged for

civilian clothes. The Xias felt sorry for them and gave them some old

clothes which they hurriedly put on over their uniforms and left.

At first light Yu-lin's wife opened the front gate. Several corpses

were lying right outside. She let out a terrified yell and ran back

into the house. My mother heard her shriek and went outside to have a

look. Corpses were lying all over the street, many of them with their

heads and limbs x5o "Daughter for Sale for lo Kilos of Rice' missing,

others with their intestines pouring out. Some were just bloody

messes. Chunks of flesh and arms and legs were hanging from the

telegraph poles. The open sewers were clogged with bloody water, human

flesh, and rubble.

The battle for Jinzhou had been herculean. The final attack had lasted

thirty-one hours, and in many ways it was the turning point of the

civil war. Twenty thousand Kuomintang soldiers were killed and over

80,000 captured.

No fewer than eighteen generals were taken prisoner, among them the

supreme commander of the Kuomintang forces in Jinzhou, General Fan

Han-jie, who had tried to escape disguised as a civilian. As the

prisoners of war thronged the streets on their way to the temporary

camps, my mother saw a friend of hers with her Kuomintang officer

husband, both of them wrapped in blankets against the morning chill.

It was Communist policy not to execute anyone who laid down their arms,

and to treat all prisoners well. This would help win over the ordinary

soldiers, most of whom came from poor peasant families. The Communists

did not run prison camps. They kept only middle- and high-ranking

officers, and dispersed the rest almost immediately. They would hold

'speak bitterness' meetings for the soldiers, at which they were

encouraged to speak up about their hard lives as landless peasants. The

revolution, the Communists said, was all about giving them land. The

soldiers were given a choice: either they could go home, in which case

they would be given their fare, or they could stay with the Communists

to help wipe out the Kuomintang so that nobody would ever take their

land away again. Most willingly stayed and joined the Communist army.

Some, of course, could not physically reach their homes with a war

going on. Mao had learned from ancient Chinese warfare that the most

effective way of conquering the people was to conquer their hearts and

minds. The policy toward prisoners proved enormously successful.

Particularly after

In Battle Jbr a New China 15 l Jinzhou, more and more Kuomintang

soldiers simply let themselves be captured. Over 1.75 million

Kuomintang troops surrendered and crossed over to the Communists during

the civil war. In the last year of the civil war, bat He casualties

81accounted for less than 2o percent of all the troops the Kuomintang

lost.

One of the top commanders who had been caught had his daughter with

him; she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. He asked the Communist

commanding officer if he could stay in Jinzhou with her. The Communist

officer said it was not convenient for a father to help his daughter

deliver a baby, and that he would send a 'woman comrade' to help her.

The Kuomintang officer thought he was only saying this to get him to

move on. Later on he learned that his daughter had been very well

treated, and the 'woman comrade' turned out to be the wife of the

Communist officer. Policy toward prisoners was an intricate

combination of political calculation and humanitarian consideration,

and this was one of the crucial factors in the Communists' victory.

Their goal was not just to crush the opposing army but, if possible, to

bring about its disintegration. The Kuomintang was defeated as much by

demoralization as by firepower.

The first priority after the battle was cleaning up, most of which was

done by Communist soldiers. The locals were also keen to help, as they

wanted to get rid of the bodies and the debris around their homes as

quickly as possible.

For days, long convoys of carts loaded with corpses and lines of people

carrying baskets on their shoulders could be seen wending their way out

of the city. As it became possible to move around again, my mother

found that many people she knew had been killed; some from direct hits,

others buried under rubble when their houses had collapsed.

The morning after the siege ended the Communists put up notices asking

the townspeople to resume normal life as quickly as possible. Dr. Xia

hung out his gaily decorated

shingle to show that his

medicine shop was open and was later told by the Communist

administration that he was the first doctor in the city to do so. Most

shops reopened on 20 October even though the streets were not yet

cleared of bodies. Two days later, schools reopened and offices began

working normal hours.

The most immediate problem was food. The new government urged the

peasants to come and sell food in the city and encouraged them to do so

by setting prices at twice what they were in the countryside. The

price of sorghum fell rapidly, from 100 million Kuomintang dollars for

a pound to 2,200 dollars. An ordinary worker could soon buy four

pounds of sorghum with what he could earn in a day. Fear of starvation

abated. The Communists issued relief grain, salt, and coal to the

destitute. The Kuomintang had never done anything like this, and

people were hugely impressed.

Another thing that captured the goodwill of the locals was the

discipline of the Communist soldiers. Not only was there no looting or

rape, but many went out of their way to demonstrate exemplary behavior.

This was in sharp contrast with the Kuomintang troops.

The city remained in a state of high alert. American planes flew over

threateningly. On 23 October sizable Kuomintang forces tried

unsuccessfully to retake Jinzhou with a pincer movement from Huludao

and the northeast. With the loss of Jinzhou, the huge armies around

Mukden and Changchun quickly collapsed or surrendered, and by 2

November the whole of Manchuria was in Communist hands.

82The Communists proved extremely efficient at restoring order and

getting the economy going again. Banks in Jinzhou reopened on 3

December, and the electricity supply resumed the next day. On 29

December a notice went up announcing a new street administration

system, with residents' committees in place of the old neighborhood

committees. These were to be a key institution in the Communist system

of administration and control. The next day

In Battle ~r a New China I 5 3 running water resumed and on the 3ist

the railwa~ reopened.

The Communists even managed to put an end to inflation, setting a

favorable exchange rate for converting the worthless Kuomintang money

into Communist "Great Wall' currency.

From the moment the Communist forces arrived, my mother had been

longing to throw herself into working for the revolution. She felt

herself to be very much a part of the Communist cause. After some days

of waiting impatiently, she was approached by a Party representative

who gave her an appointment to see the man in charge of youth work in

Jinzhou, a Comrade Wang Yu.

6. "Talking about Love' ^ Revolutionary Marriage

(1948-1949)

My mother set off to see Comrade Wang one morning on a mild autumn day,

the best time of year in Jinzhou. The summer heat had gone and the air

had begun to grow cooler, but it was still warm enough to wear summer

clothes. The wind and dust which plague the town for much of the year

were deliciously absent.

She was wearing a traditional loose pale blue gown and a white silk

scarf. Her hair had just been cut short in keeping with the new

revolutionary fashion. As she walked into the courtyard of the new

provincial government headquarters she saw a man standing under a tree

with his back to her, brushing his teeth at the edge of a flowerbed.

She waited for him to finish, and when he lifted his head she saw that

he was in his late twenties, with a very dark face and big, wistful

eyes. Under his baggy uniform she could see that he was thin, and she

thought he looked a lit He shorter than herself. There was something

dreamy about him. My mother thought he looked like a poet.

"Comrade Wang, I am Xia De-hong from the students' association," she

said.

"I am here to report on our work."

"Wang' was the nora de guerre of the man who was to

A Revolutionary Marriage I 55 become my father. He had entered Jinzhou

with the Communist forces a few days earlier. Since late 1945 he had

been a commander with the guerrillas in the area. He was now head of

the Secretariat and a member of the Communist Party Committee governing

Jinzhou, and was soon to be appointed head of the Public Affairs

Department of the city, which looked after education, the literacy

drive, health, the press, entertainment, sports, youth, and sounding

out public opinion. It was an important post.

He was born in 1921 in Yibin in the southwestern province of Sichuan,

about 1,200 miles from Jinzhou. Yibin, which then had a population of

83about 30,000, lies at the spot where the Min River joins the Golden

Sand River to form the Yangtze, the longest river in China. The area

around Yibin is one of the very fertile parts of Sichuan, which is

known as "Heaven's Granary," and the warm, misty climate in Yibin makes

it an ideal place for growing tea. Much of the black tea consumed in

Britain today comes from there.

My father was the seventh of nine children. His father had worked as

an apprentice for a textile manufacturer since the age of twelve. When

he became an adult he and his brother, who worked in the same factory,

decided to start their own business. Within a few years they were

prospering, and were able to buy a large house.

But their old boss was jealous of their success, and brought a lawsuit

against them, accusing them of stealing money from him to start their

business. The case lasted seven years, and the brothers were forced to

spend all their assets trying to clear themselves. Everyone connected

with the court extorted money from them, and the greed of the officials

was insatiable. My grandfather was thrown into prison. The only way

his brother could get him out was to get the ex-boss to drop the suit.

To do this he had to raise 1,000 pieces of silver. This destroyed

them, and my great-uncle died soon afterward at the age of thirty-four

from worry and exhaustion.

My grandfather found himself looking after two families, with fifteen

dependents. He started up his business again, and by the late 1920s

was beginning to do well. But it was a time of widespread fighfng

among warlords, who all levied heavy taxes. This, combined with the

effects of the Great Depression, made it an extremely difficult time to

run a textile factory. In 1933 my grandfather died of overwork and

strain, at age forty-five. The business was sold to pay off the debts,

and the family was scattered. Some became soldiers, which was

considered pretty much a last resort; with all the fighting going on,

it was easy for a soldier to get killed. Other brothers and cousins

found odd jobs and the gifts married as best they could. One of my

father's cousins, who was fifteen years old and to whom he was very

attached, had to marry an opium addict several decades her senior. When

the sedan chair came to carry her away, my father ran after her, not

knowing if he would ever see her again.

My father loved books, and began to learn to read classical prose at

the age of three, which was quite exceptional.

The year after my grandfather died he had to abandon school. He was

only thirteen and hated having to give up his studies. He had to find

a job, so the following year, 1935, he left Yibin and went down the

Yangtze to Chongqing, a much bigger city. He found a job as an

apprentice in a grocery store working twelve hours a day. One of his

jobs was to carry his boss's enormous water pipe as he moved around the

city reclining on a bamboo chair carried on the shoulders of two men.

The sole purpose of this was for his boss to flaunt the fact that he

could afford a servant to carry his water pipe, which could easily have

been put in the chair. My father received no pay, just a bed and two

meager meals a day. He got no supper, and went to bed every night with

cramps from an empty stomach; he was obsessed by hunger.

His eldest sister was also living in Chongking. She had married a

schoolteacher, and their mother had come to live with them after her

husband died. One day my father was so hungry he went into their

kitchen and ate a cold sweet potato. When his sister found out she

turned on him and yelled: "It's difficult enough for me to support our

84mother. I can't afford to feed a brother as well."

hurt he ran out of the house and never returned.

My father was so

He asked his boss to give him supper. His boss not only refused, but

started to abuse him. In anger, my father left and went back to Yibin

and lived doing odd jobs as an apprentice in one store after another.

He encountered suffering not only in his own life, but all around him.

Every day as he walked to work he passed an old man selling baked

rolls. The old man, who shuffled along with great difficulty, bent

double, was blind. To attract the attention of passersby, he sang a

heart-rending tune. Every time my father heard the song he said to

himself that the sociew must change.

He began to cast around for some way out. He had always remembered the

first time he heard the word 'communism': it was when he was seven

years old, in 1928. He was playing near his home when he saw that a

big crowd had gathered at a crossroads nearby. He squeezed his way to

the front: there he saw a young man sitting cross-legged on the ground.

His hands were tied behind his back; standing over him was a stout man

with an enormous broadsword. The young man, strangely, was allowed to

talk for a time about his ideals and about something called communism.

Then the executioner brought the sword down on the back of his neck. My

father screamed and covered his eyes. He was shaken to the core, but

he was also hugely impressed by the man's courage and calmness in the

face of death.

By the second half of the 1930s, even in the remote backwater of Yibin,

the Communists were beginning to organize a sizable underground. Their

main plank was resisting the Japanese. Chiang Kai-shek had adopted a

policy of nonresistance in the face of the Japanese seizure

of Manchuria and increasing encroachments on China

proper and had concentrated on trying to annihilate the Communists. The

Communists launched a slogan, "Chinese must not fight Chinese," and put

pressure on Chiang Kai-shek to focus on fighting the Japanese. In

December 1936 Chiang was kidnapped by two of his own generals, one of

them the Young Marshal, Chang Hsuehliang, from Manchuria. He was saved

partly by the Communists, who helped get him released in return for his

agreement to form a united front against Japan. Chiang Kai-shek had to

consent, albeit half-heartedly, since he knew this would allow the

Communists to survive and develop.

"The Japanese are a disease of the skin," he said, 'the Communists are

a disease of the heart." Though the Communists and the Kuomintang were

supposed to be allies, the Communists still had to work underground in

most areas.

In July 1937 the Japanese began their all-out invasion of China proper.

My father, like many others, felt appalled and desperate about what was

happening to his country.

At about this time he started working in a bookshop which sold

left-wing publications. He devoured book after book at night in the

shop, where he functioned as a kind of night watchman.

He supplemented his earnings from the bookshop with an evening job as

an 'explainer' in a cinema. Many of the films were American silents.

His job was to stand beside the screen and explain what was going on,

as the films were neither dubbed nor subtitled. He also joined an

antiJapanese theater group, and as he was a slender young man with

delicate features, he acted women's roles.

85My father loved the theater group. It was through the friends he made

there that he first entered into contact with the Communist

underground. The Communist stance about fighting the Japanese and

about creating a just society fired his imagination and he joined the

Party in 1938, when he was seventeen. It was a time when the

Kuomintang was being extremely vigilant about Communist activities in

Sichuan. Nanjing, the capital, had fallen to the Japanese in December

1937, and Chiang Kai-shek subsequently moved his government to

Chongqing. The move precipitated a flurry of police activity in

Sichuan, and my father's theater group was forcibly disbanded. Some of

his friends were arrested. Others had to flee. My father felt

frustrated that he could not do anything for his country.

A few years before, Communist forces had passed through remote parts of

Sichuan on their 6,000-mile Long March, which ultimately took them to

the small town of Yan'an in the northwest. People in the theater group

had talked a lot about Yan'an as a place of camaraderie, uncorrupt and

efficient- my father's dream. At the beginning of 1940 he set out on

his own long march to Yan'an. He first went to Chongqing, where one of

his brothers-in-law, who was an officer in Chiang Kai-shek's army,

wrote a letter to help him cross Kuomintang-occupied areas and get

through the blockade that Chiang Kai-shek had thrown up around Yan'an.

The journey took him almost four months. By the time he arrived it was

April 1940.

Yan'an lay on the Yellow Earth Plateau, in a remote and barren part of

northwest China. Dominated by a nine tiered pagoda, much of the town

consisted of rows of caves cut into the yellow cliffs. My father was

to make these caves his home for over five years. Mao Zedong and his

much-depleted forces had arrived there at different times in 1935 -

1936, at the end of the Long March, and subsequently made it the

capital of their republic. Yan'an was surrounded by hostile territory;

its chief advantage was its remoteness, which made it difficult to

attack.

After a short spell at a Party school, my father applied to join one of

the Party's most prestigious institutions, the Academy of

Marxist-Leninist Studies. The entrance exam was quite stiff, but he

took first place, as a result of his reading deep into the night in the

loft of the bookshop in Yibin. His fellow candidates were amazed. Most

of them had come from the big cities like Shanghai, and had looked down

on him as a bit of a yokel. My father became the youngest research

fellow in the Academy.

My father loved Yan'an. He found the people there full of enthusiasm,

optimism, and purpose. The Party leaders lived simply, like everyone

else, in striking contrast with Kuomintang officials. Yan'an was no

democracy, but compared with where he had come from it seemed to be a

paradise of fairness.

In 1942 Mao started a "Rectfication' campaign, and invited criticisms

about the way things were being run in Yan'an. A group of young

research fellows from the Academy, led by Wang Shi-wei and including my

father, put up wall posters criticizing their leaders and demanding

more freedom and the right to greater individual expression. Their

action caused a storm, and Mao himself came to read the posters.

Mao did not like what he saw, and turned his campaign into a

witch-hunt. Wang Shi-wei was accused of being a Trotskyite and a spy.

My father, as the youngest person in the Academy, was said by Ai Si-qi,

86the chief exponent of Marxism in China and one of the leaders of the

Academy, to have 'committed a very naive mistake." Earlier, Ai Si-qi

had often praised my father as a 'brilliant and sharp mind."

My father and his friends were subjected to relentless criticisms and

obliged to undertake self-criticisms at intensive meetings for months.

They were told that they had caused chaos in Yan'an and weakened the

Party's unity and discipline, which could damage the great cause of

saving China from the Japanese and from poverty and injustice. Over

and over again, the Party leaders inculcated into them the absolute

necessity for complete submission to the Party, for the good of the

cause.

The Academy was shut down, and my father was sent to teach ancient

Chinese history to semi-literate peasants turned-officials at the

Central Party School. But the ordeal had turned him into a convert.

Like so many other young

people, he had invested his life and faith in Yan'an. He could not let

himself be easily disappointed. He regarded his harsh treatment as not

only justified, but even a noble experience soul-cleansing for the

mission to save China.

He believed that the only way this could be done was through

disciplined, perhaps drastic, measures, including immense personal

sacrifice and the total subordination of the self.

There were less demanding activities as well. He toured the

surrounding areas collecting folk poetry, and learned to be a graceful

and elegant dancer in Western-style ballroom dancing, which was very

popular in Yan'an many of the Communist leaders, including the future

prime minister, Zhou Enlai, enjoyed it. At the foot of the dry, dusty

hills was the meandering, dark-yellow, silt-filled Yan River, one of

the scores which join the majestic Yellow River, and here my father

often went swimming; he loved to do the backstroke while looking up at

the simple solid pagoda.

Life in Yan'an was hard but exhilarating. In 1942, Chiang Kai-shek

6ghtened his blockade. Supplies of food, clothing, and other

necessities became drastically curtailed.

Mao called on everyone to take up hoes and spinning wheels and produce

essential goods themselves. My father became an excellent spinner.

He stayed in Yan'an for the whole of the war. In spite of the

blockade, the Communists strengthened their control over large areas,

particularly in northern China, behind the Japanese lines. Mao had

calculated well: the Communists had won vital breathing space. By the

end of the war they claimed some sort of control over ninety-five

million people, about 20 percent of the population, in eighteen 'base

areas." Equally important, they gained experience at running a

government and an economy under tough conditions. This stood them in

good stead: their organizational ability and their system of control

were always phenomenal.

On 9 August 1945, Soviet troops swept into northeast

China. Two days later the Chinese Communists offered them military

cooperation against the Japanese, but they were turned down: Stalin was

supporting Chiang Kaishek. That same day the Chinese Communists

started to order armed units and political advisers into Manchuria,

87which everyone realized was going to be of critical importance.

A month after the Japanese surrender my father was ordered to leave

Yan'an and head for a place called Chaoyang in southwest Manchuria,

about 700 miles to the east, near the border with Inner Mongolia.

In November, after walking for two months, my father and his small

group reached Chaoyang. Most of the territory was barren hills and

mountains, almost as poor as Yan'an. The area had been part of

Manchukuo until three months before. A small group of local Communists

had proclaimed its own 'government." The Kuomintang underground then

did the same. Communist troops came racing over from Jinzhou, about

fifty miles away, arrested the Kuomintang governor, and executed him

for 'conspiring to overthrow the Communist government."

My father's group took over, with the authority of Yan'an, and within a

month a proper administration began to function for the whole area of

Chaoyang, which had a population of about 100,000. My father became

its deputy chief. One of the first acts of the new government was to

put up posters announcing its policies: the release of all prisoners;

the closure of all pawnshops pawned goods could be recovered free of

charge; brothels were to be closed and prostitutes given six months'

living allowance by their owners; all grain stores were to be opened

and the grain distributed to those most in need; all property belonging

to Japanese and collaborators was to be confiscated; and Chinese-owned

industry and commerce was to be protected.

These policies were enormously popular. They benefited the poor, who

formed the vast majority of the population. Chaoyang had never known

even moderately good government; it had been ransacked by different

armies in the warlord period, and then occupied and bled white by the

Japanese for over a decade.

A few weeks after my father had started his new job, Mao issued an

order to his forces to withdraw from all vulnerable cities and major

communication routes and to pull back into the countryside 'leaving the

high road alone and seizing the land on both sides' and 'surrounding

the cities from the countryside." My father's unit withdrew from

Chaoyang into the mountains. It was an area almost devoid of

vegetation, except for wild grass and the occasional hazelnut tree and

wild fruits. The temperatures fell at night to around minus 30 F with

icy gales. Anyone caught outside at night without cover froze to

death. There was practically no food. From the exhilaration of seeing

Japan's defeat and their own sudden expansion into large tracts of the

northeast, the Communists' apparent victory was seemingly turning to

ashes within weeks. As my father and his men hunkered down in caves

and poor peasant huts, they were in a somber mood.

The Communists and the Kuomintang were both maneuvering for advantage

in preparation for a resumption of full-scale civil war. Chiang

Kai-shek had moved his capital back to Nanjing, and with American help,

had transported large numbers of troops to North China, issuing secret

orders for them to occupy all strategic places as fast as possible. The

Americans sent a leading general, George Marshall, to China to try to

persuade Chiang to form a coalition government with the Communists as

junior partners. A truce was signed on 10 January 1946, to go into

effect on 13 January. On the 14th the Kuomintang entered Chaoyang and

immediately started setting up a large armed police force and an

intelligence network and arming local landlords' squads. Altogether,

they put together a force of over 4,000 men to annihilate the

Communists in the area.

88By February my father and his unit were on the run,

retreating deeper and deeper into more and more inhospitable terrain.

Most of the time they had to hide with the poorest peasants. By April

there was nowhere left to run, and they had to break up into smaller

groups. Guerrilla warfare was the only way to survive. Eventually my

father set up his base at a place called Six Household Village, in

hilly country where the Xiaoling River starts, about sixty five miles

west of Jinzhou.

The guerrillas had very few arms; they had to obtain most of their guns

from the local police or 'borrow' them from landlord forces. The other

main source was former members of the Manchukuo army and police, to

whom the Communists made a particular pitch because of their weapons

and fighting experience. In my father's area, the main thrust of the

Communists' policy was to reduce the rent and interest on loans the

peasants had to pay to the landlords. They also confiscated grain and

clothing from landlords and distributed them to the poor peasants.

At first progress was slow, but by July, when the sorghum had grown to

its full height ready for harvesting, and was high enough to conceal

them, the different guerrilla units were able to come together for a

meeting in Six Household Village, under a huge tree which stood guard

over the temple. My father opened by referring to the Chinese Robin

Hood story, The Water Margin: "This is our "Hall of Justice." We are

here to discuss how to "rid the people of evil and uphold justice on

behalf of Heaven."

At this point my father's guerrillas were fighting mainly westward, and

the areas they took included many villages inhabited by Mongolians. In

November 1946, as winter closed in, the Kuomintang stepped up their

attacks. One day my father was almost captured in an ambush. After a

fierce firefight, he just managed to break out. His clothes were torn

to shreds and his penis was dangling out of his trousers, to the

amusement of his comrades.

They rarely slept in the same place two nights running, and often had

to move several times in one night. They could never take their

clothes off to sleep, and their life was an uninterrupted succession of

ambushes, encirclements, and breakouts. There were a number of women

in the unit, and my father decided to move them and the wounded and

unfit to a more secure area to the south, near the Great Wall. This

involved a long and hazardous journey through Kuomintang-held areas.

Any noise might be fatal, so my father ordered all babies to be left

behind with local peasants. One woman could not bring herself to

abandon her child, and in the end my father told her she would have to

choose between leaving the baby behind or being court-martialed. She

left the baby.

In the following months, my father's unit moved eastward toward Jinzhou

and the key railway line from Manchuria to China proper. They fought

in the hills west of Jinzhou before the regular Communist army arrived.

The Kuomintang launched a number of unsuccessful 'annihilation

campaigns' against them. The unit's actions began to have an impact.

My father, now twenty-five, was so well known that there was a price on

his head and "Wanted' notices up all over the Jinzhou area. My mother

saw these notices, and began to hear a lot about him and his guerrillas

from her relatives in Kuomintang intelligence.

When my father's unit was forced to withdraw, Kuomintang forces

89returned and took back from the peasants the food and clothing which

the Communists had confiscated from the landlords. In many cases

peasants were tortured, and some were killed, particularly those who

had eaten the food which they had often done because they were starving

and could not now hand it back.

In SIX Household Village the man who had owned the most land, one Jin

Ting-quan, had also been the police chief, and had brutally raped many

local women. He had run away with the Kuomintang and my father's unit

had presided over the meeting which opened his house and his grain

store. When Jin came back with the Kuomintang the peasants were made

to grovel in front of him and return all the goods they had been given

by the Communists.

Those who had eaten the food were tortured and their homes smashed. One

man who refused to kowtow or return the food was slowly burned to

death.

In spring 1947 the tide began to turn, and in March my father's group

was able to retake the town of Chaoyang.

Soon the whole surrounding area was in their hands. To celebrate their

victory, there was a feast followed by entertainment. My father was

brilliant at inventing riddles out of people's names, which made him a

great hit with his comrades.

The Communists carried out a land reform, confiscating land which had

hitherto been owned by a small number of landlords and redistributing

it equally among the peasants.

In Six Household Village the peasants at first refused to take Jin

Ting-quan's land, even though he had now been arrested. Although he

was under guard, they bowed and scraped to him. My father visited many

peasant families, and gradually learned the horrible truth about him.

The Chaoyang government sentenced Jin to death by shooting, but the

family of the man who had been burned to death, with the support of the

families of other victims, determined to kill him the same way. As the

flames began to lick around his body Jin clenched his teeth, and did

not utter even a moan until the moment the fire surrounded his heart.

The Communist officials sent to carry out the execution did not prevent

the villagers (from doing this.

Although the Communists were opposed to torture in theory and on

principle, officials were told that they should not intervene if the

peasants wished to vent their anger in passionate acts of revenge.

People such as Jin were not just wealthy owners of land, but had

wielded absolute and arbitrary power, which they indulged willfully,

over the lives of the local population.

They were called e-ba ('ferocious despots').

In some areas the killing extended to ordinary landlords, who were

called 'stones' obstacles to the revolution.

Policy toward the 'stones' was: "When in doubt, kill." My father

thought this was wrong and told his subordinates, and the people at

public meetings, that only those who unquestionably had blood on their

hands should be sentenced to death. In his reports to his superiors he

repeatedly said that the Party should be careful with human lives, and

that excessive executions would only harm the revolution. It was

90partly because many people like my father spoke up that in February

1948 the Communist leadership issued urgent instructions to stop

violent excesses.

All the time, the main forces of the Communist army were coming nearer.

In early 1948 my father's guerrillas joined up with the regular army.

He was put in charge of an intelligence-gathering system covering the

JinzhouHuludao area; his job was to track the deployment of Kuomintang

forces and monitor their food situation. Much of his information came

from agents inside the Kuomintang, including Yu-wu. From these reports

he heard of my mother for the first time.

The thin, dreamy-looking man my mother saw brushing his teeth in the

courtyard that October morning was known among his fellow guerrillas

for his fastidiousness. He brushed his teeth every day, which was a

novelty to the other guerrillas and to the peasants in the villages he

had fought through. Unlike everyone else, who simply blew their noses

onto the ground, he used a handkerchief, which he washed whenever he

could. He never dipped his face towel in the public washbasin like the

other soldiers, as eye diseases were widespread. He was also known as

scholarly and bookish and always carried some volumes of classical

poetry with him, even in battle.

When she had first seen the "Wanted' posters and heard about this

dangerous 'bandit' from her relatives, my mother could tell that they

admired as well as feared him. Now she was not a bit disappointed that

the legendary guerrilla did not look at all warrior like

My father also knew of my mother's courage and, most unusual of all,

the fact that she, a seventeen-year-old girl, was giving orders to men.

An admirable and emancipated woman, he had thought, although he had

also imagined her as a fierce dragon. To his delight he found her

pretty and feminine, even rather coquettish. She was both soft spoken

and persuasive and also, something rare in China, precise. This was an

extremely important quality for him, as he hated the traditional

florid, irresponsible, and vague way of talking.

She noticed that he laughed a lot, and that he had shiny white teeth,

unlike most other guerrillas, whose teeth were often brown and rotting.

She was also attracted by his conversation. He struck her as learned

and knowledgeable definitely not the sort of man who would mix up

Flaubert and Maupassant.

When my mother told him she was there to report on the work of her

students' union, he asked her what books the students were reading. My

mother gave him a list and asked if he would come and give them some

lectures on Marxist philosophy and history. He agreed, and asked her

how many people there were at her school. She gave him an exact figure

at once. Then he asked her what proportion of them backed the

Communists; again she immediately gave him a careful estimate.

A few days later he turned up to start his course of lectures. He also

took the students through Mao's works and explained what some of Mao's

basic theories were. He was an excellent speaker, and the girls,

including my mother, were bowled over.

One day, he told the students that the Party was organizing a trip to

Harbin, the Communists' temporary capital in the north of Manchuria.

Harbin was largely built by Russians and was known as 'the Paris of the

East' because of its broad boulevards, ornate buildings, smart shops,

and European-style cafes. The trip was presented as a sight seeing

91tour, but the real reason for it was that the Party

was worried that the Kuomintang was going to try to retake Jinzhou, and

they wanted to get the pro-Communist teachers and students, as well as

the professional elite like doctors, out in case the city was

reoccupied but they did not want to set off alarm bells by saying so.

My mother and a number of her friends were among the 170 people chosen

to go.

In late November my mother set off by train for the north in a state of

high excitement. It was in snow-covered Harbin, with its romantic old

buildings and its Russian mood of lingering pensiveness and poetry,

that my parents fell in love. My father wrote some beautiful poems for

my mother there. Not only were they in very elegant classical style,

which was a considerable accomplishment, but she discovered that he was

a good calligrapher, which raised him even higher in her esteem.

On New Year's Eve he invited my mother and a girlfriend of hers to his

quarters. He was living in an old Russian hotel, which was like

something out of a fairy tale, with a brightly colored roof, ornate

gables, and delicate plaster work around the windows and on the

veranda.

When my mother came in, she saw a bottle sitting on a rococo table; it

had foreign lettering on it champagne.

My father had never actually drunk champagne before; he had only read

about it in foreign books.

By this time it was well known among my mother's fellow students that

the two were in love. My mother, being the student leader, often went

to give long reports to my father, and it was noticed that she did not

come back until the small hours. My father had several other admirers,

including the friend who was with my mother that night, but she could

see from how he looked at my mother, his teasing remarks and the way

they seized every chance to be physically close to each other, that he

was in love with her.

When the friend left toward midnight, she knew my mother was going to

stay behind. My father found a note under the empty champagne bottle:

"Alas! I shall have no more reason to drink champagne! I hope the

champagne bottle is always full for you!"

That night, my father asked my mother whether she was committed to

anyone else. She told him about her previous relationships, and said

the only man she had really loved was her cousin Hu, but that he had

been executed by the Kuomintang. Then, in line with the new Communist

moral code which, in a radical departure from the past, enjoined that

men and women should be equal, he told her about his previous

relationships. He said he had been in love with a woman in Yibin, but

that that had ended when he left for Yan'an. He had had a few

girlfriends in Yan'an, and in his guerrilla days, but the war had made

it impossible even to contemplate the idea of marriage. One of his

former girlfriends was to marry Chen Boda, the head of my father's

section of the Academy in Yan'an, who later rose to enormous power as

Mao's secretary.

After hearing each other's frank accounts of their past lives, my

father said he was going to write to the Jinzhou City Party Committee

asking for permission to 'talk about love' (tan-lian-ai) with my

mother, with a view to marriage.

92This was the obligatory procedure. My mother supposed it was a bit

like asking permission from the head of the family, and in fact that is

exactly what it was: the Communist Party was the new patriarch. That

night, after their talk, my mother received her first present from my

father, a romantic Russian novel called It's Only Love.

The next day my mother wrote home saying she had met a man she liked

very much. The immediate reaction of her mother and Dr. Xia was not

enthusiasm but concern, because my father was an official, and

officials had always had a bad name among ordinary Chinese. Apart from

their other vices, their arbitrary power meant they were thought

unlikely to treat women decently. My grandmother's immediate

assumption was that my father was married already and wanted my mother

as a concubine. After all, he was well beyond the marrying age for men

in Manchuria.

After about a month it was judged safe for the Harbin group to return

to Jinzhou. The Party told my father that he had permission to 'talk

about love' with my mother.

Two other men had also applied, but their applications came too late.

One of them was Liang, who had been her controller in the underground.

In his disappointment he asked to be transferred away from Jinzhou.

Neither he nor the other man had breathed a word of their intentions to

my mother.

My father got back to be told he had been appointed head of the Public

Affairs Department ofJinzhou. A few days later my mother took him home

to introduce him to her family. The moment he came in the door my

grandmother turned her back on him, and when he tried to greet her she

refused to answer. My father was dark and terribly thin the result of

the hardships he had been through in the guerrilla days, and my

grandmother was convinced he was well over forty, and therefore that it

was impossible he had not been married before. Dr. Xia treated him

politely, if formally.

My father did not stay long. When he left, my grandmother was in

floods of tears. No official could be any good, she cried. But Dr.

Xia already realized, through meeting my father and from my mother's

explanations, that the Communists exercised such tight control over

their people that an official like my father would not be able to

cheat. My grandmother was only half reassured: "But he is from

Sichuan. How can the Communists find out when he comes from so far

away?"

She kept up her barrage of doubts and criticism, but the rest of the

family took to my father. Dr. Xia got on very well with him, and they

would talk together for hours.

Yu-lin and his wife also liked him very much. Yu-lin's wife

from a very poor family. Her mother had been forced into an

marriage after her grandfather had staked her in a card game

Her brother had been caught in a roundup by the Japanese and

do

three years of forced labor, which destroyed

his body.

had come

unhappy

and lost.

had had to

From the day she married Yu-lin, she had to get up at three o'clock

every morning to start preparing the various different meals demanded

by the complicated Manchu tradition. My grandmother was running the

93house and, although they were in theory members of the same generation,

Yu-lin's wife felt that she was the inferior because she and her

husband were dependent on the Xias. My father was the first person to

make a point of treating her as an equal, which in China was a

considerable departure from the past, and several times he gave the

couple film tickets, which for them was a big treat. He was the first

official they had ever met who did not put on airs, and Yu-lin's wife

certainly felt that the Communists were a big improvement.

Less than two months after returning from Harbin my mother and father

filed their application. Marriage had traditionally been a contract

between families, and there had never been civil registration or a

marriage certificate.

Now, for those who had 'joined the revolution," the Party functioned as

the family head. Its criteria were '28-7-regiment-l' which meant that

the man had to be at least twenty-eight years old, a Party member for

at least seven years, and with a rank equivalent to that of a

regimental commander; the '1' referred to the only qualification the

woman had to meet, to have worked for the Party for a minimum of one

year. My father was twenty-eight according to the Chinese way of

counting age (one year old at birth), he had been a Party member for

over ten years, and he held a position equivalent to that of a deputy

division commander. Although my mother was not a member of the Party,

her work for the underground was accepted as meeting the '1' criterion,

and since she had come back from Harbin she had been working full time

for an organization called the Women's Federation, which dealt with

women's affairs: it supervised the freeing of concubines and shutting

down brothels, mobilized women to make shoes for the army, organized

their education and their employment, informed them of their rights,

and helped ensure that women were not entering into marriages against

their wishes.

The Women's Federation was now my mother's 'work unit' (dan-weO, an

institution wholly under the control of the Party, to which everyone in

the urban areas had to belong and which regulated virtually every

aspect of an employee's life like in an army. My mother was supposed

to live on the premises of the Federation, and had to obtain its

permission to marry. The Federation left it up to my father's work

unit, as he was a higher official. The Jinzhou City Party Committee

speedily gave its written permission, but because of my father's

position, clearance also had to come from the Party Committee for the

province of West Liaoning. Assuming there would be no problem, my

parents set the wedding day for 4 May, my mother's eighteenth

birthday.

On that day my mother wrapped up her bedroll and her clothes and got

ready to move into my father's quarters.

She wore her favorite pale blue gown and a white silk scarf.

My grandmother was appalled. It was unheard of for a bride to walk to

the bridegroom's house. The man had to get a sedan chair to carry her

over. For a woman to walk was a sign that she was worthless and that

the man did not really want her.

"Who cares about all that stuff now?" said my mother as she tied up

her bedroll. But my grandmother was more dismayed at the thought that

her daughter was not going to have a magnificent traditional wedding.

From the moment a baby girl was born, her mother would start putting

things aside for her dowry. Following the custom, my mother's

94trousseau contained a dozen satin-covered quilts and pillows with

embroidered mandarin ducks, as well as curtains and a decorated pelmet

for a four-poster bed. But my mother regarded a traditional ceremony

as old-fashioned and redundant. Both she and my father wanted to get

rid of rituals like that, which they felt had nothing to do with their

feelings. Love was the only thing that mattered to these two

revolutionaries.

My mother walked, carrying her bedroll, to my father's quarters. Like

all officials, he was living in the building where he worked, the City

Party Committee; the employees were housed in rows of bungalows with

sliding doors situated around a big courtyard. As dusk fell, and they

were on the point of going to bed for the night, my mother was kneeling

down to take off my father's slippers when there was a knock on the

door. A man was standing there, and he handed my father a message from

the Provincial Party Committee. It said they could not get married

yet. Only the tightening of my mother's lips showed how unhappy she

was. She just bent her head, silently gathered up her bedroll, and

left with a simple "See you later." There were no tears, no scene, not

even any visible anger. The moment was etched indelibly into my

father's mind. When I was a child he used to say: "Your mother was so

graceful."

Then, jokingly, "How times have changed! You're not like your mother!

You wouldn't do something like that kneel down to take off a man's

shoes!"

What had caused the delay was that the Provincial Committee was

suspicious of my mother because of her family connections. They

questioned her in great detail about how her family had come to be

connected with Kuomintang intelligence. They told her she must be

completely truthful. It was like giving evidence in court.

She also had to explain how each of the Kuomintang officers had sought

her hand, and why she was friends with so many Kuomintang Youth League

members. She pointed out that her friends were the most anti-Japanese

and the most socially conscious people; and that when the

Kuomintang had come to Jinzhou in 1945, they had seen it as the

government of China. She herself might well have joined, but at

fourteen she was too young. In fact, most of her friends had soon

switched to the Communists.

The Party was divided: the

mother's friends had acted

provincial leaders treated

was asked to 'draw a line'

City Committee took the view that my

out of pamofic motives; but some of the

them with open-ended suspicion. My mother

between herself and her friends.

"Drawing a line' between people was a key mechanism the Communists

introduced to increase the gap between those who were 'in' and those

who were 'out." Nothing, even personal relationships, was left to

chance, or allowed to be fluid. If she wanted to get married, she had

to stop seeing her friends.

But the most painful thing for my mother was what was happening to

Hui-ge, the young Kuomintang colonel. The moment the siege was over,

after her initial exhilaration that the Communists had won, her

strongest urge had been to see whether he was all right. She ran all

the way through the blood-soaked streets to the Jis' mansion. There

was nothing there no street, no houses, only a gigantic pile of rubble.

Hui-ge had disappeared.

95In the spring, just as she was preparing to get married, she found out

that he was alive, a prisoner- and inJinzhou.

At the time of the siege he had managed to escape south and had ended

up at Tianjin; when the Communists took Tianjin in January 1949, he was

captured and brought back.

Hui-ge was not regarded as an ordinary prisoner of war.

Because of his family's influence in Jinzhou, he fell into the category

of' snakes in their old haunts," meaning established powerful local

figures. They were especially dangerous for the Communists because

they commanded loyalty from the local population, and their

anti-Communist inclinations posed a threat to the new regime.

My mother felt confident that Hui-ge would be fairly treated after it

was known what he had done, and she immediately started to appeal on

his behalfi As was the procedure, she had to talk first to her

immediate boss in her unit, the Women's Federation, which forwarded the

appeal to a higher authority. My mother did not know who had the final

say. She went to Yu-wu, who knew about, and indeed had instructed, her

contact with Hui-ge, and asked him to vouch for the colonel. Yu-wu

wrote a report describing what Hui-ge had done, but added that he had

perhaps acted out of love for my mother, and that he might not even

have known he was helping the Communists because he was blinded by

love.

My mother went to another underground leader who knew what the colonel

had done. He too refused to say that Hui-ge had been helping the

Communists. In fact he was not willing to mention the co loners role

in getting information out to the Communists at all, so that he could

take full credit for it himself. My mother said that she and the

colonel had not been in love, but she could not produce any proof. She

cited the veiled requests and promises that had passed between them,

but these were regarded only as evidence that the colonel was trying to

buy 'insurance," something about which the Party was particularly

chary.

All this was going on at the time that my mother and father were

preparing to get married, and it cast a dark shadow over their

relationship. However, my father sympathized with my mother's

quandary, and thought Hui-ge should be treated fairly. He did not let

the fact that my grandmother had favored the colonel as her son-in-law

influence his judgment.

In late May, permission finally arrived for the wedding to go ahead. My

mother was at a meeting of the Women's Federation when someone came in

and slipped a note into her hand. The note was from the city Party

chief, Lin Xiao-xia, who was a nephew of the top general who had led

the Communist forces in Manchuria, Lin Biao. It was in verse, and said

sun ply "The provincial authorities have given the okay. You can't

possibly want to be stuck in a meeting. Come quickly and get

married!"

My mother tried to look calm as she walked up and gave the note to the

woman presiding over the meeting, who nodded approval for her to leave.

She ran all the way to

A Revolutionary Mannage 17 7 my father's quarters, still wearing her

blue "Lenin suit," a uniform for government employees that had a

96doublebreasted jacket tucked in at the waist and

trousers. When she opened the door, she saw Lin

Party leaders and their bodyguards, who had just

said a carriage had been sent for Dr. Xia. Lin

your mother-in-law?" My father said nothing.

worn over bag~

Xiao-xia and the other

arrived. My father

asked: "What about

"That's not right," Lin said, and ordered a carriage to be sent for

her. My mother felt very hurt, but attributed my father's action to

his loathing of my grandmother's Kuomintang intelligence connections.

Still, she thought, was that her mother's fault? It did not occur to

her that my father's behavior might have been a reaction to the way her

mother had treated him.

There was no wedding ceremony of any kind, only a small gathering. Dr.

Xia came up to congratulate the couple. Everyone sat around for a

while eating fresh crabs which the City Party Committee had provided as

a special treat. The Communists were trying to institute a frugal

approach to weddings, which had traditionally been the occasion for

huge expenditure, far out of proportion to what people could afford. It

was not at all unusual for families to bankrupt themselves to put on a

lavish wedding.

My parents had dates and peanuts, which had been served at weddings in

Yan'an, and dried fruit called long an which traditionally symbolizes a

happy union and sons. After a short time, Dr. Xia and most of the

guests left. A group from the Women's Federation turned up late',

after their meeting was over.

Dr. Xia and my grandmother had had no idea about the wedding, nor did

the first carriage driver tell them. My grandmother only heard that

her daughter was about to be married when the second carriage came. As

she hurried up the path and came into view through the window, the

women from the Federation started whispering to each other and then

scut fled out the back door. My father left as well. My mother was on

the verge of tears. She knew the women from her group despised my

grandmother not only because of her Kuomintang connections but also

because she had been a concubine. Far from being emancipated on these

issues, many Communist women from uneducated peasant backgrounds were

set in their traditional ways. For them, no good gift would have

become a concubine even though the Communists had stipulated that a

concubine enjoyed the same status as a wife, and could dissolve the

'marriage' unilaterally. These women from the Federation were the very

ones supposed to be implementing the Party's policies of

emancipation.

My mother covered up, telling her mother that her bridegroom had had to

go back to work: "It is not the Communist custom to give people leave

for a wedding. In fact, I am about to go back to work myself." My

grandmother thought that the offhand way in which the Communists

treated a big thing like a wedding was absolutely extraordinary, but

they had broken so many rules relating to traditional values, maybe

this was just one more.

At the time one of my mother's jobs was teaching reading and writing to

the women in the textile factory where she had worked under the

Japanese, and informing them about women's equality with men. The

factory was still privately owned, and one of the foremen was still

beating women employees whenever he felt like it. My mother was

instrumental in getting him sacked, and helped the women workers elect

their own forewoman. But any credit she might have ?eceived for

achieving this was obscured by the Federation's dissatisfaction about

97another matter.

One major task of the Women's Federation was to make cotton shoes for

the army. My mother did not know how to make shoes, so she got her

mother and aunts to do it.

They had been brought up making elaborate embroidered shoes, and my

mother proudly presented the Women's Federation with a large number of

beautifully made shoes, far exceeding her quota. To her surprise,

instead of being praised for her ingenuity, she was scolded like a

child. The peasant women in the Federation could not conceive that

there could be a woman on the face of the earth who did not know how to

make shoes. It was like saying someone did not know how to eat. She

was criticized at the Federation meetings for her 'bourgeois

decadence."

My mother did not get on with some of her bosses in the Women's

Federation. They were older, and conservative, peasant women who had

slogged for years with the guerrillas, and they resented pretty,

educated city girls like my mother who immediately attracted the

Communist men.

My mother had applied to join the Party, but they said that she was

unworthy.

Every time she went home she found herself being criticized. She was

accused of being 'too attached to her family," which was condemned as a

'bourgeois habit," and had to see less and less of her own mother.

At the time there was an unwritten rule that no revolutionary could

spend the night away from his or her office except on Saturdays. My

mother's assigned sleeping place was in the Women's Federation, which

was separated from my father's quarters by a low mud wall. At night

she would clamber over the wall and cross a small garden to my father's

room, returning to her own room before dawn.

She was soon found out, and she and my father were criticized at Party

meetings. The Communists had embarked on a radical reorganization not

just of institutions, but of people's lives, especially the lives of

those who had 'joined the revolution." The idea was that everything

personal was political; in fact, henceforth nothing was supposed to be

regarded as 'personal' or private. Pettiness was validated by being

labeled 'political," and meetings became the forum by which the

Communists channeled all sorts of personal animosities.

My father had to make a verbal self-criticism, and my mother a written

one. She was said to have 'put love first," when revolution should

have had priority. She felt very wronged. What harm could it do the

revolution if she spent the night with her husband? She could

understand the rationale for such a rule in the guerrilla days, but not

now.

She did not want to write a self-criticism, and told my father so. To

her dismay he admonished her, saying: "The revolution is not won. The

war is still going on. We have broken the rules, and we should admit

mistakes. A revolution needs steel-like discipline. You have to obey

the Party even if you do not understand it or agree with it."

Soon after this disaster struck out of the blue. A poet called Bian,

who had been in the delegation to Harbin and who had become a close

friend of my mother, tried to kill himself. Bian was a follower of the

98"New Moon' school of poetry, a leading exponent of which was Hu Shi,

who became Kuomintang ambassador to the. United States. It

concentrated on aesthetics and form and was~ particularly influenced by

Keats. Bian had joined the Communists during the war, but then found

that his poetry was deemed not to be in harmony with the revolution,

which wanted propaganda, not self-expression. He accepted this with

part of his mind, but he was also very torn and depressed.

He began to feel that he would never be able to write again, and yet,

he said, he could not live without his poetry.

His attempted suicide shocked the Party. It was bad for its image for

people to think that anyone might be so disillusioned with Liberation

that they would try to kill themselves. Bian was working in Jinzhou as

a teacher at the school for Party officials, many of whom were

illiterate.

The Party organization at the school conducted an investigation and

leapt to the conclusion that Bian had tried to kill himself because of

unrequited love for my mother.

In its criticism meetings the Women's Federation suggested that my

mother had led Bian on and then ditched him for a bigger prize, my

father. My mother was furious, and demanded to see the evidence for

the accusation. Of course, none was ever produced.

In this case, my father stood by my mother.

to Harbin, when my mother was supposed

He knew that on the trip

to have been having trysts with Bian, she had been in love with him,

not the poet. He had seen Bian reading his poems to my mother and knew

that my mother admired him, and did not think there was anything wrong

with it.

But neither he nor my mother could stop the flood of gossip.

in the Federation were particularly virulent.

The women

At the height of this whispering campaign my mother heard that her

appeal for Hui-ge had been turned down.

She was beside herself with anguish. She had made a promise to Hui-ge,

and now she felt that she had somehow misled him. She had been

visiting him regularly in prison, bringing him news of her efforts to

get his case reviewed, and she had felt it was inconceivable that the

Communists would not spare him. She had been genuinely optimistic and

had tried to cheer him up. But this time when he saw her face,

red-eyed and distorted from the effort of hiding her despair, he knew

there was no hope. They wept together, sitting in full view of the

guards with a table between them on which they had to place their

hands.

Hui-ge took my mother's hands in his; she did not pull back.

My father was informed of my mother's visits to the prison. At first

he said nothing. He sympathized with her predicament. But gradually

he became angry. The scandal about Bian's attempted suicide was at its

height, and now it was alleged that his wife had had a relationship

with a Kuomintang colonel and they were still supposed to be on their

honeymoon! He was furious, but his personal feelings were not the

decisive factor in his acceptance of the Party's attitude toward the

colonel. He told my mother that if the Kuomintang came back people

99like Hui-ge would be the first to use their authority to help restore

it to power. The Communists, he said, could not afford that risk: "Our

revolution is a matter of life and death." When my mother tried to

tell him how Hui-ge had helped the Communists he responded that her

visits to the prison had

done Hui-ge no good,

particularly their holding hands.

Since the time of Confucius, men and women had to be married, or at

least lovers, to touch in public, and even under these circumstances it

was extremely rare. The fact that my mother and Hui-ge had been seen

holding hands was taken as proof that they had been in love, and that

Hui-ge's service to the Communists had not been motivated by 'correct'

reasons. My mother found it hard to disagree with him, but this did

not make her feel any less desolate.

Her sense of being caught up in impossible dilemmas was heightened by

what was happening to several of her relatives and many people close to

her. When the Communists arrived, they had announced that anybody who

had worked for Kuomintang intelligence had to report to them at once.

Her uncle Yu-lin had never worked in intelligence, but he had an

intelligence card, and felt he should report to the new authorities.

His wife and my grandmother tried to dissuade him, but he thought it

best to tell the truth.

He was in a difficult situation. If he had not turned himself in and

the Communists had discovered the facts about him, which was highly

likely, given their formidable organization, he would have been in dire

trouble. But by coming forward, he himself had given them grounds to

suspect him.

The Party's verdict was: "Has a political blemish in his past. No

punishment, but can only be employed under control." This verdict,

like almost all others, was not delivered by a court, but by a Party

body. There was no clear definition of what it meant, but as a result

of it, for three decades Yu-lin's life would depend on the political

climate and on his Party bosses. In those days Jinzhou had a

relatively relaxed City Party Committee, and he was allowed to go on

helping Dr. Xia in the shop.

My grandmother's brother-in-law, "Loyalty' Pei-o, was exiled to the

country to do manual labor. Because he had no blood on his hands, he

was given a sentence called

'under surveillance." Instead of being imprisoned, this meant being

guarded (just as effectively) in society. His family chose to go to

the country with him, but before they could leave, "Loyalty' had to

enter a hospital. He had contracted venereal disease. The Communists

had launched a major campaign to wipe out VD, and anyone who had it was

obliged to undergo treatment.

His work 'under surveillance' lasted three years. It was rather like

assigned labor under parole. People under surveillance enjoyed a

measure of freedom, but they had to report to the police at regular

intervals with a detailed account of everything they had done, or even

thought, since their last visit, and they were openly watched by the

police.

When they finished their term of formal surveillance, they would join

people like Yu-lin in a looser category of 'quiet' surveillance. One

common form of this was the 'sandwich' being kept under close watch by

100two neighbors who had been specifically assigned this task, often

called 'two reds sandwiching a black." Of course, other neighbors,

through the residents' committees, were also entitled and encouraged to

report and inform on the unreliable 'black." The 'people's justice'

was watertight, and was a central instrument of rule because it

enlisted so many citizens in active collusion with the state.

Zhu-ge, the scholarly looking intelligence officer who had married Miss

Tanaka, my mother's Japanese teacher, was sentenced to forced labor for

life and exiled to a remote border area (along with many former

Kuomintang officials, he was released in an amnesty in 1959). His wife

was sent back to Japan. As in the Soviet Union, almost all of those

sentenced to detention did not go to prison but into labor camps, often

working in dangerous jobs or highly polluted areas.

Some important Kuomintang figures, including intelligence men, went

unpunished. The academic supervisor at my mother's school had been

district secretary of the Kuomintang, but there was evidence that he

had helped to save the lives of many Communists and Communist

sympathizers, including my mother, so he was spared.

The headmistress and two teachers who had worked for intelligence

managed to hide, and eventually escaped to Taiwan. So did Yao-han, the

political supervisor who had been responsible for my mother's arrest.

The Communists also spared big shots like the 'last emperor," Pu Yi,

and top generals because they were 'useful." Mao's stated policy was:

"We kill small Chiang Kaiosheks. We don't kill big Chiang Kai-she ks

Keeping people like Pu Yi alive, he reasoned, would 'be well received

abroad." No one could complain openly about this policy, but it was a

cause of much discontent in private.

It was a time of great anxiety for my mother's family.

Her uncle Yu-lin and her aunt Lan, whose fate was hitched inexorably to

that of her husband, "Loyalty," were in a state of acute uncertainty

about their futures, and suffering ostracism. But the Women's

Federation ordered my mother to write one self-criticism after another,

as her grief indicated she had 'a soft spot for the Kuomintang."

She was also sniped at for visiting a prisoner, Hui-ge, without asking

for permission from the Federation first.

Nobody had told her she was supposed to do this. The Federation said

that they had not stopped her before because they made allowances for

someone who was 'new to the revolution'; they were waiting to see how

long it would take her to reach her own sense of discipline and ask the

Party for instructions.

"But what are the things for which I need to apply for instructions?"

she asked.

"Anything," was the answer. The need to obtain authorization for an

unspecified 'anything' was to become a fundamental element in Chinese

Communist rule. It also meant that people learned not to take any

action on their own initiative.

My mother became ostracized within the Federation, which was her whole

world. There were whispers that she had been used by Hui-ge to help

him prepare for a comeback.

101"What a mess she got herself into," exclaimed the women, 'all because

she was "loose." Look at all these involvements with men! And what

kind of men!" My mother felt surrounded by accusing fingers, and that

the people who were supposed to be her comrades in a glorious new and

liberating movement were questioning her character and her commitment,

for which she had risked her life.

She was even criticized for having left the meeting of the Women's

Federation to go and get married a sin termed 'putting love first."

mother said that the city chief had asked her to go. To this the

chairwoman retorted: "But it was up to you to show your correct

attitude by putting the meeting first."

My

Just eighteen, recently married, and full of hope for a new life, my

mother felt miserably confused and isolated.

She had always trusted her own strong sense of right and wrong, but

this now seemed to be in conflict with the views of her 'cause' and,

often, the judgment of her husband, whom she loved. She began to doubt

herself for the first time.

She did not blame the Party, or the revolution. Nor could she blame

the women in the Federation, because they were her comrades and seemed

to be the voice of the Party. Her resentment turned against my father.

She felt that his loyalty was not primarily to her and that he always

seemed to side with his comrades against her. She understood that it

might be difficult for him to express his support in public, but she

wanted it in private and she did not get it. From the very beginning

of their marriage, there was a fundamental difference between my

parents. My father's devotion to communism was absolute: he felt he

had to speak the same language in private, even to his wife, that he

did in public. My mother was much more flexible;

her commitment was tempered by both reason and emotion.

space to the private; my father did not.

She gave a

My mother was finding Jinzhou unbearable. She told my father she

wanted to leave, right away. He agreed, in spite of the fact that he

was just about to receive a promotion. He applied to the City Party

Committee for a transfer, giving as the reason that he wanted to go

back to his hometown, Yibin. The Committee was surprised, as he had

just told them this was exactly what he did not want to do. Throughout

Chinese history, it had been a rule that officials were stationed away

from their hometowns to avoid problems of nepotism.

In the summer of 1949 the Communists were advancing southward with

unstoppable momentum: they had captured Chiang Kai-shek's capital,

Nanjing, and seemed certain to reach Sichuan soon. Their experience in

Manchuria had shown them that they badly needed administrators who were

local and loyal.

The Party endorsed my father's transfer. Two months after their

marriage and less than one year after Liberation they were being driven

out of my mother's hometown by gossip and spite. My mother's joy at

Liberation had turned to an anxious melancholy. Under the Kuomintang

she had been able to discharge her tension in action and it had been

easy to feel she was doing the right thing, which gave her courage. Now

she just felt in the wrong all the time. When she tried to talk it

over with my father he would tell her that becoming a Communist was an

agonizing process. That was the way it had to be.

1027. "Going through the Five Mountain Passes' My Mothefts Long March

(1949-1950)

Just before my parents left Jinzhou, my mother was granted provisional

membership in the Party, thanks to the deputy mayor who oversaw the

Women's Federation, who argued that she needed it because she was going

to a new place.

The decision meant she could become a full member in one year's time,

if she was deemed to have proved herself worthy.

My parents were to join a group of over a hundred people traveling to

the southwest, most of them to Sichuan.

The bulk of the group were men, Communist officials from the southwest.

The few women were Manchurians who had married Sichuanese. For the

journey they were organized into units and given green army uniforms.

The civil war was still raging in their path.

On 27 July 1949 my grandmother, Dr. Xia, and my mother's closest

friends, most of whom were under suspicion from the Communists, came to

the station to see them off. As they stood on the platform saying

goodbye, my mother felt torn by contradictory feelings. With one

part of her heart she felt

like a bird which was now going to burst out of its cage and fly to the

sky. With the other part she wondered when or if- she would ever see

these people she loved, particularly her mother, again. The journey

was fraught with danger, and Sichuan was still in the hands of the

Kuomintang. It was also 1,000 miles away, inconceivably far, and she

had no idea if she would ever be able to get back to Jinzhou. She felt

an overwhelming desire to cry, but she held back her tears because she

did not want to make her mother sadder than she already was.

As the platform slipped out of sight my father tried to comfort her. He

told her that she must be strong, and that as a young student 'joining

the revolution' she needed to 'go through the five mountain passes'

which meant adopting a completely new attitude to family, profession,

love, life-style, and manual labor, through embracing hardship and

trauma. The Party's theory was that educated people like her needed to

stop being 'bourgeois' and become closer to the peasants, who formed

over 8o percent of the population. My mother had heard these theories

a hundred times. She accepted the need to reform oneself for a new

China; in fact she had just written a poem about meeting the challenge

of 'the storm of sand' in her future. But she also wanted more

tenderness and personal understanding, and she resented the fact that

she did not get them from my father.

When the train reached Tianjin, about z5o miles to the southwest, they

had to stop because the line ended. My father said he would like to

take her around the city. Tianjin was a huge port where the United

States, Japan, and a number of European states had until recently had

'concessions," extraterritorial enclaves (General Xue had died in the

French concession in Tianjin, although my mother did not know this).

There were whole quarters built in different foreign styles, with

grandiose buildings: elegant turn-of-the-century French palaces; light

Italian pa lazzi

overblown, late rococo Austro-Hungarian townhouses.

It

My Mother's Long March ~ 89 was an extraordinary condensation of

103display by eight different nations, all of whom had been trying to

impress one another and the Chinese. Apart from the squat, heaD', gray

Japanese banks, familiar from Manchuria, and the green-roofed Russian

banks, with their delicate pink-and yellow walls, it was the first time

my mother had ever seen buildings like these. My father had read a lot

of foreign literature, and the descriptions of European buildings had

always fascinated him. This was the first time he had seen them with

his own eyes. My mother could tell he was going to a lot of trouble to

try to fire her with his enthusiasm, but she was still down in the

dumps as they strolled along the streets, which were lined with heavily

scented Chinese scholar trees. She was already missing her mother, and

she could not rid herself of her anger against my father for not saying

anything sympathetic, and for his stiffness, although she knew he was

trying, awkwardly, to help her out of her mood.

The broken railway line was only the beginning. They had to continue

their journey on foot, and the route was peppered with local landlords'

forces, bandits, and units of Kuomintang soldiers who had been left

behind as the Communists advanced. There were only three rifles in the

entire group, one of which my father had, but at each stage along the

route the local authorities sent a squad of soldiers as an escort,

usually with a couple of machine guns.

They had to walk long distances every day, often on rough paths,

carrying their bedrolls and other belongings on their backs. Those who

had been in the guerrillas were used to this, but after one day the

soles of my mother's feet were covered with blisters. There was no way

she could stop for a rest. Her colleagues advised her to soak her feet

in hot water at the end of the day and to let the fluid out by piercing

the blisters with a needle and a hair.

This brought instant relief, but the next day it was laceratingly

painful when she had to start walking again. Each morning she gritted

her teeth and struggled on.

19o "Going through the Five Mountain Passes'

Much of the way there were no roads. The going was appalling,

especially when it rained: the earth became a mass of slippery mud, and

my mother fell down more times than she could count. At the end of the

day she would be covered with mud. When they reached their destination

for the night, she would collapse on the ground and just lie there,

unable to move.

One day they had to walk over thirty miles in heavy rain.

The temperature was well over 9o F, and my mother was soaked to the

skin with rain and sweat. They had to climb a mountain not a

particularly high one, only about 3,000 feet, but my mother was

completely exhausted. She felt her bedroll weighing on her like a huge

stone. Her eyes were clogged with sweat pouring from her forehead.

When she opened her mouth to gasp for air, she felt she could not get

enough into her lungs to breathe. Thousands of stars were dancing

before her eyes and she could hardly drag one foot in front of the

other. When she got to the top she thought her misery was over, but

going downhill was almost as difficult. Her calf muscles seemed to

have turned to jelly. It was wild country, and the steep, narrow path

ran along the edge of a cliff, with a drop of hundreds of feet. Her

legs were trembling and she felt sure she was going to fall into the

abyss. Several times she had to cling to trees to keep from toppling

over the cliff.

104After they had crossed the mountain there were several deep,

fast-flowing rivers in their path. The water level rose to her waist

and she found it almost impossible to keep her footing. In the middle

of one river she stumbled and felt she was about to be swept away when

a man leaned over and caught hold of her. She almost broke down and

wept, particularly since at this very moment she spotted a friend of

hers whose husband was carrying her across the river.

Although the husband was a senior official, and had the right to use a

car, he had waived his privilege in order to walk with his wife.

My father was not carrying my mother.

He was being

My Mother's Long March 19i driven along in a jeep, with his bodyguard.

His rank entitled him to transportation either a jeep or a horse,

whichever was available. My mother had often hoped that he would give

her a lift, or at least carry her bedroll in his jeep, but he never

offered. The evening after she almost drowned in the river, she

decided to have it out with him.

She had had a terrible day. What was more, she was vomiting all the

time. Could he not let her travel in his jeep occasionally? He said

he could not, because it would be taken as favoritism since my mother

was not entitled to the car. He felt he had to fight against the

age-old Chinese tradition of nepotism. Furthermore, my mother was

supposed to experience hardship. When she mentioned that her friend

was being carried by her husband, my father replied that that was

completely different: the friend was a veteran Communist. In the 193OS

she had commanded a goerrilla unit jointly with Kim II Sung, who later

became president of North Korea, fighting the Japanese under appalling

conditions in the northeast. Among the long list of sufferings in her

revolutionary career was the loss of her first husband, who had been

executed on orders from Stalin. My mother could not compare herself to

this woman, my father said. She was only a young student. If other

people thought she was being pampered she would be in trouble.

"It's for your own good," he added, reminding her that her application

for full Party membership was pending.

"You have a choice: you can either get into the car or get into the

Party, but not both."

He had a point. The revolution was fundamentally a peasant revolution,

and the peasants had an unrelentingly harsh life. They were

particularly sensitive about other people enjoying or seeking comfort.

Anyone who took part in the revolution was supposed to toughen

themselves to the point where they became inured to hardship. My

father had done this at Yan'an and as a goerrilla.

My mother understood the theory, but that did not stop her thinking

about the fact that my father was giving her

192 "Going through the Five Mountain Passes' no sympathy while she was

sick and exhausted the whole time, trudging along, carrying her

bedroll, sweating, vomiting, her legs like lead.

One night she could not stand it anymore, and burst into tears for the

first time. The group usually stayed overnight in places like empty

storerooms, or classrooms. That night they were all sleeping in a

temple, packed close together on the ground. My father was lying next

105to her.

When she first started crying, she turned her face away from him and

buried it in her sleeve, trying to muffle her sobs. My father woke up

at once and hurriedly clapped his hand over her mouth. Through her

tears she heard him whispering into her ear: "Don't cry out loud! If

people hear you, you will be critcized." To be criticized was serious.

It meant her comrades would say she was not worthy of 'being in the

revolution," even a coward. She felt him urgently pushing a

handkerchief into her hand so that she could stifle her sobs.

The next day my mother's unit head, the man who had saved her from

falling over in the river, took her aside and told her he had received

complaints about her crying.

People were saying she had behaved like 'a precious lady from the

exploiting classes." He was not unsympathetic, but he had to reflect

what other people were saying. It was disgraceful to cry after walking

a few steps, he said. She was not behaving like a proper

revolutionary. From then on, though she often felt like it, my mother

never cried once.

She slogged on. The most dangerous area they had to go through was the

province of Shandong, which had fallen to the Communists only a couple

of months previously. On one occasion they were walking through a deep

valley when bullets started pouring down on them from above. My mother

took cover behind a rock. The shooting went on for about ten minutes,

and when it died down they found that one of their group had been

killed trying to get around behind the assailants, who turned out to be

bandits. Several others were injured. They buffed the dead man by the

roadside. My father and the other officials gave up their horses to

the injured.

After forty days of marching and more skirmishes they reached the city

of Nanjing, about 7o0 miles due south of Jinzhou, which had been the

capital of the Kuomintang government. It is known as 'the Furnace of

China," and in mid-September it was still like an oven. The group was

housed in a barracks. The bamboo mattress on my mother's bed had a

dark human figure imprinted on it by the sweat of those who had slept

there before her. The group had to do military training in the

sweltering heat, learning how to tie up a bedroll, puttees, and

knapsack on the double, and practicing quick marching carrying their

kits. As part of the army, they had to observe strict discipline. They

wore khaki uniforms and rough cotton shirts and underwear. Their

uniforms had to be buttoned right up to the neck and they were never

allowed to unbutton the collar. My mother found it hard to breathe,

and like everyone she had a huge dark patch of sweat covering her back.

They also wore a double-thickness cotton cap, which had to fit tightly

around the head so that it did not show any hair. This made my mother

perspire profusely, and the edge of her cap was permanently soaked in

sweat.

Occasionally they were allowed out, and the first thing she did was to

devour several ice lollipops. Many of the people in the group had

never been in a big city, apart from their brief stop at Tianjin. They

were tremendously excited by the ice lollipops, and bought some to take

back to their comrades in the barracks, wrapping them up carefully in

their white hand towels and putting them in their bags. They were

amazed when they got back to find that all that was left was water.

At Nanjing they had to attend political lectures, some of which were

106given by Deng Xiaoping, the future leader of China, and General Chen

Yi, the future foreign minister.

My mother and her colleagues sat on the lawn at the

Central University, in the shade, while the lecturers stood in the

blazing sun for two or three hours at a stretch. In spite of the heat,

the lecturers mesmerized their audience.

One day my mother and her unit had to run several miles on the double,

fully laden, to the tomb of the founding father of the republic, Sun

Yat-sen. When they returned, my mother felt an ache in her lower

abdomen.

There was a performance of the Peking Opera that night in another part

of the city, with one of China's most famous stars in the lead. My

mother had inherited her mother's passion for the Peking Opera and was

looking forward eagerly to the performance.

That evening she walked with her comrades in file to the opera, which

was about five miles away. My father went in his car. On the way, my

mother felt more pain in her abdomen, and contemplated turning back,

but decided against it. Halfway through the performance the pain

became unbearable. She went over to where my father was sitting and

asked him to take her home in his car. She did not tell him about the

pain. He looked round to where his driver was sitting and saw him

glued to his seat, openmouthed. He turned back to my mother and said:

"How can I interrupt his enjoyment just because my wife wants to

leave?" My mother lost any desire to e~la'm that she was in agony and

turned abruptly away.

She walked all the way back to the barracks in excruciating pain.

Everything in front of her eyes was spinning. She saw blackness with

sharp stars and felt as though she were plodding through cotton wool.

She could not see the road and lost track of how long she had been

walking. It seemed like a lifetime. When she got back, the barracks

was deserted. Everybody except the guards had gone to the opera. She

managed to drag herself to her bed, and by the light of a lamp she saw

that her trousers were soaked with blood. She fainted as soon as her

head hit the bed. She had lost her first child. And there was nobody

near her.

A little later my father returned. Being in a car, he got back before

most of the others. He found my mother sprawled on the bed. At first

he thought she was just exhausted, but then he saw the blood and

realized that she was unconscious. He rushed off to find a doctor, who

thought she must have had a miscarriage. Being an army doctor he had

no experience of what to do, so he telephoned a hospital in the city

and asked them to send an ambulance. The hospital agreed but only on

condition that they were paid in silver dollars for the ambulance and

the emergency operation. Even though he had no money of his own, my

father agreed without hesitation. Being 'with the revolution' brought

automatic health insurance.

My mother had very nearly died. She had to have a blood transfusion

and her womb scraped. When she opened her eyes after the operation she

saw my father sit ling by her bedside. The first thing she said was:

"I want a divorce."

My father apologized profusely. He had had no idea she had been

pregnant nor, in fact had she. She knew that she had missed her

107period, but had thought it was probably the result of the unrelenting

exertion of the march. My father said he had not known what a

miscarriage was. He promised to be much more considerate in future,

and said over and over again he loved her and would reform.

While my mother was in a coma, he had washed her blood-soaked clothes,

which was very unusual for a Chinese man. Eventually my mother agreed

not to ask for a divorce, but she said she wanted to go back to

Manchuria to resume her medical studies. She told my father she could

never please the revolution, no matter how hard she tried; all she ever

got was criticism.

"I might as well leave," she said.

"You mustn't!"

my father said, anxiously.

"That will be interpreted as meaning you are afraid of hardship.

You will be regarded as a deserter and you will have no future. Even

if the college accepted you, you would never be able to get a good job.

You would be discriminated against for the rest of your life." My

mother was not yet aware that there was an unbreakable ban on opting

out of

196 "Going through the Fbve Mountain Passes' the system, because,

typically, it was unwritten. But she caught the tone of extreme

urgency in his voice. Once you were 'with the revolution' you could

never leave.

My mother was in the hospital when, on i October, she and her comrades

were alerted to expect a special broadcast, which would come over

loudspeakers that had been rigged up around the hospital. They

gathered to listen to Mao proclaiming the founding of the People's

Republic from the top of the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking. My

mother cried like a child. The China she had dreamed of, fought for,

and hoped for was here at last, she thought, the country to which she

could devote herself heart and soul. As she listened to Mao's voice

announcing that 'the Chinese people have stood up," she chided herself

for ever having wavered. Her suffering was trivial compared to the

great cause of saving China. She felt intensely proud and full of

nationalistic feeling, and pledged to herself that she would stick with

the revolution forever. When Mao's short proclamation was over, she

and her comrades burst into cheers and threw their caps in the air a

gesture the Chinese Communists had learned from the Russians.

Then, after drying their tears, they had a little feast to celebrate.

A few days before the miscarriage, my parents had their first formal

photograph taken together. It shows them both in army uniform, staring

pensively and rather wistfully into the camera. The photograph was

taken to commemorate their entry into the former Kuomintang capital. My

mother immediately sent a print to her mother.

On 3 October my father's unit was moved out. Communist forces were

nearing Sichuan. My mother had to stay in the hospital another month,

and was then allowed some time to recuperate in a magnificent mansion

which had belonged to the main financier of the Kuomintang, Chiang

Kai-shek's brother-in-law H. H. Kung. One day her unit was told they

were going to be extras in a documentary film about the liberation of

Nanjing. They were given civilian clothes and dressed up as ordinary

citizens welcoming the Communists. This reconstruction, which was not

108inaccurate, was shown all over China as a 'documentary' - a common

practice.

My mother stayed on in Nanjing for nearly two more months. Every now

and then she would get a telegram or a bunch of letters from my father.

He wrote every day and sent the letters whenever he could find a post

office that was working. In every one, he told her how much he loved

her, promised to reform, and insisted that she must not go back to

Jinzhou and 'desert the revolution."

Toward the end of December, my mother was told there was a place for

her on a steamer with some other people who had been left behind

because of illness. They were to assemble on the dock at nightfall

Kuomintang bombing made it too dangerous during daylight. The quay was

shrouded in a chilly fog. The few lights had been turned out as a

precaution against air raids. A bitter north wind was sweeping snow

across the river. My mother had to wait for hours on the dock,

desperately stamping her numb feet, which were clad only in the

standard-issue thin cotton shoes known as 'liberation shoes," some of

which had slogans such as "Beat Chiang Kai-shek' and "Safeguard Our

Land' painted on their soles.

The steamer carried them west along the Yangtze. For about the first

200 miles, as far as the town of Anqing, it moved only at night, tying

up during the day among reeds on the north bank of the river to hide

from Kuomintang planes. The ship carried a contingent of soldiers, who

set up machine guns on the deck, and a large amount of military

equipment and ammunition. There were occasional skirmishes with

Kuomintang forces and landowners' gangs. Once, as they were edging

into the reeds to anchor for the day, they came under heavy fire and

some Kuomintang troops tried to board the ship. My mother and the

other women hid belowdecks while the guards fought them off. The ship

had to sail off and anchor farther on.

When they reached the Yangtze Gorges, where Sichuan begins and the

river becomes dramatically narrower, they had to change into two

smaller boats which had come from Chongqing. The military cargo and

some guards were transferred to one boat, while the rest of the group

took the second boat.

The Yangtze Gorges were known as 'the Gates of Hell."

One afternoon the bright winter sun suddenly disappeared.

My mother rushed on deck to see what had happened. On both sides huge

perpendicular cliffs towered over the river, leaning toward the boat as

though they were about to crush it. The cliffs were covered with thick

vegetation and were so high that they almost obscured the sky. Every

cliff seemed steeper than the last, and they looked as though some

mighty sword had smashed down from heaven and cleaved its way through

them.

The small boat battled for days against the currents, whirlpools,

rapids, and submerged rocks, Sometimes the force of the current swept

it backwards, and it felt as though it was going to capsize at any

moment. Often my mother thought they were going to be dashed into a

cliff, but each time the helmsman managed to steer away at the last

second.

The Communists had taken most of Sichuan only within the last month. It

was still infested with Kuomintang troops, who had been stranded there

109when Chiang Kaishek had abandoned his resistance on the mainland and

fled to Taiwan. The worst moment came when a band of these Kuomintang

soldiers shelled the first boat, which was carrying the ammunition.

One round hit it square on.

My mother was standing on deck when it blew up about a hundred yards

ahead of her. It seemed as though the whole fiver suddenly burst into

fire. Flaming chunks of timber rushed toward my mother's boat, and it

looked as if there was no way they could avoid colliding with the

burning wreckage. But just as a collision seemed inevitable, it

floated past, missing them by inches. Nobody showed any signs of fear,

or elation. They all seemed to have grown numb to death. Most of the

guards on the first boat were killed.

My mother was entering a whole new world of climate and nature. The

precipices along the gorges were covered with gigantic rattan creepers

which made the eerie atmosphere even more exotic. Monkeys were jumping

from branch to branch in the luxuriant foliage. The endless,

magnificent, precipitous mountains were a stunning novelty after the

flat plains around Jinzhou.

Sometimes the boat would moor at the foot of a narrow flight of black

stone stairs, which seemed to climb endlessly up the side of a mountain

with its peak hidden in the clouds. Often there was a small town at

the top of the mountain. Because of the permanent thick mist, the

inhabitants had to burn rapeseed-oil lamps even in the daytime.

It was chilly, with damp winds blowing off the mountains and the fiver.

To my mother, the local peasants seemed horribly dark, bony, and tiny,

with much sharper features and much bigger and rounder eyes than the

people she was used to. They wore a kind of turban made of long white

cloth wound around their foreheads. White being the color of mourning

in China, my mother at first thought they were wearing mourning.

By the middle of January they had reached Chongqing, which had been the

Kuomintang's capital during the war against Japan, where my mother had

to move to a smaller boat for the next stage to the town of Luzhou,

about a hundred miles farther upriver. There she received a message

from my father that a sampan had been sent to meet her and that she

could come to Yibin right away. This was the first she knew that he

had arrived at his destination alive. By now her resentment against

him had evaporated.

It was four months since she had seen him, and she missed him. She had

imagined the excitement he must have felt along the way at seeing so

many sites described by the ancient poets, and she felt a glow of

warmth in the sure zoo "Going through the Five Mountain Passes'

knowledge that he would have composed poems for her on the journey.

She was able to leave that same evening. Next morning when she woke,

she could feel the warmth of the sun coming through the soft mist. The

hills along the river were green and gentle, and she was able to lie

back and relax and listen to the water lapping against the prow of the

sampan. She got to Yibin that afternoon, the eve of Chinese New Year.

Her first sight of file town was like an apparition a delicate image of

a city floating in the clouds.

As the boat approached the quay, she looked about for my father.

Eventually, through the mist, she could make out his hazy image: he was

standing in an unbuttoned army greatcoat, his bodyguard behind him. The

riverbank was wide and covered with sand and cobblestones. She could

110see the city climbing up to the top of the hill. Some of the houses

were built on long, thin, wooden stilts and seemed to be swaying in the

wind as though they might collapse at any minute.

The boat tied up at a dock on the promontory at the tip of the city. A

boatman laid down a plank of wood and my father's bodyguard came across

and took my mother's bedroll. She bounced down the gangway, and my

father stretched out his arms to help her off. It was not the proper

thing to embrace in public, though my mother could tell he was as

excited as she, and she felt very happy.

8. "Returnins Home Robed in Embroidered Silk' To Family and Bandits

(1949-1951)

All the way, my mother had been wondering what Yibin would be like.

Would there be electricity? Would the mountains be as high as those

along the Yangtze? Would there be theaters? As she climbed up the

hill with my father, she was thrilled to see she had come to a

beautiful place. Yibin stands on a hill overlooking a promontory at

the confluence of two rivers, one clear, the other muddy.

She could see electric lights shining in the rows of cottages.

Their walls were made of mud and bamboo, and to her eyes the thin,

curved files on the roofs seemed delicate, almost lace like compared to

the heavy ones needed to cope with the winds and snow of Manchuria. In

the distance, through the mist, she could see little houses of bamboo

and earth set in the midst of dark-green mountains covered in camphor

trees, meta sequoia and tea bushes. She felt unburdened at last, not

least because my father was letting his bodyguard carry her bedroll.

Having passed through scores of war-torn towns and villages, she was

delighted to see that here there was no war damage at all. The

7,000-man Kuomintang garrison had surrendered without a fight.

My father was living in an elegant mansion which had been taken over by

the new government as combined offices and living quarters, and my

mother moved in with him. It had a garden full of plants she had never

seen:

phoebe nanmu, papayas, and bananas, on grounds covered with green moss.

Goldfish swam in a tank, and there was even a turtle. My father's

bedroom had a double sofa bed, the softest thing she had ever slept on,

having previously known only brick kangs. Even in winter, all one

needed in Yibin was a quilt. There was no biting wind or all-pervasive

dust like in Manchuria. You did not have to wear a gauze scarf over

your face to be able to breathe. The well was not covered with a lid;

there was a bamboo pole sticking out, with a bucket tied to the other

end for drawing water.

People washed their clothes on slabs of smooth shiny stones propped up

at a slight angle, and used palm-fiber brushes to clean them. These

operations would have been impossible in Manchuria, where the clothes

would immediately have been either covered in dust or frozen solid. For

the first time in her life, my mother could eat rice and fresh

vegetables every day.

The following weeks were my parents' real honeymoon.

For the first time my mother could live with my father without being

criticized for 'putting love first." The general atmosphere was

111relaxed; the Communists were elated at their sweeping victories and my

father's colleagues did not insist on married couples staying together

only on Saturday nights.

Yibin had fallen less than two months earlier, on I i December 1949. My

father had arrived six days later, and had been appointed head of the

county of Yibin, which had a population of over a million people, about

100,000 of whom lived in the city of Yibin. He had arrived by boat

with a group of more than a hundred students who had 'joined the

revolution' in Nanjing. When the boat came up the Yangtze, it stopped

first at the Yibin power station on the riverbank opposite the city,

which had been a stronghold of the underground. Several hundred

workers came out to greet my father's party on the quay, waving lit He

red paper flags with five stars the new flag of Communist China and

shouting welcoming slogans. The flags had the stars in the wrong place

the local Communists did not know the right place to put them. My

father went ashore with another officer to address the workers, who

were delighted when they heard him speaking in Yibin dialect. Instead

of the ordinary army cap which everyone else was wearing he wore an old

eight-cornered cap of the type which the Communist army used to wear in

the 192os and early 193os, which struck the locals as unusual and

rather stylish.

Then the boat took them across the river to the city. My father had

been away ten years. He had been very fond of his family, especially

his youngest sister, to whom he had written enthusiastically from

Yan'an about his new life and how he wanted her to join him there

someday. The letters had stopped coming as the Kuomintang tightened

its blockade, and the first the family had heard from my father for

many years was when they received the photo of him and my mother taken

in Nanjing. For the previous seven years they had not even known if he

was alive. They had missed him, cried at the thought of him, and

prayed to the Buddha for his safe return. With the photograph he had

sent a note saying he would soon be in Yibin, and that he had changed

his name. While in Yan'an, like many others, he had taken a nora de

guerre, Wang Yu. Yu meant "Selfless to the point of being considered

foolish." As soon as he arrived my father reverted to his real

surname, Chang, but he incorporated his nora de guerre and called

himself Chang Shou-yu, meaning "Keep Yu."

Ten years before, my father had left as a poor, hungry, and put-upon

apprentice; now he had returned, not yet thirty, as a powerful man.

This was a traditional Chinese dream, which has entered the language as

yi-jin-huanxiang, 'returning home robed in embroidered silk." His

family was tremendously proud of him, and they were longing to see what

he was like after ten years, as they had heard all sorts of strange

things about the Communists.

And of course his mother, especially, wanted to know about his new

wife..

My father talked and laughed loudly and heartily.

of unrestrained, almost boyish excitement.

He was the picture

He has not changed after all, his mother thought with a sigh of relief

and happiness. Through their traditional, deep-rooted reserve, the

family showed their joy in their eager, tear-filled eyes. Only his

youngest sister was more animated. She talked vividly while playing

with her long plaits, which every now and then she threw back over her

shoulder when she tilted her head to emphasize what she was saying. My

father smiled as he recognized the traditional Sichuan gesture of

112feminine playfulness. He had almost forgotten it in his ten years of

austerity in the North.

There was a lot of catching up to do. My father's mother was well into

her account of what had happened to the family since he had left when

she said there was one thing worrying her: what was going to happen to

her eldest daughter, who had looked after her in Chongqing. This

daughter's husband had died and left her some land, which she had hired

a few laborers to work. There were a lot of rumors flying around about

the Communists' land reform, and the family was worried that she would

be classified as a landlord and have her land taken away. The women

became emotional, their worries shading into recriminations: "What is

going to happen to her? How is she going to live? How can the

Communists do a thing like this?"

My father was hurt and exasperated. He burst out: "I have looked

forward so much to this day, to share our victory with you. All

injustice is going to be a thing of the past. It is a time to be

positive, to rejoice. But you are so distrustful, so critical. You

only want to find fault..."

Whereupon he burst into tears like a lit He boy. The women all cried

too. For him, they were tears of disappointment and frustration. For

them, the feelings must have been more complex; among them were doubt

and uncertainty.

My father's mother was living in the old family home just outside the

city, which had been left to her by her husband when he died. It was a

modestly luxurious country house low-lying, made of wood and brick, and

walled off from the road. It had a big garden at the front, and at the

back was a field of winter plums, which gave off a delicious perfume,

and thick bamboo groves, which lent it the atmosphere of an enchanted

garden. It was spotlessly clean. All the windows were gleaming, and

there was not a speck of dust anywhere. The furniture was made of

beautiful shiny padauk wood, which is a deep red, sometimes almost

shading into black. My mother fell in love with the house from her

first visit, on the day after she arrived in Yibin.

This was an important occasion. In Chinese tradition the person with

the most power over a married woman was always her mother-in-law, to

whom she had to be completely obedient and who would tyrannize her.

When she in turn became a mother-in-law, she would bully her own

daughter-in-law in the same way. Liberating daughters-in-law was an

important Communist policy, and rumors abounded that Communist

daughters-in-law were arrogant dragons, ready to boss their

mothers-in-law around. Everyone was on tenterhooks waiting to see how

my mother would behave.

My father had a very large extended family, and they all gathered in

the house that day. As my mother approached the front gate, she heard

people whispering, "She's coming, she's coming!" Adults were shushing

their children, who were jumping around trying to catch a glimpse of

the strange Communist daughter-in-law from the far north.

When my mother entered the sitting room with my father, her

mother-in-law was seated at the far end on a formal, carved square

padauk chair. Leading up to her on both sides of the room, enhancing

the formality, were two symmetrical rows of square, exquisitely carved

padauk chairs. A small table with a vase or some other ornament on it

stood between every two chairs. Walking up the middle, my mother saw

that her mother-in-law had a very calm face, with high cheekbones

113(which my father had inherited), small eyes, a sharp chin, and thin

lips which drooped slightly at the corners. She was tiny, and her eyes

seemed to be half closed, almost as though she were medltaling. My

mother walked slowly up to her with my father, and stopped in front of

her chair. Then she knelt and kowtowed three times. This was the

correct thing to do according to the traditional ritual, but everyone

had been wondering if the young Communist would go through with it. The

room burst into relieved sighs. My father's cousins and sisters

whispered to his obviously delighted mother:

"What a lovely daughter-in-law! So gentle, so pretty, and so

respectful! Mother, you are really in good fortune?

My mother was quite proud of her little conquest.

had spent some time discussing what to do.

She and my father

The Communists had said they were going to get rid of kowtowing, which

they considered an insult to human dignity, but my mother wanted to

make an exception, just this once. My father agreed. He did not want

to hurt his mother, or offend his wife not after the miscarriage; and

besides, this kowtow was different. It was to make a point for the

Communists. But he would not kowtow himself, although it was expected

of him.

All the women in my father's family were Buddhists, and one of his

sisters, Jun-ying, who was unmarried, was particularly devout. She

took my mother to kowtow to a statue of the Buddha, to the shrines of

the family ancestors which were set up on Chinese New Year, and even to

the groves of winter plum.~ and bamboo in the back garden.

Aunt Jun-ying believed that every flower and every tree had a spirit.

She would ask my mother to do a dozen kowtows to the bamboos to beg

them not to flower, which the Chinese believed portended disaster. My

mother found all this great fun. It reminded her of her childhood and

gave her a chance to indulge her sense of playfulness. My father did

not approve, but she mollified him by saying it was just a performance

to help the Communists' image.

The Kuomintang had said the Communists would wipe out all traditional

customs, and she said it was important for people to see that this was

not happening.

My father's family was very kind to my mother. In spite of her initial

formality, my grandmother was in fact extremely easygoing. She seldom

passed judgment, and was never critical. Aunt Jun-ying's round face

was marked by smallpox, but her eyes were so gentle that anyone could

see that she was a kind woman, with whom they could feel safe and

relaxed. My mother could not help comparing her new in-laws with her

own mother. They did not exude her energy and sprightliness, but their

ease and serenity made my mother feel completely at home. Aunt

Jun-ying cooked delicious spicy Sichuan food, which is quite different

from the bland northern food. The dishes had exotic names which my

mother loved: 'tiger fights the dragon," 'imperial concubine chicken,"

'hot saucy duck," 'suckling golden cock crows to the dawn." My mother

went to the house often, and would eat with the family, looking out

into the orchard of plums, almonds, and peaches which made a sea of

pink and white blossoms in early spring. She found a warm, welcoming

atmosphere among the women in the Chang family, and felt very much

loved by them.

My mother was soon assigned a job in the Public Affairs Department of

114the government of Yibin County. She spent very little time in the

office. The first priority was to feed the population and this was

beginning to be difficult.

The southwest was the last holdout of the Kuomintang leadership, and a

quarter of a million soldiers had been stranded in Sichuan when Chiang

Kai-shek fled the province for Taiwan in December 1949. Sichuan was,

zo8 "Returning Home Robed in Embroidered Silk' moreover, one of the few

places where the Communists had not occupied the countryside before

they took the cities. Kuomintang units, disorganized but often well

armed, still controlled much of the countryside in southern Sichuan,

and most of the food supply was in the hands of landlords who were

pro-Kuomintang. The Communists urgently needed to secure supplies to

feed the cities, as well as their own forces and the large numbers of

Kuomintang troops who had surrendered.

At first they sent people out to try to buy food. Many of the big

landlords had traditionally had their own private armies, which now

joined up with the bands of Kuomintang soldiers. A few days after my

mother reached Yibin, these forces launched a full-scale uprising in

south Sichuan. Yibin was in danger of starvation.

The Communists started sending out armed teams made up of officials

escorted by army guards to collect food. Almost everyone was

mobilized. Government offices were empty. In the whole of the Yibin

county government only two women were left behind: one was a

receptionist and the other had a newborn baby.

My mother went on a number of these expeditions, which lasted many days

at a time. There were thirteen people in her team: seven civilians and

six soldiers. My mother's gear consisted of a bedroll, a bag of rice,

and a heavy umbrella made of tung-oil-painted canvas, all of which she

had to carry on her back. The team had to trek for days through wild

country and over what the Chinese call 'sheep's-intestine trails'

treacherous narrow mountain paths winding around steep precipices and

gullies.

When they came to a village they would go to the shabbiest hovel and

try to form a rapport with the very poor peasants, telling them that

the Communists would give people like them their own land and a happy

life, and then asking them which landowners had rice hoarded. Most of

the peasants had inherited a traditional fear and suspicion of any

officials. Many had only vaguely heard of the Communists,

To Family and Bandits 2oq and everything they had heard was bad; but my

mother, having quickly modified her northern dialect with a local

accent, was highly articulate and persuasive. Explaining the new

policy turned out to be her forte. If the team succeeded in getting

information about the landlords, they would go and try to persuade them

to sell at designated collection points, where they would be paid on

delivery.

Some were scared and disgorged without much fuss.

Others informed on the team's whereabouts to one of the armed gangs. My

mother and her comrades were often fired at, and spent every night on

the alert, sometimes having to move from place to place to avoid

attack.

At first they would stay with poor peasants.

But if the bandits found

115out someone had helped them, they would kill the entire household.

After a number of killings, the team decided they could not jeopardize

innocent people's lives. So they slept in the open, or in abandoned

temples.

On her third expedition, my mother started vomiting and suffering from

dizzy spells. She was pregnant again.

She got back to Yibin exhausted and desperate for a rest, but her team

had to set off on another expedition at once.

It had been left vague what a pregnant woman should do, and she was

torn about whether to go or not. She wanted to go, and the mood at the

time was very much one of self sacrifice it was considered shameful to

complain about anything. But she was frightened by the memory of her

miscarriage only five months before, and by the thought of having

another one in the midst of the wilderness, where there were no doctors

or transportation. Moreover, the expeditions involved almost daily bat

ties with the bandits, and it was important to be able to run and run

fast. Even walking made her dizzy.

Still, she decided to go. There was one other woman going, who was

also pregnant. One afternoon the team was settling down for lunch in a

deserted courtyard. They assumed the owner had fled, probably from

them. The shoulder-high mud walls which ran around the weed-covered

yard had collapsed

in several places. The wooden gate was unlocked and was creaking in

the spring breeze.

The team's rice was being prepared in the abandoned kitchen by their

cook, when a middle-aged man appeared.

He had the appearance of a peasant: he was wearing straw sandals and

loose trousers, with a big apronlike piece of cloth tucked up on one

side into a cotton cummerbund, and he had a dirty white turban on his

head. He told them that a gang of men belonging to a notorious group

of bandits known as the Broadsword Brigade was headed their way and

that they were especially keen to capture my mother and the other woman

in the team, because they knew they were the wives of high Communist

officials.

This man was not an ordinary peasant. Under the Kuomintang, he had

been the chieftain of the local township, which governed a number of

villages, including the one the team was in. The Broadsword Brigade

had tried to win his cooperation, as they did with all former

Kuomintang men and landlords. He had joined the brigade, but he wanted

to keep his options open, and he was tipping off the Communists to buy

insurance. He told them the best way to escape.

The team immediately jumped up and ran. But my mother and the other

pregnant woman could not move very fast, so the chieftain led them out

through a gap in the wall and helped them hide in a haystack nearby.

The cook lingered in the kitchen to wrap up the cooked rice and pour

cold water onto the wok to cool it down so that he could take it with

him. The rice and the wok were too precious to be abandoned; an iron

wok was hard to obtain, especially in wartime. Two of the soldiers

stayed in the kitchen helping him and trying to hurry him up. At last

the cook grabbed the rice and the wok and the three of them raced for

the back door. But the bandits were already coming through the front

door, and caught up with them after a few yards. They fell on them and

knifed them to death. The gang was short of guns and did not have

116enough

To Family and Bandits 21 I ammunition to shoot at the rest of the team,

whom they could see not far away. They did not discover my mother and

the other woman in the haystack.

Not long afterward the gang was captured, along with the chieftain. He

was both a leader of the gang and one of the 'snakes in their old

haunts," which made him eligible for execution. But he had tipped off

the team and saved the lives of the two women. At the time, death

sentences had to be endorsed by a three-man review board. It happened

that the head of the tribunal was my father. The second member was the

husband of the other pregnant woman, and the third was the local police

chief.

The tribunal split two to one. The husband of the other woman voted to

spare the chieftain's life. My father and the police chief voted to

uphold the death sentence. My mother pleaded with the tribunal to let

the man live, but my father was adamant. This was exactly what the man

had been banking on, he told my mother: he had chosen this particular

team to tip off precisely because he knew it contained the wives of two

important officials.

"He has a lot of blood on his hands," my father said.

the other woman disagreed vehemently.

The husband of

"But," my father retorted, banging his fist on the table, 'we cannot be

lenient, precisely because our wives are involved. If we let personal

feelings influence our judgment, what would be the difference between

the new China and the old?" The chieftain was executed.

My mother could not forgive my father for this. She felt that the man

should not die, because he had saved so many lives, and my father, in

particular, 'owed' him a life. The way she looked at it, which was how

most Chinese would have seen it, my father's behavior meant he did not

treasure her, unlike the husband of the other woman.

No sooner was the trial over than my mother's team was sent off to the

countryside again. She was still feeling very sick from her pregnancy,

vomiting a lot and exhausted all the time. She had had pains in her

abdomen ever since the violent rush to the haystack. The husband of

the other pregnant woman decided he was not going to let his wife go

again.

"I will protect my pregnant wife," he said.

"And I will protect any wives who are pregnant. No pregnant woman

should have to undergo such dangers." But he met fierce opposition

from my mother's boss, Mrs. Mi, a peasant woman who had been a

guerrilla. It was unthinkable for a peasant woman to take a rest if

she was pregnant.

She worked right up to the moment of delivery, and there were

innumerable stories about women cutting the umbilical cord with a

sickle and carrying on. Mrs. Mi had borne her own baby on a

battlefield and had had to abandon it on the spot a baby's cry could

have endangered the whole unit. After losing her child, she seemed to

want others to suffer a similar fate. She insisted on sending my

mother off again, producing a very effective argument. At the time, no

Party members were allowed to marry except relatively senior officials

(those who qualified as '28-7-regiment-I ').

117Any woman who was pregnant, therefore, was virtually bound to be a

member of the elite. And if they did not go, how could the Party hope

to persuade other people to go?

My father agreed with her, and told my mother she ought togo.

My mother accepted this, in spite of her fears of another miscarriage.

She was prepared to die, but she had hoped that my father would be

against her going and would say so; that way she would have felt he put

her safety first.

But she could see that my father's first loyalty was to the revolution,

and she was bitterly disappointed.

She spent several painful and exhausting weeks traipsing around the

hills and mountains. The skirmishes were intensifying. Almost every

day came news of members of other teams being tortured and murdered by

bandits. They were particularly sadistic to women. One day the corpse

of one of my father's nieces was dumped just outside the city gate: she

had been raped and knifed, and her vagina was a bloody mess. Another

young woman was caught by the

Broadsword Brigade during a skirmish. They were surrounded by armed

Communists, so they tied the woman up and told her to shout out to her

comrades to let them escape. Instead she shouted, "Go ahead, don't

worry about me!" Every time she called out one of the bandits cut a

hunk out of her flesh with a knife. She died horribly mutilated. After

several such incidents, it was decided that women would not be sent on

food-collecting expeditions anymore.

Meanwhile, in Jinzhou my grandmother had been worrying constantly about

her daughter. As soon as she got a letter from her saying she had

arrived in Yibin, she decided to go and make sure she was all right. In

March 195o she set off on her own long march across China, alone.

She knew nothing about the rest of the huge country, and imagined that

Sichuan was not only mountainous and cut off, but also lacking in the

daily necessities of life. Her first instinct was to take a large

supply of basic goods with her. But the country was still in a state

of upheaval, and fighting was still going on along her intended route;

she realized she was going to have to carry her own luggage, and

probably walk a good deal of the way, which was extremely difficult on

bound feet. In the end she set fled on one small bundle, which she

could carry herself.

Her feet had grown bigger since she had married Dr. Xia. By

tradition, the Manchus did not practice foot binding so my grandmother

had taken off the binding cloths and her feet gradually grew a little.

This process was almost as painful as the original binding. The broken

bones could not mend, of course, so the feet did not go back to their

original shape, but remained crippled and shrunken. My grandmother

wanted her feet to look normal, so she used to stuff cotton wool into

her shoes.

Before she left, Lin Xiao-xia, the man who had brought her to my

parents' wedding, gave her a document which said she was the mother of

a revolutionary; with this, Party

214 "Returning Horne Robed in Embroidered Silk' organizations along the

way would provide her with food, accommodations, and money. She

118followed almost the same route as my parents, taking the train part of

the way, sometimes traveling in trucks, and walking when there was no

other transportation. Once she was on an open truck with some women

and children who all belonged to families of Communists. The truck

stopped for some of the children to have a pee. The moment it did so

bullets ripped into the wooden planks around the side. My grandmother

hunkered down in the back while bullets zinged by inches above her

head. The guards fired back with machine guns and managed to silence

the attackers, who turned out to be Kuomintang stragglers. My

grandmother emerged unscathed, but several of the children and some of

the guards were killed.

When she got to Wuhan, a big city in central China, which was about

two-thirds of the way, she was told that the next stretch, by boat up

the Yangtze, was unsafe because of bandits. She had to wait a month

until things quieted down even so, her ship was attacked several times

from the shore. The boat, which was rather ancient, had a flat, open

deck, so the guards built a wall of sandbags about four feet high down

both sides of it, with slits for their guns. It looked like a floating

fortress. Whenever it was fired on, the captain would put it on full

steam ahead and try to race through the fusillade, while the guards

shot back from behind their sandbagged embrasures. My grandmother

would go belowdecks and wait until the shooting was over.

She changed to a smaller boat at Yichang and passed through the Yangtze

Gorges, and by May she was near Yibin, sitting in a boat covered with

palm fronds, sailing quietly among crystal-clear ripples, the breeze

scented with orange blossom.

The boat was rowed upstream by a dozen oarsmen. As they rowed they

sang traditional Sichuan opera arias and improvised songs about the

names of the villages they were passing, the legends of the hills, and

the spirits of the bamboo groves. They sang about their moods too. My

grandmother was most amused by the flirtatious songs they sang to one

of the female passengers, with a twinkle in their eye. She could not

understand most of the expressions they used, because they were in

Sichuan dialect, but she could tell they were sexually suggestive by

the way the passengers gave out low laughs betraying both pleasure and

embarrassment. She had heard about the Sichuan character, which was

supposed to be as saucy and spicy as the food. My grandmother was in a

happy mood. She did not know that my mother had had several close

shaves with death, nor had my mother said anything about her

miscarriage.

It was mid-May when she arrived. The journey had taken over two

months. My mother, who had been feeling sick and miserable, was

ecstatic at seeing her again. My father was not so pleased. Yibin was

the first time he had been alone with my mother in an even semi-stable

situation. He had only just gotten away from his mother-inlaw, and now

here she was again, when he had hoped she was a thousand miles away. He

was well aware that he was no match for the bonds between mother and

daughter.

My mother was seething with resentment against my father. Since the

bandit threat had become more acute, the quasi-military life-style had

been reinstated. And because they were both away so much, my mother

rarely spent the night with my father. He was traveling around the

country most of the time, investigating conditions in the rural areas,

hearing the peasants' complaints, and dealing with every kind of

problem, particularly ensuring the food supply. Even when he was in

Yibin, my father would work late at the office. My parents were seeing

119less and less of each other, and were drifting apart again.

The arrival of my grandmother reopened old wounds.

She was allotted a room in the courtyard where my parents were living.

At the time, all officials were living on a comprehensive allowance

system called gong-ji-zhi. They

2 x6 "Returning Home Robed in Embroidered Silk' received no salary, but

the state provided them with housing, food, clothing, and daily

necessities, plus a tiny amount of pocket money as in an army. Everyone

had to eat in canteens, where the food was meager and unappetizing.

You were not allowed to cook at home, even if you had cash from some

other source.

When my grandmother arrived she started selling some of her jewelry to

buy food in the market; she was especially keen to cook for my mother

because it was traditionally thought vital for pregnant women to eat

well. But soon complaints started pouring in via Mrs. Mi about my

mother being 'bourgeois' getting privileged treatment and using up

precious fuel which, like food, had to be collected from the

countryside. She was also criticized for being 'pampered'; having her

mother there was bad for her reeducation. My father made a

self-criticism to his Party organization and ordered my grandmother to

stop cooking at home. My mother resented this, and so did my

grandmother.

"Can't you stand up for me just once?"

my mother said bitterly.

"The baby I am carrying is yours as well as mine, and it needs

nourishment!" Eventually my father conceded a little: my grandmother

could cook at home twice a week, but no more. Even this was breaking

the rules, he said.

It turned out that my grandmother was breaking a more important rule.

Only officials of a certain rank were entitled to have their parents

staying with them, and my mother did not qualify. Because officials

did not receive salaries, the state was responsible for looking after

their dependants, and wanted to keep the numbers down. Even though my

father was senior enough, he let his own mother continue to be

supported by Aunt Jun-ying. My mother pointed out that her mother

would not be a burden on the state, because she had enough jewelry to

support herself, and she had been invited to stay with Aunt Jun-ying.

Mrs. Mi said my grandmother should not be there at all and would have

to go back to Manchuria. My father agreed.

My mother argued vehemently with him, but he said that a rule was a

rule and he would not fight to have it bent. In old China one of the

major vices was that anyone with power was above the rules, and an

important component of the Communist revolution was that officials,

like everyone else, should be subject to rules. My mother was in

tears. She was afraid of having another miscarriage.

Perhaps my father could consider her safety and let her mother stay

until the birth? Still he said no.

"Corruption always starts with lit He things like this. This is the

sort of thing that will erode our revolution." My mother could not

find any argument to win him over. He has no feelings, she thought. He

does not put my interests first. He does not love me.

120My grandmother had to go, and my mother was never to forgive my father

for this. My grandmother had been with her daughter for little more

than a month, having spent over two months traveling across China, at

the risk of her life. She was afraid my mother might have another

miscarriage, and she did not trust the medical services in Yibin.

Before she left she went to see my aunt Jun-ying and solemnly kowtowed

to her, saying she was leaving my mother in her care. My aunt was sad,

too. She was worried about my mother, and wanted my grandmother to be

there for the birth. She went to plead with her brother, but he would

not budge.

With a heavy heart, and amid bitter tears, my grandmother hobbled down

to the quay with my mother to take the little boat back down the

Yangtze on the start of the long and uncertain journey back to

Manchuria. My mother stood on the riverbank, waving as the boat

disappeared into the mist, and wondering if she would ever see her

mother again.

It was July 195o. My mother's one-year provisional membership in the

Party was due to end, and her Party cell was grilling her intensively.

It had only three members:

my mother, my father's bodyguard, and my mother's boss,

Mrs. Mi. There were so few Party members in Yibin that these three

had been thrown together rather incongruously. The other two, who were

both full members, were leaning toward turning down my mother's

application, but they did not give a straightforward no. They just

kept grilling her and forcing her to make endless self-criticisms.

For each self-criticism, there were many criticisms. My mother's two

comrades insisted that she had behaved in a 'bourgeois' manner. They

said she had not wanted to go to the country to help collect food; when

she pointed out that she had gone, in line with the Party's wishes,

they retorted: "Ah, but you didn't really want to go." Then they

accused her of having enjoyed privileged food cooked, moreover, by her

mother at home and of succumbing to illness more than most pregnant

women. Mrs. Mi also criticized her because her mother had made

clothes for the baby.

"Who ever heard of a baby wearing new clothes?"

she said.

"Such a bourgeois waste! Why can't she just wrap the baby up in old

clothes like everyone else?" The fact that my mother had shown her

sadness that my grandmother had to leave was singled out as definitive

proof that she 'put family first," a serious offense.

The summer of 195o was the hottest in living memory, with high humidity

and temperatures above 100 F. My mother had been washing every day, and

she was attacked for this, too. Peasants, especially in the North

where Mrs. Mi came from, washed very rarely, because of the shortage

of water. In the guerrillas, men and women used to compete to see who

had the most 'revolutionary insects' (lice).

Cleanliness was regarded as un proletarian When the steamy summer

turned into cool autumn my father's bodyguard weighed in with a new

accusation: my mother was 'behaving like a Kuomintang official's grand

lady' because she had used my father's leftover hot water. At the

121time, in order to save fuel, there was a rule that only officials above

a certain rank were entitled to wash with hot water.

My father fell into this group, but my mother did not. She had been

strongly advised by the women in my father's family not to touch cold

water when she came near to delivery time. After the bodyguard's

criticism, my father would not let my mother use his water. My mother

felt like screaming at him for not taking her side against the endless

intrusions into the most irrelevant recesses of her life.

The Party's all-around intrusion into people's lives was the very point

of the process known as 'thought reform."

Mao wanted not only external discipline, but the total subjection of

all thoughts, large or small. Every week a meeting for 'thought

examination' was held for those 'in the revolution." Everyone had both

to criticize themselves for incorrect thoughts and be subjected to the

criticism of others.

The meetings tended to be dominated by self-righteous and petty-minded

people, who used them to vent their envy and frustration; people of

peasant origin used them to attack those from 'bourgeois' backgrounds.

The idea was that people should be reformed to be more like peasants,

because the Communist revolution was in essence a peasant revolution.

This process appealed to the guilt feelings of the educated; they had

been living better than the peasants, and self-criticism tapped into

this.

Meetings were an important means of Communist control. They left

people no free time, and eliminated the private sphere. The pettiness

which dominated them was justified on the grounds that prying into

personal details was a way of ensuring thorough soul-cleansing. In

fact, pettiness was a fundamental characteristic of a revolution in

which intrusiveness and ignorance were celebrated, and envy was

incorporated into the system of control. My mother's cell grilled her

week after week, month after month, forcing her to produce endless

self-criticisms.

She had to consent to this agonizing process. Life for a revolutionary

was meaningless if they were rejected by the Party. It was like

excommunication for a Catholic. Besides, it was standard procedure. My

father had gone through it and had accepted it as part of 'joining the

revolution." In fact, he was still going through it. The Party had

never hidden the fact that it was a painful process. He told my mother

her anguish was normal.

At the end of all this, my mother's two comrades voted against full

Party membership for her. She fell into a deep depression. She had

been devoted to the revolution, and could not accept the idea that it

did not want her; it was particularly galling to think she might not

get in for completely petty and irrelevant reasons, decided by two

people whose way of thinking seemed light years away from what she had

conceived the Party's ideology to be. She was being kept out of a

progressive organization by backward people, and yet the revolution

seemed to be telling her that it was she who was in the wrong. At the

back of her mind was another, more practical point which she did not

even spell out to herself: it was vital to get into the Party, because

if she failed she would be stigmatized and ostracized.

With these thoughts churning through her mind, my mother came to feel

the world was against her. She dreaded seeing people and spent as much

122time as possible alone, crying to herself. Even this she had to

conceal, as it would have been considered as showing lack of faith in

the revolution. She found she could not blame the Party, which seemed

to her to be in the right, so she blamed my father, first for making

her pregnant and then for not standing by her when she was attacked and

rejected. Many times she wandered along the quay, gazing down into the

muddy waters of the Yangtze, and thought of committing suicide to

punish him, picturing to herself how he would be filled with remorse

when he found she had killed herself.

The recommendation of her cell had to be approved by a higher

authority, which consisted of three open-minded intellectuals. They

thought my mother had been treated unfairly, but the Party rules made

it difficult for them to overturn the recommendation of her cell. So

they procrastinated. This was relatively easy because the three were

seldom in one place at the same time. Like my father and

the other male officials, they were usually

away in different parts of the countryside foraging for food and

fighting bandits. Knowing that Yibin was almost undefended, and driven

to desperation by the fact that all their escape routes both to Taiwan

and through Yunnan to Indochina and Burma had been cut, a sizable army

of Kuomintang stragglers, landlords, and bandits laid siege to the

city, and for a time it looked as though it was going to fall. My

father raced back from the countryside as soon as he heard about the

attack.

The fields started just outside the city walls and there was vegetation

to within a few yards of the gates. Using this for cover, the

attackers managed to get right up to the walls and began to pound the

north gate with huge battering rams. In the vanguard was the

Broadsword Brigade, consisting largely of unarmed peasants who had

drunk 'holy water' which, they believed, made them immune to bullets.

The Kuomintang soldiers were behind them. At first the Communist army

commander tried to aim his fire at the Kuomintang, not at the peasants,

whom he hoped to scare into retreating.

Even though my mother was seven months pregnant, she joined the other

women in taking food and water to the defenders on the walls and

carrying the wounded to the rear. Thanks to the training she had had

at school, she was good at first aid. She was also brave. After about

a week, the attackers abandoned the siege and the Communists

counterattacked, mopping up virtually all armed resistance in the area

for good.

Immediately after this, land reform started in the Yibin area. The

Communists had passed an agrarian reform law that summer, which was the

key to their program for transforming China. The basic concept, which

they called 'the land returning home," was to redistribute all

farmland, as well as draft animals and houses, so that every farmer

owned a more or less equal amount of land. Landowners were to be

allowed to keep a plot, on the same basis as everyone else. My father

was one of the people running the program. My mother was excused from

going to the villages because of her advanced pregnancy.

Yibin was a rich place. A local saying has it that with one year's

work, peasants could live at ease for two. But decades of incessant

warfare had devastated the land; on top of this had come heavy taxes to

pay for the fighting and for the eight-year war against Japan.

Depredations had escalated when Chiang Kai-shek moved his wartime

capital to Sichuan, and corrupt officials and carpetbaggers had

descended on the province. The last straw came when the Kuomintang

123made Sichuan their final redoubt in 1949 and levied exorbitant taxes

just before the Communists arrived. All this, plus greedy landlords,

had combined to produce appalling poverty in the rich province. Eighty

percent of the peasants did not have enough to feed their families. If

the crops failed, many were reduced to eating herbs and the leaves of

sweet potatoes, which were normally fed to pigs. Starvation was

widespread, and life expectancy was only about forty years. The

poverty in such a rich land was one of the reasons my father had been

attracted to communism in the first place.

In Yibin the land reform drive was on the whole nonviolent, partly

because the fiercer landlords had been involved in the rebellions

during the first nine months of Communist rule and had already been

killed in battle or executed. But there was some violence. In one

case a Party member raped the female members of a landowner's family

and then mutilated them by cutting off their breasts. My father

ordered that the man be executed.

One bandit gang had captured a young Communist, a university graduate,

while he was out in the country looking for food. The bandit chief

ordered him to be cut in half.

The chief was later caught, and beaten to death by the Communist land

reform team leader, who had been a friend of the man who had been

killed. The team leader then cut out the chief's heart and ate it to

demonstrate his revenge. My father ordered the team leader to be

dismissed from his job, but not shot. He reasoned that while he had

engaged in a form of brutality, it was not against an innocent person

but a murderer, and a cruel one at that.

The land reform took over a year to complete. In the majority of

cases, the worst the landlords suffered was the loss of most of their

land and their homes. So-called open-minded landlords, those who had

not joined the armed rebellion, or who had actually helped the

Communist underground, were treated well. My parents had friends whose

families were local landlords, and had been to dinner at their grand

old houses before they were confiscated and divided up among the

peasants.

My father was completely wrapped up in his work, and was not in town

when my mother gave birth to her first child, a girl, on 8 November.

Because Dr. Xia had given my mother the name De-hong, which

incorporates the character for 'wild swan' (Hong) with a generation

name (De), my father named my sister Xiao-hong, which means 'to be

like' (Xiao) my mother. Seven days after my sister's birth Aunt

Jun-ying had my mother brought home from the hospital to the Chang

house on a bamboo litter carried by two men. When my father got back a

few weeks later, he said to my mother that, as a Communist, she should

not have allowed herself to be carried by other human beings.

She said she had done it because, according to traditional wisdom,

women were not supposed to walk for a while after a birth. To this my

father replied: what about the peasant women who have to carry on

working in the fields immediately after they give birth?

My mother was still in a deep depression, uncertain whether she could

stay in the Party or not. Unable to let her rage out on my father or

the Party, she blamed her baby daughter for her misery. Four days

after they came out of the hospital, my sister cried all through the

night.

124My mother was at the end of her tether, and screamed at her and smacked

her quite hard. Aunt Jun-ying, who was sleeping in the next room,

rushed in and said: "You're exhausted. Let me look after her." From

then on my aunt looked after my sister. When my mother went back to

her own place a few weeks later my sister stayed on with Aunt Jun-ying

in the family house.

To this day my mother remembers with grief and remorse the night she

hit my sister. When my mother went to see her, Xiao-hong used to hide,

and in a tragic reversal of what had happened to her as a young child

at General Xue's mansion my mother would not allow Xiao-hong to call

her "Mother."

My aunt found a wet-nurse for my sister. Under the allowance system

the state paid for a wet-nurse for every newborn baby in an official's

family, and also provided free physical checkups for the wet-nurses,

who were treated as state employees. They were not servants, and did

not even have to wash diapers. The state could afford to pay for them

since, according to the Party's rules governing people 'in the

revolution," the only ones who were allowed to marry were senior

officials, and they produced relatively few babies.

The wet-nurse was in her late teens, and her own baby had been

stillborn. She had married into a landlord family who had now lost

their income from the land. She did not want to work as a peasant, but

wanted to be with her husband, who taught and lived in Yibin City.

Through mutual friends she was put in touch with my aunt and went to

live in the Chang family house with her husband.

Gradually my mother began to pull out of her depression. After the

birth she was allowed thirty days' statutory leave, which she spent

with her mother-in-law and Aunt Jun-ying. When she went back to work

she moved to a new job in the Communist Youth League of Yibin City, in

connection with a complete reorganization of the region.

The region of Yibin, covering an area of about 7,500 square miles and

with a population of over two million, was redivided into nine rural

counties and one city, Yibin.

My father became a member of the four-man committee which governed the

whole of the region and the head of the Depa~iment of Public Affairs

for the region.

This reorganization transferred Mrs. Mi and brought my mother a new

boss: the head of the Department of Public Affairs for the city of

Yibin, which controlled the Youth League. In Communist China, in spite

of the formal rules, the personality of one's immediate boss was far

more important than in the West. The boss's attitude is the Party's.

Having a nice boss makes all the difference to one's life.

My mother's new chief was a woman called Zhang Xiting. She and her

husband had been in an army unit which was part of the force earmarked

to take Tibet in 195o.

Sichuan was the staging post for Tibet, which was considered the back

of beyond by Han Chinese. The couple had asked to be discharged and

were sent to Yibin instead.

Her husband was called Liu Jie-ting. He had changed his name to

Jie-ting ("Linked to Ting') to show how much he admired his wife.

couple became known as 'the two Tings."

The

125In the spring my mother was promoted to head of the Youth League, an

important job for a woman not yet twenty. She had recovered her

equilibrium and much of her old bounce. It was in this atmosphere that

I was conceived, in June 1951.

9. "When a Man Gets Power, Even His Chickens and Do~s to

Heaven'-living

My mother was now in a new Party cell, made up of herself, Mrs. Ting,

and a third woman who had been in the Yibin underground, with whom my

mother got on very well. The nonstop intrusion and demands for

self-criticisms came to an immediate halt. Her new cell quickly voted

for her to become a full Party member, and in July she was given Party

membership.

Her new boss, Mrs. Ting, was no beauty, but her slender figure,

sensuous mouth, freckled face, lively eyes, and sharp repartee all

exuded energy and showed she was a character. My mother warmed to her

at once.

Instead of sniping at her like Mrs. Mi, Mrs. Ting let my mother do

all sorts of things she wanted, like reading novels; before, readin, g

a book without a Marxist cover would bring down a rain of criticism

about being a bourgeois intellectual. Mrs. Ting allowed my mother

to

Living with an Incorruptible Man 227 go to the cinema on her own, which

was a great privilege, as at the time those 'with the revolution' were

allowed to see only Soviet films and even then only in organized groups

whereas the public cinemas, which were privately owned, were still

showing old American films, such as Charlie Chaplin's. Another thing

which meant a lot to my mother was that she could now have a bath every

other day.

One day my mother went to the market with Mrs. Ting and bought two

yards of fine pink flower-patterned cotton from Poland. She had seen

the cloth before, but had not dared to buy it for fear of being

criticized for being frivolous. Soon after she had reached Yibin, she

had had to hand in her army uniform and return to her "Lenin suit."

Under that she wore a shapeless, undyed, rough cotton shirt. There was

no rule saying it was compulsory to wear this garb, but anyone who did

not do the same as everybody else would come in for criticism. My

mother had been longing to wear a dash of color. She and Mrs. Ting

rushed over to the Changs' house with the cloth in a state of high

excitement. In no time, four pretty blouses were ready, two for each

of them. Next day they wore them under their Lenin jackets. My mother

turned her pink collar out and spent the whole day feeling terribly

excited and nervous.

Mrs. Ting was even more daring; she not only turned her collar outside

her uniform, but rolled up her sleeves so that a broad band of pink

showed on each arm.

My mother was staggered, almost awestruck, at this defiance. As

expected, there were plenty of disapproving glances. But Mrs. Ting

held her chin up: "Who cares?" she said to my mother. My mother was

tremendously relieved;

with the sanction of her boss, she could ignore any criticisms, verbal

126or wordless.

One reason Mrs. Ting was not frightened of bending the rules a bit was

that she had a powerful husband, who was less scrupulous in exercising

his power. A sharp-nosed, sharp-chinned, and slightly hunched man of

my father's age, Mr. Ting was head of the Party Organization

Department for the region of Yibin, which was a very important

position, as this department was in charge of promotions, demotions,

and punishments. It also kept the files of Party members. In

addition, Mr. Ting, like my father, was a member of the four-man

committee governing the region of Yibin.

In the Youth League my mother was working with people her own age. They

were better educated, more carefree, and more ready to see the humorous

side of things than the older, self-righteous, peasant-turned

Party-official women she had been working with before.

Her new colleagues liked dancing, they went on picnics together, and

they enjoyed talking about books and ideas.

Having a responsible job also meant my mother was treated with more

respect, and this increased as people realized that she was extremely

capable as well as dynamic.

As she grew to be more confident and to rely less on my father, she

felt less disappointed with him. Besides, she was getting used to his

attitudes; she had stopped expecting him always to put her first, and

was much more at peace with the world.

Another bonus of my mother's promotion was that it qualified her to

bring her mother to Yibin on a permanent basis. At the end of August z

95 x, after an exhausting journey, my grandmother and Dr. Xia arrived;

the transportation system was working properly again and they had

traveled the whole way by regular train and boat. As dependants of a

government official, they were assigned lodgings at the state's

expense, a three-room house in a guesthouse compound. They received a

free ration of basic goods, like rice and fuel, which were delivered to

them by the manager of the compound, and they were also given a small

allowance to buy other food. My sister and her wet-nurse went to live

with them, and my mother spent most of her brief spare time there,

enjoying my grandmother's delicious cooking.

My mother was delighted to have her mother and Dr. Xia, whom she loved

with her. She was particularly glad that they were no longer in

Jinzhou, as war had recently broken out in Korea, on the doorstep of

Manchuria; at one point in late 195o American troops had stood on the

banks of the Yalu River, on the border between Korea and China, and

American planes had bombed and strafed towns in Manchuria.

One of the first things my mother wanted to know was what had happened

to Hui-ge, the young colonel. She was devastated to hear that he had

been executed by firing squad, by the bend in the river outside the

western gate of Jinzhou.

For the Chinese, one of the most terrible things that could happen was

not to have a proper burial. They believed that only when the body was

covered and placed deep in the earth could the dead find peace. This

was a religious feeling, but it also had a practical side: if the body

was not buried, it would be torn to pieces by wild dogs and picked to

the bone by birds. In the past, the bodies of people who had been

executed had traditionally been exposed for three days as a lesson to

127the population; only then were the corpses collected and given a sort

of burial.

Now the Communists issued an order that the family should immediately

bury an executed relative; if they could not do it, the task was

carried out by grave diggers hired by the government.

My grandmother had gone herself to the execution ground. Hui-ge's body

had been left lying on the ground, fiddled with bullets, one of a row

of corpses. He had been shot along with fifteen other people. Their

blood had stained the snow dark red. There was no one from his family

left in the city, so my grandmother had hired professional undertakers

to give him a decent burial. She herself brought a long piece of red

silk in which to wrap his body. My mother asked if there were other

people she knew there. Yes, there had been. My grandmother had z3o

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bumped into a woman she knew who was collecting the corpses of her

husband and her brother. Both had been Kuomintang district chiefs.

My mother was also horrified to hear that my grandmother had been

denounced by her own sister-in-law, Yu-lin's wife. She had long felt

put-upon by my grandmother, as she had to do the hard work around the

house, while my grandmother ran it as its mistress. The Communists had

urged everyone to speak up about 'oppression and exploitation," so Mrs.

Yu-lin's grudges were given a political framework. When my grandmother

collected Hui-ge's corpse Mrs. Yu-lin denounced her for being well

disposed toward a criminal. The neighborhood gathered to hold a

'struggle meeting' to 'help' my grandmother understand her 'faults."

My grandmother had to attend, but wisely decided to say nothing and

appear meekly to accept the criticism. Inwardly, she was fuming

against her sister-in-law and the Communists.

The episode did not help relations between my grandmother and my

father. When he found out what she had done, he was enraged, saying

she was more in sympathy with the Kuomintang than with the Communists.

But it was obvious that he also felt a twinge of jealousy. While she

hardly spoke to my father, my grandmother had been very fond of Hui-ge

and had considered him a good match for my mother.

My mother was caught in the middle between her mother and her husband;

and between her personal feelings, her grief over Hui-ge's death, and

her political feelings, her commitment to the Communists.

The execution of the colonel was part of a campaign to 'suppress

counterrevolution ari Its goal was to eliminate all supporters of the

Kuomintang who had had power or influence, and it was triggered by the

Korean War, which had started in June 195o. When US troops had come

right up to the Manchurian border Mao had feared the United States

might attack China, or unleash Chiang Kai-shek's army against the

mainland, or both. He sent over a million men into Korea to fight on

the side of the North Koreans against the Americans.

Although Chiang Kai-shek's army never left Taiwan, the United States

did organize an invasion into southwest China by Kuomintang forces from

Burma; raids were also frequent in the coastal areas, many agents were

landed, and acts of sabotage increased. Large numbers of Kuomintang

soldiers and bandits were still at large and there were sizable

rebellions in parts of the hinterland. The Communists worried that

supporters of the Kuomintang might try to topple their newly

established order, and that if Chiang Kai-shek tried to stage a

128comeback they would rise up as a fifth column. They also wanted to

show people that they were there to stay, and getting rid of their

opponents was one way to impress the concept of stability on the

population, who had traditionally yearned for it. However, opinions

were divided about the degree of ruthlessness necessary. The new

government decided not to be fainthearted. As one official document

put it: "If we do not kill them they will come back and kill us."

My mother was not convinced by the argument, but she decided there was

not much point trying to talk to my father about it. In fact she

rarely saw him, as he spent much of the time away in the countryside,

troubleshooting.

Even when he was in town, she did not see much of him.

Officials were supposed to work from 8 a.m. until 11 p.m., seven days

a week, and one or both of them usually came home so late they hardly

had time to talk to each other.

Their baby daughter did not live with them, and they ate in the

canteen, so there was almost nothing one could call a home life.

Once the land reform was completed, my father was off again,

supervising the construction of the first proper road through the

region. Formerly, the only link between Yibin and the outside world

had been by river. The government decided to build a road south to the

province of Yunnan.

In only one year, using no machinery at all, they built over eighty

miles through a very hilly area, with numerous rivers. The labor force

was made up of peasants, who worked in exchange for food.

During the digging, the peasants hit the skeleton of a dinosaur, which

got slightly damaged. My father made a self-criticism and ensured it

was excavated carefully and shipped to a museum in Peking. He also

sent soldiers to guard some tombs dating from about ~ zoo from which

the peasants had been taking bricks to improve their pigsties.

One day two peasants were killed by a rock slide. My father walked

through the night along mountain paths to the scene of the accident.

This was the first time in their lives the local peasants had set eyes

on an official of my father's rank, and they were moved to see that he

was concerned about their well-being. In the past it had been assumed

that all officials were only out to line their pockets.

After what my father did, the locals thought the Communists were

marvelous.

Meanwhile, one of my mother's main jobs was to galvanize support for

the new government, particularly among factory workers. From the

beginning of 1951 she had been visiting factories, making speeches,

listening to complaints, and sorting out problems. Her job included

explaining to the young workers what communism was and encouraging them

to join the Youth League and the Party. She lived for long periods in

a couple of factories: Communists were supposed to 'live and work among

the workers and peasants," as my father was doing, and to know their

needs.

One factory just outside the city made insulating circuits.

Living conditions there, as in every other factory, were appalling,

129with scores of women sleeping in a huge shack built of straw and

bamboo. The food was woefully inadequate: the workers got meat only

about twice a month, even though they were doing exhausting work. Many

of the women had to stand in cold water for eight hours at a stretch

washing the porcelain insulators. Tuberculosis, from malnutrition and

lack of hygiene, was common. The eating bowls and chopsticks were

never properly washed and were all mixed up together.

In March my mother began to cough up a little blood.

She knew at once that she had TB, but she kept on working. She was

happy because no one was intruding on her life. She believed in what

she was doing, and she was excited by the results of her work:

conditions in the factory were improving, the young workers liked her,

and many pledged their allegiance to the Communist cause as the result

of her. She genuinely felt that the revolution needed her devotion and

self-sacrifice, and she worked flat out, all day, seven days a week.

But after working without a break for months, it became obvious that

she was extremely ill.

Four cavities had developed in her lungs.

pregnant with me.

By the summer she was also

One day in late November my mother fainted on the factory floor. She

was rushed to a small hospital in the city which had originally been

set up by foreign missionaries.

There she was looked after by Chinese Catholics. There was still one

European priest there, and a few European nuns, wearing religious

habits. Mrs. Ting encouraged my grandmother to bring her food, and my

mother ate an enormous amount- a whole chicken, ten eggs, and a pound

of meat a day sometimes. As a result, I became gigantic in her womb

and she put on thirty pounds.

The hospital had a small amount of American medicine for TB. Mrs. Ting

charged in and got hold of the whole lot for my mother. When my father

found out he asked Mrs. Ting to take at least half of it back, but she

snapped at him: "What sense does that make? As it is, this is not

enough for one person. If you don't believe me, you can go and ask the

doctor. Besides, your wife works under me and I am making the

decisions about her." My mother was enormously grateful to Mrs. Ting

for standing up to my father. He did not insist. He was obviously

torn between concern for my mother's health and his principles,

according to which his wife's interest must not override that of the

ordinary people, and at least some of the medicine ought to be saved

for others.

Because of my huge size and the way I grew upward, the cavities in her

lungs were compressed and started to close. The doctors told her this

was a compliment to her baby, but my mother thought the credit should

probably go to the American medicine she had been able to take, thanks

to Mrs. Ting. My mother stayed in the hospital three months, until

February 1952, when she was eight months pregnant. One day she was

suddenly asked to leave, 'for her own safety." A friend told her that

some guns had been found in the residence of a foreign priest in

Peking, and all foreign priests and nuns had fallen under extreme

suspicion.

She did not want to leave. The hospital was set in a pretty garden

with beautiful water lilies, and she found the professional care and

the clean environment, which were rare in China at that time, extremely

130soothing. But she had no choice, and was moved to the Number One

People's Hospital. The director of this hospital had never delivered a

baby before. He had been a doctor with the Kuomintang army until his

unit had mutinied and gone over to the Communists. He was worried that

if my mother died giving birth, he would be in dire trouble because of

his background and because my father was a high official.

Near the date when I was due to appear, the director suggested to my

father that my mother should be moved to a hospital in a larger city,

where there were better facilities and specialist obstetricians. He

was afraid that when I emerged, the sudden removal of pressure might

cause the cavities in my mother's lung to reopen and produce a

hemorrhage. But my father refused; he said his wife had to be treated

like anyone else, as the Communists had pledged themselves to combat

privilege. When my mother heard this she thought bitterly that he

always seemed to act against her interest and that he did not care

whether she lived or died.

I was born on 25 March 1952. Because of the complexi~' of the case, a

second surgeon was invited in from another hospital. Several other

doctors were present, along with staff with extra oxygen and blood

transfusion equipment, and Mrs. Ting. Chinese men traditionally did

not attend births, but the director asked my father to stand by outside

the delivery room because it was a special case and to protect himself

in case anything went wrong. It was a very difficult delivery. When

my head came out, my shoulders, which were unusually broad, got caught.

And I was too fat.

The nurses pulled my head with their hands, and I came out squeezed

blue and purple, and half strangled. The doctors placed me first in

hot water, then in cold water, and lifted me up by my feet and smacked

me hard. Eventually I started crying, very loudly, too. They all

laughed with relief.

I weighed just over ten pounds.

My mother's lungs were undamaged.

A woman doctor picked me up and showed me to my father, whose first

words were: "Oh dear, this child has bulging eyes!" My mother was very

upset at this remark.

Aunt Jun-ying said, "No, she just has beautiful big eyes!"

As for every occasion and condition in China, there was a particular

dish considered just right for a woman immediately after she had given

birth: poached eggs in raw sugar juice with fermented glutinous rice.

My grandmother prepared these in the hospital, which, like all

hospitals, had kitchens where patients and their families could cook

their own food, and had them ready the minute my mother was able to

eat.

When the news of my birth reached Dr.

"All, another wild swan is born."

means "Second Wild Swan."

Xia, he said:

I was given the name Er-hong, which

Giving me my name was almost the last act in Dr. Xia's long life. Four

days after I was born he died, at the age of eighty-two. He was

leaning back in bed drinking a glass of milk. My grandmother went out

of the room for a minute and when she came back to get the glass she

saw the milk had spilled and the glass had fallen to the floor. He had

died instantly and painlessly.

131Funerals were very important events in China. Ordinary people would

often bankrupt themselves to lay on a grand ceremony and my grandmother

loved Dr. Xia and wanted to do him proud. There were three things she

absolutely insisted on: first, a good coffin; second, that the coffin

must be carried by pallbearers and not pulled on a cart; and third, to

have Buddhist monks to chant the sutras for the dead and musicians to

play the mona, a piercing woodwind ins manent traditionally used at

funerals. My father agreed to the first and second requests, but

vetoed the third. The Communists regarded any extravagant ceremony as

wasteful and 'feudal." Traditionally, only very lowly people were

buried quietly. Noise-making was considered important at a funeral to

make it a public affair:, this brought 'face' and also showed respect

for the dead. My father insisted there could be no suona or monks. My

grandmother had a blazi g row with him. For her, these were essentials

which she just had to have. In the mid die of the altercation she

fainted from anger and grief. She was also wrought up because she was

all alone at the saddest moment of her life. She had not told my

mother what had happened, for fear of upsetting her, and the fact that

my mother was in the hospital meant that my grandmother had to deal

directly with my father. After the funeral she had a nervous breakdown

and had to be hospitalized for almost two months.

Dr. Xia was buried in a cemetery on top of a hill on the edge of

Yibin, overlooking the Yangtze. His grave was shaded by pines,

cypresses, and camphor trees. In his short time in Yibin Dr. Xia had

won the love and respect of all who knew him. When he died, the

manager of the guesthouse where he had been living arranged

everything

Lh'ing with an Incorruptible Man 237 for my grandmother and led his

staff in the silent tuner al procession.

Dr. Xia had been happy in his old age. He loved Yibin and took

tremendous pleasure in all the exotic flowers which flourished in the

subtropical climate, so different from Manchuria. Right up until the

very end he enjoyed extraordinarily good health. He had had a good

life in Yibin, with his own house and courtyard rent free; he and my

grandmother were well looked after, with abundant supplies of food

delivered to their home. It was the dream of every Chinese, in a

society without any social security, to be cared for in old age. Dr.

Xia was able to enjoy this, and it was no small thing.

Dr. Xia had got on very well with everybody, including my father, who

respected him enormously as a man of principle. Dr. Xia considered my

father a very knowledgeable man. He used to say he had seen many

officials in the past, but never one like my father. Common wisdom had

it that 'there is no official who is not corrupt," but my father never

abused his position, not even to look after the interests of his own

family.

The two men would talk together for hours. They shared many ethical

values, but whereas my father's were dressed in the garb of an

ideology, Dr. Xia's rested on a humanitarian foundation. Once Dr. Xia

said to my father: "I think the Communists have done many good things.

But you have killed too many people. People who should not have been

killed."

"Like who?"

my father asked.

"Those masters in the Society of Reason," which was the quasi-religious

132sect to which Dr. Xia had belonged. Its leaders had been executed as

part of the campaign to 'suppress counterrevolution ari The new regime

suppressed all secret societies, because they commanded loyalties, and

the Communists did not want divided loyalties.

"They were not bad people, and you should have let the Society be," Dr.

Xia said. There was a long pause.

My father tried to defend the Communists, saying that the struggle with

the Kuomintang was a matter of life and death.

Dr. Xia could tell that my father was not fully convinced himself, but

felt he had to defend the Party.

When my grandmother left the hospital she came to live with my parents.

My sister and her wet-nurse also moved in. I shared a room with my

wet-nurse, who had had her own baby twelve days before I was born and

had taken the job because she desperately needed money. Her husband, a

manual worker, was in jail for gambling and dealing in opium, both of

which had been outlawed by the Communists. Yibin had been a major

center of the opium trade, with an estimated 25,000 addicts, and opium

had previously circulated as money. Opium dealing had been closely

linked to gangsters and provided a substantial portion of the

Kuomintang's budget. Within two years of coming to Yibin the

Communists wiped out opium smoking.

There was no social security or unemployment benefit for someone in the

position of my wet-nurse. But when she came to us the state paid her

salary, which she sent to her mother-in-law, who was looking after her

baby. My nurse was a tiny woman with fine skin, unusually big round

eyes, and long exuberant hair, which she kept in a bun.

She was a very kind woman, and treated me like her own daughter.

Traditionally, square shoulders were regarded as unbecoming for girls,

so my shoulders were bound tightly to make them grow into the required

sloppy shape. This made me bawl so loudly that my nurse would release

my arms and shoulders, allowing me to wave at people who came to the

house, and clutch them, which I liked doing from an early age. My

mother always attributed my outgoing character to the fact that she was

happy when she was pregnant with me.

We were living in the old landlord's mansion where my father had his

office; it had a big garden with Chinese pepper trees, banana groves,

and lots of sweet-smelling flowers and subtropical plants, which were

looked after by a gardener provided by the government. My father greys

his own tomatoes and chiles. He enjoyed this work, but it was also one

of his principles that a Communist official should perform physical

labor, which had traditionally been looked down on by mandarins.

My father was very affectionate to me. When I began to crawl, he would

lie on his stomach to be my 'mountains," and I would climb up and down

him.

Soon after I was born my father was promoted to become the governor of

the Yibin region, the number-two man in the area, below only the first

secretary of the Party. (The Party and the government were formally

distinct, but actually inseparable.)

When he had first returned to Yibin, his family and old friends all

expected him to help them. In China it was assumed that anyone in a

133powerful position would look after their relatives. There was a

well-known saying: "When a man gets power, even his chickens and dogs

rise to heaven." But my father felt that nepotism and favoritism were

the slippery slope to corruption, which was the root of all the evils

of the old China. He also knew that the local people were watching him

to see how the Communism would behave, and that what he did would

influence how they regarded communism.

His strictness had already estranged him from his family.

One of his cousins had asked him for a recommendation for a job in the

box office at a local cinema. My father told him to go through the

official channels. Such behavior was unheard of, and after this no one

ever asked him for a favor again. Then something else happened soon

after he was appointed governor. One of his older brothers was a tea

expert who worked in a tea marketing office. The economy was doing

well in the early 195os, production was expanding, and the local tea

board wanted to promote him to manager. All promotions above a certain

level had to be cleared by my father. When the recommendation landed

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on his desk, he vetoed it.

mother.

His family was incensed, and so was my

"It's not you who is promoting him, it's his management!"

exploded.

she

"You don't have to help him, but you don't have to block him either!"

My father said that his brother was not capable enough and that he

would not have been put forward for promotion if he had not been the

governor's brother. There was a long tradition of anticipating the

wishes of one's superiors, he pointed out.

The tea management board was indignant because my father's action

implied that their recommendation had ulterior motives. My father

ended up offending everyone, and his brother never spoke to him

again.

But my father was unrepentant. He was fighting his own crusade

the old ways, and he insisted on treating everyone by the same

criteria. But there was no objective standard for fairness, so

relied on his own instincts, bending over backward to be fair.

not consult his colleagues, partly because he knew that none of

would ever tell him that a relative of his was undeserving.

against

he

He did

them

His personal moral crusade reached its zenith in 1953 when a civil

service ranking system was instituted. All officials and government

employees were divided into twenty-six grades. The pay of the lowest

grade, Grade 26, was one-twentieth of that of the highest grade. But

the real difference lay in the subsidies and perks. The system

determined almost everything: from whether one's coat was made of

expensive wool or cheap cotton to the size of one's apariment and

whether it had an indoor toilet or not.

The grading also determined every official's access to information. A

very important part of the Chinese Communist system was that all

information was not only very tightly controlled, but highly

compatia~tentalized and rationed, not only to the general public who

were told very little but also within the Party.

134Although its eventual significance was not apparent, even at the time

civil servants could feel that the grading system was going to be

crucial to their lives, and they were

all nervous about what grade they

would get. My father, whose grade had already been set at 11 by

higher authorities, was in charge of vetting the rankings proposed for

everyone in the Yibin region. These included the husband of his

youngest sister, who was his favorite. He demoted him two grades. My

mother's department had recommended my mother to be Grade i5; he

relegated her to Grade 17.

This grade system is not directly linked to a person's position in the

civil service. Individuals could be promoted without necessarily being

upgraded. In nearly four decades, my mother was upgraded only twice,

in 1962 and 198z; each time she moved up only one grade, and by 199o

she was still Grade z5. With this ranking, in the 198OS, she was not

entitled to buy a plane ticket or a 'soft seat' on a train: these can

be bought only by officials of Grade z4 and above. So, thanks to my

father's actions in 1953, almost forty years later she was one rung too

low on the ladder to travel in comfort in her own country. She could

not stay in a hotel room which had a private bath, as these were for

Grade 13 and above. When she applied to change the electric meter in

her apartment to one with a larger capacity, the management of the

block told her that only officials of Grade x3 and above were entitled

to a bigger meter.

The very acts which infuriated my father's family were deeply

appreciated by the local population, and his reputation has endured to

this day. One day in 1952 the headmaster of the Number One Middle

School mentioned to my father that he was having difficulty finding

accommodations for his teachers.

"In that case, take my family's house it's too big for only three

people," my father said instantly, in spite of the fact that the three

people were his mother, his sister Jun-ying, and a brother who was

retarded, and that they all adored the beautiful house with its

enchanted garden. The school was delighted; his family less so,

although he found them a small house in the middle of town. His mother

was not too pleased, but being a gracious and understanding woman, she

said nothing.

Not every official was as incorruptible as my father.

Quite soon after taking power, the Communists found themselves facing a

crisis. They had attracted the support of millions of people by

promising clean government, but some officials began taking bribes or

bestowing favors on their families and friends. Others threw

extravagant banquets, which is a traditional Chinese indulgence, almost

a disease, and a way of both entertaining and showing of fall at the

expense, and in the name, of the state, at a time when the government

was extremely short of funds; it was trying to reconstruct the

shattered economy and also fight a major war in Korea, which was eating

up about 50 percent of the budget.

Some officials started embezzling on a large scale. The regime was

worried. It sensed that the goodwill which had swept it into power and

the discipline and dedication which had ensured its success were

eroding. In late 195I it decided to launch a movement against

corruption, waste, and bureaucracy. It was called the "Three Antis

Campaign." The government executed some corrupt officials, imprisoned

quite a number, and dismissed many others.

135Even some veterans of the Communist army who had been involved in

large-scale bribery or embezzlement were executed, to set an example.

Henceforth, corruption was severely punished, and it became rare among

officials for the next couple of decades.

My father was in charge of the campaign in his region.

There were no corrupt senior officials in his area, but he felt it was

important to demonstrate that the Communists were keeping their promise

to provide clean government.

Every official had to make a self-criticism about any infraction,

however minor: for example, if they had used an office telephone to

make a personal call, or a piece of official notepaper to write a

private letter. Officials became so scrupulous about using state

property that most of them would not even use the ink in their office

to write anything except official communications. When they switched

from official business to something personal they changed pens.

There was a puritanical zeal about sticking to these prescriptions. My

father felt that through these minutiae they were creating a new

attitude among the Chinese: public property would, for the first time,

be strictly separate from private; officials would no longer treat the

people's money as their own, or abuse their positions. Most of the

people who worked with my father took this position, and genuinely

believed that their painstaking efforts were directly linked to the

noble cause of creating a new China.

The Three Antis Campaign was aimed at people in the Party. But it

takes two to make a corrupt transaction, and the corrupters were often

outside the Party, especially 'capitalists," factory owners and

merchants, who had still hardly been touched. Old habits were deeply

entrenched.

In spring 1952, soon after the Three Antis Campaign got go' rag

another, overlapping campaign was started. This was called the "Five

Antis' and was aimed at capitalists.

The five targets were bribery, tax evasion, fraud, theft of state

property, and obtaining economic information through corruption. Most

capitalists were found to have committed one or more of these offenses,

and the punishment was usually a fine. The Communists used this

campaign to coax and (more often) cow the capitalists, but in such a

way as to maximize their usefulness to the economy.

Not many were imprisoned.

These two linked campaigns consolidated mechanisms of control,

originally developed in the early days of communism, which were unique

to China. The most important was the 'mass campaign'

(qiun-zhongyun-dong), which was conducted by bodies known as 'work

teams' (gong-zuo-zu).

Work teams were ad hoc bodies, made up mainly of employees from

government offices and headed by senior Party officials. The central

government in Peking would send teams to the provinces to vet the

provincial officials and employees. These, in turn, formed teams which

checked up on the next level, where the process was repeated, all the

way down to the grass roots. Normally, no one could become a member of

a work team who had not already been vetted in that particular

136campaign.

Teams were sent to all organizations where the campaign was to be

conducted 'to mobilize the people." There were compulsory meefngs most

evenings to study instructions issued by the top authorities. Team

members would talk, lecture, and try to persuade people to stand up and

expose suspects. People were encouraged to place anonymous complaints

in boxes provided for the purpose. The work team would investigate

each case. If the investigation confirmed the charge, or revealed

grounds for suspicion, the team would formulate a verdict which was

sent up to the next level of authority for approval.

There was no genuine appeal system, although a person who came under

suspicion could ask to see the evidence and would usually be allowed to

make some sort of defense.

Work teams could impose a range of sentences including public

criticism, dismissal from one's job, and various forms of surveillance;

the maximum sentence they could give was to send a person to the

countryside to do physical labor. Only the most serious cases went to

the formal judicial system, which was under the Party's control. For

each of the campaigns, a set of guidelines was issued from the very

top, and the work teams had to abide strictly by these. But when it

came down to individual cases, the judgment and even the temperament-

of the specific work team could also be important.

In each campaign everyone in the category which had been designated as

the target by Peking came under some degree of scrufny, mostly from

their work mates and neighbors rather than the police. This was a key

invention of

Mao's to involve the entire population in the machinery of control. Few

wrongdoers, according to the regime's criteria, could escape the

watchful eyes of the people,

especially in a society with an age-old concierge mentality-.

But the 'efficiency' was acquired at a tremendous price:

because the campaigns operated on very vague criteria, and because of

personal vendettas, and even gossip, many innocent people were

condemned.

Aunt Jun-ying had been working as a weaver to help support her mother,

her retarded brother, and herself.

Every night she worked into the small hours, and her eyes became quite

badly damaged from the dim light. By 1952 she had saved and borrowed

enough money to buy two more weaving machines, and had two friends

working with her. Although they divided the income, in theory my aunt

was paying them because she owned the machines. In the Five Antis

Campaign anyone employing other people fell under some sort of

suspicion. Even very small businesses like Aunt Jun-ying's, which were

in effect cooperatives, came under investigation. She wanted to ask

her friends to leave, but did not want them to feel she was giving them

the sack. But then the two friends told her it would be best if they

left. They were worried that if someone else threw mud at her, she

might think it was them.

By the middle of 1953 the Three Antis and Five Antis campaigns had

wound down; the capitalists had been brought to heel, and the

137Kuomintang had been eradicated.

Mass meetings were coming to an end, as officials had come to recognize

that much of the information which emerged at them was unreliable.

Cases were being examined on an individual basis.

In May 1953 my mother went into hospital to have her third child, who

was born on 23 May: a boy called Jinming. It was the missionary

hospital where she had stayed when she was pregnant with me, but the

missionaries had now been expelled, as had happened all over China. My

mother had just been given a promotion to head of the Public Affairs

Department for the city of Yibin, still working under Mrs. Ting, who

had risen to be Party secretary for the city. At the time my

grandmother was also in the hospital with severe asthma. And so was I,

with a navel infection; my wet-nurse was staying with me in the

hospital. We were being given good treatment, which was free, as we

belonged to a family 'in the revolution." Doctors tended to give the

very scarce hospital beds to officials and their families. There was

no public health service for the majority of the population: peasants,

for example, had to pay.

My sister and my auntJun-ying were staying with friends in the country,

so my father was alone at home. One day Mrs. Ting came to report on

her work. Afterward she said she had a headache and wanted to lie

down. My father helped her onto one of the beds, and as he did so she

pulled him down toward her and tried to kiss and stroke him. My father

backed away at once.

"You must be very exhausted," he said, and immediately left the room. A

few moments later he returned, in a very agitated state. He was

carrying a glass of water which he put on the bedside table.

"You must know that I love my wife," he said, and then, before Mrs.

Ting had a chance to do anything, he went to the door and closed it

behind him. Under the glass of water he had left a piece of paper with

the words "Communist morality."

A few days later my mother left the hospital. As she and her baby son

crossed the threshold of the house, my father said: "We're leaving

Yibin the minute we can, for good."

My mother could not imagine what had got into him. He told her what

had happened, and said Mrs. Ting had been eyeing him for some time. My

mother was more shocked than angry.

"But why do you want to leave so urgently?"

she asked.

"She's a determined woman," my father said.

"I'm afraid she might try again. And she is also a vindictive woman.

What I am most worried about is that she might try to harm you. That

would be easy, because you work under her."

"Is she that bad?"

my mother replied.

"I' did hear some gossip that when she was in jail under the

Kuomintang she seduced the warder, that sort of thing.

138But some people like to spread rumors.

should fancy you," she smiled.

Anyway, I'm not surprised she

"But do you think she would really turn nasty on me?

friend here."

She is my best

"You don't understand there is something called "rage out of being

shamed" [nao-xiu-cheng-nu]. I know that is how she is feeling. I

wasn't very tactful. I must have shamed her. I'm sorry. On the spur

of the moment I acted on impulse, I'm afraid. She is a woman who will

take revenge."

My mother could visualize exactly how my father might have

rebuffed Mrs. Ting. But she could not imagine Mrs. Ting

that malicious, nor could she see what disaster Mrs. Ting

down on them. So my father told her about his predecessor

of Yibin, Mr. Shu.

abruptly

would be

could bring

as governor

Mr. Shu had been a poor peasant who had joined the Red Army on the

Long March. He did not like Mrs. Ting, and criticized her for being

flirtatious. He also objected to the way she wound her hair into many

6ny plaits, which verged on the outrageous for the 6me. Several times

he said that she should cut her plaits. She refused, telling him to

mind his own business, which only made him redouble his criticisms,

making her even more hostile to him. She decided to take revenge on

him, with the help of her husband.

There was a woman working in Mr. Shu's office who had been the

concubine of a Kuomintang official who had fled to Taiwan. She had

been seen trying her charms on Mr. Shu, who was married, and there was

gossip about them having an affair. Mrs. Ting got this woman to sign

a statement saying that Mr. Shu had made advances to her and had

forced her to have sex with him. Even though he was the governor, the

woman decided the Tings were more fearsome. Mr. Shu was charged with

using his position to have relations with a former Kuomintang

concubine, which was considered inexcusable for a Communist veteran.

A standard technique in China to bring a person down was to draw

together several different charges to make the case appear more

substantial. The Tings found another 'offense' with which to charge

Mr. Shu. He had once disagreed with a policy put forward by Peking

and had written to the top Party leaders stating his views. According

to the Party charter, this was his right; moreover, as a veteran of the

Long March, he was in a privileged position. So he felt confident that

he could be quite open with his complaints. The Tings used this to

claim that he was opposed to the Party.

Stringing the two charges together, Mr. Ting proposed expelling Mr.

Shu from the Party and sacking him. Mr. Shu denied the charges

vigorously. The first, he said, was simply untrue. He had never made

a pass at the woman;

all he had done was to be civil to her. As for the second, he had done

nothing wrong and had no intention of opposing the Party. The Party

Committee that governed the region was composed of four people: Mr. Shu

himself, Mr. Ting, my father, and the first secretary. Now Mr. Shu

was judged by the other three. My father defended him. He felt sure

Mr. Shu was innocent, and he regarded writing the letter as completely

legitimate.

When it came to the vote, my father lost, and Mr.

Shu was dismissed.

139The first secretary of the Party supported Mr. Ting. One reason he

did so was that Mr. Shu had been in the 'wrong' branch of the Red

Army. He had been a senior officer in what was called the Fourth Front

in Sichuan in the early 193OS. This army had joined forces with the

branch of the Red Army led by Mao on the Long March in 1935. Its

commander, a flamboyant figure called Zhang Guo-tao, challenged Mao for

the leadership of the Red Army and lost. He then left the Long March

with his troops. Eventually, after suffering heavy casualties, he was

forced to rejoin Mao. But in 1938, after the Communists reached

Yan'an, he went over to the Kuomintang. Because of this, anyone who

had been in the Fourth Front bore a stigma, and their allegiance to Mao

was considered suspect. This issue was particularly touchy, as many of

the people in the Fourth Front had come from Sichuan.

After the Communists took power this type of unspoken stigma was

attached to any part of the revolution which Mao had not directly

controlled, including the underground, which included many of the

bravest, most dedicated and best educated Communists. In Yibin, all

the former members of the underground felt under some sort of pressure.

Among the added complications was the fact that many of the people in

the local underground had come from well-to-do backgrounds, and their

families had suffered at the hands of the Communists. Moreover,

because they were usually better educated than the people who had

arrived with the Communist army, who were mainly from peasant

backgrounds and often illiterate, they became the object of envy.

Though himself a guerrilla fighter, my father was instinctively much

closer to the underground people. In any case, he refused to go along

with the insidious ostracism, and spoke out for the former members of

the underground.

"It is ridiculous to divide Communists into "underground" and over

ground he often said. In fact, most of the people he picked to work

with him had been in the underground, because they were the most

able.

My father thought that to consider Fourth Front men like Mr. Shu as

suspect was unacceptable, and he fought to have him rehabilitated.

First, he advised him to leave Yibin to avoid further trouble, which he

did, taking his last meal with my family. He was transferred to

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, where he was given a job as a

clerk in the Provincial Forestry Bureau. From there he wrote appeals

to the Central Committee in Peking, naming my father as his reference.

My father wrote supporting his appeal. Much later, Mr. Shu was

cleared of 'opposing the Party," but the lesser charge of 'having

extramarital affairs' stood. The former concubine who had lodged the

accusation dared not retract it, but she gave a patently feeble and

incoherent account of the alleged advances, which was clearly designed

to signal to the investigating group that the accusations were untrue.

Mr. Shu was given a fairly senior post in the Forestry Ministry in

Peking, but he did not get his old position back.

The point my father was trying to get across to my mother was that the

Tings would stop at nothing to set He old scores. He gave more

examples and repeated that they had to leave at once. The very next

day he traveled to Chengdu, one day's journey to the north. There he

went straight to the governor of the province, whom he knew well, and

asked to be transferred, saying that it was very difficult to work in

his hometown and to cope with the expectations of his many relatives.

He kept his real reasons to himself, as he had no hard evidence about

the Tings.

140The governor, Lee Daozhang, was the man who had originally sponsored

the application by Mao's wife, Jiang (~mg, to join the Party. He

expressed sympathy with my father's position and said he would help him

get a transfer, but he did not want him to move immediately: all the

suitable posts in Chengdu had been filled. My father said he could not

wait, and would accept anything. After trying hard to dissuade him,

the governor finally gave up and told him he could have the job of head

of the Arts and Education Office. But he warned, "This is much below

your ability." My father said he did not mind as long as there was a

job to do.

My father was so worried that he did not go back to

Yibin at all, but sent a message to my mother telling her to join him

as soon as possible. The women in his family said it was out of the

question for my mother to move so soon after giving birth, but my

father was terrified about what Mrs. Ting might do, and as soon as the

traditional month's postnatal convalescence was over, he sent his

bodyguard to Yibin to collect us.

It was decided that my brother Jin-ming would stay behind, as he was

considered too young to travel. Both his wet-nurse and my sister's

wanted to stay, to be near their families. Jin-ming's wet-nurse was

very fond of him, and she asked my mother if she could keep him with

her. My mother agreed. She had complete confidence in her.

My mother, my grandmother, my sister, and I, with my wet-nurse and the

bodyguard, left Yibin before dawn one night at the end of June. We all

crammed into a jeep with our meager luggage, just a couple of

suitcases. At the time, officials like my parents did not own any

property at all only a few articles of basic clothing. We drove over

potholed dirt roads until we reached the town of Neijiang in the

morning. It was a sweltering day, and we had to wait there for hours

for the train.

Just as it was finally coming into the station, I suddenly decided I

had to relieve myself and my nurse picked me up and carried me to the

edge of the platform. My mother was afraid that the train might

suddenly leave and tried to stop her. My nurse, who had never seen a

train before and had no concept of a timetable, rounded on her and said

rather grandly: "Can't you tell the driver to wait? Er-hong has to

have a pee." She thought everyone would, like her, automatically put

my needs first.

Because of our different status, we had to split up when we got on the

train. My mother was in a second-class sleeper with my sister, my

grandmother had a soft seat in another carriage, and my nurse and I

were in what was called the 'mothers' and children's compartment,"

where she had a hard seat and I had a cot. The bodyguard was in a

fourth carriage, with a hard seat.

As the train chugged slowly along my mother gazed out at the rice

paddies and sugarcane. The occasional peasants walking on the mud

ridges seemed to be half asleep under their broad-brimmed straw hats,

the men naked to the waist. The network of streams flowed haltingly,

obstructed by tiny mud dams which channeled the water into the numerous

individual rice paddies.

My mother was in a pensive mood. For the second time within four

years, she and her husband and family were having to decamp from a

141place to which they were deeply attached. First from her hometown,

Jinzhou, and now from my father's, Yibin. The revolution had not, it

seemed, brought a solution to their problems. Indeed, it had caused

new ones. For the first time she vaguely reflected on the fact that,

as the revolution was made by human beings, it was burdened with their

failings. But it did not occur to her that the revolution was doing

very lit He to deal with these failings, and actually relied on some of

them, often the worst.

As the train approached Chengdu in the early afternoon, she found

herself increasingly looking forward to a new life there. She had

heard a lot about Chengdu, which had been the capital of an ancient

kingdom and was known as 'the City of Silk' after its most famous

product. It was also called 'the City of Hibiscus," which was said to

bury the city with its petals after a summer storm. She was twenty two

At the same age, some twenty years before, her mother had been living

as a virtual prisoner in Manchuria in a house belonging to her absent

warlord 'husband," under the watchful eyes of his servants; she was the

plaything and the property of men. My mother, at least, was an

independent human being. Whatever her misery, she was sure it bore no

comparison with the plight of her mother as a woman in old China. She

told herself she had a lot to thank the Communist revolution for. As

the train pulled into Chengdu station, she was full of determination to

throw herself into the great cause again.

10.

"Suffering Will Make You a

Better Communist' My Mother Falls under Suspicion

~'1953-195d)

My father met us at the station. The air was motionless and

oppressive, and my mother and my grandmother were exhausted from the

jolting car journey the night before and the burning heat which had

blown through the train all the way. We were taken to a guesthouse

belonging to the Sichuan provincial government, which was to be our

temporary lodging. My mother's transfer had happened so quickly that

she had not been assigned a job, and there had been no time to make

proper arrangements about a place for us to live.

Chengdu was the capital of Sichuan, which was the most populous

province in China, with some sixty-five million people then. It was a

large city, with a population of over half a million, and had been

founded in the fifth century BC. Marco Polo visited it in the

thirteenth century and was enormously impressed by its prosperity. It

was laid out on the same plan as Peking, with ancient palaces and major

gates all on a north-south axis which divided the city neatly

254 "Suffering Will Make You a Better Communist' into two parts,

western and eastern. By 1953 it had outgrown its original neat plan

and was divided into three administrative districts eastern, western,

and the outskirts.

Within a few weeks of arriving my mother was given a job. My father

was consulted about it, but, in the good' old tradition of China, not

my mother herself. My father said anything would do, as long as she

was not working directly under him, so she was made head of the Public

Affairs Department for the Eastern District of the city. As one's work

unit was responsible for one's accommodations, she was assigned rooms

which belonged to her department, in a traditional courtyard. We moved

into these rooms, while my father stayed on in his office suite.

142Our living quarters were in the same compound as the Eastern District

administration. Government offices were mostly housed in large

mansions which had been confiscated from Kuomintang officials and

wealthy landlords. All government employees, even senior officials,

lived at their office. They were not allowed to cook at home, and all

ate in canteens. The canteen was also where everyone got their boiled

water, which was fetched in thermos flasks.

Saturday was the only day married couples were allowed to spend

together. Among officials, the euphemism for making love was 'spending

a Saturday." Gradually, this regimented life-style relaxed a bit and

married couples were able to spend more time together, but almost all

still lived and spent most of their time in their office compounds.

My mother's depariment ran a very broad field of activities, including

primary education, health, entertainment, and sounding out public

opinion. At the age of twenty-two, my mother was in charge of all

these activities for about a quarter of a million people. She was so

busy we hardly ever saw her. The government wanted to establish a

monopoly (known as 'unified purchasing and marketing') over trade in

the basic commodities grain, cotton, edible o'fi, and meat. The idea

was to get the peasants to sell these exclusively to the government,

which would then ration them out to the urban population and to parts

of the countrx where they were in short supply.

When the Chinese Communist Party launched a new policy, they

accompanied it with a propaganda drive to help put the new policy

across. It was part of my mother's job to try to convince people that

the change was for the good.

The core of the message this time was that China had a huge population

and that the problem of feeding and clothing it had never been solved;

now the government wanted to make sure the basic necessities were

fairly distributed and that nobody starved while others hoarded grain

or other essentials. My mother set about her job with gusto, rushing

around on her bicycle, talking at endless meetings every day, even when

she was in the last months of pregnancy with her fourth child. She

enjoyed her work, and believed in it.

She only went into the hospital at the last minute to have her next

child, a son, who was born on 15 September 1954.

It was a dangerous delivery again. The doctor was getting ready to go

home when my mother stopped him. She was bleeding abnormally, and knew

there was something wrong. She insisted on the doctor staying and

giving her a checkup. A fragment of her placenta was missing. Finding

it was considered a major operation, so the doctor had her placed under

a general anesthetic and searched her womb again. They found the

fragment, which probably saved her life.

My father was in the countryside trying to galvanize support for the

state monopoly program. He had just been upgraded to Grade 10 and

promoted to deputy director of the Public Affairs Department for the

whole of Sichuan.

One of its major functions was to keep a running check on public

opinion: How did the people feel about a particular policy? What

complaints did they have? Since peasants formed the overwhelming

majority of the population, he was often in the countryside finding out

their views and feelings. Like my mother, he believed passionately in

143his work, which was to keep the Party and the government in touch with

the people.

On the seventh day after my mother gave birth, one of his colleagues

sent a car to the hospital to bring her home.

It was accepted that, if the husband was away, the Party organization

was responsible for taking care of his wife.

My mother gratefully accepted the lift, as 'home' was half an hour's

walk away. When my father came back a few days later, he reprimanded

his colleague. The rules stipulated that my mother could ride in an

official car only when my father was in it. Using a car when he was

not there would be seen as nepotism, he said. My father's colleague

said he had authorized the car because my mother had just been through

a serious operation which had left her extremely weak. But a rule is a

rule, replied my father. My mother found it hard to take this

puritanical rigidity once again. This was the second time my father

had attacked her immediately after a difficult birth. Why was he not

there to take her home, she asked, so they would not have to break the

rules? He had been tied up with his work, he said, which was

important. My mother understood his dedication she was dedicated

herself. But she was also bitterly disappointed.

Two days after he was born my new brother, Xiao-bei, developed eczema.

My mother thought this was because she had not eaten any boiled green

olives during the summer, when she was too busy working. The Chinese

believe that olives get rid of body heat that otherwise comes out in

heat bumps. For several months Xiao-her's hands had to be tied to the

railings of his cot to prevent him from scratching himself. When he

was six months old he was sent to a dermatology hospital. At this

point my grandmother had to rush to Jinzhou as her mother was ill.

Xiao-her's nurse was a country girl from Yibin, with luxuriant long

black hair and flirtatious eyes. She had accidentally killed her own

baby she had been breast-t~eding it lying down, had fallen asleep, and

had smothered it. She had gone to see my aunt Jun-ying via a family

connection and begged her to give her a recommendation to my family.

She wanted to go to a big city and have fun. My aunt gave her a

reference, in spite of the opposition of some local women who said she

only wanted to get to Chengdu to be rid of her husband. Jun-ying,

though unmarried, was far from being jealous of other people's

pleasure, especially sexual pleasure; in fact, she was always delighted

for them.

She was full of understanding and tolerant of human foibles, and quite

un judgmental

Within a few months the nurse was alleged to be having an affair with

an undertaker in the compound. My parents considered such things

private matters, and turned a blind eye.

When my brother went into the skin hospital, the wet nurse went with

him. The Communists had largely eliminated venereal disease, but there

were still some VD patients in one of the wards, and one day the

wet-nurse was spotted in bed with a patient in that ward. The hospital

told my mother and suggested it would be unsafe for the nurse to

continue breast-feeding Xiao-her. My mother asked her to leave. After

that, Xiao-her was cared for by my wet-nurse and the wet-nurse who

looked after my other brother, Jin-ming, who had now joined us from

144Yibin.

At the end of 1954 Jin-ming's nurse had written to my mother saying she

would like to come and live with us, as she had been having trouble

with her husband, who had become a heavy drinker and was beating her

up. My mother had not seen Jin-ming for eighteen months, since he was

a month old. But his arrival was terribly distressing.

For a long time he would not let her touch him, and the only person he

would call "Mother' was his nurse.

My father also found it difficult to strike up a close relationship

with Jin-ming, but he was very close to me.

He would crawl on the floor and let me ride on his back.

Usually he put some flowers in his collar for me to smell.

If he forgot, I would point at the garden and make commanding noises,

indicating that some should be brought instantly. He would often kiss

me on the cheek. Once, when he had not shaved, I wrinkled up my face

and complained, "Old beard, old beard!" at the top of my voice. I

called him Old Beard (/ao hu-zO for months. He kissed me more gingerly

after that. I loved to toddle in and out of offices and play with the

officials. I used to chase after them and call them by special names I

invented for them, and recite nursery rhymes to them. Before I was

three I was known as "Little Diplomat."

I think my popularity was really due to the fact that the officials

welcomed a break and a bit of fun, which I provided with my childish

chattiness. I was very plump, too, and they all liked sitting me on

their laps and pinching and squeezing me.

When I was a little over three years old my siblings and I were all

sent away to different boarding nurseries. I could not understand why

I was being taken away from home, and kicked and tore the ribbon in my

hair in protest. In the nursery I deliberately created trouble for the

teachers and used to pour my milk into my desk every day, following it

with my cod-liver-oil capsules. We had to take a long siesta after

lunch, during which I would tell frightening stories, which I had made

up, to the other children in the big dormitory. I was soon found out

and punished by being made to sit on the doorstep.

The reason we were in the nurseries was that there was no one to look

after us. One day in July 1955, my mother and the 800 employees in the

Eastern District were all told they had to stay on the premises until

further notice. A new political campaign had started this time to

uncover 'hidden counterrevolution ari Everyone was to be thoroughly

checked.

My mother and her colleagues accepted the order with out question. They

had been leading a regimented life anyway. Besides, it seemed natural

for the Party to want to check on its members in order to ensure that

the new society was stable. Like most of her comrades, my mother's

desire to devote herself to the cause overrode any wish to grumble

about the strictness of the measure.

After a week, almost all her colleagues were cleared and allowed to go

out freely. My mother was one of the few exceptions. She was told

that certain things in her past were not yet clarified. She had to

move out of her own bedroom and sleep in a room in a different part of

145the office building. Before that she was allowed a few days at home to

make arrangements for her family as, she was told, she might be

confined for quite a long time.

The new campaign had been triggered by Mao's reaction to the behavior

of some Communist writers, notably the prominent author Hu Feng. They

did not necessarily disagree with Mao ideologically, but they betrayed

an element of independence and an ability to think for themselves which

he found unacceptable. He feared that any independent thinking might

lead to less than total obedience to him. He insisted that the new

China had to act and think as one, and that stringent measures were

needed to hold the country together, or it might disintegrate. He had

a number of leading writers arrested and labeled them a

'counterrevolutionary conspiracy," a terrifying accusation, as

'counterrevolutionary' activity carried the harshest punishment,

including the death sentence.

This signaled the beginning of the end of individual expression in

China. All the media had been taken over by the Party when the

Communists came to power. From now on it was the minds of the entire

nation that were placed under ever tighter control.

Mao asserted that the people he was looking for were 'spies for the

imperialist countries and the Kuomintang, Trotskyists, ex-Kuomintang

officers, and traitors among the Communists." He claimed that they

were working for a comeback by the Kuomintang and the "US

imperialists," who were refusing to recognize Peking and were

surrounding China with a ring of hostility. Whereas the earlier

campaign to suppress counterrevolution ari in which my mother's friend

Hui-ge had been executed, had been directed at actual Kuomintang

people, the targets now were people in the Party, or working in the

government, who had Kuomintang connections in their backgrounds.

Compiling detailed files on people's backgrounds had been a crucial

part of the Communists' system of control even before they came to

power. The files on Party members were kept by the Organization

Deparunent of the Party. The dossier on anyone working for the state

who was not a Party member was assembled by the authorities in their

work unit and kept by its personnel management.

Every year a report was written about every employee by their boss, and

this was put into their file. No one was allowed to read their own

file, and only specially authorized people could read other people's.

To be targeted in this new campaign it was enough to have some sort of

Kuomintang connection in one's past, however tenuous or vague. The

investigations were carried out by work teams made up of officials who

were known to have no Kuomintang connections. My mother became a prime

suspect. Our nurses also became targets because of their family

ties.

There was a work team responsible for investigating the servants and

staff of the provincial government- chauffeurs, gardeners, maids,

cooks, and caretakers. My nurse's husband was in jail for gambling and

smuggling opium, which made her an 'undesirable." Jin-ming's nurse had

married into a landlord's family and her husband had been a minor

Kuomintang official. Because wet-nurses were not in positions of

importance, the Party did not delve into their cases very vigorously.

But they had to stop working for our family.

My mother was informed of this when she was home

146My Mother Falls under Suspia'on ztI briefly before her detention. When

she broke the news to the two nurses, they were distraught. They loved

Jin-ming and me. My nurse was also worried about losing her income if

she had to go back to Yibin, so my mother wrote to the governor there

asking him to find her a job, which he did. She went to work on a tea

plantation and was able to take her young daughter to live with her.

Jin-ming's nurse did not want to go back to her husband.

She had acquired a new boyfriend, a caretaker in Chengdu, and wanted to

marry him. In floods of tears, she begged my mother to help her get a

divorce so she could marry him. Divorce was exceedingly difficult, but

she knew that a word from my parents, particularly my father, could

assist greatly. My mother liked the nurse very much and wanted to help

her. If she could get a divorce and marry the caretaker she would

automatically move from the 'landlord' category into the working class

and then she would not have to leave my family after all. My mother

talked to my father, but he was against it: "How can you arrange a

divorce? People would say the Communists were breaking up families."

"But what about our children?"

my mother said.

"Who will look after them if the nurses both have to go?"

had an answer to that, too: "Send them to nurseries."

My father

When my mother told Jin-ming's nurse that she would have to leave, she

almost collapsed. Jin-ming's first ever memory is of her departure.

One evening at dusk someone carried him to the front door. His nurse

was standing there, wearing a countrywoman's outfit, a plain top with

cotton butterfly buttons on the side, and carrying a cotton bundle.

He wanted her to take him in her arms, but she stood just out of reach

as he stretched out his hands toward her.

Tears were streaming down her face. Then she walked down the steps

toward the gate on the far side of the courtyard. Someone he did not

know was with her. She was about to pass through the gate when she

stopped and turned around. He screamed and bawled and kicked, but he

was not carried any nearer. She stood for a long time framed in the

arch of the courtyard gate, gazing at him.

Then she turned quickly and disappeared.

again.

Jin-ming never saw her

My grandmother was still in Manchuria. My great grandmother had just

died of tuberculosis. Before being 'confined to barracks," my mother

had to pack us four children off to nurseries. Because it was so

sudden, none of the municipal nurseries could take more than one of us,

so we had to be split up among four different institutions.

As my mother was leaving for detention, my father advised her: "Be

completely honest with the Party, and have complete trust in it. It

will give you the right verdict."

A wave of aversion swept over her. She wanted something warmer and

more personal. Still feeling resentful against my father, she reported

one steamy summer day for her second bout of detention this time under

her own Party.

Being under investigation did not in itself carry the stigma of guilt.

147It just meant there were things in one's background which had to be

cleared up. Still, she was grieved to be subjected to such a

humiliating experience after all her sacrifices and her manifest

loyalty to the Communist cause. But part of her was full of optimism

that the dark cloud of suspicion which had been hanging over her for

almost seven years would finally be swept away forever.

She had nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide. She was a devoted

Communist and she felt sure the Party would recognize this.

A special team of three people was put together to investigate her. The

head of it was a Mr. Kuang, who was in charge of Public Affairs for

the city of Chengdu, which meant he was below my father and above my

mother. His family knew my family well. Now, though he was still

kindly to my mother, his attitude was more formal and reserved.

Like other detainees, my mother was assigned various women 'companions'

who followed her everywhere, even to the toilet, and slept in the same

bed with her. She was told that this was for her protection. She

understood implicitly that she was being 'protected' from committing

suicide, or trying to collude with anyone else.

Several women rotated in shifts as her companion. One of them was

relieved of her duties because she had to go into detention herself to

be investigated. Each companion had to file a report on my mother

every day. They were all people my mother knew because they worked in

the district offices, though not in her department. They were friendly

and, except for the lack of freedom, my mother was treated well.

The interrogators, plus her companion, conducted the sessions like

friendly conversations, although the subject of these conversations was

extremely unpleasant. The presumption was not exactly of guilt, but it

was not of innocence, either. And because there were no proper legal

procedures, there was lit He opportunity to defend oneself against

insinuations.

My mother's file contained detailed reports about every stage of her

life as a student working for the underground, in the Women's

Federation in Jinzhou, and at her jobs in Yibin. These had been

written by her bosses at the time. The first issue that came up was

her release from prison under the Kuomintang in 1948. How had her

family been able to get her out, considering that her offense had been

so serious? She had not even been tortured! Could the arrest actually

have been a hoax, designed to establish her credentials with the

Communists so that she could worm her way into a trusted position as an

agent for the Kuomintang?

Then there was her friendship with Hui-ge. It became obvious that her

bosses in the Women's Federation in Jinzhou had put disparaging

comments into her file about this. Since Hui-ge had been trying to buy

insurance from the Communists through her, they alleged, was she not

perhaps trying to acquire similar insurance from the Kuomintang in case

it won?

The same question was asked about her Kuomintang suitors. Did she not

encourage them as insurance for herself? And then back to the same

grave suspicion: Had any of them instructed her to lie low inside the

Communist Party and work for the Kuomintang?

My mother was put in the impossible position of having to prove her

innocence. All the people she was being asked about either had been

148executed or were in Taiwan, or she did not know where. In any case,

they were Kuomintang people and their word was not going to be trusted.

How can I convince you? she sometimes thought with exasperation, as

she went over the same incidents again and again.

She was also asked about her uncles' Kuomintang connections, and about

her relationship with every one of her school friends who, as

teenagers, had joined the Kuomintang's Youth League in the period

before the Communists took Jinzhou. The guidelines for the campaign

classified anyone who had been appointed a branch chief of the

Kuomintang Youth League after the Japanese surrender as a

'counterrevolutionary." My mother tried to argue that Manchuria was a

special case: the Kuomintang had been seen as representing China, the

motherland, after the Japanese occupation. Mao himself had been a

senior official in the Kuomintang once, though she did not mention

this.

Besides, her friends had switched their allegiance to the Communists

within a couple of years. But she was told that these old friends of

hers were now all designated counterrevolution ari My mother did not

belong to any condemned category, but she was asked the impossible

question: Why was it that you had so many connections with Kuomintang

people?

She was kept in detention for six months. During this period she had

to attend several mass rallies at which 'enemy agents' were paraded,

denounced, sentenced, handcuffed, and led away to prison amidst

thunderous shouting of slogans and raising of fists by tens of

thousands of people. There were also counterrevolution ari who had

'confessed' and therefore been given 'lenient punishment which meant

not being sent to prison. Among these was a friend of my mother's.

After the rally she committed suicide because, under interrogation, in

despair, she had made a false confession. Seven years later the Party

acknowledged that she had been innocent all along.

My mother was taken to these rallies 'to receive a lesson."

But, being a strong character, she was not crushed by fear, like so

many, or confused by the deceptive logic and coaxing of the

interrogations. She kept a clear head and wrote the story of her life

truthfully.

There were long nights when she lay awake, unable to stifle her

bitterness at her unfair treatment. As she listened to the whining

mosquitoes outside the net over her bed in the airless heat of the

summer, then the autumn rain pattering on the window, and the damp

silence of winter, she chewed over the unfairness of the suspicions

against her particularly the doubts about her arrest by the Kuomintang.

She was proud of the way she had behaved then, and had never dreamed it

would become the reason for her becoming alienated from the

revolution.

But then she began to persuade herself that she should not resent the

Party for trying to maintain its purity. In China, one was accustomed

to a certain amount of injustice. Now, at least, it was for a worthy

cause. She also repeated to herself the Party's words when it demanded

sacrifice from its members: "You are going through a test, and

suffering will make you a better Communist."

She contemplated the possibility of being classified as a

'counterrevolutionary." If that happened, her children would also be

149contaminated, and our entire lives ruined.

The only way she could avoid this would be to divorce my father and

'disown' herself as our mother. At night, thinking about these grim

prospects, she learned not to shed tears. She could not even toss and

turn, as her 'companion' was sleeping in the bed with her, and no

matter how friendly they were, they had to report every scrap of

information about how she behaved. Tears would be interpreted as

meaning she was feeling wounded by the Party or losing confidence in

it. Both were unacceptable, and could have a negative effect on the

final verdict.

My mother gritted her teeth and told herself to put her faith in the

Party. Even so, she found it very hard being totally cut off from her

family, and missed her children terribly. My father did not write or

visit her once letters and meetings were forbidden. What she needed

more than anything else at the time was a shoulder on which to rest her

head, or at least a loving word.

But she did get phone calls. From the other end of the line would come

jokes and words of trust which cheered her up enormously. The only

phone in the whole department was on the desk of the woman who was in

charge of secret documents. When a call came for my mother, her

'companions' would stand in the room while she was on the line, but

because they liked her and wanted her to get some comfort, they would

show they were not listening.

The woman in charge of secret documents was not part of the team

investigating my mother, so she was not entitled to listen to or report

on her. My mother's companions made sure that she never got into

trouble for these phone calls. They would simply report: "Director

Chang telephoned. Discussed family matters." Word went around about

what a considerate husband my father was, so concerned about my mother

and so affectionate. One of my mother's young companions told her she

wanted to find a husband as nice as my father.

No one knew that the caller was not my father, but another high

official who had come over to the Communists from the Kuomintang during

the war against Japan.

Having once been a Kuomintang officer, he had come under suspicion and

had been imprisoned by the Communists in 1947, although he was

eventually cleared. He cited his experience to reassure my mother, and

in fact remained a lifelong friend of hers. My father never phoned

once in the six long months. He knew from his years of being a

Communist that the Party preferred the person under investigation to

have no contact with the outside world, not even with their spouse. As

he saw it, to comfort my mother would imply some kind of distrust of

the Party. My mother could never forgive him for deserting her at a

time when she needed love and support more than anything. Once again

he had proved that he put the Party first.

One January morning, as she was staring at the clumps of shivering

grass being battered by the dismal rain under the jasmine on the

trellis with its masses of intertwined green shoots, my mother was

summoned to see Mr. Kuang, the head of the investigating team. He

told her she was being allowed to go back to work and to go out. But

she had to report in every night. The Party had not reached a final

conclusion about her.

What had happened, my mother realized, was that the investigations had

150bogged down. Most of the suspicions could not be either proved or

disproved. Although this was unsatisfactory for her, she pushed it to

the back of her mind in her excitement at the thought of seeing her

children for the first time in six months.

In our different boarding nurseries, we seldom saw our father, either.

He was constantly away in the countryside.

On the rare occasions when he was back in Chengdu, he would send his

bodyguard to bring my sister and me home on Saturdays. He never had

the two boys fetched because he felt he could not cope with them, they

were too young.

"Home' was his office.

off to some meeting, so

where there was nothing

bubbles. Once I got so

for days.

When we got there he would always have to go

his bodyguard would lock us up in the office,

to do, apart from competing at blowing soap

bored I drank a lot of soapy water and was ill

When my mother was told she could go out, the first thing she did was

jump on her bicycle and speed off to our nurseries. She was

particularly worried about Jin-ming, now two and a half, whom she had

hardly had any time to

268 "SuJ]~ring Will Make You a Better Communist' get to know. But,

after sitting around unused for six months, her bicycle's tires were

flat, and she was barely out of the gate when she had to stop and get

some air put in them. She had never felt so impatient in her life, as

she paced around the shop while the man pumped up her tires in what

seemed to her a very lackadaisical manner.

She went to see Jin-ming first. When she arrived, the teacher looked

at her coldly. Jin-ming, the teacher said, was one of the very few

children who had been left behind on weekends. My father had hardly

ever come to see him, and had never taken him home. At first, Jin-ming

had asked for "Mother Chen," the teacher said.

"That's not you, is it?" she asked. My mother acknowledged that

"Mother Chen' was his wet-nurse. Later, Jin-ming would hide in a

corner room when it was time for the other parents to come and collect

their offspring.

"You must be a stepmother," the teacher said accusingly.

could not explain.

My mother

When Jin-ming was brought in, he remained at the far end of the room

and would not go near my mother. He just stood there silently,

resentfully refusing to look at her.

My mother produced some peaches and asked him to come over and eat them

while she peeled them. But Jin-ming would not move. She had to put

the peaches on her handkerchief and push them along the table. He

waited for her to withdraw her hand before he grabbed one peach and

devoured it. Then he took another one. In no time the three peaches

were gone. For the first time since she had been taken into detention,

my mother let her tears fall.

I remember the evening she came to see me. I was nearly four, and was

in my wooden bed which had bars like a cage. One side of the railing

was let down so she could sit and hold my hand while I fell asleep. But

I wanted to tell her about all my adventures and mischief. I was

151worried that once I fell asleep she would disappear again forever.

Whenever she thought I was asleep and tried to slip her hand away, I

gripped it and started to cry. She stayed until around midnight. I

screamed when she started to leave, but she pulled herself away. I did

not know that 'parole' time was up.

11.

"After the Anti-Rightist Campaign No One Opens Their Mouth' w

China Silenced

(7 956- 7958)

Because we now had no nurses and my mother had to check in for her

'parole' report every evening, we children had to stay on in our

nurseries. My mother could not have looked after us anyway. She was

too busy 'racing toward socialism' as a propaganda song went with the

rest of Chinese society.

While she had been in detention Mao had accelerated his attempt to

change the face of China. In July 1955 he had called for a speeding up

of collective farming, and in November he abruptly announced that all

industry and commerce, which had so far remained in private hands, were

to be nationalized.

My mother was thrown straight into this movement. In theory, the state

was supposed to own enterprises join fly with the former owners, who

were to draw 5 percent of the value of their business for twenty years.

Since there was officially no inflation, this was supposed to

represent

?

5!

full payment of the total value. The former owners were to stay on as

managers and be paid a relatively high wage, but there would be a Party

boss over them.

My mother was put in charge of a work team supervising the

nationalization of over a hundred food factories, bakeries, and

restaurants in her district. Although she was still on 'parole," and

had to report in every evening, and could not even sleep in her own

bed, she was entrusted with this important job.

The Party had attached astigmatic label to her kongzhi shi-yong, which

meant 'employed but under control and surveillance." This was not made

public, but was known to her and the people in charge of her case. The

members of her work team knew she had been detained for six months, but

did not know she was still under surveillance.

When my mother was put in detention, she had written to my grandmother

asking her to stay on in Manchuria for the time being. She had

concocted an excuse, as she did not want my grandmother to know she was

being detained, which would have worried her terribly.

My grandmother was still in Jinzhou when the nationalization program

started, and she found herself caught up in it. After she had left

Jinzhou with Dr. Xia in 195I his medicine business had been run by her

brother, Yu-lin.

152When Dr. Xia died in 1952 ownership of the medicine shop passed to

her. Now the state was planning to buy it out. In every business a

group, made up of work team members and representatives of both

employees and management, was set up to value its assets so the state

could pay a 'fair price." They would often suggest a very low figure

to please the authorities. The value placed on Dr. Xia's shop was

ridiculously low, but there was an advantage to this for my

grandmother: it meant that she was classified only as a 'minor

capitalist," which made it easier for her to keep a low profile. She

was not happy about being quasi-expropriated, but she kept her own

counsel.

272 The the Anti-Rightist Campaign..."

As part of the nationalization campaign, the regime organized

processions with drums and gongs and endless meetings, some of them for

the capitalists. My grandmother saw that all of them were expressing

willingness to be bought out, even gratitude. Many said that what was

happening to them was much better than they had feared.

In the Soviet Union, they had heard, businesses were confiscated

outright. Here in China the owners were being indemnified, and what

was more, the state did not just order them to hand over their

businesses. They had to be willing. Of course, everyone was.

My grandmother was confused about how she should feel resentful toward

the cause her daughter was engaged in, or happy with her lot, as she

was told she should be.

The medicine business had been built up by Dr. Xia's hard work, and

her livelihood and that of her daughter had depended on it. She was

reluctant to see it go just like that.

Four years earlier, during the Korean War, the government had

encouraged people to donate their valuables to help buy fighter planes.

My grandmother did not want to give up her jewelry, which had been

given to her by General Xue and Dr. Xia, and had at times been her

only source of income. It also had strong sentimental value. But my

mother added her voice to that of the government. She felt that

jewelry was connected with an outdated past, and shared the Party's

view that it was the fruit of 'the exploitation of the people' and

should therefore be returned to them. She also produced the standard

line about protecting China from being invaded by the "US

imperialists," which did not mean very much to my grandmother. Her

clinching arguments were: "Mother, what do you still want these things

for? Nobody wears this sort of thing nowadays. And you don't have to

rely on them to live. Now that we have the Communist Party, China is

no longer going to be poor.

What have you got to be worried about? In any case, you have me. I

will look after you. You never have to worry again. I have to

persuade other people to donate. It's part jj of my work. How can I

ask them if my own mother doesn't do it?" My grandmother gave up. She

would do anything for her daughter. She surrendered all her jewelry

except a couple of bracelets, a pair of gold earrings, and a gold ring,

which were wedding presents from Dr. Xia. She got a receipt from the

government and much praise for her 'patriotic zeal."

But she was never happy about losing her jewelry, though she hid her

feelings. Apart from sentimental attachment, there was a very

practical consideration. My grandmother had lived through constant

153insecurity.

everyone?

Could one really trust the Communist Party to look after

Forever?

Now, four years later, she was again in the situation of having to hand

over to the state something she wanted to keep, in fact the last

possession she had. This time, she did not really have any choice. But

she was also positively cooperative. She did not want to let her

daughter down, and wanted to make sure her daughter would not be even

slightly embarrassed by her.

The nationalization of the shop was a long process, and my grandmother

stayed on in Manchuria while it dragged on. My mother did not want her

to come back to Sichuan anyway until she herself had her full freedom

of movement restored and was able to live in her own quarters. It was

not until summer 1956 that my mother recovered freedom of movement and

the 'parole' restrictions were lifted. However, even then there was no

definitive decision on her case.

It was finally brought to a conclusion at the end of that year. The

verdict, which was issued by the Chengdu Party authorities, said in

effect that they believed her account, and that she had no political

connection with the Kuomintang. This was a clear-cut decision which

exonerated her completely. She was tremendously relieved, as she knew

her case could well have been left open 'for lack of satisfactory

evidence," like many other similar cases. Then a stigma

would have stuck with her for life. Now the chapter was closed, she

thought. She was very grateful to the chief of the investigation team,

Mr. Kuang. Usually officials tended to err on the side of

overzealousness in order to protect themselves. It needed courage on

the part of Mr. Kuang to decide to accept what she had said.

After eighteen months of intense anxiety, my mother was in the clear

again. She was lucky. As a result of the campaign over I6O'OOO men

and women were labeled counterrevolution ari and their lives were

ruined for three decades. Among these were some of my mother's friends

in Jinzhou who had been the Kuomintang Youth League cadres. They were

summarily branded counterrevolution ari sacked from their jobs, and

sent to do manual labor.

This campaign to root out the last vestiges of the Kuomintang past

pushed family background and connections to the forefront. Throughout

Chinese history, when one person was condemned sometimes the entire

clan men, women, and children, even newborn babies was executed.

Execution could extend to cousins nine times removed (zhu-lian

jill-zu). Someone being accused of a crime could endanger the lives of

a whole neighborhood.

Hitherto the Communists had included people with 'undesirable'

backgrounds in their ranks. Many sons and daughters of their enemies

rose to high positions. In fact, most early Communist leaders had come

from 'bad' backgrounds themselves. But after 1955 family origins

became increasingly important. As the years went by and Mao launched

one witch-hunt after another, the number of victims snowballed, and

each victim brought down many others, including, first and foremost,

his or her immediate family.

In spite of these personal tragedies, or perhaps partly because of the

steely control, China was more stable in 1956 than at any time this

154century. Foreign occupation, civil war, widespread death from

starvation, bandits,

inflation all seemed to be things of the past. Stability, the dream of

the Chinese, sustained the faith of people like my mother in their

sufferings.

In the summer of 1956 my grandmother returned to Chengdu. The first

thing she did was to rush to the nurseries and take us back to my

mother's place. My grandmother had a fundamental dislike of nurseries.

She said children could not be properly looked after in a group. My

sister and I looked all right, but as soon as we spotted her, we

screamed and demanded to go home. The two boys were another matter:

Jin-ming's teacher complained that he was terribly withdrawn, and would

not let any adult touch him. He only asked, quietly but obstinately,

for his old nurse. My grandmother burst into tears when she saw

Xiao-her. He looked like a wooden puppet, with a meaningless grin on

his face. Wherever he was put, whether sitting or standing, he would

just remain there, motionless.

He did not know how to ask to go to the lavatory, and did not even seem

to be able to cry. My grandmother swept him up into her arms and he

instantly became her favorite.

Back at my mother's apartment, my grandmother gave vent to her anger

and incomprehension. In between her tears she called my father and my

mother 'heartless parents." She did not know that my mother had no

choice.

Because my grandmother could not look after all four of us, the two

older ones, my sister and I, had to go to a nursery during the week.

Every Monday morning, my father and his bodyguard would lift us onto

their shoulders and carry us off howling, kicking, and tearing their

hair.

This went on for some time. Then, subconsciously, I developed a way of

protesting. I began to fall ill at the nursery, with high fevers which

alarmed the doctors. As soon as I was back home, my illness

miraculously evaporated.

Eventually, my sister and I were allowed to stay at home.

For my grandmother, all flowers and trees, the clouds and the rain were

living beings with a heart and tears and a moral sense. We would be

safe if we followed the old Chinese rule for children, ting-hua

('heeding the words," being obedient). Otherwise all sorts of things

would happen to us. When we ate oranges my grandmother would warn us

against swallowing the seeds.

"If you don't listen to me, one day you won't be able to get into the

house.

Every little seed is a baby orange tree, and he wants to grow up, just

like you. He'll grow quietly inside your turn roy up and up, and then

one day, Ai-ya! There he is, out from the top of your head! He'll

grow leaves, and bear more oranges, and he'll become taller than our

door..."

The thought of carrying an orange tree on my head fascinated me so much

that one day I deliberately swallowed a seed one, no more. I did not

want an orchard on my head: that would be too heavy. For the whole

155day, I anxiously felt my skull every other minute to see whether it was

still in one piece. Several times I almost asked my grandmother

whether I would be allowed to eat the oranges on my head, but I checked

myself so that she would not know I had been disobedient. I decided to

pretend it was an accident when she saw the tree. I slept very badly

that night. I felt something was pushing up against my skull.

But usually my grandmother's stories sent me happily to sleep. She had

a wealth of them from classical Chinese opera. We also had a lot of

books about animals and birds and myths and fairy tales. We had

foreign children's stories, too, including Hans Christian Andersen and

Aesop's fables. Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White and the Seven

Dwarfi, and Cinderella were among my childhood companions.

Along with the stories, I loved nursery rhymes. They were my earliest

encounters with poetry. Because the Chinese language is based on

tones, its poetry has a particularly musical quality to it. I was

mesmerized by my grandmother's chanting of classical poems, whose

meaning I did not understand. She read them in traditional style,

producing singsong, lingering sounds, rising and falling

!(,

in cadence. One day my mother overheard her reciting to us some poems

written in about 500 BC. My mother thought they were far too difficult

for us and tried to stop her. But my grandmother insisted, saying we

did not have to understand the meaning, just get the feel for the

musicality of the sounds. She often said she regretted losing her

zither when she left Yixian twenty years before.

My two brothers were not so interested in bedtime stories, or in being

read to. But my sister, who shared a room with me, was just like me:

she loved these stories.

And she had an extraordinary memory. She had impressed everyone by

reciting Pushkin's long ballad "The Fisherman and the Goldfish'

flawlessly at the age of three.

My family life was tranquil and loving. Whatever resentment my mother

felt for my father, she seldom had rows with him, at least not in front

of the children. My father's love for us was rarely shown through

physical contact now that we were older. It was not customary for a

father to hold his children in his arms, or to show affection by

kissing them or embracing them. He would often give the boys piggyback

rides, and would pat their shoulders or stroke their hair, which he

rarely did to us girls. When we got beyond the age of three he would

lift us carefully with his hands under our armpits, strictly adhering

to Chinese convention, which prescribed avoiding intimacy with one's

daughters. He would not come into the room where my sister and I slept

without our permission.

My mother did not have as much physical contact with us as she would

have liked. This was because she fell under another set of rules:

those of the Communists' puritanical life-style. In the early 195os, a

Communist was supposed to give herself so completely to the revolution

and the people that any demonstration of affection for her children was

frowned on as a sign of divided loyalties. Every single hour apart

from eating or sleeping belonged to the revolution, and was supposed to

be spent working. Anything that was regarded as not to do with the

revolution, like carrying your children in your arms, had to be

dispatched as speedily as possible.

156At first, my mother found this hard to get used to.

"Putting family first' was a criticism constantly leveled at her by her

Party colleagues. Eventually, she became drilled into the habit of

working nonstop. By the time she came home in the evening, we had long

since gone to sleep. She would sit by our bedsides watching our faces

as we slept and listening to our peaceful breathing. It was the

happiest moment in her day.

Whenever she had time she would cuddle us, gently scratching or

tickling us, especially on our elbows, which was intensely pleasurable.

Pure heaven for me was putting my head on her lap and having the inside

of my ears tickled.

Ear-picking was a traditional form of pleasure for the Chinese. As a

child, I remember seeing professionals carrying a stand with a bamboo

chair on one end and scores of tiny fluffy picks dangling from the

other.

Starting in 1956 officials started to have Sundays off.

My parents would take us to parks and playgrounds where we played on

the swings and merry-go-rounds or rolled down the grass-covered slopes.

I have a memory of somersaulting dangerously but thrillingly downhill,

meaning to career into my parents' arms, but instead crashing into two

hibiscus trees, one after the other.

My grandmother was still appalled at how often my parents were

absent.

"What sort of parents are these?" she would sigh, shaking her head. To

make up for them, she gave all her heart and energy to us. But she

could not cope with four children on her own, so my mother invited Aunt

Jun-ying to come and live with us. She and my grandmother got on very

well, and this harmony continued when they were joined in early 1957 by

a live-in maid. This coincided with our move to new quarters, in a

former Christian vicarage. My father came with us, and so, for the

first time ever, the whole family was living together under one roof.

The maid was eighteen. When she first arrived she was wearing a

flower-patterned cotton top and slacks, which city dwellers, who wore

quiet colors in keeping with both urban snobbery and Communist

puritanism, would have regarded as rather garish. City ladies also had

their clothes cut like Russian women's, but our maid wore traditional

peasant-style garb, buttoned at the side, with cotton buttons instead

of the new plastic ones. Instead of a belt, she used a cotton string

to tie up her trousers. Many peasant women coming to town would have

changed their attire so as not to look like country bumpkins. But she

was completely unselfconscious about her clothes, which showed her

strength of character. She had big, rough hands and a shy, honest

smile on her dark, suntanned face, with two permanent dimples in her

rosy cheeks. Everyone in our family liked her immediately. She ate

with us and did the housework with my grandmother and my aunt. My

grandmother was delighted to have two close friends and confidantes, as

my mother was never there.

Our maid came from a landlord's family, and had been desperate to get

away from the countryside and the constant discrimination she faced

there. In 1957 it had again become possible to employ people from a

'bad' family background. The 1955 campaign was over, and the

157atmosphere was generally more relaxed.

The Communists had instituted a system under which everyone had to

register their place of residence (hu-kou).

Only those registered as urban dwellers were entitled to food rations.

Our maid had a country registration so she had no source of food when

she was with us, but the rations for my family were more than enough to

feed her too. One year later, my mother helped her to move her

registration into Chengdu.

My family also paid her wages. The system of state allowances had been

abolished in late 1956, when my father also lost his bodyguard, who was

replaced by a shared manservant who did chores for him in his office,

like serving him tea and arranging cars. My parents were now earning

salaries fixed according to their civil service grades. My mother was

Grade i7, and my father was Grade io, which meant he earned twice as

much as she did. Because basics were cheap, and there was no concept

of a consumer society, their combined income was more than adequate. My

father was a member of a special category known as gas-gan, 'high

officials," a term applied to people of Grade: 3 and above, of whom

there were about zoo in Sichuan. There were fewer than twenty people

of Grade xo and above in the whole province, which had a population of

about seventy-two million now.

In the spring of 1956 Mao announced a policy known as the Hundred

Flowers, from the phrase 'let a hundred flowers bloom' (bai-hua

qi-j~ng), which in theory meant greater freedom for the arts,

literature, and scientific research. The Party wanted to enlist the

support of China's educated citizens, which the country needed, as it

was entering a stage of 'post-recovery' industrialization.

The general educational level of the country had always been very low.

The population was huge over 600 million by then and the vast majority

had never enjoyed anything like a decent standard of living. The

country had always had a dictatorship which operated by keeping the

public ignorant and thus obedient. There was also the problem of the

language: the Chinese script is exceedingly difficult;

it is based on tens of thousands of individual characters which are not

related to sounds, and each has complicated strokes and needs to be

remembered separately. Hundreds of millions of people were completely

illiterate.

Anybody with any education at all was referred to as an 'intellectual."

Under the Communists, who based their policies on class categories,

'intellectuals' became a specific, if vague, category, which included

nurses, students, and actors as well as engineers, technicians,

writers, teachers, doctors, and scientists.

Under the Hundred Flowers policy, the country enjoyed

China Silenced 28 i about a year of relative relaxation. Then, in

spring 1957, the Party urged intellectuals to criticize officials all

the way to the top. My mother thought this was to encourage further

liberalization. After a speech by Mao on the subject, which was

gradually relayed down to her level, she was so moved she could not

sleep all night. She felt that China was really going to have a modern

and democratic party, a party that would welcome criticism to

revitalize itself. She felt proud of being a Communist.

158When my mother's level was told about Mao's speech soliciting criticism

of officers, they were not informed about some other remarks he had

made around the same time, about enticing snakes out of their lairs to

uncover anyone who dared to oppose him or his regime. One year before,

the Soviet leader, Khrushchev, had denounced Stalin in his 'secret

speech," and this had devastated Mao, who identified himself with

Stalin. Mao was further rat fled by the Hungarian uprising that

autumn, the first successful if short-lived attempt to overthrow an

established Communist regime. Mao knew that a large proportion of

China's educated people favored moderation and liberalization. He

wanted to prevent a "Chinese Hungarian uprising." In fact, he

effectively told the Hungarian leaders that his solicitation of

criticism had been a trap, which he had prolonged after his colleagues

suggested bringing it to a halt, in order to make sure he had smoked

out every single potential dissident.

He was not worried about the workers or the peasants, as he was

confident they were grateful to the Communists for bringing them full

stomachs and stable lives. He also had a fundamental contempt for them

he did not believe they had the mental capacity to challenge his rule.

But Mao had always distrusted intellectuals. They had played a big

role in Hungary, and were more likely than others to think for

themselves.

Unaware of Mao's secret maneuvers, officials and intellectuals alike

engaged in soliciting and offering criticisms.

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According to Mao, they were to 'say whatever they want to say, and to

the full." My mother enthusiastically repeated this in the schools,

hospitals, and entertainment groups she looked after. All kinds of

opinions were aired at organized seminars and on wall posters.

Well-known people set an example by making criticisms in the

newspapers.

My mother, like almost everyone, came in for some criticism. The main

one from the schools was that she showed favoritism toward 'key'

(zhong-dian) schools. In China there were a number of officially

designated schools and universities on which the state concentrated its

limited resources. These got better teachers and facilities, and

selected the brightest pupils, which guaranteed that they had a high

entrance rate into institutions of higher education, especially the

'key' universities. Some teachers from ordinary schools complained

that my mother had been paying too much attention to the 'key' schools

at their expense.

Teachers were also graded. Good teachers were given honorary grades

which entitled them to much higher salaries, special food supplies when

there was a shortage, better housing, and complimentary theater

tickets. Most graded teachers under my mother seemed to have come from

'undesirable' family backgrounds, and some of the ungraded teachers

complained that my mother placed too much importance on professional

merit rather than 'class background." My mother made self-criticisms

about her lack of even handedness regarding the 'key' schools, but she

insisted that she was not wrong in using professional merit as the

criterion for promotion.

There was one criticism to which my mother turned a deaf ear in

disgust. The headmistress of one primary school had joined the

159Communists in 1945 earlier than my mother and was unhappy at having to

take orders from her. This woman attacked my mother on the grounds

that she had got her job solely on the strength of my father's

statuS.

There were other complaints: the headmasters wanted the right to choose

their own teachers, instead of having them assigned by a higher

authority. Hospital directors wanted to be able to buy herbs and other

medicines themselves, because the state supply did not meet their

needs.

Surgeons wanted larger food rations: they considered their job to be as

demanding as that of a kung-fu player in a traditional opera, but their

ration was a quarter less. A junior official lamented the

disappearance from Chengdu markets of some famous traditional items

like "Pockmark Wong scissors' and "Beards Hu brushes," which had been

replaced by inferior mass-produced substitutes. My mother agreed with

many of these views, but there was nothing she could do about them, as

they involved state policies. All she could do was report them to

higher authorities.

The outburst of criticisms, which were often personal grouses or

practical, nonpolitical suggestions for improvements, blossomed for

about a month in the early summer of 1957. At the beginning of June,

Mao's speech about 'enticing snakes out of their lairs' was relayed

down orally to my mother's level.

In this talk, Mao said that 'rightists' had gone on a rampage attacking

the Communist Party and China's socialist system. He said these

rightists made up between 1 percent and 10 percent of all

intellectuals and that they must be smashed. To simplify things, a

figure of 5 percent, halfway between Mao's two extremes, had been

established as the quota for the number of rightists who had to be

caught. To meet it, my mother was expected to find over a hundred

rightists in the organizations under her.

She had not been very happy about some of the criticisms made to her.

But few of them could even remotely be considered 'anti-Communist' or

'anti-socialist." Judging from what she had read in the newspapers, it

seemed there had been some attacks on the Communists' monopoly of power

and on the socialist system. But in her schools and a84 ~lfier the

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hospitals, there were no such grand calls.

find the rightsts?

Where on earth could she

Besides, she thought, it was unfair to penalize people who had spoken

up after they had been invited, indeed urged, to do so. Moreover, Mao

had explicitly guaranteed that there would be no reprisals for speaking

up. She herself had called enthusiastically on people to voice their

criticisms.

Her dilemma was typical of that facing millions of officials across

China. In Chengdu, the Anti-Rightist Campaign had a slow and painful

start. The provincial authorities decided to make an example of one

man, a Mr. Hau, who was the Party secretary of a research institute

staffed by top scientists from all over Sichuan. He was expected to

catch a considerable number of rightists, but he reported that there

was not a single one in his institute.

"How is that possible?"

his boss said.

Some of the scientists had

160studied abroad, in the West.

"They must have been contaminated by Western society. How can you

expect them to be happy under communism? How can there be no rightists

among them?" Mr. Hau said that the fact that they were in China by

choice proved they were not opposed to the Communists, and went so far

as to give a personal guarantee for them. He was warned several times

to mend his ways. In the end he was declared a rightist himself,

expelled from the Party, and sacked from his job. His civil service

grade was drastically reduced, which meant his salary was slashed, and

he was put to work sweeping the floors of the laboratories in the

institute he had formerly been running.

My mother knew Mr. Hau, and admired him for sticking to his guns. She

developed a great friendship with him which has lasted till today. She

spent many evenings with him, giving vent to her anxieties. But in his

fate she saw her own if she did not fill her quota.

Every day, after the usual endless meetings, my mother had to report to

the municipal Party authorities on how the campaign was going. The

person in charge of the campaign i,

China Silenced z85 in Chengdu was a Mr. Ying, a lean, tall, rather

arrogant man. My mother was supposed to produce figures for him

showing how many rightists had been nailed. There did not have to be

any names. It was numbers that mattered.

But where could she find her ioo-plus 'antiCommunist, anti-socialist

rightists'? Eventually one of her deputies, a Mr. Kong, who was in

charge of education for the Eastern District, announced that the

headmistresses of a couple of schools had identified some teachers in

their schools. One was a teacher in a primary school whose husband, a

Kuomintang officer, had been killed in the civil war. She had said

something to the effect that "China today is worse off than in the

past." One day she got into a row with the headmistress, who had

criticized her for slacking off. She flew into a rage and hit the

headmistress. A couple of her teachers tried to stop her, one telling

her to be careful because the headmistress was pregnant. She was

reported to have screamed that she wanted to 'get rid of that Communist

bastard' (meaning the baby in the woman's womb).

In another case, a teacher whose husband had fled to Taiwan with the

Kuomintang was reported to have shown off to other young women teachers

some jewelry her husband had given her, trying to make them envious of

her life under the Kuomintang. These young women also said she told

them it was a pity the Americans had not won the war in Korea and

advanced into China.

Mr. Kong said he had checked the facts. It was not up to my mother to

investigate. Caution would be seen as trying to protect the rightists

and questioning her colleagues' integrity.

The hospital chiefs and the deputy who was running the health bureau

did not name any rightists themselves, but several doctors were labeled

rightists by the higher authorities of the Chengdu municipality for

their criticisms made at earlier meetings organized by the city

authorities.

All these rightists together came to fewer than ten, far short of the

quota. By now Mr. Ying was fed up with the lack of zeal displayed by

my mother and her colleagues, and he told her that the fact that she

161could not spot rightism showed she was 'rightist material' herself. To

be labeled a rightist not only meant becoming a political outcast and

losing one's job, but, most important, one's children and family would

suffer discrimination and their future would be in jeopardy. The

children would be ostracized at school and in the street where they

lived. The residents' committee would spy on the family to see who was

visiting them.

If a rightist was sent to the countryside, the peasants would give the

hardest jobs to him and his family. But no one knew the exact impact,

and this uncertainty was itself a powerful cause of fear.

This was the dilemma facing my mother. If she was labeled a rightist,

she would either have to renounce her children or ruin their future. My

father would probably be forced to divorce her, or he too would be

blacklisted and under permanent suspicion. Even if my mother

sacrificed herself and divorced him, the whole family would still be

marked as suspects, forever. But the cost of saving herself and her

family was the well-being of more than a hundred innocent people and

their families.

My mother did not talk to my father about this. What solution could he

have come up with? She felt resentful because his high position meant

he did not have to deal with specific cases. It was the lower- and

middle-rank officials like Mr. Ying, my mother, her deputies, the

headmistresses, and hospital directors who had to make these agonizing

decisions.

One of the institutions in my mother's district was the Chengdu Number

Two Teacher Training College. Students in teacher training colleges

were given scholarships which covered their fees and living expenses,

and these institutions naturally attracted people from poor families.

The first railway linking Sichuan, "Heaven's Granary," with the rest of

China had recently been completed. As a result,

?

a lot of food was suddenly transported out of Sichuan to other parts of

China, and the prices of many items doubled or even tripled almost

overnight. The students at the college found their standard of living

practically halved, and staged a demonstration calling for higher

grants. This action was compared by Mr. Ying to those of the Pettfi

Circle in the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and he called the students

'kindred spirits of the Hungarian intellectuals."

He ordered that every student who had participated in the demonstration

should be classified as a rightist. There were about 300 students at

the college, of whom ~ 30 had taken part in the demonstration. All of

them were labeled rightists by Mr. Ying. Although the college was not

under my mother, as she looked after primary schools only, it was

located in her district, and the city authorities arbitrarily counted

the students as her quota.

My mother was not forgiven for her lack of initiative.

Mr. Ying put her name down for further investigation as a rightist

suspect. But before he could do anything, he was condemned as a

rightist himself.

In March 1957 he had gone to Peking for a conference of the heads of

162provincial and municipal Public Affairs departments from the whole of

China. In the group discussions, delegates were encouraged to voice

their complaints about the way things were run in their areas. Mr.

Ying aired some fairly innocuous grumbles against the first secretary

of the Sichuan Party Committee, Li Jing-quan, who was always known as

Commissar Li. My father was the head of the Sichuan delegation at the

conference, so it fell to him to write the routine report when they

came back. When the Anti-Rightist Campaign started, Commissar Li

decided he did not like what Mr. Ying had said. He checked with the

deputy head of the delegation, but this man had adroitly absented

himself in the toilet when Mr. Ying started his criticism. In the

later stage of the campaign, Commissar Li labeled Mr. Ying a rightist.

When he heard this, my father became desperately upset, tormenting

himself with the thought that he was partly responsible for Mr. Ying's

downfall. My mother tried to convince him this was not the case: "It's

not your fault!" she told him. But he never stopped agonizing about

it.

Many officials used the campaign to settle personal scores. Some found

that one easy way to fill their quota was to offer up their enemies.

Others acted out of sheer vindictiveness. In Yibin, the Tings purged

many talented people with whom they did not get on, or of whom they

were jealous. Almost all of my father's assistants there, whom he had

picked out and promoted, were condemned as rightists. One former

assistant whom my father liked very much was branded an 'extreme

rightist." His crime was a single remark to the effect that China's

reliance on the Soviet Union should not be 'absolute." At the time the

Party was proclaiming that it should be. He was sentenced to three

years in one of China's gnlags and worked on building a road in a wild,

mountainous area, where many of his fellow prisoners died.

The Anti-Rightist Campaign did not affect society at large.

and workers carried on with their lives.

Peasants

When the campaign ended after a year, at least 55o,000 people had been

labeled as rightists students, teachers, writers, artists, scientists,

and other professionals. Most of them were sacked from their jobs and

became manual laborers in factories or on farms. Some were sent to do

hard labor in gnlags. They and their families became second-class

citizens. The lesson was harsh and clear:

criticism

on people

summed up

charge of

of any kind was not going to be tolerated. From that point

stopped complaining, or speaking up at all. A popular saying

the atmosphere: "After the Three Antis no one wants to be in

money;

after the Anti-Rightist Campaign no one opens their mouth."

But the tragedy of 1957 was more than that of reducing people to

silence. The possibility of falling into the abyss now became

unpredictable. The quota system combined with personal vendettas meant

that anyone could be persecuted, for nothing.

The vernacular caught the mood. Among the categories ofrighfists were

'lots-drawing rightists' (chou-qianyou-pal), people who drew lots to

decide who should be named as rightists, and 'toilet rightists' (ce-suo

you-pat), people who found they had been nominated in their absence

after they could not restrain themselves from going to the toilet

during the many long, drawn-out meetings. There were also rightists

who were said to 'have poison but not released it'

163Oeou-du Im-J~ng); these were people who were named as rightists without

having said anything against anyone.

When a boss did not like someone, he could say: "He doesn't look

right," or "His father was executed by the

Communists, how can he not feel resentful? He just won't say it

openly." A kindhearted unit leader sometimes did the opposite: "Whom

should I nail? I can't do that to anyone.

Say it's me." He was popularly called a 'self-acknowledged rightist'

(zi-ren you-pal).

For many people 1957 was a watershed. My mother was still devoted to

the Communist cause, but doubts crept in about its practice. She

talked about these doubts with her friend Mr. Hau, the purged director

of the research institute, but she never revealed them to my father not

because he had no doubts, but because he would not discuss them with

her. Party rules, like military orders, forbade members from talking

about Party policies among themselves. It was stipulated in the Party

charter that every member must unconditionally obey his Party

organization, that a lower-rank official must obey a higher-rank one.

If you had any disagreement, you could mention it only to a higher-rank

official, who was deemed to be an inca marion of the Party

organization. This regimental discipline, which the Communists had

insisted on since the Yan'an days and earlier, was crucial to their

success. It was a formidable instrument of power, as it needed to be

in a society where personal relationships overrode any other rules. My

father

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adhered to this discipline totally. He believed that the revolution

could not be preserved and sustained if it were challenged openly. In

a revolution you had to fight for your side even if it was not perfect

as long as you believed it was better than the other side. Unity was

the categorical imperative.

My mother could see that as far as my father's relationship with the

Party was concerned, she was an outsider.

One day, when she ventured some critical comments about the situation

and got no response from him, she said bitterly, "You are a good

Communist, but a rotten husband!"

My father nodded.

He said he knew.

Fourteen years later, my father told us children what had almost

happened to him in 1957. Since his early days in Yan'an, when he was a

young man of twenty, he had been close friends with a well-known woman

writer called Ding Ling. In March 1957, when he was in Peking leading

the Sichuan delegation at a Public Affairs conference, she sent him a

message inviting him to visit her in Tianjin, near Peking. My father

wanted to go, but decided against it because he was in a hurry to get

home. Several months later Ding Ling was labeled as the number-one

rightist in China.

"If I had gone to see her," my father told us, "I would have been done

for too."

12.

"Capable Women Can Make a Meal without Food' Famine

164(1958-19dr)

In the autumn of 1958, when I was six, I started going to a primary

school about twenty minutes' walk from home, mostly along muddy cobbled

back alleys. Every day on my way to and from school, I screwed up my

eyes to search every inch of ground for broken nails, rusty cogs, and

any other metal objects that had been trodden into the mud between the

cobbles. These were for feeding into furnaces to produce steel, which

was my major occupation. Yes, at the age of six, I was involved in

steel production, and had to compete with my schoolmates at handing in

the most scrap iron. All around me uplifting music blared from

loudspeakers, and there were banners, posters, and huge slogans painted

on the walls proclaiming "Long Live the Great Leap Forward!" and

"Everybody, Make Steel{' Although I did not fully understand why, I

knew that Chairman Mao had ordered the nation to make a lot of steel.

In my school, crucible-like vats had replaced some of our cooking woks

and were sitting on the giant stoves in the kitchen.

All our scrap iron was fed into them, including the old

292 "Capable Women Can Make a Meal without Food' woks, which had now

been broken to bits. The stoves were kept permanently lit until they

melted down. Our teachers took turns feeding firewood into them around

the-clock, and stirring the scraps in the vats with a huge spoon. We

did not have many lessons, as the teachers were too preoccupied with

the vats. So were the older, teenage children. The rest of us were

organized to clean the teachers' apa~iments and babysit for them.

I remember visiting a hospital once with some other children to see one

of our teachers who had been seriously burned when molten iron had

splashed onto her arms. Doctors and nurses in white coats were rushing

around frantically. There was a furnace on the hospital grounds, and

they had to feed logs into it all the time, even when they were

performing operations, and right through the night.

Shortly before I started going to school, my family had moved from the

old vicarage into a special compound, which was the center of

government for the province. It enclosed several streets, with blocks

of apatiments and offices and a number of mansions; a high wall blocked

it off from the outside world. Inside the main gate was what had been

the US Servicemen's Club during the Second World War. Ernest Hemingway

had stayed there in 194x.

The club building was in traditional Chinese style, with the ends of

its yellow filed roof turning upward, and heavy dark red pillars. It

was now the office of the secretariat of the Sichuan government.

A huge furnace was erected in the parking lot where the chauffeurs used

to wait. At night the sky was lit up, and the noise of the crowds

around the furnace could be heard 3o0 yards away in my room. My

family's woks went into this furnace, together with all our cast-iron

cooking utensils. We did not suffer from their loss, as we did not

need them anymore. No private cooking was allowed now, and everybody

had to eat in the canteen. The furnaces were insatiable. Gone was my

parents' bed, a so~~, comfortable one with iron springs. Gone also

were the iron railings from the city pavements, and anything else that

was iron.

I hardly saw my parents for months. They often did not come home at

all, as they had to make sure the temperature in their office furnaces

165never dropped.

It was at this time that Mao gave full vent to his halfbaked dream of

turning China into a first-class modern power. He called steel the

"Marshal' of industry, and ordered steel output to be doubled in one

year from 5.35 million tons in 1957 to zo.7 million in 1958. But

instead of trying to expand the proper steel industry with skilled

workers, he decided to get the whole population to take part. There

was a steel quota for every unit, and for months people stopped their

normal work in order to meet it. The country's economic development

was reduced to the simplistic question of how many tons of steel could

be produced, and the entire nation was thrown into this single act. It

was officially estimated that nearly zoo million peasants were pulled

out of agricultural work and into steel production. They had been the

labor force producing much of the country's food. Mountains were

stripped bare of trees for fuel. But the output of this mass

production amounted only to what people called 'caMe droppings'

(nill-shi-ge-day meaning useless turds.

This absurd situation reflected not only Mao's ignorance of how an

economy worked, but also an almost metaphysical disregard for reality,

which might have been interesting in a poet, but in a political leader

with absolute power was quite another matter. One of its main

components was a deep-seated contempt for human life. Not long before

this he had told the Finnish ambassador, "Even if the United States had

more powerful atom bombs and used them on China, blasted a hole in the

earth, or blew it to pieces, while this might be a matter of great

significance to the solar system, it would still be an insignificant

matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned."

Mao's voluntarism had been fueled by his recent experience in Russia.

Increasingly disillusioned with Khrushchev after his denunciation of

Stalin in 1956, Mao went to Moscow in late 1957 to attend a world

Communist summit.

He returned convinced that Russia and its allies were abandoning

socialism and turning 'revisionist." He saw China as the only true

believer. It had to blaze a new path.

Megalomania and voluntarism meshed easily in Mao's mind.

Mao's fixation on steel went largely unquestioned, as did his other

obsessions. He took a dislike to sparrows they devour grain. So every

household was mobilized. We sat outside ferociously beating any metal

object, from cymbals to saucepans, to scare the sparrows off the trees

so they would eventually drop dead from exhaustion. Even today I can

vividly hear the din made by my siblings and me, as well as by the

government officials, sitting under a mammoth wolfoerry tree in our

courtyard.

There were also fantastic economic goals. Mao claimed that China's

industrial output could overtake that of the United States and Britain

within fifteen years. For the Chinese, these countries represented the

capitalist world.

Overtaking them would be seen as a triumph over their enemies. This

appealed to people's pride, and boosted their enthusiasm enormously.

They had felt humiliated by the refusal of the United States and most

major Western countries to grant diplomatic recognition, and were so

keen to show the world that they could make it on their own that they

wanted to believe in miracles. Mao provided the inspiration. The

166energy of the population had been eager to find an outlet. And here it

was. The gung-ho spirit overrode caution, as ignorance triumphed over

reason.

In early 1958, shortly after returning from Moscow, Mao visited

Chengdu for about a month. He was fired up with the idea that China

could do anything, especially seize the leadership of socialism from

the Russians. It was in

Chengdu that he outlined his "Great Leap Forward." The city organized

a big parade for him, but the participants had no idea that Mao was

there. He lurked out of sight.

At this parade a slogan was put forward, "Capable women can make a meal

without food," a reversal of a pragmatic ancient Chinese saying, "No

matter how capable, a woman cannot make a meal without food."

Exaggerated rhetoric had become concrete demands. Impossible fantasies

were supposed to become reality.

It was a gorgeous spring that year. One day Mao went for an outing to

a park called the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, the eighth century Tang

poet. My mother's Eastern District office was responsible for the

security of one area of the park, and she and her colleagues patrolled

it, pretending to be tourists. Mao rarely kept to a schedule, or let

people know his precise movements, so for hours and hours my mother sat

sipping tea in the teahouse, trying to keep on the alert. She finally

grew restless and told her colleagues she was going for a walk. She

strayed into the security area of the Western District, whose staff did

not know her, and was immediately followed. When the Party secretary

of the Western District received reports about a 'suspicious woman' and

came to see for himself, he laughed: "Why, this is old Comrade Xia from

the Eastern District!" Afterward my mother was criticized by her boss,

district chief Guo, for 'running around without discipline."

Mao also visited a number of farms in the Chengdu Plain. Thus far,

peasant cooperatives had been small. It was here that Mao ordered them

all to be merged into bigger institutions, which were later called

'people's communes."

That summer, all of China was organized into these new units, each

containing between 2,000 and 20,000 households. One of the forerunners

of this drive was an area called Xushui, in Hebei province in North

China, to which Mao took a shine. In his eagerness to prove that they

deserved Mao's attention, the local boss there claimed they were going

to produce over ten times as much grain as before. Mao smiled broadly

and responded: "What are you going to do with all that food? On second

thought, it's not too bad to have too much food, really. The state

doesn't want it. Everybody else has plenty of their own. But the

farmers here can just eat and eat. You can eat five meals a day!" Mao

was intoxicated, indulging in the eternal dream of the Chinese peasant-

surplus food. After these remarks, the villagers further stoked the

desires of their Great Leader by claiming that they were producing more

than a million pounds of potatoes per mu (one mu is one-sixth of an

acre), over 130,000 pounds of wheat per mu, and cabbages weighing 500

pounds each.

It was a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and

believing them, was practised to an incredible degree. Peasants moved

crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials

that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar "Potemkin fields'

were shown off to gullible or self-blinded agricultural scientists,

167reporters, visitors from other regions, and foreigners.

Although these crops generally died within a few days because of

untimely transplantation and harmful density, the visitors did not know

that, or did not want to know. A large part of the population was

swept into this confused, crazy world.

"Self-deception while deceiving others' (~ioqiqi-ren) gripped the

nation. Many people including agricultural scientists and senior Party

leaders Said they saw the miracles themselves. Those who failed to

match other people's fantastic claims began to doubt and blame

themselves. Under a dictatorship like Mao's, where information was

withheld and fabricated, it was very difficult for ordinary people to

have confidence in their own experience or knowledge. Not to mention

that they were now facing a nationwide tidal wave of fervor which

promised to swamp any individual cool headedness It was easy to start

ignoring reality and simply put one's faith in Mao. To go along with

the frenzy was by far the easiest course. To pause and think and be

circumspect meant trouble.

An official cartoon portrayed a mouselike scientist wh~=

ingA stove like yours can only boil water to make tea."

Next to him stood a giant worker, lifting a huge sluice gate releasing

a flood of molten steel, who retorted, "How much can you drink?" Most

who saw the absurdity of the situation were too frightened to speak

their minds, particularly after the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957.

Those who did voice doubts were immediately silenced, or sacked, which

also meant discrimination against their family and a bleak prospect for

their children.

In many places, people who refused to boast of massive increases in

output were beaten up until they gave in. In Yibin, some leaders of

production units were trussed up with their arms behind their backs in

the village square while questions were hurled at them:

"How much wheat can you produce per mu?"

"Four hundred fin' (about 450 pounds a realistic amount).

Then, beating him: "How much wheat can you produce per mu?"

"Eight hundred fin."

Even this impossible

be beaten, or simply

fin." Sometimes the

increase the figure,

enough.

figure was not enough. The unfortunate man would

left hanging, until he finally said: "Ten thousand

man died hanging there because he refused to

or simply before he could raise the figure high

Many grass-roots officials and peasants involved in scenes like this

did not believe in the ridiculous boasting, but fear of being accused

themselves drove them on. They were carrying out the orders of the

Party, and they were safe as long as they followed Mao. The

totalitarian system in which they had been immersed had sapped and

warped their sense of responsibility. Even doctors would boast about

miraculously healing incurable diseases.

Trucks used to turn up at our compound carrying grinning peasants

coming to report on some fantastic, recordbreaking achievement. One

168day it was a monster cucumber half as long as the truck. Another time

it was a tomato carded with difficulty by two children. On another

occasion there was a giant pig squeezed into a truck. The peasants

claimed they had bred an actual pig this size. The pig was only made

of papier-m~eh~, but as a child I imagined that it was real. Maybe I

was confused by the adults around me, who behaved as though all this

were true. People had learned to defy reason and to live with

acting.

The whole nation slid into doublespeak. Words became divorced from

reality, responsibility, and people's real thoughts. Lies were told

with ease because words had lost their meanings and had ceased to be

taken seriously by others.

This was entrenched by the further regimentation of society. When he

first set up the communes, Mao said their main advantage was that 'they

are easy to control," because the peasants would now be in an organized

system rather than being, to a certain extent, left alone. They were

given detailed orders from the very top about how to fill their land.

Mao summed up the whole of agriculture in eight characters: 'soil,

fertilizer, water, seeds, dense planting, protection, tending,

technology." The Party Central Committee in Peking was handing out

two-page instructions on how peasants all over China should improve

their fields, another page on how to use fertilizers, another on

planting crops densely. Their incredibly simplistic instructions had

to be strictly followed: the peasants were ordered to replant their

crops more densely in one mini-campaign after another.

Another means of regimentation, setting up canteens in the communes,

was an obsession with Mao at the time. In his airy way, he defined

communism as 'public canteens with free meals." The fact that the

canteens themselves did not produce food did not concern him. In 1958

the regime effectively banned eating at home. Every peasant had to eat

in the commune canteen. Kitchen utensils like woks and, in some

places, money were outlawed. Everybody was going to be looked after by

the commune and the state.

The peasants filed into the canteens every day after work and ate to

their hearts' content, which they had never been able to do before,

even in the best years and in the most fertile areas. They consumed

and wasted the entire lbod reserve in the countryside. They filed into

the fields, too.

But how much work was done did not matter, because the produce now

belonged to the state, and was completely unrelated to the peasants'

lives. Mao put forward the prediction that China was reaching a

society of communism, which in Chinese means 'sharing material goods,"

and the peasants took this to mean that they would get a share anyway,

regardless of how much work they did. With no incentive to work, they

just went to the fields and had a good snooze.

Agriculture was also neglected because of the priority given to steel.

Many of the peasants were exhausted from having to spend long hours

finding fuel, scrap iron, and iron ore and keeping the furnaces going.

The fields were often left to the women and children, who had to do

everything by hand, as the animals were busy making their contribution

to steel production. When harvest time came in autumn 1958, few people

were in the fields.

The failure to get in the harvest in 1958 flashed a warning that a food

shortage was on its way, even though official statistics showed a

169double-digit increase in agricultural output. It was officially

announced that in 1958 China's wheat output had overtaken that of the

United States. The Party newspaper, the People's Daily, started a

discussion on the topic "How do we cope with the problem of producing

too much food?"

My father's depa~Unent was in charge of the press in Sichuan, which

printed outlandish claims, as did every publication in China. The

press was the voice of the Party, and when it came to Party policies,

neither my father nor anyone else in the media had any say. They were

part of a huge conveyor belt. My father watched the turn of events

with alarm. His only option was to appeal to the top leaders.

At the end of 1958 he wrote a letter to the Central Committee in Peking

stating that producing steel like this was pointless and a waste of

resources; the peasants were exhausted, their labor was being

squandered, and there was a food shortage. He appealed for urgent

action.

He gave the letter to the governor to pass on. The governor, Lee

Da-zhang, was the number-two man in the province. He had given my

father his first job when he had come to Chengdu from Yibin, and

treated him like a friend.

Governor Lee told my father he was not going to forward the letter.

Nothing in it was new, he said.

"The Party knows everything. Have faith in it." Mao had said that

under no circumstances must the people's morale be dampened.

The Great Leap Forward had changed the psychological attitude of the

Chinese from passivity to a can-do, get-up and-go spirit, he said,

which must not be imperiled.

Governor Lee also told my father that he had been given the dangerous

nickname "Opposition' among the provincial leaders, to whom he had

voiced disagreements. It was only because of his other qualities, his

absolute loyalty to the

Party and his stern sense of discipline, that my father was still all

right.

"The good thing," the governor said, 'is that you only voiced your

doubts to the Party, and not to the public." He warned my father he

could get into serious trouble if he insisted on raising these

concerns, as could his family and 'others," clearly meaning himself, my

father's friend. My father did not insist. He was half convinced by

the argument, and the stakes were too high. He had reached a stage

where he was not insusceptible to compromise.

But my father and the people working in the departments of Public

Affairs collected a great number of complaints, as part of their jobs,

and forwarded them to Peking.

There was general discontent among the people and officials alike. In

fact, the Great Leap Forward triggered off the most serious split in

the leadership since the Communists had taken power a decade before.

Mao had to step down from the less important of his two main posts,

president of the state, in favor of Liu Shaoqi. Liu became the

number-two man in China, but his prestige was only a fraction of that

of Mao, who kept his key post as chairman of the Party.

170The voices of dissent grew so strong that the Party had to convene a

special conference, which was held at the end of June 1959 in the

mountain resort of Lushan, in central China. At the conference the

defense minister, Marshal Peng Dehual, wrote a letter to Mao

criticizing what had happened in the Great Leap Forward and

recommending a realistic approach to the economy. The letter was

actually rather restrained, and ended on the obligatory note of

optimism (in this case, catching up with Britain in four years).

But although Peng was one of Mao's oldest comrades, and one of the

people closest to him, Mao could not take even this slight criticism,

particularly at a time when he was on the defensive, because he knew he

was wrong. Using the aggrieved language of which he was enamored, Mao

called the letter 'a bombardment intended to level Lushan." He dug in

his heels and dragged the conference out for over a month, fiercely

attacking Marshal Peng. Peng and the few who openly supported him were

branded 'rightist opportunists." Peng was dismissed as defense

minister, placed under house arrest, and later sent into premature

retirement in Sichuan, where he was assigued a lowly post.

Mao had had to scheme hard to preserve his power.

In this he was a supreme master. His favorite reading, which he

recommended to other Party leaders, was a classic multi-volume

collection about court power and intrigues. In fact, Mao's rule was

best understood in terms of a medieval court, in which he exercised

spellbinding power over his courtiers and subjects. He was also a

maestro at 'divide and rule," and at manipulating men's inclination to

throw others to the wolves. In the end, few top officials stood up for

Marshal Peng, in spite of their private disenchantment with Mao's

policies. The only one who avoided having to show his hand was the

general secretary of the Party, Deng Xiaoping, who had broken his leg.

Deng's stepmother had been grumbling at home, "I was a farmer all my

life and I have never heard of such a nonsensical way of farming? When

Mao heard how Deng had broken his leg playing billiards he commented,

"How very convenient."

Commissar Li, the Sichuan first secretary, returned to Chengdu from the

conference with a document containing the remarks Peng had made at

Lushan. This was distributed to officials of Grade 17 and above; they

were asked to state formally whether they agreed with it.

My father had heard something about the Lushan dispute from the

governor of Sichuan. At his 'exam' meeOng my father made some vague

remarks about Penbes letter.

Then he did something he had never done before: he warned my mother

that it was a trap. She was greatly moved. This was the first time he

had ever put her interests before the rules of the Party.

She was surprised to see that a lot of other people seemed to have been

tipped off as well. At her collective 'exam," half of her colleagues

showed flaming indignation against Peng's letter, and claimed the

criticisms in it were 'totally untrue." Others looked as though they

had lost their ability to speak, and mumbled something evasive. One

man managed to straddle the fence, saying, "I am not in a position to

agree or disagree because I do not know whether the evidence given by

Marshal Peng is factual or not. If it is, I would support him. Of

course, I would not if it were not true."

171The chief of the grain bureau for Chengdu and the chief of the Chengdu

post office were Red Army veterans who had fought under Marshal Peng.

They both said they agreed with what their old and much-revered

commander had said, adding their own experiences in the countryside to

back up Peng's observations. My mother wondered whether these old

soldiers knew about the trap. If so, the way they spoke their minds

was heroic.

She wished she had their courage. But she thought of her children what

would happen to them? She was no longer the free spirit she had been

as a student. When her turn came she said, "The views in the letter

are not in keeping with the policies of the Party over the last couple

of years."

She was told by her boss, Mr. Guo, that her remarks were thoroughly

unsatisfactory because she had failed to state her attitude. For days

she lived in a state of acute anxiety. The Red Army veterans who had

supported Peng were denounced as 'rightist opportunists," sacked, and

sent to do manual labor. My mother was called to a meeting to have her

'right-wing tendencies' criticized. At the meeting, Mr. Guo described

another of her 'serious errors." In 1959 a sort of black market had

sprung up in Chengdu selling chickens and eggs. Because the communes

had taken over chickens from individual peasants, and were incapable of

raising them, chickens and eggs had disappeared from the shops, which

were state owned. A few peasants had somehow managed to keep one or

two chickens at home under their beds, and were now surreptitiously

selling them and their eggs in the back alleys at about twenty times

their previous price. Officials were sent out every day to try to

catch the peasants. Once, when my mother was asked by Mr. Guo to go

on one of these raids, she said, "What's wrong with supplying things

people need? If there is demand, there should be supply." Because of

this remark, my mother was given a warning about her 'right-wing

tendencies."

The purge of 'rightist opportunists' rocked the Party once again, as a

great many officials agreed with Peng. The lesson was that Mao's

authority was un challengeable even though he was clearly in the wrong.

Officials could see that no matter how high up you were Peng, after

all,

was the defense minister and no matter what your standing - Peng had

reputedly been Mao's favorite if you offended Mao you would fall into

disgrace. They also knew that you could not speak your mind and

resign, or even resign quietly: resignation was seen as an unacceptable

protest. There was no opting out. The mouths of the Party as well as

the people were now tightly sealed. After this, the Great Leap Forward

went into further, madder excesses. More impossible economic goals

were imposed from on high.

More peasants were mobilized to make steel. And more arbitrary orders

rained down, causing chaos in the countryside.

At the end of 1958, at the height of the Great Leap Forward, a massive

construction project was begun: ten great buildings in the capital,

Peking, to be completed in ten months to mark the tenth anniversary, x

October 1959, of the founding of the People's Republic.

One of the ten buildings was the Great Hall of the People, a

Soviet-style columned edifice on the west side of Tiananmen Square. Its

marbled front was a good quarter of a mile long, and its chandeliered

main banqueting hall could seat several thousand people. This was where

172important meetings were to be held and the leaders were to receive

foreign visitors. The rooms, all to be on a grand scale, were named

after the provinces of China. My father was put in charge of the

decoration of the Sichuan Room, and when the work was completed he

invited Party leaders who had been connected with Sichuan to inspect

it. Deng Xiaoping, who was from Sichuan, came, as did Marshal Ho Lung,

a famous Robin Hood figure who had been one of the founders of the Red

Army, and was a close friend of Deng's.

At one point my father was called

old colleague of theirs, actually

themselves. As he came back into

to Deng's brother, while pointing

the throne." At that moment they

stopped talking.

away, leaving these two and another

Deng's brother, chatting among

the room he heard Marshal Ho saying

at Deng: "It really should be him on

spotted my father and immediately

My father was in a state of intense

he had accidentally overheard hints

regime. Any conceivable action, or

trouble. In fact, nothing happened

the incident almost ten years later

of disaster ever since.

apprehension after this. He knew

of disagreements at the top of the

inaction, could get him into deadly

to him, but when he told me about

he said he had lived with the fear

"Just to have heard that amounts to treason," he said, using a phrase

which means 'a crime bringing decapitation."

What he had overheard was nothing but an indication of some

disenchantment with Mao. This sentiment was shared by many top

leaders, not least by the new president, Liu Shaoqi.

In autumn 1959 Liu came to Chengdu to inspect a commune called "Red

Splendor." The previous year, Mao had been highly enthusiastic about

the astronomical rice output there. Before Liu arrived the local

officials rounded up anyone they thought might expose them, and locked

them up in a temple. But Liu had a 'mole," and as he was walking past

the temple he stopped and asked to have a look inside. The officials

made various excuses, even claiming that the temple was about to

collapse, but Liu refused to take no for an answer. Eventually the

big, rusty lock was clicked open, and a group of shabby peasants

stumbled out into the daylight. The embarrassed local officials tried

to explain to Liu that these were 'troublemakers' who had been locked

up because they might harm the distinguished visitor. The peasants

themselves were silent. Commune officials, though completely impotent

regarding policies, held awesome power over people's lives. If they

wanted to punish someone, they could give him the worst job to do, the

least food, and invent an excuse to have him harassed, denounced, even

arrested.

President Liu asked some questions, but the peasants just smiled and

mumbled. From their point of view it was better to offend the

president than the local bosses. The president would be leaving for

Peking in a few minutes, but the commune bosses would be with them for

the rest of their lives.

Shortly afterward another senior leader also came to Chengdu Marshal

Zhu De accompanied by one of Mao's private secretaries. Zhu De was

from Sichuan and had been the commander of the Red Army, and military

architect of the Communists' victory. Since 1949 he had kept a low

profile. He visited several communes near Chengdu, and afterward, as

he strolled by the Silk River looking at the pavilions, bamboo groves,

and willow embraced teahouses along the riverbank, he waxed emotional:

173"Sichuan is indeed a heavenly place .... He spoke the words in the

style of a line of poetry. Mao's secretary added the matching line, in

the traditional poets' fashion:

"Pity that damning gales of lie telling and false communism are

destroying it!" My mother was with them, and thought to herself: I

agree wholeheartedly.

Suspicious of his colleagues, and still angry about being attacked at

Lushan, Mao obstinately stuck to his crazy economic policies. Although

he was not unaware of the disasters they had been causing, and was

discreetly allowing some of the most impracticable ones to be revised,

his 'face' would not allow him to give up completely. Meanwhile, as

the sixties began, a great famine spread across the whole of China.

In Chengdu, the monthly food ration for each adult was reduced to 19

pounds of rice, 3.5 ounces of cooking off, and 3-5 ounces of meat, when

there was any.

Scarcely anything else was available, not even cabbage.

Many people were afflicted by edema, a condition in which fluid

accumulates under the skin because of malnutrition.

The patient turns yellow and swells up. The most popular remedy was

eating chlorella, which was supposed to be rich in protein. Chlorella

fed on human urine, so people stopped going to the toilet and peed into

spittoons instead, then dropped the chlorella seeds in; they grew into

something looking like green fish roe in a couple of days, and were

scooped out of the urine, washed, and cooked with rice. They were

truly disgusting to eat, but did reduce the swelling.

Like everybody else, my father was entitled only to a limited food

ration. But as a senior official he had some privileges. In our

compound there were two canteens, a small one for depa~u'ental

directors and their wives and children, and a big one for everyone

else, which included my grandmother, my aunt Jun-ying, and the maid.

Most of the time we collected our food at the canteens and took it home

to eat. There was more food in the canteens than on the streets. The

provincial government had its own farm, and there were also 'presents'

from county governments. These valuable supplies were divided between

the canteens, and the small one got preferential treatment.

As Party officials, my parents also had special food coupons. I used

to go with my grandmother to a special store outside the compound to

buy food with them. My mother's coupons were blue. She was entitled

to five eggs, almost an ounce of soybeans, and the same amount of sugar

per month. My father's coupons were yellow. He was entitled to twice

as much as my mother because of his higher rank.

My family pooled the food from the canteens and the other sources and

ate together. The adults always gave the children more, so I did not

go hungry. But the adults all suffered from malnutrition, and my

grandmother developed slight edema. She grew chlorella at home, and I

was aware that the adults were eating it, although they would not tell

me what it was for. Once I tried a little, and immediately spat it out

as it tasted revolting. I never had it again.

I had little idea that famine was raging all around me.

One day on my way to school, as I was eating a small steamed roll,

174someone rushed up and snatched it from my hands. As I was recovering

from the shock, I caught a glimpse of a very thin, dark back in shorts

and bare feet running down the mud alley with his hand to his mouth,

devouring the roll. When I told my parents what had happened, my

father's eyes were terribly sad. He stroked my head and said, "You are

lucky. Other children like you are starving."

I often had to visit the hospital for my teeth at that time.

Whenever I went there I had an attack of nausea at the horrible sight

of dozens of people with shiny, almost transparent swollen limbs, as

big as barrels. The patients were carried to the hospital on flat

carts, there were so many of them. When I asked my dentist what was

wrong with them, she said with a sigh, "Edema." I asked her what that

meant, and she mumbled something which I vaguely linked with food.

These people with edema were mostly peasants. Starvation was much

worse in the countryside because there were no guaranteed rations.

Government policy was to provide food for the cities first, and commune

officials were having to seize gram from the peasants by force. In

many areas, peasants who tried to hide food were arrested, or beaten

and tortured. Commune officials who were reluctant to take food from

the hungry peasants were themselves dismissed, and some were physically

maltreated. As a result, the peasants who had actually grown the food

died in the millions all over China.

I learned later that several of my relatives from Sichuan to Manchuria

had died in this famine. Among them was my father's retarded brother.

His mother had died in 1958, and when the famine struck he was unable

to cope as he would not listen to anyone else's advice. Rations were

allotted on a monthly basis, and he ate his within days, leaving

nothing for the rest of the month. He soon starved to death. My

grandmother's sister, Lan, and her husband, "Loyalty' Pei-o, who had

been sent to the inhospitable countryside in the far north of Manchuria

because of his old connection with Kuomintang intelligence, both died

too. As food began to run out, the village authorities allocated

supplies according to their own, unwritten priorities.

Pei-o's outcast status meant that he and his wife were among the first

to be denied food. Their children survived because their parents gave

their food to them. The father of Yu-lin's wife also died. At the

end, he had eaten the stuffing in his pillow and the braids of garlic

plants.

One night, when I was about eight, a tiny, very old looking woman, her

face a mass of wrinkles, walked into our house. She looked so thin and

feeble it seemed a puff of wind would blow her down. She dropped to

the ground in front of my mother and banged her forehead on the floor,

calling her 'the savior of my daughter." She was our maid's mother.

"If it wasn't for you," she said, 'my daughter would not survive .... I

did not grasp the full meaning of this until a month later, when a

letter came for our maid.

It said that her mother had died soon after visiting our house, where

she had passed on the news that her husband and her younger son were

dead. I will never forget the heart-rending sobs of our maid as she

stood on the terrace, leaning against a wooden pillar and stifling her

moans in her handkerchief. My grandmother sat cross-legged on her bed,

weeping as well. I hid myself in a corner outside my grandmother's

mosquito net. I could hear my grandmother saying to herself: "The

175Communists are good, but all these people are dead .... Years later, I

heard that our maid's other brother and her sister-in-law died soon

after this.

Landlords' families were placed at the bottom of the list for food in a

starving commune.

In ,989 an official who had been working in famine relief told me that

he believed that the total number of people who had died in Sichuan was

seven million. This would be 10 percent of the entire population of a

rich province. An accepted estimate for the death toll for the whole

country is around thirty million.

One day in 1960, the three-year-old daughter of my aunt Jun-ying's

next-door neighbor in Yibin went missing.

A few weeks later the neighbor saw a young girl playing in the street

wearing a dress that looked like her daughter's.

She went up and examined it: it had a mark which identified it as her

daughter's. She reported this to the police.

It turned out that the parents of the young girl were selling

wind-dried meat. They had abducted and murdered a number of babies and

sold them as rabbit meat at exorbitant prices. The couple were

executed and the case was hushed up, but it was widely known that baby

killing did go on at the time.

Years later I met an old colleague of my father's, a very kind and

capable man, not given to exaggeration. He told me with great emotion

what he had seen during the famine in one particular commune.

Thirty-five percent of the peasants had died, in an area where the

harvest had been good although little was collected, since the men had

been pulled out to produce steel, and the commune canteen had wasted a

large proportion of what there was. One day a peasant burst into his

room and threw himself on the floor, screaming that he had committed a

terrible crime and begging to be punished. Eventually it came out that

he had killed his own baby and eaten it. Hunger had been like an

uncontrollable force driving him to take up the knife. With tears

rolling down his cheeks, the official ordered the peasant to be

arrested. Later he was shot as a warning to baby killers.

One official explanation for the famine was that Khrushchev had

suddenly forced China to pay back a large debt it had incurred during

the Korean War in order to come to the aid of North Korea. The regime

played on the experience of much of the population, who had been

landless peasants and could remember being hounded by heartless

creditors to pay rent or reimburse loans. By identifying the Soviet

Union, Mao also created an external enemy to take the blame and to

rally the population.

Another cause mentioned was 'unprecedented natural

calamities." China is a vast country, and bad weather causes food

shortages somewhere every year. No one but the highest leaders had

access to nationwide information about the weather. In fact, given the

immobility of the population, few knew what happened in the next

region, or even over the next mountain. Many thought then, and still

think today, that the famine was caused by natural disasters. I have no

full picture, but of all the people I have talked to from different

parts of China, few knew of natural calamities in their regions. They

176only have stories to tell about deaths from starvation.

At a conference for 7,000 top-ranking officials at the beginning of

1962, Mao said that the famine was caused 7o percent by natural

disasters and 3o percent by human error. President Liu Shaoqi chipped

in, apparently on the spur of the moment, that it was caused 3o percent

by natural disasters and 7o percent by human error. My father was at

the conference, and when he returned he said to my mother: "I fear

Comrade Shaoqi is going to be in trouble."

When the speeches were relayed to lower-rank officials like my mother,

President Liu's assessment was cut out.

The population at large was not even told about Mao's figures. This

concealing of information did help keep the people quiet, and there

were no audible complaints against the Communist Party. Quite apart

from the fact that most dissenters had been killed off or otherwise

suppressed in the past few years, whether the Communist Party was to

blame was far from clear to the general population. There was no

corruption in the sense of officials hoarding grain.

Party officials were only marginally better off than the ordinary

people. In fact, in some villages they themselves starved first and

died first. The famine was worse than anything under the Kuomintang,

but it looked different:

in the Kuomintang days, starvation took place alongside blatant

unchecked extravagance.

Before the famine, many Communist officials from landlords' families

had brought their parents to stay with them in the cities. When the

famine hit, the Party gave orders for these elderly men and women to be

sent back to their villages to share the hard life meaning starvation

with the local peasants. The idea was that Communist officials should

not be seen to be using their privileges to benefit their 'class-enemy'

parents. Some grandparents of friends of mine had to leave Chengdu and

died in the famine.

Most peasants lived in a world where they did not look much beyond the

boundary of the village, and they blamed the famine on their immediate

bosses for giving them all the catastrophic orders. There were popular

rhymes to the effect that the Party leadership was good, only the

grass-roots officials were rotten.

The Great Leap Forward and the appalling famine shook my parents

deeply. Although they did not have the full picture, they did not

believe that 'natural calamities' were the explanation. But their

overwhelming feeling was one of guilt. Working in the field of

propaganda, they were right in the center of the misinformation

machine. To salve his conscience, and to avoid the dishonest daily

routine, my father volunteered to help with famine relief in the

communes. This meant staying and starving with the peasants. In doing

so, he was 'sharing weal and woo with the masses," in line with Mao's

instructions, but it was resented by his staff. They had to take turns

going with him, which they hated, because it meant going hungry.

From late 1959 to 196I, in the worst period of the famine, I seldom saw

my father. In the countryside he ate the leaves of sweet potatoos,

herbs, and tree bark like the peasants. One day he was walking along a

bank between the paddy fields when he saw a skeletal peasant moving

extremely slowly, and with obvious difficulty, in the distance. Then

177the man suddenly disappeared. When my father rushed over, he was lying

in the field, dead of starvation.

Every day my father was devastated by what he saw, although he hardly

saw the worst, because in the customary manner local officials

surrounded him everywhere he went.

But he suffered bad hepatomegaly and edema and deep depression. Several

times when he came back from his trips he went straight into the

hospital. In the summer of 1961, he stayed there for months. He had

changed. He was no longer the assured puritan of yesteryear. The

Party was not pleased with him. He was criticized for 'letting his

revolutionary will wane' and ordered out of the hospital.

He took to spending a lot of time fishing. Across from the hospital

there was a lovely river called the Jade Brook.

Willows bent over to stroke its surface with their curving shoots, and

clouds melted and solidified in their many reflections. I used to sit

on its sloping bank gazing at the clouds and watching my father fish.

The smell was of human manure. On top of the bank were the hospital

grounds, which had once been flowerbeds, but had now been turned into

vegetable fields to supply the staff and patients with additional food.

When I close my eyes now, I can still see the larvae of the butterflies

eating away at the cabbage leaves. My brothers caught them for my

father to use as bait. The fields had a pathetic look.

The doctors and nurses were obviously no experts on farming.

Throughout history Chinese scholars and mandarins had traditionally

taken up fishing when they were disillusioned with what the emperor was

doing. Fishing suggested a retreat to nature, an escape from the

politics of the day. It was a kind of symbol for disenchantment and

noncooperation.

My father seldom caught any fish, and once wrote a poem with the line:

"Not for the fish I go fishing." But his angling companion, another

deputy director of his department, always gave him part of his catch.

This was because in 1961, in the middle of the famine, my mother was

pregnant again, and the Chinese regard fish as essential for the

development of a baby's hair. She had not wanted another

3 I4 "Capable Women Can Make a Meal without Food' child. Among other

things, she and my father were on salaries, which meant the state no

longer provided them with wet-nurses or nannies. With four children,

my grandmother, and part of my father's family to support, they did not

have a lot of money to spare. A large chunk of my father's salary went

for buying books, particularly huge volumes of classical works, one set

of which could cost two months' salary. Sometimes my mother grumbled

slightly:

other people in his position dropped hints to the publishing houses and

got their copies free, 'for work purposes." My father insisted on

paying for everything.

Sterilization, abortion, and even contraception were difficult. The

Communists had started promoting family planning in 1954, and my mother

was in charge of the program in her district. She was then in an

advanced stage of pregnancy with Xiao-her, and often started her

meetings with a good-humored self-criticism. But Mao turned against

birth control. He wanted a big, powerful China, based on a large

178population. He said that if the Americans dropped atomic bombs on

China, the Chinese would 'just go on reproducing' and reconstitute

their numbers at great speed. He also shared the traditional Chinese

peasant's attitude toward children: the more hands the better. In

1957, he personally named a famous Peking University professor who had

advocated birth control as a rightist. After that, family planning was

seldom mentioned.

My mother had become pregnant in 1959, and had written to the Party

asking for permission to have an abortion.

This was the standard procedure. One reason the Party had to give its

consent was that the operation was a dangerous one at the time. My

mother had said that she was busy working for the revolution, and could

serve the people better if she did not have another baby. She was

granted an abortion, which was dreadfully painful because the method

used was primitive. When she became pregnant again in 1961, another

abortion was out of the question in the opinion of the doctors, my

mother herself, and the Party., which stipulated a minimum three-year

gap between abortions.

Our maid was also pregnant. She had married my father's former

manservant, who was now working in a factory. My grandmother cooked

both of them the eggs and soybeans which could be obtained with my

parents' coupons, as well as the fish which my father and his colleague

caught.

Our maid gave birth to a boy at the end of 1961 and left to set up her

own home with her husband. When she was still with us, she would go to

the canteens to fetch our food. One day my father saw her walking

along a garden path stuffing some meat into her mouth and chewing

voraciously. He turned and walked away in case she saw him and was

embarrassed. He did not tell anyone until years later when he was

ruminating over how differently things had turned out from the dreams

of his youth, the main one of which had been putting an end to

hunger.

When the maid left, my family could not afford another one, because of

the food situation. Those who wanted the job women from the

countryside were not entitled to a food allocation. So my grandmother

and my aunt had to look after the five of us.

My youngest brother, Xiao-fang, was born on 17 January 1962. He was

the only one of us who was breast-fed by my mother. Before he was

born, my mother had wanted to give him away, but by the time he arrived

she had become deeply attached to him, and he became the favorite. We

all played with him as though he were a big toy. He grew up surrounded

by loving crowds, which, my mother ,~o.

"dieved, accounted for his ease and confidence. My father spent a lot

of time with him, which he had never done with his other children. When

Xiao-fang was old enough to play with toys, my father carried him every

Saturday to the depa,hnent store at the top of the street and bought

him a new toy. The moment Xiao-fang started to cry, for any

reason, my father

would drop everything and rush to comfort him.

By the beginning of 1961, tens of millions of deaths had finally forced

Mao to give up his economic policies. Reluctantly, he allowed the

pragmatic President Liu and Deng Xiaoping, general secretary of the

Party, more control over the country. Mao was forced to make

179self-criticisms, but they were full of self-pity, and were always

phrased in such a way that it sounded as if he was carrying the cross

for incompetent officials all over China. He further magnanimously

instructed the Party to 'draw lessons' from the disastrous experience,

but what the lessons were was not left to the judgment of the lowly

officials: Mao told them they had become divorced from the people, and

had made decisions which did not reflect ordinary people's feelings.

Starting from Mao, the endless self-criticisms masked the real

responsibility, which no one pursued.

Nevertheless, things began to improve. The pragmatists put through a

succession of major reforms. It was in this context that Deng Xiaoping

made the remark: "It doesn't matter whether the cat is white or black,

as long as it catches mice." There was to be no more mass production

of steel. A stop was put to crazy economic goals, and realistic

policies were introduced. Public canteens were abolished, and

peasants' income was now related to their work. They were given back

household property, which had been confiscated by the communes,

including farm implements and domestic animals. They were also allowed

small plots of land to till privately. In some areas, land was

effectively leased out to peasant households. In industry and

commerce, elements of a market economy were officially sanctioned, and

within a couple of years the economy was flourishing again.

Hand in hand with the loosening up of the economy, there was also

political liberalization. Many landlords had the label of 'class

enemy' removed. A large number of people who had been purged in the

various political campaigns were 'rehabilitated." These included the

counterrevolution ari from 1955, 'rightists' from 1957, and 'rightist

opportunists' from 1959. Because my mother had received a warning for

her 'right-wing tendencies' in 1959, in 1962 she was raised from Grade

17 to Grade 16 in her civil service rank as compensation. There was

greater literary and artistic freedom. A more relaxed general

atmosphere prevailed. For my father and mother, as for many others,

the regime seemed to be showing it could correct and learn from its

mistakes and that it could work and this restored their confidence in

it.

While all this was going on I lived in a cocoon behind the high walls

of the government compound. I had no direct contact with tragedy. It

was with these 'noises off' that I embarked on my teens.

13.

"Thousand-Gold

Ultle Precious' In a Priwlelled Cocoon

(1P58-1965)

When my mother took me to register at primary school in 1958, I was

wearing a new pink cord jacket and green flannel trousers with a huge

pink ribbon in my hair. We went straight into the office of the

headmistress, who was waiting for us with the academic supervisor and

one of the teachers. They were all smiling, and they addressed my

mother respectfully as "Director Xia' and treated her like a V.I.P.

Later I learned that the school came under my mother's depariment.

I had this special

only took children

schools. But even

time, as he and my

interview because I was six, and nor really they

from the age of seven, as there was a shortage of

my father did not mind the rules being bent this

mother both wanted me to start school early. My

180fluent recitation of classical poems and my handsome calligraphy

convinced the school I was advanced enough. After I had satisfied the

headmistress and her colleagues in the standard entrance test, I was

accepted as a special case. My parents were tremendously proud of me.

Many of their

In a Privileged Cocoon 319 colleagues' children had been turned down by

this school.

Everyone wanted to get their children into this school because it was

the best in Chengdu, and the top 'key' school for the whole province.

It was very difficult to get into the key schools and universities.

Entrance was strictly on merit, and children from officials' families

were not given priority.

Whenever I was introduced to a new teacher, it was always as 'the

daughter of Director Chang and Director Xia." My mother often came to

the school on her bicycle as part of her job, to check on how it was

being run. One day the weather suddenly turned cold, and she brought a

warm green cord jacket with flowers embroidered on the front for me.

The headmistress herself came to my classroom to give it to me. I was

terribly embarrassed with all my classmates staring at me. Like most

children, I just wanted to belong and to be accepted as part of my peer

group.

We had exams every week and the results were put up on the notice

board. I was always at the top of the class, which was rather resented

by those behind me. They sometimes took their bitterness out on me by

calling me 'thousand-gold little precious' (qian-jin xiao-jie), doing

things like putting a frog in my desk drawer, and tying the ends of my

plaits to the back of my seat. They said I had no 'collective spirit'

and looked down on others. But I knew I simply liked being on my

own.

The curriculum was like that in a Western school, except during the

period when we had to produce steel. There was no political education,

but we did have to do a lot of sports: running, high jump and long

jump, as well as compulsory, gym and swimming. We each had one after

school sport: I was selected for tennis. At first my father was

against the prospect of my becoming a sportswoman, which was the

purpose of the training, but the tennis coach, a very pretty young

woman, came to see him, dressed in her fetching shorts. Among his

other jobs, my father was

32o "Thousand-Gold Little Precious' in charge of sports for the

province. The coach gave him her most charming smile and told him that

since tennis, the most elegant of sports, was not played much in China

at the time, it would be good if his daughter set an example - 'for the

nation," as she put it. My father had to give in.

I loved my teachers, who were excellent and had the girl of making

their subjects fascinating and exciting. I remember the science

teacher, a Mr. Dali who taught us the theory behind putting a

satellite into orbit (the Russians had just launched the first Sputnik)

and the possibility of visiting other planets. Even the most unruly

boys were glued to their seats during his lessons. I overheard some

pupils saying that he had been a rightist, but none of us knew what

this meant, and it did not make any difference to us.

My mother told me years later that Mr. Dali had been a writer of

children's science fiction. He was named a rightist in 1957 because he

181had written an article about mice stealing food and fattening

themselves up, which was alleged to be a covert attack on Party

officials. He was banned from writing, and was about to be sent to the

countryside when my mother managed to get him relocated to my school.

Few officials were brave enough to reemploy a rightist.

My mother was, and this was the very reason she was in charge of my

school. According to its location, it should have come under the

Western District of Chengdu. But the city authorities assigned it to

my mother's district in the east because they wanted it to have the

best teachers, even if they came from 'undesirable' backgrounds, and

the head of the Public Affairs Department of the Western District would

not dare to give such people jobs. The academic supervisor in my

school was the wife of a former Kuomintang officer who was in a labor

camp. Usually people with a background like hers would not have been

able to occupy a job like this, but my mother refused to transfer them,

and even gave them honorary grades. Her superiors approved, but they

wanted her to take the responsibility for this unorthodox behavior. She

did not mind.

With the implicit additional protection which my father's position

brought her, she felt more secure than her colleagues.

In 1962 my father was invited to send his children to a new school that

had just been set up next to the compound where we lived. It was

called "Plane Tree' after the trees which formed an avenue on the

grounds. The school was set up by the Western District with the

express purpose of making it into a key school, since there was no key

school under the jurisdiction of this district. Good teachers were

transferred to Plane Tree from other schools in the district.

The school soon acquired a reputation as the 'aristocratic school' for

the children of VIPs in the provincial government.

Before Plane Tree was set up there had been one boarding school in

Chengdu, for the children of top army officers. A few senior ci 'vdian

officials also sent their children there. Its academic level was poor,

and it earned a reputation for snobbery, as the children were highly

competitive about their parents. They could often be heard saying

things like: "My father is a division commander.

Yours is ouly a brigadier!" At weekends there were long lines of cars

outside, with nannies, bodyguards, and chauffeurs waiting to take the

children home. Many people thought the atmosphere was poisoning the

children, and my parents had always been totally averse to this

school.

Plane Tree was not set up as an exclusive school, and after meeting the

headmaster and some of the teachers, my parents felt that it was

committed to high ethical standards and discipline. There were only

about twenty-five pupils in each year. Even in my previous school

there had been fifty pupils in my class. The advantages of Plane Tree

were, of course, partly intended for the benefit of the top

322 "Thousand-Gold Little Precious' officials who lived next door, but

my newly mellowed father overlooked this fact.

Most of my new classmates were children of officials in the provincial

government. Some lived in the compound with me. Apart from school,

the compound was my entire world. The gardens were filled with flowers

and luxuriant plants. There were palm trees, sisal hemps, oleanders,

182magnolias, camellias, roses, hibiscus, and even a pair of rare Chinese

aspens which had grown toward each other and intertwined their arms,

like lovers. They were very sensitive, too. If we scratched one of

the trunks even ever so gently the two trees would tremble and their

leaves would start to flutter. During the summer lunch breaks I would

sit on a drum-shaped stone stool under a trellis of wisteria, my elbows

resting on a stone table reading a book or playing chess. Around me

were the blazing colors of the grounds and not far away a rare coconut

tree thrust arrogantly into the sky. My favorite, though, was a

heavily scented jasmine, also climbing on a big trellis. When it was

in blossom, my room was filled with its fragrance. I loved to sit by

the window gazing at it and soaking up the delicious smell.

When we first moved into the compound we lived in a lovely detached

one-story house set in its own courtyard.

It was built in traditional Chinese style, with no modern facilities:

no running water indoors, no flush toilet, no ceramic bath. In 1961,

some modern Western-type apartments with all these amenities were built

in one corner of the compound, and my family was assigned one of

them.

Before we moved in, I visited this wonderland and examined all the

novel and magical taps and flush toilets and mirrored cupboards on the

walls. I ran my hand along the shiny white files on the walls of the

bathrooms. They felt cool and pleasant to the touch.

There were thirteen apartment blocks in the compound.

Four were for the directors of departments, the rest for bureau chiefs.

Our apartment occupied a whole floor,

whereas the bureau chiefs had to share a floor between two families.

Our rooms were more spacious. We had anti mosquito screens on our

inner windows, which they did not, and two bathrooms, while they had

only one. We had hot water three days a week, whereas they had none.

We had a telephone, which was extremely rare in China, and they did

not. Lesser officials occupied blocks in a smaller compound on the

other side of the street, and their amenities were one grade lower

still. The half-dozen Party secretaries who formed the core of the

provincial leadership had their own inner compound within our compound.

This inner sanctum lay behind two gates, which were guarded

around-the-clock by army guards with guns, and only specially

authorized personnel were allowed through.

Inside these gates were detached two-story houses, one for each Party

secretary. On the doorstep of the first secretary, Li Jing-quan, stood

yet another armed guard. I grew up taking hierarchy and privilege for

granted.

All adults working in the main compound had to show their passes when

they came through the main gate. We children had no passes, but the

guards recognized us.

Things became complicated if we had visitors. They had to fill out

forms, then the porter's lodge would ring our apartment and someone had

to go all the way down to the front gate to collect them. The staff

did not welcome other children. They said they did not want the

grounds messed up. This discouraged us from bringing friends home, and

during the whole of my four years in the top key school I invited

girlfriends home only a very few times.

183I hardly ever went outside the compound except to go to school. A few

times I went to a depa~is,lent store with my grandmother, but I never

felt the need to buy anything.

Shopping was an alien concept to me, and my parents gave me pocket

money only on special occasions. Our canteen was like a restaurant,

and served excellent food. Except during the famine, there were always

at least seven or eight dishes from which to choose. The chefs were

handpicked,

and were all either 'grade one' or 'special grade." Top chefs were

graded like teachers. At home, there were always sweets and fruit.

There was nothing else I wanted to eat except ice 1ollies. Once, on

Children's Day, I June, when I was given some pocket money, I ate

twenty-six in one go.

Life in the compound was self-contained. It had its own shops,

hairdressers, cinemas, and dance halls, as well as plumbers and

engineers. Dancing was very popular. On weekends there were different

dancing parties for the different levels of staff in the provincial

government. The one in the former US servicemen's ballroom was for

families at and above the level of bureau chief. It always had an

orchestra, and actors and actresses from the Provincial Song and Dance

Troupe to make it more colorful and elegant. Some of the actresses

used to come to our apartment to chat with my parents, and then they

would take me for a walk around the compound. I was terribly proud to

be seen in their company, as actors and actresses were endowed with

tremendous glamour in China. They enjoyed special tolerance and were

allowed to dress more flamboyantly than other people, and even to have

affairs.

Since the troupe came under his department, my father was their boss.

But they did not defer to him like other people. They used to tease

him and call him 'the star dancer." My father just smiled and looked

shy. The dancing was a kind of casual ballroom dancing, and the

couples glided up and down rather demurely on the highly polished

floor. My father was indeed a good dancer, and he obviously enjoyed

himself. My mother was no good at it she could not get the rhythm

right, so she did not like it.

During the intervals, the children were allowed onto the dance floor,

and we pulled each other by the hands and did a kind of floor skiing.

The atmosphere, the heat, the perfume, the glamorously dressed ladies

and beaming gentlemen formed a dreamy, magical world for me.

There were films every Saturday evening. In 1962, with the more

relaxed atmosphere, there were even some from

Hong Kong, mostly love stories. They gave a glimpse of the outside

world, and were very popular. There were also, of course, uplifting

revolutionary films. The screenings were held in two different places,

according to status. The elite one was in a spacious hall with big,

comfortable seats.

The other was in a large auditorium in a separate compound and was

jam-packed. I went there once because it was showing a film I wanted

to see. The seats had all been taken long before the film started.

Latecomers had to bring their own stools. Lots of people were

standing. If you were stuck at the back, you had to stand on a chair

to see anything. I had no idea it was going to be like this, and had

184not brought a stool. I was caught in the crush at the back, unable to

see a thing. I glimpsed a chef I knew who was standing on a short

bench which could seat two people.

When he saw me squeezing past, he asked me to get on it with him.

was very narrow and I felt terribly unsteady.

It

People kept pushing by, and soon one of them knocked me off. I fell

quite hard and cut my eyebrow on the edge of a stool. The scar is

still there today.

In our elite hall there were more restricted films which were not shown

to anyone else, even the staff in the big auditorium. These were

called 'reference films' and were made up mostly of clips of films from

the West. This was the first time I ever saw a miniskirt or the

Beatles. I remember one film showed a Peeping Tom at the seaside;

the women he had been peeping at poured a bucket of water over him.

Another extract from a documentary showed abstract painters using a

chimpanzee to daub ink on a sheet of paper and a man playing the piano

with his bottom.

I suppose these must have been selected to show how decadent the West

was. They were only for high Party officials, and even they were

denied access to most information about the West. Occasionally, a film

from the West was shown in a small screening room where children were

not allowed. I was intensely curious and begged my parents to take me.

They agreed a couple of times. By then my father had become quite soft

with us. There was a guard at the door, but because I was with my

parents, he did not object. The films were totally beyond me. One

seemed to be about an American pilot going mad after dropping an atom

bomb on Japan. The other was a black-and-white feature film. In one

scene a trade union leader was punched by two thugs in a car: blood

trickled out of the corner of his mouth. I was absolutely horrified.

This was the first time in my life I had ever seen an act of violence

with blood being shed (corporal punishment in schools had been

abolished by the Communists). Chinese films in those days were gentle,

sentimental, and uplifting; if there was even a hint of violence it was

stylized, as in Chinese opera.

I was baffled by the way the Western workers were dressed in neat suits

that were not even patched, a far cry from my idea of what the

oppressed masses in a capitalist country ought to be wearing. After

the film I asked my mother about this and she said something about

'relative living standards." I did not understand what she meant, and

the question remained with me.

As a child, my idea of the West was that it was a miasma of poverty and

misery, like that of the homeless "Little Match Girl' in the Hans

Christian Andersen story. When I was in the boarding nursery and did

not want to finish my food, the teacher would say: "Think of all the

starving children in the capitalist world!" In school, when they were

trying to make us work harder, the teachers often said:

"You are lucky to have a school to go to and books to read.

In the capitalist countries children have to work to support their

hungry families." Often when adults wanted us to accept something they

would say that people in the West wanted it, but could not get it, and

therefore we should appreciate our good fortune. I came to think this

way automatically. When I saw a girl in my class wearing a new kind of

185pink translucent raincoat I had never seen, I thought how nice it would

be to swap my commonplace old

In a Privileged Cocoon 3 z7 wax-paper umbrella for one. But I

immediately castigated myself for this 'bourgeois' tendency, and wrote

in my diary: "Think of all the children in the capitalist world they

can't even think of owning an umbrella!"

In my mind foreigners were terrifying. All Chinese have black hair and

brown eyes, so they regard differently colored hair and eyes as

strange. My image of a foreigner was more or less the official

stereotype: a man with red, unkempt hair, strange-colored eyes, very,

very long nose, stumbling around drunk, pouring Coca-Cola into his

mouth from a bottle, with his legs splayed out in a most inelegant

position. Foreigners said 'hello' all the time, with an odd

intonation. I did not know what 'hello' meant; I thought it was a

swear word. When boys played 'guerrilla warfare," which was their

version of cowboys and Indians, the enemy side would have thorns glued

onto their noses and say 'hello' all the time.

During my third year in primary school, when I was nine, my classmates

and I decided to decorate our classroom with plants. One of the girls

suggested she could get some unusual ones from a garden which her

father looked after at a Catholic church on Safe Bridge Street. There

had once been an orphanage attached to the church, but it had been

closed down. The church was still functioning, under the control of

the government, which had forced Catholics to break with the Vatican

and join a 'patriotic' organization. The idea of a church was both

mysterious and frightening, because of the propaganda about religion.

The first time I ever heard about rape was reading about one attributed

to a foreign priest in a novel. Priests also invariably appeared as

imperialist spies and evil people who used babies from orphanages for

medical experiments.

Every day on my way to and from school, I used to walk past the top of

scholar-tree-lined Safe Bridge Street and see the profile of the church

gate. To my Chinese eye, it had the most alien-looking pillars: they

were made of white marble, and were fluted in the Greek style,

whereas

3z8 "Thousand-Gold Little Precious' Chinese pillars were always made of

painted wood. I was dying to look inside, and had asked the girl to

let me visit her home, but she said her father did not want her to

bring any visitors. This only increased the mystery. When this girl

offered to get some plants from her garden I eagerly volunteered to go

with her.

As we approached the church gate I tensed up and my heart almost

stopped beating. It seemed to be the most imposing gate I had ever

seen. My friend stood on tiptoe and reached up to bang a metal ring on

the gate. A small door creaked open in the gate, revealing a wrinkled

old man, bent almost double. To me he seemed like a witch in one of

the illustrations in a fairy tale. Although I could not see his face

clearly, I imagined that he had a long hooked nose and pointed hat and

was about to ride up into the sky on a broomstick. The fact that he

was of a different sex from a witch was irrelevant to me. Avoiding

looking at him, I hurried through the doorway. Immediately in front of

me was a garden in a small, neat courtyard. I was so nervous I could

not see what was in it. My eyes could only register a proliferation of

colors and shapes, and a small fountain trickling in the middle of a

186rockery. My friend took my hand and led me along the arcade around the

courtyard. On the far side, she opened a door and told me that that

was where the priest delivered his sermons.

Sermons! I had come across this word in a book in which the priest

used his 'sermon' to pass state secrets to another imperialist spy. I

tensed up even more when I crossed the threshold into a large, dark

room, which seemed to be a hall; for a moment I could not see anything.

Then I saw a statue at the end of the hall. This was my first

encounter with a crucifix. As I got nearer, the figure on the cross

seemed to be hovering over me, enormous and crushing.

The blood, the posture, and the expression on the face combined to

produce an utterly terrifying sensation. I turned and dashed out of

the church. Outside, I nearly collided with a man in a black robe. He

stretched out a hand to steady me; I thought he was trying to grab me,

and dodged and rushed away. Somewhere behind me a heavy door creaked.

The next moment it was terrifyingly still except for the murmuring of

the fountain. I opened the small door in the front gate and ran all

the way to the end of the street without stopping. My heart was

pounding and my head was spinning.

Unlike me, my brother Jin-ming, who was born a year after me, was

independent-minded from a young age. He loved science and read a lot

of popular scientific magazines.

Although these, like all other publications, carried the inevitable

propaganda, they did report advances in science and technology in the

West, and these impressed Jin-ming enormously. He was fascinated by

photographs of lasers, Hovercraft, helicopters, electronics, and cars

in these magazines, in addition to the glimpses he got of the West in

the 'reference films." He began to feel that school, the media, and

adults in general could not be trusted when they said that the

capitalist world was hell and China was paradise.

The United States in particular caught Jin-ming's imagination as the

country with the most highly developed technology. One day when he was

eleven and was excitedly describing new developments in lasers in

America over the dinner table, he said to my father that he adored

America.

My father was at a loss about how to respond, and looked deeply

worried. Eventually he strokedJin-ming's head and said to my mother,

"What can we do? This child is going to grow up to become a

rightist!"

Before he was twelve, Jin-ming had made a number of 'inventions' based

on illustrations in children's science books, including a telescope

with which he tried to observe Halley's Comet and a microscope using

glass from a light bulb. One day he was trying to improve a repeating

rubberband 'gun' which fired small stones and yew nuts. In order to

create the right sound effect he asked a classmate of his,

whose father was an army officer, to find him some empty bullet

casings. His friend got hold of some bullets, took off the ends,

emptied out the gunpowder, and gave them to Jin-ming without realizing

that the detonators were still inside. Jin-ming filled a shell with a

cut-up toothpaste tube and held it over the coal stove in the kitchen

with tongs to bake it. There was a kettle sitting on a grill over the

coal, and Jin-ming was holding the tongs under it when suddenly there

was an enormous bang, and a big hole in the bottom of the kettle.

187Everyone rushed in to see what had happened. Jin-ming was terrified.

Not because of the explosion, but because of my father, who was a very

intimidating figure.

But my father did not hit Jin-ming, or even scold him.

He just looked at him hard for a while, then said he was already scared

enough, and should go outside and take a walk. Jin-ming was so

relieved he could hardly keep from jumping up and down. He never

thought he would get off so easily. After his walk, my father said he

was not to do any more experiments without being supervised by an

adult. But he did not enforce this order for long, and soon Jin-ming

was carrying on as before.

I helped him with a couple of his projects. Once we made a model

pulverizer powered by tap water which could crush chalk into powder.

Jin-ming provided the brains and the skill, of course. My interest

never lasted.

Jin-ming went to the same key primary school as I did.

Mr. Dali the science teacher who had been condemned as a rightist,

also taught him, and played a crucial role in opening up the world of

science to him. Jin-ming has remained deeply grateful to him all his

life.

My second brother, Xiao-her, who was born in 1954, was my grandmother's

favorite, but he did not get much attention from my father and mother.

One of the reasons was that they thought he got enough affection from

my grandmother. Sensing he was not in favor, Xiao-her became defensive

toward my parents. This irritated them,

especially my father, who could not stand anything he considered un

straightforward

Sometimes he was so enraged by Xiao-her that he beat him. But he would

regret it afterward, and at the first opportunity he would stroke

Xiao-her on the head and tell him he was sorry he had lost control of

his temper. My grandmother would have a tearful row with my father,

and he would accuse her of spoiling Xiao-her. This was a constant

source of tension between them. Inevitably, my grandmother grew even

more attached to Xiao-her and spoiled him even more.

My parents thought that only their sons should be scolded and hit, and

not their daughters. One of the only two times when my sister,

Xiao-hong, was hit was when she was five. She had insisted on eating

sweets before a meal, and when the food came she complained that she

could not taste anything because of the sweet taste in her mouth. My

father told her she had only got what she wanted. Xiao-hong took

umbrage at this and started yelling and threw her chopsticks across the

dining room. My father smacked her and she grabbed a feather duster to

hit him. He snatched the duster away from her, so she got hold of a

broom. After some scuffling, my father locked her in our bedroom and

kept saying, "Too spoiled! Too spoiled!" My sister missed her

lunch.

Xiao-hong was quite willful as a child. For some reason, she

absolutely refused to watch films or plays, or to travel.

And there were a lot of things she hated eating: she would scream her

head off when she was fed milk, beef, or lamb.

188When I was a child, I followed her example, and missed out on many

films and a lot of delicious food.

My character was very different, and people said I was both sensible

and sensitive (dong-shl) well before my teens.

My parents never laid a hand on me or said a harsh word to me. Even

their rare criticisms were delivered extremely delicately, as if I were

a grown-up and easily wounded.

They gave me plenty of love, particularly my father, who always took

his after-supper walk with me, and often took me with him when he

visited his friends. Most of his closest friends were veteran

rev,~lutionaries, intelligent and able, and they all seemed to have

something 'wrong' in their pasts in the eyes of the Party, and so had

been given only lowly posts. One had been in the branch of the Red

Army led by Mao's challenger Zhang Guo-tao. Another was a Don Juan-

his wife, a Party official whom my father always tried to avoid, was

insufferably stern. I enjoyed these adult gatherings, but I liked

nothing better than to be alone with my books, which I sat reading all

day during my school holidays, chewing the ends of my hair. Apart from

literature, including some reasonably simple classical poems, I loved

science fiction and adventure stories. I remember one book about a man

spending what seemed to him to be a few days on another planet and

coming back to earth in the twenty-first century, finding everything

had changed.

People ate food capsules, traveled by Hovercraft, and had telephones

with video screens. I longed to be living in the twenty-first century

with all these magic gadgets.

I spent my childhood racing toward the future, hurrying to be an adult,

and was always daydreaming about what I would do when I was older. From

the moment I could read and write, I preferred books with substantial

amounts of words to picture books. I was also impatient in every other

way: when I had a sweet, I would never suck it, but bit into it and

chewed it at once. I even chewed my cough lozenges.

My siblings and I got on unusually well. Traditionally, boys and girls

seldom played together, but we were good friends and cared about each

other. There was little jealousy or competitiveness, and we rarely had

rows. Whenever my sister saw me crying, she would burst into tears

herself. She did not mind hearing people praising me. The good

relationship between us was much commented on, and parents of other

children were constantly asking my parents how they did it.

Between them my parents and my grandmother provided a loving family

atmosphere. We saw only affection between our parents, never their

quarrels. My mother never showed us her disenchantment with my father.

After the famine, my parents, like most officials, were no longer as

passionately devoted to their work as they had been in the 195os.

Family life took a more prominent place, and was no longer equated with

disloyalty. My father, now over forty, mellowed and became closer to

my mother. My parents spent more time together, and as I was growing

up I often saw evidence of their love for each other.

One day I heard my father telling my mother about a compliment paid to

her by one of his colleagues, whose wife had the reputation of being a

beauty.

189"The two of us are lucky to have such outstanding wives," he had said

to my father.

"Look around: they stand out from everyone else." My father was

beaming, recalling the scene with restrained delight.

"I smiled politely, of course," he said.

"But I was really thinking, How can you compare your wife with mine? My

wife is in a class of her own!"

Once my father went away on a three-week sight-seeing tour for the

directors of the Public Affairs departments of every province in China,

which was to take them all over the country. It was the only such tour

ever given in the whole of my father's career and was supposed to be a

special treat. The group enjoyed V.I.P treatment all the way, and a

photographer traveled with them, recording their progress. But my

father was restless. By the start of the third week, when the tour had

reached Shanghai, he missed home so much that he said he did not feel

well, and flew back to Chengdu. Forever afterward, my mother would

call him a 'silly old thing."

"Your home wouldn't have flown away. I wouldn't have disappeared. Not

in that week, anyway. What a chance you missed to have fun!" I always

had a feeling when she said this that she was really quite pleased

about my father's 'silly homesickness."

In their relationship with their children, my parents seemed to be

concerned above all with two things. One was our academic education.

No matter how preoccupied they were with their jobs, they always went

through our homework with us. They were in constant touch with our

teachers, and firmly established in our heads that our goal in life was

academic excellence. Their involvement in our studies increased after

the famine, when they had more spare time. Most evenings, they took

turns giving us extra lessons.

My mother was our math teacher, and my father tutored us in Chinese

language and literature. These evenings were solemn occasions for us,

when we were allowed to read my father's books in his study, which was

lined from floor to ceiling with thick hardbacks and thread-bound

Chinese classics. We had to wash our hands before we turned the leaves

of his books. We read Lu Xun, the great modern Chinese writer, and

poems from the golden ages of Chinese poetry, which were considered

difficult even for adults.

My parents' attention to our studies was matched only by their concern

for our education in ethics. My father wanted us to grow up to be

honorable and principled citizens, which was what he believed the

Communist revolution was all about. In keeping with Chinese tradition,

he gave a name to each of my brothers which represented his ideals:

Zhi, meaning 'honest," to Jin-ming; Pu, 'unpretentious," to Xiao-her;

and Fang, 'incorruptible," was part of Xiao-fang's name. My father

believed that these were the qualities which had been lacking in the

old China and which the Communists were going to restore. Corruption,

in particular, had sapped the old China. Once he rebuked Jin-ming for

making a paper airplane out of a sheet of paper with his dep~iment

letterhead on it. If we ever wanted to use the telephone at home we

had to get his permission. As his job covered the media, he was

supplied with a lot of newspapers and periodicals. He encouraged us to

read them, but they could not be taken out of his study. At the end of

the month he took them back to his department, as old newspapers were

190sold for recycling. I spent many tedious Sundays helping him check

that not one was missing.

My father was always very strict with us, which was a constant source

of tension between him and my grandmother, and between him and us. In

1965 one of the daughters of Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia came to

Chengdu to give a ballet performance. This was a great novelty in a

society which was almost totally isolated. I was dying to see the

ballet. Because of his job, my father was given complimentary tickets,

the best, for all new performances, and he often took me. This time,

for some reason, he could not go. He gave me a ticket but said I had

to exchange it with somebody with a seat at the back so that I would

not be in the best seat.

That evening I stood by the door of the theater, holding my ticket in

my hand, while the audience crowded in all, in fact, with complimentary

tickets, allocated according to their rank. A good quarter of an hour

passed and I was still by the door. I was too embarrassed to ask

anyone to swap. Eventually the number of people going in thinned out;

the performance was about to start. I was on the verge of tears,

wishing I had a different father. At that moment I saw a junior

official from my father's department. I summoned up my courage and

pulled the edge of his jacket from behind. He smiled and immediately

agreed to let me have his seat, which was right at the back. He was

not surprised. My father's strictness to his children was legendary in

our compound.

For Chinese New Year, 1965, a special performance was organized for

schoolteachers. This time my father went to the performance with me,

but instead of letting me sit with him, he exchanged my ticket for one

at the very back. He said it was inappropriate for me to sit in front

of the teachers. I could hardly see the stage, and felt miserable.

Later I heard from the teachers how much they appreciated his

sensitivity. They had been annoyed at seeing other high officials'

children lounging on the front seats in a manner which they regarded as

disrespectful.

Throughout China's history there was a tradition of officials' children

being arrogant and abusing their privileges. This caused widespread

resentment. Once a new guard in the compound did not recognize a

teenage girl who lived there and refused to let her in. She screamed

at him and hit him with her satchel. Some children talked to the

chefs, chauffeurs, and other staff in a rude and imperious manner. They

would call them by their names, which a younger person should never do

in China it is supremely disrespectful. I will never forget the pained

look in the eyes of a chef in our canteen when the son of one of my

father's colleagues took some food back and said it was no good, and

shouted out his name. The chef was deeply wounded, but said nothing.

He did not want to displease the boy's father. Some parents did

nothing about this kind of behavior by their children, but my father

was outraged.

Often he said: "These officials are no Communists."

My parents regarded it as very important that their children should be

brought up to be courteous and respectful to everyone. We called the

service staff "Uncle' or "Aunt' So-and-so, which was the traditional

polite form for a child addressing an adult. After we had finished our

meal, we always took the dirty bowls and chopsticks back to the

kitchen. My father told us we should do this as a courtesy to the

191chefs, as otherwise they would have to clear the tables themselves.

These small things earned us immense affection from the compound staff.

The chefs would keep food warm for us if we were late. The gardeners

used to give me flowers or fruit. And the chauffeur happily made

detours to pick me up and drop me home this was strictly behind my

father's back, as he would never let us use the car without him being

there.

Our modern apartment was on the third floor, and our balcony looked

down on a narrow alley of mud and cobbles outside the compound wall.

One side of the alley was the brick wall of the compound; the other was

a row of thin wooden one-story terraced houses, typical of poor

people's dwellings in Chengdu. The houses had mud floors and no

toilets or running water. Their facades were made out of vertical

planks, two of which served as the door. The front room led directly

into another room, which led to another, and a row of several such

rooms formed the house. The back room opened onto another street.

Since the side walls of the house were shared with neighbors, these

houses had no windows. The inhabitants had to leave the doors at both

ends open to let in light or air. Often, especially on hot summer

evenings, they would sit on the narrow pavement, reading, sewing, or

chatting. From the pavement they could look straight up at the

spacious balconies of our apartments with their shiny glass windows. My

father said we must not offend the feelings of the people living in the

alley, and so he forbade us to play on the balcony.

On summer evenings, boys from the huts in the alley often used to walk

through the streets peddling anti mosquito incense. They sang a

special tune to attract attention to their wares. My evening reading

used to be punctuated by this lingering, sad tune. Through my father's

constant reminding, I knew that being able to study undisturbed in a

big, cool room with a parquet floor and mosquito-netted open windows

was an enormous privilege.

"You must not think you are superior to them," he would say.

"You are just lucky to be here. You know why we need communism? So

that everyone can live in a good house like ours, and in much better

ones."

My father said things like this so often that I grew up feeling ashamed

of my privileges. Sometimes boys from the compound would stand on

their balconies and mimic the tune the young peddlers sang. I felt

ashamed when they did this. When I went out with my father in his car,

I was always embarrassed when the car honked through the crowds. If

people stared into the car, I would sink down in my seat and try to

avoid their gaze.

In my early teens I was a very serious girl. I liked to be on my own,

thinking, often about moral issues that confused me. I had become

rather lukewarm about games and fairgrounds and playing with other

children, and rarely gossiped with other girls. Although I was

sociable and popular, there always seemed to be a certain distance

between me and the others. In China people easily become familiar with

one another, particularly women. But ever since I was a child, I have

always wanted to be left alone.

My father noticed this side of my character, and would comment on it

with approval. While my teachers constantly said I should have more

'collective spirit," he told me that familiarity and living on top of

each other could be a destructive thing. With this encouragement, I

192kept my privacy and my space. There are no exact words for these two

concepts in the Chinese language, but they were instinctively yearned

for by many, certainly by my siblings as well as me. Jin-ming, for

instance, insisted so strongly on being allowed to lead his own life

that he was sometimes thought by those who did not know him to be

antisocial; in fact he was gregarious and extremely popular with his

peers.

My father often said to us, "I think it is marvelous that your mother

has this policy of "letting you roam free on the pasture." Our parents

left us alone and respected our need to keep our separate worlds.

14. "Father Is Close, Mother Is Close, but Neither Is as Close as

Chairman Mao' The Cult of Mao (1964-1965)

"Chairman Mao," as we always called him, began to impinge directly on

my life in 1964, when I was twelve.

Having been in retreat for some time after the famine, he was starting

his comeback, and in March of the previous year he had issued a call to

the whole country, particularly the young, to 'learn from Lei Feng."

Lei Feng was a soldier who, we were told, had died at the age of

twenty-two in 1962. He had done an awful lot of good deeds going out

of his way a help the elderly, the sick, and the needy. He had donated

his savings to disaster relief funds and given up his food rations to

comrades in the hospital.

Lei Feng soon began to dominate my life. Every afternoon we left

school to 'do good deeds like Lei Feng." We went down to the railway

station to try to help old ladies with their luggage, as Lei Feng had

done. We sometimes had to grab their bundles from them forcibly

because some

340 '... but Neither Is as Close as Chairman Mao' countrywomen thought

we were thieves. On rainy days, I stood on the street with an

umbrella, anxiously hoping that an old lady would pass by and give me

an opportunity to escort her home as Lei Feng had done. If I saw

someone carrying water buckets on a shoulder pole old houses still did

not have running water t would try unsuccessfully to summon up the

courage to offer my help, although I had no idea how heavy a load of

water was.

Gradually, during the course of 1964, the emphasis began to shift from

boy scoutish good deeds to the cult of Mao. The essence of Lei Feng,

the teachers told us, was his 'boundless love and devotion to Chairman

Mao."

Before he took any action, Lei Feng always thought of some words of

Mao's. His diary was published and became our moral textbook. On

almost every page there was a pledge like: "I must study Chairman Mao's

works, heed Chairman Mao's words, follow Chairman Mao's instructions,

and be a good soldier of Chairman Mao's." We vowed to follow Lei Feng,

and be ready to 'go up mountains of knives and down seas of flames," to

'have our bodies smashed to powder and our bones crushed to

smithereens," to 'submit ourselves unquestioningly to the control of

the Great Leader' Mao. The cult of Mao and the cult of Lei Feng were

two sides of the same coin: one was the cult of personality; the other,

its essential corollary, was the cult of impersonality.

I read my first article by Mao in 1964, at a time when two slogans of

193Mao's - "Serve the People' and "Never Forget Class Struggle' dominated

our lives. The essence of these two complementary slogans was

illustrated in Lei Feng's poem "The Four Seasons," which we all learned

by heart:

Like spring, I treat my comrades warmly.

Like summer, I am full of ardor for my revolutionary work.

The Cult of ,"rlao I eliminate my individualism as an autumn gale

sweeps away fallen leaves, And to the class enemy, I am cruel and

ruthless like harsh winter.

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In line with this, our teacher said we had to be careful whom we helped

on our do-good errands. We must not help 'class enemies." But I did

not understand who they were, and when I asked, neither the teachers

nor my parents were keen to elaborate. One common answer was:

'like the baddies in the movies." But I could not see anyone around me

who looked like the highly stylized enemy characters in the movies.

This posed a big problem. I no longer felt sure about seizing bags

from old ladies. I could not possibly ask, "Are you a class enemy?"

We sometimes went to clean the houses in an alley next to our school.

In one house there was a young man who used to lounge on a bamboo chair

watching us with a cynical smile as we toiled away on his windows. Not

only did he not offer to help, he even wheeled his bicycle out of the

shed and suggested we clean that for him as well.

"What a pity," he once said, 'that you are not the real Lei Feng, and

that there are no photographers on hand to take your pictures for the

newspapers." (Lei Feng's good deeds were miraculously recorded by an

official photographer.) We all hated the lounger with the dirty

bicycle. Could he be a class enemy? But we knew he worked at a

machinery factory, and workers, we had been repeatedly told, were the

best, the leading class in our revolution. I was confused.

One of the things I had been doing was helping to push carts on the

streets after school. The carts were often piled high with cement

blocks or chunks of sandstone. They were terribly heavy, and every

step was an enormous effort for the men who pulled them. Even in cold

weather, some would be bare-chested, and shiny beads of sweat trickled

down their faces and backs. If the road was even slightly uphill, it

was very hard for some of them to keep going.

Whenever I saw them, I was attacked by a wave of sadness.

Since the campaign to learn from Lei Feng had started, I had stood by a

ramp waiting for carts to pass. I would be exhausted after helping to

push just one of them. As I left off, the man pulling would give me an

almost imperceptible sideways smile, trying not to break his stride and

lose momentum.

One day a classmate said to me in a very serious tone of voice that

most of the people pulling carts were class enemies who had been

assigned to do hard labor. Therefore, she told me, it was wrong to

help them. I asked my teacher, since I, in accordance with Chinese

tradition, always turned to teachers for authority. But instead of her

normal air of confidence, she looked unsettled and said she did not

194know the answer, which puzzled me. In fact, it was actually true that

people pulling carts had often been assigned the job because they had

Kuomintang links, or because they were victims of one of the political

purges.

My teacher obviously did not want to tell me this, but she did ask me

to stop helping to push carts. From then on, every time I happened on

a cart in the street, I averted my eyes from the bent figure trudging

along and quickly walked away with a heavy heart.

To fill us with hatred for class enemies, the schools started regular

sessions of 'recalling bitterness and reflecting on happiness," at

which older people would tell us about the miseries of pre-Communist

China. Our generation had been born 'under the red flag' in new China,

and had no idea what life was like under the Kuomintang.

Lei Feng had, we were taught, which was why he could hate the class

enemies so deeply and love Chairman Mao with all his heart. When he

was seven, his mother was supposed to have hanged herself after being

raped by a landlord.

Workers and peasants came to give talks at our school:

we heard of childhoods dominated by starvation, freezing winters with

no shoes, and premature, painful deaths. They

told us how boundlessly grateful they were to Chairman Mao for saving

their lives and giving them food and clothing. One speaker was a member

of an ethnic group called the Yi, who had a system of slavery until the

late 195os.

He had been a slave and showed us scars from appalling beatings under

his previous masters. Every time the speakers described the hardships

they had endured the packed hall was shaken by sobs. I came out of

these sessions feeling devastated at what the Kuomintang had done, and

passionately devoted to Mao.

To show us what life without Mao would be like, every now and then the

school canteen cooked something called a 'bitterness meal," which was

supposed to be what poor people had to eat under the Kuomintang. It

was composed of strange herbs, and I secretly wondered whether the

cooks were playing a practical joke on us it was truly unspeakable. The

first couple of times I vomited.

One day we were taken to an exhibition of 'class education' about

Tibet: on display were photos of dungeons crawling with scorpions, and

horrific instruments of torture, including a tool for scooping out eyes

and knives for cutting the tendons in the ankles. A man in a

wheelchair who came to our school to give a talk told us he was a

former serf from Tibet who had had his ankle tendons severed for some

trivial offense.

Since 1964, large houses had also been opened as 'museums of class

education' to show how class enemies like landlords had lived in luxury

on the sweat and blood of the peasants before Mao came. During the

holiday for Chinese New Year in 1965, my father took us to a famous

mansion two and a half hours' drive from home. Underneath the

political justification, the journey was really an excuse for an outing

to the countryside in early spring, in accordance with the Chinese

tradition of 'walking on the tender green' (ta-qing) to welcome the

season. This was one of the few occasions that my family ever went on

195a trip out to the country.

As the car drove across the green Chengdu Plain along the

eucalyptus-lined asphalt road, I looked intently out of the window at

the lovely bamboo groves embracing the farmhouses, and the curving

smoke lingering above the thatched cottages peeping between the bamboo

leaves.

Occasionally, a branch of early plum blossom was reflected in the

streams that meandered around almost every thicket.

My father had asked us all to write an essay after the trip, describing

the scenery, and I observed everything with great care. There was one

sight which puzzled me: the few trees dotted around the fields were

completely stripped of their branches and leaves except for the very

top, and looked like bare flagpoles with a cap of green. My father

explained that firewood was scarce on the densely cultivated Chengdu

Plain, and that the peasants had cut off as many branches as they could

reach. What he did not tell me was that there had been many more trees

until a few years before, but most of them had been cut down to feed

the furnaces to produce steel during the Great Leap Forward.

The countryside seemed extremely prosperous. The market town where we

stopped for lunch was teeming with peasants in bright new clothes, the

older ones wearing shiny white turbans and clean dark-blue aprons.

Golden roast ducks glowed in the windows of the packed restaurants.

Deliciously scented clouds burst out of the lids of huge bamboo

steamers in the stalls on the crowded streets. Our car crawled through

the market to the local government offices, which were in a mansion

with two stone lions squatting outside the gate. My father had lived

in this county during the famine in 196I, and now, four years later,

the local officials wanted to show him how much had changed. They took

us to a restaurant where a private room had been reserved for us. As

we squeezed through the crowded restaurant the peasants stared at us,

obvious outsiders ushered in respectfully by the local bosses. I saw

that the tables were covered with strange,

mouth-watering dishes. I had hardly ever eaten anything except what we

were given in our canteen, and the food in this market town was full of

lovely surprises. It had novel names too: "Pearl Balls,"

"Three Gunshots," "Lions' Heads." Afterward the manager of the

restaurant said goodbye to us on the pavement while the local peasants

gawked at our entourage.

On the way to the museum, our car overtook an open truck with some boys

and girls from my school in it. They were obviously going to the

'class-education' mansion as well. One of my teachers was standing on

the back. She smiled at me, and I shrank down in my seat with

embarrassment at the difference between our chauffeur-driven car and

the open truck on the bumpy road in the cold early spring air. My

father was sitting in front with my youngest brother on his lap. He

recognized my teacher and smiled back at her. When he turned around to

attract my attention, he saw that I had completely disappeared. He

beamed with pleasure. My embarrassment showed my good qualities, he

said; it was good that I felt ashamed of privilege rather than

flaunting it.

I found the museum incredibly shocking. There were sculptures of

landless peasants having to pay exorbitant rent. One showed how the

landlord used two different measures: a big one for collecting grain

196and a small one for lending it out at crippling interest, too. There

were also a torture chamber and a dungeon with an iron cage sitting in

filthy water. The cage was too small for a man to be able to stand up

straight, and too narrow for him to sit down. We were told the

landlord used it to punish peasants who could not pay their rent. One

room was said to have housed three wet-nurses who provided him with

human milk, which he believed was the most nutritious kind. His

number-five concubine was said to have eaten thirty ducks a day not the

meat, only the feet, which were considered a great delicacy.

We were not told that the brother of this allegedly inhuman landlord

was now a minister in the government in Peking, having been given the

post as a reward for surrendering Chengdu to the Communists in 1949.

Throughout, while we were being instructed about the 'man-eating days

of the Kuomintang," we were reminded that we should be grateful to

Mao.

The cult of Mao went hand in hand with the manipulation of people's

unhappy memories of their past. Class enemies were presented as

vicious malefactors who wanted to drag China back to the days of the

Kuomintang, which would mean that we children would lose our schools,

our winter shoes, and our food. That was why we had to smash these

enemies, we were told. Chiang Kai-shek was said to have launched

assaults on the mainland and tried to stage a comeback in 1962 during

the 'difficult period' the regime's euphemism for the famine.

In spite of all this talk and activity, class enemies for me, and for

much of my generation, remained abstract, unreal shadows. They were a

thing of the past, too far away. Mao had not been able to give them an

everyday material form.

One reason, paradoxically, was that he had smashed the past so

thoroughly. However, the expectation of an enemy figure was planted in

us.

At the same time, Mao was sowing the seeds for his own deification, and

my contemporaries and I were immersed in this crude yet effective

indoctrination. It worked partly because Mao adroitly occupied the

moral high ground: just as harshness to class enemies was presented as

loyalty to the people, so total submission to him was cloaked in a

deceptive appeal to be selfless. It was very hard to get behind the

rhetoric, particularly when there was no alternative viewpoint from the

adult population. In fact, the adults positively colluded in enhancing

Mao's cult.

For two thousand years China had an emperor figure who was state power

and spiritual authority rolled into one.

The religious feelings which people in other parts of the world have

toward a god have in China always been directed toward the emperor. My

parents, like hundreds of millions of Chinese, were influenced by this

tradition.

Mao made himself more godlike by shrouding himself in mystery. He

always appeared remote, beyond human approach. He eschewed radio, and

there was no television.

Few people, except his court staff, ever had any contact with him. Even

his colleagues at the very top only met him in a sort of formal

audience. After Yan'an, my father only set eyes on him a few times,

197and then only at large-scale meetings. My mother only ever saw him

once, when he came to Chengdu in 1958 and summoned all officials above

Grade I8 to have a group photo taken with him.

After the fiasco of the Great Leap Forward, he had disappeared almost

completely.

Mao, the emperor, fitted one of the patterns of Chinese history: the

leader of a nationwide peasant uprising who swept away a rotten dynasty

and became a wise new emperor exercising absolute authority. And, in a

sense, Mao could be said to have earned his god-emperor status.

He was responsible for ending the civil war and bringing peace and

stability, which the Chinese always yearned for so much that they said

"It's better to be a dog in peacetime than a human being in war." It

was under Mao that China became a power to be reckoned with in the

world, and many Chinese stopped feeling ashamed and humiliated at being

Chinese, which meant a tremendous amount to them. In reality, Mao

turned China back to the days of the Middle Kingdom and, with the help

of the United States, to isolation from the world. He enabled the

Chinese to feel great and superior again, by blinding them to the world

outside. Nonetheless, national pride was so important to the Chinese

that much of the population was genuinely grateful to Mao, and did not

find the cult of his personality offensive, certainly not at first. The

near total lack of access to information and the systematic feeding of

disinformation meant that most Chinese had no way to discriminate

between Mao's successes and his failures, or to identi~ the relative

role of Mao and other leaders in the Communists' achievements.

Fear was never absent in the building up of Mao's cult.

Many people had been reduced to a state where they did not dare even to

think, in case their thoughts came out involuntarily. Even if they did

entertain unorthodox ideas, few mentioned them to their children, as

they might blurt out something to other children, which could bring

disaster to themselves as well as their parents. In the learn-from Lei

Feng years it was hammered into children that our first and only

loyalty should be to Mao. A popular song went: "Father is close,

Mother is close, but neither is as close as Chairman Mao." We were

drilled to think that anyone, including our parents, who was not

totally for Mao was our enemy. Many parents encouraged their children

to grow up as conformists, as this would be safest for their future.

Self-censorship covered even basic information. I never heard of

Yu-lin, or my grandmother's other relatives. Nor was I told about my

mother's detention in 1955, or about the famine in fact, anything that

might sow a gram of doubt in me about the regime, or Mao. My parents,

like virtually every parent in China, never said anything unorthodox to

their children.

In 1965, my New Year resolution was "I will obey my grandmother' - a

traditional Chinese way of promising to behave well. My father shook

his head: "You should not say that. You should only say "I obey

Chairman Mao."

On my thirteenth birthday, in March that year, my father's present was

not his usual books of science ficfon, but a volume containing the four

philosophical works of Mao.

Only one adult ever said anything to me which conflicted with the

official propaganda, and that was the stepmother of Deng Xiaoping, who

198lived some of the time in the apartment block next to ours, with her

daughter, who worked in the provincial government. She liked children,

and I was constantly in and out of her apariment. When my friends and

I stole pickles from the canteen, or picked melon flowers and herbs

from the compound garden, we did not dare to take them home for fear of

being scolded, so we used to go to her apartment, where she would ~ash

and fry them for us. This was all the more exciting because we were

eating something illicit. She was about seven~ then but looked much

younger, with tiny feet and a gentle, smooth, but strong face. She

always wore a gray cotton jacket and black cotton shoes, which she made

herself. She was very relaxed and treated us like equals. I liked

sitting in her kitchen chatting with her. On one occasion, when I was

about thirteen, I went to see her straight after an emotional

'speak-bitterness' session. I was bursting with compassion for anyone

who had had to live under the Kuomintang, and I said: "Grandma Deng,

how you must have suffered under the evil Kuomintang! How the soldiers

must have looted you! And the bloodsucking landlords!

What did they do to you?"

"Well," she answered, 'they didn't always loot ... and they were not

always evil .... Her words hit me like a bombshell. I was so shocked

that I never told anyone what she had said.

At the time, none of us had any idea that the cult of Mao and the

emphasis on class struggle were part of Mao's plans for a showdown with

the president, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping, the general secretary of

the Party. Mao was unhappy about what Liu and Deng were doing. Since

the famine they had been liberalizing both the economy and the society.

To Mao, their approach smacked of capitalism rather than socialism. It

especially galled him that what he called 'the capitalist road' was

proving successful, while his chosen way, the 'correct' way, had turned

out to be a disaster. As a practical man, Mao recognized this, and had

to allow them to have their way. But he planned to impose his ideas

again as soon as the country was in good enough shape to stand the

experiment, and as soon as he could build-up enough momentum to

dislodge his powerful enemies in the Party.

35o '... but Neither Is as Close as Chairman Mao'

Mao found the idea of peaceful progress suffocating. A restless

military leader, a warrior-poet, he needed action violent action and

regarded permanent human snuggle as necessary for social development.

His own Communists had become too tolerant and soft for his taste,

seeking to bring harmony rather than conflict. There had been no

political campaigns, in which people fought each other, since 1959!

And Mao was sore. He felt that his opponents had humiliated him by

showing him up as incompetent. He had to take revenge, and, being

aware that his opponents had widespread support, he needed to increase

his authority hugely. To achieve this, he needed to be deified.

Mao bided his time while the economy was recovering.

But as it improved, especially after 1964, he began to prepare the

grand opening of his confrontation. The relative liberalization of the

early 1960s began to fade.

The weekly dances in the compound stopped in 1964.

So did the films from Hong Kong.

Out went my mother's fluffy bobs; in

199came short, straight hair. Her blouses and jackets were no longer

colorful or figure-hugging. They were made of plain quiet colors and

looked like tubes. I was particularly sorry to see her skirts go. I

remembered how, a short time before, I had watched her getting off her

bicycle, gracefully lifting her blue-and-white check skirt with her

knee. I was leaning against the mottled trunk of a plane tree that

formed part of the glade coveting the street outside the compound. Her

skirt had been flowing like a fan as she rode toward me. On summer

evenings, I had often pushed Xiao-fang there in his bamboo pram and

waited for her to come home.

My grandmother, now in her mid-fifties, kept more signs of her

femininity than my mother. Although her jackets still in the

traditional style all became the same color of pale gray, she took

particular care of her long, thick black hair. According to Chinese

tradition, which the Communists inherited, hair had to be well above

the shoulder for women of middle age, meaning over thirty.

My grandmother kept her hair tied up in a neat bun at the back of her

head, but she always had flowers there, sometimes a pair of

ivory-colored magnolias, and sometimes a white Cape jasmine cupped by

two dark-green leaves, which set off her lustrous hair. She never used

shampoo from the shops, which she thought would make her hair dull and

dry, but would boil the fruit of the Chinese honey locust and use the

liquid from that. She would rub the fruit to produce a perfumed

lather, and slowly let her mass of black hair drop into the shiny,

white, slithery liquid. She soaked her wooden combs in the juice of

pomelo seeds, so that the comb ran smoothly through her hair, and gave

it a faint aroma. She added a final touch by putting on a little water

of osmanthus flowers which she made herself, as perfume had begun to

disappear from the shops. I remember watching her combing her hair. It

was the only thing over which she took her time. She did everything

else very swiftly. She would also paint her eyebrows lightly with a

black charcoal pencil and dab a little powder on her nose. Remembering

her eyes smiling into the mirror with a particular kind of intense

concentration, I think these must have been among her most pleasurable

moments.

Watching her doing her face was strange, even though I had been

watching her do it since I was a baby. The women in books and films

who made themselves up now were invariably wicked characters, like

concubines. I vaguely knew something about my beloved grandmother

having been a concubine, but I was learning to live with contradictory

thoughts and realities, and getting used to compartmentalizing them.

When I went out shopping with my grandmother, I began to realize that

she was different from other people, with her makeup, no matter how

discreet, and the flowers in her hair. People noticed her.

She walked proudly, her figure erect, with a restrained

self-consciousness.

She could get away with it because she lived in the compound. If she

had been living outside, she would have fallen under one of the

residents' committees, which supervised the lives of any adult who did

not have a job and so did not belong to a work unit. The committees

usually contained retired men and old housewives, and some of them

became notorious for minding other people's business and throwing their

weight around. Had my grandmother been under one of these, she would

have received disapproving hints or open criticism. But the compound

had no committee. She did have to go to a meeting once a week with

other parents-in-law and maids and nannies from the compound, to be

200told about Party policies, but she was mainly left alone. Actually,

she enjoyed the meetings; they were a chance to chat with the other

women and she always came home beaming with the latest gossip.

Politics invaded my life more and more after I went to middle school in

the autumn of 1964. On our first day we were told we should thank

Chairman Mao for being there, because his 'class line' had been applied

to our year's enrollment. Mao had accused schools and universities of

having taken in too many children of the bourgeoisie. Now, he had

instructed, priority should be given to sons and daughters of 'good

backgrounds' (chu-shen hao). This meant having workers, peasants,

soldiers, or Party officials as parents, particularly as fathers. The

application of this 'class-line' criterion to the whole society meant

that one's lot was more than ever determined by one's family and the

accident of birth.

However, the status of a family was often ambiguous: a worker might

once have been employed in a Kuomintang office; a clerk did not belong

to any category; an intellectual was an 'undesirable," but what if he

was a Party member?

How should the children of such parents be classified?

Many enrollment officers decided to play it safe, which meant giving

preference to children whose parents were Party officials. They

constituted half the pupils in my class.

My new school, the Number Four Middle School, was the leading key

school for the whole province and took students with the highest marks

in the all-Sichuan entrance exams. In previous years, entrance had

been decided solely on the basis of exam results. In my year, exam

marks and family background were equally important.

In the two exam papers, I got 100 percent for math and an unusual 100

percent 'plus' for Chinese. My father had constantly drummed it into

me that I should not rely on my parents' name, and I did not like the

suggestion that the 'class line' had helped me get into the school. But

I soon thought no more about it. If this was what Chairman Mao said,

it must be good.

It was in this period that 'high officials' children' (gaogan zi-dO

became almost a stratum of their own. They developed an air which

identified them unmistakably as members of an elite group, exuding an

awareness of powerful backing and untouchability. Many high officials'

children now grew more arrogant and haughty than ever, and from Mao

downward concern was constantly being expressed about their behavior.

It became a recurrent theme in the press. All this only reinforced the

idea that they were a special group.

My father frequently warned us against this air and against forming

cliques with other children of high officials. The result was that I

had few friends, as I seldom met children from any other background.

When I did come into contact with them, I found we had been so

conditioned by the importance of family background and the lack of

shared experience that we seemed to have little in common with each

other.

When I entered the new school two teachers came to see my parents to

ask which foreign language they wanted me to learn. They chose English

rather than Russian, which was the only other option. The teachers

also wanted to know whether I was going to take physics or chemistry in

201my first year.

school.

My parents said they would leave that up to the

I loved the school from the moment I walked in. It had an imposing

gate with a broad roof of blue tiles and carved caves. A flight of

stone stairs led up to it, and the loggia was supported by six

red-timber columns. Symmetrical rows of dark-green cypresses enhanced

the atmosphere of solemnity leading into the interior.

The school had been founded in 14 18 BC. It was the first school set

up by a local government in China. At its center was a magnificent

temple, formerly dedicated to Confucius. It was well preserved, but

was not functioning as a temple any longer. Inside were half a dozen

ping-pong tables, separated by the massive columns. In front of the

carved doors, down a long flight of stairs, lay extensive grounds

designed to provide a majestic approach to the temple. A two-story

teaching block had been erected, which cut off the grounds from a brook

crossed by three little arched bridges, with sculptures of miniature

lions and other animals sitting on their sandstone edges. Beyond the

bridges was a beautiful garden surrounded by peaches and plane trees.

Two giant bronze incense burners were set at the bottom of the stairs

in front of the temple, although there was no longer any blue smoke

curling up and lingering in the air above them. The grounds on the

sides of the temple had been converted into basketball and volleyball

courts. Farther along were two lawns where we used to sit or lie in

spring and enjoy the sun during lunch breaks.

Behind the temple was another lawn, beyond which lay a big orchard at

the foot of a small hill covered with trees, vines, and herbs.

Dotted around were laboratories where we studied biology and chemistry,

learned to use microscopes, and dissected dead animals. In the lecture

theaters, we watched teaching films. For after-school activities, I

joined the biology group which strolled around the hill and the back

garden with the teacher learning the names and characteristics of the

different plants. There were temperaturecontrolled breeding cases for

us to observe how tadpoles and ducklings broke out of their eggs. In

spring, the school was a sea of pink because of all the peach trees.

But what I liked most was the two-story library, built in the

traditional Chinese style. The building was encircled on both floors

by loggias, and the outside of these was enclosed by a row of

gorgeously painted seats which were shaped like wings.

I had a favorite corner in these 'wing seats' (fei-lai-yO where I used

to sit for hours reading, occasionally stretching my arm out to touch

the fan-shaped leaves of a rare ginkgo tree. There was a pair of them

outside the front gate of the library, towering and elegant. They were

the only sight that could distract me from my books.

My clearest memory is of my teachers. They were the best in their

field; many were grade one, or special grade.

Their classes were sheer joy, and I could never have enough of them.

But more and more political indoctrination was creeping into school

life. Gradually, morning assembly became devoted to Mao's teachings,

and special sessions were instituted in which we read Party documents.

Our Chineselanguage textbook now contained more propaganda and less

classical literature, and politics, which mainly consisted of works by

Mao, became part of' the curriculum.

202Almost every activity became politicized. One day at morning assembly

the headmaster told us we were going to do eye exercises. He said

Chairman Mao had observed that there were too many schoolchildren

wearing spectacles, a sign that they had hurt their eyes by working too

hard. He had ordered something to be done about it. We were all

terribly moved by his concern. Some of us wept with gratitude. We

started doing eye exercises for fifteen minutes every morning. A set

of movements had been devised by doctors and set to music. After

rubbing various points around our eyes, we all stared intently at the

rows of poplars and willows outside the window. Green was supposed to

be a restful color. As I enjoyed the comfort the exercises and the

leaves brought me, I thought of Mao and repledged my loyalty to him.

A repeated theme was that we must not allow China to 'change color,"

which meant going from Communist to capitalist. The split between

China and the Soviet Union, which had been kept secret at first, had

burst into the open in early 1963. We were told that since Khrushchev

had come to power after the death of Stalin in 1953 the Soviet Union

had surrendered to international capitalism, and that Russian children

had been reduced to suffering and misery again, just like Chinese

children under the Kuomintang. One day, after warning us for the

umpteenth time against the road taken by Russia, our politics teacher

said: "If you aren't careful, our country will change color gradually,

first from bright red to faded red, then to gray, then to black." It

so happened that the Sichuan expression 'faded red' had exactly the

same pronunciation (er-hong) as my name.

My classmates giggled, and I could see them stealing glances at me. I

felt I must get rid of my name immediately. That evening I begged my

father to give me another name. He suggested Zhang, meaning both

'prose' and 'coming into one's own early," which expressed his desire

for me to become a good writer at a young age.

But I did not want the name. I told my father that I wanted 'something

with a military ring to it." Many of my friends had changed their

names to incorporate the characters meaning 'army' or 'soldier." My

father's choice reflected his classical learning. My new name, Jung

(pronounced "Yung'), was a very old and recondite word for 'martial

affairs' which appeared only in classical poetry and a few antiquated

phrases. It evoked an image of bygone battles between knights in

shining armor, with tasseled spears and neighing steeds. When I turned

up at school with my new name even some teachers could not recognize

the character $1.

At this time Mao had called on the country to go from learning from Lei

Feng to learning from the army. Under the defense minister, Lin Biao,

who had succeeded Marshal Peng Dehuai in 1959, the army had become the

trailblazer for the cult of Mao. Mao also wanted to regimentalize the

nation even more. He had just written a well-publicized poem exhorting

women to 'doff feminini~ and don military attire." We were told that

the Americans were waiting for a chance to invade and reinstate the

Kuomintang, and that in order to defeat an invasion by them Lei Feng

had trained day and night to overcome his weak physique and become a

champion hand-grenade thrower.

Physical training suddenly assumed vital importance.

There was compulsory running, swimming, high jumping, working out on

parallel bars, shot-punning, and throwing wooden hand grenades. In

addition to the two hours of sports per week, forty-five minutes of

after-school sports now became obligatory.

203I had always been hopeless at sports, and hated them, except tennis.

Previously this had not mannered, but now it took on a political

connotation, with slogans like: "Build up a strong physique to defend

our motherland." Unfortunately, my aversion to sports was increased by

this pressure. When I tried to swim, I always had a mental picture of

being pursued by invading Americans to the bank of a surging river. As

I could not swim, my only choice was between being drowned or being

captured and tortured by the Americans. Fear gave me frequent cramps

in the water, and once I thought I was drowning in the swimming pool.

In spite of compulsory swimming every week during the summer, I never

managed to learn to swim all the time I lived in China.

Hand-grenade throwing was also regarded as very important, for obvious

reasons. I was always at the bottom of the class. I could only throw

the wooden hand grenades we practised with a couple of yards. I felt

that my classmates were questioning my resolve to fight the US

imperialists. Once at our weekly political meeting somebody commented

on my persistent failure at hand-grenade throwing. I could feel the

eyes of the class boring into me like needles, as if to say: "You are a

lackey of the Americans!" The next morning I went and stood in a

corner of the sports field, with my arms held out in front of me and a

couple of bricks in each hand. In Lei Feng's diary, which I had

learned by heart, I had read that this was how he had toughened up his

muscles to throw hand grenades.

After a few days, by which time my upper arms were red and swollen, I

gave up, and whenever I was handed the wooden chunk, I became so

nervous that my hands shook uncontrollably.

One day in 1965, we were suddenly told to go out and start removing all

the grass from the lawns. Mao had instructed that grass, flowers, and

pets were bourgeois habits and were to be eliminated. The grass in the

lawns at our school was of a type I have not seen anywhere outside

China. Its name in Chinese means 'bound to the ground." It crawls all

over the hard surface of the earth and spreads thousands of roots which

drill down into the soil like claws of steel. Underground they open up

and produce further roots which shoot out in every direction.

In no time there are two networks, one aboveground and one below ground

which intertwine and cling to the earth, like knotted metal wires that

have been nailed into the ground. Often the only casualties were my

fingers, which always ended up with deep, long cuts. It was only when

they were attacked with hoes and spades that some of the root systems

went, reluctantly. But any fragment left behind would make a

triumphant comeback after even a slight rise in temperature or a gentle

drizzle, and we would have to go into battle all over again.

Flowers were much easier to deal with, but they went with even more

difficulty, because no one wanted to remove them. Mao had attacked

flowers and grass several times before, saying that they should be

replaced by cab

The Cult q lao 35~;

bales and cotton. But only now was he able to generate enough pressure

to get his order implemented but only~ up to a point. People loved

their plants, and some flowerbeds survived Mao's campaign.

204I was extremely sad to see the lovely plants go. But I did not resent

Mao. On the contrary, I hated myself for feeling miserable. By then I

had grown into the habit of self criticism and automatically blamed

myself for any instincts that went against Mao's instructions. In

fact, such feelings frightened me. It was out of the question to

discuss them with anyone. Instead, I tried to suppress them and

acquire the correct way of thinking. I lived in a state of constant

self-accusation.

Such self-examination and self-criticism were a feature of Mao's China.

You would become a new and better person, we were told. But all this

introspection was really designed to serve no other purpose than to

create a people who had no thoughts of their own.

The religious aspect of the Mao cult would not have been possible in a

traditionally secular society like China had there not been impressive

economic achievements.

The country had made a stunning recovery from the famine, and the

standard of living was improving dramatically. In Chengdu, although

rice was still rationed, there was plenty of meat, poultry, and

vegetables. Winter melons, turnips, and eggplants were piled up on the

pavements outside the shops because there was not enough space to store

them. They were left outside overnight, and almost nobody took them;

the shops were giving them away for a pittance. Eggs, once so

precious, sat rotting in large baskets there were too many of them.

Only a few years before it had been hard to find a single peach now

peach eating was being promoted as 'patriotic," and officials went

around to people's homes and tried to persuade them to take peaches for

next to nothing.

There were a number of success stories which boosted the nation's

pride. In October 1964 China exploded its first atomic bomb. This was

given huge publicity and touted as a demonstration of the country's

scientific and industrial achievement, particularly in relation to

'standing up to imperialist bullies." The explosion of the atomic bomb

coincided with the ousting of Khrushchev, which was presented as proof

that Mao was right again. In 1964 France recognized China at full

ambassadorial level, the first leading Western nation to do so. This

was received with rapture inside China as a major victory over the

United States, which was refusing to acknowledge China's rightful place

in the world.

In addition, there was no general political persecution, and people

were relatively content. All the credit was given to Mao. Although

the very top leaders knew what Mao's real contribution was, the people

were kept completely in the dark. Over the years I composed passionate

eulogies thanking Mao for all his achievements and pledging my undying

loyalty to him.

I was thirteen in 1965. On the evening of I October that year, the

sixteenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, there

was a big fireworks display on the square in the center of Chengdu. To

the north of the square was the gate to an ancient imperial palace,

which had recently been restored to its third-century grandeur, when

Chengdu was the capital of a kingdom and a prosperous warlord city.

The gate was very similar to the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking, now

the entrance to the Forbidden City, except for its color: it had

sweeping green tiled roofs and gray walls. Under the glazed roof of

the pavilion stood enormous dark-red pillars. The balustrades were

made of white marble. I was standing behind them with my family and

205the Sichuan dignitaries on a reviewing stand enjoying the festival

atmosphere and waiting for the fireworks to begin. Below in the square

50,000 people were singing and dancing. Bang. t Bang.t The signals

for the fireworks went off a few yards from where I stood. In an

instant, the sky was a garden of spectacular shapes and

The Cult of Mao 36I colors, a sea of wave after wave of brilliance. The

music and noise rose from below the imperial gate to join in the

sumptuousness. After a while, the sky was clear for a few seconds.

Then a sudden explosion brought out a gorgeous blossom, followed by the

unfurling of a long, vast, silky hanging. It stretched itself in the

middle of the sky, swaying gently in the autumn breeze. In the light

over the square, the characters on the hanging were shining: "Long Live

Our Great Leader Chairman Mao!" Tears sprang to my eyes.

"How lucky, how incredibly lucky I am to be living in the great era of

Mao Zedong!" I kept saying to myself.

"How can children in the capitalist world go on living without being

near Chairman Mao, and without the hope of ever seeing him in person?"

I wanted to do something for them, to rescue them from their plight. I

made a pledge to myself there and then to work hard to build a stronger

China, in order to support a world revolution. I needed to work hard

to be entitled to see Chairman Mao, too. That was the purpose of my

life.

15.

"Destroy First, and

Construction Will

Look After Itself'-The Cultural Revolution Begins

(1965-1966)

At the beginning of the 1960s, in spite of all the disasters Mao had

caused, he was still China's supreme leader, idololized by the

population. But because the pragmatists were actually running the

country, there was relative literary and artistic freedom. A host of

plays, operas, films, and novels emerged after long hibernation. None

attacked the Party openly, and contemporary themes were rare. At this

time Mao was on the defensive, and he turned more and more to his wife,

Jiang Qjng, who had been an actress in the 193OS. They decided that

historical themes were being used to convey insinuations against the

regime and against Mao himself.

In China, there was a strong tradition of using historical allusion to

voice opposition, and even apparently esoteric allusions were widely

understood as coded references to the present day. In April 1963 Mao

banned all "Ghost Dramas," a genre rich in ancient tales of revenge by

dead victims' spirits on those who had persecuted them. To him, these

ghost avengers were uncomfortably close to the class enemies who had

perished under his rule.

The Maos also turned their attention to another genre, the "Dramas of

the Ming Mandarin," the protagonist of which was Hai Rui, a mandarin

from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). A famous personification of justice

and courage, the Ming Mandarin remonstrated with the emperor on behalf

of the suffering ordinary people, at the risk of his own life. He was

dismissed and exiled. The Maos suspected that the Ming Mandarin was

being used to represent Marshal Peng Dehuai, the former defense

minister who in 1959 had spoken out against Mao's disastrous policies

206which had caused the famine. Almost immediately after Peng's

dismissal, there was a noticeable resurgence of the Ming Mandarin

genre. Mme Mao tried to get the plays denounced, but when she

approached the writers and ministers in charge of the arts they turned

a deaf ear.

In 1964, Mao drew up a list of thirty-nine artists, writers, and

scholars for denunciation. He branded them 'reactionary bourgeois

authorities," a new category of class enemies.

Prominent names on the list included the most famous playwright in the

Ming Mandarin genre, Wu Han, and Professor Ma Yin-chu, who had been the

first leading economist to advocate birth control. For this he had

already been named a rightist in 1957. Mao had subsequently realized

that birth control was necessary, but he resented Professor Ma for

showing him up and making it clear that he was wrong.

The list was not made public, and the thirty-nine people were not

purged by their Party organizations. Mao had the list circulated to

officials down to my mother's level with instructions to catch other

'reactionary bourgeois authorities." In the winter of 1964-65, my

mother was sent as the head of a work team to a school named "Ox

Market."

She was told to look for suspects among prominent

teachers and those who had written books or articles.

My mother was appalled, particularly as the purge threatened the very

people she most admired. Besides, she could plainly see that even if

she were to look for 'enemies' she would not find any. Apart from

anything else, with the memory of all the recent persecutions few had

dared to open their mouths at all. She told her superior, Mr. Pao,

who was in charge of the campaign in Chengdu, how she felt.

Nineteen sixty-five passed, and my mother did nothing.

Mr. Pao did not exert any pressure on her. Their inaction reflected

the general mood among Party officials. Most of them were fed up with

persecutions, and wanted to get on with improving living standards and

building a normal life.

But they did not openly oppose Mao, and indeed went on promoting his

personality cult. The few who watched Mao's deification with

apprehension knew there was nothing they could do to stop it: Mao had

such power and prestige that his cult was irresistible. The most they

could do was engage in some kind of passive resistance.

Mao interpreted the reaction from the Party officials to his call for a

witch-hunt as an indication that their loyalty to him was weakening and

that their hearts were with the policies being pursued by President Liu

and Deng. His suspicion was confirmed when the Party newspapers

refused to publish an article he had authorized denouncing Wu Han and

his play about the Ming Mandarin. Mao's purpose in getting the article

published was to involve the population in the witch-hunt. Now he

found he was cut off from his subjects by the Party system, which had

been the intermediary between himself and the people. He had, in

effect, lost control. The Party Committee of Peking, where Wu Han was

deputy mayor, and the Central Department of Public Affairs, which

looked after the media and the arts, stood up to Mao, refusing either

to denounce Wu Han or to dismiss him.

207Mao felt threatened.

He saw himself as a Stalin figure,

about to be denounced by a Khrushchev while he was still alive. He

wanted to make a preemptive strike and destro~ the man he regarded as

"China's Khrushchev," Liu Shaoqi, and his colleague Deng, as well as

their followers in the Party. This he deceptively termed the "Cultural

Revolution." He knew his would be a lone battle, but this gave him the

majestic satisfaction of feeling that he was challenging nothing less

than the whole world, and maneuvering on a grand scale. There was even

a tinge of self-pity as he portrayed himself as the tragic hero taking

on a mighty enemy the huge Party machine.

On io November ,965, having repeatedly failed to have the article

condemning Wu Han's play published in Peking, Mao was at last able to

get it printed in Shanghai, where his followers were in charge. It was

in this article that the term "Cultural Revolution' first appeared. The

Party's own newspaper, the People's Daily, refused to reprint the

article, as did the Peking Daily, the voice of the Party organization

in the capital. In the provinces, some papers did carry the article.

At the time, my father was overseeing the provincial Party newspaper,

the Sichuan Daily, and was against reprinting the article, which he

could sense was an attack on Marshal Peng and a call for a witch-hunt.

He went to see the man in charge of cultural affairs for the province,

who suggested they telephone Deng Xiaoping. Deng was not in his

office, and the call was taken by Marshal Ho Lung, a close friend of

Deng's, and a member of the Politburo. It was he whom my father had

overheard saying in 1959: "It really should be him [Deng] on the

throne." Ho said not to reprint the article.

Sichuan was one of the last provinces to run the article, doing so only

on 18 December, well after the People's Daily finally printed it on 30

November. The article appeared in the People's Daily only after Zhou

Enlai, the premier, who had emerged as the peacekeeper in the power

struggle, added a note to it, in the name of 'the editor," saying that

the Cultural Revolution was to be an 'academic' discussion,

meaning that it should be nonpolitical and should not lead to political

condemnations.

Over the next three months there was intense maneuvering, with Mao's

opponents, as well as Zhou, trying to head off Mao's witch-hunt. In

February 1966, while Mao was away from Peking, the Politburo passed a

resolution that 'academic discussions' must not degenerate into

persecutions. Mao had objected to this resolution, but he was

ignored.

In April my father was asked to prepare a document in the spirit of the

Politburo's February resolution to guide the Cultural Revolution in

Sichuan. What he wrote became known as the "April Document." It said:

The debates must be strictly academic. No wild accusations should be

allowed. Everyone is equal before the truth. The Party must not use

force to suppress intellectuals.

Just as this document was about to be published in May, it was suddenly

blocked. There was a new Politburo decision. This time, Mao had been

present and had got the upper hand, with Zhou Enlai's complicity. Mao

tore up the February resolution and declared that all dissident

scholars and their ideas must be 'eliminated." He emphasized that it

was officials in the Communist Party who had been protecting the

dissident scholars and other class enemies. He termed these officials

208'those in power following the capitalist road," and declared war on

them. They became known as 'capitalist-roaders." The mammoth Cultural

Revolution was formally launched.

Who exactly were these 'capitalist-roaders'? Mao himself was not sure.

He knew he wanted to replace the whole of the Peking Party Committee,

which he did. He also knew he wanted to get rid of Liu Shaoqi and Deng

Xiaoping, and 'the bourgeois headquarters in the Party." But he did

not know who in the vast Party system were loyal to him and who were

followers of Liu and Deng and their 'capitalist road." He calculated

that he controlled only a third of the Party. In order not to let a

single one of his enemies escape, he resolved to overthrow the entire

Communist Party. Those faithful to him would survive the upheaval. In

his own words: "Destroy first, and construction will look after

itself." Mao was not worried about the possible destruction of the

Party: Mao the Emperor always overrode Mao the Communist. Nor was he

fainthearted about hurting anyone unduly, even those most loyal to

him.

One of his great heroes, the ancient general Tsao Tsao, had spoken an

immortal line which Mao openly admired:

"I would rather wrong all people under Heaven; and no one under Heaven

must ever wrong me." The general proclaimed this when he discovered

that he had murdered an elderly couple by mistake the old man and

woman, whom he had suspected of betraying him, had in fact saved his

life.

Mao's vague bat He calls threw the population and the majority of Party

officials into profound confusion. Few knew what he was driving at, or

who exactly were the enemies this time. My father and mother, like

other senior Party people, could see that Mao had decided to punish

some officials. But they had no idea who these would be. It could

well be themselves. Apprehension and bewilderment overwhelmed them.

Meanwhile, Mao made his single most important organizational move: he

set up his own personal chain of command that operated outside the

Party apparatus, although by formally claiming it was under the

Politburo and the Central Committee he was able to pretend it was

acting on Party orders.

First, he picked as his deputy Marshal Lin Biao, who had succeeded Peng

Dehuai as defense minister in 1959 and had greatly boosted Mao's

personality cult in the armed forces. He also set up a new body, the

Cultural Revolution Authority, under his former secretary Chen Boda,

with his intelligence chief Kang Sheng and Mme Mao as its de facto

leaders. It became the core of the leadership of the Cultural

Revolution.

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Next, Mao moved in on the media, primarily the People's Daily, which

carried the most authority as it was the official Party newspaper and

the population had become accustomed to it being the voice of the

regime. He appointed Chen Boda to take it over on 3I May, thus

securing a channel through which he could speak directly to hundreds of

millions of Chinese.

Starting in June 1966, the People's Daily showered the country with one

strident editorial after another, calling for 'establishing Chairman

Mao's absolute authority," 'sweeping away all the ox devils and snake

209demons' (class enemies), and exhorting people to follow Mao and join

the vast, unprecedented undertaking of a Cultural Revolution.

In my school, teaching stopped completely from the beginning of June,

though we had to continue to go there.

Loudspeakers blasted out People's Daily editorials, and the front page

of the newspaper, which we had to study every day, was frequently taken

up entirely by a full-page portrait of Mao. There was a daily column

of Mao's quotations. I still remember the slogans in bold type, which,

through reading in class over and over again, were engraved into the

deepest folds of my brain: "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our

hearts!"

"Mao Zedong Thought is our lifeline!"

"We will smash whoever opposes Chairman Mao!"

"People all over the world love our Great Leader Chairman Mao!"

There were pages of worshipping comments from foreigners, and pictures

of European crowds trying to grab Mao's works. Chinese national pride

was being mobilized to enhance his cult.

The daily newspaper reading soon gave way to the recitation and

memorizing of The Quotations of Chairman Mao, which were collected

together in a pocket-size book with a red plastic cover, known as "The

Little Red Book." Everyone was given a copy and told to cherish it

'like our eyes."

Every day we chanted passages from it over and over again in unison.

still remember many verbatim.

I

One day, we read in the People's Daily that an old peasant had stuck

thirty-two portraits of Mao on his bedroom walls, 'so that he can see

Chairman Mao's face as soon as he opens his eyes, whatever direction he

looks in." So we covered the walls of our classroom with pictures of

Mao's face beaming his most benign smile. But we soon had to take them

down, and quickly, too. Word circulated that the peasant had really

used the pictures as wallpaper, because Mao's portraits were printed on

the best-quality paper and were free. Rumour had it that the reporter

who had written up the story had been found to be a class enemy for

advocaring 'abuse of Chairman Mao." For the first time, fear of

Chairman Mao entered my subconscious.

Like "Ox Market," my school had a work team stationed in it. The team

had hal heartedly branded several of the school's best teachers as

'reactionary bourgeois authorities," but had kept this from the pupils.

In June 1966, however, panicked at the tide of the" Cultur:,l

Revolution and feeling the need to create some victims, the work team

suddenly announced the names of the accused to the whole school.

The work team organized pupils and the teachers who had not been

accused to write denunciation posters and slogans, which soon covered

the grounds. Teachers became active for a variety of reasons:

conformity, loyalty to the Party's orders, envy of the prestige and

privileges of other teachers and fear.

Among the victims was my Chinese language and literature teacher, Mr.

Chi, whom I adored. According to one of the wall posters, he had said

in the early 1960s: "Shouting "Long live the Great Leap Forward!" will

210not fill our stomachs, will it?" Having no idea that the Great Leap

had caused the famine, I did not understand his alleged remark,

although I could catch its irreverent tone.

There was something about Mr.

Chi which set him apart.

At the time I could not put my finger on it, but now I think it was

that he had an air of irony about him. He had a way of making dry,

short half-cough, half-laughs which suggested he had kept something

unsaid. He once made this noise in response to a ques6 on I asked him.

One lesson in our textbook was an extract from the memoirs of Lu

Dingyi, the then head of Central Public Affairs, about his experience

on the Long March. Mr. Chi drew our attention to a vivid description

of the troops marching along a zigzagging mountain path, the whole

procession lit up by pine torches carried by the marchers, the flames

glowing against a moonless black sky. When they reached their night's

destination, they all 'rushed to grab a bowlful of food to pour down

their stomachs." This puzzled me profoundly, as Red Army soldiers had

always been described as offering their last mouthful to their comrades

and going starving themselves. It was impossible to imagine them

'grabbing." I went to Mr. Chi for an answer. He cough laughed said I

did not know what being hungry meant, and quickly changed the subject.

I was unconvinced.

In spite of this, I felt the greatest respect for Mr. Chi. It broke

my heart to see him, and other teachers I admired, being wildly

condemned and called ugly names. I hated it when the work team asked

everyone in the school to write wall posters 'exposing and denouncing'

them.

I was fourteen at the time, instincfvely averse to all militant

activities, and I did not know what to write. I was frightened of the

wall posters' overwhelming black ink on giant white sheets of paper,

and the outlandish and violent language, such as "Smash So-and-so's

dog's head' and "Annihilate So-and-so if he does not surrender." I

began to play truant and stay at home. For this I was constantly

criticized for 'putting family first' at the endless meetings that now

made up almost our entire school life. I dreaded these meetings. A

sense of unpredictable danger haunted me.

One day my deputy headmaster, Mr. Kan, a jolly, energetic man, was

accused of being a capitalist-roader and of protecting the condemned

teachers. Everything he had done in the school over the years was said

to be 'capitalist,"

The Cultural Revolution Begins 37 i even studying Mao's works as fewer

hours had been devoted to this than to academic studies.

I was equally shocked to see the cheerful secretary of the Communist

Youth League in the school, Mr. Shan, being accused of being

'anti-Chairman Mao." He was a dashing-looking young man whose

attention I had been eager to attract, as he might help me join the

Youth League when I reached the minimum age, fifteen.

He had been teaching a course on Marxist philosophy to the sixteen- to

eighteen-year-olds, and had given them some essay-writing assignments.

He had underlined bits of the essays which he thought were particularly

well written. Now these disconnected parts were joined together by his

pupils to form an obviously nonsensical passage which the wall posters

claimed was anti-Mao. I learned years later that this method of

concocting an accusation through the arbitrary linking of unconnected

211sentences had started as early as 1955, the year my mother suffered her

first detention under the Communists, when some writers had used it to

attack their fellow writers.

Mr. Shan told me years later that the real reason he and the deputy

headmaster were picked out as victims was that they were not around at

the time they had been absent as members of another work team which

made them convenient scapegoats. The fact that they did not get on

with the headmaster, who had stayed behind, made things worse.

"If we'd been there and he'd been away, that son of a turtle wouldn't

have been able to pull his pants up, he would have had so much shit on

his arse," Mr. Shan told me ruefully.

The deputy headmaster, Mr. Kan, had been devoted to the Party, and

felt terribly wronged. One evening he wrote a suicide note and then

slashed his throat with a razor. He was rushed to hospital by his

wife, who had come home earlier than usual. The work team hushed up

his suicide attempt. For a Party member like Mr. Kan to commit

suicide was regarded as a betrayal. It was seen as a loss of faith in

the Party and an attempt at blackmail. Therefore, no mercy should be

shown to the unfortunate person. But the work team was nervous. They

knew very well that they had been inventing victims without the

slightest justification.

When my mother was told about Mr. Kan she cried. She liked him very

much, and knew that as he was a man of immense optimism he must have

been under inhuman pressure to have acted in this way.

In her own school, my mother refused to be swept into any panic

victimizing. But the teenagers in the school, stirred up by the

articles in the People's Daily, began to move against their teachers.

The People's Daily called for 'smashing up' the examination system

which 'treated pupils like enemies' (quoting Mao) and was part of the

vicious designs of the 'bourgeois intellectuals," meaning the majority

of the teachers (again quoting Mao). The paper also denounced

'bourgeois intellectuals' for poisoning the minds of the young with

capitalist rubbish in preparation for a Kuomintang comeback.

"We cannot allow bourgeois intellectuals to dominate our schools

anymore!" said Mao.

One day my mother bicycled to the school to find that the pupils had

rounded up the headmaster, the academic supervisor, the graded

teachers, whom they understood from the official press to be

'reactionary bourgeois authorities," and any other teachers they

disliked. They had shut them all up in a classroom and put a notice on

the door saying 'demons' class." The teachers had let them do it

because the Cultural Revolution had thrown them into bewilderment. The

pupils now seemed to have some sort of authorization, undefined but

nonetheless real. The grounds were covered with giant slogans, mostly

headlines from the People's Daily.

As my mother was shown to the classroom now turned 'prison," she passed

through a crowd of pupils. Some looked fierce, some ashamed, some

worried, and others uncertain. More pupils had been following her from

the moment she arrived. As the leader of the work team, she had

supreme authority, and was identified with the Part)'.

The pupils looked to her for orders.

had no idea what to do next.

Having set up the 'prison," they

212My mother announced forcefully that the 'demons' class' was dismissed.

There was a stir among the pupils, but nobody challenged her order. A

few boys muttered to one another, but lapsed into silence when my

mother asked them to speak out. She went on to tell them that it was

illegal to detain anyone without authorization, and that they should

not ill-treat their teachers, who deserved their gratitude and respect.

The door to the classroom was opened and the 'prisoners' set free.

My mother was very brave to go against the tide. Many other work teams

engaged in victimizing completely innocent people to save their own

skins. In fact, she had more cause than most to worry. The provincial

authorities had already punished several scapegoats, and my father had

a strong presentiment that he was going to be the next in line. A

couple of his colleagues had told him discreetly that the word was

going around in some organizations under him that they should turn

their suspicion on him.

My parents never said anything to me or my siblings.

The restraints which had kept them silent about politics before still

prevented them from opening their minds to us. Now it was even less

possible for them to speak. The situation was so complex and confusing

that they could not understand it themselves. What could they possibly

say to us that would make us understand? And what use would it have

been anyway? There was nothing anyone could do.

What was more, knowledge itself was dangerous. As a result, my

siblings and I were totally unprepared for the Cultural Revolution,

although we had a vague feeling of impending catastrophe.

In this atmosphere, August came. All of a sudden, like a storm

sweeping across China, millions of Red Guards emerged.

16.

"Soar to Heaven, and Pierce the Earth'~

Mao's Red Guards June-August 1966)

Under Mao a generation of teenagers grew up expecting to fight class

enemies, and the vague calls in the press for a Cultural Revolution had

stoked the feeling that a 'war' was imminent. Some politically

well-attuned youngsters sensed that their idol, Mao, was directly

involved, and their indoctrination gave them no alternative but to take

his side.

By the beginning of June a few activists from a middle school attached

to one of China's most renowned universities, qmghua in Peking, had got

together several times to discuss their strategies for the forthcoming

battle and had decided to call themselves 'the Red Guards of Chairman

Mao." They adopted a quotation by Mao that had appeared in the

People's Daily, "Rebellion is justified," as their motto.

These early Red Guards were 'high officials' children."

Only they could feel sufficiently secure to engage in activities of

this kind. In addition, they had been brought up in a political

environment, and were more interested in political intrigues than most

Chinese. Mme Mao noticed them, and gave them an audience in July. On

x August, Mao made the unusual gesture of writing them an open letter

to offer his 'most warm and fiery support." In the letter he subtly

modified his earlier saying to "Rebellion against reactionaries is

213justified." To the teenage zealots, this was like being addressed by

God. After this, Red Guard groups sprang up all over Peking, and then

throughout China.

Mao wanted the Red Guards to be his shock troops. He could see that

the people were not responding to his repeated calls to attack the

capitalist-roaders. The Communist Party had a sizable constituency,

and, moreover, the lesson of 1957 was also still fresh in people's

minds.

Then, too, Mao had called on the population to criticize Party

officials, but those who had taken up his invitation had ended up being

labeled as rightists and had been damned. Most people suspected the

same tactic again 'enticing the snake out of its haunt in order to cut

off its head."

If he was to get the population to act, Mao would have to remove

authority from the Party and establish absolute loyalty and obedience

to himself alone. To achieve this he needed terror an intense terror

that would block all other considerations and crush all other fears. He

saw boys and girls in their teens and early twenties as his ideal

agents.

They had been brought up in the fanatical personality cult of Mao and

the militant doctrine of' class struggle." They were endowed with the

qualities of youth- they were rebellious, fearless, eager to fight for

a 'just cause," thirsty for adventure and action. They were also

irresponsible, ignorant, and easy to manipulate and prone to violence.

Only they could give Mao the immense force that he needed to terrorize

the whole society, and to create a chaos that would shake, and then

shatter, the foundation of the Party. One slogan summed up the Red

Guards' mission: "We vow to launch a bloody war against anyone who

dares to resist the Cultural Revolution, who dares to oppose Chairman

Mao!"

All policies and orders had hitherto been conveyed through a tightly

controlled system which was entirely in

376 "Soar to Heaven, and Pierce the Earth' the hands of the Party. Mao

now discarded this channel and turned directly to the masses of the

youth. He did this by combining two quite different methods: vague,

high flown rhetoric carried openly in the press; and conspirao to rial

manipulation and agitation conducted by the Cultural Revolution

Authority, particularly his wife. It was they who filled out the real

meaning of the rhetoric. Phrases like 'rebellion against authority,"

'revolution in education," 'destroying an old world so a new one could

be born," and 'creating new man' all of which attracted many in the

West in the 1960s were interpreted as calls for violent action. Mao

understood the latent violence of the young, and said that since they

were well fed and had had their lessons stopped, they could easily be

stirred up and use their boundless energy to go out and wreak havoc.

To arouse the young to controlled mob violence, victims were necessary.

The most conspicuous targets in any school were the teachers, some of

whom had already been victimized by work teams and school authorities

in the last few months. Now the rebellious children set upon them.

Teachers were better targets than parents, who could only have been

attacked in an atomized and isolated manner.

They were also more important figures of authority than parents in

214Chinese culture.

In practically every school in

China, teachers were abused and beaten, sometimes fatally. Some

schoolchildren set up prisons in which teachers were tortured.

But this was not enough on its own to generate the kind of terror that

Mao wanted. On i8 August, a mammoth rally was held in Tiananmen Square

in the center of

Peking, with over a million young participants. Lin Biao appeared in

public as Mao's deputy and spokesman for the first time. He made a

speech calling on the Red Guards to charge out of their schools and

'smash up the four olds' defined as 'old ideas, old culture, old

customs, and old habits."

Following this obscure call, Red Guards all over China took to the

streets, giving full vent to their vandalism, ignorance, and

fanaticism. They raided people's houses, smashed their antiques, tore

up paintings and works of calligraphy. Bonfires were lit to consume

books. Very soon nearly all treasures in private collections were

destroyed.

Many writers and artists committed suicide after being cruelly beaten

and humiliated, and being forced to witness their work being burned to

ashes. Museums were raided.

Palaces, temples, ancient tombs, statues, pagodas, city walls anything

'old' was pillaged. The few things that survived, such as the

Forbidden City, did so only because Premier Zhou Enlai sent the army to

guard them, and issued specific orders that they should be protected.

The Red Guards only pressed on when they were encouraged.

Mao hailed the Red Guards' actions as "Very good indeed!"

the nation to support them.

and ordered

He encouraged the Red Guards to pick on a wider range of victims in

order to increase the terror. Prominent writers, artists, scholars,

and most other top professionals, who had been privileged under the

Communist regime, were now categorically condemned as 'reactionary

bourgeois authorities." With the help of some of these people's

colleagues who hated them for various reasons, ranging from fanaticism

to envy, the Red Guards began to abuse them. Then there were the old

'class enemies': former landlords and capitalists, people with

Kuomintang connections, those condemned in previous political campaigns

like the 'rightists' and their children.

Quite a number of' class enemies' had not been executed or sent to

labor camps, but had been kept 'under surveillance." Before the

Cultural Revolution, the police were allowed to release information

about them only to authorized personnel. Now that policy changed. The

police chief, one of Mao's own liege men Xie Fuzhi, ordered his men to

offer the 'class enemies' to the Red Guards, and to tell the Red Guards

about their crimes, such as their 'intention to overthrow the Communist

government."

Up till the beginning of the Cultural Revolution torture, as distinct

from torment, had been forbidden. Now Xie ordered policemen 'not to be

bound by the old rules, no matter if they had been set by the police

authoriues or by the state." After saying "I'm not in favor of beating

people to death," he continued: "But if some fRed Guards] hate the

class enemies so much that they want to kill them, you don't have to

215force them to stop."

A wave of beating and torture swept the country, mainly during house

raids. Almost invariably, the families would be ordered to kneel on

the floor and kowtow to the Red Guards; they were then beaten with the

brass buckles of the Guards' leather belts. They were kicked around,

and one side of their head was shaved, a humiliating style called the

'yin and yang head," because it resembled the classic Chinese symbol of

a dark side (yin) and a light side (yang).

Most of their possessions were either smashed or taken away.

It was worst in Peking, where the Cultural Revolution

Authority was on hand to incite the young people. In the city center

some theaters and cinemas were turned into torture chambers. Victims

were dragged in from all over

Peking. Pedestrians avoided the spots because the streets around

echoed with the screams of the victims.

The earliest Red Guard groups were made up of high officials' children.

Soon, when more people from other backgrounds joined, some of the high

officials' children managed to keep their own special groups, like the

"Pickets." Mao and his camarilla took a number of steps calculated to

increase their sense of power. At the second mass

Red Guards rally, Lin Biao wore their arm band to signify that he was

one of them. Mme Mao made them the guards of honor in front of the

Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square on National Day, 1 October.

As a result, some of them developed an outrageous 'theory of the

bloodline," summed up in the words of a song: "The son of a hero father

is always a great man; a reactionary father produces nothing but a

bastard!" Armed with this 'theory," some high officials' children

tyrannized and even tortured children from 'undesirable' backgrounds.

Mao let all this happen in order to generate the terror and chaos he

wanted. He was not scrupulous about either who was hit or who were the

agents of violence. These early victims were not his real targets, and

Mao did not particularly like or trust his young Red Guards. He was

simply using them. For their part, the vandals and torturers were not

always devoted to Mao. They were just having a wild time, having been

licensed to indulge their worst instincts.

Only a small proportion of the Red Guards was actually involved in

cruelty or violence. Many were able to avoid taking part because the

Red Guard was a loose organization which, by and large, did not

physically force its members to do evil. As a matter of fact, Mao

himself never ordered the Red Guards to kill, and his instructions

regarding violence were contradictory. One could feel devoted to Mao

without perpetrating violence or evil.

Those who chose to do so could not simply blame Mao.

But Mao's insidious encouragement of atrocities was undeniable. On 18

August, at the first of the eight gigantic rallies which altogether

were attended by thirteen million people, he asked a female Red Guard

what her name was.

When she answered "Bin-bin," which means 'gentle," he said

disapprovingly, "Be violent' (yao-wu-ma). Mao rarely spoke in public,

216and this remark, well publicized, was naturally followed like the

gospel. At the third mammoth rally, on x5 September, when the Red

Guards' atrocities were reaching their zenith, Mao's recognized

spokesman, Lin Biao, announced, with Mao standing next to him: "Red

Guard fighters: The direction of your battles has always been correct.

You have soundly, heartily battered the capitalist-roaders, the

reactionary bourgeois authorities, the bloodsuckers and parasites. You

have done the right thing!

And you have done marvelously!"

At that, hysterical cheers,

deafening screams of "Long live Chairman Mao," uncontrollable tears,

and howled pledges of loyalty took possession of the crowds filling the

enormous Tiananmen Square. Mao waved paternally, generating more

frenzy.

Through his Cultural Revolution Authority, Mao kept control over the

Peking Red Guards. He then sent them to the provinces to tell the

local young people what to do. In Jinzhou, in Manchuria, my

grandmother's brother Yu-lin and his wife were beaten up, and they and

their two children were exiled to a barren part of the country. Yu-lin

had come under suspicion when the Communists first arrived, because of

his possession of a Kuomintang intelligence card, but nothing had

happened to him or his family until now. My family did not know about

this at the time.

People avoided exchanging news. With accusations so willfully

concocted, and the consequences so horrific, you never knew what

catastrophe you might bring to your correspondents, or they to you.

People in Sichuan had little idea of the extent of the terror in

Peking. There were fewer atrocities in Sichuan, partly because the Red

Guards there were not directly incited by the Cultural Revolution

Authority. In addition, the police in Sichuan turned a deaf ear to

their minister in Peking, Mr. Xie, and refused to offer up the 'class

enemies' under their control to the Red Guards. However, the Red

Guards in Sichuan, as in other provinces, copied the actions of those

in Peking. There was the same kind of chaos as everywhere in China

controlled chaos. The Red Guards may have looted the houses which they

were authorized to raid, but they rarely stole from shops. Most

sectors, including commerce, the postal services and transport, worked

normally.

In my school, a Red Guard organization was formed on z6 August, with

the help of some Red Guards from Peking.

I had been staying at home feigning illness to escape the political

meetings and frightening slogans, and was unaware that the organization

had been set up until a

Mao's Red Guards 38I couple of days later, when a phone call summoned

me back 'to participate in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution."

When I got to the school, I noticed that many pupils were proudly

wearing red armbands with gold characters saying "Red Guards."

In these early days, the newborn Red Guards had the immense prestige of

being Mao's babies. It went without saying that I should join, and I

immediately submitted my application to the Red Guard leader in my form

a fifteen-year-old boy named Geng who had been constantly seeking my

company, but became shy and gauche the moment he was with me.

217I could not help wondering how Geng had become a Red Guard, and he was

mysterious about his activities. But it was very clear to me that the

Red Guards were mostly high officials' children. The head of the

school Red Guards was one of the sons of Commissar Li, the Party first

secretary for Sichuan. I ought to have been a natural;

few pupils had fathers in higher positions than mine. But Geng

privately told me that I was considered soft and 'too inactive," and

must be toughened up before they could consider accepting me.

Since June, there had been an unwritten rule that everyone should

remain in school around-the-clock to devote themselves entirely to the

Cultural Revolution. I was one of the few who did not. But now the

thought of playing truant somehow gave me a sense of danger, and I felt

compelled to stay. The boys slept in the classrooms so we girls could

occupy the dormitories. Non-Red Guards were attached to Red Guard

groups and taken with them on their various activities.

The day after I returned to school, I was taken out with several dozen

other children to change street names to make them more

'revolutionary." The street where I lived was called Commerce Street,.

and we debated what it should be renamed. Some proposed "Beacon Road,"

to signify the role of our provincial Party leaders. Others said

"Public Servants' Street," as that was what officials should be,

according to a quote of Mao's. Eventually we left without settling on

anything because a preliminary problem could not be solved: the name

plate was too high up on the wall to reach. As far as I knew, no one

ever went back.

In Peking the Red Guards were much more zealous. We heard about their

successes: the British mission was now on "Anti-Imperialism Road," the

Russian embassy on "Anti-Revisionism Road."

In Chengdu, streets were shedding their old names like "Five

Generations under One Roof' (a Confucian virtue), "The Poplar and

Willow Are Green' (green was not a revolutionary color), and "Jade

Dragon' (a symbol of feudal power). They became "Destroy the Old,"

"The East Is Red," and "Revolution' streets. A famous restaurant

called "The Fragrance of Sweet Wind' had its plaque broken to bits.

It was renamed "The Whiff of Gunpowder."

Traffic was in confusion for several days. For red to mean 'stop' was

considered impossibly counterrevolutionary. It should of course mean

'go." And traffic should not keep to the right, as was the practice,

it should be on the left. For a few days we ordered the traffic

policemen aside and controlled the traffic ourselves. I was stationed

at a street corner telling cyclists to ride on the left. In Chengdu

there were not many cars or traffic lights, but at the few big

crossroads there was chaos. In the end, the old rules reasserted

themselves, owing to Zhou Enlai, who managed to convince the Peking Red

Guard leaders. But the youngsters found justifications for this: I was

told by a Red Guard in my school that in Britain traffic kept to the

left, so ours had to keep to the right to show our anti-imperialist

spirit. She did not mention America.

As a child I had always shied away from collective activity. Now, at

fourteen, I felt even more averse to it. I suppressed this dread

because of the constant sense of guilt I had come to feel, through my

218education, when I was out of step with Mao. I kept telling myself that

I must train my thoughts according to the new revolutionary theories

and practices. If there was anything I did not understand, I must

reform myself and adapt. However, I found myself trying very hard to

avoid militant acts such as stopping passersby and cutting their long

hair, or narrow trouser legs, or skirts, or breaking their

semi-high-heeled shoes.

These things had now become signs of bourgeois decadence, according to

the Peking Red Guards.

My own hair came to the critical attention of my schoolmates.

have it cut to the level of my earlobes.

I had to

Secretly, though much ashamed of myself for being so 'petty bourgeois,"

I shed tears over losing my long plaits.

As a young child, my nurse had a way of doing my hair which made it

stand up on top of my head like a willow branch. She called it

'fireworks shooting up to the sky."

Until the early 1960s I wore my hair in two coils, with rings of little

silk flowers wound around them. In the mornings, while I hurried

through my breakfast, my grandmother or our maid would be doing my hair

with loving hands. Of all the colors for the silk flowers, my favorite

was pink.

After 1964, following Mao's calls for an austere lifestyle, more suited

to the atmosphere of class struggle, I put patches on my trousers to

try to look 'proletarian' and wore my hair in the uniform style of two

plaits with no colors, but long hair had not been condemned as yet. My

grandmother cut it for me, muttering all the while. Her hair survived,

because she never went out at that time.

The famous teahouses in Chengdu also came under attack as 'decadent." I

did not understand why, but did not ask. In the summer of 1966 I

learned to suppress my sense of reason. Most Chinese had been doing

that for a long time.

A Sichuan teahouse is a unique place. It usually sits in the embrace

of a bamboo grove or under the canopy of a large tree. Around the low,

square wooden tables are bamboo armchairs which give out a faint aroma

even after years of use. To prepare the tea a pinch of tea leaves is

dropped into a cup and boiling water is poured on top.

Then a lid is sunk loosely onto the cup, allowing the steam to seep

through the gap, bringing out the fragrance of the jasmine or other

blossoms. Sichuan has many kinds of tea.

Jasmine alone has five grades.

Teahouses are as important to the Sichuanese as pubs are to the

British. Older men, in particular, spend a lot of time there, puffing

their long-stemmed pipes over a cup of tea and a plateful of nuts and

melon seeds. The waiter shuttles between the seats with a kettle of

hot water which he pours from a couple of feet away with pinpoint

accuracy.

A skillful waiter makes the water level higher than the edge of the cup

without it spilling over. As a child I was always mesmerized watching

the water fall from the spout. I was rarely taken to a teahouse,

219though.

It had an air of indulgence of which my parents disapproved.

Like European cafes, a Sichuan teahouse provides newspapers on bamboo

frames. Some customers go there to read, but it is primarily a place

to meet and chat, exchanging news and gossip. There is often

entertainment storytelling punctuated with wooden clappers.

Perhaps because they had an aura of leisure, and if people were sitting

in one they were not out making revolution, teahouses had to be closed.

I went with a couple of dozen pupils between thirteen and sixteen years

old, most of whom were Red Guards, to a small one on the bank of the

Silk River. Chairs and tables were spread outside under a Chinese

scholar tree. The summer evening breeze from the river fanned out a

heavy scent from the clusters of white blossoms. The customers, mostly

men, raised their heads from their chessboards as we approached along

the uneven cobblestones that paved the bank. We stopped under the

tree. A few voices from our group started to shout: "Pack up! Pack

up! Don't linger in this bourgeois place!" A boy from my form

snatched a corner of the paper chessboard on the nearest table and

jerked it away. The wooden pieces scattered on the ground.

The men who had been playing were quite young. One of them lunged

forward, his fists clenched, but his friend quickly pulled the corner

of his jacket. Silently they began to pick up the chess pieces. The

boy who had jerked away their board shouted: "No more chess playing!

Don't you know it is a bourgeois habit?" He stooped to sweep up a

handful of pieces and threw them toward the river.

I had been brought up to be courteous and respectful to anyone older

than me, but now to be revolutionary meant being aggressive and

militant. Gentleness was considered 'bourgeois." I was repeatedly

criticized for it, and it was one reason given for not allowing me into

the Red Guards.

Over the years of the Cultural Revolution, I was to witness people

being attacked for saying 'thank you' too often, which was branded as

'bourgeois hypocrisy'; courtesy was on the brink of extinction.

But now, outside the teahouse, I could see that most of us, including

the Red Guards, were uneasy about the new style of speaking and lording

it over others. Not many of us opened our mouths. Quietly, a few

started to paste rectangular slogans onto the walls of the teahouse and

the tnmk of the scholar tree.

The customers silently began to walk away along the bank. Watching

their disappearing figures, a feeling of loss overwhelmed me. A couple

of months before, these adults probably would have told us to get lost.

But now they knew that Mao's backing had given the Red Guards power.

Thinking back, I can see the thrill some children must have felt at

demonstrating their power over adults. A popular Red Guard slogan

went: "We can soar to heaven, and pierce the earth, because our Great

Leader Chairman Mao is our supreme commander!" As this declaration

reveals, the Red Guards were not enjoying genuine freedom of

self-expression. From the start they were nothing but the tool of a

tyrant.

Standing on the riverbank in August 1966, though, I was just confused.

I went into the teahouse with my fellow pupils. Some asked the manager

to close down. Others started pasting slogans on the walls. Many

customers were getting up to go, but in a far corner one old man was

220still sitting at his table, calmly sipping his tea. I stood beside

him, feeling embarrassed that I was supposed to assume the voice of

authority. He looked at me, and resumed his noisy sipping. He had a

deeply lined face that was almost stereotypical 'working class' as

shown in propaganda pictures. His hands reminded me of one of my

textbook stories which described the hands of an old peasant: they

could bundle thorny firewood without feeling any pain.

Perhaps this old man was very sure of his unquestionable background, or

his advanced age, which had hitherto been the object of respect, or

perhaps he simply did not think I was very impressive. Anyway, he

remained in his seat taking no notice of me. I summoned up my courage

and pleaded in a low voice, "Please, could you leave?" Without looking

at me, he said, "Where to?"

"Home, of course," I replied. He turned to face me.

in his voice, though he spoke quietly.

"Home? What home?

a corner surrounded

all. When the kids

do you have to take

There was emotion

I share a tiny room with my two grandsons. I have

by a bamboo curtain. Just for the bed. That's

are home I come here for some peace and quiet. Why

this away from me?"

His words filled me with shock and shame. This was the first time I

had heard a firsthand account of such miserable living conditions. I

turned and walked away.

This teahouse, like all the others in Sichuan, was shut for fifteen

years until 198x, when Deng Xiaoping's reforms decreed it could be

reopened. In 1985 I went back there with a British friend. We sat

under the scholar tree.

An old waitress came to fill our cups with a kettle from two feet away.

Around us, people were playing chess. It was one of the happiest

moments of that trip back.

When Lin Biao called for everything that represented the old culture to

be destroyed, some pupils in my school started to smash things up.

Being more than 2,000 years old, the school had a lot of antiques and

was therefore a prime site for action. The school gateway had an old

tiled roof with carved eaves. These were hammered to pieces.

The same happened to the sweeping blue-glazed roof of the big temple

which had been used as a ping-pong hall.

The pair of giant bronze incense burners in front of the temple were

toppled, and some boys urinated into them.

In the back garden, pupils with big hammers and iron rods went along

the sandstone bridges casually breaking the little statues. On one

side of the sports field was a pair of towering rectangular tablets

made of red sandstone, each twenty feet high. Some lines about

Confucius were carved on them in beautiful calligraphy. A huge rope

was tied around them, and two gangs pulled. It took them a couple of

days, as the foundations were deep. They had to get some workers from

outside to dig a hole around the tablets.

When the monuments finally crashed down amidst cheers, they lifted part

of the path that ran behind them.

All the things I loved were disappearing.

The saddest thing of all for

221me was the ransacking of the library: the golden filed roof, the

delicately sculpted windows, the blue painted chairs .... Bookshelves

were turned upside down, and some pupils tore books to pieces just for

the hell of it.

Afterward, X-shaped white paper strips with black characters were stuck

on what was left of the doors and windows to signal that the building

was sealed.

Books were major targets of Mao's order to destroy.

Because they had not been written within the last few months, and

therefore did not quote Mao on every page, some Red Guards declared

that they were all 'poisonous weeds." With the exception of Marxist

classics and the works of Stalin, Mao, and the late Lu Xun, whose name

Mme Mao was using for her personal vendettas, books were burning all

across China. The country lost most of its written heritage. Many of

the books which survived later went into people's stoves as fuel.

But there was no bonfire at my school. The head of the school Red

Guards had been a very conscientious student.

A rather feminine-looking seventeen-year-old, he had been made the Red

Guard leader because his father was the Party chief for the province,

rather than because of his own ambition. While he could not prevent

the general vandalism, he did manage to stop the books from being

burned.

Like everyone else, I was supposed to join in the 'revolutionary

actions." But I, like most pupils, was able to avoid them, because the

destruction was not organized, and no one made sure we took part. I

could see that many pupils hated the whole thing, but nobody tried to

stop it. Like myself, many boys and girls may well have been telling

themselves that they were wrong to feel sorry about the destruction and

needed to reform. But subconsciously we all knew we would have been

crushed instantly had we raised any objection.

By then 'denunciation meetings' were becoming a major feature of the

Cultural Revolution. They involved a hysterical crowd and were seldom

without physical brutality.

Peking University had taken the lead, under the personal supervision of

Mao. At its first denunciation meeting, on i8 June, over sixty

professors and heads of depariments, including the chancellor, were

beaten, kicked, and forced to kneel for hours. Dunce caps with

humiliating slogans were forced onto their heads. Ink was poured over

their faces to make them black, the color of evil, and slogans were

pasted all over their bodies. Two students gripped the arms of each

victim, twisting them around behind his back and pushing them up with

such ferocity as almost to dislocate them. This posture was called the

'jet plane," and soon became a feature of most denunciation meetings

all over the country.

I was once called by the Red Guards in my form to attend such a

meeting. Horror made me feel very chilly in the hot summer afternoon

when I saw a dozen or so teachers standing on the platform on the

sports ground, with their heads bent and their arms twisted into the

'jet plane' position. Then, some were kicked on the back of their

knees and forced to kneel, while others, including my English-language

teacher, an elderly man with the fine manner of a classical gentleman,

were forced to stand on long, narrow benches. He found it hard to keep

222his balance, and swayed and fell, cutting his forehead on the sharp

corner of a bench. A Red Guard standing next to him instinctively

stooped and extended his hands to help, but immediately straightened up

and assumed an exaggeratedly harsh posture, with his fists clenched,

yelling: "Get back onto the bench!" He did not want to be seen as soft

on a 'class enemy." Blood trickled down the teacher's forehead and

coagulated on the side of his face.

He, like the other teachers, was accused of all sorts of outlandish

crimes; but they were really there because they were graded, and

therefore the best, or because some pupils had grudges against them.

I learned in later years that the pupils in my school behaved

relatively mildly because, being in the most prestigious school, they

were successful and academically inclined. In the schools which took

in wilder boys, there were teachers who were beaten to death. I

witnessed only one beating in my school. My philosophy teacher had

been somewhat dismissive to those who had not done well in her classes,

and some of them hated her and now started to accuse her of being

'decadent." The 'evidence," which reflected the extreme conservatism

of the Cultural Revolution, was that she had met her husband on a bus.

They got to chatting, and fell in love. Love arising out of a chance

meeting was regarded as a sign of immorality. The boys took her to an

office and 'took revolutionary actions over her' the euphemism for

beating somebody up. Before they started, they called for me

especially and made me

39 "Soar to Heaven, and Pierce the Earth' attend.

"What will she think when she sees you, her pet pupil, there!"

I was considered her favorite because she had praised my work often.

But I was also told that I should be there because I had been too soft,

and needed 'a lesson in revolution."

When the beating started, I shrank at the back of the ring of pupils

who crowded into the small office. A couple of classmates nudged me to

go to the front and join in the hitting. I ignored them. In the

center my teacher was being kicked around, rolling in agony on the

floor, her hair askew.

As she cried out, begging them to stop, the boys who had set upon her

said in cold voices, "Now you beg! Haven't you been ferocious? Now

beg properly!" They kicked her again, and ordered her to kowtow to

them and say "Please spare my life, masters!" To make someone kowtow

and beg was an extreme humiliation. She sat up and stared blankly

ahead: I met her eyes through her knotted hair. In them I saw agony,

desperation, and emptiness. She was gasping for breath, and her face

was ashen gray. I sneaked out of the room. Several pupils followed

me. Behind us I could hear people shouting slogans, but their voices

were tentative and uncertain. Many pupils must have been scared. I

walked away swiftly, my heart pounding. I was afraid I might be caught

and beaten myself. But no one came after me, and I was not condemned

afterward.

I did not get into trouble in those days, in spite of my obvious lack

of enthusiasm. Apart from the fact that the Red Guards were loosely

organized, I was, according to the 'theory of bloodlines," born bright

red, because my father was a high official. Although I was disapproved

of, nobody did anything drastic, except criticize me.

223At the time, the Red Guards divided pupils into three categories:

'reds," 'blacks," and 'grays." The 'reds' were from the families of

'workers, peasants, revolutionary officials, revolutionary officers,

and revolutionary martyrs."

The 'blacks' were those with parents classified as 'land

lords, rich peasants, counterrevolution ari bad elements, and

rightists." The 'grays' came from ambiguous families such as shop

assistants and clerks. In my year, all pupils ought to have been

'reds' because of the screening in the enrollment. But the pressure of

the Cultural Revolution meant that some villains had to be found. As a

result, more than a dozen became 'grays' or 'blacks."

There was a girl named Ai-ling in my year. We were old friends, and I

had often been to her house and knew her family well. Her grandfather

had been a prominent economist, and her family had been enjoying a very

privileged life under the Communists. Their house was large, elegant,

and luxurious, with an exquisite garden much better than my family's

apartment. I was especially attracted by their collection of antiques,

in particular the snuff bottles which Ai-ling's grandfather had brought

back from England where he had studied at Oxford in the

19~0S.

Now, suddenly, Ai-ling became a 'black." I heard that pupils from her

form had raided her house, smashed all the antiques, including the

snuff bottles, and beaten her parents and grandfather with the brass

buckles of their belts. The next day when I saw her she was wearing a

scarf. Her classmates had given her a 'yin and yang head."

She had had to have it completely shaved. She wept with me. I felt

terribly inadequate because I could not find any words to comfort

her.

In my own form a meeting was organized by the Red Guards at which we

all had to give our family backgrounds so we could be categorized. I

announced 'revolutionary official' with great relief. Three or four

pupils said 'office staff." In the jargon of the day, this was

different from 'officials," who held more senior positions. The

division was unclear, as there was no definition of what 'senior'

meant. Nevertheless, these vague labels had to be used on various

forms, all of which had a space for 'family background." Together with

a girl whose father was a shop assistant, the children of 'office

staff' were branded as 'grays." It was announced that they were to be

kept under surveillance, sweep the school grounds and clean toilets,

bow their heads at all times, and be prepared to be lectured by any Red

Guard who cared to address them. They also had to report their

thoughts and behavior every day.

These pupils suddenly looked subdued and shrunken.

Their vigor and enthusiasm, which they had had in abundance up to now,

had deserted them. One gift bent her head and tears streamed down her

cheeks. We had been friends.

After the meeting I went over to her to say something comforting, but

when she raised her head I saw resentment, almost hatred, in her eyes.

I walked away without a word, and wandered listlessly through the

grounds. It was the end of August. The Cape jasmine bushes spread

their rich fragrance. It seemed strange there should be any scent at

224all.

As dusk was descending I was walking back to the dormitory when I saw

something flash by a second-floor window of a classroom block about

forty yards away. There was a muffled bang at the foot of the

building. The hazy branches of some orange trees prevented me from

seeing what was happening, but people started to run in the direction

of the noise. Out of the confused, suppressed exclamations I made out

the message: "Someone has jumped out of the window!"

I instinctively raised my hands to cover my eyes, and ran to my room. I

was terribly scared. My mind's eye fixated on the blurry crooked

figure in midair. Hurriedly I shut the windows, but the noise of

people talking nervously about what had happened filtered through the

thin glass.

A seventeen-year-old girl had attempted suicide. Before the Cultural

Revolution, she had been one of the leaders of the Communist Youth

League, and had been a model in studying Chairman Mao's works and

learning from Lei Feng. She had done many good deeds like washing her

comrades' clothes and cleaning out toilets, and frequently gave talks

to the school about how loyally she followed Mao's teachings. She was

often to be seen strolling deep in conversation with a fellow pupil,

with a conscientious and purposeful look on her face, carrying out

'heart-to heart duties with someone who wanted to join the Youth

League. But now, suddenly, she had been categorized as a 'black." Her

father was 'office staff." He worked for the municipal government, and

was a Party member. But some of her classmates who found her a 'pain,"

and whose fathers were in higher posts, decided she should be a

'black." In the last couple of days, she had been put under guard with

other 'blacks' and 'grays' and forced to pull grass out of the sports

ground. To humiliate her, her classmates had shaved her beautiful

black hair, leaving her head grotesquely bald. On that evening, the

'reds' in her form had been giving her and the other victims an

insulting lecture.

She retorted that she was more loyal to Chairman Mao than they were.

The 'reds' slapped her and told her she was not fit to talk about her

loyalty to Mao because she was a class enemy. She ran to the window

and threw herself out.

Stunned and scared, the Red Guards rushed her to a hospital.

not die, but she was crippled for life.

She did

When I saw her many months later on the street, she was bent over on

crutches, her eyes blank.

On the night of her attempted suicide, I could not sleep.

The moment I closed my eyes, an indistinct figure loomed over me,

smeared with blood. I was terrified and shaking.

The next day I asked for sick leave, which was granted.

Home seemed to be the only escape from the horror at school.

desperately wished I would never have to go out again.

17.

I

"Do You Want Our Children to Become Blacks" My Parents' Dilemma

(August-October 1966)

225Home was no relief this time. My parents seemed distracted, and hardly

noticed me. When Father was not pacing up and down the apartment, he

was shut in his study.

Mother threw one waste basketful of crushed paper balls after another

into the kitchen stove. My grandmother also looked as though she was

expecting disaster. Her intense eyes were fixed on my parents, full of

anxiety. Timorously, I watched their moods, too afraid to ask what was

wrong.

My parents did not tell me about a conversation they had had some

evenings before. They had been sitting by an open window, outside

which a loudspeaker tied to a street lamp was blasting out endless

quotations of Mao's, particularly one about all revolutions being

violent by definition - 'the savage tumult of one class overthrowing

another." The quotations were chanted again and again in a high

pitched shriek that roused fear and, for some, excitement. Every now

and then there were announcements of 'victories' achieved by Red

Guards: they had raided more homes of 'class enemies' and 'smashed

their dogs' heads."

My father had been looking out at the blazing sunset.

He turned to my mother and said slowly: "I don't understand the

Cultural Revolution. But I am certain that what is happening is

terribly wrong. This revolution cannot be justified by any Marxist or

Communist principles. People have lost their basic rights and

protection. This is unspeakable. I am a Communist, and I have a duty

to stop a worse disaster. I must write to the Party leadership, to

Chairman Mao."

In China there was virtually no channel through which people could

voice a grievance, or influence policy, except appealing to the

leaders. In this particular case, only Mao could change the situation.

Whatever Father thought, or guessed, about Mao's role, the only thing

he could do was to petition him.

My mother's experience told her that complaining was extremely

dangerous. People who had done it, and their families, had suffered

vicious retribution. She was silent for a long time, staring out over

the distant burning sky, trying to control her worry, anger, and

frustration.

"Why do you want to be a moth that throws itself into the fire?"

she said at last.

My father replied, "This is no ordinary fire. It concerns the life and

death of so many people. I must do something this time."

My mother said, with exasperation, "All

yourself. You have no concern for your

about our children? You know what will

into trouble. Do you want our children

right, you don't care about

wife. I accept that. But what

happen to them once you get

to become "blacks"?"

My father said thoughtfully, as though he were trying to persuade

himself, "Every man loves his children. You know that before a tiger

is about to jump and kill, he always looks back and makes sure that his

cub is all right. Even a man-eating beast feels that way, let alone a

human being.

226396 7)0 You Want Our Children to Become "Blacks '7' But a Communist has

to be more than that. He has to think about other children. What

about the children of the victims?"

My mother stood up and walked away.

It was no use.

Once she was on her own, she wept bitterly.

Father began to write his letter, tearing up draft after draft. He had

always been a perfectionist, and a letter to Chairman Mao was no small

matter. Not only did he have to formulate exactly what he wanted to

say, he had to try to minimize the potential consequences, particularly

to his family. In other words, his criticism must not be seen as a

criticism. He could not afford to offend Mao.

Father had begun thinking about his letter in June.

Waves of scapegoating had claimed several of his colleagues, and he

wanted to speak up for them. But events had kept overtaking his plans.

Among other things, there had been more and more signs that he was

about to become a victim himself. One day, my mother saw a prominent

wall poster in the center of Chengdu attacking him by name, calling him

'the number-one opponent of the Cultural Revolution in Sichuan." This

was based on two accusations: the previous winter he had resistod

printing the article denouncing the Dramas of the Ming Mandarin, which

was Mao's original summons for the Cultural Revolution; and he had

drafted the "April Document," which opposed persecution and attempted

to limit the Cultural Revolution to nonpolitical debate.

When my mother told my father about the poster, he said

was the doing of the provincial Party leaders. The two

accused him of were known only to a small circle at the

felt convinced that they had now made up their minds to

and he knew why. Students from universities in Chengdu

to direct their offensive at the provincial leaders.

at once that it

things it

top. Father

scapegoat him,

were beginning

University students were entrusted with more information by the

Cultural Revolution Authority than middle-school pupils, and had been

told that Mao's real intention was to destroy the 'capitalist-roaders'

that is, Communist officials. The students were generally not high

officials' children, as most Communist officials had married only after

the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 anti so did not have

children of university age. Having no vested interest in the status

quo, the students were happy to turn on the officials.

The Sichuan authorities were outraged by the violence committed by

middle-school children, but the university students really made them

panic. They felt they had to find a prominent scapegoat to placate the

students. My father was one of the top officials in the field of

'culture," which was a major target of the Cultural Revolution. He had

a reputation for insisting on his principles. At a time when they

needed unanimity and obedience, they felt they could do without him.

Father's predicament was soon confirmed. On 26 August he was asked to

attend a meeting for the students of Sichuan University, the most

prestigious university in the province. They had been attacking the

chancellor and the senior staff, and were now raising their sights

toward the provincial Party officials. The meeting was nominally for

the provincial leaders to hear the students' complaints.

Commissar Li sat on the platform, together with the whole panoply of

227top Party officials.

packed.

The huge auditorium, the biggest in Chengdu, was

The students came to the meeting intending to make trouble, and the

hall was soon in pandemonium. Students, shouting slogans and waving

flags, began jumping onto the stage to try to grab the microphone.

Although my father was not the chairman, it was he who was asked to

bring the situation under control. While he was confronting the

students, the other Party officials left.

My father shouted: "Are you intelligent students, or are you hooligans?

Will you talk reason?" In general, officials in China maintain an

impassive manner, in keeping with their status, but my father was

yelling like one of the stu 398 "Do You Want Our Children to Become

"Blacks"?"

dents. Unfortunately, his genuineness did not impress them, and he

left amid much screaming of slogans.

Immediately afterward, huge wall posters appeared calling him 'the most

obstinate capitalist-roader, the diehard who opposes the Cultural

Revolution."

This meeting became a milestone. It was from it that the Red Guard

group at Sichuan University took its name - 'z6 August." This

organization was to become the core of a province wide bloc,

incorporating millions of people, and the major force in the Cultural

Revolution in Sichuan.

After the meeting, the provincial authorities ordered my father not to

leave our apartment under any circumstances for his own 'protection."

My father could see that he had first been deliberately exposed to the

students as a target, and then put under virtual house arrest. He

added his own anticipated victimization to his letter to Mao. One

night, with tears in his eyes, he asked my mother to take the letter to

Peking now that he had lost his freedom.

My mother had never wanted him to write the letter, but now she changed

her mind. What tipped the balance was the fact that he was being

turned into a victim. This meant that her children would become

'blacks' and she knew what that meant. Going to Peking and appealing

to the top leaders was her only chance, however remote, of saving her

husband and her children. She promised to take the letter.

On the last day of August I was awakened from an uneasy nap by a noise

from my parents' quarters. I tiptoed to the half-opened door of my

father's study. My father was standing in the middle of the room.

Several people were crowding around him. I recognized them: they were

from his depa~uaent. They all looked stern, devoid of their usual

eager-to-please smiles. My father was saying, "Would you please thank

the provincial authorities for me? I'm very grateful for their

concern. But I prefer not to go into hiding. A Communist should not

be afraid of students."

His voice was calm, but it contained a hint of emotion

which made me afraid. Then I heard a rather important sounding man's

voice saying threateningly, "But Director Chang, surely the Party knows

best. The university students are attacking you, and they can be

violent. The Party thinks you should be placed under protection. This

is the decision of the Party. You must know that a Communist has to

228obey Party decisions unconditionally."

After a silence, my father said quietly, "I obey the decision of the

Party. I will go with you."

"But where to?"

voice:

I heard my mother asking.

Then an impatient man's

"The Party's instructions are: no one is to know."

the study my father saw me and took my hand.

When he came out of

"Father is going away for a while," he said.

"Be a good girl to your mother."

My mother and I walked with him to the side gate of the compound. The

long path was lined with members of his department. My heart was

pounding and my legs seemed to be made of cotton wool. Father appeared

very agitated. His hand was shaking in mine. I stroked it with my

other hand.

A car was parked outside the gate. The door was held open for him.

There were two men in the car, one in front and one in the back.

Mother's face was taut, but she was calm. She looked into my father's

eyes and said, "Don't worry. I will do it." Without hugging me or my

mother, my father was gone. The Chinese show little physical affection

in public, even at extraordinary times.

I did not realize that my father was being taken into custody, because

the act was dressed up as 'protection."

Being fourteen, I had not learned to decipher the regime's hypocritical

style; deviousness was involved here because the authorities had not

made up their minds what to do with my father. As in most such cases,

the police played no role. The people who came to take my father away

were members of his department with a verbal authorization from the

Provincial Party Committee.

As soon as Father was gone, my mother threw a few

clothes into a bag and told us she was going to Peking. My father's

letter was still in draft form, with scribbles and alterations. The

minute he saw the staff posse coming he had pushed it into her hand.

My grandmother hugged my four-year-old brother Xiao-fang and wept. I

said I wanted to go with my mother to the station. There was no lime

to wait for a bus, so we jumped into a tricycle taxi.

I was fearfid and confused. My mother did not explain what was

happening. She looked strained and preoccupied, deep in her thoughts.

When I asked her what was going on, she said briefly that I would know

in time, and left it at that. I assumed she thought it was too

complicated to explain, and I was used to being told I was too young to

know certain things. I could also tell that my mother was busy sizing

up the situation and planning her next moves, and I did not want to

distract her. What I did not know was that she was battling to

comprehend the confused situation herself.

We sat in the tricycle taxi silent and tense, my hand in hers. My

mother kept glancing over her shoulder: she knew the authorities would

not want her to get to Peking, and had only let me come with her so I

229could be a witness in case anything happened. At the station she

bought a 'hard-seat' ticket for the next train to Peking. It was not

due until dawn, so we sat down on a bench in the waiting room, a kind

of shed with no walls.

I huddled up against her to wait for the long hours to pass. Silently,

we gazed at the darkness descending over the cement ground of the

square in front of the station. A few feeble bare bulbs on top of

wooden lampposts were shedding a pale light, reflected in the puddles

of water left over from a heavy thunderstorm that morning. I felt

chilly in my summer blouse. My mother wrapped her raincoat around me.

As the night dragged on, she told me to go to sleep. Exhausted, I

dozed off with my head on her lap.

I was awakened by a movement of her knees.

I lifted my

My Parents' Dilemma 4o i head and saw two people in hooded raincoats

standing in front of us. They were arguing about something in low

voices. In my muddled state, I could not work out what they were

saying. I could not even tell whether they were men or women. I

vaguely heard my mother say, in a calm, restrained voice, "I will shout

for the Red Guards." The gray-hooded raincoats fell silent. They

whispered to each other and then walked away, obviously not wanting to

attract attention.

At dawn, my mother got on the train to Peking.

Years later she told me that the two people were women she knew, junior

officials from my father's depasiment.

They told her the authorities had ruled that her going to Peking was an

'anti-Party' act. She quoted the Party charter, which said that it was

the right of any Party member to appeal to the leaders. When the

emissaries indicated that they had men wailing in a car who could seize

her by force, my mother said that if they did she would shout for help

from the Red Guards around the station and tell them they were trying

to stop her going to Peking to see Chairman Mao. I asked her how she

could be sure the Red Guards would help her rather than the pursuers.

"Suppose they denounced you to the Red Guards as a class enemy who was

trying to escape?" Mother smiled and said, "I calculated that they

would not take the risk. I was prepared to gamble everything. I had

no alternative."

In Peking my mother took my father's letter to a 'grievance office."

Chinese rulers throughout history, having never permitted an

independent legal system, had set up offices where ordinary people

could lodge grievances against their bosses, and the Communists

inherited this tradition. When during the Cultural Revolution it began

to look as though Communist bosses were losing their power, many people

who had been persecuted by them in the past flooded into Peking to

appeal. But the Cultural Revolution Authority soon made it clear that

'class enemies' were not allowed to complain, even against

'capitalist-roaders." If they tried to do so they would be doubly

punished.

Few cases concerning senior officials like my father were presented to

the grievance office, so my mother received special attention. She was

also one of the very few spouses of victims who had the courage to go

and appeal in Peking, as they were under pressure to 'draw a line'

between themselves and those accused rather than invite trouble by

230speaking up for the victims. My mother was received almost immediately

by Vice-Premier Tao Zhu, who was the head of the Central Department of

Public Affairs and one of the leaders of the Cultural Revolution at the

time.

She gave him my father's letter, and pleaded with him to order the

Sichuan authorities to release my father.

A couple of weeks later, Tao Zhu saw her again. He gave her a letter

which said my father had acted in a perfectly constitutional manner and

in concert with the Sichuan party leadership, and should be released at

once. Tao had not investigated the case. He took my mother's word,

because what had happened to my father was a common occurrence: Party

officials all over China were choosing scapegoats in their panic to

save their own skins. Tao gave her the letter directly rather than

sending it through normal Party channels, knowing they were in

disarray.

Tao Zhu showed he understood and agreed with the other concerns in my

father's letter: the epidemic of scape boating and the widespread

random violence. My moO' could see he wanted to control the situation.

As it happened, because of this, he himself was soon to be condemned as

'the third biggest capitalist-roader," after Lin Shaoqi and Deng

Xiaoping.

Meanwhile, my mother hand-copied Tao Zhu's letter, mailed the copy to

my grandmother and asked her to show it to my father's deparunent and

to tell them that she would return only after they released my father.

My mother was worried that if she returned to Sichuan the authorities

there might arrest her, seize the letter and not release my father. She

felt that, on balance, her best bet was to stay in Peking, where she

could continue to exercise pressure.

My grandmother passed on my mother's hand-copied text of Tao Zhu's

letter. But the provincial authorities said the whole thing was a

misunderstanding, and that they were just protecting my father. They

insisted that my mother must come back and stop her individualistic

meddling.

Officials came to our apartment several times to try to persuade my

grandmother to go to Peking and bring my mother back. One said to her,

"I'm really thinking of your daughter. Why persist in misunderstanding

the Party? The Party was only trying to protect your son-in-law. Your

daughter would not listen to the Party and went to Peking.

I'm worried for her that if she does not come back, she will be

regarded as anti-Party. And you know how serious that is. Being her

mother, you must do what is best for her. The Party has promised that

as long as she comes back and makes a self-criticism, she will be

forgiven."

The thought that her daughter was in trouble brought my grandmother to

the verge of collapse. After several such sessions, she was wavering.

Then one day her mind was made up for her: she was told that my father

was having a nervous breakdown, and only when my mother came home would

they send him to a hospital.

The Party gave my grandmother two tickets, one for herself and one for

Xiao-fang, and they set off to Peking, thirty-six hours away by train.

As soon as my mother heard the news, she sent a telegram to tell my

father's department she was on her way, and started making arrangements

231to return home. She arrived back with my grandmother and Xiao-fang in

the second week of October.

During her absence, the whole of September, I had stayed at home to

keep my grandmother company. I could see that she was consumed by

worry, but I did not know what was going on. Where was my father? Was

he under arrest,

or was he being protected?

know no one said anything.

Was my family in trouble or not?

I did not

I could stay at home because the Red Guards never exercised the

rigorous control the Party did. Besides, I had a sort of 'patron' in

the Red Guards, Geng, my gauche fifteen-year-old boss, who had made no

effort to summon me back to the school. But at the end of September he

telephoned to urge me to get back before I October, National Day, or I

would never be able to join the Red Guards.

I was not forced to join the Red Guards.

spite of what was happening around me, my

clear object, and it never occurred to me

Revolution or the Red Guards explicitly.

and Mao was beyond contemplation.

I was keen to do so. In

aversion and fear had no

to question the Cultural

They were Mao's creations,

Like many Chinese, I was incapable of rational thinking in those days.

We were so cowed and contorted by fear and indoctrination that to

deviate from the path laid down by Mao would have been inconceivable.

Besides, we had been overwhelmed by deceptive rhetoric, disinformation,

and hypocrisy, which made it virtually impossible to see through the

situation and to form an intelligent judgment.

Back at school, I heard that there had been many complaints from 'reds'

demanding to know why they had not been admitted to the Red Guards.

That was why it was important to be there on National Day, as there was

going to be a big enrollment, incorporating all the rest of the 'reds."

So, at the very time the Cultural Revolution had brought disaster on my

family, I became a Red Guard.

I was thrilled by my red arm band with its gold characters. It was the

fashion of the day for Red Guards to wear old army uniforms with

leather belts, like the one Mao was seen wearing at the beginning of

the Cultural Revolution.

I was keen to follow the fashion, so as soon as I was enrolled I rushed

home, and from the bottom of an old trunk I dug out a pale-gray Lenin

jacket which had been my mother's uniform in the early 1950S. It was a

little too big, so I got my grandmother to take it in. With a leather

belt from a pair of my father's trousers my costume was complete. But

out on the streets I felt very uncomfortable.

I found my image too aggressive.

Still, I kept the outfit on.

Soon after this my grandmother went to Peking.

school, having just joined the Red Guards.

I had to stay in the

Because of what had happened at home, the school frightened and

startled me all the time. When I saw the 'blacks' and 'grays' having

to clean the toilets and the grounds, their heads bowed, a creeping

dread came over me, as though I were one of them. When the Red Guards

went off at night on house raids, my legs went weak, as if they were

heading for my family. When I noticed pupils whispering near me, my

232heart started to palpitate frantically:

were they saying that I had become a 'black," or that my father had

been arrested?

But I found a refuge: the Red Guard reception office.

There were a lot of visitors to the school. Since September 1966, more

and more young people were on the road, traveling all over the country.

To encourage them to travel around and stir things up, transport, food,

and accommodations were provided free.

The reception office was in what had once been a lecture hall. The

wandering and often aimless visitors would be given cups of tea and

chatted to. If they claimed to have serious business, the office would

make an appointment for them to see one of the school Red Guard

leaders. I zeroed in on this office because the people in it did not

have to participate in actions like guarding the 'blacks' and 'grays,"

or go on house raids. I also liked it because of the five girls

working there. There was an air of warmth and lack of zealotry around

them which made me feel soothed the moment I met them.

A lot of people used to come to the office, and many would hang around

to chat with us. There was often a line at the door, and some returned

again and again. Looking back now, I can see that the young men really

wanted some female company. They were not that engrossed in the

revolution. But I remember being extremely earnest. I never avoided

their gazes or returned their winks, and I conscientiously took notes

of all the nonsense they spouted.

One hot night two rather coarse middle-aged women turned up at the

reception office, which was boisterous as usual. They introduced

themselves as the director and deputy director of a residents'

committee near the school.

They talked in a very mysterious and grave manner, as though they were

on some grand mission. I had always disliked this kind of affectation,

so I turned my back. But soon I could tell that an explosive piece of

information had been delivered. The people who had been hanging around

started shouting, "Get a truck! Get a truck! Let's all go there!"

Before I knew what was happening, I was swept out of the room by the

crowd and into a truck. As Mao had ordered the workers to support the

Red Guards, trucks and drivers were permanently at our service. In the

truck, I was squeezed next to one of the women. She was retelling her

story, her eyes full of eagerness to ingratiate herself with us. She

said that a woman in her neighborhood was the wife of a Kuomintang

officer who had fled to Taiwan, and that she had hidden a portrait of

Chiang Kai-shek in her apa~iment.

I did not like the woman, especially her toadying smile.

And I resented her for making me go on my first house raid. Soon the

truck stopped in front of a narrow alley. We all got out and followed

the two women down the cobbled path. It was pitch-dark, the only light

coming from the crevices between the planks of wood that formed the

walls of the houses. I staggered and slipped, trying to fall behind.

The apa~i,nent of the accused woman consisted of two rooms, and was so

small that it could not hold our truckful of people. I was only too

happy to stay outside. But before long someone shouted that space had

been made for those outside to come in and 'receive an education in

233class struggle."

As soon as I was pressed into the room with the others, my nostrils

were filled with the stench of feces, urine, and unwashed bodies. The

room had been turned upside down. Then I saw the accused woman. She

was perhaps in her forties, kneeling in the middle of the room, partly

naked. The room was lit by a bare fifteen-watt bulb. In its shadows,

the kneeling figure on the floor looked grotesque.

Her hair was in a mess, and part of it seemed to be matted with blood.

Her eyes were bulging out in desperation as she shrieked: "Red Guard

masters! I do not have a portrait of Chiang Kai-shek! I swear I do

not!" She was banging her head on the floor so hard there were loud

thuds and blood oozed from her forehead. The flesh on her back was

covered with cuts and bloodstains. When she lifted her bottom in a

kowtow, murky patches were visible and the smell of excrement filled

the air. I was so frightened that I quickly averted my eyes. Then I

saw her tormentor, a seventeen-year-old boy named Chian, whom up to now

I had rather liked. He was lounging in a chair with a leather belt in

his hand, playing with its brass buckle.

"Tell the truth, or I'll hit you again," he said languidly.

Chian's father was an army officer in Tibet. Most officers sent to

Tibet left their families in Chengdu, the nearest big city in China

proper, because Tibet was considered an uninhabitable and barbaric

place. Previously I had been rather attracted by Chian's languorous

manner, which had given an impression of gentleness. Now I murmured,

trying to control the quaking in my voice, "Didn't Chairman Mao teach

us to use verbal struggle [wendou] rather than violent struggle

[wu-dou]? Maybe we shouldn't... ?"

My feeble protest was echoed by several voices in the room. But Chian

cast us a disgusted sideways glance and said emphatically: "Draw a line

between yourselves and the class enemy. Chairman Mao says, "Mercy to

the enemy is cruelty to the people!" If you are afraid of blood, don't

be Red Guards!" His face was twisted into ugliness by fanaticism. The

rest of us fell silent. Although it was impossible to feel anything

but revulsion at what he was doing, we could not argue with him. We

had been taught to be ruthless to class enemies. Failure to do so

would make us class enemies ourselves. I turned and walked quickly

into the garden at the back. It was crammed with Red Guards with

shovels. From inside the house the sound of lashes started again,

accompanied by screams that made my hair stand on end. The yelling

must have been unbearable for the others too, because many swiftly

straightened up from their digging: "There is nothing here. Let's

go!

Let's go? As we passed through the room, I caught sight of Chian

standing casually over his victim. Outside the door, I saw the woman

informer with the ingratiating eyes.

Now there was a cringing and frightened look there. She opened her

mouth as if to say something, but no words came out. As I glanced at

her face, it dawned on me that there was no portrait of Chiang

Kai-shek. She had denounced the poor woman out of vindictiveness. The

Red Guards were being used to set He old scores. I climbed back into

the truck full of disgust and rage.

18.

"More Than Gigantic

234Wonderful News'm

Pilgrimage to Peking

(October-December 1966)

I found an excuse to get out of school, and was home again the next

morning. The apariment was empty. My father was in detention. My

mother, grandmother, and Xiao-fang were in Peking. My teenage siblings

were living their own, separate lives elsewhere.

Jin-ming had resented the Cultural Revolution from the very beginning.

He was in the same school as me, and was in his first year. He wanted

to become a scientist, but this was denounced by the Cultural

Revolution as 'bourgeois."

He and some boys in his form had formed a gang before the Cultural

Revolution. They loved adventure and mystery, and had called

themselves the "Iron-Wrought Brotherhood." Jin-ming was their

number-one brother. He was tall, and brilliant at his studies. He had

been giving his form weekly magic shows using his chemistry knowledge,

and had been openly skipping lessons which he was not interested in or

which he had already gone beyond.

And he was fair and generous to the other boys.

When the school Red Guard organization was set up on

August, Jin-ming's 'brotherhood' was merged into it.

He and his gang were given the job of printing leaflets and

distributing them on the streets. The leaflets had been written by

older Red Guards in their mid-teens and typically had rifles like

"Founding Declaration of the First Brigade of the First Army Division

of the Red Guards of the Number Four School' (all Red Guard

organizations had grand names), "Solemn Statement' (a pupil announced

he was changing his name to "Huang the Guard for Chairman Mao'), "More

Than Gigantic Wonderful News' (a member of the Cultural Revolution

Authority had just given an audience to some Red Guards), and "The

Latest Most Supreme Instructions' (a word or two by Mao had just been

leaked out).

Jin-ming was soon bored stiff by this gibberish. He started to absent

himself from his missions, and became interested in a girl of his age,

thirteen. She seemed to him the perfect lady beautiful, gentle, and

slightly aloof, with a touch of shyness. He did not approach her, but

was content to admire her from afar.

One day the pupils in his form were summoned to go on a house raid. The

older Red Guards said something about 'bourgeois intellectuals." All

members of the family were declared prisoners and ordered to gather in

one room while the Red Guards searched the rest of the house.

Jin-ming was appointed to watch the family.

was the other 'jailer."

To his delight, the girl

There were three 'prisoners': a middle-aged man and his son and

daughter-in-law. They had obviously been expecting the raid, and sat

with resigned expressions on their faces, staring into Jin-ming's eyes

as though into space. Jin-ming felt very awkward under their gaze, and

he was also uneasy because of the presence of the girl, who looked

235bored and kept glancing toward the door. When she saw several boys

carrying a huge wooden case full of porcelain, she mumbled to Jin-ming

that she was going to have a look, and left the room.

3i

Facing his captives alone, Jin-ming felt his discomfort growing. Then

the woman prisoner stood up and said she wanted to go and breast-feed

her baby in the next room.

Jin-ming readily agreed.

The moment she left the room, the object of Jin-ming's affection rushed

in. Sternly, she asked him why a prisoner was at large. When Jin-ming

said he had given permission, she yelled at him for being 'soft on

class enemies." She was wearing a leather belt on what Jin-ming had

thought of as her 'willowy' waist. Now she pulled it off and pointed

it at his nose a stylized Red Guard posture while she screamed at him.

Jin-ming was struck dumb. The girl was unrecognizable. All of a

sudden she was far from gentle, shy, or lovely. She was all hysterical

ugliness. Thus was Jin-ming's first love extinguished.

But he shouted back. The girl left the room and returned with an older

Red Guard, the leader of the group. He started yelling so much his

spittle splashed on Jinming, and he too pointed his rolled-up belt at

him. Then he stopped, realizing that they should not be washing their

dirty linen in front of class enemies. He ordered Jin-ming to go back

to the school to 'wait for adjudication."

That evening, the Red Guards in Jin-ming's form held a meeting without

him. When the boys came back to the dormitory, their eyes avoided his.

They behaved distantly for a couple of days. Then they toldJin-ming

they had been arguing with the militant girl. She had reported

Jin-ming's 'surrender to the class enemies' and had insisted that he be

given a severe punishment. But the Iron-Wrought Brotherhood defended

him. Some of them resented the girl, who had been terribly aggressive

toward other boys and girls too.

Still, Jin-ming was punished: he was ordered to pull out grass

alongside the 'blacks' and 'grays." Mao's instruction to exterminate

grass had led to a constant demand for manpower because of the grass's

obstinate nature. This

412 Wl ore Than Gigantic Wonderful News' fortuitous by offered a form

of punishment for the newby created 'class enemies."

Jin-ming pulled up grass only for a few days.

Brotherhood could not bear to see him suffer.

His Iron Wrought

But he had been classified as a 'sympathizer with class enemies," and

was never sent on any more raids, which suited him fine. He soon

embarked on a journey with his brotherhood sight-seeing all over the

country, taking in China's rivers and mountains, but, unlike most Red

Guards, Jin-ming never made the pilgrimage to Peking to see Mao. He

did not come home until the end of ,966.

My sister Xiao-hong, at fifteen, was a founding member of the Red

Guards at her school. But she was only one among hundreds, as the

school was crammed with officials' children, many of them competing to

be active. She hated and feared the atmosphere of militancy and

violence so much that she was soon on the verge of a nervous

236collapse.

She came home to ask my parents for help at the beginning of September,

only to find they were not there: my father was in detention and my

mother had gone to Peking. My grandmother's anxiety made her even more

scared, so she returned to her school. She volunteered to help 'guard'

the school library, which had been ransacked and sealed, like the one

at my school. She spent her days and nights reading, devouring all the

forbidden fruits she could. It was this that held her together. In

mid-September, she set out on a long tour around the country with her

friends and like Jin-ming she did not come home until the end of the

year.

My brother Xiao-her was almost twelve, and was at the same key primary

school I had attended. When the Red Guards were formed in the middle

schools, Xiao-her and his friends were eager to join. To them the Red

Guards meant freedom to live away from home, staying up all night, and

power over adults. They went to my school and begged to be allowed

into the Red Guards. To get rid of

Pilgrimage to Peking 4x 3 them, one Red Guard said offnandedly, "You

can form the First Army Division of Unit 4969." So Xiao-her became the

head of the Propaganda Department of a troop of twenty boys, all the

others being 'commander," 'chief of staff," and so on. There were no

privates.

Xiao-her joined in hitting teachers twice. One of the victims was a

sports teacher, who had been condemned as a 'bad element." Some girls

of Xiao-her's age had accused the teacher of touching their breasts and

thighs during gym lessons. So the boys set upon him, not least to

impress the girls. The other teacher was the moral tutor. As corporal

punishment was banned in schools, she would complain to the parents,

who would beat their sons.

One day, the boys set out on a house raid, and were assigned to go to a

household which was rumored to be that of an ex-Kuomintang family. They

did not know what exactly they were supposed to do there. Their heads

had been filled with vague notions of finding something like a diary

saying how the family longed for Chiang Kai-shek's comeback and hated

the Communist Party.

The family had five sons, all well-built and tough looking They stood

by the door, arms akimbo, and looked down at the boys with their most

intimidating stares. Only one boy attempted to tiptoe in. One of the

sons picked him up by the scruff of his neck and threw him out with one

hand. This put an end to any further such 'revolutionary actions' by

Xiao-her's 'division."

So, in the second week of October, while Xiao-her was living at his

school and enjoying his freedom, Jin-ming and my sister were away

traveling, and my mother and grandmother were in Peking, I was alone at

home when one day, without warning, my father appeared on the

doorstep.

It was an eerily quiet homecoming. My father was a changed person. He

was abstracted and sunk deep in thought, and did not say where he had

been or what had

4z4 ~14ore Than Gigantic Wonderful News' been happening to him.

listened to him pacing his room through sleepless nights, too

frightened and worried to sleep myself. Two days later, to my

I

237tremendous relief, my mother returned from Peking with my grandmother

and Xiao-fang.

My mother immediately went to my father's deparunent and handed Tao

Zhu's letter to a deputy director. Straight away, my father was sent

to a health clinic. My mother was allowed to go with him."

I went there to see them. It was a lovely place in the country,

bordered on two sides by a beautiful green brook.

My father had a suite with a sitting room in which there was a row of

empty bookshelves, a bedroom with a large double bed, and a bathroom

with shiny white files. Outside his balcony, several osmanthus trees

spread an intoxicating scent. When the breeze blew, tiny golden

blossoms floated softly down to the grass less earth.

Both my parents seemed peaceful. My mother told me they went fishing

in the brook every day. I felt they were safe, so I told them I was

planning to leave for Peking to see Chairman Mao. I had longed to make

this trip, like almost everybody else. But I had not gone because I

felt I should be around to give my parents support.

Making the pilgrimage to Peking was very much encouraged and food,

accommodations, and transport were all free. But it was not organized.

I left Chengdu two days later with the five other girls from the

reception office. As the train whistled north, my feelings were a

mixture of excitement and nagging disquiet about my father. Outside

the window, on the Chengdu Plain, some rice fields had been harvested,

and squares of black soil shone among the gold, forming a rich

patchwork. The countryside had been only marginally affected by the

upheavals, in spite of repeated instigations by the Cultural Revolution

Authority led by Mme Mao. Mao wanted the population fed so that they

could 'make revolution," so he did not give his wife his full backing.

The peasants knew that if they got involved and stopped producing food,

they would be the first to starve, as they had learned in the famine

only a few years before. The cottages among the green bamboo groves

seemed as peaceful and idyllic as ever. The wind gently swayed the

lingering smoke to form a crown over the graceful bamboo tips and the

concealed chimneys. It was less than five months since the beginning

of the Cultural Revolution, but my world had changed completely. I

gazed out at the quiet beauty of the plain, and let a wistful mood

envelop me. Fortunately, I did not have to worry about being

criticized for being 'nostalgic," which was considered bourgeois, as

none of the other girls had an accusing turn of mind. With them, I

felt I could relax.

The prosperous Chengdu Plain soon gave way to low hills. The snowy

mountains of west Sichuan glistened in the distance. Before very long

we were traveling in and out of the tunnels through the towering Qjn

Mountains, the wild range that cuts Sichuan off from the north of

China.

With Tibet to the west, the hazardous Yangtze Gorges to the east, and

the southern neighbors considered barbarians, Sichuan had always been

rather self-contained, and the Sichuanese were known for their

independent spirit. Mao had been concerned about their legendary

inclination to seek some margin of independence, and had always made

sure the province was in the firm grip of Peking.

After the Qjn Mountains, the scenery became dramatically different. The

soft greenness gave way to harsh yellow earth, and the thatched

238cottages of the Chengdu Plain were replaced by rows of dry mud

cave-huts. It was in caves like these that my father had spent five

years as a young man.

We were only a hundred miles from Yan'an, where Mao had set up his

headquarters after the Long March. It was there that my father dreamed

his youthful dreams and became a devoted Communist. Thinking of him,

my eyes became moist.

The journey took two days and a night.

The attendants

4x6 ~lore Than Gigantic Wonderful News' came to talk to us often and

told us how envious they were that we would be seeing Chairman Mao

soon.

At Peking Station huge slogans welcomed us as "Chairman Mao's guests."

It was after midnight, yet the square in front of the station was lit

~up like daytime. Searchlights swept through the thousands and

thousands of young people, all wearing red armbands and speaking often

mutually unintelligible dialects. They were talking, shouting,

giggling, and quarreling against the background of a gigantic chunk of

stolid Soviet-style architecture the station itself. The only Chinese

features were the pastiche pavilion like roofs on the two clock towers

at each end.

As I stumbled drowsily out into the searchlights, I was enormously

impressed by the building, its ostentatious grandeur and its shiny

marbled modernity. I had been used to traditional dark timber columns

and rough brick walls.

I looked back, and with a surge of emotion saw a huge portrait of Mao

hanging in the center, under three golden characters, "Peking Station,"

in his calligraphy.

Loudspeakers directed us to the reception rooms in a corner of the

station. In Peking, as in every other city in China, administrators

were appointed to arrange food and accommodations for the traveling

youngsters. Dormitories in universities, schools, hotels, and even

offices were pressed into service. After waiting on line for hours, we

were assigned to Q~mghua University, one of the most prestigious in the

country. We were taken there by coach and told that food would be

provided in the canteen. The running of the gigantic machine for the

millions of traveling youngsters was overseen by Zhou Enlai, who dealt

with the daily chores with which Mao could not be bothered.

Without Zhou or somebody like him, the country and with it the Cultural

Revolution would have collapsed, and Mao let it be known that Zhou was

not to be attacked.

We were a very serious group, and all we wanted to do was to see

Chairman Mao. Unfortunately, we had just missed his fifth review of

Red Guards in Tiananmen

Square. What were we to do? Leisure activities and sightseeing were

out irrelevant to the revolution. So we spent all our time on the

campus copying wall posters. Mao had said that one purpose of

traveling was to 'exchange information about the Cultural Revolution."

That was what we would do: bring the slogans of the Peking Red Guards

back to Chengdu.

Actually, there was another reason for not going out:

239transport was impossibly crowded and the university was out in the

suburbs, about ten miles from the city center.

Still, we had to tell ourselves that our disinclination to move was

correctly motivated.

Staying on the campus was intensely uncomfortable.

Even today I can still smell the latrines down the corridor from our

room, which were so blocked that the water from the washbasins and

urine and loosened excrement from the toilets flooded the tiled floor.

Fortunately, the doorway to the latrines had a ridge, which prevented

the stinking overflow from invading the corridor. The university

administration was paralyzed, so there was nobody to get repairs done.

But children from the countryside were still using the toilets: manure

was not considered untouchable by peasants. When they trudged out,

their shoes left highly odorous stains along the corridor and in the

rooms.

A week passed, and still there was no news of another rally at which we

could see Mao. Subconsciously desperate to get away from our

discomfort, we decided to go to Shanghai to visit the site where the

Communist Party had been founded in 19:zl, and then on to Mao's

birthplace in Hunan, in south-central China.

These pilgrimages turned out to be hell: the trains were unbelievably

packed. The dominance of the Red Guards by high officials' children

was coming to an end, because their parents were beginning to come

under attack as capitalist-roaders. The oppressed 'blacks' and 'grays'

began to organize their own Red Guard groups and to travel. The color

codes were beginning to lose their meaning. I rem em 4x 8 Wlore Than

Gigantic Wonderful News' her meeting on one train a very beautiful,

slim girl of about eighteen, with unusually big, velvet black eyes and

long, thick eyelashes. As was the custom, we started by asking each

other what 'family background' we were from. I was amazed at the

unembarrassed manner with which this lovely girl replied that she was a

'black." And she seemed confidently to be expecting us 'red' girls to

be friendly with her.

The six of us were very un militant in our behavior, and our seats were

always the center of boisterous chatting.

The oldest member of our group was eighteen, and she was particularly

popular. Everyone called her "Plumpie," as she was very well padded

all around. She laughed a lot, with a deep, chesty, operafc sound. She

sang a lot too, but, of course, only songs of Chairman Mao's

quotations.

All songs except these and a few in praise of Mao were banned, like all

other forms of entertainment, and remained so for the ten years of the

Cultural Revolution.

This was the happiest I had been since the start of the

Cultural Revolution, in spite of the persistent worry about my father

and the agony involved in traveling. Every inch of space in the trains

was occupied, even the luggage racks.

The toilet was jam-packed: no one could get in.

to see the holy sites of China sustained us.

Only our determination

240Once, I desperately needed to relieve myself. I was sitting squeezed

up next to a window, because five people were crammed onto a narrow

seat made for three. With an incredible struggle I reached the toilet

but when I got there I decided it was impossible to use it. Even if

the boy who sat on the lid of the tank with his feet on the toilet seat

cover could lift his legs for one moment, even if the girl who sat

between his feet could somehow manage to be held up briefly by the

others filling every usable space around her, I could not bring myself

to do it in front of all these boys and girls. I returned to my seat

on the verge of tears. Panic worsened the bursting sensation, and my

legs were shaking. I resolved to use the toilet at the next stop.

After what seemed an interminable time, the train stopped at a small,

dusk-enveloped station. The window was opened and I clambered out, but

when I came back I found

I could not get in.

I was perhaps the least athletic of us six. Previously, whenever I had

had to climb into a train through the window, one of my friends had

always lifted me from the platform while others pulled me from inside.

This time, although I was being helped by about four people from

inside, I could not hoist my body high enough to get my head and elbows

in. I was sweating like mad, even though it was freezing cold. At

this point, the train started to pull away. Panicking, I looked around

to see if there was anyone who could help. My eyes fell on the thin,

dark face of a boy who had sidled up beside me. But his intention was

not to lend me a hand.

I had my purse in a pocket of my jacket, and because of my climbing

position it was quite visible. With two fingers, the boy picked it

out. He had presumably chosen the moment of departure to snatch it. I

burst out crying. The boy paused. He looked at me, hesitated, and put

the purse back. Then he took hold of my right leg and hoisted me up. I

landed on the table as the train was beginning to pick up speed.

Because of this incident, I developed a soft spot for adolescent

pickpockets. In the coming years of the Cultural Revolution, when the

economy was in a shambles, theft was widespread, and I once lost a

whole year's food coupons. But whenever I heard that policemen or

other custodians of' law and order' had beaten a pickpocket, I always

felt a pang. Perhaps the boy on that winter platform had shown more

humanity than the hypocritical pillars of society.

Altogether we traveled about 2,000 miles on this trip, in a state of

exhaustion such as I had never experienced in my life. We visited

Mao's old house, which had been turned into a museum-cum-shrine. It

was rather grand quite different from my idea of a lodging for

exploited peasants, as I had expected it to be. A cap ton underneath

an enormous photograph of Mao's mother said that she had been a very

kind person and, because her family was relatively well off, had often

given food to the poor. So our Great Leader's parents had been rich

peasants! But rich peasants were class enemies! Why were Chairman

Mao's parents heroes when other class enemies were objects of hate? The

question frightened me so much that I immediately suppressed it..

When we got back to Peking in mid-November, the capital was freezing.

The reception offices were no longer at the station, because the area

was too small for the huge number of youngsters now pouring in. A

truck took us to a park where we spent the whole night waiting for

241accommodations to be allocated. We could not sit down because the

ground was covered with frost and it was unbearably cold. I dozed off

for a second or two standing up. I was not used to the harsh Peking

winter and, having left home in the autumn, had not brought any winter

clothes with me. The wind cut through my bones, and the night seemed

never-ending. So did the line. It meandered around and around the

ice-covered lake in the middle of the park.

Dawn came and went and we were still in line, absolutely exhausted. It

was not until dusk fell that we reached our accommodations: the Central

Drama School. Our room had once been used for singing classes. Now

there were two rows of straw mattresses on the floor, no sheets or

pillows. We were met by some air force officers, who said they had

been sent by Chairman Mao to look after us and give us military

training. We all felt very moved by the concern Chairman Mao showed

us.

Military training for the Red Guards was a new development. Mao had

decided to put a brake on the random destruction which he had

unleashed. The hundreds of Red Guards lodged in the Drama School were

organized into a 'regiment' by the air force officers. We struck up a

good relationship with them, and liked two

officers in particular, whose family backgrounds we learned at once, as

was customary. The company commander had been a peasant from the

north, while the political commissar came from an intellectual's family

in the famous garden city of Suzhou. One day they proposed taking the

six of us to the zoo, but asked us not to tell the others because their

jeep could not hold any more people. Besides, they implied, they were

not supposed to divert us to activities irrelevant to the Cultural

Revolution. Not wanting to get them into trouble we declined, saying

we wanted to 'stick to making revolution." The two officers brought us

bagfuls of big ripe apples, which were seldom seen in Chengdu, and

bunches of toffee-coated water chestnuts, which we had all heard of as

a great Peking specialty. To repay their kindness, we sneaked into

their bedroom and collected their dirty clothes, then washed them with

great enthusiasm. I remember struggling with the big khaki uniforms,

which were extremely heavy and hard in the icy water. Mao had told the

people to learn from the armed forces, because he wanted everyone to be

as regimented and indoctrinated with loyalty to him alone as the army

was. Learning from servicemen had gone hand in hand with the promotion

of affection for them, and numerous books, articles, songs, and dances

featured girls helping soldiers by washing their clothes.

I even washed their underpants, but nothing sexual ever entered my

mind. I suppose many Chinese girls of my generation were too dominated

by the crushing political upheavals to develop adolescent sexual

feelings. But not all. The disappearance of parental control meant it

was a time of promiscuity for some. When I got back home I heard about

a former classmate of mine, a pretty girl of fifteen, who went off

traveling with some Red Guards from Peking. She had an affair on the

way and came back pregnant. She was beaten by her father, followed by

the accusing eyes of the neighbors, and enthusiastically gossiped about

by her comrades. She hanged

herself, leaving a note saying she was 'too ashamed to live." No one

challenged this medieval concept of shame, which might have been a

target of a genuine cultural revolution. But it was never one of Mao's

concerns, and was not among the 'olds' which the Red Guards were

encouraged to destroy.

The Cultural Revolution also produced a large number of militant

puritans, mostly young women. Another girl from my form once received

242a love letter from a boy of sixteen. She wrote back calling him 'a

traitor to the revolution': "How dare you think about such shameless

things when the class enemies are still rampant, and people in the

capitalist world still live in an abyss of misery!" Such a style was

affected by many of the girls I knew. Because Mao called for girls to

be militant, femininity was condemned in the years when my generation

was growing up. Many girls tried to talk, walk, and act like

aggressive, crude men, and ridiculed those who did not. There was not

much possibility of expressing femininity anyway. To start with, we

were not allowed to wear anything but the shapeless blue, grey or green

trousers and jackets.

Our air force officers drilled us round and round the Drama School's

basketball courts every day. Next to the courts was the canteen. My

eyes used to steal toward it as soon as we formed up, even if I had

just finished breakfast.

I was obsessed

to the lack of

dreamed of the

sweet-and-sour

delicacies.

with food, although I was not sure whether this was due

meat, or the cold, or the boredom of the drilling. I

variety of Sichuan cuisine, of crispy duckling,

fish, "Drunken Chicken," and dozens of other succulent

None of us six girls was used to having money. We also thought that

buying things was somehow 'capitalist." So, in spite of my obsession

with food, I only bought one bunch of toffee-coated water chestnuts,

after my appetite for them had been whetted by the ones our officers

gave us. I resolved to give myself this treat after a great deal of

agonizing and consultation with the other girls. When I got home after

the trip I immediately devoured some stale biscuits, while handing my

grandmother the almost untouched money she had given me. She pulled me

into her arms and kept saying, "What a silly girl!"

I also returned home with rheumatism. Peking was so cold that water

froze in the taps. Yet I was drilling, in the open, without an

overcoat. There was no hot water to warm up our icy feet. When we

first arrived, we were given a blanket each. Some days later, more

girls arrived, but there were no more blankets. We decided to give

them three and share the other three between us six. Our upbringing

had taught us to help comrades in need. We had been informed that our

blankets had come from stores reserved for wartime. Chairman Mao had

ordered them to be taken out for the comfort of his Red Guards. We

expressed our heartfelt gratitude to Mao. Now, when we ended up with

hardly any blankets, we were told to be even more grateful to Mao,

because he had given us all China had.

The blankets were small, and could not cover two people unless they

slept close together. The shapeless nightmares which had started after

I had seen the attempted suicide had become worse after my father was

taken away and my mother left for Peking; and since I slept badly, I

often twisted out from under the blanket. The room was poorly heated,

and once I fell asleep, an icy chill invaded me. By the time we left

Peking the joints in my knees were so inflamed that I could hardly bend

them.

My discomfort did not stop there. Some children from the countryside

had fleas and lice. One day I came into our room and saw one of my

friends crying. She had just discovered a blot of tiny white eggs in

the armpit seam of her underwear lice eggs. This threw me into a

panic, because lice caused unbearable itchiness and were associated

with dirtiness. From then on, I felt itchy all the time, and examined

243my underwear several times a day.

us soon so I could go home!

How I longed for Chairman Mao to see

On the afternoon of 24 November, I was in one of our usual Mao

quotation studying sessions in one of the boys' rooms (officers and

boys would not come into the girls' rooms, out of modesty). Our nice

company commander came in with an unusually light gait and proposed

conducting us in the most famous song of the Cultural Revolution: "When

Sailing the Seas, We Need the Helmsman."

He had never done this before, and we were all pleasantly surprised. He

waved his arms beating time, his eyes shining, his cheeks flushed. When

he finished, and announced with restrained excitement that he had some

good news, we knew immediately what it was.

"We're going to see Chairman Mao tomorrow!" he exclaimed. The rest of

his words were drowned out by our cheers. After the initial wordless

yelling, our excitement took the form of shouting slogans: "Long live

Chairman Mao!"

"We will follow Chairman Mao forever!"

The company commander told us that no one could leave the campus from

that minute on, and that we should watch one another to make sure of

this. To be asked to watch one another was quite normal. Besides,

these were safety measures for Chairman Mao, which we were only too

glad to apply. After dinner, the officer approached my five companions

and me, and said in a hushed and solemn voice: "Would you like to do

something to ensure Chairman Mao's safety?"

"Of course!" He signaled for us to keep quiet, and continued in a

whisper: "Would you propose before we leave tomorrow morning that we

all search each other to make sure that no one is carrying anything

they shouldn't? You know, young people might forget about the rules

.... He had announced the rules earlier that we must not bring anything

metal, not even keys, to the rally.

Most of us could not sleep, and excitedly talked the night away. At

four o'clock in the morning we got up and gathered in disciplined ranks

for the hour-and-a-half walk to Tiananmen Square. Before our 'company'

set off, at a wink from the officer, Plumpie stood up and proposed a

search. I could see that some of the others thought she was wasting

our time, but our company commander cheerfully seconded her proposal.

He suggested we search him first.

A boy was called to do this, and found a big bunch of keys on him.

commander acted as though he had been genuinely careless, and gave

Plumpie a victorious smile.

Our

The rest of us searched each other. This roundabout way of doing

things reflected a Maoist practice: things had to look as though they

were the wish of the people, rather than commands from above. Hypocrisy

and playacting were taken for granted.

The early-morning streets were bursting with activity.

Red Guards were marching toward Tiananmen Square from all over the

capital. Deafening slogans surged like roaring waves. As we chanted,

we raised our hands and our Little Red Books formed a dramatic red line

against the darkness. We reached the square at dawn. I was placed in

the seventh row from the front on the wide northern pavement of the

244Avenue of Eternal Peace to the east side of Tiananmen Square.

me were many more rows.

Behind

After lining us up tidily, our officers ordered us to sit down on the

hard ground cross-legged. With my inflamed joints, this was agony, and

I soon got pins and needles in my bottom. I was deadly cold and drowsy

and exhausted because I could not fall asleep. The officers conducted

nonstop singing, making different groups challenge each other, to keep

up our spirits.

Shortly before noon, hysterical waves of "Long live Chairman Mao!"

roared from the east. I had been flagging and was slow to realize that

Mao was about to pass by in an open car. Suddenly thunderous yelling

exploded all around me.

"Long live Chairman Mao! Long live Chairman Mao!" People sitting in

front of me shot up and hopped in delirious excitement, their raised

hands frantically waving their Litfie Red Books.

"Sit down!

Sit down!"

I cried, in vain. Our company commander had said that we all had to

remain seated throughout. But few seemed to be observing the rules,

possessed by their urge to set eyes on Mao.

Having been sitting for so long, my legs had gone numb.

For some seconds, all I could see was a boiling sea of the backs of

heads. When I finally managed to totter to my feet, I caught only the

very end of the motorcade. Liu Shaoqi, the president, had his face

turned in my direction.

Wall posters had already started attacking Liu as "China's Khrushchev'

and the leading opponent of Mao.

Although he had not been officially denounced, it was clear that his

downfall was imminent. In press reports of the Red Guard rallies, he

was always given a very undistinguished place. In this procession,

instead of standing next to Mao, as the number-two man should have

done, he was right at the back, in one of the last cars.

Liu looked subdued and weary. But I did not have any feelings for him.

Although he was the president, he did not mean anything to my

generation. We had grown up imbued with the cult of Mao alone. And if

Liu was against Mao, it seemed to us natural that he should go.

At that moment, with the sea of youngsters screaming their loyalty to

Mao, Liu must have felt how utterly hopeless his situation was. The

irony was that he himself had been instrumental in promoting Mao's

deification, which had led to this explosion of fanaticism in the youth

of a nation which was largely unreligious. Liu and his colleagues may

have helped deificao in order to appease him, thinking that he would be

satisfied with abstract glory and leave them to get on with the mundane

work, but Mao wanted absolute power both on earth and in heaven. And

perhaps there was nothing they could have done: the cult of Mao may

have been unstoppable.

These reflections did not occur to me on the morning of 25 November

1966. All I cared about then was catching a glimpse of Chairman Mao. I

turned my eyes quickly away from Liu to the front of the motorcade. I

spotted Mao's stalwart back, his right arm steadily waving. In an

245instant, he had disappeared. My heart sank. Was that all I would see

of Chairman Mao? Only a fleeting glimpse of his back?

The sun seemed suddenly to have turned gray. All around me the Red

Guards were making a huge din. The girl standing next to me had just

pierced the index finger of her right hand and was squeezing blood out

of it to write something on a neatly folded handkerchief. I knew

exactly the words she was going to use. It had been done many times by

other Red Guards and had been publicized ad name am "I am the happiest

person in the world today. I have seen our Great Leader Chairman Mao!"

Watching her, my despair grew. Life seemed pointless. A thought

flickered into my mind: perhaps I should commit suicide?

It vanished almost the next instant. Looking back, I suppose the idea

was really a subconscious attempt to quantify my devastation at having

my dream smashed, especially after all the hardships I had suffered on

my journey. The bursting trains, the inflamed knees, the hunger and

cold, the itchiness, the blocked toilets, the exhaustion all in the end

unrewarded.

Our pilgrimage was over and a few days later we headed home. I had had

enough of the trip, and I longed for warmth and comfort, and a hot

bath. But the thought of home was tinged with apprehension. No matter

how uncomfortable, the journey had never been frightening, as my life

immediately prior to it had been. Living in close contact with

thousands and thousands of Red Guards for well over a month, I had

never seen any violence, or felt terror. The gigantic crowds,

hysterical though they were, were well disciplined and peaceful. The

people I met were friendly.

Just before I left Peking, a letter came from my mother.

It said my father had fully recovered and everyone in Chengdu was fine.

But she added at the end that both she

4z8 Wlore Than Gigantic Wonder~l News' and my father were being

criticized as capitalist-roaders.

My heart sank. By now it had become clear to me that

capitalist-roaders Communist officials were the main targets of the

Cultural Revolution. I was soon to see what this meant for my family

and for me.

19. "Where There Is a Will to Condemn, There Is Evidence'-My Parents

Tormented

(December 1966-1967)

A capitalist-roader was supposed to be a powerful official who was

pursuing capitalist policies. But in reality no officials had any

choice about which policies they pursued.

The orders of Mao and those of his opponents were all presented as

coming from the Party, and the officials had to obey all of them even

though in doing so they were obliged to carry out many zigzags and even

U-turns. If they really disliked a particular order, the most they

could do was engage in passive resistance, which they had to try hard

to disguise. It was therefore impossible to determine whether

officials were capitalist-roaders or not on the basis of their work.

Many officials had their own views, but the Party rule was that they

246must not reveal them to the public. Nor did they dare to. So whatever

the officials' sympathies were, they were unknown to the general

public.

But ordinary people were the very force Mao now ordered to attack

capitalist-roaders without, of course, the benefit of either

information or the right to exercise

43 "Where There Is a Will to Condemn, There Is Evidence' any

independent judgment. So what happened was that officials came under

attack as capitalist-roaders because of the positions they held.

Seniority alone was not the cflteflon. The decisive factor was whether

a person was the leader of a relatively self-contained unit or not. The

whole population was organized into units, and the people who

represented power to ordinary people were their immediate bosses unit

leaders. In designating these people for attack, Mao was tapping into

the most obvious pool of resentment, in the same way that he had

incited pupils against teachers. Unit leaders were also the key links

in the chain of the Communist power structure which Mao wanted to get

rid of.

It was because they were leaders of deparl,uents that both my parents

were denounced as capitalist-roaders.

"Where there is a will to condemn, there is evidence," as the Chinese

saying has it. On this basis, all unit leaders across China, big and

small, were summarily denounced by people under them as

capitalist-roaders for implementing policies that were alleged to be

'capitalist' and anti Chairman Mao." These included allowing free

markets in the countryside, advocating better professional skills for

workers, permitting relative literary and artistic freedom, and

encouraging competitiveness in sports now termed 'bourgeois

cups-and-medals mania." Until now most officials had had no idea that

Mao had disliked these policies after all, the directives had all come

from the Party, which was led by him. Now they were told, out of the

blue, that all these policies had come from the 'bourgeois

headquarters' within the Party.

In every unit there were people who became activists.

They were called Rebel Red Guards, or "Rebels' for short.

They wrote wall posters and slogans proclaiming "Down with the

capitalist-roaders," and held denunciation meetings against their

bosses. The denunciations often sounded hollow, because the accused

simply said that they had been carrying out Party orders Mao had always

told them to

My Parents Tormented 43 i obey Party orders unconditionally, and had

never told them of the existence of the 'bourgeois headquarters." How

were they to know? And how could they have acted otherwise?

The officials had many supporters, some of whom rallied to their

defense. They were called the "Loyalists." Verbal and physical

battles broke out between them and the Rebels. Because Mao never said

explicitly that all Party bosses should be condemned, some militants

became hesitant: what if the bosses they attacked turned out not to be

capitalist-roaders? Beyond the posters and slogans and denunciation

meetings, ordinary people did not know what they were expected to do.

So when I returned to Chengdu in December 1966 I sensed a distinct

247uncertainty in the air.

My parents were living at home. The health clinic where my father had

been staying had asked them to leave in November because

capitalist-roaders were supposed to go back to their units to be

denounced. The small canteen in the compound had been closed down, and

we all had to get our food from the big canteen, which went on working

normally. My parents continued to receive their salaries every month,

in spite of the fact that the Party system was paralyzed and they did

not go to work. Since their departments dealt with culture, and their

bosses in Peking were particularly hated by the Maos and had been

purged at the start of the Cultural Revolution, my parents were in the

direct line of fire. They were attacked in wall posters with standard

abuse like "Bombard Chang Shou-yu' and "Burn Xia De-hong." The

accusations against them were the same as those made against almost

every director of every Department of Public Affairs up and down the

country.

Meetings were convened in my father's department to denounce him. He

was yelled at. As with most political struggles in China, the real

impetus came from personal animosity. Father's foremost accuser was a

Mrs. Shau, a prim and fiercely self-righteous deputy section chief

who

432 "Where There Is a Will to Condemn, There Is Evidence' had long been

aspiring to get rid of the prefix 'deputy."

She considered that her promotion had been blocked by my father, and

was determined to take revenge. Once she spat in his face and slapped

him. But in general the anger was limited. Many of the staff liked

and respected my father and were not fierce to him. Outside his

department, some organizations for which he had been responsible, like

the Sichuan Daily, also held denunciation meetings against him. But

the staff there bore no personal grudges against him, and the meetings

were formalities.

Against my mother there were no denunciation meetings at all. As a

grass-roots official, she had looked after more individual units than

my father schools, hospitals, and entertainment groups. Normally,

someone in her position would have been denounced by people from these

organizations. But she was left alone by all of them. She had been

responsible for solving their personal problems, such as housing

transfers, and pensions. And she had done her job with unfailing

helpfulness and efficiency. She had tried her best in previous

campaigns not to victimize anyone, and had in fact managed to protect

many. People knew the risks she had run, and repaid her by refusing to

turn on her.

On my first evening back home my grandmother made 'cloud-swallowing'

dumplings and steamed rice in palm leaves filled with 'eight

treasures." My mother gave me a cheerful account of what had been

happening to her and my father. She said they had agreed they did not

want to be officials anymore after the Cultural Revolution. They were

going to apply to be ordinary citizens, and enjoy a normal family life.

As I was to realize later, this was no more than a self-deluding

fantasy, because the Communist

Party allowed no opting out; but at the time they needed something to

hold on to.

My father also said: "Even a capitalist president can become an

248ordinary citizen overnight. It's a good thing not to be given

permanent power. Otherwise officials will tend to abuse their power."

He then apologized to me for ha~Sng been dictatorial with the family.

"You are like singing cicadas silenced by chilling winter," he said,

'and it is good that you young people should rebel against us, the

older generation." Then he said, half to me, half to himself, 'l think

there is nothing wrong with officials like me being subject to

criticism even a bit of hardship and loss of face."

This was another confused attempt by my parents to try to cope with the

Cultural Revolution. They did not resent the prospect of losing their

privileged positions in fact, they were trying to see this as something

positive.

Nineteen sixty-seven came. Suddenly, the Cultural Revolution switched

into high gear. In its first stage, with the Red Guard movement, an

atmosphere of terror had been created. Now Mao turned to his major

goal: to replace the 'bourgeois headquarters' and the existing Party

hierarchy with his personal power system. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping

were formally denounced and detained, as was Tao Zhu.

On 9 January, the People'sDaily and the radio announced that a "January

Storm' had started from Shanghai, where Rebels had taken control. Mao

called on people throughout China to emulate them and seize power from

the capitalist-roaders.

"Seize power' (duo-quart)! This was a magic phrase in China. Power

did not mean influence over policies it meant license over people. In

addition to money, it brought privilege, awe, and fawning, and the

opportunity to take revenge. In China, there were virtually no safety

valves for ordinary people. The whole country was like a pressure

cooker in which a gigantic head of compressed steam had built up. There

were no football matches, pressure groups, law suits, or even violent

films. It was impossible to voice any kind of protest about the system

and its injustices, unthinkable to stage a demonstration. Even talking

about politics an important form of relieving pressure in most

societies was taboo. Subordinates had very little chance of redress

against their bosses. But if you were a boss of some kind, you had a

chance to vent your frustration. So when Mao launched his call to

'seize power," he found a huge constituency of people who wanted to

take revenge on somebody. Although power was dangerous, it was more

desirable than powerlessness, particularly to people who had never had

it. Now it looked to the general public as if Mao was saying that

power was up for grabs.

In practically every unit in China, the morale of the Rebels was

immensely boosted. So were their numbers.

All sorts of people -workers, teachers, shop assistants, even the staff

of government offices started calling themselves "Rebels." Following

the example of Shanghai, they physically beat the now disorientated

"Loyalists' into surrender. The earlier Red Guard groups, like the one

in my school, were disintegrating, because they had been organized

around the children of high officials, who were under attack. Some

early Red Guards who opposed the new phase of the Cultural Revolution

were arrested. One of the sons of Commissar Li was beaten to death by

Rebels who accused him of having let slip a remark against Mme Mao.

The people in my father's depafiment who had been in the posse which

had taken him away to be detained were now Rebels. Mrs. Shau was

249chief of a Rebel group for all the Sichuan government offices, in

addition to being its branch leader in my father's depa~uuent.

No sooner were the Rebels formed than they split into factions and

fought for power in almost every work unit in China. All sides accused

their opponents of being 'anti Cultural Revolution," or of being loyal

to the old Party system. In Chengdu, the numerous groups quickly

coalesced into two opposing blocs, headed by two universiF Rebel

groups: the more militant 'z6 August' from Sichuan University, and the

relatively moderate "Red Chengdu' from Chengdu University. Each

commanded a following of millions of people throughout the province. In

my father's department, Mrs. Shau's group was affiliated with 26

August, and the opposing group mainly consisting of more moderate

people whom my father had liked and promoted, and who liked him with

the Red Chengdu.

Outside our apartment, beyond the compound walls, 26 August and Red

Chengdu each rigged up loudspeakers to trees and electricity poles,

which blasted out abuse of each other day and night. One night, I

heard that 26 August had gathered hundreds of supporters and attacked a

factory which was a stronghold of Red Chengdu. They captured the

workers and tortured them, using methods including 'singing fountains'

(splitting their skulls open so the blood burst out) and 'landscape

paintings' (slashing their faces into patterns). Red Chengdu's

broadcasts said several workers had become martyrs by jumping from the

top of the building. I gathered they had killed themselves because

they were unable to stand the torture.

One major target of the Rebels was the professional elite in every

unit, not only prominent doctors, artists, writers, and scientists, but

also engineers and graded workers, even model night-soil collectors

(people who collect human waste, which was extremely valuable to the

peasants). They were accused of having been promoted by

capitalistroaders, but were really the object of their colleagues'

jealousy. Other personal scores were also settled in the name of the

revolution.

The "January Storm' triggered brutal violence against the

capitalist-roaders. Power was now being seized from Party officials,

and people were spurred on to abuse them.

Those who had hated their Party bosses grabbed the opportunity to take

revenge, although the victims of previous persecutions were not allowed

to act. It was some time before Mao got around to making new

appointments, as he did not know whom to appoint at this stage, so

ambitious careerists were eager to show their militancy in the hope

that this would get them chosen as the new holders of power. Rival

factions competed to outdo each other in brutality. Much of the

population colluded, driven by intimidation, conformism, devotion to

Mao, desire to set He personal scores, or just the releasing of

frustration.

Physical abuse finally caught up with my mother. It did not come from

people working under her, but mainly from ex-convicts who were working

in street workshops in her Eastern District robbers, rapists, drug

smugglers, and pimps. Ulalike 'political criminals," who were on the

receiving end of the Cultural Revolution, these common criminals were

encouraged to attack designated victims. They had nothing against my

mother personally, but she had been one of the top leaders in her

district, and that was enough.

250At meetings held to denounce her, these ex-convicts were particularly

active. One day she came home with her face twisted in pain. She had

been ordered to kneel on broken glass. My grandmother spent the

evening picking fragments of glass from her knees with tweezers and a

needle. The next day she made my mother a pair of thick kneepads. She

also made her a padded waist protector, because the tender structure of

the waist was where the assailants always aimed their punches.

Several times my mother was paraded through the streets with a dunce

cap on her head, and a heavy placard hanging from her neck on which her

name was written with a big cross over it to show her humiliation and

her demise. Every few steps, she and her colleagues were forced to go

down on their knees and kowtow to the crowds. Children would be

jeering at her. Some would shout that their kowtowing did not make

enough noise and demand that they do it again. My mother and her

colleagues then had to bang their foreheads loudly on the stone

pavement.

One day that winter there was a denunciation meeting at a street

workshop. Before the meeting, while the participants had lunch in the

canteen, my mother and her colleagues were ordered to kneel for one and

a half hours on grit-covered ground in the open. It was raining and

she got soaked to the skin; the biting wind sent icy chills through her

wet clothes and into her bones. When the meeting started, she had to

stand bent double on the platform, trying to control her shivers. As

the wild, empty screaming went on, her waist and neck became unbearably

painful. She twisted herself slightly, and tried to lift her head a

bit to ease the aching. Suddenly she felt a heavy blow across the back

of her head, which knocked her to the ground.

It was only some time later that she learned what had happened. A

woman sitting in the front row, a brothel owner who had been imprisoned

when the Communists clamped down on prostitution, had fixated on my

mother, perhaps because she was the only woman on the platform.

The moment my mother lifted her head, this woman jumped up and thrust

an awl straight at her left eye. The Rebel guard standing behind my

mother saw it coming and struck her to the ground. Had it not been for

him, my mother would have lost her eye.

My mother did not tell us about this incident at the time.

She seldom referred to what happened to her at all. When she had to

mention something like the broken glass she said it casually, trying to

make it sound as undramatic as possible. She never showed the bruises

on her body, and she was always composed, even cheerful. She did not

want us to worry about her. But my grandmother could tell how much she

was suffering. She would follow my mother anxiously with her eyes,

trying to hide her own pain.

One day our former maid came to see us. She and her husband were among

the few who never broke off with our family through the whole of the

Cultural Revolution. I felt immensely grateful for the warmth they

brought us, especially as they ran the risk of being accused as

'sympathizers of capitalist-roaders." Awkwardly, she mentioned to my

grand mother that she had just seen my mother being paraded through the

streets. My grandmother pressed her to say more, then suddenly

collapsed, the back of her head hitting the floor with a loud bang. She

had lost consciousness.

Gradually, she came to.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, she said,

251"What has my daughter done to deserve this?"

My mother developed a hemorrhage from her womb, and for the next six

years, until she had a hysterectomy in 1973, she bled most days.

Sometimes it was so severe she would faint and had to be taken to a

hospital. Doctors prescribed hormones to control the flow of blood,

and my sister and I gave her the injections. My mother knew it was

dangerous to depend on hormones, but there was no alternative. It was

the only way she could get through the denunciation meetings.

In the meantime, the Rebels in my father's department stepped up their

assaults on him. Being one of the most important in the provincial

government, the depa~isuent had more than its share of opportunists.

Formerly obedient instruments of the old Party system, many now became

fiercely militant Rebels, led by Mrs. Shall under the banner of 26

August.

One day, a group of them barged into our apariment and marched into my

father's study. They looked at the bookshelves, and declared him a

real 'diehard' because he still had his 'reactionary books." Earlier,

in the wake of the book burning by the teenage Red Guards, many people

had set fire to their collections. But not my father. Now he made a

faint attempt to protect his books by pointing at the sets of Marxist

hardbacks.

"Don't try to fool us Red Guards!"

yelled Mrs.

"You have plenty of "poisonous weeds"!"

classics printed on flimsy rice paper.

"What do you mean, "us Red Guards"?"

Shau.

She picked up some Chinese

my father retorted.

"You are old enough to be their mother and you ought to have more

sense, too."

Mrs. Shau slapped my father hard. The crowd barked at him

indignantly, although a few tried to hide their giggles Then they

pulled out his books and threw them into huge jute sacks they had

brought with them. When all the bags were full, they carried them

downstairs, telling my father they were going to burn them on the

grounds of the department the next day after a denunciation meeting

against him. They ordered him to watch the bonfire 'to be taught a

lesson." In the meantime, they said, he must burn the rest of his

collection.

When I came home that afternoon, I found my father in the kitchen. He

had lit a fire in the big cement sink, and was hurling his books into

the flames.

This was the first time in my life I had seen him weeping.

It was agonized, broken, and wild, the weeping of a man who was not

used to shedding tears. Every now and then, in fits of violent sobs,

he stamped his feet on the floor and banged his head against the

wall.

I was so frightened that for some time I did not dare to do anything to

comfort him. Eventually I put my arms around him and held him from the

back, but I did not know what to say. He did not utter a word either.

My father had spent every spare penny on his books. They were his

life. After the bonfire, I could tell that something had happened to

252his mind.

He had to go to many denunciation meetings. Mrs. Shau and her group

usually got a large number of Rebels from outside to increase the size

of the crowd and to lend a hand in the violence. A standard opening

was to chant:

"Ten thousand years, another ten thousand years, and yet another ten

thousand years to our Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, and

Great Helmsman Chairman Mao!" Each time the three 'ten thousand's and

four 'great's were shouted out, everyone raised their Litfie Red Books

in unison. My father would not do this. He said that the 'ten

thousand years' was how emperors used to be addressed, and it was

unfitting for Chairman Mao, a Communisc

This brought down a torrent of hysterical yells and slaps.

At one meeting, all the targets were ordered to kneel and kowtow to a

huge portrait of Mao at the back of the platform. While the others did

as they were told, my father refused. He said that kneeling and

kowtowing were undignified feudal practices which the Communists were

committed to eliminating. The Rebels screamed, kicked his knees, and

struck him on the head, but he still struggled to stand upright.

"I will not kneel! I will not kowtowl' he said furiously. The enraged

crowd demanded, "Bow your head and admit your crimes!" He replied, "I

have committed no crime. I will not bend my head!"

Several large young men jumped on him to try to force him down, but as

soon as they let go he stood up straight, raised his head, and stared

defiantly at the audience. His assailants yanked his hair and pulled

his neck. My father struggled fiercely. As the hysterical crowd

screamed that he was 'anti-Culttu'al Revolution," he shouted angrily,

"What kind of Cultural Revolution is this? There is nothing "cultural"

about it! There is only brutality!"

The men who were beating him howled, "The Cultural Revolution is led by

Chairman Mao! How dare you oppose it?" My father raised his voice

higher: "I do oppose it, even if it is led by Chairman Mao!"

There was total silence.

"Opposing Chairman Mao' was a crime punishable by death. Many people

had died simply because they had been accused of it, without any

evidence.

The Rebels were stunned to see that my father did not seem to be

afraid. After they recovered from their initial shock, they began to

beat him again, calling on him to withdraw his blasphemous words. He

refused. Enraged, they tied him up and dragged him to the local

police, demanding that they arrest him. But the policemen there would

not take him. They liked law and order and Party officials, and hated

the Rebels. They said they needed permission to arrest an official as

senior as my father, and no one had given such an order.

My father was to be beaten up repeatedly. But he stuck to his guns. He

was the only person in the compound to behave like this, indeed the

only one I knew of at all, and many people, including Rebels, secretly

admired him.

Every now and then a complete stranger passing us in the street would

253murmur stealthily how my father had impressed them. Some boys told my

brothers they wanted to have bones as strong as my father's.

After their day's torment, both my parents would come home to my

grandmother's nursing hand. By then, she had set aside her resentment

of my father, and he had also mellowed toward her. She applied

ointment to his wounds, stuck on special poultices to reduce his

bruising, and got him to drink potions made with a white powder called

bai-yao to help cure his internal injuries.

My parents were under permanent orders to stay at home and wait to be

summoned to the next meeting. Going into hiding was out of the

question. The whole of China was like a prison. Every house, every

street was watched by the people themselves. In this vast land, there

was nowhere anyone could hide.

My parents could not go out for relaxation either.

"Relaxation' had become an obsolete concept: books, paintings, musical

instruments, sports, cards, chess, teahouses, bars all had disappeared.

The parks were desolate, vandalized wastelands in which the flowers and

the grass had been uprooted and the tame birds and goldfish killed.

Films, plays, and concerts had all been banned: Mme Mao had cleared the

stages and the screens for the eight 'revolutionary operas' which she

had had a hand in producing, and which were all anyone was allowed to

put on. In the provinces, people did not dare to perform even these.

One director had been condemned because the makeup he had put on the

torn red hero of one of the operas was considered by Mme Mao to be

excessive. He was thrown into prison for 'exaggerating the hardship in

the revolutionary struggle." We hardly even thought of going out for a

walk.

The atmosphere outside was terrifying, with the violent street-corner

denunciation meetings and all the sinister wall posters and slogans;

people were walking around like zombies, with harsh or cowed

expressions on their faces.

What was more, my parents' bruised faces marked them as condemned, and

if they went out they ran the risk of being abused.

As an indication of the terror of the day, no one dared to burn or

throw away any newspapers. Every front page carried Mao's portrait,

and every few lines featured Mao's quotations. These papers had to be

treasured and it would bring disaster if anyone saw you disposing of

them. Keeping them was also a problem: mice might gnaw into Mao's

portrait, or the papers might simply rot either of these would be

interpreted as a crime against Mao. Indeed, the first large-scale

factional fighting in Chengdu was triggered by some Red Guards

accidentally sitting on old newspapers which had Mao's face on them. A

schoolfriend of my mother's was hounded to suicide because she wrote

"Heartily love Chairman Mao' on a wall poster with one brush stroke

inadvertently shorter, making the character 'heartily' look like the

one meaning 'sadly."

One day in February 1967, in the depths of this overwhelming terror, my

parents had a long conversation which I only came to know about years

later. My mother was sitting on the edge of their bed, and my father

was in a wicker chair opposite. He told her that he now knew what the

Cultural Revolution was really about, and the realization had shattered

his whole world. He could see clearly that it had nothing to do with

democratization, or with giving ordinary people more say. It was a

254bloody purge to increase Mao's personal power.

My father talked slowly and deliberately, choosing his words

carefully.

"But Chairman Mao has always been so magnanimous," my mother said.

"He even spared Pu Yi.

Why can't he tolerate his comrades-in-arms who fought for a new China

with him? How can he be so harsh on them?"

My father said quietly, but intensely, "What was Pu Yi?

He was a war criminal, with no support from the people.

He couldn't do anything. But..." He fell into a meaningful silence.

My mother understood him: Mao would not tolerate any possible

challenge. Then she asked, "But why all of us, who after all only

carry out orders? And why incriminate all these innocent people? And

so much destruction and suffering?"

My father replied, "Maybe Chairman Mao feels he could not achieve his

goal without turning the whole place upside down. He has always been

thorough and he has never been fainthearted about casualties."

After a charged pause, my father went on: "This cannot be a revolution

in any sense of the term. To secure personal power at such cost to the

country and the people has to be wrong. In fact, I think it is

criminal."

My mother scented disaster. After reasoning like this, her husband had

to act. As she expected, he said, "I am going to write a letter to

Chairman Mao."

My mother dropped her head into her hands.

"What's the use?"

she burst out.

"How could you possibly imagine Chairman Mao would listen to you? Why

do you want to destroy yourself- and for nothing? Don't count on me to

take it to Peking this time!"

My father leaned over and kissed her.

"I wasn't thinking about your delivering it. I'm going to post it."

Then he lifted her head and looked into her eyes. In a tone of despair

he said, 'what else can I do? what alternatives do I have? I must

speak up. It might help. And I must do it even if just for my

conscience."

"Why is your conscience so important?"

"More than your children?

my mother said.

Do you want them to become "blacks"?"

There was a long pause. Then my father said hesitantly, "I suppose you

must divorce me and bring up the children your way." Silence fell

between them again, making her think that perhaps he had not made up

his mind about writing the letter, because he was aware of its

consequences. It would surely be catastrophic.

255Days passed. In late February, an airplane flew low over Chengdu

spreading thousands of sparkling sheets which floated down out of the

leaden sky. On them was printed a copy of a letter dated 17 February

and signed by the Central Military Committee, the top body of senior

army men. The letter told the Rebels to desist from their violent

actions. Although it did not condemn the Cultural Revolution directly,

it was obviously trying to halt it. A colleague showed the leaflet to

my mother. My parents had a surge of hope. Perhaps China's old and

much-respected marshals were going to intervene. There was a big

demonstration through the streets of central Chengdu in support of the

marshals' call.

The leaflets were the result of upheavals behind closed doors in

Peking. In late January Mao had for the first time called on the army

to support the Rebels. Most of the top military leaders except Defense

Minister Lin Biao were furious. On 14 and 16 February, they held two

long meetings with political leaders. Mao himself stayed away, as did

Lin Biao, his deputy. Zhou Enlai presided. The marshals joined forces

with Politburo members who had not yet been purged. These marshals had

been the commanders of the Communist army, veterans of the Long March,

and heroes of the revolution. They condemned the Cultural Revolution

for persecuting innocent people and destabilizing the country. One of

the vice-premiers, Tan Zhenlin, burst out in a fury, "I've followed

Chairman Mao all my life. Now I'm not following him anymore!"

Immediately after these meetings the marshals began to take steps to

try to stop the violence. Because it was particularly bad in Sichuan,

they issued the letter of 17 February especially for the province.

Zhou Enlai declined to throw his weight behind the majority, and stuck

with Mao. The personality cult had endowed Mao with demonic power.

Retribution against

!:

the opposition was swift. Mao stage-managed mob attacks on the

dissident Politburo members and military commanders, who were subjected

to house raids and brutal denunciation meetings. When Mao gave the

word to punish the marshals, the army did not make a move to support

them.

This single feeble attempt to stand up to Mao and his Cultural

Revolution was termed the "February Adverse Current." The regime

released a selective account of it to generate more intense violence

against the capitalistroaders.

The February meetings were a turning point for Mao.

He saw that virtually everyone opposed his policies.

total discarding in all but name of the Party.

This led to the

The Politburo was effectively replaced by the Cultural Revolution

Authority. Lin Biao soon began to purge commanders loyal to the

marshals, and the role of the Central Military Committee was taken over

by his personal office, which he controlled through his wife. Mao's

cabal now was like a medieval court, structured around wives, cousins,

and fawning courtiers. Mao sent delegates to the provinces to organize

"Revolutionary Committees," which were to be the new instruments of his

personal power, replacing the Party system all the way down to the

grass roots.

In Sichuan, Mao's delegates turned out to be my parents' old

256acquaintances, the Tings. After my family had left Yibin, the Tings

had practically taken control of the region. Mr. Ting had become its

Party secretary; Mrs. Ting was Party chief of the city of Yibin, the

capital.

The Tings had used their positions to engage in endless persecutions

and personal vendettas. One involved a man who had been Mrs. Ting's

bodyguard in the early 195os.

She had tried to seduce him several times, and one day she complained

about having stomach trouble and got the young man to massage her

abdomen. Then she guided his hand down to her private parts. The

bodyguard immediately pulled his hand back and walked away. Mrs. Ting

accused him of trying to rape her and had him sentenced to three years

in a labor camp.

An anonymous letter exposing the whole affair reached the Sichuan Party

Committee, which ordered an investigation. Being the defendants, the

Tings were not supposed to see this letter, but a crony of theirs

showed it to them.

They got every member of the Yibin government to write a report on some

issue or other in order to check their handwriting. They were never

able to identify the author, but the investigation came to nothing.

In Yibin, officials and ordinary people alike were terrified of the

Tings. The recurrent political campaigns and the quota system provided

ideal opportunities for them to engage in victimization.

In 1959 the Tings got rid of the governor of Yibin, the man who had

succeeded my father in 1953. He was a veteran of the Long March, and

was very popular, which made the Tings'envious. He was called "Straw

Sandal Li' because he always wore peasant's sandals a sign that he

wanted to keep close to his roots in the soil. Indeed, during the

Great Leap Forward, he showed little alacrity in forcing the peasants

to produce steel, and in 1959 he spoke up about the famine. The Tings

denounced him as a 'rightist opportunist' and had him demoted to

purchasing agent for the canteen of a brewery. He died in the famine,

although his job should have meant he had a better opportunity to fill

his stomach than most. The autopsy showed there was only straw in his

stomach. He had remained an honest man to his death.

Another case, also in 1959, involved a doctor whom the Tings condemned

as a class enemy because he made a truthful diagnosis of hunger victims

and the famine was officially unmentionable.

There were scores of cases like these so many that people risked their

lives to write to the provincial authorities to denounce the Tings. In

1962, when the moderates had the upper hand in the central government,

they launched a nationwide investigation into the previous campaigns

and rehabilitated many of the victims. A team was formed by the

Sichuan government to investigate the Tings, who were found guilty of

gross abuse of power.

They were sacked and detained, and in 1965 General Secretary Deng

Xiaoping signed an order expelling them from the Party.

When the Cultural Revolution started, the Tings somehow escaped and got

to Peking, where they appealed to the Cultural Revolution Authority.

They presented themselves as heroes upholding 'class struggle," for

which, they claimed, they had been persecuted by the old Party

257authorities. My mother actually bumped into them once at the grievance

office. They asked her warmly for her address in Peking. She declined

to give it to them.

The Tings were picked up by Chen Boda, one of the leaders of the

Cultural Revolution Authority, and my father's old boss in Yan'an.

Through him, Mme Mao received them, and immediately recognized them as

kindred spirits. Mme Mao's motivation for the Cultural Revolution had

much less to do with policy than with set fling personal scores some of

the pettiest kind. She had a hand in the persecution of Mme Liu Shaoqi

because, as she herself told the Red Guards, she was furious about Mme

Liu's overseas trips with her husband, the president. Mao only went

abroad twice, both times to Russia, and both times without Mme Mao.

What was worse, on her trips abroad Mme Liu was seen wearing smart

clothes and jewelry that no one could wear in Mao's austere China.

Mme Liu was accused of being a CIA agent and thrown into prison, barely

escaping death.

Back in the 193os, before she had met Mao, Mme Mao had been a minor

actress in Shanghai, and had felt cold-shouldered by the lite raft

there. Some of them were Communist underground leaders, who after 1949

became leading figures in the Central Department of Public Affairs.

Partly to avenge her real or imagined humiliation in

Shanghai thirty years before, Mme Mao went to extreme lengths to find

'anti-Chairman Mao, anti-socialist' elements in their work. As Mao

went into retreat during the famine, she managed to get closer to him

and whispered much venomous pillow talk in his ear. In order to bring

her foes down, she condemned the entire system under them, which meant

the departments of Public Affairs all over the country.

She also took revenge on actors and actresses from the Shanghai period

who had aroused her jealousy. An actress called Wang Ying had played a

role which Mme Mao had coveted. Thirty years later, in 1966, Mme Mao

had her and her husband imprisoned for life. Wang Ying committed

suicide in prison in 1974.

Another well-known actress, Sun Wei-shi, had once appeared decades

before with Mine Mao in a play in Yan'an in front of Mao. Sun's

performance was apparently more of a hit than Mme Mao's, and she became

a very popular figure among the top leaders, including Mao.

Being Zhou Enlai's adopted daughter, she did not feel the need to

butter up Mme Mao. In 1968, Mme Mao had her and her brother arrested

and tortured to death. Even Zhou Enlai's power could not protect

her.

Mme Mao's vendettas gradually became known to the general public by

word of mouth; her character also revealed itself in her speeches,

which were reproduced on wall posters. She was to become almost

universally hated, but at the beginning of 1967 her evils were still

little known.

Mme Mao and the Tings belonged to the same breed, who had a name in

Mao's China -zheng-ren, people persecuting officials." The

tirelessness and single mindedness with which they engaged in

persecution, and the bloodthirsty methods they used, were on a truly

horrific scale. In March 1967, a document signed by Mao announced that

the Tings had been rehabilitated and empowered to organize the Sichuan

Revolutionary Committee.

258A transitional authority called the Sichuan Preparatory

Revolutionary Committee was set up. It was composed of two generals

the chief political commissar and the commander of the Chengdu Military

Region (one of

China's eight military regions) and the Tings. Mao had decreed that

every Revolutionary Committee should have three components: the local

army, representatives of the

Rebels, and 'revolutionary officials." The latter were to be chosen

from among former officials, and this was at the discretion of the

Tings, who were in effect running the committee.

In late March 1967 the Tings came to see my father.

They wanted to include him in their committee. My father enjoyed high

prestige among his colleagues for being honest and fair. Even the

Tings appreciated his qualities, particularly as they knew that when

they had been in disgrace my father had not, like some, added his

personal denunciations. Besides, they needed someone with his

abilities.

My father greeted them as courtesy required, but my 'grandmother

welcomed them with enthusiasm. She had heard lit He about their

vendettas, and she knew that it was Mrs. Ting who had authorized the

precious American medicines which had cured my mother of TB when she

was pregnant with me.

When the Tings went into my father's quarters, my grandmother quickly

rolled out some dough, and soon the loud rhythmic melody of chopping

filled the kitchen. She minced pork, cut a bundle of tender young

chives, hashed an assortment of spices, and poured hot rapeseed oil

onto chili powder to make the sauce for the traditional welcoming meal

of dumplings.

In my father's study, the Tings told him about their rehabilitation and

their new status. They said they had been to his deparisaaent and been

briefed by the Rebels there about the trouble he had gotten himself

into. However, they said, they had always liked him in those early

years in Yibin, still had high regard for him, and wanted to work with

him again. They promised that all the incriminating things he had said

and done could be forgotten if he cooperated. Not only that, he could

rise again in the new power structure, taking charge of all cultural

affairs in Sichuan, for example. They made it clear it was an offer he

could not afford to refuse.

My father had heard about the Tings' appointment from my mother, who

had read it on wall posters. He had said to my mother at the time: "We

mustn't believe in rumors.

This is impossible!" It was incredible to him to see this couple

placed in vital positions by Mao. Now he tried to restrain his

disgust, and said, "I'm sorry, I can't accept your offer."

Mrs. Ting snapped, "We are doing you a big favor. Other people would

have begged for this on their knees. Do you realize what a spot you

are in, and who we are now?"

My father's anger rose.

He said, "Whatever I have said or done I take

259responsibility for myself. I do not want to get mixed up with you." In

the heated exchanges that followed, he went on to say that he thought

their punishment had been just, and they should never have been trusted

with important jobs. Stunned, they told ~ to be careful what he said:

it was Chairman Mao himself who had rehabilitated them and had called

them 'good officials."

My father's outrage spurred him on.

"But Chairman Mao could not have known all the facts about you. What

sort of' good officials" are you? You have committed unforgivable

mistakes." He checked himself from saying 'crimes."

"How dare you challenge Chairman Mao's words!"

exclaimed Mrs.

Ting.

"Deputy Commander Lin Biao said:

"Every word of Chairman Mao's is universal absolute truth, and every

word equals ten thousand words"!"

"If a word means one word," my father said, 'it is already a man's

supreme achievement. It is not humanly possible for one word to mean

ten thousand. What Deputy Commander Lin Biao said was rhetorical, and

should not be taken literally."

The Tings could not believe their ears, according to their account

afterward. They warned my father that his way of thinking, talking,

and behaving was against the Cultural Revolution, which was led by

Chairman Mao. To this my father said he would like a chance to debate

with Chairman Mao about the whole thing. These words were so suicidal

that the Tings were speechless. After a silence, they stood up to

leave.

My grandmother heard angry footsteps and rushed out of the kitchen, her

hands dusted with wheat flour into which she had been dipping the

dumplings. She collided with Mrs. Ting and asked the couple to stay

for lunch.

Mrs. Ting ignored her, stormed out of the apartment, and started to

tramp downstairs. At the landing she stopped, turned around, and said

furiously to my father, who had come out with them, "Are you crazy? I'm

asking you for the last time: Do you still refuse my help? You realize

I can do anything to you now."

"I want nothing to do with you," my father said.

"You and I are different species."

Leaving my star fled and fearful grandmother at the top of the stairs,

my father went into his study. He came out almost at once, and carried

an ink stone to the bathroom.

He dripped a few drops of water onto the stone and walked thoughtfully

back into the study. Then he sat down at his desk, and started

grinding a stick of ink round and round the stone, forming a thick

black liquid. He spread a blank sheet of paper in front of him. In no

time, he had finished his second letter to Mao. He started by saying:

"Chairman Mao, I appeal to you, as one Communist to another, to stop

the Cultural Revolution." He went on to describe the disasters into

260which it had thrown China. The letter ended with the words: "I fear

the worst for our Party and our country if people like Liu Jie-ting and

Zhang Xi-ting are given power over the lives of tens of millions of

people."

He addressed the envelope to "Chairman

post office at the top of the street.

airmail. The clerk behind the counter

it, maintaining an expression of total

walked home to wait.

20.

Mao, Peking," and took it to the

He sent it by registered

took the envelope and glanced at

blankness. Then my father

'1 Will Not Sell My Soul' My Father Arrested

(1967-1968)

On the afternoon of the third day after my father posted his letter to

Mao, my mother answered a knock on the door of our apartment. Three

men came in, all wearing the same baggy blue uniform like clothes as

every other man in China. My father knew one of them: he had been a

caretaker in his department and was a militant Rebel.

One of the others, a tall man with boils on his thin face, announced

that they were Rebels from the police and that they had come to arrest

him, 'a counterrevolutionary in action bombarding Chairman Mao and the

Cultural Revolution." Then he and the third man, who was shorter and

stouter, gripped my father by the arms, and gestured to him to go.

They did not show any identity cards, much less an arrest warrant. But

there was no doubt that they were Rebel plainclothes policemen. Their

authority was unquestionable, because they came with a Rebel from my

father's department.

Although they did not mention his letter to Mao, my father knew it must

have been intercepted, as was almost inevitable. He had known that he

would probably be arrested, because not only had he committed his

blasphemy to paper, but there was now an authority the Tings to

sanction his arrest. Even so, he had wanted to take the only chance

there was, however slight. He was silent and tense, but did not

protest. As he was walking out of the apartment, he paused and said

softly to my mother: "Don't bear a grudge against our Party. Have

faith that it will correct its mistakes, however grave they may be.

Divorce me and give my love to our children. Don't alarm them."

When I came home later that afternoon, I found both of my parents gone.

My grandmother told me my mother had gone to Peking to appeal for my

father, who had been taken away by Rebels from his par anent She did

not say 'the police," because that would have been too frightening,

being more disastrous and final than detention by Rebels.

I rushed to my father's deparl,nent to ask where he was.

I got no answer except assorted barks, led by Mrs. Shau, of "You must

draw a line from your stinking capitalist-roader father' and "Wherever

he is, it serves him right." I forced back my furious tears. I was

filled with loathing for these supposedly intelligent adults. They did

not have to be so merciless, so brutal. A kinder look, a gentler tone,

or even silence would have been perfectly possible, even in those

days.

It was from this time that I developed my way of judging the Chinese by

dividing them into two kinds: one humane, and one not. It took an

261upheaval like the Cultural Revolution to bring out these

characteristics in people, whether they were teenage Red Guards, adult

Rebels, or capitalistroaders.

Meanwhile, my mother was waiting at the station for the train that was

to take her to Peking a second time. She felt much more despondent now

than six months before.

There had still been a chance for some justice then, but it was

virtually hopeless now. My mother did not give in to despair. She was

determined to fight.

She had decided that the one person she had to see was

L~

Premier Zhou Enlai. No one else would do. If she sa~ anyone

would only hasten the demise of her husband, herself, and her

She knew that Zhou was tar more moderate than Mme Mao and the

Revolution Authority and that he exercised considerable power

Rebels, to whom he gave orders almost even' day.

else it

family.

Cultural

over the

But getting to see him was like trying to walk into the White House, or

see the Pope alone. Even if she reached Peking without being caught,

and got to the right grievance office, she could not specify whom she

wanted to see, as that would be taken as an insult to, even an attack

on, other leaders. Her anxiety grew, and she did not know whether her

absence from home had already been discovered by the Rebels. She was

meant to be waiting to be summoned to her next denunciation meeting,

but there was a possible loophole. One Rebel group might think she was

in the hands of another.

As she waited, she saw a huge banner with the words "The Red Chengdu

Petition Delegation to Peking." Clustered around it was a crowd of

about 200 people in their early twenties. Their other banners made it

clear they were university students, going to Peking to protest against

the Tings. What was more, the banners proclaimed that they had secured

a meeting with Premier Zhou.

Compared with its rival Rebel group, 26 August, Red Chengdu was

relatively moderate. The Tings had thrown their weight behind 26

August, but Red Chengdu did not surrender. The power of the Tings was

never absolute, even though they were backed by Mao and the Cultural

Revolution Authority.

At this time, the Cultural Revolution was dominated by intense

factional fighting between Rebel groups. This had begun almost as soon

as Mao had given the signal to seize power from the capitalist-roaders;

now, three months later, most of the Rebel leaders were emerging as

something very different from the ousted Communist officials: they were

undisciplined opportunists, and were not even fanatical Maoists. Mao

had instructed them to unite and share power, but they only paid lip

service to this injunction.

They verbally attacked each other with Mao's quotations, making cynical

use of his guru-like elusiveness it was easy to select a quotation of

Mao's to suit any situation, or even both sides of the same argument.

Mao knew that his vapid 'philosophy' was boomeranging on him, but he

could not intervene explicitly without losing his mystical

remoteness.

262In order to destroy 26 August, Red Chengdu knew it had to bring down

the Tings. They knew the Tings' reputation for vindictiveness and

their lust for power, which were widely discussed, in hushed tones by

some, more openly by others. Even Mao's endorsement of the couple was

not enough to get Red Chengdu to fall into line. It was against this

background that Red Chengdu was sending the students to Peking. Zhou

Enlai had promised to receive them because Red Chengdu, as one of the

two Rebel camps in Sichuan, had millions of supporters.

My mother followed the Red Chengdu crowd as they were waved through the

ticket barrier onto the platform where the Peking express was puffing.

She was trying to climb into a carriage with them when she was stopped

by a male student.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

like a student.

"You're not one of us.

My mother, at thirty-five, hardly looked

Get off{'

My mother clung tightly to the handle of the door.

"I am going to Peking, too, to appeal against the Tings{' she cried.

"I know them from the past." The man looked at her in disbelief. But

from behind him came two voices, a man's and a woman's: "Let her in{

Let's hear what she has to say{'

My mother squeezed into the packed compartment, and was seated between

the man and the woman. They introduced themselves as staff officers of

Red Chengdu. The man was called Yong, and the woman Yan. They were

both students at Chengdu University.

j~

From what they said, my mother could see that the students did not know

very much about the Tings. She told them what she could remember about

some of the many cases of persecution in Yibin before the Cultural

Revolution; about Mrs. Ting's attempt to seduce my father in 1953; the

couple's recent visit to my father, and his refusal to collaborate with

them. She said the Tings had had my father arrested because he had

written to Chairman Mao to oppose their appointment as the new leaders

of Sichuan.

Yan and Yong promised they would take her to their meeting with Zhou

Enlai. All night, my mother sat wide awake planning what she should

say to him, and how.

When the delegation arrived at Peking Station, a representative of the

premier was waiting for them. They were taken to a government

guesthouse, and told that Zhou would see them the next evening.

The next day, while the students were out, my mother prepared a written

plea to Zhou. She might not get a chance to talk to him, and in any

case it was better to petition him in writing. At 9 p.m. she went with

the students to the Great Hall of the People on the west side of

Tiananmen Square. The meeting was in the Sichuan Room, which my father

had helped decorate in 1959. The students sat in an arc facing the

premier. There were not enough seats, so some sat on the carpeted

floor. My mother sat in the back row.

She knew her speech had to be succinct and effective, and she rehearsed

263it again in her head as the meeting got under way. She was too

preoccupied to hear what the students were saying. She only noted how

the premier reacted. Every now and then he nodded acknowledgment.

He never indicated approval or disagreement. He just listened, and

occasionally made general remarks about 'following Chairman Mao' and

'the need to unite." An aide took notes.

Suddenly she heard the premier saying, as though in conclusion:

"Anything else?" She shot up from her seat.

"Premier, I have something to say."

Zhou raised his eyes.

My mother was obviously not a student.

"Who are you?" he asked. My mother gave her name and position, and

followed immediately with: "My husband has been arrested as a

"counterrevolutionary in action." I am here to seek justice for him."

She then gave my father's name and position.

Zhou's eyes became intent.

My father had an important position.

"The students can go," he said.

"I'll talk to you privately."

My mother longed to talk to Zhou alone, but she had decided to

sacrifice this chance for a more important goal.

"Premier, I would like the students to stay to be my witnesses." While

saying this, she handed her petition to the student in front, who

passed it on to Zhou.

The premier nodded: "All right.

Go ahead."

Quickly but clearly, my mother said my father had been arrested for

what he had written in a letter to Chairman Mao. My father disagreed

with the Tings' appointment as the new leaders of Sichuan, because of

their record of abuse of power which he had witnessed in Yibin. Apart

from that, she said briefly: "My husband's letter also contained

serious mistakes about the Cultural Revolution."

She had thought carefully about how she would put this.

She had to give a true account to Zhou, but she could not repeat my

father's exact words for fear of the Rebels. She had to be as abstract

as possible: "My husband held some seriously erroneous views. However,

he did not spread his views in public. He was following the charter of

the Communist Party and speaking his mind to Chairman Mao. According

to the charter, this is the legitimate right of a Party member, and

should not be used as an excuse to arrest him. I am here to appeal for

justice for him."

When my mother's eyes met Zhou Enlai's, she saw that he had fully

understood the real content of my father's letter, and her dilemma of

not being able to spell it out.

He glanced at my mother's petition, then turned to an aide sitting

behind him and whispered something. The hall was deadly quiet. All

eyes were on the premier.

264The aide handed Zhou some sheets of paper with the letterhead of the

State Council (the cabinet). Zhou started writing in his slightly

strained way his right arm had been broken years before when he fell

from a horse in Yan'an.

When he finished, he gave the paper to the aide, who read it out.

'"One: As a Communist Party member, Chang Shou-yu is entitled to write

to the Party leadership. No matter what serious mistakes the letter

contains, it may not be used to accuse him of being a

counterrevolutionary. Two: As Deputy Director of the Depaximent of

Public Affairs of Sichuan Province, Chang Shou-yu has to submit himself

to investigation and criticism by the people. Three: Any final

adjudication on Chang Shou-yu must wait fill the end of the Cultural

Revolution. Zhou Enlai."

My mother was speechless with relief. The note was not addressed to

the new leaders in Sichuan, which would normally have been the case, so

she was not bound to hand it in to them, or to anyone. Zhou intended

her to keep it and show it to whoever might prove useful.

Yan and Yong were sitting on my mother's left.

them, she saw they were beaming with joy.

When she turned to

She caught the train back to Chengdu two days later, keeping with Yan

and Yong all the time, as she was worried the Tings might get wind of

the note and send their henchmen to grab it and her. Yan and Yong also

thought it was vital for her to stick with them, "In case z6 August

abducts you." They insisted on accompanying her to our apactment from

the station. My grandmother gave them pork-and chive pancakes, which

they devoured in no time.

I immediately took to Yan and Yong. Rebels, and yet so kind, so

friendly and warm to my family! It was unbelievable. I could also

tell at once that they were in love: the way they glanced at each

other, the way they teased and touched each other, was very unusual in

company. I heard my grandmother sigh to my mother that it would be

nice to give them some presents for their wedding. My mother said this

would be impossible, and would get them into trouble if it became

known. Accepting 'bribes' from a capitalist-roader was no small

offense.

Yan was twenty-four, and had been in her third year studying accounting

at Chengdu University. Her lively face was dominated by a pair of

thick-rimmed spectacles. She laughed frequently, throwing her head

back. It was a very heart-warming laugh. In China in those days,

dark-blue or gray jacket and trousers were the standard gear for men,

women, and children. No pan ems were allowed. In spite of the

uniformity, some women managed to wear their clothes with signs of care

and thoughtfulness. But not Yan.

She always looked as though she had put her buttons in the wrong holes,

and her short hair was pulled back impatiently into an untidy tail. It

seemed that not even being in love could induce her to pay attention to

her looks.

Yong looked more fashion conscious. He wore a pair of straw sandals,

which were set off by rolled-up trouser legs.

Straw sandals were a sort of fashion among some students because of

their association with the peasants. Yong seemed exceedingly

265intelligent and sensitive.

I was fascinated by him.

After a happy meal, Yan and Yong took their leave. My mother walked

downstairs with them, and they whispered to her that she must keep Zhou

Enlai's note in a safe place.

My mother said nothing to me or my siblings about her meeting with

Zhou.

That evening, my mother went to see an old colleague of hers and showed

him Zhou's note. Chen Mo had worked with my parents in Yibin in the

early 195os, and got on well with both of them. He had also managed to

maintain a good relationship with the Tings, and when they were

rehabilitated he threw in his lot with them. My

3/I3, Father:~Irrested 46 l mother asked him, in tears, to help secure

my father's release for old times' sake, and he promised to have a word

with the Tings.

Time passed, and then, in April, my father suddenly reappeared. I was

tremendously relieved and happy to see him, but almost immediately my

joy turned to horror.

There was a strange light in his eyes. He would not say where he had

been, and when he did speak, I could hardly understand his words. He

was sleepless for days and nights on end, and paced up and down the

apartment, talking to himself. One day he forced the whole family to

go and stand in the pouring rain, telling us this was 'to experience

the revolutionary storm." Another day, after collecting his salary

packet, he threw it into the kitchen stove, saying that this was 'to

break with private property." The dreadful truth dawned on us: my

father had gone insane.

My mother became the focus of his madness. He raged at her, calling

her 'shameless," 'a coward," and accusing her of 'selling her soul."

Then, without warning, he would become embarrassingly loving toward her

in front of the rest of us saying over and over again how much he loved

her, how he had been an unworthy husband, and begging her to 'forgive

me and come back to me."

On his first day back he had looked at my mother suspiciously and asked

her what she had been doing. She told him she had been to Peking to

appeal for his release. He shook his head incredulously, and asked her

to produce evidence. She decided not to tell him about the note from

Zhou Enlai. She could see he was not himself, and was worried he might

hand in the note, even to the Tings, if 'the Party' ordered him to. She

could not even name Yan and Yong as her witnesses: my father would

think it was wrong to get involved with a Red Guard faction.

He kept coming back to the issue obsessively. Every day he would

cross-examine my mother, and apparent inconsistencies emerged in her

story. My father's suspicion and confusion grew. His rage toward my

mother began to verge on violence. My siblings and I wanted to help my

mother, and tried to make her story, about which we were vague

ourselves, sound more convincing. Of course, when my father started to

question us, it became even more muddled.

What had happened was that while my father was in prison, his

interrogators had constantly told him he would be deserted by his wife

and family if he did not write his 'confession." Insisting on

confessions was a standard practice. Forcing victims to admit their

266'guilt' was vital in crushing their morale. But my father said he had

nothing to confess, and would not write anything.

His interrogators then told him that my mother had denounced him. When

he asked for her to be allowed to visit him, he was told she had been

given permission, but had refused, to show that she was 'drawing a

line' between herself and him. When the interrogators realized that my

father was beginning to hear things a sign of schizophrenia- they drew

his attention to a faint buzz of conversation from the next room,

saying that my mother was in there, but would not see him unless he

wrote his confession. The interrogators play-acted so vividly that my

father thought he really heard my mother's voice. His mind began to

collapse. Still he would not write the confession.

As he was being released, one of his interrogators told him he was

being allowed home to be kept under the eyes of his wife, 'who has been

assigned by the Party to watch you." Home, he was told, was to be his

new prison. He did not know the reason for his sudden release, and in

his confusion he latched onto this explanation.

My mother knew nothing about what had happened to him in prison. When

my father asked her why he had been released, she could not give him a

satisfactory answer. Not only could she not tell him about Zhou

Enlai's note, she could not mention going to see Chen Mo, who was the

right-hand man of the Tings. My father would not have tolerated his

wife's 'begging for a favor' from the Tings.

In this vicious circle, both my mother's dilemma and my father's

insanity grew, and fed off each other.

My mother tried to get medical treatment for him. She went to the

clinic that had been attached to the old provincial government. She

tried the mental hospitals. But as soon as the people at the

registration desks heard my father's name, they shook their heads. They

could not take him without sanction from the authorities and they were

not prepared to ask for that themselves.

My mother went to the dominant Rebel group in my father's department

and asked them to authorize hospitalization. This was the group led by

Mrs. Shau, and firmly in the hands of the Tings. Mrs. Shau snarled

at my mother that my father was faking mental illness in order to

escape his punishment, and that my mother was helping him, using her

own medical background (her stepfather, Dr. Xia, having been a

doctor). My father was 'a dog that has fallen into the water, and must

be flogged and beaten with absolutely no charity," said one Rebel,

quoting a current slogan vaunting the merciless ness of the Cultural

Revolution.

Under instructions from the Tings, the Rebels hounded my father with a

wall-poster campaign. Apparently, the Tings had reported to Mme Mao

the 'criminal words' my father had used at the denunciation meeting, in

his conversation with them, and in his letter to Mao. According to the

posters, Mme Mao had risen to her feet in indignation and said, "For

the man who dares to attack the Great Leader so blatantly,

imprisonment, even the death sentence, is too kind! He must be

thoroughly punished before we have done with him!"

The terror such wall posters induced in me was immense. Mme Mao had

denounced my father! This was surely the end for him. But,

paradoxically, one of Mme Mao's evil traits was actually to help us:

Mme Mao was more dedicated to her personal vendettas than to real

267issues, and because she did not know my father and had no personal

grudge against him, she did not pursue him.

We were not to know this, however, and I tried to take comfort in the

thought that her reported comment might only be a rumor. In theory,

wall posters were unofficial, since they were written by the 'masses'

and not part of the official media. But, deep down, I knew that what

they said was tale.

With the Tings' venom and Mme Mao's condemnation, the Rebels'

denunciation meetings became more brutal, even though my father was

still allowed to live at home.

One day he came back with one of his eyes badly damaged.

Another day I saw him standing on a slow-moving truck, being paraded

through the streets. A huge placard hung from a thin wire that was

eating into his neck, and his arms were twisted ferociously behind his

back. He was struggling to keep his head up under the forceful pushing

of some Rebels. What made me saddest of all was that he appeared

indifferent to his physical pain. In his insanity, his mind seemed to

be detached from his body.

He tore to pieces any photographs in the family album which had the

Tings in them. He burned his quilt covers and sheets, and much of the

family's clothing. He broke the legs of chairs and tables and burned

them, too.

One afternoon my mother was having a rest on their bed and Father was

reclining on his favorite bamboo armchair in his study, when he

suddenly jumped up and stamped into the bedroom. We heard the banging

and dashed after him and found him gripping my mother's neck. We

screamed and tried to pull him away. It looked as if my mother was

going to be strangled. But then he let go with a jerk, and strode out

of the room.

My mother sat up slowly, her face ashen. She cupped her left ear in

her hand. My father had awakened her by striking her on the side of

the head. Her voice was weak, but she was calm.

"Don't worry, I'm all right," she said to my sobbing grandmother. Then

she turned to us and said, "See how your father is. Then go to your

rooms." She leaned back against the oval mirror framed in camphor wood

which formed the headboard of the bed. In the mirror I saw her right

hand clutching the pillow. My grandmother sat by my parents' door all

night. I could not sleep either. What would happen if my father

attacked my mother with their door locked?

My mother's left ear was permanently damaged, and became almost totally

deaf. She decided it was too dangerous for her to stay at home, and

the next day she went to her department to find a place to move to. The

Rebels there were very sympathetic. They gave her a room in the

gardener's lodge in the corner of the garden. It was terribly small,

about eight feet by ten. Only a bed and a desk could be squeezed in,

with no space even to walk between them.

That night, I slept there with my mother, my grandmother, and

Xiao-fang, all crammed together on the bed.

We could not stretch our legs or turn. The bleeding from my mother's

womb worsened. We were very frightened because, having just moved to

268this new place, we had no stove and could not sterilize the syringe and

needle, and therefore could not give her an injection. In the end, I

was so exhausted I dropped into a fitful sleep. But I knew that

neither my grandmother nor my mother closed their eyes.

Over the next few days, while Jin-ming went on living with Father, I

stayed at my mother's new place helping to look after her. Living in

the next room was a young Rebel leader from my mother's district. I

had not said hello to him because I was not sure whether he would want

to be spoken to by someone from the family of a capitalistroader, but

to my surprise he greeted us normally when we ran into each other. He

treated my mother with courtesy, although he was a bit stiff. This was

a great relief after the ostentatious frostiness of the Rebels in my

father's department.

One morning a couple of days after we moved in, my mother was washing

her face under the eaves because there was no space inside when this

man called out to her and asked if she would like to swap rooms. His

was twice as big as ours. We moved that afternoon. He also helped us

to get another bed so we could sleep in relative comfort.

We were very touched.

This young man had a severe squint and a very pretty girlfriend who

stayed overnight with him, which was almost unheard of in those days.

They did not seem to mind us knowing. Of course, capitalist-roaders

were in no position to tell tales. When I bumped into them in the

mornings, they always gave me a very kind smile which told me they were

happy. I realized then that when people are happy they become kind.

When my mother's health improved, I went back to Father. The apartment

was in a dreadful state: the windows were broken, and there were bits

of burned furniture and clothing all over the floor. My father seemed

indifferent to whether I was there or not; he just paced incessantly

around and around. At night I locked my bedroom door, because he could

not sleep and would insist on talking to me, endlessly, without making

sense. But there was a small window over the door which could not be

locked. One night I woke up to see him slithering through the tiny

aperture and jumping nimbly to the floor.

But he paid no attention to me. He aimlessly picked up various pieces

of heavy mahogany furniture and let them drop with seemingly little

effort. In his insanity he had become super humanly agile and

powerful. Staying with him was a nightmare. Many times, I wanted to

run away to my mother, but I could not bring myself to leave him.

A couple of times he slapped me, which he had never done before, and I

would go and hide in the back garden under the balcony of the

apartment. In the chill of the spring nights I listened desperately

for the silence upstairs which meant he had gone to sleep.

One day, I missed his presence. I was seized by a presentiment and

rushed out of the door. A neighbor who

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lived on the top floor was walking down the stairs. We had stopped

greeting each other some time before in order to avoid trouble, but

this time he said: "I saw your father going out onto the roof."

Our apattsnent block had five stories.

I raced to the top floor.

On

269the landing to the left a small window gave onto the flat, shingled

roof of the four-story block next door.

The roof had low iron rails around the edge. As I was trying to climb

through the window, I saw my father at the edge of the roof. I thought

I saw him lifting his left leg over the railing.

"Father," I called, in a voice which was trembling, although I was

trying to force it to sound normal. My instinct told me I must not

alarm him.

He paused, and turned toward me: "What are you doing here?"

"Please come and help me get through the window."

Somehow, I coaxed him away from the edge of the roof.

I grabbed his hand and led him onto the landing. I was shaking.

Something seemed to have touched him, and an almost normal expression

replaced his usual blank indifference or the intense introspective

rolling of his eyes. He carried me downstairs to a sofa and even

fetched a towel to wipe away my tears. But the signs of normality were

short-lived. Before I had recovered from the shock, I had to scramble

up and run because he raised his hand and was about to hit me.

Instead of allowing my father medical treatment, the Rebels found his

insanity a source of entertainment. A poster serial appeared every

other day entitled "The Inside Story of Madman Chang." Its authors,

from my father's department, ridiculed and lavished sarcasm on my

father.

The posters were pasted up in a prime site just outside the department,

and drew large, appreciative crowds. I forced myself to read them,

although I was aware of the stares from other readers, many of whom

knew who I was. I heard them whispering to those who did not know my

identity. My heart would tremble with rage and unbearable pain for my

father, but I knew that reports of my reactions would reach my father's

persecutors. I wanted to look calm, and to let them know that they

could not demoralize us. I had no fear or sense of humiliation, only

contempt for them.

What had turned people into monsters? What was the reason for all this

pointless brutality? It was in this period that my devotion to Mao

began to wane. Before when people had been persecuted I could not be

absolutely sure of their innocence; but I knew my parents. Doubts

about Mao's infallibility crept into my mind, but at that stage, like

many people, I mainly blamed his wife and the Cultural Revolution

Authority. Mao himself, the godlike Emperor, was still beyond

questioning.

We watched my father deteriorate mentally and physically with each

passing day. My mother went to ask Chen Mo for help again. He

promised to see what he could do.

We waited, but nothing happened: his silence meant he must have failed

to get the Tings to allow my father to have treatment. In desperation,

my mother went to the Red Chengdu headquarters to see Yan and Yong.

The dominant group at Sichuan Medical College was part of Red Chengdu.

The college had a psychiatric hospital attached to it, and a word from

Red Chengdu headquarters could get my father in. Yan and Yong were

270very sympathetic, but they would have to convince their comrades.

Humanitarian considerations had been condemned by Mao as 'bourgeois

hypocrisy," and it went without saying that there should be no mercy

for 'class enemies." Yan and Yong had to give a political reason for

treating my father.

They had a good one: he was being persecuted by the Tings. He could

supply ammunition against them, perhaps even help to bring them down.

This, in turn, could bring about the collapse of z6 August.

There was another reason. Mao had said the new Revolutionary

Committees must contain 'revolutionary officials'

as well as Rebels and members of the armed forces. Both Red Chengdu

and 26 August were trying to find officials to represent them on the

Sichuan Revolutiona~ Commiuee.

Besides, the Rebels were beginning to find out how complex politics

was, and how daunting a task it was actually to run an administration.

They needed competent politicians as advisers. Red Chengdu thought my

father was an ideal candidate, and sanctioned medical treatment.

Red Chengdu knew that my father had been denounced for saying

blasphemous things against Mao and the Cultural Revolution, and that

Mme. Mao had condemned him.

But these claims had only been made by their enemies in wall posters,

where truth and lies were often mixed up.

They could, therefore, dismiss them.

My father was admitted to the mental hospital of Sichuan Medical

College. It was in the suburbs of Chengdu, surrounded by rice fields.

Bamboo leaves swayed over the brick walls and the iron main gate. A

second gate shut off a walled courtyard green with moss the residential

area for the doctors and nurses. At the end of the courtyard, a flight

of red sandstone stairs led into the windowless side of a two-story

building flanked by solid, high walls. The stairs were the only access

to the inside the psychiatric wards.

The two male nurses who came for my father were dressed in ordinary

clothes, and told him they were taking him to another denunciation

meeting. When they reached the hospital my father straggled to get

away. They dragged him upstairs into a small empty room, shutting the

door behind them so my mother and I would not have to see them putting

him into a straitjacket. I was heartbroken to see him being so roughly

handled, but I knew it was for his own good.

The psychiatrist, Dr. Su, was in his thirties, with a gentle face and

professional manner. He told my mother he would spend a week observing

my father before he gave a diagnosis. At the end of the week, he

reached his conclusion:

schizophrenia. My father was given electric shocks and insulin

injections, for which he had to be tied tight onto the bed. In a few

days, he began to recover his sanity. With tears in his eyes, he

begged my mother to ask the doctor to change the treatment.

"It is so painful."

His voice broke.

271"It feels worse than death."

way.

But Dr.

Su said there was no other

The next time I saw my father, he was sitting on his bed chatting to my

mother and Yan and Yong. They were all smiling. My father was even

laughing. He looked well again.

I had to pretend to go to the toilet to wipe away my tears.

On the orders of Red Chengdu, my father received special food and a

full-time nurse~Yan and Yong visited him often, with members of his

department who were sympathetic to him and who had themselves been

subjected to denunciation meetings by Mrs. Shau's group. My father

liked Yan and Yong very much, and although he could be unobservant, he

realized they were in love, and teased them charmingly. I could see

they enjoyed this greatly. At last, I felt, the nightmare was over;

now that my father was well, we could face any disasters together.

The treatment lasted about forty days. By mid-July he was back to

normal. He was discharged, and he and my mother were taken to Chengdu

University, where they were given a suite in a small self contained

courtyard.

Student guards were placed on the gate. My father was provided with a

pseudonym and told that he should not go out of the courtyard during

the day, for his safety. My mother fetched their meals from a special

kitchen. Yan and Yong came to see him every day, as did the Red

Chengdu leaders, who were all very courteous to him.

I visited my parents there often, riding a borrowed bicycle for an hour

on potholed country roads. My father seemed peaceful. He would say

over and over again how grateful he felt to these students for enabling

him to get treatment.

When it was dark, he was allowed out, and we went for

long, quiet strolls on the campus, followed at

a distance by a couple of guards. We wandered along the lanes lined

with hedges of Cape jasmine. The fist-sized white flowers gave off a

strong fragrance in the summer breeze. It seemed like a dream of

serenity, so far away from the terror and violence. I knew this was my

father's prison, but I wished he would never have to come out.

In the summer of 1967, factional fighting among the Rebels was

escalating into mini civil war all over China.

The antagonism between the Rebel factions was far greater than their

supposed anger toward the capitalist-roaders, because they were

fighting tooth and nail for power. Kang Sheng, Mao's intelligence

chief, and Mme Mao led the Cultural Revolution Authority in stirring up

more animosity by calling the factional fighting 'an extension of the

struggle between the Communists and the Kuomintang' without specifying

which group was which. The Cultural Revolution Authority ordered the

army to 'arm the Rebels for self-defense," without telling them which

factions to support. Inevitably, different army units armed different

factions on the basis of their own preferences.

The armed forces were in great upheaval already, because Lin Biao was

busy trying to purge his opponents and replace them with his own men.

Eventually Mao realized that he could not afford instability in the

army, and reined in Lin Biao. However, he appeared to be in two minds

about the factional fighting among the Rebels. On the one hand, he

272wanted the factions to unite so that his personal power structure could

be established. On the other hand, he seemed incapable of repressing

his love of fighting: as bloody wars spread across China he said, "It

is not a bad thing to let the young have some practice in using arms we

haven't had a war for so long."

In Sichuan, the battles were especially fierce, partly because the

province was the center of China's arms industry. Tanks, armored cars,

and artillery were taken from the production lines and warehouses by

both sides. Another cause was the Tings, who set out to eliminate

their opponents. In Yibin there was brutal fighting with guns, hand

grenades, mortars, and machine guns. Over a hundred people died in the

city of Yibin alone. In the end Red Chengdu was forced to abandon the

city.

Many went to the nearby city of Luzhou, which was held by Red Chengdu.

The Tings dispatched over 5,000 members of 26 August to attack the

city, and eventually seized it, killing nearly 300 and wounding many

more.

In Chengdu, the fighting was sporadic, and only the most fanatical

joined in. Even so, I saw parades of tens of thousands of Rebels

carrying the blood-soaked corpses of people killed in bat ties and

people shooting rifles in the streets.

It was under these circumstances that Red Chengdu made three requests

of my father: to announce his support for them; to tell them about the

Tings; and to become an adviser and eventually represent them on the

Sichuan Revolution Committee.

He refused. He said he could not back one group against another, nor

could he provide information against the Tings, as that might aggravate

the situation and create more animosity. He also said he would not

represent a faction on the Sichuan Revolutionary Committee indeed, he

had no desire to be on it at all.

Eventually, the friendly atmosphere turned ugly. The chiefs of Red

Chengdu were split. One group said they had never encountered anyone

so incredibly obstinate and perverse. My father had been persecuted to

the brink of death, yet he refused to let other people avenge him. He

dared to oppose the powerful Rebels who had saved his life. He turned

down an offer to be rehabilitated and return to power. In anger and

exasperation, some shouted: "Let's give him a good beating. We should

at least break a couple of his bones to teach him a lesson!"

But an and Yong spoke up for him, as did a few others.

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"It is rare to see a character like him," said Yong.

"It is not right to punish him. He would not bend even if he were

beaten to death. And to torture him is to bring shame on us all. Here

is a man of principle!"

Despite the threat of beating, and his gratitude to these

father would not go against his principles. One night at

September 1967 a car brought him and my mother home. Yan

could no longer protect him. They accompanied my parents

said goodbye.

Rebels, my

the end of

and Yong

home, and

273My parents immediately fell into the hands of the Tings and Mrs. Shau's

group. The Tings made it clear that the attitude staff members took

toward my father would determine their future. Mrs. Shau was promised

the equivalent of my father's job in the forthcoming Sichuan

Revolutionary Committee, provided my father was 'thoroughly smashed."

Those who showed sympathy to my father were themselves condemned.

One day two men from Mrs. Shau's group came to our apatunent to take

my father away to a 'meeting." Later they returned and told me and my

brothers to go to his depa~i,nent to bring him back.

My father was leaning against a wall in the courtyard of the

department, in a position which showed that he had been trying to stand

up. His face was black and blue, and unbelievably swollen. His head

had been half shaved, clearly in a very rough manner.

There had been no denunciation meeting. When he arrived at the office,

he was immediately yanked into a small room, where half a dozen large

strangers set upon him. They punched and kicked the lower part of his

body, especially his genitals. They forced water down his mouth and

nose and then stamped on his stomach. Water, blood, and excreta were

pressed out. My father fainted.

When he came to, the thugs had disappeared. My father felt terribly

thirsty. He dragged himself out of the room, and scooped some water

from a puddle in the courtyard.

He tried to stand up, but was unable to stay on his feet.

Members of Mrs. Shau's group were in the courtyard, but no one lifted

a finger to help him.

The thugs came from the 26 August faction in Chongqing, about x5o miles

from Chengdu. There had been large-scale battles there, with heavy

artillery lobbing shells across the Yangtze. 26 August was driven out

of the city, and many members fled to Chengdu, where some were

accommodated in our compound. They were restless and frustrated, and

told Mrs. Shau's group that their fists 'itched to put an end to their

vegetarian life and to taste some blood and meat." My father was

offered up to them.

That night, my father, who had never once moaned after his previous

beatings, cried out in agony. The next morning, my fourteen-year-old

brother Jin-ming raced to the compound kitchen as soon as it was open

to borrow a cart to take him to the hospital. Xiao-her, then thirteen,

went out and bought a hair clipper, and cut the remaining hair from my

father's half-shaved head. When he saw his bald head in the mirror, my

father gave a wry smile.

"This is good. I won't have to worry about my hair being pulled next

time I'm at a denunciation meeting."

We put my father on the cart and pulled him to a nearby orthopedic

hospital. This time we did not need authorization to get him looked

at, as his ailment had nothing to do with the mind. Mental illness was

a very sensitive area.

Bones had no ideological color.

The doctor was very warm.

When I saw how carefully he touched my father, a lump rose in my

throat. I had seen so much shoving, slapping, and hitting, and so

274little gentleness.

The doctor said two of my father's ribs were broken.

be hospitalized. That needed authorization.

But he could not

Besides, there were far too many severe injuries for the hospital to

accommodate. It was crams ed with people who had been wounded in the

denunciation meetings and the factional fightng. I saw a young man on

a stretcher with a jl third of his head gone. His companion told us he

had been hit by a hand grenade.

My mother went to see Chen Mo again, and asked him to put in a word

with the Tings to stop my father's beatings.

A few days later Chen told my mother the Tings were prepared to

'forgive' my father if he would write a wall poster singing the praises

of 'good officials' Liu Jie-ting and Zhang Xi-ting. He emphasized that

they had just been given renewed full, explicit backing by the Cultural

Revolution Authority, and Zhou Enlai had specifically stated that he

regarded the Tings as 'good officials." To continue to oppose them,

Chen told my mother, was tantamount to 'throwing an egg against a

rock." when my mother told my father, he said, "There's nothing good

to say about them."

"But," she implored him tearfully, 'this is not to get your job back,

or even for rehabilitation, it's for your life! What is a poster

compared to a life?"

"I will not sell my soul," answered my father.

For over a year, until the end of 1968, my father was in and out of

detention, along with most of the former leading officials in the

provincial government. Our apa~uHent was constantly raided and turned

upside down. Detention was now called "Mao Zedong Thought Study

Courses." The pressure in these 'courses' was such that many groveled

to the Tings; some committed suicide. But my father never gave in to

the Tings' demands to work with them. He would say later how much

having a loving family had helped him. Most of those who committed

suicide did so after their families had disowned them. We visited my

father in detention whenever we were allowed, which was seldom, and

surrounded him with affection whenever he was home for a fleeting

stay.

The Tings

break him

him. She

mother to

miles,

knew that my father loved my mother very much, and tried to

through her. Intense pressure was put on her to denounce

had many reasons to resent my father. He had not invited her

their wedding. He had let her walk hundreds of agonizing

and had not given her much sympathy in her crises. In Yibin he had

refused to let her go to a better hospital for a dangerous birth. He

had always given the Party and the revolution priority over her. But

my mother had understood and respected my father and had above all

never ceased to love him. She would particularly stand by him now that

he was in trouble. No amount of suffering could bring her to denounce

him.

My mother's own department turned a deaf ear to the Tings' orders to

torment her, but Mrs. Shau's group was happy to oblige, and so were

some other organizations which had nothing to do with her. Altogether,

she had to go through about a hundred denunciation meetings. Once she

275was taken to a rally of tens of thousands of people in the People's

Park in the center of Chengdu to be denounced. Most of the

participants had no idea who she was. She was not nearly important

enough to merit such a mass event.

My mother was condemned for all sorts of things, not least for having a

warlord general as a father. The fact that General Xue had died when

she was barely two made no difference.

In those days, every capitalist-roader had one or more teams

investigating his or her past in minute detail, because Mao wanted the

history of everyone working for him thoroughly checked. At different

times my mother had four different teams investigating her, the last of

which contained about fifteen people. They were sent to various parts

of China. It was through these investigations that my mother came to

know the whereabouts of her old friends and relatives with whom she had

lost contact for years.

Most of the investigators just went sight-seeing and returned with

nothing incriminating, but one group came back with a 'scoop."

Back in Jinzhou in the late 194os, Dr. Xia had let a room to the

Communist agent Yu-wn, who had been my mother's boss, in charge of

collecting military information and smuggling it out of the city.

Yu-wu's own controller, who was unknown to my mother then, had been

pretending to work for the Kuomintang. During the Cultural Revolution,

he was put under intense pressure to confess to being a Kuomintang spy,

and was tortured atrociously. In the end, he 'confessed," inventing a

spy ring which included Yu-wu.

Yu-wu was tortured ferociously as well. In order to avoid

incriminating other people, he killed himself by slashing his wrists.

He did not mention my mother. But the investigation team found out

about their connection and claimed that she was a member of the 'spy

ring."

Her teenage contact with the Kuomintang was dragged up. All the

questions that had come up in 1955 were gone over again. This time

they were not asked in order to get an answer. My mother was simply

ordered to admit that she was a Kuomintang spy. She argued that the

investigation in 1955 had cleared her, but she was told that the chief

investigator then, Mr. Kuang, was a 'traitor and Kuomintang spy'

himself.

Mr. Kuang had been imprisoned by the Kuomintang in his youth. The

Kuomintang had promised to release underground Communists if they

signed a recantation for publication in the local newspaper. At first

he and his comrades had refused, but the Party instructed them to

accept. They were told the Party needed them, and did not mind

'anti-Communist statements' which were not sincere. Mr. Kuang

followed orders and was duly released.

Many others had done the same thing. In one famous case in 1936,

sixty-one imprisoned Communists were released this way. The order to

'recant' was given by the Party Central Committee and delivered by Liu

Shaoqi.

Some of these sixty-one subsequently became top officials in the

Communist government, including vice-premiers, ministers, and first

secretaries of provinces. During the Cultural Revolution, Mme Mao and

Kang Sheng announced that they were 'sixty-one big traitors and

276spies."

The verdict was endorsed by Mao personally, and these people were

subjected to the cruelest tortures. Even people remotely connected

with them got into deadly trouble.

Following this precedent, hundreds of thousands of former underground

workers and their contacts, some of the bravest men and women who had

fought for a Communist China, were charged with being 'traitors and

spies' and suffered detention, brutal denunciation meetings, and

torture. According to a later official account, in the province next

to Sichuan, Yunnan, over 14,000 people died.

In Hebei province, which surrounds Peking, 84,000 were detained and

tortured; thousands died. My mother learned years later that her first

boyfriend, Cousin Hu, was among them. She had thought he had been

executed by the Kuomintang, but his father had in fact bought him out

of prison with gold bars. No one would ever tell my mother how he

died.

Mr. Kuang fell under the same accusation. Under torture, he attempted

suicide, unsuccessfully. The fact that he had cleared my mother in

1956 was alleged to prove her 'guilt." She was kept in various forms

of detention on and off for nearly two years from late 1967 to October

1969. Her conditions depended largely on her guards.

Some were kind to her when they were alone. One of them, the wife of

an army officer, got medicine for her hemorrhage. She also asked her

husband, who had access to privileged food supplies, to bring my mother

milk, eggs, and chicken every week.

Thanks to kindhearted guards like her, my mother was allowed home

several times for a few days. The Tings learned of this, and the kind

guards were replaced by a sour4 aced woman whom my mother did not know,

who tormented and tortured her for pleasure. When the fancy took her,

she would make my mother stand bent over in the courtyard for hours. In

the winter, she would make her kneel in cold water until she passed

out. Twice she put my mother on what was called a 'tiger bench." My

mother had

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343' Father.4rrested 479 to sit on a narrow bench with her legs

stretched out in front of her. Her torso was tied to a pillar and her

thighs to the bench so she could not move or bend her legs. Then

bricks were forced under her heels. The intention was to break the

knees or the hipbones. Twenty years before, in Jinzhou, she had been

threatened with this in the Kuomintang torture chamber. The 'tiger

bench' had to stop because the guard needed men to help her push in the

bricks; they helped reluctantly a couple of times, but then refused to

have any more to do with it. Years later the woman was diagnosed as a

psychopath, and today is in a psychiatric hospital.

My mother signed many 'confessions," admitting that she had sympathized

with a 'capitalist road." But she refused to denounce my father, and

she denied all 'spy' charges, which she knew would inevitably lead to

the incrimination of others.

During her detention we were often not allowed to see her, and even had

no idea where she was. I would wander the streets outside the possible

place in the hope of catching sight of her.

277There was a period when she was detained in a deserted cinema on the

main shopping street. There we were occasionally permitted to deliver

a parcel for her to a warden, or to see her for a few minutes, although

never on her own. When a fierce guard was on duty, we had to sit under

freezing eyes. One day in autumn 1968 I went there to deliver a food

parcel and was told it could not be accepted. No reason was given, and

I was told not to send things anymore. When my grandmother heard the

news she passed out. She thought my mother must be dead.

It was unbearable not knowing what had happened to my mother. I took

my six-year-old brother Xiao-fang by the hand and went to the cinema.

We walked up and down the street in front of the gate. We searched the

rows of windows on the second floor. In desperation we screamed

"Mother! Mother!" at the top of our voices again and again.

Passersby stared at us, but I took no notice. I just wanted to see

her. My brother cried. But my mother did not appear.

Years later, she told me that she had heard us. In fact, her

psychopath guard had opened the window slightly so our voices would be

louder. My mother was told that if she agreed to denounce my father,

and to confess to being a Kuomintang spy, she could see us

immediately.

"Otherwise," said the guard, 'you may never get out of this building

alive." My mother said no. All the time, she dug her nails into her

palms to stop her tears from falling.

21. "Giving Charcoal in Snow'~ My Siblings and My Friends

(1967-1968)

Throughout 1967 and 1968, while Mao struggled to set up his personal

power system, he kept his victims, like my parents, in a state of

uncertainty and suffering.

Human anguish did not concern Mao. People existed only to help him

realize his strategic plans. But his purpose was not genocide, and my

family, like many other victims, were not deliberately starved. My

parents still received their salaries every month in spite of the fact

that not only were they doing no work, they were also being denounced

and tormented. The main compound canteen was working normally to

enable the Rebels to carry on with their 'revolution," and we, like the

families of other capitalist-roaders, were fed. We also got the same

rations from the state as everyone else in the cities.

Much of the urban population was kept 'on hold' for the revolution. Mao

wanted the population to fight, but to live.

He protected the extremely capable premier, Zhou Enlai, so that he

could keep the economy going. He knew he needed another first-class

administrator in reserve in case anything happened to Zhou, so he kept

Deng Xiaoping in relative security. The country was not allowed to

collapse totally.

But, as the revolution dragged on, large parts of the economy slipped

into paralysis. The urban population increased by several tens of

millions, but virtually no new housing or other service facilities were

built in the towns.

Nearly everything, from salt, toothpaste, and toilet paper to every

278kind of food and clothing, either was rationed or disappeared

completely. In Chengdu there was no sugar for a year, and six months

passed without a single bar of soap.

Starting from June 1966, there was no schooling. The teachers either

had been denounced or were organizing their own Rebel groups. No

school meant no control. But what could we do with our freedom? There

were virtually no books, no music, no films, no theater, no museums, no

teahouses, almost no way of keeping oneself occupied except cards,

which, though not officially sanctioned, made a stealthy comeback.

Unlike most revolutions, in Mao's there was nothing to do. Naturally,

"Red Guardship' became many youngsters' full-time occupation. The only

ways they could release their energy and frustration were in violent

denunciations and in physical and verbal bat ties with each other.

Joining the Red Guards was not compulsory. With the disintegration of

the Party system, control over individuals loosened, and most of the

population was left alone. Many people just stayed idle at home, and

one result was an explosion of petty fights. Surliness replaced the

good service and polite behavior of the pre-Cultural Revolution days.

It became extremely common to see people quarreling on the streets with

shop assistants, with bus conductors, with passersby. Another result

was that, since no one was looking after birth control, there was a

baby boom.

The population increased during the Cultural Revolution by two hundred

million.

By the end of 1966 my teenage siblings and I had decided that we had

had enough of being Red Guards.

Children in condemned families were supposed to 'draw a line' between

themselves and their parents, and many did so. One of President Liu

Shaoqi's daughters wrote wall posters 'exposing' her father. I knew

children who changed their surnames to demonstrate that they were

disowning their fathers, others who never visited their parents in

detention, and some who even took part in denunciation meetings against

their parents.

Once, when my mother was under tremendous pressure to divorce my

father, she asked us what we thought. Standing by him meant we could

become 'blacks'; we had all seen the discrimination and torment such

people suffered.

But we said we would stick by him, come what may. My mother said she

was pleased and proud of us. Our devotion to our parents was increased

by our empathy for their suffering, our admiration for their integrity

and courage, and our loathing for their tormentors. We came to feel a

new degree of respect, and love, for our parents.

We grew up fast. We had no rival ties no squabbles, and no resentment

of each other, none of the usual problems or pleasures of teenagers.

The Cultural Revolution destroyed normal adolescence, with all its

pitfalls, and threw us straight into sensible adulthood in our early

teens.

At the age of fourteen, my love for my parents had an intensity that

could not have existed under normal circumstances. My life revolved

entirely around them. Whenever they were briefly at home, I would

watch their moods, trying to provide amusing company. When they were

in detention, I would repeatedly go to the disdainful-looking Rebels

279and demand a visit. Sometimes I would be allowed a few minutes to sit

and talk with one of my parents, in the company of a guard. I would

tell them how much I loved them. I became well known among the former

staff of the Sichuan government and the Eastern District of Chengdu,

and an irritation to my parents' tormentors, who also hated me for

refusing to show fear of them. Once Mrs. Shau screamed that I 'looked

straight through' her. Their fury led them to invent the accusation,

printed on one of their wall posters, that Red Chengdu had given my

father treatment because I had used my body to seduce Yong.

Apart from being with my parents, I spent most of my abundant free time

with friends. After I came back from Peking in December 1966, I went

for a month to an airplane maintenance factory on the outskirts of

Chengdu with Plumpie and Ching-ching, a friend of hers. We needed

something to occupy ourselves, and the most important thing we could

do, according to Mao, was to go to factories to stir up rebellious

actions against capitalistroaders. Upheaval was invading industry too

slowly for Mao's liking.

The only action the three of us stirred up was the attention of some

young men from the now defunct factory basketball team. We spent a lot

of time strolling on the country roads together, enjoying the rich

evening scent of the early bean blossoms. But soon, as my parents'

suffering worsened, I went home, leaving Mao's orders and my

participation in the Cultural Revolution behind once and for all.

My friendship with Plumpie, Ching-ching, and the basketball players

lasted. Also in our circle were my sister Xiao-hong and several other

girls from my school. They were all older than I. We would meet

frequently in the home of one or another of us, and linger there for

the whole day, and often the night as well, having nothing else to

do.

We had endless discussions about which of the basketball players

fancied whom. The captain of the team, a handsome nineteen-year-old

called Sai, was the center of speculation. The girls wondered whether

he liked me or Ching-ching more. He was reticent and reserved, and

Ching-ching was very keen on him. Every time we were going to see him,

she would meticulously wash and comb her shoulder-length hair,

carefully iron and adjust her clothes to look stylish, and even put on

a lit He powder and rouge and pencil her eyebrows. We all teased her

gently

I was also drawn to Sai. I could feel my heart pound whenever I

thought of him, and would wake up at night seeing his face and feeling

feverishly hot. I often murmured his name and talked to him in my mind

whenever I felt fear or worry. But I never revealed anything to him,

or to my friends, or even to myself explicitly. I only timidly

fantasized about him. My parents dominated my life and my conscious

thoughts. Any indulgence in my own affairs was immediately suppressed

as being disloyal. The Cultural Revolution had deprived me of, or

spared me, a normal girlhood with tantrums, bickerings, and

boyfriends.

But I was not without vanity. I sewed big blue wax-dyed,

abstract-patterned patches on the knees and seat of my trousers, which

had faded to pale gray. My friends would laugh at the sight of them.

My grandmother was scandalized, and complained, "No other girls dress

like you."

But I insisted.

I was not trying to make myself look beautiful, just

280different.

One day one of my friends told us that her parents, both distinguished

actors, had just committed suicide, unable to stand the denunciations.

Not long after, news came that the brother of another gift had killed

himself. He had been a student at the Peking Aeronautical College, and

he and some fellow students had been denounced for trying to organize

an anti-Mao party. He threw himself out of a third-floor window when

the police came to arrest him.

Some of his fellow 'conspirators' were executed; others were given life

sentences, the normal punishment for anyone attempting to organize an

opposition, which was rare.

Tragedies like this were part of our everyday life.

The families of Plumpie, Ching-ching, and some others were nor hit. And

they remained my friends. They were not harassed by my parents'

persecutors, who could not extend their power to that degree. But they

still ran risks by not swimming with the tide. My friends were among

the millions who held sacred the traditional Chinese code of loyalty

'giving charcoal in snow." The fact that they were there helped me

through the worst years of the Cultural Revolution.

They gave me a lot of practical help, too. Toward the end of 1967 Red

Chengdu began to attack our compound, which was controlled by 26

August, and our block was turned into a fortress. We were ordered to

move from our third-floor aparisuent into some ground-floor rooms in

the next block.

My parents were in detention at the time. My father's department,

which would normally have looked after the move, now only gave us our

marching orders. As there were no furniture-removal companies, without

the help of our friends my family would have ended up without a bed.

Still, we moved only the most essential furniture, leaving things like

my father's heavy bookcases behind; we could not lift them, let alone

can them down several flights of stairs.

Our new quarters were in an apasis~lent already occupied by the family

of another capitalist-roader, who were now ordered to vacate half of

it. Apaximents were being reorganized like this all over the compound

so the top floors could be used as command posts. My sister and I

shared a room. We kept the window facing the now deserted back garden

permanently shut, because the moment it was opened, a strong stench

would flood in from the blocked drains outside. At night, we heard

cries for surrender from outside the compound wall, and sporadic

shooting. One night I was awakened by the sound of shattering glass: a

bullet had come through the window and embedded itself in the wall

opposite. Strangely, I was not frightened. After the horrors I had

been through, bullets had lost their effect.

To occupy myself, I began writing poetry in classical styles. The

first poem with which I felt satisfied was written on my sixteenth

birthday, z5 March 1968. There was no birthday celebration. Both my

parents were in detention That night, as I lay in bed listening to the

gunshots and the Rebels' loudspeakers blaring out bloodcurdling

diatribes, I reached a turning point. I had always been told, and had

believed, that I was living in a paradise on earth, socialist China,

whereas the capitalist world was hell. Now I asked myself." If this

is paradise, what then is hell? I decided that I would like to see for

281myself whether there was indeed a place more full of pain. For the

first time, I consciously hated the regime I lived under, and craved an

alternative.

Still, I subconsciously avoided Mao. He had been part of my life ever

since I was a child. He was the idol, the god, the inspiration. The

purpose of my life had been formulated in his name. A couple of years

before, I would happily have died for him. Although his magic power

had vanished from inside me, he was still sacred and un doubtable Even

now, I did not challenge him.

It was in this mood that I composed my poem. I wrote about the death

of my indoctrinated and innocent past as dead leaves being swept from a

tree by the whirlwind and carried to a world of no return. I described

my bewilderment at the new world, at not knowing what and how to think.

It was a poem of groping in the dark, searching.

I wrote the poem down, and was lying in bed going over it in my head

when I heard banging on the door. From the sound, I knew it was a

house raid. Mrs. Shau's Rebels had raided our apa,iment several

times. They had taken away 'bourgeois luxury items' like my

grandmother's elegant clothes from the pre-Communist days, my mother's

fur lined Manchurian coat, and my father's suits- even though they were

Mao-style. They even confiscated my woolen trousers. They kept coming

back to try to find 'evidence' against my father. I had grown used to

our quarters being turned upside down.

I was seized with anxiety about what would happen if they saw my poem.

When my father first came under attack he asked my mother to burn his

poems; he knew how writing, any writing, could be twisted against its

author.

But my mother could not bring herself to destroy them all.

She kept a few which he had written for her.

brutal denunciation meetings.

These cost him several

In one poem my father poked fun at himself for failing to climb to the

top of a scenic mountain. Mrs. Shau and her comrades accused him of

'lamenting his frustrated ambition to usurp China's supreme

leadership."

In another, he described working at night:

The light shines whiter when the night grows darker,

My pen races to meet the dawn... The Rebels claimed he was referring to

socialist China as 'dark night," and that he was working with his pen

to welcome a 'white dawn' - a Kuomintang comeback (white was the color

of counterrevolution). In those days it was commonplace for such

ridiculous interpretations to be forced upon someone's writings. Mao,

who was a lover of classical poetry, did not think of making it an

exception to this ghastly rule. Writing poetry became a highly

dangerous occupation.

When the pounding on the door began, I quickly ran to the toilet, and

locked the door while my grandmother answered Mrs. Shau and her posse.

My hands trembling, I managed to tear the poem into tiny pieces, throw

them into the bowl, and flush the toilet. I searched the floor

carefully to make sure no pieces had fallen out. But the paper did not

all disappear the first time. I had to wait and flush again. By now

282the Rebels were banging on the door of the toilet, curtly ordering me

to come out immediately.

I did not answer.

My brother Jin-ming also got a fright that night. Ever since the

Cultural Revolution had started, he had been frequenting a black market

specializing in books. The commercial instinct of the Chinese is so

strong that black markets, Mao's greatest capitalist Mte noire, existed

right through the crushing pressure of the Cultural Revolution.

In the center of Chengdu, in the middle of the main shopping street,

was a bronze statue of Sun Yat-sen, who had led the 19x i republican

revolution which had overthrown 2,000 years of imperial rule. The

statue had been erected before the Communists came to power. Mao was

not particularly keen on any revolutionary leaders before himself,

including Sun. But it was politic to lay claim to his tradition, so

the statue was allowed to stay, and the patch of ground around it

became a plant nursery. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Red

Guards attacked emblems of Sun Yat-sen until Zhou Enlai slapped a

protection order on them. The statue survived, but the plant nursery

was abandoned as 'bourgeois decadence." When Red Guards began raiding

people's houses and burning their books, a small crowd started to

gather on this deserted ground to deal in the volumes which had escaped

the bonfires. All manner of people were to be found there: Red Guards

who wanted to make some cash from the books they had confiscated;

frustrated entrepreneurs who smelled money; scholars who did not want

their books to be burned but were afraid of keeping them; and book

lovers. The books being traded had all been published or sanctioned

under the Communist regime before the Cultural Revolution. Apart from

Chinese classics, they included Shakespeare, Dickens, Byron, Shelley,

Shaw, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, Ibsen,

Balzac, Maupassant, Flaubert, Dumas, Zola, and many other world

classics. Even Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who had been a great

favorite in China.

The price of the books depended on a variety of factors.

If they had a library stamp in them, most people shunned them. The

Communist government had such a reputation for control and order that

people did not want to risk being caught with illegally gotten state

property, for which they would be severely punished. They were much

happier buy 49o "Giving Charcoal in Snowing privately owned books with

no identification marks.

Novels with erotic passages commanded the highest prices, and also

carried the greatest danger. Stendhars Le Rouge et le Noir, considered

erotic, cost the equivalent of two weeks' wages for an average

person.

Jin-ming went to this black market every day. His initial capital came

from books which he had obtained from a paper recycling shop, to which

frightened citizens were selling their collections as scrap paper.

Jin-ming had chatted up a shop assistant and bought a lot of these

books, which he resold at much higher prices. He then bought more

books at the black market, read them, sold them, and bought more.

Between the start of the Cultural Revolution and the end of 1968, at

least a thousand books passed through his hands. He read at the rate

of one or two a day. He only dared to keep a dozen or so at any one

time, and had to hide them carefully. One of his hiding places was

283under an abandoned water tower in the compound, until a downpour

destroyed a stock of his favorites, including Jack London's The Call of

the Wild. He kept a few at home stashed in the mattresses and the

corners of our storeroom. On the night of the house raid he had Le

Rouge et le Noir hidden in his bed. But, as always, he had torn the

cover off and replaced it with that of The Selected Works of Mao

Zedong, and Mrs. Shau and her comrades did not examine it.

Jin-ming dealt in other black-market goods as well. His enthusiasm for

science had not waned. At the time, the only black market dealing in

scientific goods in Chengdu traded in semi-conductor radio parts: this

branch of industry was in favor because it 'spread Chairman Mao's

words."

Jin-ming bought parts and made his own radios, which he sold at good

prices. He bought more parts for his real purpose: testing various

theories in physics which had been nagging him.

To get money for his experiments, he even dealt in Mao badges.

factories had stopped normal production

Many

to produce aluminum badges with Mao's head on them.

Collecting of any kind, including stamps and paintings, had been banned

as a 'bourgeois habit." So people's instinct for collecting turned to

this sanctioned object although they could only deal in it

clandestinely. Jin-ming made a small fortune. Litfie did the Great

Helmsman know that even the image of his head had become a piece of

property for capitalist speculation, the very activity he had tried so

hard to stamp out.

There were repeated clamp downs Often truckloads of Rebels would

arrive, seal off the streets, and grab anyone who looked suspicious.

Sometimes they sent spies who pretended to be browsing. Then a whistle

would blow and they would swoop on the dealers. Those who were caught

had their belongings confiscated. They were usually beaten. One

regular punishment was 'bloodletting' stabbing them in the buttocks.

Some were tortured, and all were threatened with double punishment if

they did not stop. But most came back, again and again.

My second brother, Xiao-her, was twelve at the beginning of 1967.

Having nothing to do, he soon found himself involved in a street gang.

Virtually nonexistent before the Cultural Revolution, these were now

flourishing. A gang was called a 'dock," and its leader the

'helmsman." Everyone else was a 'brother," and had a nickname, usually

with some connection with animals: "Thin Dog' if a boy was thin; "Gray

Wolf' if he had a lock of gray hair. Xiao-her was called "Black Hoof'

because part of his name, her, means 'black," and also because he was

dark, and was swift at running errands, which was one of his duties, as

he was younger than most of the gang members.

At first the gangsters treated him as a revered guest, because they had

rarely known any high officials' children.

Gang members tended to come from poor families, and had often been

school dropouts before the Cultural Revolution. Their families were

not targets of the revolution, and they were not interested in it,

either.

Some boys sought to imitate the ways of the high officials' children,

disregarding the fact that the high officials had been toppled. In

284their Red Guard days, the high officials' children favored old

Communist army uniforms, as they were the only people who had access to

these through their parents. Some street boys got the old gear through

black-market trading, or dyed their clothes green. But they lacked the

haughty air of the elite, and their green was often not quite the right

shade. They were sneered at by high officials' children, as well as by

their own friends, as 'pseuds."

Later the high officials' children switched to wearing dark-blue

jackets and trousers. Although most of the population was wearing blue

at the time, theirs was a particular shade, and it was also unusual to

wear the same color top and bottom. After they had made this their

distinguishing sign, boys and girls from other backgrounds had to avoid

it, if they did not want to be treated as pseuds. The same went for a

certain kind of shoes: black cord uppers with white plastic soles and a

white plastic band showing in between.

Some gang members invented their own style. They wore many layers of

shirts under an outer garment, and turned out all their collars. The

more collars you named out, the smarter you were considered to be.

Often Xiao-her wore six or seven shirts under his jacket and two even

in the boiling summer heat. Jogging pants always had to show under

their shortened trousers. They also wore white sneakers without laces,

and sported army caps, with cardboard strips tucked inside to make the

peaks stick up so they looked imposing.

One of the main ways in which Xiao-her's 'brothers' occupied their

empty days was stealing. Whatever they got, their haul had to be

handed over to the helmsman to be divided up evenly among them.

Xiao-her was too afraid to steal anything, but his brothers gave him

his share without demur.

Theft was extremely widespread during the Cultural Revolution,

particularly pick pocketing and stealing bicycles. Most people I knew

had their pockets picked at least once. For me, shopping trips often

involved either losing my own purse or seeing someone yelling because

their purse had been stolen. The police, who had split into factions,

exercised only token surveillance.

When foreigners first came to China in large numbers in the 197os, many

were impressed by the 'moral cleanliness' of the society: a discarded

sock would follow its owner a thousand miles from Peking to Guangzhou,

cleaned and folded and placed in his hotel room. The visitors did not

realize that only foreigners and Chinese under close surveillance

received such attention, or that no one would dare to steal from

foreigners, because taking even a handkerchief was likely to be

punished by death. The clean folded sock bore no relation to the real

state of society: it was just part of the regime's theater.

Xiao-her's brothers were also obsessed with chasing gifts. The twelve-

and thirteen-year-olds like Xiao-her were often too shy to go after

gifts themselves, so they became the older boys' messengers, delivering

their error fiddled love letters. Xiao-her would knock on a door,

praying that it would be opened by the girl herself and not her father

or brother, who was sure to slap him across the head. Sometimes, when

fear got the upper hand, he would slip the letter under the door.

When a girl rejected a proposal, Xiao-her and other younger boys became

the tool of revenge of the spurned lover, making noises outside her

house and firing catapults at her window. When the girl came out, they

spat at her, swore at her, shook their middle fingers at her, and

285yelled dirty words which they did not fully understand. Abusive

Chinese terms for women are rather graphic: 'shuffle' (for the shape of

her genitals), 'horse saddle' (for the image of being mounted), over

spilling oil lamp' ('too frequent' discharge), and 'worn-out shoes'

(much 'used').

Some girls tried to find protectors in the gangs, and the more capable

ones became helms women themselves. The girls who became involved in

this male world sported their own picturesque sobriquets, like "Dewy

Black Peony," "Broken Wine Vessel,"

"Snake Enchantress."

The third major occupation of the gangs was fighting, at the slightest

provocation. Xiao-her was very excited by the fights, but much to his

regret, he was endowed with what he called 'a cowardly disposition." He

would run away at the first sign that a battle was turning ugly. Thanks

to his lack of bravado, he survived intact while many boys were

injured, even killed, in these pointless exchanges.

One afternoon, he and some of his brothers were loitering about as

usual when a member of the gang rushed over and said the home of a

brother had just been raided by another dock, and this brother had been

subjected to a 'bloodletting." They went back to their own 'dockyard'

to collect their weapons sticks, bricks, knives, wire whips, and

cudgels. Xiao-her tucked a three-section cudgel into his leather belt.

They ran to the house where the incident had occurred, but found that

their enemies had gone and their wounded brother had been taken to a

hospital by his family. Xiao-her's helmsman wrote a letter, peppered

with errors, throwing down the gauntlet to the other gang, and Xiao-her

was charged with delivering it.

The letter demanded a formal fight in the People's Sports Stadium,

where there was plenty of space. The stadium no longer hosted any kind

of sport now, competitive games having been condemned by Mao. Athletes

had to devote themselves to the Cultural Revolution.

On the appointed day, Xiao-her's gang of several dozen boys waited on

the running track. Two slow hours passed, then a man in his early

twenties limped into the stadium.

It was "Lame Man' Tang, a famous figure in the Chengdu underworld. In

spite of his relative youth, he was treated with the respect normally

reserved for the old.

Lame Man Tang had become lame from polio.

His

father had been a Kuomintang official, and so the son was allocated an

undesirable job in a small workshop located in his old family house,

which the Communists had confiscated. Employees in small units like

this did not enjoy the benefits available to workers in big factories,

such as guaranteed employment, free health services, and a pension.

His background had prevented Tang from going on to higher education,

but he was extremely bright, and became the defaao chief of the Chengdu

underworld. Now he had come at the request of the other dock, to ask

for a truce.

He produced several cartons of the best cigarettes and handed them

around. He delivered apologies from the other dock, and their promise

to foot the bills for the damaged house and the medical care.

286Xiao-her's helmsman accepted: it was impossible to say no to Lame Man

Tang.

Lame Man Tang was soon arrested. By the beginning of 1968, a new,

fourth stage of the Cultural Revolution had started. Phase One had

been the teenage Red Guards;

then came the Rebels and the attacks on capitalist-roaders;

the third phase had been the factional wars among the Rebels. Mao now

decided to halt the factional fighting. To bring about obedience, he

spread terror to show that no one was immune. A sizable part of the

hitherto unaffected population, including some Rebels, now became

victims.

New political campaigns were cranked up one after another to consume

new class enemies. The largest of these witch hunts "Clean Up the

Class Ranks," claimed Lame Man Tang. He was released after the end of

the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and in the early 1980s he became an

entrepreneur and a millionaire, one of the richest men in Chengdu. His

dilapidated family house was returned to him. He tore it down and

built a grand two-story edifice.

When the craze for discos hit China he was often to be seen sitting in

the most prominent spot, benignly watching the young boys and girls of

his entourage dancing while he slowly counted out a thick wad of bank

notes with emphatic, deliberate nonchalance, paying for the whole crowd

and reveling in his newfound power money.

The "Clean Up the Class Ranks' campaign ruined the lives of millions.

In one single case, the so-called Inner Mongolia People's Party affair,

some ten percent of the adult Mongolian population were subjected to

torture or physical maltreatment; at least twenty thousand died. This

particular campaign was modeled on pilot studies of six factories and

two universities in Peking, which were under Mao's personal

supervision. In a report on one of the six factories, the Xinhua

Printing Unit, there was a passage which read: "After this woman was

labeled a counterrevolutionary, one day when she was doing forced labor

and the guard turned his eyes away, she rushed up to the fourth floor

of the women's dormitory, jumped out of a window, and killed herself.

Of course, it is inevitable that counterrevolution ari should kill

themselves. But it is a pity that we now have one less "negative

example." Mao wrote on this report: "This is the best written of all

the similar reports I have read."

This and other campaigns were managed by the Revolutionary Committees

which were being set up all over the country. The Sichuan Provincial

Revolutionary Committee was established on 1 June 1968. Its leaders

were the same four people who had headed the Preparatory Committee the

two army chiefs and the Tings. The committee included the chiefs of

the two major Rebel camps, Red Chengdu and 26 August, and some

'revolutionary officials."

This consolidation of Mao's new power system had profound effects on my

family. One of the first results was a decision to withhold part of

the salaries of the capitalistroaders and only to leave each dependent

a small monthly cash allowance. Our family income was cut by more than

half. Although we were not starving, we could no longer afford to buy

from the black market, and the state supply of food was deteriorating

fast. The meat ration, for instance, was half a pound per person per

month. My grandmother worried and planned day and night to enable us

287children to eat better, and to produce food parcels for our parents in

detention.

The next decision of the Revolutionary Committee was to order all the

capitalist-roaders out of the compound to make room for the new

leaders. My family was assigned some rooms at the top of a three-story

house which had been the office of a now defunct magazine. There was

no running water or toilet on the top floor. We had to go downstairs

even to brush our teeth, or to pour away a cup of leftover tea. But I

did not mind, because the house was so elegant, and I was thirsty for

beautiful things.

Unlike our apartment in the compound, which was in a featureless cement

block, our new residence was a splendid brick-and-timber double-fronted

mansion with exquisitely framed reddish-brown colored windows under

gracefully curving eaves. The back garden was dense with mulberry

trees, and the front garden had a thick vine trellis, a grove of

oleander, a paper mulberry, and a huge nameless tree whose pepper like

fruit grew in little clusters inside the folds of its boat-shaped brown

and crispy leaves. I particularly loved the ornamental bananas and

their long arc of leaves, an unusual sight in a nontropical climate.

In those days, beauty was so despised that my family was sent to this

lovely house as a punishment. The main room was big and rectangular,

with a parquet floor. Three sides were glass, which made it

brilliantly light and on a clear day offered a panoramic view of the

distant snowy mountains of west Sichuan. The balcony was not made of

the usual cement, but of wood painted a reddish brown color, with

"Greek key' patterned railings. Another room which opened onto the

balcony had an unusually high, pointed ceiling about twenty feet in

height with exposed, faded scarlet beams. I fell in love with our new

residence at once.

Later I realized that in winter the rectangular room was a battlefield

of bitter winds from all directions through the thin glass, and dust

fell like rain from the high ceiling when the wind blew. Still, on a

calm night, lying in bed with the moonlight filtering through the

windows, and the shadow of the tall paper mulberry tree dancing on the

wall, I was filled with joy. I was so relieved to be out of the

compound and all its dirty politics that I hoped my family would never

go near it again.

I loved our new street as well. It was called Meteorite Street,

because hundreds of years before a meteorite had fallen there. The

street was paved with crushed cobblestones, which I much preferred to

the asphalt surface of the street outside the compound.

The only thing that reminded me of the compound was some of our

neighbors, who worked in my father's department and belonged to Mrs.

Shau's Rebels. When they looked at us it was with expressions of

steely rigidity, and on the rare, unavoidable occasions when we had to

communicate, they spoke to us in barks. One of them had been the

editor of the closed-down magazine, and his wife had been a

schoolteacher. They had a boy of six called Jo-jo, the same age as my

brother Xiao-fang. A minor government official, with a five-year-old

daughter, came to stay with them, and the three children often played

together in the garden. My grandmother was anxious about Xiao-fang

playing with them, but she dared not forbid him our neighbors might

interpret this as hostility toward Chairman Mao's Rebels.

At the foot of the wine-red spiral staircase which led to our rooms was

288a big half-moon-shaped table. In the old days, a huge porcelain vase

would have been placed on it with a bouquet of winter jasmine or peach

blossom. Now it was bare, and the three children often played on it.

One day, they were playing 'doctor': Jo-jo was the doctor, Xiao-fang a

nurse, and the five-year-old girl the patient.

She lay on her stomach on the table and pulled her skirt up for an

injection. Xiao-fang held a piece of wood from the back of a broken

chair as his 'needle." At this moment, the girl's mother came up the

sandstone steps onto the landing. She screamed and snatched her

daughter off the table.

She found a few scratches on the child's inner thigh.

Instead of taking her to a hospital, she fetched some Rebels from my

father's office a couple of streets away. A crowd soon marched into

the front garden. My mother, who happened to be home for a few days

from detention, was immediately seized. Xiao-fang was grabbed and

yelled at by the adults. They told him they would 'beat him to death'

if he refused to say who had taught him to 'rape the girl."

They tried to force him to say it was his elder brothers.

Xiao-fang was unable to say a word, even to cry. Jo-jo looked badly

scared. He cried and said it was he who had asked Xiao-fang to give

the injection. The little girl cried, too, saying she had not had her

injection. But the adults shouted at them to shut up, and continued to

hector Xiaofang. Eventually, at my mother's suggestion, the crowd,

jostling my mother and dragging Xiao-fang, stormed off to the Sichuan

People's Hospital.

As soon as they entered the outpatients' department, the angry mother

of the girl and the dramatically heated crowd started to make

accusations to the doctors, nurses, and the other patients: "The son of

a capitalist-roader has raped the daughter of a Rebel! The

capitalist-roader parents must be made to pay!" While the girl was

being examined in the doctor's room a young man in the corridor, a

complete stranger, shouted, "Why don't you grab the capitalistroader

parents and beat them to death?"

When the doctor finished examining the girl, she came out and announced

that there was absolutely no sign that the girl had been raped. The

scratches on her legs were not recent, and they could not have been

caused by Xiao-fang's piece of wood which, as she showed the crowd, was

painted and smooth. They were probably caused by climbing a tree. The

crowd dispersed, reluctantly.

That evening, Xiao-fang was delirious. His face was dark red and he

screamed and raved incoherently. The next day, my mother carried him

to a hospital, where a doctor gave him a large dose of tranquilizers.

After a few days he was well again, but he stopped playing with other

children. With this incident, he practically said goodbye to his

childhood at the age of six.

Our move to Meteorite Street had been left to the resources of my

grandmother and us five children. But by then we had the help of my

sister Xiao-hong's boyfriend, Cheng-yi.

Cheng-yi's father had been a minor official under the Kuomintang and

had not been able to get a proper job after 1949, partly because of his

289undesirable past and partly because he had TB and a gastric ulcer. He

did odd jobs like street cleaning and collecting the fees at a communal

water tap. During the famine he and his wife, who were living in

Chongqing, died from illnesses aggravated by starvation.

Cheng-yi was a worker in an airplane engine factory, and had met my

sister at the beginning of 1968. Like most people in the factory, he

was an inactive member of its major Rebel group, which was affiliated

with 26 August.

In those days, there was no entertainment, so most Rebel groups set up

their own song-and-dance troupes, which performed the few sanctioned

songs of Mao quotations and eulogies. Cheng-yi, who was a good

musician, was a member of one such troupe. Though she was not in the

factory, my sister, who loved dancing, joined it, together with Plumpie

and Ching-ching. She and Cheng-yi soon fell in love. The relationship

came under pressure from all sides: from his sister and his fellow

workers, who were worried 'that a liaison with a capitalist-roader

family would jeopardize his future; from our circle of high officials'

children, who scorned him for not being 'one of us," and from the

unreasonable me, who regarded my sister's desire to

live her own life as deserting our parents. But their love survived,

and sustained my sister through the following difficult years. I soon

came to like and respect Cheng-yi very much, as did all my family.

Because he wore glasses, we took to calling him "Specs."

Another musician from the troupe, a friend of Specs, was a carpenter

and the son of a truck driver. He was a jolly young man with a

spectacularly large nose which made him look somewhat un-Chinese. In

those days the only foreigners whose pictures we saw often were

Albanians, because tiny, faraway Albania was China's only ally even the

North Koreans were considered to be too decadent.

His friends nicknamed him "AI," short for "Albanian."

AI came with a cart to help us move to Meteorite Street.

Not wanting to overtax him, I suggested we leave some things behind.

But he wanted us to take everything. With a nonchalant smile, he

clenched his fists and proudly flexed his taut, bulging muscles. My

brothers poked the hard lumps with great admiration.

AI was very keen on Plumpie. The day after the move, he invited her,

Ching-ching, and me to lunch at his home, one of the common windowless

Chengdu houses with mud floors, which opened directly onto the

pavement. This was the first time I had been in one of these houses.

When we reached Al's street, I saw a group of young men hanging about

on the corner. Their eyes followed us as they said a pointed hello to

AI. He flushed with pride, and went over to talk to them. He came

back with an animated smile on his face. In a casual tone he said, "I

told them you were high officials' children, and that I had made

friends with you so I could lay my hands on privileged goods when the

Cultural Revolution is over."

I was stunned. First, what he said seemed to suggest that people

thought officials' children had access to consumer goods, which was not

the case. Second, I was amazed at his obvious pleasure at being

associated with us, and the prestige this clearly gave him in the eyes

of his friends. At the moment when my parents were in detention and we

had just been thrown out of the compound, when the Sichuan

290Revolutionary Committee had been established and the capitalist-roaders

had been ousted, when the Cultural Revolution seemed to have won, AI

and his friends still apparently took it for granted that officials

like my parents would come back.

I was to encounter a similar attitude again and again.

Whenever I went out of the imposing gate of our courtyard, I was always

aware of the stares from people on Meteorite Street, stares which were

a mixture of curiosity and awe.

It was clear to me that the general public regarded the Revolutionary

Committees, rather than the capitalistroaders, as transient.

In the autumn of 1968 a new type of team came to take over my school;

they were called "Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams." Made up of

soldiers or workers who had not been involved in factional fighting,

their task was to restore order. In my school, as in all others, the

team recalled all the pupils who had been in the school when the

Cultural Revolution started two years before, so they could be kept

under control. Those few who were out of the city were tracked down

and summoned back by telegram. Few dared to stay away.

Back at school, the teachers who had not fallen victim did no teaching.

They did not dare. The old textbooks had all been condemned as

'bourgeois poison," and nobody was brave enough to write new ones. So

we just sat in classes reciting Mao's articles and reading People's

Daily editorials.

We sang songs of Mao's quotations, or gathered to dance 'loyalty

dances," gyrating and waving our Little Red Books.

Making 'loyalty dances' compulsory was one of the major orders issued

by the Revolutionary Committees throughout China. This absurd twisting

was mandatory everywhere:

in schools and factories, on the streets, in shops, on railway

My Siblings and~r Friends 5o3 platforms, even in hospitals for the

patients who could still move.

On the whole, the propaganda team sent to my school was fairly benign.

Others were not. The one at Chengdu University was hand-picked by the

Tings because the university had been the headquarters of their enemy

Red Chengdu. Yan and Yong suffered more than most. The Tings

instructed the propaganda team to put pressure on them to condemn my

father. They refused. They later told my mother that they so admired

my father's courage that they decided to take a stand.

By the end of 1968, all university students in China had been summarily

'graduated' en masse, without any exam, assigned jobs, and dispersed to

every corner of the land.

Yan and Yong were warned that if they did not denounce my father, they

would have no future. But they stuck to their guns. Yan was sent to a

small coal mine in the mountains of east Sichuan. This was just about

the worst job possible; the work conditions were extremely primitive

and there were virtually no safety measures. Women, like men, had to

crawl down the pit on all fours to drag the coal baskets out. Yan's

fate was partly the result of the twisted rhetoric of the time: Mme Mao

had been insisting on women doing the same kind of work as men, and one

291of the slogans of the day was Mao's saying "Women can hold up half the

sky." But women knew that when they were given the privilege of this

equality they were in for hard physical labor.

Immediately after the expulsion of university students, middle-school

pupils like me discovered that we were to be exiled to faraway rural

and mountainous areas to do backbreaking farm labor. Mao intended me

to spend the rest of my life as a peasant.

22. "Thought Reform through Labor'-To the Edge of the Himahyas

(January-June 1909)

In i 969 my parents, my sister, my brother Jin-ming, and I were

expelled from Chengdu one after another, and sent to distant parts of

the Sichuan wilderness. We were among millions of urban dwellers to be

exiled to the countryside.

In this way, young people would not be roaming the cities with nothing

to do, creating trouble out of sheer boredom, and adults like my

parents would have a 'future." They were part of the old

administration which had been replaced by Mao's Revolutionary

Committees, and packing them off to the sticks to do hard labor was a

convenient solution.

According to Mao's rhetoric, we were sent to the countryside 'to be

reformed." Mao advocated 'thought reform through labor' for everyone,

but never explained the relationship between the two. Of course, no

one asked for clarification. Merely to contemplate such a question was

tantamount to treason. In reality, everyone in China knew that hard

labor, particularly in the countryside, was always punishment. It was

noticeable that none of Mao's

To the Edge of the Himalayas 505 henchmen, the members of the newly

established Revolutionary Committees, army officers and very few of

their children had to do it.

The first of us to be expelled was my father. Just after New Year 1969

he was sent to Miyi County in the region of Xichang, on the eastern

edge of the Himalayas, an area so remote that it is China's satellite

launch base today. It lies about 300 miles from Chengdu, four days'

journey by truck, as there was no railway. In ancient times, the area

was used for dumping exiles, because its mountains and waters were said

to be permeated with a mysterious 'evil air." In today's terms, the

'evil air' was subtropical diseases.

A camp was set up there to accommodate the former staff of the

provincial government. There were thousands of such camps throughout

China. They were called 'cadres' schools," but apart from the fact

that they were not schools, they were not just for officials either.

Writers, scholars, scientists, teachers, doctors, and actors who had

become 'useless' in Mao's know-nothing new order were also dispatched

there.

Among officials, it was not only capitalist-roaders like my father and

other class enemies who were packed off to the camps. Most of their

Rebel colleagues were also expelled, as the new Sichuan Revolutionary

Committee could not accommodate anything like all of them, having

filled its posts with Rebels from other backgrounds like workers and

students, and with army men.

"Thought reform through labor' became a handy way of dealing with the

292surplus Rebels. In my father's depa,iment only a few stayed in

Chengdu. Mrs. Shau became deputy director of Public Affairs on the

Sichuan Revolutionary Committee.

All Rebel organizations were now disbanded.

The 'cadres' schools' were not concentration camps or gulags, but they

were isolated places of detention where the inmates had restricted

freedom and had to do hard labor under strict supervision. Because

every cultivable area in China is densely populated, only in arid or

moun 506 "Thought Reform through Labor' tai nous areas was there space

to contain the exiles from the cities. The inmates were supposed to

produce food and be self supporting. Although they were still paid

salaries, there was lit He for them to buy. Life was very harsh.

In order to prepare for his trip, my father was released from his place

of detention in Chengdu a few days before his departure. The only

thing he wanted to do was to see my mother. She was still being

detained, and he thought he might never see her again. He wrote to the

Revolutionary Committee, as humbly as he could, begging to be allowed

to see her. His request was turned down.

The cinema in which my mother was being kept was on what used to be the

busiest shopping street in Chengdu.

Now the shops were half empty, but the black market for semiconductor

parts which my brother Jin-ming frequented was nearby, and he sometimes

saw my mother walking along the street in a line of detainees, carrying

a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. The canteen in the cinema did not

operate every day, so the detainees had to go out for their meals from

time to time. Jin-ming's discovery meant we could sometimes see our

mother by waiting on the street. Occasionally she did not appear with

the other detainees, and we would be consumed by anxiety. We did not

know that those were the times when her psychopath guard was punishing

her by denying her permission to go and eat. But perhaps the next day

we would catch sight of her, one among a dozen or so silent and

grim-looking men and women, their heads bowed, all wearing white

armbands with four sinister black characters: 'ox devil, snake

demon."

I took my father to the street for several days running, and we waited

there from dawn fill lunchtime. But there was no sign of her. We

would walk up and down, stamping our feet on the frost-covered pavement

to keep warm. One morning, we were again watching the thick fog lift

to reveal the lifeless cement buildings, when my mother appeared.

Having seen her children many times on the street, she

To the Edge of the Himalayas 5o7 looked up quickly to see whether we

were there this time Her eyes met my father's. Their lips quivered,

but no sounds came out. They just locked eyes until the guard shouted

at my mother to lower her head. Long after she had turned the corner,

my father stood gazing after her.

A couple of days later, my father was gone. Despite his calm and

reserve, I detected signs his nerves were on the verge of snapping. I

was desperately worried that he might go out of his mind again,

particularly now that he had to suffer his physical and mental torment

in solitude, without his family nearby. I resolved to go and keep him

company soon, but it was extremely difficult to find transport to Miyi,

as public services to such remote areas were paralyzed. So when I was

293told some days later that my school was being dispatched to a place

called Ningnan, which was only about fifty miles from his camp, I was

delighted.

In January 1969, every middle school in Chengdu was sent to a rural

area somewhere in Sichuan. We were to live in villages among the

peasants and be 'reeducated' by them. What exactly they were supposed

to educate us in was not made specific, but Mao always maintained that

people with some education were inferior to illiterate peasants, and

needed to reform to be more like them. One of his sayings was:

"Peasants have dirty hands and cowshitsodden feet, but they are much

cleaner than intellectuals."

My school and my sister's were full of children of capitalist-roaders,

so they were sent to particularly godforsaken places. None of the

children of members of the Revolutionary Committees went. They joined

the armed services, which was the only, and much cushier, alternative

to the countryside. Starting at this time, one of the clearest signs

of power was for one's children to be in the army.

Altogether, some fifteen million young people were sent to the country

in what was one of the largest population movements in history. It was

an indication of the order within the chaos that this was swiftly and

supremely well organized. Everyone was given a subsidy to help buy

extra clothes, quilts, sheets, suitcases, mosquito nets, and plastic

sheets for wrapping up bedrolls. Minute attention was paid to such

details as providing us with sneakers, water cans, and torches. Most

of these things had to be manufactured specially, as they were not

available in the poorly stocked shops. Those from poor families could

apply for extra financial help. For the first year we were to be

provided by the state with pocket money and food rations, including

rice, cooking oil, and meat. These were to be collected from the

village to which we were assigned.

Since the Great Leap Forward, the countryside had been organized into

communes, each of which grouped together a number of villages and could

contain anywhere from 2,000 to 20,000 households. Under the commune

came production brigades which, in turn, governed several production

teams. A production team was roughly equivalent to a village, and was

the basic unit of rural life. In my school, up to eight pupils were

assigned to each production team, and we were allowed to choose with

whom we wanted to form a group. I chose my friends from Plumpie's

form. My sister chose to go with me instead of with her school: we

were allowed to opt to go to a place with a relative. My brother

Jin-ming, though he was in the same school as I, stayed in Chengdu

because he was not yet sixteen, which was the cutoff age. Plumpie did

not go either, because she was an only child.

I looked forward to Ningnan. I had had no real experience of physical

hardship and lit He appreciated what it meant. I imagined an idyllic

environment where there was no politics. An official had come from

Ningnan to talk to us, and he had described the subtropical climate

with its high blue sky, huge red hibiscus flowers, foot-long bananas,

and the Golden Sand River the upper part of the Yangtze shining in the

bright sun, rippled by gentle breezes.

I was living in a world of gray mist and black wall slogans, and

sunshine and tropical vegetation were like a dream to

?

294~v me. Listening to the official, I pictured myself in a mountain of

blossoms with a golden fiver at my feet. He mentioned the mysterious

'evil air' which I had read about in classical literature, but even

that added a touch of ancient eroticism. Danger existed for me only in

political campaigns.

I was also eager to go because I thought it would be easy to visit my

father. But I failed to notice that between us lay pathless mountains

10,000 feet high. I have never been much good at maps.

On 27 January 1969, my school set off for Ningnan.

Each pupil was allowed to take one suitcase and a bedroll.

We were loaded into trucks, about three dozen of us in each. There

were only a few seats; most of us sat on our bedrolls or on the floor.

The column of trucks bumped up and down country roads for three days

before we reached the border of Xichang. We passed through the Chengdu

Plain and the mountains along the eastern edge of the Himalayas, where

the trucks had to put on chains. I tried to sit near the back so I

could watch the dramatic snow showers and hail which whitened the

universe, and which almost instantly cleared into turquoise sky and

dazzling sunshine. This tempestuous beauty left me speechless. In the

distance to the west rose a peak almost 25,000 feet high, beyond which

lay the ancient wilderness in which were born many of the world's

flora. I only realized when I came to the West that such everyday

sights as rhododendrons, chrysanthemums, most roses, and many other

flowers came from here. It was still inhabited by pandas.

The second evening we entered a place called Asbestos County, named

after its major product. Somewhere in the mountains, our convoy

stopped so we could use the toilets two mud huts containing round

communal pits covered with maggots. But if the sight inside the toilet

was revolting, the one outside was horrifying. The faces of the

workers were ashen, the color of lead, and devoid of any animation.

Terrified, I asked a nice propaganda team man, Dong-an,

5xo "Thought RqCorrn through Labor' who was taking us to our

destination, who these zombie like people were. Convicts from a

lao-gai ('reform through labor') camp, he replied. Because asbestos

mining was highly noxious, it was mainly done by forced labor, with few

safety or health precautions. This was my first, and only, encounter

with China's gulag.

On the fifth day, the truck unloaded us at a granary at the top of a

mountain. Propaganda publicity had led me to expect a ceremony with

people beating drums and pinning red paper flowers on the new arrivals

with great fanfare, but all that happened was that a commune official

came to meet us at the grain station. He made a speech of welcome in

the stilted jargon of the newspapers. A couple of dozen peasants were

there to help us with our bedrolls and suitcases. Their faces were

blank and inscrutable, and their speech was unintelligible to me.

My sister and I walked to our new home with the two other girls and

four boys who made up our group. The four peasants who carried some of

our luggage walked in complete silence, and did not seem to understand

the questions we put to them. We fell into silence, too. For hours we

trekked in single file, deeper and deeper into the great universe of

dark-green mountains. But I was far too exhausted to notice their

beauty. Once, after I had been struggling to support myself against a

295rock to catch my breath, I looked around, into the distance. Our group

seemed so insignificant amid the vast, boundless mountain world, with

no roads, no houses, and no other human beings in sight, only the wind

soughing through the forests, and the purling of hidden streams. I

felt I was disappearing into a hushed, alien wilderness.

At dusk, we arrived at the lightless village. There was no

electricity, and oil was too precious to be wasted if it was not

completely dark. People stood by their doors and stared at us with

open-mouthed blankness; I did not know flit denoted interest or

indifference. It was stares like these which many foreigners

encountered in China after it was first opened in the 197OS. Indeed,

we were like foreigners to the peasants and they to us.

The village had prepared a residence for us, made of timber and mud and

comprising two big rooms one for the four boys, and one for the four

girls. A corridor led to the village hall, where a brick stove had

been built for us to cook on.

I fell exhausted onto the hard plank of wood that was the bed I was to

share with my sister. Some children followed us, making excited

noises. They now started banging on our door, but when we opened it

they would scamper away, only to reappear to rap on the door again.

They peeped into our window, which was just a square hole in the wall,

with no shutter, and screamed odd noises. At first we smiled and

invited them in, but our friendliness met no response. I was desperate

for a wash. We nailed an old shirt onto the window frame as a curtain

and began to dip our towels into the freezing water in our washbasins.

I tried to ignore the children's giggles as they repeatedly flipped up

the 'curtain." We had to keep our padded jackets on while we washed.

One of the boys in our group acted as leader and liaison with the

villagers. We had a few days, he told us, to get all our daily

necessities like water, kerosene, and firewood organized; after that we

would have to start working in the fields.

Everything at Ningnan was done manually, the way it had been for at

least 2,000 years. There was no machinery and no draft animals,

either. The peasants were too short of food to be able to afford any

for horses or donkeys. For our arrival the villagers had filled a

round earthenware water tank for us. The next day I realized how

precious every drop was. To get water, we had to climb for thirty

minutes up narrow paths to the well, carrying a pair of wooden barrels

on a shoulder pole. They weighed ninety pounds when they were full. My

shoulders ached agonizingly even when they were empty. I was vastly

relieved when the boys gallantly declared

that fetching water was their job.

They cooked, too, as three out of us four girls, me included, had never

cooked in our lives, having come from the kind of families we did. Now

I began to learn to cook the hard way. The grain came un husked and

had to be put into a stone mortar and beaten with all one's might with

a heavy pestle. Then the mixture had to be poured into a big shallow

bamboo basket, which was swung with a particular movement of the arms

so that the light shells gathered on top and could be scooped away,

leaving the rice behind. After a couple of minutes my arms became

unbearably sore and soon were shaking so much I could not pick up the

basket. It was an exhausting battle for every meal.

Then we had to collect fuel. It was two hours' walk to the woods

designated by the forest protection regulations as the area where we

296could collect firewood. We were only allowed to chop small branches,

so we climbed up the short pines and slashed ferociously with our

knives. The logs were bundled together and carried on our backs. I

was the youngest in our group, so I only had to carry a basket of

feathery pine needles. The journey home was another couple of hours,

up and down mountain paths. I was so exhausted when I got back that I

felt my load must weigh 140 pounds at least. I could not believe my

eyes when I put my basket on the scales: it came to only five pounds.

This would burn up in no lime: it was not enough even to boil a wok of

water.

On one of the first trips to gather fuel, I tore the seat of my

trousers getting down from a tree. I was so embarrassed I hid in the

woods and came out last so no one could walk behind me and see. The

boys, who were all perfect gentlemen, kept insisting I should go in

front so they would not walk too fast for me. I had to repeat many

times that I was happy to go last, and that I was not just being

polite.

To the Edge of the Himalayas 513 Even going to the toilet was no easy

job. It involved climbing down a steep, slippery slope to a deep pit

next To the goaffold. One always had either one's bottom or one's head

toward the goats, who were keen to butt at intruders.

I was so nervous I could not move my bowels for days.

Once out of the goat fold it was a struggle to clamber up the slope

again. Every time I came back I had new bruises on me somewhere.

On our first day working with the peasants, I was assigned to carry

goat droppings and manure from our toilet up to the tiny fields which

had just been burned free of bushes and grass. The ground was now

covered by a layer of plant ash that, together with the goat and human

excrement, was to fertilize the soil for the spring plowing, which was

done manually.

I loaded the heavy basket on my back and desperately crawled up the

slope on all fours. The manure was fairly dry, but still some of it

began to soak through onto my cotton jacket and through to my underwear

and my back.

It also slopped over the top of the basket and seeped into my hair.

When I finally arrived at the field I saw the peasant women skillfully

unloading by bending their waists sideways and tilting the baskets in

such a way that the contents poured out. But I could not make mine

pour. In my desperation to get rid of the weight on my back I tried to

take the basket off. I slipped my right arm out of its strap, and

suddenly the basket lurched with a tremendous pull to the left, taking

my left shoulder with it. I fell to the ground into the manure. Some

time later, a friend dislocated her knee like this. I only strained my

waist slightly.

Hardship was part of the 'thought reform." In theory, it was to be

relished, as it brought one closer to becoming a new person, more like

the peasants. Before the Cultural Revolution, I had subscribed

wholeheartedly to this naive attitude, and had deliberately done hard

work in order to make myself a better person. Once in the spring of x

966 my form was helping with some roadwork. The girls were asked to do

light jobs like separating out stones which were then broken up by the

boys. I offered to do the boys' work and ended up with horribly

297swollen arms from crushing stones with a huge sledgehammer which I

could hardly lift. Now, scarcely three years later, my indoctrination

was collapsing. With the psychological support of blind belief gone, I

found myself hating the hardship in the mountains of Ningnan. It

seemed utterly pointless.

I developed a serious skin rash as soon as I arrived. For over three

years this rash recurred the moment I was in the country, and no

medicine seemed able to cure it. I was tormented by itchiness day and

night, and could not stop myself from scratching. Within three weeks

of star fng my new life I had several sores running with pus, and my

legs were swollen from infections. I was also hit by diarrhea and

vomiting. I was hatefully weak and sick all the time when I needed

physical strength most, and the commune clinic was thirty-odd miles

away.

I soon came to the conclusion that I had lit He chance of visiting my

father from Ningnan. The nearest proper road was a day's hard walk

away, and even when one got there, there was no public transport.

Trucks were few and far between, and they were extremely unlikely to be

going from where I was to Miyi. Fortunately, the propaganda team man,

Dong-an, came to our village to check that we were settled in all

right, and when he saw I was ill he kindly suggested I should go back

to Chengdu for treatment. He was returning with the last of the trucks

which had brought us to Ningnan. Twenty-six days after I had arrived,

I set off back to Chengdu.

As I was leaving I realized that I had hardly got to know the peasants

in our village. My only acquaintance was the village accountant who,

being the most educated man around, came to see us often to claim some

intellectual kinship. His home was the only one I had been in, and

what I remember most were the suspicious stares on his young wife's

weather-beaten face. She was cleaning the bloody intestines of a pig,

and had a silent baby on her back. When I said hello, she shot me an

indifferent look and did not return my greeting. I felt alien and

awkward, and soon left.

In the few days I actually worked with the villagers, I had lit He

spare energy and did not talk to them properly.

They seemed remote, uninterested, separated

Ningnan mountains. I knew we were supposed

them, as my friends and my sister, who were

in the evenings, but I was exhausted, sick,

from me by the impenetrable

to make the effort to visit

in better shape, were doing

and itchy all the time.

Besides, visiting them would have meant that I was resigned to making

the best of my life there. And I subconsciously refused to settle for

a life as a peasant. Without spelling it out to myself, I rejected the

life Mao had assigned to me.

When the time came for me to leave, I suddenly missed the extraordinary

beauty of Ningnan. I had not appreciated the mountains properly when I

was struggling with life there. Spring had come early, in February,

and golden winter jasmines shone beside the icicles hanging from the

pines. The brooks in the valleys formed one crystal-clear pool after

another, dotted around which were fancifully shaped rocks. The

reflections in the water were of gorgeous clouds, canopies of stately

trees, and the nameless blossoms that elegantly wriggled out of the

cracks in the rocks. We washed clothes in those heavenly pools, and

spread them on the rocks to dry in the sunshine and the crisp air. Then

we would lie down on the grass and listen to the vibration of the pine

298forests in the breeze. I would marvel at the slopes of distant

mountains opposite us, covered with wild peach trees, and imagine the

masses of pink in a few weeks' time.

When I reached Chengdu, after four interminable days of being thrown

about in the back of an empty truck, with constant stomach pains and

diarrhea, I went straight to the

5 x6 "Thought Rqbrm through Labor' clinic attached to the compound.

Injections and tablets cured me in no time. Like the canteen, the

clinic was still open to my family. The Sichuan Revolutionary

Committee was split and second-rate: it had not managed to organize a

functioning administration. It had not even got around to issuing

regulations concerning many aspects of everyday life. As a result, the

system was full of holes; many of the old ways continued, and people

were largely left to their own devices. The managements of the canteen

and the clinic did not refuse to serve us, so we went on enjoying the

facilities.

in addition to the Western injections and pills prescribed at the

clinic, my grandmother said I needed Chinese medicines. One day she

came home with a chicken and some roots of membranous milk vetch and

Chinese angelica, which were considered very bu (healing), and made a

soup for me into which she sprinkled finely chopped spring onions.

These ingredients were unavailable in the shops, and she had hobbled

for miles to buy them in a country black market.

My grandmother was unwell herself. Sometimes I saw her lying on her

bed, which was extremely unusual for her;

she had always been so energetic I had hardly ever seen her sit still

for a minute. Now her eyes were shut tight and she bit her lips hard,

which made me feel she must be in great pain. But when I asked her

what the matter was, she would say it was nothing, and she continued

collecting medicines and standing in line to get food for me.

I was soon much better. As there was no authority to order me to

return to Ningnan, I began to plan a trip to see my father. But then a

telegram came from Yibin saying that my aunt Jun-ying, who had been

looking after my youngest brother, Xiao-fang, was seriously ill. I

thought I should go and take care of them.

Aunt Jun-ying and my father's other relations in Yibin had been very

kind to my family, in spite of the fact that my father had broken the

deep-rooted Chinese tradition of looking after one's relatives. By

tradition, it was considered the filial duty of a son to prepare for

his mother a heavy wooden coffin with many layers of paint, and to

provide a grand and often financially crippling- funeral.

But the government strongly encouraged cremation to save land and

simpler funerals. When his mother died in 1958, my father was not told

until after the funeral, because his family was worried that he would

object to the burial and the elaborate service. After we moved to

Chengdu his family hardly ever visited us.

However, when my father fell into trouble in the Cultural Revolution,

they came to see us and offered their help. Aunt Jun-ying, who had

been traveling frequently between Chengdu and Yibin, eventually took

Xiao-fang under her care to relieve my grandmother of some of her

burden. She shared a house with my father's youngest sister, but had

also selflessly given up half of her part to the family of a distant

299relative who had had to abandon their own dilapidated lodgings.

When I arrived, my aunt was sitting in a wicker easy chair by the front

door to the hall, which served as the sitting room. In the place of

honor lay a huge coffin made of heavy, dark-red wood. This coffin, her

own, was her only indulgence. The sight of my aunt overwhelmed me with

sadness. She had just had a stroke, and her legs were half-paralyzed.

Hospitals were working only sporadically.

With no one to repair them, facilities had broken down and the supply

of medicine was erratic. The hospitals had told Aunt Jun-ying there

was nothing they could do for her, so she stayed at home.

What my aunt found most traumatic were her bowel movements. After

eating, she felt unbearably bloated, but she could not relieve herself

without great agony. Her relatives' formulas helped sometimes, but

more often failed. I massaged her stomach frequently, and once, when

she felt desperate and asked me to, I even put my finger into her anus

to try to scratch out the excrement. All these remedies only gave her

momentary relief. As a result, she did not dare to eat much. She was

terribly weak, and would sit in the wicker chair in the hall for hours,

gazing at the papaya and banana trees in the back garden. She never

complained. Only once did she say to me in a gentle whisper, "I'm so

very hungry. I wish I could eat..."

She could no longer walk without help, and even sitting up required a

great effort. To prevent her getting bedsores, I would sit beside her

so she could lean on me. She said I was a good nurse and that I must

be tired and bored sitting there. No matter how much I insisted, she

would only sit for a brief period every day, so that I could 'go out

and have some fun."

Of course, there was no fun outside. I longed for something to read.

But apart from the four volumes of The Seleaed Works of Mao Zedong, all

I discovered in the house was a dictionary. Everything else had been

burned. I occupied myself with studying the 15,000 characters in it,

learning the ones I did not know by heart.

I spent the rest of my time looking after my seven-year old brother,

Xiao-fang, and took long walks with him.

Sometimes he got bored and demanded things like a toy gun or the

charcoal-colored sweets that were on lonely display in the shops. But

I had no money our basic allowance was small. Xiao-fang, at seven,

could not understand this, and would throw himself on the dusty ground,

kicking, yelling, and tearing my jacket. I would crouch and coax and

eventually, at my wits' end, start crying as well.

At this, he would stop and make up with me.

exhausted.

We would both go home

Yibin was a very atmospheric town, even in the middle of the Cultural

Revolution. The waving rivers and serene hills, and the hazy horizon

beyond, produced a sense of eternity in me, and soothed me temporarily

from the miseries all around. When dusk fell, the posters and

loudspeakers all over the city were obscured, and the unlit back lanes

were enveloped in mist, broken only by the flickering of oil lamps

seeping through the cracks between the frames of the doors and the

windows. From time to time, there was a bright patch: a small food

stall was open. There was not much for sale, but there would be a

square wooden table on the pavement, with four long narrow benches

300around it, all dark brown and shiny from years of rubbing and sitting.

On the table would be a tiny pea-shaped spark - a lamp that burned

rapeseed oil. There was never anyone sitting at these tables chatting,

but the owner kept the stall open. In the old days, it would have been

crowded with people gossiping and drinking the local 'five-grained

liquor," accompanied by marinated beef, soy-stewed pig's tongue, and

salt-and-pepper roasted peanuts. The empty stalls evoked for me a

Yibin in the days when life had not been completely taken over by

politics.

Once out of the back lanes, my ears were assaulted by loudspeakers. For

up to eighteen hours a day the town center was a perpetual hubbub of

chanting and denouncing. Quite apart from the content, the noise level

was unbearable, and I had to develop a technique of forcing myself to

hear nothing to preserve my sanity.

One evening in April, a broadcast suddenly caught my attention.

Party Congress had been convened in Peking.

A

As usual, the Chinese people were not told what this most important

assembly of their 'representatives' was actually doing. A new top

leadership team was announced. My heart sank as I heard that the new

organization of the Cultural Revolution was confirmed.

This Congress, the Ninth, marked the formal establishment of Mao's

personal power system. Few senior leaders from the previous Congress,

in 1956, had made it to this one. Out of seventeen Politburo members,

only four Mao, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, and Li Xiannian were still in

office. All the rest, apart from those already dead, had been

denounced and ousted. Some of these were soon to die.

President Liu Shaoqi, the number-two man at the

Eighth Congress, had been under detention since 1967, and was

ferociously beaten at denunciation meetings. He was denied medicine

for both his long-term illness, diabetes, and his newly caught

pneumonia, and was given treatment only when he was on the brink of

death because Mme Mao explicitly ordered that he be kept alive so the

Ninth Congress would 'have a living target." At the Congress the

verdict that he was 'a criminal traitor, enemy agent, and scab in the

service of the imperialists, modern revisionists [Russians], and the

Kuomintang reactionaries' was read by Zhou Enlai. After the Congress,

Liu was allowed to die, in agony.

Marshal Ho Lung, another former Politburo member and a founder of the

Communist army, died scarcely two months after the Congress. Because

he had wielded power in the army, he was subjected to two and a half

years of slow torture, which, he said to his wife, was 'intended to

destroy my health so they can murder me without spilling my blood." The

torment included allowing him only a small can of water every day

during the boiling summer, cutting off all heating during the winter,

when the temperature remained well below zero for months on end, and

denying him medicine for his diabetes. In the end, he died after a

large dose of glucose was administered when his diabetes got worse.

Tao Zhu, the Politburo member who had helped my mother at the start of

the Cultural Revolution, was detained under inhuman conditions for

nearly three years, which destroyed his health. He was denied proper

treatment until his gallbladder cancer was far advanced and Zhou Enlai

sanctioned an operation. But the windows in his hospital room were

permanently blacked out with newspapers, and his family was not allowed

301to see him at his deathbed or after his death.

Marshal Peng Dehuai died of the same kind of drawn out torment, which

in his case lasted eight years, until 1974. His last request was to

see the trees and the daylight outside his newspaper-covered hospital

windows, and it was turned down.

These and many similar persecutions were typical of Mao's methods in

the Cultural Revolution. Instead of signing death warrants Mao would

simply indicate his intentions, and some people would volunteer to

carry out the tormenting and improvise the gruesome details. Their

methods included mental pressure, physical brutality, and denial of

medical care or even the use of medicine to kill. Death caused in this

way came to have a special term in Chinese: po-had zhi-si - 'persecuted

to death." Mao was fully aware of what was happening, and would

encourage the perpetrators by giving his 'silent consent' (mo-xu). This

enabled him to get rid of his enemies without attracting blame. The

responsibility was inescapably his, but not his alone. The tormentors

took some initiative. Mao's subordinates were always on the lookout

for ways to please him by anticipating his wishes and, of course, to

indulge their own sadistic tendencies.

The horrible details of the persecutions of many top leaders were not

revealed until years later. When they came out, they surprised no one

in China. We knew all too many similar cases from our own

experience.

As I stood in the crowded square listening to the broadcast, the new

Central Committee was read out. With dread I waited for the names of

the Tings. And there they were - Liu Jie-ting and Zhang Xi-ting. Now

I felt there was to be no end to my family's suffering.

Shortly afterward a telegram came saying my grandmother had collapsed

and taken to her bed. She had never done anything like this before.

Aunt Jun-ying urged me to go home and look after her. Xiao-fang and I

took the next train back to Chengdu.

My grandmother was approaching her sixtieth birthday, and her stoicism

had at last been conquered by pain. She felt it piercing and moving

all over her body, then concentrating in her ears. The doctors at the

compound clinic said it might be nerves, and that they had no cure for

it except that she should maintain a cheerful mood. I took her to a

hospital half an hour's walk from Meteorite Street.

Ensconced in their chauffeur-driven cars, the new holders of power felt

little concern for how ordinary people had to live. Buses were not

running in Chengdu, as they were not considered vital to the

revolution, and pedicabs had been banned, on the grounds that they

exploited labor.

My grandmother could not walk because of the intense pain. She had to

sit on the luggage rack of a bicycle, with a cushion on it, holding on

to the seat. I pushed the bicycle, Xiao-her propped her up, and

Xiao-fang sat on the crossbar.

The hospital was still working, thanks to the professionalism and

dedication of some of the staff. On its brick walls, I saw huge

slogans from their more militant colleagues accusing them of 'using

work to suppress revolution' - a standard accusation for people

sticking to their jobs. The doctor we saw had twitching eyelids and

black rings under her eyes, and I guessed she must be exhausted by the

302throngs of patients, in addition to the political attacks she was

having to endure. The hospital was bursting at the seams with

grim-looking men and women, some with bruised faces, others with broken

ribs lying on stretchers victims of denunciation meetings.

None of the doctors could diagnose what was wrong with my grandmother.

There was no X-ray machine or any other instrument to examine her

properly. They were all broken. My grandmother was given various

painkillers.

When these failed to work, she was admitted to the hospital. The wards

were crowded, the beds jammed right up against each other. Even the

corridors were lined with beds. The few nurses rushing from ward to

ward could not manage to look after all the patients, so I decided to

stay with my grandmother.

I went home and got some utensils so I could cook for her there. I

also brought a bamboo mattress which I spread under her bed. At night

I was constantly awakened by her groaning, and I would climb out from

under my thin quilt and massage her, which soothed her temporarily.

From under the bed, the room smelled intensely of urine. Everyone's

chamber pot was placed next to the bed. My grandmother was very fussy

about cleanliness, and she would insist on getting up and going to the

toilet down the corridor even at night. But the other patients did not

bother, and often the chamber pots were not emptied for days. The

nurses were too busy to attend to such details.

The window by my grandmother's bed looked out over the front garden. It

was overgrown with weeds, and its wooden benches were collapsing. The

first time I looked out at it, several children were busy trying to

break off the few branches of a small magnolia tree that still had one

or two flowers on them. Adults walked by indifferently.

Vandalism against trees had become too much a part of everyday life to

attract any attention.

One day, from the open window, I saw Bing, a friend of mine, getting

off his bicycle. My heart started to leap, and my face suddenly felt

hot. I quickly checked in the windowpane. To look into a real mirror

in public was to invite condemnation as a 'bourgeois element." I was

wearing a pink-and-white checked jacket, a pattern that had just been

allowed for young women's clothing. Long hair was permissible again,

but only in two plaits, and I would dither for hours over how I should

do mine: Should they be close together or far apart? Straight, or

curved a lit He at the ends? Should the plaited part be longer than

the loose part, or vice versa? The decisions, all minute, were

endless. There were no state regulations about hairstyles or clothes.

It was what everyone else was wearing that determined the rules of the

day. And because the range was so narrow, people were always looking

out for the tiniest variations. It was a real test of ingenuity to

look different and attractive, and yet similar enough to every body

else so that nobody with an accusing finger could pinpoint what exactly

was heretical.

I was still wondering how I looked when Bing walked into the ward. His

appearance was nothing out of the ordinary, but a certain air set him

apart. He had a touch of cynicism, which was rare in those humorless

years. I was very much drawn to him. His father had been a

departmental director in the pre-Cultural Revolution provincial

government, but Bing was different from most other high officials'

children.

303"Why should I be

succeeded in not

He was the first

inquisitive mind

who first opened

sent to the countryside?" he said, and actually

going by obtaining an 'incurable illness' certificate.

person to show me a free intelligence, an ironic,

which did not take anything for granted. It was he

up the taboo areas in my mind.

Up to now, I had shunned any love relationship. My devotion to my

family, which had been intensified by adversity, overshadowed every

other emotion. Although within me there had always been another being,

a sexual being, yearning to get out, I had succeeded in keeping it

locked in. Knowing Bing pulled me to the brink of an entanglement.

On this day, Bing turned up at my grandmother's ward with a black eye.

He said he had just been hit by Wen, a young man who had come back from

Ningnan as the escort for a girl who had broken her leg there. Bing

described the fight with deliberate nonchalance, saying with a great

deal of satisfaction that Wen was jealous of him for enjoying more of

my attention and company. Later, I heard Wen's story: he had hit Bing

because he could not stand 'that conceited grin of his."

Wen was short and stout, with big hands and feet and buck teeth. Like

Bing, he was the son of high officials. He took to rolling up his

sleeves and trouser legs and wearing a pair of straw sandals like a

peasant, in the spirit of a model youth in the propaganda posters. One

day he told me he was going back to Ningnan to continue 'reforming'

himself. When I asked why, he said casually, "To follow Chairman Mao.

Why else? I'm Chairman Mao's Red Guard." For a moment I was

speechless. I had begun to assume that people only spouted this sort

of jargon on official occasions. What was more, he had not put on the

obligatory solemn face that was part of the act. The offhanded way he

spoke made me feel he was sincere.

Wen's way of thinking did not make me want to avoid him. The Cultural

Revolution had taught me not to divide people by their beliefs, but by

whether they were capable of cruelty and viciousness or not. I knew

Wen was a decent person, and when I wanted to get out of Ningnan

permanently, it was to him that I turned for help.

I had been away from Ningnan for over two months.

There was no rule that forbade this, but the regime had a powerful

weapon to make sure I would have to go back to the mountains sooner or

later: my residence registration had been moved there from Chengdu, and

as long as I stayed in the city, I was entitled to no food or any other

rations. For the time being I was living off my family's rations, but

that could not last forever. I realized that I had to get my

registration moved to somewhere near Chengdu.

Chengdu itself was out of the question, because no one was allowed to

move a country registration to a city. Moving one's registration from

a harsh mountainous place to a richer area like the plain around

Chengdu was also forbidden. But there was a loophole: we could move if

we had relatives who were willing to accept us. It was possible to

invent such a relative, as no one could keep track of the numerous

relatives a Chinese might have.

I planned the transfer with Nana, a good friend of mine who was just

back from Ningnan to try to find a way to get out of there. We

included my sister, who was still in Ningnan, in our plan. To get our

304registrations moved, we first of all needed three letters: one from a

commune saying it would accept us, on the recommendation of a relative

in that commune; a second from the county to which the commune

belonged, endorsing the first; and a third from the Sichuan Bureau for

City Youth, sanctioning the transfer. When we had all three, we had to

go back to our production teams in Ningnan to obtain their approval

before the registrar at Ningnan county would give us the final release.

Only then could we be given the crucial document, which was essential

for every citizen in China our registration books which we had to hand

in to the authorities at our next place of residence.

Life was always as daunting and complex as this whenever one took even

the smallest step outside the authorities' rigid plan. And in most

cases there were unexpected complications. While I was planning how to

arrange the transfer, out of the blue the central government issued a

regulation freezing all registration transfers as of 11 June.

It was already the third week in May. It would be impossible to locate

a real relative who would accept us and go through all the procedures

in time.

I turned to Wen. Without hesitating for a moment, he offered to

'create' the three letters. Forging official documents was a serious

offense, punishable by a long prison sentence. But Mao's devoted Red

Guard shrugged off my words of caution.

The crucial elements in the forgery were the seals. In China, all

documents are made official by the stamps on them. Wen was good at

calligraphy, and could carve in the style of official stamps. He used

cakes of soap. In one evening all three letters for the three of us,

which would have taken months to obtain, if we were lucky, were

ready.

Wen offered to go back to Ningnan with Nana and me to help with the

rest of the procedure.

When the time came to go, I was agorfizingly torn, because it meant

leaving my grandmother in the hospital.

She urged me to go, saying she would return home and keep an eye on my

younger brothers. I did not try to dissuade her: the hospital was a

terribly depressing place.

Apart from the revolting smell, it was also incredibly noisy,

7b the Edge of the Himalaya~ 52, with moaning and clattering and loud

conversations in the corridors day and night. Loudspeakers woke eve

none up at six in the morning, and there were often deaths in full view

of other patients.

On the evening she was discharged, my grandmother felt a sharp pain at

the base of her spine. She could not sit on the luggage rack of the

bicycle, so Xiao-her rode it home with her clothes, towels, washbowls,

thermos flasks, and the cooking utensils, and I walked with her,

supporting her. The evening was sultry. Walking even very slowly hurt

her, as I could see from her tightly pursed lips and her trembling as

she tried to suppress her moans. I told her stories and gossip to

divert her. The plane trees that used to shade the pavements now

produced only a few pathetic branches with leaves on them they had not

been pruned in the three years of the Cultural Revolution. Here and

there, buildings were scarred, the result of the fierce fighting

305between R/~bel factions.

It took us nearly an hour to get halfway. Suddenly the sky turned

dark. A violent gale swept up the dust and the torn fragments of wall

posters. My grandmother staggered.

I held her tight. It started to pour with rain, and in an instant we

were drenched. There was nowhere to take cover, so we struggled on.

Our clothes were clinging to us and impeding our movements. I was

panting for breath.

My grandmother's tiny, thin figure felt heavier and heavier in my arms.

The rain was hissing and splashing, the wind slashed against our soaked

bodies, and I felt very cold. My grandmother sobbed, "Oh heaven, let

me die! Let me die!"

I wanted to cry too, but I only said, "Grandma, we'll soon be home ....

'

Then I heard a bell tinkling.

"Hey, do you want a lift?"

A pedal-cart had pulled over; a young man in an open shirt was

straddling it, rain running down his cheeks. He came over and carried

my grandmother onto the open cart on which an old man was crouching. He

nodded to us. The young man said this was his father whom he was

taking home from the hospital. He dropped us at our door, waving off

my profuse thanks with a cheerful "No trouble at all," before

disappearing into the sodden darkness. Because of the pressure of the

downpour, I never learned his name.

Two days later my grandmother was up and about in the kitchen, rolling

out dumpling wrappings to give us a treat. She started to tidy up the

rooms, too, in her usual nonstop way. I could see she was overdoing

things and asked her to stay in bed, but she would not listen.

By now it was the beginning of June. She kept telling me I should

leave, and insisted that Jin-ming should go as well, to look after me,

since I had been so sick last time in Ningnan. Though he had just

turned sixteen, Jin-ming had not yet been assigned a commune. I sent a

telegram asking my sister to come back from Ningnan and look after our

grandmother. Xiao-her, fourteen at the time, promised that he could be

depended on, and seven-year-old Xiao-fang solemnly made the same

announcement.

When I went to say goodbye to her, my grandmother wept. She said she

did not know whether she would ever see me again. I stroked the back

of her hand, which was now bony, with bulging veins, and pressed it to

my cheek.

I suppressed the surge of tears and said I would be back very soon.

After a long search, I had finally found a truck going to the Xichang

region. Since the mid-1960s Mao had ordered many important factories

(including the one where my sister's boyfriend Specs worked) to be

moved to Sichuan, particularly to Xichang, where a new industrial base

was being built. Mao's theory was that the mountains of Sichuan

provided the best deterrent in case the Americans or the Russians

attacked. Trucks from five different provinces were busy delivering

goods to the base. Through a friend, a driver from Peking agreed to

306take us -Jin-ming, Nana, Wen, and me. We had to sit on the back of the

open truck because the cabin was reserved for the relief

To the Edge of the Hirnalqyas 5' (~ driver.

convoy which met up in the evening.

Every truck belonged to a

These drivers had the reputation of being happy to take girls but not

boys much the same as their brotherhood the world over. Since they

were almost the only source of transport, this angered some boys. Along

the way I sa~' slogans pasted on the trunks of trees: "Strongly protest

the truckers who only take females and not males!" Some bolder boys

stood in the middle of the road to try to force the trucks to stop.

One boy from my school did not manage to leap away in time and was

killed.

From the lucky female hitchhikers, there were a few reports of rape,

but many more of romance. Quite a few marriages resulted from these

journeys. A truck driver who took part in the construction of the

strategic base enjoyed certain privileges, one being the right to

transfer his wife's country registration to the city where he lived.

Some girls jumped at this opportunity.

Our drivers were very kind, and behaved impeccably.

When we stopped for the night, they would help us secure a hotel bed

before going to their guesthouse, and they would invite us to have

supper with them so we could share their special food, free.

Only once did I feel there was something faintly sexual on their minds.

At one stop another pair of drivers invited Nana and me to go on their

truck for the next leg. When we told our driver, his face fell a mile,

and he said in a sulky voice, "Go ahead then, go ahead with those nice

guys of yours if you like them better." Nana and I looked at each

other and mumbled in embarrassment, "We didn't say we liked them

better. You are all very nice to us .... We did not go.

Wen kept an eye on Nana and me. He constantly warned us about drivers,

about men in general, about thieves, about what to eat and what not to

eat, and about going out after dark. He also carried our bags and

fetched hot water for us. At dinnertime, he would tell Nana, Jin-ming,

and

53o "Thought Reform through Labor' me to join the drivers to eat while

he stayed behind in the hotel to look after our bags, as theft was

rampant. We brought food back for him.

There was never any sexual advance from Wen. On the evening we crossed

the border into Xichang, Nana and I wanted to wash in the river,

because the weather was so hot and the evening so beautiful. Wen found

us a quiet bend in the river where we bathed in the company of wild

ducks and twirling reeds. The rays of the moon were pouring onto the

river, the image scattering into masses of sparkling silver rings. Wen

sat near the road with his back studiously to us, keeping guard. Like

many other young men, he had been brought up in the pre-Cultural

Revolution days to be chivalrous.

To get into a hotel, we needed to produce a letter from our unit. Wen,

Nana, and I had each secured a letter from our production teams in

Ningnan, and Jin-ming had a letter from his school. The hotels were

inexpensive, but we did not have much money, since our parents'

salaries had been drastically reduced. Nana and I would get a single

307bed between us in a dormitory and the boys would do the same. The

hotels were filthy, and very basic. Before going to bed, Nana and I

would turn the quilt over and over looking for fleas and lice. The

hotel washbowls usually had rings of dark-gray or yellow dirt on them.

Trachoma and fungal infections were commonplace, so we used our own.

One night we were awakened about twelve o'clock by loud bangs on the

door: everyone in the hotel had to get up to make an 'evening report'

to Chairman Mao. This farcical activity was in the same package as the

'1oyaIty dances." It involved gathering in front of a statue or

portrait of Mao, chanting quotations from the Litfie Red Book, and

shouting "Long live Chairman Mao, long long live Chairman Mao, and long

long long live Chairman Mao!"

while waving the Litfie Red Book rhythmically.

Half awake, Nana and I staggered out of our room.

To the Edge of the Himalayas 53 l Other travelers were emerging in twos

and threes, rubbing their eyes, buttoning their jackets, and pulling up

the cotton backs of their shoes. There was not a single complaint. No

one dared. At five in the morning we had to go through the same thing

again. This was called 'morning request for instructions' from Mao.

Later, when we were on our way, Jin-ming said, "The head of the

Revolutionary Committee in this town must be an insomniac."

Grotesque forms of worshipping Mao had been part of our lives for some

time chanting, wearing Mao badges, waving the Little Red Book. But the

idolatry had escalated when the Revolutionary Committees were formally

established nationwide by late 1968. The committee members reckoned

that the safest and most rewarding course of action was to do nothing,

except promote the worship of Mao and, of course, continue to engage in

political persecutions. Once, in a pharmacy in Chengdu, an old shop

assistant with a pair of impassive eyes behind gray-rimmed spectacles

murmured without looking at me, "When sailing the seas we need a

helmsman..." There was a pregnant pause. It took me a moment to

realize I was supposed to complete the sentence, which was a fawning

quotation from Lin Biao about Mao. Such exchanges had just been

enforced as a standard greeting. I had to mumble, "When making

revolution we need Mao Zedong Thought."

Revolutionary Committees all over China ordered statues of Mao to be

built. A huge white marble figure was planned for the center of

Chengdu. To accommodate it, the elegant ancient palace gate, on which

I had stood so happily only a few years before, was dynamited. The

white marble was to come from Xichang, and special trucks, called

'loyalty trucks," were shipping the marble out from the mountains.

These trucks were decorated like floats in a parade, festooned with red

silk ribbons and a huge silk flower in front. They made the journey

from Chengdu empty, as they were devoted exclusively to carrying the

marble. The trucks which supplied Xichang returned to

Chengdu empty: they were not allowed to sully the material that was

going to form Mao's body.

After we said goodbye to the driver who had brought us from Chengdu we

hitched a lift on one of these 'loyalty trucks' for the last stretch to

Ningnan. On the way we stopped at a marble quarry for a rest. A group

of sweating workers, naked to the waist, were drinking tea and smoking

their yard-long pipes. One of them told us they were not using any

machinery, as only working with their bare hands could express their

308loyalty to Mao. I was horrified to see a badge of Mao pinned to his

bare chest. When we were back in the truck, Jin-ming observed that the

badge might have been stuck on with a plaster. And, as for their

devoted quarrying by hand: "They probably don't have any machines in

the first place."

Jin-ming often made skeptical comments like this which kept us

laughing. This was unusual in those days, when humor was dangerous.

Mao, hypocritically calling for 'rebellion," wanted no genuine inquiry

or skepticism. To be able to think in a skeptical way was my first

step toward enlightenment. Like Bing, Jin-ming helped to destroy my

rigid habits of thinking.

As soon as we entered Ningnan, which was about 5,000 feet above sea

level, I was hit by stomach trouble again. I vomited up everything I

had eaten and the world seemed to be spinning around me. But we could

not afford to stop.

We had to get to our production teams and complete the rest of the

transfer procedure by 21 June. Since Nana's team was nearer, we

decided to go there first. It was a day's walk through wild mountains.

The summer torrents roared down ravines across which there were often

no bridges. While Wen waded ahead to test the depth of the water,

Jin-ming carried me on his bony back. Often we had to walk on goat

trails about two feet wide at the edges of cliffs with sheer drops of

thousands of feet. Several of my school friends had been killed

walking home along them at night. The sun was blazing down, and my

skin

To the Edge of the Himala3,a.~ 53.;

began to peel. I became obsessed with thirst, and drank all the water

from everybody's water cans. When we came to a gully, I threw myself

on the ground and gulped down the cool liquid. Nana tried to stop me.

She said even the peasants would not drink this water unboiled. But I

was too wild with thirst to care. Of course, this was followed by more

violent vomiting.

Eventually we came to a house. It had several gigantic chestnut trees

in front, stretching out their majestic canopies. The peasants invited

us in. I licked my cracked lips and immediately made for the stove

where I could see a big earthenware bowl, probably containing rice

fluid. Here in the mountains this was considered the most delicious

drink, and the owner of the house kindly offered it to us.

Rice fluid is normally white, but what I saw was black. A whine burst

out from it, and a mass of flies lifted off from the jellied surface. I

stared into the bowl and saw a few casualties drowning. I had always

been very squeamish about flies, but now I picked up the bowl, flicked

aside the corpses, and downed the liquid in great gulps.

It was dark when we reached Nana's village. The next day, her

production team leader was only too glad to stamp her three letters and

get rid of her. In the last few months the peasants had learned that

what they had acquired were not extra hands, but extra mouths to feed.

They could not throw the city youths out, and were delighted when

anyone offered to leave.

I was too sick to go on to my own team, so Wen set off alone to try to

secure the release of my sister and myselfi Nana and the other girls in

her team tried their best to nurse me. I ate and drank only things

309which had been boiled and reboiled many times, but I lay there feeling

miserable, missing my grandmother and her chicken soup.

Chicken was considered a great delicacy in those days, and Nana joked

that I somehow managed to combine turmoil in my stomach with an

appetite for the best food. Nevertheless, she and the other girls and

Jin-ming went all out to try to purchase a chicken. But the local

peasants did not eat or sell chickens, which they raised only for eggs.

They put this custom down to their ancestors' rules, but we were told

by friends that chickens here were infested with leprosy, which was

widespread in these mountains. So we shunned eggs as well.

Jin-ming was determined to make me some soup like my grandmother's, and

put his bent for inven6on to practical use. On the open platform in

front of the house, he propped up a big round bamboo lid with a stick

and spread some grain underneath. He tied a piece of string to the

stick and hid behind a door, holding the other end of the string, and

placed a mirror in such a position that he could monitor what went on

under the half-open lid. Crowds of sparrows landed to fight for the

gram, and sometimes a turtledove swaggered in. Jin-ming would choose

the best moment to pull the string and bring down the lid. Thanks to

his ingenuity, I had delicious game soup.

The mountains at the back of the house were covered with peach trees

now bearing ripe fruit, and Jin-ming and the gifts came back every day

with baskets full of peaches.

Jin-ming said I must not eat them uncooked, and made me jam.

I felt pampered, and spent my days in the hall, gazing at the faraway

mountains and reading Turgenev and Chekhov, which Jin-ming had brought

for the journey. I was deeply affected by the mood in Turgenev, and

learned many passages from First Love by heart.

In the evenings, the serpentine curve of some distant mountains burned

like a dramatic fire dragon silhouetted against the dark sky. Xichang

had a very dry climate, and forest protection rules were not being

enforced, nor were the fire services working. As a result, the

mountains were burning day after day, only stopping when a gorge

blocked the way, or a storm doused the flames.

After a few days Wen returned with the permission from my production

team for my sister and me to leave. We set off immediately to find the

registrar, although I was still weak, and could walk only a few yards

before my eyes became dazzled by a mass of sparkling stars. There was

only a week left before 2I June.

We reached the county town of Ningnan, and found the atmosphere there

like wartime. In most pans of China heavy factional fighting had

stopped by now, but in remote areas like this local battles continued.

The losing side was hiding in the mountains, and had been launching

frequent lightning attacks. There were armed guards everywhere, mostly

members of an ethnic group, the Yi, a lot of whom lived in the deeper

recesses of the Xichang wilderness.

Legend had it that when they slept, the Yi did not lie down, but

squatted, burying their heads in the folds of their arms.

The faction leaders, who were all Han, talked them into doing the

dangerous jobs like fighting in the front line and keeping guard.

we searched the county offices for the registrar, we often had to

As

310engage in long, involved explanations with the Yi guards, using hand

gestures, as we had no language in common. When we approached, they

lifted their guns and aimed them at us, their fingers on the triggers,

and their left eyes narrowed. We were scared to death, but had to look

nonchalant. We had been advised that they would regard any

demonstration of fear as a sign of guilt, and react accordingly.

We finally found the registrar's office, but he was not there. Then we

bumped into a friend who told us that he had gone into hiding because

of the hordes of city youth besieging him to sort out their problems.

Our friend did not know where the registrar was, but he told us about a

group of 'old city youth' who might.

"Old city youth' were ones who had gone to the countryside before the

Cultural Revolution. The Party had been trying to persuade those who

had failed exams for high schools and universities to go and 'build a

splendid new socialist countryside' which would benefit from their

education. In their romanic enthusiasm, a number of young

536 "Thought Rearm through Labor' people followed the Party's call. The

harsh reality of rural life, with no chance to escape, and the

realiTation of the regime's hypocrisy because no officials' children

ever went, even if they had failed their exams had turned many of them

into cynics.

This group of 'old city youth' was very friendly. They gave us an

excellent meal of game and offered to find out where the registrar was.

While a couple of them went to look for him, we chatted with the

others, sitting on their spacious pine veranda facing a roaring fiver

called the Black Water. On the high rocks above, egrets were balancing

on one long slender leg, raising the other in various balletic

postures. Others were flying, fanning their gorgeous snow-white wings

with panache. I had never seen these stylish dancers wild and free.

Our hosts pointed out a dark cave across the river. From its ceiling

hung a rusty-looking bronze sword. The cave was inaccessible because

it was right next to the turbulent river. Legend had it that the sword

had been left there by the famous, wise prime minister of the ancient

kingdom of Sichuan, Marquis Zhuge Liang, in the third century. He had

led seven expeditions from Chengdu to try to conquer the barbarian

tribes here in the Xichang area. I knew the story well, and was

thrilled to see evidence of it before my eyes. He captured the

chieftain of the tribes seven times, and each time he released him,

hoping to win him over by his magnanimity. Six times, the Chieftain

was unmoved and continued his rebellion, but after the seventh time he

became wholeheartedly loyal to the Sichuanese king. The moral of this

legend was that to conquer a people, one must conquer their hearts and

minds a strategy to which Mao and the Communists subscribed. I vaguely

mused that this was why we had to go through 'thought reform' so that

we would follow orders willingly. That was why peasants were set up as

models: they were the most unquestioning and submissive subjects. On

reflection today, I think the variant of Nixon's adviser Charles Colson

spelled out the hidden agenda: When you have them by the balls, their

hearts and minds will follow.

My train of thought was interrupted by our hosts. What we should do,

they enthusiastically advised, was drop a hint to the registrar about

our fathers' positions.

"He will slap the seal on in no time," declared one jolly-looking young

man. They knew we were high officials' children because of the

311reputation of my school.

I felt dubious about their advice.

"But our parents no longer hold these positions.

They have been labeled capitalist-roaders," I pointed out hesitantly.

"What does that matter?"

Several voices brushed aside my worry.

"Your father is a Communist veteran, right?"

"Right," I murmured.

"A high official, right?"

"Sort of," I mumbled.

"But that was before the Cultural Revolution.

"Never mind that.

Now..."

Has anyone announced his dismissal?

No? That's all right, then. You see, it's as clear as daylight that

the mandate of Party officials is not over. He will tell you that' the

jolly young man pointed in the direction of the sword of the wise old

prime minister. I did not realize at the time that, consciously or

subconsciously, people regarded Mao's personal power structure as no

alternative to the old Communist administration. The ousted officials

would come back. Meanwhile, the jolly young man was continuing,

shaking his head for emphasis: "No official here would dare to offend

you and create problems for himself in the future." I thought of the

appalling vendettas of the Tings. Of course, people in China would

always be alert to the possibility of revenge by those with power.

As we left, I asked how I should drop the hint to the registrar about

my father's position without sounding vulgar. They laughed heartily.

"He is just like a peasant! They don't have that kind of sensibility.

They won't be able to tell the difference anyway. Just tell him

straight out: "My father is the head of"' I was struck by the scornful

tone

538 "Thought ReJbrrn through Labor' in their voices. Later I

discovered that most city youth, old or new, developed a strong

contempt for the peasants after they had set fled down among them.

Mao, of course, had expected the opposite reaction.

On 2o June, after days of desperately searching the mountains, we found

the registrar. My rehearsal of how to drop the hint about my parents'

positions proved completely unnecessary. The registrar himself took

the initiative by asking me: "What did your father do before the

Cultural Revolution?" After many personal questions, put from

curiosity rather than necessity, he took a dirty handkerchief out of

his jacket pocket and unfolded it to reveal a wooden seal and a flat

fin box containing a sponge in red ink. Solemnly he pressed the seal

into the sponge and then stamped our letters.

With that vital seal and by the skin of our teeth with less than

twenty-four hours to spare we had accomplished our mission. We still

had to find the clerk in charge of our registration books, but we knew

that that was not going to be a big problem. The authorization had

been obtained. I relaxed immediately into stomach pains and

diarrhea.

312I struggled back with the others to the county town. It was dark by

the time we arrived. We made for the government guesthouse, a drab

two-story building standing in the middle of a walled enclosure. The

porter's lodge was empty, and there was no one visible on the grounds

either.

Most of the rooms were shut, but on the top floor some bedroom doors

were half open.

I entered one, after making sure there was no one in it. An open

window looked out on some fields beyond a dilapidated brick wall.

Across the corridor was another row of rooms. There was not a soul

around. From some personal things in the room and a half-drunk mug of

tea, I gathered that someone had been staying here very recently.

But I was too tired to wonder why he or she and everyone else had

deserted the building. Without even the energy to close the door, I

threw myself onto the bed and fell asleep fully dressed.

I was jolted awake by a loudspeaker chanting some quo~ tafions by Mao,

one being: "If the enemy won't surrender, we will eliminate them!" I

was suddenly wide awake. I realized our building was under attack.

The next thing I heard was the whine of bullets very close by, and

windows breaking. The loudspeaker yelled out the name of some Rebel

organization, urging it to surrender. Otherwise, it screeched, the

attackers would dynamite the building.

Jin-ming burst in. Several armed men wearing rattan helmets were

rushing into the rooms opposite mine, which overlooked the front gate.

One of them was a young boy shouldering a gun taller than himself.

Without a word, they raced to the windows, smashed the glass with the

butts of their rifles, and started shooting. A man who seemed to be

their commander told us hurriedly that the building had been the

headquarters of his faction, and was now being attacked by the

opposition. We had better get out quickly but not down the stairs,

which led to the front. How then?

We frantically tore the sheets and quilt covers off the bed and made a

sort of rope. We fled one end of it to a window frame and scrambled

down the two stories. As we landed, bullets whistled and hissed into

the hard mud around us. We bent double and ran for the collapsed

wall.

Once over it, we kept running for a long time before we felt safe

enough to stop. The sky and the maize fields were beginning to show

their pale features. We made for a friend's place in a nearby commune

to catch our breath and decide what to do next. On the way, we heard

from some peasants that the guesthouse had been blown up.

At our friend's place, a message was waiting for me. A telegram from

my sister in Chengdu had arrived just after we had left Nana's village

in search of the registrar. As no one knew where I was, my friends had

opened it and passed

54o "Thought ReJbrm through Labor' the message around so that whoever

saw me could let me know.

This was how I learned that my grandmother was dead.

31323. "The More Books You Read, the More Stupid You Become'B I Work as a

Peasant and a Barefoot Doctor

(lune 1969-1971)

Jin-ming and I sat on the bank of the Golden Sand River, waiting for a

ferry. I rested my head on my hands and stared at the unruly river

tumbling past me on its long journey from the Himalayas to the sea. It

was to become the longest fiver in China the Yangtze, after joining the

Min River at Yibin, 300 miles downstream.

Toward the end of its journey, the Yangtze spreads and meanders,

irrigating vast areas of flat farmland. But here, in the mountains, it

was too violent to build a bridge across it. Only ferries linked

Sichuan province with Yunnan to the east. Every summer, when the

torrent was high and fierce with the melted snow, the river claimed

lives. Just a few days before, it had swallowed a ferry with three of

my schoolmates in it.

Dusk was descending. I felt very ill. Jin-ming had spread his jacket

on the ground for me so I would not have to sit on the damp grass. Our

aim was to cross over to Yunnan and try to hitch a lift to Chengdu. The

roads through Xichang were cut off by fighting between Rebel factions,

so we had to try a roundabout route. Nana and Wen had offered to get

my registration book and luggage, and those of Xiao-hong, to Chengdu.

A dozen strong men rowed the ferry against the current, chanting a song

in unison. When they reached the middle of the river, they stopped and

let the ferry be carried downstream toward the Yunnan side. Huge waves

broke over us several times. I had to hold on tight to the side while

the boat listed helplessly. Normally I would have been terrified, but

now I felt only numbness. I was too preoccupied with the death of my

grandmother.

A solitary truck stood on a basketball court in the town on the Yunnan

bank, Qjaojia. The driver readily agreed to give us a lift in the

back. All the time, I kept turning over in my head what I could have

done to save my grandmother. As the truck jolted along, we passed

banana groves at the back of mud houses in the embrace of cloud-capped

mountains. Seeing the gigantic banana leaves, I remembered the small,

potted, fruitless banana by the door of my grandmother's hospital ward

in Chengdu. When Bing came to see me, I used to sit beside it with

him, chatting deep into the night. My grandmother did not like him

because of his cynical grin and the casualness with which he treated

adults, which she considered disrespectful. Twice she came staggering

downstairs to call me back.

I had hated myself for making her anxious, but I could not help it. I

could not control my desire to see Bing. Now how I wished I could

start all over again! I would not do anything to upset her. I would

just make sure she got better although how I did not know.

We passed through Yibin. The road wound down Emerald Screen Hill on

the edge of the city. Staring at the elegant redwoods and bamboo

groves, I thought back to April, when I had just returned home to

Meteorite Street from Yibin. I was telling my grandmother how I had

gone

I Work as a Peasant and a Barefoot Doctor 543 to sweep Dr. Xia's tomb,

which was on the side of this hill, on a sunny spring day. Aunt

Jun-ying had given me some special 'silver money' to burn at the tomb.

314God knows where she had got it from, as it had been condemned as

'feudal." I searched up and down for hours, but could not find the

tomb. The hillside was a battered mess. The Red Guards had leveled

the cemetery and smashed the tombstones, as they considered burial an

'old' practice. I can never forget the intense flame of hope in my

grandmother's eyes when I mentioned the visit, and how it darkened

almost immediately when I stupidly added that the tomb was lost. Her

look of disappointment had been haunting me. Now I kicked myself for

not telling her a white lie.

But it was too late.

When Jin-ming and I got home, after more than a week on the road, there

was only her empty bed. I remembered seeing her stretched out on it,

her hair loose but still tidy, biting her lips hard, her cheeks sunken.

She had suffered her murderous pains in silence and composure, never

screaming, never writhing. Because of her stoicism, I had failed to

realize how serious her illness was.

My mother was in detention. What Xiao-her and Xiaohong told me about

Grandmother's last days caused me such anguish that I had to ask them

to stop. It was only years later that I learned what had happened

after I left.

She would do some housework, then go back to bed and lie there with her

face taut, trying to fight back the pain.

She constantly murmured that she was anxious about my trip, and worried

about my younger brothers.

"What will become of the boys, with no schools?"

she would sigh.

Then one day she could not get out of bed. No doctor would come to the

house, so my sister's boyfriend, Specs, carried her to the hospital on

his back. My sister walked by his side, propping her up. After a

couple of journeys, the doctors asked them not to come anymore. They

said they could find nothing wrong with her and there was nothing they

could do.

So she lay in bed, waiting for death. Her body became lifeless bit by

bit. Her lips moved from time to time, but my sister and brothers

could hear nothing. Many times they went to my mother's place of

detention to beg for her to be permitted to come home. Each time, they

were turned away without being able to see her.

My grandmother's entire body seemed to be dead. But her eyes were

still open, looking around expectantly. She would not close them until

she had seen her daughter.

At last my mother was allowed home. Over the next two days, she did

not leave my grandmother's bedside. Every now and then, my grandmother

would whisper something to her. Her last words were about how she had

fallen into this pain.

She said the neighbors belonging to Mrs. Shau's group had held a

denunciation meeting against her in the courtyard. The receipt for the

jewelry she had donated during the Korean War had been confiscated by

some Rebels in a house raid. They said she was 'a stinking member of

the exploiting class," otherwise how could she have acquired all that

jewelry in the first place?

315My grandmother said she had had to stand on a small table. The ground

was uneven and the table wobbled, and she felt dizzy. The neighbors

were yelling at her. The woman who had accused Xiao-fang of raping her

daughter hit one leg of the table ferociously with a club. My

grandmother could not keep her balance and fell backwards onto the hard

ground. She said she had felt a sharp pain ever since.

In fact, there had been no denunciation meeting. But that was the

image that haunted my grandmother to her last breath.

On the third day after my mother came home, my grandmother died. Two

days later, immediately after my grandmother was cremated, my mother

had to return to detention.

I have often dreamed of my grandmother since, and

I Work as a Peasant and a Barqbot Doctor 545 awakened sobbing. She was

a great character vivacious, talented, and immensely capable. Yet she

had no outlet for her abilities. The daughter of an ambitious

small-town policeman, concubine to a warlord, stepmother to an extended

but divided family, and mother and mother-inlaw to two Communist

officials in all these circumstances she had little happiness. The

days with Dr. Xia were lived under the shadow of their past, and

together they endured poverty, Japanese occupation, and the civil war.

She might have found happiness in looking after her grandchildren, but

she was rarely free from anxiety about us. Most of her life she had

lived in fear, and she faced death many times.

She was a strong woman, but in the end the disasters which hit my

parents, the worries about her grandchildren, the tide of ugly human

hostility all conspired to crush her.

But the most unbearable thing for her was what happened to her

daughter. It was as though she felt in her own body and soul every bit

of the pain that my mother suffered, and she was finally killed by the

accumulation of anguish.

There was another, more immediate factor in her death:

she was denied proper medical care and could not be looked after, or

even seen, by her daughter when she was fatally ill. Because of the

Cultural Revolution. How could the revolution be good, I asked myself,

when it brought such human destruction, for nothing? Over and over

again, I told myself I hated the Cultural Revolution, and I felt even

worse because there was nothing I could do.

I blamed myself for not looking after my grandmother as well as I might

have. She was in the hospital at the time when I had come to know Bing

and Wen. My friendships with them had cushioned and insulated me, and

had blunted my awareness of her suffering. I told myself it was

despicable to have had any happy feelings at all, by the side of what

I'now realized was my grandmother's deathbed. I resolved never to have

a boyfriend again. Only by self denial I thought, could I expiate some

of my guilt.

The next two months I stayed in Chengdu, desperately looking, with Nana

and my sister, for a 'relative' nearby whose commune would accept us.

We had to find one by the end of the autumn harvest when food was

distributed, otherwise we would have nothing to eat for the following

year our state supply ran out in January.

316When Bing came to see me, I was very cold to him, and told him never to

come again. He wrote me letters but I threw them into the stove

without opening them- a gesture I had perhaps picked up from Russian

novels. Wen came back from Ningnan with my registration book and

luggage, but I refused to see him. Once I passed him on the street,

and looked straight through him, catching only a glimpse of his eyes,

in which I saw confusion and hurt.

Wen returned to Ningnan. One summer day in 197o, a forest fire broke

out near his village. He and a friend rushed out with a couple of

brooms to try to put it out. A gust of wind threw a ball of flames

into his friend's face, leaving him permanently disfigured. The two of

them left Ningnan and crossed into Laos, where there was a war going on

between left-wing guerrillas and the United States. At the time a

number of high officials' children were going to Laos and Vietnam to

fight the Americans secretly, as it was forbidden by the government.

These young people had become disillusioned with the Cultural

Revolution, and hoped they could get back their youthful adrenaline by

taking on the "US imperialists."

One day soon after they got to Laos, Wen heard the alarm which signaled

that American planes were coming.

He was the first to leap up and charge out, but in his inexperience he

stepped on a mine which his comrades had planted themselves. He was

blown to smithereens. My last memory of him is his perplexed and

wounded eyes watching me from a muddy street corner in Chengdu.

Meanwhile, my family was scattered. On I7 October 1969 Lin Biao

ordered the country into a state of war, using as a pretext clashes

which had broken out earlier that year on

I Work as a Peasant and a Baredhot Doctor 547 the border with the

Soviet Union. In the name of 'evacuation," he sent his opponents in

the army and the disgraced top leaders out of the capital and placed

them under house arrest or detention in different parts of China. The

Revolutionary Committees used this opportunity to speed up the

deportation of 'undesirables." The 500 members of my mother's Eastern

District staff were ordered out of Chengdu to a place in the Xichang

hinterland called Buffalo Boy Flatland. My mother was allowed ten days

at home from detention to make arrangements. She put Xiao-her and

Xiao-fang on a train to Yibin. Although Aunt Jun-ying was

half-paralyzed, there were other aunts and uncles there who could look

after them. Jin-ming had been sent by his school to a commune fifty

miles northeast of Chengdu.

At the same time Nana, my sister, and I finally found a commune that

would take us in a county called Deyang, not far from where Jin-ming

was. Specs, my sister's boyfriend, had a colleague from the county who

was prepared to claim we were his cousins. Some communes in the area

needed more farmhands. Although we had no proof of kinship, no one

asked any questions. The only thing that mattered was that we were or

at least seemed to be extra labor.

We were allocated to two different production teams, because two extra

people was the maximum any one team could accommodate. Nana and I went

to one team and my sister to another, three miles away. The railway

station was about five hours' walk away, much of it along eighteen

inch-wide ridges between rice paddies.

My family of seven was now dispersed in six different places.

Xiao-her

317was happy to leave Chengdu, where the new Chinese-language textbook at

his school, compiled by some teachers and members of the propaganda

team there, contained a condemnation of my father by name, and Xiaohei

was ostracized and bullied.

In the early summer of 1969, his school had been sent to the

countryside on the outskirts of Chengdu to help with the harvest. The

boys and girls camped separately in two large halls. In the evenings,

under the starry vault of the sky, the paths between the paddy fields

were frequented by young couples. Romance bloomed, not least in the

heart of my fourteen-year-old brother, who started to fancy a girl in

his group. After days of summoning up his courage, he nervously

approached her one afternoon when they were cutting wheat, and invited

her to go for a walk that evening. The girl bent her head and said

nothing. Xiao-her thought this was a sign of 'silent consent,"

mo-xu.

He leaned on a haystack in the moonlight, and waited with all the

anxieties and longings of first love. Suddenly, he heard a whistle.

gang of boys from his form appeared.

A

They shoved him around and called him names, then they threw a jacket

over his head and started to hit and kick him. He managed to break

free, and staggered to the door of one of the teachers and shouted for

help. The teacher opened the door, but pushed him away, saying, "I

can't help you! Don't you dare come back!"

Xiao-her was too frightened to return to his camp, and spent the night

hiding in a haystack. He realized it was his 'sweetheart' who had

called in the bullies: she had felt insulted that the son of a

'counterrevolutionary capitalistroader' should have the audacity to

fancy her.

When they returned to Chengdu, Xiao-her went to his street gang for

help. They appeared at his school with much flaunting of muscles, and

a gigantic wolfhound, and hauled the leading bully out of the

classroom. He was shaking, his face ashen. But before the gang set

upon him, Xiao-her was overtaken by pity, and asked his helmsman to let

the boy go.

Pity had become an alien concept, and was seen as a sign of stupidity.

Xiao-her was bullied even more than before. He made a feeble attempt

at enlisting the help of his gang again, but they told him they would

not help a 'shrimp."

Xiao-her approached his new school in Yibin dreading more bullying.

his amazement, he received a warm.

To

almost emotional welcome. The teachers, the propaganda team members

who were running the school, the children all seemed to have heard of

my father and referred to him with open admiration. Xiao-her

immediately acquired a certain prestige. The prettiest girl in the

school became his girlfriend. Even the most thuggish boys treated him

with respect. It was clear to him that my father was a revered figure

in Yibin, in spite of the fact that everyone knew he was in disgrace,

and the Tings were in power.

The population of Yibin had suffered horribly under the Tings.

Thousands had died or been injured in the factional fighting or under

torture. One family friend escaped death because when his children

went to collect his corpse in the morgue, they found he was still

318breathing.

People in Yibin had developed a great yearning for the days of peace,

for officials who did not abuse their power, for a government that was

dedicated to getting things to work. The focus of this nostalgia was

the early 195os, when my father was the governor. It was then that the

Communists were at their most popular just after they had replaced the

Kuomintang, put an end to starvation, and established law and order,

but before their incessant political campaigns (and their own,

Mao-induced famine).

My father became identified in the folk memory with the good old days.

He was seen as the legendary good official, in stark contrast with the

Tings.

Because of him, Xiao-her enjoyed his stay in Yibin although he learned

lit He at school. Teaching materials still consisted of Mao's works

and People's Daily articles, and no one had any authority over the

pupils since Mao had not retracted his blanket dismissal of formal

learning.

The teachers and the workers' propaganda team tried to enlist

Xiao-her's help to enforce discipline in his class.

But here even my father's reputation failed, and Xiao-her was

eventually ostracized by some of the boys for being the teacher's

'lackey." A whispering campaign began claiming that he had embraced

his girlfriend under lampposts in the street, which was a 'bourgeois

crime." Xiao-her lost his privileged position and was told to write

self-criticisms and to pledge to carry out thought reform. The girl's

mother turned up one day insisting on a surgical examination to prove

her daughter's chastity. After a big scene, she took her daughter out

of the school.

Xiao-her had one close friend in his class, a popular boy of seventeen

who had one sensitive spot: his mother had never married, but had five

children all with different and unknown fathers, which was extremely

unusual in a society where 'illegitimacy' was heavily stigmatized, in

spite of having been formally abolished. Now, in one of the

witch-hunting tides, she was publicly humiliated as a 'bad element."

The boy felt very ashamed of his mother, and told Xiao-her in private

that he hated her. One day the school was awarding a best-swimmer

prize (because Mao liked swimming), and Xiao-her's friend was

unanimously nominated by the pupils; but when the award was announced,

it was not to him. Apparently one young woman teacher had objected:

"We can't give it to him: his mother is a "worn shoe."

When the boy heard this, he grabbed a kitchen chopper and stormed into

the teacher's office. Someone stopped him while the teacher scuttled

off and hid. Xiao-her knew how much this incident had hurt his friend:

for the first time, the boy was seen weeping bitterly. That night,

Xiaohei and some of the other boys sat up with him, trying to comfort

him. The next day, he disappeared. His corpse was washed up on the

bank of the Golden Sand River. He had tied his hands together before

he jumped.

The Cultural Revolution not only did nothing to modernize the medieval

elements in China's culture, it actually gave them political

respectability.

"Modern' dictatorship and ancient intolerance fed on each other.

Any

319one who fell foul of the age-old conservative attitude, could now

become a political victim.

My new commune in Deyang was in an area of low hills dotted with shrubs

and eucalyptus trees. Most of the farmland was good, producing two

major harvests a year, one of wheat and one of rice. Vegetables,

rapeseed, and sweet potatoes grew in abundance. After Ningnan, the

biggest relief for me was that we did not have to do any climbing, and

I could breathe normally instead of panting for breath all the time. I

did not mind the fact that walking here meant staggering along narrow,

muddy ridges between paddy fields. I often fell on my bottom, and

sometimes in a grab for support I would push the person in front

usually Nana into a rice paddy. Nor did I mind another peril of

walking at night: the possibility of being bitten by dogs, quite a few

of which had rabies.

When we first arrived, we stayed next to a pigsty. At night, we fell

asleep to a symphony of pigs grunting, mosquitoes whining, and dogs

barking. The room smelled permanently of pig manure and anti-mosquito

incense. After a while the production team built Nana and me a

two-room cottage on a plot of land which had been used for cutting mud

bricks. The land was lower than the rice paddy which lay just across a

narrow footpath, and in spring and summer, when the paddy He Ids were

filled with water, or after heavy rain, marshy water would ooze up from

the mud floor. Nana and I had to take off our shoes, roll up our

trouser legs, and wade into the cottage. Fortunately the double bed we

shared had tall legs, so we slept about two feet above the muddy water.

Getting into bed involved putting a bowl of clean water on a stool,

climbing up onto the stool, and washing our feet. Living in these damp

conditions, my bones and muscles ached all the time.

But the cottage was also fun. When the flood receded, mushrooms would

spring up under the bed and in the corners of the rooms. With a little

imagination, the floor

looked like something out of a fairy tale. Once I dropped a spoonful

of peas on the ground. After the water had come and gone, a cluster of

delicate petals unfolded from slender stems, as though they had just

awakened to the rays of the sun, which brimmed through the wood-framed

opening in the wall which was our window.

The view was perpetually magical to me. Beyond our door lay the

village pond, overgrown with water lilies and lotuses. The path in

front of the cottage led up to a pass in the hill about 35o feet above

us. The sun set behind it, framed by black rocks. Before darkness

fell, silver mist would hang over the fields at the foot of the hills.

Men, women, and children walked back to the village after their day's

work in the evening haze, carrying baskets, hoes, and sickles, and were

met by their dogs who yapped and leaped about them. They looked as

though they were sailing in clouds. Smoke curved out from the thatched

cottages.

Wooden barrels clicked at the stone well, as people fetched water for

the evening meal. Loud voices were heard as people chatted by the

bamboo groves, the men squatting and puffing their long, slender pipes.

Women neither smoked nor squatted: these were traditionally considered

unbecoming for women, and no one in 'revolutionary' China had talked

about changing these attitudes.

It was in Deyang that I came to know how China's peasants really lived.

Each day started with the production team leader allocating jobs. All

the peasants had to work, and they each earned a fixed number of' work

320points' gong fen for their day's work. The number of work points

accumulated was an important element in the distribution at the end of

the year. The peasants got food, fuel, and other daily necessities,

plus a tiny sum of cash, from the production team. After the harvest,

the production team paid part of it over as tax to the state. Then the

rest was divided up. First, a basic quantity was meted out equally to

every male, and about a quarter less to every female.

Children under three received a half portion. Since a child just over

three obviously could not eat an adult's share, iT was desirable to

have more children. The system functioned as a positive disincentive

to birth control.

The remainder of the crop was then distributed according to how many

work points each person had earned.

Twice a year, the peasants would all assemble to fix the daily work

points for each person. No one missed these meetings. In the end,

most young and middle-aged men would be allocated ten points a day, and

women eight.

One or two whom the whole village acknowledged to be exceptionally

strong got an extra point.

"Class enemies' like the former village landlord and his family got a

couple of points less than the others, in spite of the fact that they

worked no less hard and were usually given the toughest jobs. Nana and

I, being inexperienced 'city youth," got four the same number as

children barely in their teens; we were told this was 'to start with,"

though mine were never raised.

Since there was little variation from individual to individual of the

same gender in terms of daily points, the number of work points

accumulated depended mainly on how many days one worked, rather than

how one worked.

This was a constant source of resentment among the villagers in

addition to being a massive discouragement to efficiency. Every day,

the peasants would screw up their eyes to watch how the others were

working in case they themselves were being taken advantage of. No one

wanted to work harder than others who earned the same number of work

points. Women felt bitter about men who sometimes did the same kind of

job as they, but earned two points more. There were constant

arguments.

We frequently spent ten hours in the fields doing a job which could

have been done in five. But we had to be out there for ten hours for

it to be counted as a full day. We worked in slow motion, and I stared

at the sun impatiently willing it to go down, and counted the minutes

until the whistle blew, signaling an end to work. I soon discovered

that boredom was as exhausting as backbreaking labor.

Here, as in Ningnan, and much of Sichuan, there were no machines at

all. Farming methods were more or less the same as 2,000 years ago,

except for some chemical fertilizers, which the team received from the

government in exchange for grain. There were practically no work

animals except water buffaloes for plowing. Everything else, including

the transport of water, manure, fuel, vegetables, and grain, was done

entirely by hand, and shoulders, using bamboo baskets or wooden barrels

on a shoulder pole. My biggest problem was carrying loads. My right

shoulder was perpetually swollen and sore from having to carry water

321from the

to visit

fill the

and even

well to the house. Whenever a young man who fancied me came

I displayed such helplessness that he never failed to offer to

water tank for me. And not only the water tank jugs, bowls,

cups too.

The team leader considerately stopped assigning me to carry things, and

sent me to do 'light' jobs with the children and the older and pregnant

women. But they were not always light to me. Ladling out manure soon

made my arms sore, not to mention churning up my stomach when I saw the

fat maggots swimming on the surface. Picking cotton in a sea of

brilliant whiteness might have made an idyllic picture, but I quickly

realized how demanding it was directly under the relentless sun, in

temperatures well over 85 F, with high humidity, among prickly branches

that left scratches all over me.

I preferred transplanting rice shoots.

because one had to bend so much.

This was considered a hard job

Often at the end of the day, even the toughest men complained about not

being able to stand up straight. But I loved the cool water on my legs

in the otherwise unbearable heat, the sight of the neat rows of tender

green, and the soft mud under my bare feet, which gave me a sensuous

pleasure. The only thing that really bothered me was the leeches. My

first encounter was when I felt something

[ Work as a Peasant and a BareJ3of Doctor 555 ticklish on my leg. I

lifted it to scratch and saw a fat, slithery creature bending its head

into my skin, busily trying to squeeze in. I let out a mighty scream.

A peasant girl next to me giggled. She found my squeamishness funny.

Nevertheless, she trudged over and slapped my leg just above the leech.

It fell into the water with a plop.

On winter mornings, in the two-hour work period before breakfast, I

climbed up the hills with the 'weaker' women to collect firewood. There

were scarcely any trees on the hills, and even the bushes were few and

far between. We often had to walk a long way. We cut with a sickle,

grabbing the plants with our free hand. The shrubs were covered with

thorns, quite a few of which would always manage to embed themselves in

my left palm and wrist. At first I spent a long time trying to pick

them out, but eventually I got used to leaving them to come out on

their own, after the spots became inflamed.

We gathered what the peasants called 'feather fuel." This was pretty

useless, and burned up in no time. Once I voiced my regret about the

lack of proper trees. The women with me said it had not always been

like this. Before the Great Leap Forward, they told me, the hills had

been covered with pine, eucalyptus, and cypress. They had all been

felled to feed the 'backyard furnaces' to produce steel. The women

told me this placidly, with no bitterness, as though it were not the

cause of their daily battle for fuel. They seemed to treat it as

something which life had thrust on them, like many other misfortunes. I

was shocked to come face-to-face, for the first time, with the

disastrous consequences of the Great Leap, which I had known only as a

'glorious success."

I found out a lot of other things. A 'speak-bitterness' session was

organized for the peasants to describe how they had suffered under the

Kuomintang, and to generate gratitude to Mao, particularly among the

younger generation. Some peasants talked about childhoods of

unrelieved hunger, and lamented that their own children were so spoiled

that they often had to be coaxed to finish their food.

322Then their conversation turned to a particular famine.

They described having to eat sweet potato leaves and digging into the

ridges between the fields in the hope of finding some roots. They

mentioned the many deaths in the village. Their stories reduced me to

tears. After saying how they hated the Kuomintang and how they loved

Chairman Mao, the peasants referred to this famine as taking place at

'the time of forming the communes." Suddenly it struck me that the

famine they were talking about was under the Communists. They had

confused the two regimes. I asked:

"Were there unprecedented natural calamities in this period?

that the cause of the problem?"

Wasn't

"Oh no," they said.

"The weather could not have been better and there was plenty of grain

in the fields. But that man' they pointed to a cringing forty-year-old

'ordered the men away to make steel, and half the harvest was lost in

the fields. But he told us: no matter, we were in the paradise of

Communism now and did not have to worry about food.

Before, we had always had to control our stomachs, but then we ate our

fill in the commune canteen; we threw away the leftovers; we even fed

the pigs with precious rice.

Then the canteen had no more food, but he placed guards outside the

store. The rest of the grain was to be shipped to Peking and Shanghai

there were foreigners there."

Bit by bit, the full picture came out. The cringing man had been the

leader of the production team during the Great Leap. He and his

cronies had smashed the peasants' woks and stoves so they could not

cook at home, and so the woks could be fed into the furnaces. He had

reported vastly exaggerated harvests, with the result that the taxes

were so high they took every morsel of grain the peasants had left. The

villagers had died in scores. After the famine, he was blamed for all

the wrongs in the village. The commune allowed the villagers to vote

him out of office, and labeled him a 'class enemy."

4~

I Work as a Peasant and a Barefoot Da;'or 557 Like most class enemies,

he was not put in prison but kept 'under surveillance' by his fellow

villagers. This was Mao's way: to keep 'enemy' figures among the

people so they always had someone visible and at hand to hate. Whenever

a new campaign came along, this man would be one of the 'usual

suspects' to be rounded up and attacked atYesh. He was always assigned

the hardest jobs, and was allocated only seven work points a day, three

fewer than most of the other men. I never saw anyone talking to him.

Several times I spotted village children throwing stones at his sons.

The peasants thanked Chairman Mao for punishing him. No one questioned

his guilt, or the degree of his responsibility. I sought him out, on

my own, and asked him his story.

He seemed pathetically grateful to be asked.

"I was carrying out orders," he kept saying.

323"I had to carry out orders .... Then he sighed: "Of course, I didn't

want to lose my post. Somebody else would have taken my place.

Then what would have happened to me and my kids? We probably would

have died of hunger. A production team leader is small, but at least

he can die after everyone else in the village."

His words and the peasants' stories shook me to the core. It was the

first time I had come across the ugly side of Communist China before

the Cultural Revolution. The picture was vastly different from the

rosy official version.

In the hills and fields of Deyang my doubts about the Communist regime

deepened.

I have sometimes wondered whether Mao knew what he was doing putting

the sheltered urban youth of China in touch with reality. But then he

was confident that much of the population would not be able to make

rational deductions with the fragmentary information available to

them.

Indeed, at the age of eighteen I was still only capable of vague

doubts, not explicit analysis of the regime. No matter how much I

hated the Cultural Revolution, to doubt Mao still did not enter my

mind.

In Deyang, as in Ningnan, few peasants could read the simplest article

in a newspaper or write a rudimentary letter. Many could not even

write their own name. The Communists' early drive to tackle illiteracy

had been pushed aside by incessant witch-hunts. There had once been an

elementary school in the village, subsidized by the commune, but at the

beginning of the Cultural Revolution the children abused the teacher to

their hearts' content.

They paraded him around the village with heavy cast-iron woks piled up

on his head and his face blackened with soot. Once they almost

fractured his skull. Since then, no one could be persuaded to teach.

Most peasants did not miss the school.

"What's the point?"

they would say.

"You pay fees and read for years, and in the end you are still a

peasant, earning your food with your sweat. You don't get a grain of

rice more for being able to read books. Why waste time and money?

Might as well start earning your work points right away."

The virtual absence of any chance of a better future and the near total

immobility for anyone born a peasant took the incentive out of the

pursuit of knowledge. Children of school age would stay at home to

help their families with their work or look after younger brothers and

sisters. They would be out in the fields when they were barely in

their teens. As for girls, the peasants considered it a complete waste

of time for them to go to school.

"They get married and belong to other people.

on the ground."

It's like pouring water

The Cultural Revolution was trumpeted as having brought education to

the peasants through 'evening classes." One day my production team

324announced it was starting evening classes and asked Nana and me to be

the teachers. I was delighted. However, as soon as the first 'class'

began, I realized that this was no education.

The classes invariably started with Nana and me being asked by the

production team leader to read out articles by Mao or other items from

the People's Daily. Then he would make an hour-long speech consisting

of all the latest political jargon strung together in undigested and

largcl~ unintelligible hunks. Now and then he would give specihc

orders, all solemnly delivered in the name of Mao.

"Chairman Mao says we must eat two meals of rice porridge and only one

meal of solid rice a day."

"Chairman Mao says we mustn't waste sweet potatoes on pigs."

After a hard day's work in the fields, the peasants' minds were on

their household chores. Their evenings were valuable to them, but no

one dared to skip the 'classes." They just sat there, and eventually

dozed off. I was not sorry, to see this form of 'education," designed

to stupe~ rather than enlighten, gradually wither away.

Without education, the peasants' world was painfully narrow. Their

conversations usually centered on minute details of daily living. One

woman would spend a whole morning complaining that her sister-in-law

had used ten bundles of feather fuel for cooking breakfast when she

could have made do with nine (fuel, like everything else, was pooled).

Another would grumble for hours that her mother-in-law put too many

sweet potatoes in the rice (rice being more precious and desirable than

sweet potatoes).

I knew their restricted horizon was not their fault, but nonetheless I

found their conversations unbearable.

One unfailing topic of gossip was, of course, sex. A twenty-year-old

woman called Mei from the Deyang county town had been assigned to the

village next to mine.

She had allegedly slept with a lot of city youths as well as peasants,

and every now and then in the fields someone would come up with a lewd

story about her. It was rumored that she was pregnant, and had been

binding her waist to hide it. In an effort to prove that she was not

carrying a 'bastard," Mei deliberately did all the things a pregnant

woman was not supposed to do, like carrying heavy loads.

Eventually a dead baby was discovered in the bushes next to a stream in

her village. People said it was hers. Nobody knew whether it had been

born dead. Her production team leader ordered a hole dug and buried

the baby. And that was that, apart from the gossip, which became even

more virulent.

The whole story appalled me, but there were other shocks. One of my

neighbors had four daughters four dark-skinned, round-eyed beauties.

But the villagers did not think they were pretty. Too dark, they said.

Pale skin was the main criterion for beauty in much of the Chinese

countryside. When it was time for the eldest daughter to get married,

the father decided to look for a son-in-law who would come and live in

their house. That way, he would not only keep his daughter's work

points, but would also get an extra pair of hands. Normally, women

married into men's families, and it was considered a great humiliation

for a man to marry into a woman's family. But our neighbor eventually

325found a young man from a very poor mountain area who was desperate to

get out and could never do so except through marriage. The young man

thus had a very low status. I often heard his father-in-law shouting

abuse at him at the top of his voice. To torment the young man, he

made his daughter sleep alone when the whim took him. She did not dare

to refuse because 'filial piety," which was deep-rooted in Confucian

ethics, enjoined that children must obey their parents and because she

must not be seen as being keen to sleep with a man, even her husband:

for a woman to enjoy sex was considered shameful. I was awakened one

morning by a commotion outside my window. The young man had somehow

got hold of a few bottles of alcohol made with sweet potatoes and had

poured them down his throat. His father in-law had been kicking his

bedroom door to get him to start working. When he finally broke the

door down, the son-in-law was dead.

One day my production team was making pea noodles, and borrowed my

enamel washbowl to carry water. That day, the noodles collapsed into a

shapeless mess. The crowd that had gathered excitedly and expectantly

around

I Work as a Peasant and a Bare~of Doctor the noodle-making barrel

started muttering loudly when they saw me approaching, and glared at me

with disgust.

I was scared. Later I was told by some women that the villagers blamed

the sagging noodles on me. They said I must have used the bowl to wash

when I was menstruating.

The women told me I was lucky to be a 'city youth." If it had been one

of them, their menfolk would have given them 'a really good hiding."

On another occasion, a group of young men passing through our village

carrying baskets of sweet potatoes were taking a break on a narrow

road. Their shoulder poles were lying on the ground, blocking the way.

I stepped over one of them. All of a sudden, one of the young men

jumped to his feet, picked up his pole, and stood in front of me, with

fiery eyes. He looked as though he was going to strike me. From the

other peasants, I learned that he believed he would develop shoulder

sores if a woman stepped over his pole. I was made to cross back over

it 'to undo the poison."

During the whole time I was in the countryside, I never saw any attempt

to tackle such warped thinking in fact, it was never even mentioned.

The most educated person in my production team was the former landlord.

I had been conditioned to regard landlords as evil, and now, to my

initial uneasiness, I found that I got on best with this family. They

bore no resemblance to the stereotypes that had been drilled into my

mind. The husband did not have cruel, vicious eyes, and his wife did

not wiggle her bottom, or make her voice sugary, to appear seductive.

Sometimes, when we were alone, he would talk about his grievances.

"ChangJung," he once said, "I know you are a kind person. You must be

a reasonable person as well, since you have read books. You can judge

whether this is fair." Then he told me why he had been classified as a

landlord. He had been a waiter in Chengdu in 1948, and had saved up

some money by watching every penny. At the time, some farsighted

landlords were selling their land cheap, as they could see land reform

coming if the Communists reached Sichuan. The waiter was not

politically astute, and bought some land, thinking he had got a

326bargain. He not only soon lost most of it in the land reform, but

became a class enemy to boot.

"Alas," he said, with resignation, quoting a classic line, 'one single

slip has caused a thousand years of sorrow."

The villagers seemed to feel no hostility toward the landlord and his

family, although they kept their distance. But, like all 'class

enemies," they were always given the jobs no one else wanted. And the

two sons got one work point less than other men, in spite of the fact

that they were the hardest-working men in the village. They seemed to

me to be highly intelligent, and also the most refined young men

around. Their gentleness and gracefulness set them apart, and I found

that I felt closer to them than to any other young people in the

village. However, in spite of their qualities, no girls wanted to

marry them. Their mother told me how much money she had spent buying

presents for the few gifts whom the go-betweens had introduced. The

gifts would accept the clothes and money and then walk off. Other

peasants could have demanded the presents back, but a landlord's family

could do nothing. She would sigh long and loud about the fact that her

sons had little prospect of decent marriages. But, she told me, they

bore their misfortune lightly: after each disappointment, they would

try to cheer her up. They would offer to work on market days to earn

back the cost of her lost presents.

All these misfortunes were told to me without much drama or emotion.

Here it seemed that even shocking deaths were like a stone being

dropped into a pond where the splash and the ripple closed over into

stillness in no lime.

In the placidity of the village, in the hushed depth of the nights in

my damp home, I did a lot of reading and thinking. When I first came

to Deyang, Jin-ming gave me several big cases of his black-market

books, which he had been

able to accumulate because the house raiders had now mostly been

packed off to the 'cadres' school' at Miyi, together with my father.

All day while I was out in the fields, I itched to get back to them.

I devoured what had survived the burning of my father's library. There

were the complete works of Lu Xun, the great Chinese writer of the

192os and 193os.

Because he died in 1936, before the Communists came to power, he

escaped being persecuted by Mao, and even became a great hero of his

whereas Lu Xun's favorite pupil and closest associate, Hu Feng, was

personally named by Mao as a counterrevolutionary, and was imprisoned

for decades. It was the persecution of Hu Feng that led to the

witch-hunt in which my mother was detained in 1955.

Lu Xun had been my father's great favorite. When I was a child, he

often read us essays by Lu. I had not understood them at the time,

even with my father's explanations, but now I was engrossed. I found

that their satirical edge could be applied to the Communists as well as

to the Kuomintang. Lu Xun had no ideology, only enlightened

humanitarianism. His skeptical genius challenged all assumptions.

He was another whose free intelligence helped liberate me from my

indoctrination.

My father's collection of Marxist classics was also useful to me.

read randomly, following the obscure words with my finger, and

I

327wondering what on earth those nineteenth century German controversies

had to do with Mao's China. But I was attracted by something I had

rarely come across in China the logic that ran through an argument.

Reading Marx helped me to think rationally and analytically.

I enjoyed these new ways of organizing my thoughts. At other times I

would let my mind slip into more nebulous moods and wrote poetry, in

classical styles. While I was working in the fields I was often

absorbed in composing poems, which made working bearable, at times even

agree able. Because of this, I preferred solitude, and positively

discouraged conversation.

One day I had been working all morning, cutting cane with a sickle and

eating the juiciest parts near the roots.

The cane went to the commune sugar factory, in exchange for sugar. We

had to fill a quota in quantity, but not in quality, so we ate the best

parts. When lunch break came, and someone had to stay in the field to

keep watch for thieves, I offered my services so I would have some time

alone. I would go for my lunch when the peasants came back and so have

even more time to myself.

I lay on my back on a stack of canes, a straw hat par fly shading my

face. Through the hat I could see the vast turquoise sky. A leaf

protruded from the stack above my head, looking disproportionately

enormous against the sky.

I half-closed my eyes, feeling soothed by the cool greenness.

The leaf reminded me of the swaying leaves of a grove of bamboo on a

similar hot summer afternoon many years before. Sitting in its shade

fishing, my father had written a forlorn poem. In the same ge-lu

pattern of tones, rhymes, and types of words as his poem, I began to

compose one of my own. The universe seemed to be standing still, apart

from the light rustle of the refreshing breeze in the cane leaves. Life

felt beautiful to me at that moment.

In this period, I snatched at the chance for solitude, and

ostentatiously showed that I wanted nothing to do with the world around

me, which must have made me seem rather arrogant. And because the

peasants were the model I was meant to emulate, I reacted by

concentrating on their negative qualities. I did not try to get to

know them, or to get on with them.

I was not very popular in the village, although the peasants largely

left me alone. They disapproved of me for failing to work as hard as

they thought I should. Work was their whole life, and the major

criterion by which they judged anyone. Their eye for hard work was

both uncompromising and fair, and it was clear to them that I hated

physical labor and took every opportunity to stay at home and read my

books. The stomach trouble and skin rash I had suffered in Ningnan hit

me again as soon as I came to Deyang. Virtually every day I had some

sort of diarrhea, and my legs broke out in infected sores. I

constantly felt weak and dizzy, but it was no good complaining to the

peasants; their harsh life had made them regard all nonfatal illnesses

as trivial.

The thing that made me most unpopular, though, was that I was often

away. I spent about two-thirds of the time that I should have been in

Deyang visiting my parents in their camps, or looking after Aunt

328Jun-ying in Yibin. Each trip lasted several months, and there was no

law forbidding it. But although I did not work nearly enough to earn

my keep, I still took food from the village. The peasants were stuck

with their egalitarian distribution system, and they were stuck with me

they could not throw me out. Naturally, they blamed me, and I felt

sorry for them. But I was stuck with them, too. I could not get

out.

In spite of their resentment, my production team allowed me to come and

go as I liked, which was partly because I had kept my distance from

them. I learned that the best way to get by was to be regarded as an

unobtrusively aloof outsider. Once you became 'one of the masses," you

immediately let yourself in for intrusion and control.

Meanwhile, my sister Xiao-hong was doing well in the neighboring

village. Although, like me, she was perpetually bitten by He as and

poisoned by manure so that her legs were sometimes so swollen she got

fever, she continued to work hard, and was awarded eight work points a

day. Specs often came from Chengdu to help her. His factory, like

most others, was at a virtual standstill. The management had been

'smashed," and the new Revolutionary Committee was only concerned with

getting the workers to take part in the revolution rather than in

production, and most just came and went as they pleased. Sometimes

Specs worked in the fields in my sister's place to give her a break.

At other times, he worked with her, which delighted the villagers, who

said: "This is a bargain. We took in one young girl, but we've ended

up with two pairs of hands!"

Nana, my sister, and I used to go to the country market together on

market day, which was once a week. I loved the boisterous alleys lined

with baskets and shoulder poles.

The peasants would walk for hours to sell a single chicken or a dozen

eggs, or a bundle of bamboo. Most moneymaking activities, such as

growing cash crops, making baskets, or raising pigs for sale, were

banned for individual households, on the grounds that they were

'capitalist." As a result, peasants had very little to exchange for

cash. Without money, it was impossible for them to travel to cities,

and market day was almost their only source of entertainment. They

would meet up with their relatives and friends, the men squatting on

the muddy pavements puffing on their pipes.

In spring 197o my sister and Specs were married. There was no

ceremony. In the atmosphere of the day, it did not cross their minds

to have one. They just collected their marriage certificate from the

commune headquarters and then went back to my sister's village with

sweets and cigarettes with which to entertain the villagers. The

peasants were thrilled: they could rarely afford these precious

treats.

For the peasants, a wedding was a big thing. As soon as the news

broke, they crowded into my sister's thatched cottage to offer their

congratulations. They brought presents like a handful of dried

noodles, a pound of soybeans, and a few eggs, wrapped carefully in red

straw paper and fled with straw in a fancy knot. These were no

ordinary gifts. The peasants had deprived themselves of valuable

items. My sister and Specs were very touched. When Nana and I went to

see the new couple, they were teaching the village children how to do

'loyalty dances' for fun.

329Marriage did not get my sister out of the countryside,

I Work as a Peasant and a Bare~of Donor 567 as couples were not

automatically granted residence together. Of course, if Specs had been

willing to relinquish his city registration, he could easily have set

fled with my sister, but she could not move to Chengdu with him because

she had a country registration. Like tens of millions of couples in

China, they lived separately, entitled by regulation to twelve days a

year together. Luckily for them, Specs's factory was not working

normally, so he could spend a lot of time in Deyang.

After a year in Deyang there was a change in my life: I entered the

medical profession. The production brigade to which my team belonged

ran a clinic which dealt with simple illnesses. It was funded by all

the production teams under the brigade, and treatment was free, but

very limited.

There were two doctors. One of them, a young man with a fine,

intelligent face, had graduated from the medical school of Deyang

County in the fifties, and had come back to work in his native village.

The other was middle-aged with a goatee. He had started out as an

apprentice to an old country doctor practicing Chinese medicine, and in

1964 he had been sent by the commune to attend a crash course in

Western medicine.

At the beginning of 197x, the commune authorities ordered the clinic to

take on a 'barefoot doctor." The name came about because the 'doctor'

was supposed to live like the peasants, who treasured their shoes too

much to wear them in the muddy fields. At the time, there was a big

propaganda campaign hailing barefoot doctors as an invention of the

Cultural Revolution. My production team jumped at this opportunity to

get rid of me: if I worked in the clinic, the brigade, rather than my

team, would be responsible for my food and other income.

I had always wanted to be a doctor. The illnesses in my family,

particularly the death of my grandmother, had driven home to me how

important doctors were. Before I went to Deyang, I had started

learning acupuncture from a friend, and I had been studying a book

called A Barefoot

Doctor's Manual, one of the few printed items allowed in those days.

The propaganda about barefoot doctors was one of Mao's political

maneuvers. He had condemned the pre Cultural Revolution Health

Ministry for not looking after peasants and concerning itself only with

city dwellers, especially Party officials. He also condemned doctors

for not wanting to work in the countryside, particularly in the remote

areas. But Mao took no responsibility as head of the regime, nor did

he order any practical steps to remedy the situation, such as giving

instructions to build more hospitals or train more proper doctors, and

during the Cultural Revolution the medical situation got worse. The

propaganda line about peasants having no doctors was really intended to

generate hatred against the pre-Cultural Revolution Party system, and

against intellectuals (this category included doctors and nurses).

Mao offered a magic cure to the peasants: 'doctors' who could be turned

out en masse barefoot doctors.

"It is not at all necessary to have so much formal training," he

said.

330"They should mainly learn and raise their standard in practice." On

26June 1965 he made the remark which became a guideline for health and

education: "The more books you read, the more stupid you become." I

went to work with absolutely no training.

The clinic was in a large hall on top of a hill about an hour's walk

from my cottage. Next door was a shop selling matches, salt, and soy

sauce which were all rationed. One of the surgery rooms became my

bedroom. My professional duties were left vague.

The only medical book I had ever set eyes on was A Barefoot Doctor's

Manual. I studied it avidly. There was no theory in it, just a

summary of symptoms, followed by suggested prescriptions. When I sat

at my desk, with the other two doctors behind me, all wearing our dusty

everyday clothes, it was clear that the sick peasants who came in very

sensibly wanted nothing to do with me, an inexperi

I Work as a Peasant and a BareJbot Doctor 569 enced eighteen-year-old

with some sort of book they could not read, and which was not even very

thick. They went straight past me to the other two desks. I felt more

relieved than offended. It was not my idea of being a doctor to have

to consult a book every time patients described their symptoms, and

then to copy down the recommended prescription. Sometimes, in an

ironic mood, I would contemplate whether our new leaders Chairman Mao

was still beyond questioning would want me as their personal doctor,

barefoot or not. But then, I told myself, of course not: barefoot

doctors were supposed to 'serve the people, not the officials' in the

first place. I settled happily for just being a nurse, doling out

medicines on prescription and giving injections, which I had learned to

give to my mother for her hemorrhage.

The young doctor who had been to medical school was the one everybody

wanted. His prescriptions of Chinese herbs cured many ailments. He

was very conscientious, too, visiting patients in their villages and

collecting and growing herbs in his spare time. The other doctor, with

the goatee, terrified me with his medical nonchalance. He would use

the same needle to inject several different patients without any

sterilization. And he injected penicillin without testing whether the

person was allergic to it, which was extremely dangerous because

Chinese penicillin was not pure and could cause serious reactions, even

death.

Politely, I offered to do it for him. He smiled, not offended by my

interference, and said there had never been any accidents: "The

peasants are not like delicate city folk."

I liked the doctors, and they were very kind to me, always helpful when

I asked questions. Not surprisingly, they did not see me as a threat.

Out in the countryside, it was one's professional skills, rather than

political rhetoric, that counted.

I enjoyed living on that hilltop, far away from any village.

Every morning

to the rising

acupuncture.

to the cocks'

I got up early, strolled along the edge of the hill, and

sun recited lines from an ancient book of verse about

Beneath my feet, the fields and cottages began to wake up

crowing.

A lonely Venus watched with a pale glow from a sky that was getting

brighter every minute. I loved the fragrance of the honeysuckle in the

morning breeze, and the big petals of nightshade shaking off pearls of

331dew. Birds chirped all around, distracting me from my recitations.

would linger for a bit, and then walk back to light my stove for

breakfast.

I

With the help of an anatomical chart and my acupuncture verses, I had a

fairly clear idea where on the body I should stick my needles to cure

what. I was eager for patients. And I had some enthusiastic

volunteers boys from Chengdu who were now living in other villages and

who were keen on me. They would walk for hours for an acupuncture

session. One young man, rolling up his sleeve to expose an acupuncture

point near his elbow, declared with a brave face, "What are men friends

for?"

I did not fall in love with any of them, although my resolution to deny

myself a boyfriend in order to dedicate myself to my parents and

appease my guilt over my grandmother's death was weakening. But I

found it difficult to let my heart go, and my upbringing prevented me

from having any physical relationship without surrendering my heart.

All around me, other boys and girls from the city were leading rather

freer lives. But I sat, lonely, on a pedestal. Word got out that I

wrote poetry, and that helped keep me there.

The young men all behaved most chivalrously. One gave me a musical

instrument called a san-xian, made of a snakeskin bowl with a long

handle and three silk strings, which were plucked, and spent days

teaching me how to play it. The permitted tunes were all in praise of

Mao, and were very limited. But that did not make much difference to

me: my ability was even more limited.

In the warm evenings, I sat by the fragrant medicinal garden encircled

by Chinese trumpet creepers, and thrummed to myself. Once the shop

next door closed for the night, I was

entirely alone. It was dark except for the gently shining moon and the

twinkling of lights from distant cottages. Sometimes fireflies glowed

and floated by like torches carried by tiny, invisible flying men. The

scents from the garden made me dizzy with pleasure. My music hardly

matched the enthusiastic chorus of the thundering frogs and the wistful

croon of the crickets. But I found solace in it.

24.

"Please Accept My Apologies That Come a Lifetime Too Late'-My

Three days' truck journey from Chengdu, in northern Xichang, is Buffalo

Boy Flatland. There the road forks, one branch heading southwest to

Miyi, where my father's camp was, the other southeast to Ningnan.

A famous legend gave the Flatland its name. The Goddess Weaver,

daughter of the Celestial Queen Mother, used to descend from the

Celestial Court to bathe in a lake there. (The meteor which fell on

Meteorite Street is supposed to have been a stone that propped up her

loom.) A boy living by the lake who looks after buffaloes sees the

goddess, and they fall in love. They marry, and have a son and a

daughter. The Celestial Queen Mother is jealous of their happiness,

and sends some gods down to kidnap the goddess. They carry her off,

and the buffalo boy rushes after them. Just as he is about to catch

them, the Celestial Queen Mother pulls a hairpin from her coil and

draws a huge river between them. The Silver River separates the couple

permanently, except on the seventh day of the seventh moon, when

magpies fly from all over China to form a bridge for the family to

meet.

The Silver River is the Chinese name for the Milky Way.

Over Xichang

332it looks vast, with a mass of stars, the bright Vega, the Goddess

Weaver, on one side, and Altair, the Buffalo Boy, with his two

children, on the other. This legend has appealed to the Chinese for

centuries because their families have often been broken up by wars,

bandits, poverty, and heartless governments. Ironically, it was to

this place that my mother was sent.

She arrived there in November 1969, with her 500 former colleagues from

the Eastern District Rebels as well as capitalist-roaders. Because

they had been ordered out of Chengdu in a hurry there was nowhere for

them to live, except for a few shacks left by army engineers who had

been building a railway from Chengdu to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

Some squeezed into these.

Others had to cram their bedrolls into the houses of local peasants.

There were no building materials except cogon grass and mud, which had

to be dug out and carried down from the mountains. The mud for the

walls was mixed with water and made into bricks. There were no

machines, no electricity, not even any work animals. On the Flatland,

which is about 5,000 feet above sea level, it is the day, rather than

the year, that is divided into four seasons. At seven in the morning,

when my mother started working, the temperature was around freezing. By

midday, it could reach the high 8os. At about 4 p.m. hot winds swirled

through the mountains and literally swept people off their feet. At

seven in the evening, when they finished work, the temperature

plummeted again. In these harsh extremes my mother and the other

inmates worked twelve hours a day, breaking only for a brief lunch.

For the first few months, all they had to eat was rice and boiled

cabbage.

The camp was organized like an army, run by army officers, and came

under the control of the Chengdu Revolutionary Committee. At first my

mother was treated as a class enemy and was forced to stand for the

whole of every lunch break with her head bowed. This form of

punishment, called field side denunciation," was recommended by the

media as a way to remind the others, who were able to rest, that they

should save some energy for hatred. My mother protested to her company

commander that she could not work all day without resting her legs. The

officer had been in the Military Department of the Eastern District

before the Cultural Revolution, and had got on well with her; he put a

stop to the practice. Still, my mother was given the hardest jobs, and

she did not have Sundays off, unlike the other inmates. The bleeding

from her womb worsened. Then she was struck down with hepatitis. Her

whole body was yellow and swollen, and she could hardly stand up.

One thing the camp did have was doctors, as half the hospital staff in

the Eastern District had been packed off there. Only those who were

most in demand by the bosses of the Revolutionary Committees remained

in Chengdu.

The doctor who treated my mother told her how grateful he and the other

hospital staff were to her for protecting them before the Cultural

Revolution, and said that had it not been for her he would probably

have been labeled a rightist back in 1957. There was no Western

medicine available, so he went miles to gather herbs like Asiatic

plantain and sun plants which the Chinese consider good for

hepatitis.

He also exaggerated the infectiousness of her illness to the camp

authorities, who then moved her to a place entirely on her own, half a

333mile away. Her tormentors left her alone, for fear of infection, but

the doctor came to see her every day, and secretly ordered a daily

supply of goat's milk from a local peasant. My mother's new residence

was a deserted pigsty. Sympathetic inmates cleaned it for her and put

a thick layer of hay on the ground. It felt to her like a luxurious

mattress. A friendly cook volunteered to deliver meals. When no one

was looking, she would include

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3/I), Parents in Camps 575 a couple of eggs. When meat became

available, my mother had it every day, while the others got it only

once a week.

She also had fresh fruit pears and peaches provided by friends who

bought them at markets. As far as she was concerned, her hepatitis was

a godsend.

After about forty days, much to her regret, she recovered and was moved

back into the camp, now housed in new mud huts. The Flatland is an odd

place in that it attracts lightning and thunder but not rain, which

falls on the surrounding mountains. The local peasants did not plant

crops on the plains, because the soil was too dry and it was dangerous

during the frequent dry thunderstorms. But this land was the only

resource available to the camp, so they planted a special strain of

drought-resistant corn and carried water from the lower slopes of the

mountains. In order to get a future supply of rice, they offered to

help the local peasants harvest theirs.

The peasants agreed, but it was the local custom that women were

forbidden to carry water and men were barred from planting rice, which

could only be done by married women with children, particularly sons.

The more sons a woman had, the more she was in demand for this

backbreaking job. The belief was that a woman who had produced a lot

of sons would produce more grains in the rice she planted ('sons' and

'seeds' have the same sound, zi, in Chinese). My mother was the prime

'beneficiary' of this ancient custom. As she had three sons, more than

most of her women colleagues, she had to spend up to fifteen hours a

day bent double in the paddy fields, with an inflamed lower abdomen,

and bleeding.

At night, she joined everyone else in taking turns to guard the pigs

from wolves. The mud-and-grass shacks backed on to a range of

mountains aptly called "Wolves' Lair." The wolves were very clever,

the locals told the new arrivals. When one got into a pigsty, it would

gently scratch and lick a pig, particularly behind its ears, to get the

animal into a kind of pleasurable trance, so it would not make a noise.

Then the wolf would lightly bite the pig on one ear and lead it out of

the sty, all the time rubbing its body with its fluffy tail. The pig

would still be dreaming of being caressed by a lover when the wolf

pounced.

The peasants told the city folk that the wolves and occasional leopards

were afraid of fires. So every night a fire was lit outside the

pigsty. My mother spent many sleepless nights watching meteors

shooting across the starlit vault of the sky, with the silhouette of

the Wolves' Lair against it, listening to the distant howling of the

wolves.

One evening she was washing her clothes in a small pond. When she

straightened up from her squatting position she found she was staring

334straight into the red eyes of a wolf standing about twenty yards away

across the pond.

Her hair stood on end, but she remembered that her childhood friend Big

Old Lee had told her that the way to deal with a wolf was to walk

backwards, slowly, never showing any sign of panic, and not to turn and

run. So she backed away from the pond and walked as calmly as she

could toward the camp, all the time facing the wolf, who followed her.

When she reached the edge of the camp, the wolf stopped. The fire was

in sight, and voices could be heard.

She swung around and raced into a doorway.

The fire was almost the only light in the depth of the nights in

Xichang. There was no electricity. Candles, when available at all,

were prohibitively expensive, and there was very little kerosene. But

there was not much to read anyway. Unlike Deyang, where I had relative

freedom to read Jin-ming's black-market books, a cadres' school was

lightly controlled. The only printed materials allowed were the

selected works of Mao and the People's DaiS. Occasionally, a new film

was shown in an army barracks a few miles away: it was invariably one

of Mine Mao's model operas.

As the days, then months went by, the harsh work and lack of relaxation

became unbearable. Everyone missed their families and children, the

Rebels included. Their resentment was perhaps more intense because

they now felt that all their past zealotry had turned out to be for

nothing, and that whatever they did, they would never get back to power

in Chengdu. The Revolutionary Committees had been filled in their

absence. Within months of reaching the Flatland, depression replaced

denunciations, and the Rebels sometimes had to be cheered up by my

mother. She was given the nickname "Kuanyin' the goddess of

kindness.

At night, lying on her straw mattress, she thought back over her

children's early years. She realized that there was not an awful lot

of family life to remember. She had been an absentee mother when we

were growing up, having submitted herself to the cause at the cost of

her family.

Now she reflected with remorse on the pointlessness of her devotion.

She found she missed her children with a pain which was almost

unendurable.

Ten days before Chinese New Year, in February 197o, after over three

months on the Flatland, my mother's company was lined up in front of

their camp to welcome an army commander who was coming for an

inspection. After waiting for a long time, the crowd spotted a small

figure approaching along the dirt track which climbed up from the

distant road. They all stared at the moving figure, and decided it

could not be the big shot: he would be in a car with an entourage. But

it could not be a local peasant, either: the way the long black wool

scarf was wrapped around the bent head was too stylish. It was a young

woman with a large basket on her back. Watching her slowly coming

nearer and nearer, my mother's heart started pounding. She felt it

looked like me, and then she thought she might be imagining it.

"How wonderful it would be if it was Er-hong!" she said to herself.

Suddenly, people were nudging her excitedly: "It's your daughter! Your

daughter's here to see you! Er-hong's here!"

335This was my mother's account of how she saw me coming after what seemed

to her a lifetime. I was the first visitor to the camp, and was

received with a mixture of warmth and envy. I had come on the same

truck which had taken me to Ningnan to get my registration moved in

June the year before. The big basket on my back was full of sausages,

eggs, sweets, cakes, noodles, sugar, and finned meats. All five of us

children and Specs had pooled things from our rations, or our shares

from our production teams, to give our parents a treat. I was

practically dragged down by the weight.

Two things immediately struck me. My mother looked well she was just

over her convalescence from hepatitis, as she told me later. And the

atmosphere around her was not hostile. In fact, some people were

already calling her "Kuanyin," which was absolutely incredible to me

since she was officially a class enemy.

A dark-blue scarf covered her hair and was knotted under her chin. Her

cheeks were no longer fine and delicate. They had turned rough and

deep red under the fierce sun and harsh wind, and her skin looked very

much like that of a Xichang peasant. She appeared at least ten years

older than her thirty-eight years. When she stroked my face, her hands

felt like cracked old tree bark.

I stayed ten days, and was to depart for my father's camp on New Year's

Day. My nice truck driver was to pick me up where he had dropped me

off. My mother's eyes moistened because, although his camp was not far

away, she and my father were forbidden to visit each other. I put the

food basket on my back untouched my mother insisted I take the whole

lot to my father. Saving precious food for others has always been a

major way of expressing love and concern in China. My mother was very

sad that I was going, and kept saying she was sorry I had to miss the

traditional Chinese New Year breakfast which her camp was going to

serve: tang-yuan, round dumplings, symbolizing family union. But I

could not wait for it for fear of missing the truck.

My mother walked half an hour with me to the roadside and we sat down

in the high grass to wait. The sweep of the landscape undulated with

the gentle waves of the thick cogon grass. The sun was already bright

and warm. M?

mother hugged me, her whole body seeming to say that she did not want

to let me go, that she was afraid she would never see me again. At the

time, we did not know whether her camp and my commune would ever come

to an end.

We had been told we would be there for life. There were hundreds of

reasons why we might die before we saw each other again. My mother's

sadness infected me, and I thought of my grandmother dying before I was

able to get back from Ningnan.

The sun rose higher and higher. There was no trace of my truck. As

the large rings of smoke that had been pouring out of the chimney of

her camp in the distance thinned down, my mother was seized by regret

that she had not been able to give me the New Year's breakfast. She

insisted on going back to get some for me.

While she was away the truck came. I looked toward the camp and saw

her running toward me, the white-golden grass surging around her blue

scarf. In her right hand she carried a big colorful enamel bowl. She

was running with the kind of carefulness that told me she did not want

the soup with the dumplings to spill. She was still a good way off,

336and I could see she would not reach me for another twenty minutes or

so. I did not feel I could ask the driver to wait that long, as he was

already doing me a big favor.

I clambered onto the back of the truck. I could see my mother still

running toward me in the distance. But she no longer seemed to be

carrying the bowl.

Years later, she told me the bowl had fallen from her hand when she saw

me climbing onto the truck. But she still ran to the spot where we had

been sitting, just to make sure I had really gone, although it could

not have been anyone else getting onto the truck. There was not a

single person around in that vast yellow ness For the next few days

she walked around the camp as though in a trance, feeling blank and

lost.

58o "Please Accept My Apologies..."

After many hours of being bounced around on the back of the truck, I

arrived at my father's camp. It was deep in the mountains, and had

been a forced labor camp a gulag. The prisoners had hacked a farm out

of the wild mountains and had since been moved on to open up more harsh

virgin land, leaving this relatively cultivated site for those one rung

better off on China's punishment ladder, the deported officials. The

camp was huge: it held thousands of former employees of the provincial

government.

I had to walk for a couple of hours from the road to reach my father's

'company." A rope suspension bridge wobbled over a deep chasm as I

stepped onto it, almost making me lose my balance. Exhausted as I was,

with the load on my back, I still managed to be amazed by the stunning

beauty of the mountains. Although it was only early spring, bright

flowers were everywhere, next to kapok trees and bushes of papayas.

When I finally got to my father's dormitory, I saw a couple of colorful

pheasants swaggering majestically under a glade of early pear, plum,

and almond blossoms. Weeks later, the fallen petals, pink and white,

were to bury the mud path.

My first sight of my father after over a year was harrowing. He was

trotting into the courtyard carrying two baskets full of bricks on a

shoulder pole. His old blue jacket hung loose on him, and his

rolled-up trouser legs revealed a pair of very thin legs with prominent

sinews. His sun-beaten face was wrinkled, and his hair was almost

gray. Then he saw me. He put down his load with a fumbling movement,

the result of over excitement as I rushed over to him.

Because the Chinese tradition permitted little physical contact between

fathers and daughters, he told me how happy he was through his eyes.

They were so full of love and tenderness. In them I also saw traces of

the ordeal he had been going through. His youthful energy and spark

had given way to an air of aged confusion with a hint of quiet

determination. Yet he was still in his prime, only forty-eight years

old. A lump rose in my throat. I searched his eyes

My Parents in Camps 58 I for signs of my worst fear, the return of his

insanit)'. But he looked all right. A heavy load lifted from my

heart.

He was sharing a room with seven other people, all from his department.

There was only one tiny window, so the door had to be left open all day

to let in some light. The people in the room seldom spoke to each

337other, and no one greeted me at all. I felt immediately that the

atmosphere was much more severe than in my mother's camp.

The reason was that this camp was under the direct control of the

Sichuan Revolutionary Committee, and therefore of the Tings. On the

walls of the courtyard there were still layers of posters and slogans

reading "Down with Soand-so' or "Eliminate So-and-so," against which

were propped scarred hoes and spades. As I soon discovered, my father

was still being subjected to frequent denunciation meetings in the

evenings after a hard day's work. Since one way to get out of the camp

was to be invited back to work for the Revolutionary Committee, and the

way to do that was to please the Tings, some Rebels competed with each

other to demonstrate their militancy, and my father was their natural

victim.

He was not allowed into the kitchen. As an 'anti-Mao criminal," he was

alleged to be so dangerous he might poison the food. It did not matter

whether anyone believed this. The point was in the insult.

My father bore this and other cruelties with fortitude.

Only once did he allow his anger to show. When he first came to the

camp, he was ordered to wear a white arm band with black characters

saying 'counterrevolutionary element in action." He pushed away the

arm band violently and said from between clenched teeth, "Come on and

beat me to death. I will not wear this!" The Rebels backed away. They

knew he meant it and they had no order from above to kill him.

Here in the camp, the Tings were able to revenge themselves on their

enemies. Among them was a man who had been involved in the

investigation into them in 1965. He

had worked in the underground before 1949, and had been imprisoned and

tortured by the Kuomintang, which had destroyed his health. In the

camp he soon fell gravely ill, but he had to go on working, and was not

allowed a single day off. Because he was slow, he was ordered to make

it up in the evenings. Wall posters denounced him for his laziness.

One of the posters I saw opened with the words:

"Have you, Comrade, noticed this grotesque living skeleton with hideous

facial features?" Under Xichang's relentless sun, his skin had become

scorched and withered, and was peeling off in great chunks. Also, he

was starved out of human shape: he had had two-thirds of his stomach

cut out, and could digest only a small amount of food at a time.

Because he could not have frequent meals, as he needed to, he was

permanently starving. One day, in desperation, he went into the

kitchen to look for some pickle juice. He was accused of trying to

poison the food. Knowing he was on the verge of total collapse, he

wrote to the camp authorities saying that he was dying and requesting

to be spared some heavy jobs. The only answer was a venomous poster

campaign. Soon afterward he fainted in a field under the blazing sun,

as he was spreading manure. He was taken to the camp hospital and died

the next day. He had no family at his deathbed. His wife had

committed suicide.

The capitalist-roaders were not the only ones who suffered in the

cadres' school. People who had had any connection, however remote,

with the Kuomintang, anyone who had by some misfortune become the

target of some personal revenge, or the object of jealousy even leaders

of the unsuccessful Rebel factions had been dying in the camp in

scores. Many had thrown themselves into the roaring river that sliced

338through the valley. The river was called "Tranquillity' (An-ning-he).

In the dead of night, its echoes spread many miles, and sent chills up

the spines of the inmates, who said it sounded like the sobbing of

ghosts.

Hearing about these suicides increased my determination to help relieve

the mental and physical pressure on my father as a matter of urgency.

I had to make him feel lift. was worth living, and that he was loved.

At his denunciation meetings, which were now largely nonviolent, as the

inmates had run out of steam, I would sit where he could see me, so

that he could feel reassured by my being with him. As soon as the

meeting was over, we would go off together on our own. I would tell

him cheerful things to make him forget the ugliness of the meeting, and

massage his head, neck, and shoulders. And he would recite classical

poems for me. During the day, I helped him with his jobs, which,

naturally, were the hardest and dirtiest. Sometimes I would carry his

loads, which weighed over a hundred pounds. I managed to show him a

nonchalant face, although I could hardly stand under the weight.

I stayed over three months. The authorities allowed me to eat in the

canteen, and gave me a bed in a room with five other women, who only

spoke to me briefly and coldly, if at all. Most of the inmates

immediately assumed an air of hostility whenever they saw me. I just

looked through them. But there were kind people as well, or people who

were more courageous than others in showing their kindness.

One was a man in his late twenties with a sensitive face and big ears.

His name was Young, and he was a university graduate who had come to

work in my father's par anent just before the Cultural Revolution. He

was the 'commander' of the 'squad' to which my father belonged.

Although he was obliged to assign the hardest jobs to my father,

whenever he could he would unobtrusively reduce his workload. In one

of my fleeting conversations with him, I told him that I could not cook

the food I had brought with me, as there was no kerosene for my small

stove.

A couple of days later, Young sauntered past me with a blank expression

on his face. I felt something metal thrust into my hand: it was a wire

burner about eight inches high and four inches in diameter, which he

had made himself.

It burned paper balls made out of old newspapers they could be torn up

now because Mao's portrait had disappeared from the pages. (Mao

himself had stopped the practice, as he considered that its purpose 'to

greatly and especially establish' his 'absolute supreme authority' had

been achieved, and to go on with it would only result in overkill.) On

the burner's blue-and-orange flames I produced food that was far

superior to the camp fare. When the delicious steam seeped through the

saucepan, I could see the jaws of my father's seven roommates

involuntarily masfcatng. I regretted that I could not offer any of it

to Young: we would both be in trouble if his militant colleagues got

wind of it.

It was thanks to Young and other decent people like him that my father

was allowed to have visits from his children.

It was also Young who gave my father permission to leave the camp

premises on rainy days, which were his only days off, since, unlike

other inmates, he had to work on Sundays, just like my mother. As soon

as it stopped raining, my father and I would go into the forests and

339collect wild mushrooms under the pine trees, or search for wild peas,

which I would cook with a fin of duck or some other meat back in the

camp. We would enjoy a heavenly meal.

After supper we often strolled to my favorite spot, which I called my

'zoological garden' - a group of fantastically shaped rocks in a grassy

clearing in the woods. They looked like a herd of bizarre animals

lazing in the sun.

Some of them had hollows that fitted our bodies, and we would lie back

and gaze into the distance. Down the slope from us was a row of

gigantic kapok trees, their leafless scarlet flowers, bigger versions

of magnolia, growing directly from the stark black branches, which all

grew uncompromisingly straight up. During my months in the camp, I had

watched these giant flowers open, a mass of crimson against black. Then

they bore fruit as big as figs, and each burst into silky wool, which

was blown all over the mountains like feathery snow by the warm

winds.

Beyond the kapok trees lay the River of Tranquillity, and beyond it

stretched endless mountains.

One day when we were relaxing in our 'zoological garden," a peasant

passed by who was so gnarled and dwarfish he gave me a fright. My

father told me that in this isolated region inbreeding was common. Then

he said, "There is so much to be done in these mountains! It is such a

beautiful place with great potential. I'd love to come and live here

to look after a commune, or maybe a production brigade, and do some

real work. Something useful.

Or maybe just be an ordinary peasant. I am so fed up with being an

official. How nice it would be if our family could come here and enjoy

the simple life of the farmers." In his eyes, I saw the frustration of

an energetic, talented man who was desperate to work. I also

recognized the traditional idyllic dream of the Chinese scholar

disillusioned with his mandarin career. Above all, I could see that an

alternative life had become a fantasy for my father, something

wonderful and unobtainable, because there was no opting out once you

were a Communist official.

I visited the camp three times, staying each time for several months.

My siblings did the same, so that my father would have warmth around

him all the time. He often said proudly that he was the envy of the

camp because no one else had so much company from their children.

Indeed, few had any visitors at all: the Cultural Revolution had

brutalized human relationships, and alienated countless families.

My family became closer as time went by. My brother Xiao-her, who had

been beaten by my father when he was a child, now came to love him. On

his first visit to the camp, he and my father had to sleep on a single

bed because the camp leaders were jealous that my father had so much

family company. In order to let my father have a good night's sleep

which was particularly important for his mental condition Xiao-her

would never allow himself to fall into a deep sleep lest he stretch out

and disturb him.

For his part, my father reproached himself for having been harsh to

Xiao-her, and would stroke his head and apologize.

"It seems inconceivable I could have hit you so hard.

on you," he would say.

I was too tough

340"I've been thinking a lot about the past, and I feel very guilty toward

you. Funny the Cultural Revolution should turn me into a better

person."

The camp fare was mainly boiled cabbage, and the lack of protein made

people feel hungry all the time. Every meat-eating day was eagerly

anticipated, and celebrated with an air almost of exhilaration. Even

the most militant Rebels seemed to be in a better humor. On these

occasions, my father would pick the meat from his bowl and force it

into his children's. There would always be a kind of fight with

chopsticks and bowls.

My father was in a constant state of remorse. He told me how he had

not invited my grandmother to his wedding, and had sent her on the

perilous journey back to Manchuria from Yibin only a month after she

had arrived. I heard him reproach himself many times for not showing

his own mother enough affection, and for being so rigid that he was not

even told about her funeral. He would shake his head: "It's too late

now!" He also blamed himself for his treatment of his sister Jun-ying

in the 1950S, when he had tried to persuade her to give up her Buddhist

beliefs, and even to get her, a vegetarian by conviction, to eat

meat.

Aunt Jun-ying died in the summer of 1970. Her paralysis had gradually

invaded her whole body, and she had received no proper treatment. She

died in the same state of quiet composure as she had shown all her

life. My family kept the news from my father. We all knew how deeply

he loved and respected her.

That autumn my brothers Xiao-her and Xiao-fang were staying with my

father. One day they were having a walk after supper, when

eight-year-old Xiao-fang let slip the news that Aunt Jun-ying had died.

Suddenly, my father's face changed. He stood still, looking blank for

a long time, then turned to the side of the path, sagged onto his

haunches, and covered his face with both hands. His shoulders shook

with sobs. Never having seen my father cry, my brothers were

dumbfounded.

At the beginning of 197x news filtered through that the Tings had been

sacked. For my parents, particularly my father, there was some

improvement in their lives. They began to have Sundays off and lighter

jobs. The other detainees started to speak to my father, though still

coldly.

Proof that things really were changing came when a new inmate arrived

at the camp early in 1971 Mrs. Shau, my father's old tormentor, who

had fallen from grace together with the Tings. Then my mother was

allowed to spend two weeks with my father the first chance for them to

be together for several years, in fact the first time they had even

glimpsed each other since the winter morning on the street in Chengdu

just before my father's departure for the camp, over two years

before.

But my parents' misery was far from over. The Cultural Revolution

continued. The Tings had not been purged because of all the evil they

had done, but because they were suspected by Mao of being closely

linked to Chen Boda, one of the leaders of the Cultural Revolution

Authority, who had fallen foul of Mao. In this purge, more victims

were generated. Chen Mo, the Tings' right-hand man, who had helped

secure my father's release from prison, committed suicide.

341One day in the summer of 1971 my mother had a severe hemorrhage from

her womb; she passed out and had to be taken to a hospital. My father

was not permitted to visit her, although they were both in Xichang.

When her condition stabilized, she was allowed to go back to Chengdu

for treatment. There, the bleeding was finally stopped; but the

doctors discovered that she had developed a skin disease called

scleroderma. A patch of skin behind her right ear had turned hard and

had begun to contract. The right side of her jaw had become

considerably smaller than the left, and the hearing in her right ear

was going. The right side of her neck was stiff, and her right hand

and arm felt rigid and numb. Dermatologists told her the hardening of

the skin could eventually spread to the internal organs and, if so, she

would shrink and die in three or four years. They said there was

nothing Western medicine could do. All they could suggest was corf

sone which my mother took in the form of tablets and injections in her

neck.

I was in the camp with my father when a letter came from Mother with

the news. Immediately my father went to ask for permission to go home

and see her. Young was very sympathetic, but the camp authorities

refused. My father burst out crying in front of a whole courtyard of

inmates. The people from his department were taken aback. They knew

him as a 'man of iron." Early the next morning, he went to the post

office and waited outside for hours until it opened. He sent a

three-page telegram to my mother. It began: "Please accept my

apologies that come a lifetime too late. It is for my guilt toward you

that I am happy for any punishment. I have not been a decent husband.

Please get well and give me another chance."

On z5 October 197i, Specs came to see me in Deyang with a dynamite

piece of news: Lin Biao had been killed.

Specs had been officially told in his factory that Lin had attempted to

assassinate Mao and that, having failed, he had tried to flee to the

Soviet Union, and his plane had crashed in Mongolia.

Lin Biao's death was shrouded in mystery. It was linked with the

downfall of Chen Boda a year before. Mao grew suspicious of both of

them when they went too far with their over-the-top deification of him,

which he suspected was part of a scheme to kick him upstairs to

abstract glory and deprive him of earthly power. Mao particularly

smelled a rat with Lin Biao, his chosen successor, who was known i l

for 'never letting the Little Red Book leave his hand, nor "Long live

Mao!" leave his lips," as a later rhyme put it.

Mao decided that Lin, being next in line to the throne, was up to no

good. Either Mao or Lin, or both, took action to save their own power

and life.

My village was given the official version of events by the commune soon

afterward. The news meant nothing to the peasants. They hardly even

knew Lin's name, but I received the news with blinding joy. Not having

been able to challenge Mao in my mind, I blamed Lin for the Cultural

Revolution. The evident rift between him and Mao meant, I thought,

that Mao had repudiated the Cultural Revolution, and would put an end

to all the misery, and destruction. The demise of Lin in a way

reaffirmed my faith in Mao. Many people shared my optimism because

there were signs that the Cultural Revolution was going to be reversed.

Almost immediately some capitalist-roaders started to be rehabilitated

and released from the camps.

342My father was told the news about Lin in mid November At once, the

occasional smile appeared on the faces of some Rebels. At the

meetings, he was asked to sit down, which was unprecedented, and

'expose Yeh Chun' - Mme Lin Biao, who had been a colleague of his in

Yan'an in the early 194os. My father said nothing.

But although his colleagues were being rehabilitated, and leaving the

camp in droves, my father was told by the camp commandant: "Don't you

assume you can get off the hook now." His offense against Mao was

considered too serious.

His health had been deteriorating under the combination of intolerable

mental and physical pressure, with years of brutal beatings followed by

hard physical labor under atrocious conditions. For nearly five years

he had been taking large doses of tranquilizers in order to keep

himself under control. Sometimes he consumed up to twenty times the

normal dose, and this had worn out his system. He felt crippling pains

somewhere in his body all the time; he began to cough blood, and was

frequently short of breath, accompanied by severe dizzy spells. At the

age of fifty, he looked like a seventy-year-old. The doctors in the

camp always greeted him with cold faces and impatient prescriptions of

more tranquilizers; they refused to give him a checkup, or even to hear

him out. And each trip to the clinic would be followed by a barked

lecture from some of the Rebels: "Don't imagine you can get away with

faking illness!"

Jin-ming was in the camp at the end of 197 x. He was so worried about

Father that he stayed ore until the spring of 1972. Then he got a

letter from his production team ordering him to return immediately, or

he would not be allocated any food at harvest time. The day he was

leaving, my father went with him to the train a railway line had just

come to Miyi because of the strategic industries relocated to Xichang.

During the long walk, they were both silent. Then Father had a sudden

attack of breathlessness and Jin-ming had to help him sit down by the

side of the road. For a long time Father struggled to catch his

breath.

Then Jin-ming heard him sigh deeply and say, "It looks as though I

probably don't have long to live. Life seems to be a dream." Jin-ming

had never heard him talk about death.

Startled, he tried to comfort him. But Father said slowly, "I ask

myself whether I am afraid of death. I don't think I am. My life as

it is now is worse. And it looks as if there is not going to be any

ending. Sometimes I feel weak: I stand by Tranquillity River and

think, Just one leap and I can get it over with. Then I tell myself I

must not. If I die without being cleared, there will be no end of

trouble for all of you .... I have been thinking a lot lately. I had a

hard childhood, and society was full of injustice. It was for a fair

society that I joined the Communists. I've tried my best through the

years. But what good has it done for the people? As for myself, why

is it that in the end I have come to be the ruin of my family? People

who believe in retribution say that to end badly you must have

something

My Parents in Camps 59 l on your conscience. I have been thinking hard

about the things I've done in my life. I have given orders to execute

some people..."

Father went on to tell Jin-ming about the death sentences he had

343signed, the names and stories of the e-ba ('ferocious despots') in the

land reform in Chaoyang, and the bandit chiefs in Yibin.

"But these people had done so much evil that God himself would have had

them killed.

What, then, have I done wrong to deserve all this?"

After a long pause, Father said, "If I die like this, don't believe in

the Communist Party anymore."

25.

"The Fragrance of

Sweet Wind'~ A New Life with The Electricians' Manual and Six Crises

(197~- 1975)

It was with deaths, love, torment, and respite that 1969, 197O, and

197i passed. In Miyi, the dry and rainy seasons followed hard on each

other's heels. On Buffalo Boy Flatland the moon waxed and waned, the

wind roared and hushed, the wolves howled and fell silent. In the

medicinal garden in Deyang, the herbs flowered once, and then again and

again. I rushed between my parents' camps, my aunt's deathbed, and my

village. I spread manure in the paddy fields and composed poems to

water lilies.

My mother was at home in Chengdu when she heard of Lin Biao's demise.

She was rehabilitated in November 1971 and told that she did not have

to return to her camp.

But although she received her full salary, she was not given back her

old job, which had been filled by someone else.

Her department in the Eastern District now had no fewer than seven

directors the existing members of the Revolutionary Committees and the

newly rehabilitated officials

A New Lip with The Electricians' Manual 593 who had just returned from

the camp. Poor health was one reason Mother did not go back to work,

but the most important reason was that my father had not been

rehabilitated, unlike most capitalist-roaders.

Mao had sanctioned the mass rehabilitation not because he had at last

come to his senses, but because, with the death of Lin Biao and the

inevitable purge of his men, Mao had lost the hand with which he had

controlled the army. He had removed and alienated virtually all the

other marshals, who opposed the Cultural Revolution, and had had to

rely almost solely on Lin. He had put his wife, relatives, and stars

of the Cultural Revolution in important army posts, but these people

had no military record, and therefore received no allegiance from the

army. With Lin gone, Mao had to turn to those purged leaders who still

commanded the loyalty of the army, including Deng Xiaoping, who was

soon to reemerge. The first concession Mao had to make was to bring

back most of the denounced officials.

Mao also knew that his power depended on a functioning economy. His

Revolutionary Committees were hopelessly divided and second-rate, and

could not get the country moving. He had no choice but to turn to the

old, disgraced officials again.

My father was still in Miyi, but the part of his salary which had been

held back since June 1968 was returned to him, and we suddenly found

344ourselves with what seemed to us an astronomical sum in the bank. Our

personal belongings that had been taken away by the Rebels in the house

raids were all returned, the only exception being two bottles of

mao-tai, the most sought-after liquor in China.

There were other encouraging signs. Zhou Enlai, who now had increased

power, set about getting the economy going. The old administration was

largely restored, and production and order were emphasized. Incentives

were reintroduced. Peasants were allowed some cash sidelines.

Scientific research began again. Schools started

594 "The Fragrance of Sweet Wind' proper teaching, after a gap of six

years; and my youngest brother, Xiao-fang, belatedly started his

schooling at the age of ten.

With the economy reviving, factories began to recruit new workers. As

part of the incentive system, they were allowed to give priority to

their employees' children who had been sent to the country. Though my

parents were not factory employees, my mother spoke to the managers of

a machinery factory that had formerly come under her Eastern District,

and now belonged to the Second Bureau of Light Industry in Chengdu.

They readily agreed to take me on. So, a few months before my

twentieth birthday, I left Deyang for good. My sister had to stay,

because young people from the cities who married after going to the

country were banned from returning, even if their spouses had city

registrations.

Becoming a worker was my only option. Most universities were still

shut, and there were no other careers available. Being in a factory

meant working only eight hours a day compared with the peasant's

dawn-to-dusk day. There were no heavy loads to carry, and I could live

with my family. But the most important thing was getting back my city

registration, which meant guaranteed food and other basics from the

state.

The factory was in the eastern suburbs of Chengdu, about forty-five

minutes by bicycle from home. For much of the way I rode along the

bank of the Silk River, then along muddy country roads through fields

of rapeseed and wheat. Finally I reached a shabby-looking enclosure

dotted with piles of bricks and rusting rolled steel. This was my

factory. It was a rather primitive enterprise, with some machines

dating back to the turn of the century. After five years of

denunciation meetings, wall slogans, and physical bat ties between the

factions in the factory, the managers and engineers had just been put

back to work and it had begun to resume producing machine tools. The

workers gave me a special welcome, largely on account of my

A New Lift with The Electricians' Manual 595 parents: the

destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution had made them hanker for the

old administration, under which there had been order and stability.

I was assigned as an apprentice in the foundry, under a woman whom

everyone called "Auntie Wei." She had been very poor as a child, and

had not even had a decent pair of trousers when she was a teenager. Her

life had changed when the Communists came, and she was immensely

grateful to them. She joined the Party, and at the beginning of the

Cultural Revolution she was among the Loyalists who defended the old

Party officials. When Mao openly backed the Rebels, her group was

beaten into surrender and she was tortured. A good friend of hers, an

old worker who also owed much to the Communists, died after being hung

horizontally by his wrists and ankles (a torture called 'duck

345swimming'). Auntie Wei told me the story of her life in tears, and

said that her fate was tied to that of the Party, which she considered

had been wrecked by 'anti-Party elements' like Lin Biao. She treated

me like a daughter, primarily because I came from a Communist family. I

felt uneasy with her because I could not match her faith in the

Party.

There were about thirty men and women doing the same job as me, ramming

earth into molds. The incandescent, bubbling molten iron was lifted

and poured into the molds, generating a mass of sparkling white-hot

stars. The hoist over our workshop creaked so alarmingly that I was

always worded it might drop the crucible of boiling liquid iron onto

the people ramming away underneath.

My job as a caster was dirty and hard. I had swollen arms from

pounding the earth into the molds, but I was in high spirits, as I

naively believed that the Cultural Revolution was coming to an end. I

threw myself into my work with an ardor that would have surprised the

peasants in Deyang.

In spite of my newfound enthusiasm, I was relieved to hear after a

month that I was going to be transferred. I

could not have sustained ramming eight hours a day for long. Owing to

the goodwill toward my parents, I was given several jobs to choose from

lathe operator, hoist operator, telephone operator, carpenter, or

electrician. I dithered between the last two. I liked the idea of

being able to create lovely wooden things, but decided that I did not

have talented hands. As an electrician, I would have the glamour of

being the only woman in the factory doing the job. There had been one

woman in the electricians' team, but she was leaving for another post.

She had always attracted great admiration. When she climbed to the top

of the electric poles people would stop to marvel. I struck up an

immediate friendship with this woman, who told me something which made

up my mind for me: electricians did not have to stand by a machine

eight hours a day. They could stay in their quarters waiting to be

called out on a job. That meant I would have time to myself to read.

I received five electric shocks in the first month. Like being a

barefoot doctor, there was no formal training: the result of Mao's

disdain for education. The six men in the team taught me patiently,

but I started at an abysmally low level. I did not even know what a

fuse was. The woman electrician gave me her copy of The Electricians'

Manual and I plunged into it, but still came out confusing electric

current with voltage. In the end, I felt ashamed of wasting the other

electricians' time, and tried to copy what they did without

understanding much of the theory. I managed fairly well, and gradually

was able to do some repairs on my own.

One day a worker reported a faulty switch on a power distribution

board. I went to the back of the board to examine the wiring, and

decided a screw must have come loose.

Instead of switching off the electric supply first, I impetuously poked

my mains-tester cure screwdriver at the screw.

The back of the board was a net of wires, connections, and joints

carrying 380 volts of power. Once inside this mine field, I had to

push my screwdriver extremely carefully

A New Li/?

with The Electricians' Manual 597 through a gap.

I reached

346the screw, only to find it was not loose after all. By then my arm had

started to shake slightl~ from being taut and nervous. I began to pull

it back, holding my breath. Right at the very edge, just as I was

about to relax, a series of colossal jolts shot through my right hand

and down to my feet. I leaped in the air, and the screwdriver sprang

out of my hand. It had touched a joint at the entrance to the power

distribution network. I sagged onto the floor, thinking I could have

been killed if the screwdriver had slipped a lit He earlier. I did not

tell the other electricians, as I did not want them to feel they had to

go on calls with me.

I got used to the shocks. No one else made a fuss about them, either.

One old electrician told me that before 1949, when the factory was

privately owned, he had had to use the back of his hand to test the

current. It was only under the Communists that the factory was obliged

to buy the electricians mains-testers.

There were two rooms in our quarters, and when they were not out on a

call, most of the electricians would play cards in the outer room while

I read in the inner room. In Mao's China, failure to join the people

around you was criticized as 'cutting oneself off from the masses," and

at first I was nervous about going off on my own to read. I would put

my book down as soon as one of the other electricians came inside, and

would try to chat with him in a somewhat awkward manner. As a result

they seldom came in. I was enormously relieved that they did not

object to my eccentricity. Rather, they went out of their way not to

disturb me. Because they were so nice to me I volunteered to do' as

many repairs as possible.

One young electrician in the team, Day, had been in a high school until

the start of the Cultural Revolution, and was considered very well

educated. He was a good calligrapher and played several musical

instruments beautifully. I was very attracted to him, and in the

mornings I would always find him leaning against the door to the

electricians'

quarters, waiting to greet me. I found myself doing a lot of calls

with him. One early spring day, after finishing a maintenance job, we

spent the lunch break leaning against a haystack at the back of the

foundry, enjoying the first sunny day of the year. Sparrows were

chirping over our heads, fighting for the grains left on the rice

plants. The hay gave off an aroma of sunshine and earth. I was

overjoyed to discover that Day shared my interest in classical Chinese

poetry, and that we could compose poems to each other using the same

rhyme sequence, as ancient Chinese poets had done. In my generation,

few people understood or liked classical poetry. We were very late

back to work that afternoon, but there were no criticisms. The other

electricians only gave us meaningful smiles.

Soon Day and I were counting the minutes during our days off from the

factory, eager to be back together. We sought every opportunity to be

near each other, to brush each other's fingers, to feel the excitement

of being close, to smell the smell of each other, and to look for

reasons to be hurt or pleased by each other's half-spoken words.

Then I began to hear gossip that Day was unworthy of me. The

disapproval was partly caused by the fact that I was considered

special. One of the reasons was that I was the only offspring of high

officials in the factory, and indeed the only one most of the workers

had ever come into contact with. There had been many stories about

high officials' children being arrogant and spoiled. I apparently came

347as a nice surprise, and some workers seemed to feel that no one in the

factory could possibly be worthy of me.

They held it against Day that his father had been a Kuomintang officer,

and had been in a labor camp. The workers were convinced I had a

bright future, and should not be 'dragged into misfortune' by being

associated with Day.

Actually, it was purely by chance that Day's father had

A New Lip with The Electricians' Manual 5Uo become a Kuomintang

officer. In 1937, he and two friends were on their way to Yan'an to

join up with the Communists to fight the Japanese. They had almost

reached Yan'an when they were stopped at a Kuomintang roadblock where

the officers urged them to join the Kuomintang instead. While the two

friends insisted on pressing on to Yan'an, Day's father set fled for

the Kuomintang, thinking it did not matter which Chinese army he

joined, as long as it fought the Japanese. When the civil war re

starred he and his two friends ended up on opposite sides. After 1949,

he was sent to a labor camp, while his companions became high-ranking

officers in the Communist army.

Because of this accident of history, Day was sniped at in the factory

for not knowing his place by 'pestering' me, and even for being a

social climber. I could see from his drained face and bitter smiles

that he was stung by the snide gossip, but he said nothing to me. We

had only hinted at our feelings in allusions in our poems. Now he

stopped writing poems to me. The confidence with which he had begun

our friendship disappeared, and he adopted a subdued and humbled manner

toward me in private. In public, he tried to appease the people who

disapproved of him by awkwardly trying to show them he really thought

nothing of me. At times I felt that he behaved in such an undignified

way that I could not help being irritated as well as saddened. Having

been brought up in a privileged position, I did not realize that in

China dignity was a luxury scarcely available to those who were not

privileged. I did not appreciate Day's dilemma, and the fact that he

could not show his love for me, for fear of ruining me. Gradually we

became alienated.

During the four months of our acquaintance, the word 'love' had never

been mentioned by either of us. I had even suppressed it in my mind.

One could never let oneself go, because consideration of the vital

factor, family background, was ingrained in one's mind. The

consequences of being tied to the family of a 'class enemy' like Day's

were

too serious. Because of the subconscious self-censorship, I never

quite fell in love with Day.

During this period my mother had come off the cortisone, and had been

receiving treatment with Chinese medicines for her scleroderma. We had

been scouring country markets for the weird ingredients prescribed for

her tortoiseshell, snake gallbladder, and anteater scales. The doctors

recommended that as soon as the weather turned warmer, she should go to

see some top-class specialists in Peking for both her womb and the

scleroderma. As part compensation for what she had suffered, the

authorities offered to send a companion with her. My mother asked if I

could go.

We left in April 1972, staying with family friends, whom it was now

safe to contact. My mother saw several gynecologists in Peking and

348Tianjin, who diagnosed a benign tumor in her womb and recommended a

hysterectomy.

Meanwhile, they said her bleeding could be controlled if she had plenty

of rest and tried to keep cheerful. The dermatologists thought that

the scleroderma might be localized, in which case it would not be

fatal. My mother followed the doctors' advice and had a hysterectomy

the following year. The scleroderma remained localized.

We visited many friends of my parents. Everywhere we went, they were

being rehabilitated. Some had just come out of prison. Mao-tai and

other treasured liquors flowed freely, as did tears. In almost every

family, one or more members had died as a result of the Cultural

Revolution.

The eighty-year-old mother of an old friend died after falling off a

landing where she had had to sleep, her family having been driven out

of their apartment. Another friend struggled to hold back his tears

when he set eyes on me.

I reminded him of his daughter, who would have been my age. She had

been sent with her school to a godforsaken place on the border with

Siberia, where she had become pregnant. Frightened, she consulted a

back-street midwife

A New Lift with The Electricians' Manual 6ol who tied musk around her

waist and told her to jump over a wall to get rid of the baby. She

died of a violent hemorrhage. Tragic stories cropped up in every

household. But we also talked about hope, and looked forward to

happier times ahead.

One day we went to see Tung, an old friend of my parents who had just

been released from prison. He had been my mother's boss on her march

from Manchuria to Sichuan, and had become a bureau chief in the

Ministry of Public Security. At the beginning of the Cultural

Revolution he was accused of being a Russian spy, and of having

supervised the installation of tape recorders in Mao's quarters which

he had apparently done, under orders. Every word of Mao's was supposed

to be so precious it had to be preserved, but Mao spoke a dialect which

his secretaries found hard to understand, and in addition they were

sometimes sent out of the room. In early 1967 Tung was arrested and

sent to the special prison for top people, Qjncheng. He spent five

years in chains, in solitary confinement. His legs were like

matchsticks, while from the hips up he was terribly bloated. His wife

had been forced to denounce him, and had changed the surname of their

children from his to hers to demonstrate that they were cutting him off

forever. Most of their household things, including his clothes, had

been taken away in house raids. As a result of Lin Biao's downfall,

Tung's patron, a foe of Lin Biao's, was back in power, and Tung was

released from prison.

His wife was summoned back from her camp in the nor them border region

to be reunited with him.

On the day of his release, she brought him new clothes.

His first words to her were, "You shouldn't have just brought me

material goods. You should have brought me spiritual food [meaning

Mao's works]." Tung had been reading nothing but these during his five

years in solitary.

349I was staying with his family at the time, and saw him making them

study Mao's articles every day, with a seriousness which I found more

tragic than ridiculous.

A few months after our visit Tung was sent to supervise a case in a

port in the south. His long confinement had left him unfit for a

demanding job, and he soon had a heart attack. The government

dispatched a special plane to take him to a hospital in Guangzhou. The

lift in the hospital was not working, and he insisted on walking up

four floors because he considered being carried upstairs against

Communist morality. He died on the operating table. His family was

not with him because he had left word that 'they should not interrupt

their work."

It was while we were staying with Tung and his family at the end of May

1972 that my mother and I received a telegram saying my father had been

allowed to leave his camp. After the fall of Lin Biao, the camp

doctors had at last given my father a diagnosis, saying that he was

suffering from dangerously high blood pressure, serious heart and liver

trouble, and vascular sclerosis. They recommended a complete checkup

in Peking.

He took a train to Chengdu, and then flew to Peking.

Because there was no public transport to the airport for non passengers

my mother and I had to wait to meet him at the city terminal. He was

thin and burned almost black by the sun. It was the first time in

three and a half years that he had been out of the mountains of Miyi.

For the first few days he seemed at a loss in the big city, and would

refer to crossing the road as 'crossing the river' and taking a bus as

'taking a boat." He walked hesitantly on the crowded streets and

looked somewhat baffled by all the traffic. I assumed the role of his

guide. We stayed with an old friend of his from Yibin who had also

suffered atrociously in the Cultural Revolution.

Apart from this man and Tung, my father did not visit anyone because he

had not been rehabilitated. Unlike me, who was full of optimism, he

was heavy-hearted most of the lime. To try to cheer him up, I dragged

him and my mother out sight-seeing in temperatures sometimes exceeding

xoo F. Once I half-forced him to go to the

A New LiE with The Electricians' Manual ~o3 Great Wall with me in a

crowded coach, choking with dust and sweat. As I babbled away, he

listened with pensive smiles. A baby in the arms of a peasant woman

sitting in front of us started crying, and she smacked it hard. My

father shot up from his seat and yelled at her, "Don't you hit the

baby!" I hurriedly pulled his sleeve and made him sit down. The whole

coach stared at us. It was most unusual for a Chinese to interfere in

a matter like this. I thought with a sigh of how my father had changed

from the days when he had beaten Jin-ming and Xiao-her.

In Peking I also read books which opened new horizons for me. President

Nixon had visited China in February that year. The official line was

that he had come 'with a white flag." The idea that America was the

number-one enemy had by now vanished from my mind, together with much

of my indoctrination. I was overjoyed that Nixon had come because his

visit helped generate a new climate in which some translations of

foreign books were becoming available. They were marked 'for internal

circulation," which meant in theory that they were to be read only by

authorized personnel, but there were no rules specifying to whom they

should be circulated, and they passed freely between friends if one of

350them had privileged access through their job.

I was able to lay my hands on some of these publications.

It was with unimaginable pleasure that I read Nixon's own Six Crises

(somewhat expurgated, of course, given his antiCommunist past), David

Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest, William L. Shirer's The Rise

and Fall of the Third Reich, and The Winds of War by Herman Wouk, with

their (to me) up-to-date picture of the outside world. The

descriptions of the Kennedy administration in The Best and the

Brightest made me marvel at the relaxed atmosphere of the American

government, in contrast with my own so remote, frightening, and

secretive. I was captivated by the style of writing in the nonfiction

works. How cool and detached it was! Even Nixon's Six Crises seemed a

model of calmness compared with the sledgehammer style of the Chinese

media, full of hectoring, denunciations, and assertions. In The Winds

of War I was less impressed by its majestic descriptions of the times

than by its vignettes showing the uninhibited fuss that Western women

could make about their clothing, by their easy access to it and by the

range of colors and styles available. At twenty, I had only a few

clothes, in the same style as everybody else, almost every piece blue,

gray, or white. I closed my eyes and caressed in my imagination all

the beautiful dresses I had never seen or worn.

The increased availability of information from abroad was, of course,

part of the general liberalization after the downfall of Lin Biao, but

Nixon's visit gave it a convenient pretext the Chinese must not lose

face by showing themselves to be totally ignorant of America. In those

days, every step in the process of relaxation had to be given some

farfetched political justification. Learning English was now a worthy

cause for 'winning friends from all over the world' and was therefore

no longer a crime. So as not to alarm or frighten our distinguished

guest, streets and restaurants lost the militant names that had been

imposed on them at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution by the Red

Guards. In Chengdu, although it was not visited by Nixon, the

restaurant The Whiff of Gunpowder switched back to its old name, The

Fragrance of Sweet Wind.

I was in Peking for five months. Whenever I was alone, I thought of

Day. We did not write to each other. I composed poems to him, but

kept them to myself. Eventually, my hope for the future conquered my

regrets about the past.

One piece of news in particular overshadowed all my other thoughts for

the first time since I was fourteen I saw the possibility of a future I

had not dared to dream about: I might be able to go to college. In

Peking, small numbers of students had been enrolled in the previous

couple of years, and it looked as though universities all over the

country would be opening soon. Zhou Enlai was emphasizing a quote by

Mao to the effect that universities were still needed, particularly for

science and techno log I could not wait to get back to Chengdu to start

studying to try t~ get in.

I returned to the factory in September ~972, and sa,a Day without too

much pain. He had also become calm, only occasionally revealing a

glimpse of melancholy. We were good friends again, but we no longer

talked about poetry. I buried myself in my preparations for a

universin' course, although I had no idea which. It was not up to me

to choose, as Mao had said that 'education must be thoroughly

revolutionized." This meant, among other things, that university

students were to be assigned to courses with no consideration for what

351they were interested in that would be individualism, a capitalist vice.

I began to study all the major subjects: Chinese, math, physics,

chemistry, biology, and English.

Mao had also decreed that students were not to come from the

traditional source middle-school graduates but had to be workers or

peasants. This suited me, as I had been a genuine peasant and was now

a worker.

There was to be an entrance exam, Zhou Enlai had decided, although he

had to change the term 'exam' (kaoshO to 'an investigation into the

candidates' situation of handling some basic knowledge, and their

ability to analyze and solve concrete problems," a criterion based on

another Mao quote. Mao did not like exams. The new procedure was that

first one had to be recommended by one's work unit, then came entrance

examinations, then the enrollment authorities weighed the exam results

and the applicant's 'political behavior."

For nearly ten months I spent all my evenings and weekends, and much of

my time at the factory as well, poring over textb9oks that had survived

the flames of the Red Guards. They came from many friends. I also had

a network of tutors who gave up their evenings and holidays happily and

enthusiastically. People who loved learning felt a rapport which bound

them together. This was the reaction from a nation with a highly

sophisticated civilization which had been subjected to virtual

extinction.

In spring 1973, Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated and appointed

vice-premier, the de facto deputy to the ailing Zhou Enlai. I was

thrilled. Deng's comeback seemed to me a sure sign that the Cultural

Revolution was being reversed. He was known to be dedicated to

construction rather than destruction, and was an excellent

administrator. Mao had sent him away to a tractor factory in relative

security to keep him in reserve in case of Zhou Enlai's demise. No

matter how power-crazed, Mao was always careful not to burn his

bridges.

I was delighted at Deng's rehabilitation for personal reasons as well.

I had known his stepmother very well when I was a child, and his

half-sister was our neighbor for years in the compound we all called

her "Auntie Deng." She and her husband had been denounced simply

because they were related to Deng, and the compound residents who had

fawned over her before the Cultural Revolution shunned her. But my

family greeted her as usual. At the same time, she was one of the very

few people in the compound who would tell my family how they admired my

father at the height of his persecution. In those days even a nod, or

a fleeting smile, was rare and precious, and our two families developed

very warm feelings for each other.

In the summer of 1973, university enrollment started. I felt as if I

was awaiting a sentence of life or death. One place in the Foreign

Languages Department at Sichuan University was allocated to the Second

Bureau of Light Industry in Chengdu, which had twenty-three factories

under it, mine being one of them. Each of the factories had to

nominate one candidate to sit for exams. In my factory there were

several hundred workers, and six people applied, including me. An

election was held to select the candidate, and I was chosen by four of

the factory's five workshops.

In my own workshop there was another candidate, a friend of mine who

was nineteen. Both of us were popular, but our work mates could only

352vote for one of us. Her name was read out first; there was an awkward

stirring it was clear that people could not decide what to do. I was

miserable in the extreme if there were a lot of votes for her, there

would be fewer for me. Suddenly she stood up and said with a smile,

"I'd like to forgo my candidacy and vote for Chang Jung. I'm two years

younger than she is. I'll try next year." The workers burst out in

relieved laughter, and promised to vote for her next year. And they

did. She went to the university in 1974.

I was hugely moved by her gesture, and also by the outcome of the vote.

It was as if the workers were helping me to achieve my dreams. My

family background did not hurt, either. Day did not apply: he knew he

had no chance.

I took the Chinese, math, and English exams. I was so nervous the

night before that I could not sleep. When I came home for the lunch

break, my sister was waiting for me. She massaged my head gently, and

I fell into a light snooze. The papers were very elementary, and

scarcely touched on my assiduously imbibed geometry, trigonometry,

physics, and chemistry. I got honors in all my papers, and for my

English oral I got the highest mark of all the candidates in Chengdu.

Before I could relax, there came a crushing blow. On 20 July an

article appeared in the People's Daily about a 'blank exam paper."

Unable to answer the questions in his university entrance papers, an

applicant called Zhang Tie-sheng, who had been sent to the countryside

near Jinzhou, had handed in a blank sheet, along with a letter

complaining that the exams were tantamount to a 'capitalist

restoration." His letter was seized on by Mao's nephew and personal

aide, Mao Yuanxin, who was running the province. Mme Mao and her

cohorts condemned the emphasis on academic standards as 'bourgeois

dictatorship."

"What does it matter even if the whole country becomes illiterate?"

they declared.

"What matters is that the Cultural Revolution achieves the greatest

miumph!"

The exams I had taken were declared void. Entrance to universities was

now to be decided solely by 'political behavior." How that should be

measured became a big question. The recommendation from my factory had

been written after a 'collective appraisal meeting' of the

electricians' team. Day had drafted it and my former female

electrician master had polished it. It made me out to be an absolute

paragon, the most model worker that ever existed.

I had no doubt that the other twenty-two candidates had exactly the

same credentials. There was therefore no way to differentiate between

us.

The official propaganda was not much help. One widely publicized

'hero' shouted, "You ask me for my qualification for university? My

qualification is this!" at which he raised his hands and pointed at

his calluses. But we all had calluses on our hands. We had all been

in factories, and most had worked on farms.

There was only one alternative: the back door.

Most directors of the Sichuan Enrollment Committee were old colleagues

of my father's who had been rehabilitated, and they admired his courage

353and integrity. But, much though he wanted me to have a university

education, my father would not ask them to help.

"It would not be fair to people with no power," he said.

"What would our country become if things had to be done this way?" I

started to argue with him, and ended up in tears. I must have looked

truly heartbroken, because eventually he said, with a pained face.

"All right, I'll do it."

I took his arm and we walked to a hospital about a mile away where one

of the directors of the Enrollment Committee was having a checkup:

nearly all victims of the Cultural Revolution suffered appalling health

as a result of their ordeals. My father walked slowly, with the help

of a stick. His old energy and sharpness had disappeared.

Watching him shuffling along, stopping to rest every now and then,

battling with his mind as well as his legs, I wanted to say "Let's go

back." But I also desperately wanted to get into the university.

On the hospital grounds we sat on the edge of a low stone bridge to

rest. My father looked in torment. Eventually he said, "Would you

forgive me? I really find it very difficult to do this .... For a

second I felt a surge of resentment, and wanted to cry out at him that

there was no fairer alternative. I wanted to tell him how much I had

dreamed of going to the university, and that I deserved it for my hard

work, for my exam results, and because I had been elected. But I knew

my father knew all this. And it was he who had given me my thirst for

knowledge. Still, he had his principles, and because I loved him I had

to accept him as he was, and understand his dilemma of being a moral

man living in a land which was a moral void. I held back my tears and

said, "Of course." We trudged back home in silence.

How lucky I was to have my resourceful mother! She went to the wife of

the head of the Enrollment Committee, who then spoke to her husband. My

mother also went to see the other chiefs, and got them to back me. She

emphasized my exam results, which she knew would be the clincher for

these former capitalist-roaders. In October 1973, I entered the

Foreign Languages Depa~unent of Sichuan University in Chengdu to study

English.

20. "Sniffing after Foreigners' Farts and Calling Them Sweet'-Learning

English in Mao's Wake

(1971-1974)

Since her return from Peking in autumn 1972, helping her five children

had been my mother's major occupation.

My youngest brother, Xiao-fang, then aged ten, needed daily coaching to

make up for his missed school years, and the future of her other

children depended largely on her.

With the society half paralyzed for over six years, an enormous number

of social problems had been created, and simply left unsolved. One of

the most serious was the many millions of young people who had been

sent to the countryside and who were desperate to come back to the

cities. After the demise of Lin Biao it began to be possible for some

to get back, partly because the state needed labor for the urban

economy, which it was now trying to revitalize. But the government

354also had to put strict limits on the number who could return because it

was state policy in China to control the population of the cities: the

state took it on itself to guarantee the urban population food,

housing, and jobs.

So competition for the limited 'return tickets' was fierce.

The state created regulations to keep the number down.

Marriage was one criterion for exclusion. Once married, no

organization in the city would take you. It was on these grounds that

my sister was disqualified from applying for a job in the city, or to a

university, which were the only legitimate ways to get back to Chengdu.

She was extremely miserable, as she wanted to join her husband; his

factory had started working normally again, and as a result he could

not go to Deyang and live with her, except for the official 'marriage

leave' of just twelve days a year. Her only chance of getting to

Chengdu was to obtain a certificate that said she had an incurable

disease which was what many like her were doing. So my mother had to

help her get one from a doctor Mend which said Xiao-hong suffered from

cirrhosis of the liver. She came back to Chengdu at the end of 197z.

The way to get things done now was through personal connections. There

were people coming to see my mother every day schoolteachers, doctors,

nurses, actors, and minor officials appealing for help to get their

children out of the countryside. Often she was their only hope,

although she had no job, and she pulled strings on their behalf with

unflagging energy. My father would not help;

he was too set in his ways to start 'fixing."

Even when the official channel worked, the personal connection was

still essential to make sure things went smoothly and to avoid

potential disaster. My brotherJin-ming got out of his village in March

1972. Two organizations were recruiting new workers from his commune:

one was a factory in his county town making electrical appliances, the

other an unspecified enterprise in the Western District of Chengdu.

Jin-ming wanted to get back to Chengdu, but my mother made inquiries

among her friends in the Western District and found out that the job

was in a slaughterhouse.

Jin-ming immediately withdrew his application and went to work in the

local factory instead.

It was in fact a large plant which had relocated from Shanghai in 1966

as part of Mao's plan to conceal industry in the mountains of Sichuan

against an American or Soviet attack. Jin-ming impressed his fellow

workers with his hard work and fairness, and in 1973 he was one of four

young people elected by the factory to attend a university, out of 200

applicants. He passed his exam papers brilliantly and effortlessly.

But because Father had not been rehabilitated, my mother had to make

sure that when the university came to do the obligatory 'political

investigation' they would not be scared off, and would instead get the

impression that he was about to be cleared. She also had to ensure

that Jin-ming was not pushed out by some failed applicant with powerful

connections. In October 1973, when I went to Sichuan University,

Jin-ming was admitted to the Engineering College of Central China at

Wuhan to study casting.

He would have preferred to do physics, but he was in seventh heaven

anyway.

355While Jin-ming and I had been preparing to try to get into a

university, my second brother, Xiao-her, was living in a state of

despondency. The basic qualification for university entrance was that

one had to have been either a worker, a peasant, or a soldier, and he

had been none of these. The government was still expelling urban youth

en masse to the rural areas, and this was the only future facing him

except joining the armed forces. Dozens applied for every place, and

the only way in was via connections.

My mother got Xiao-her in in December 1972, against almost impossible

odds, as my father had not been cleared.

Xiao-her was assigned to an air force college in northern China, and

after three months' basic training became a radio operator. He worked

five hours a day, in a supremely leisurely manner, and spent the rest

of the time in 'political studies' and producing food.

In the 'studies' sessions everyone claimed they had joined the armed

forces 'to follow the Party's command, to protect the people, to

safeguard the motherland." But

Learning English in Mao's 14like 613 there were more pertinent reasons.

The young men from the cities wanted to avoid being sent to the

countryside, and those from the country hoped to use the army as a

springboard to leap into the city. For peasants from poor areas, being

in the armed forces meant at least a better filled stomach.

As the 197os unfolded, joining the Party, like joining the army, became

increasingly unrelated to ideological commitment. Everyone said in

their applications that the Party was 'great, glorious, and correct,"

and that 'to join the Party means to devote my life to the most

splendid cause of mankind the liberation of the world proletariat."

But for most the real reason was personal advantage. This was the

obligatory step to becoming an officer; and when an officer was

discharged he automatically became a 'state official," with a secure

salary, prestige, and power, not to mention a city registration. A

private had to go back to his village and become a peasant again. Every

year before discharge time there would be stories of suicides,

breakdowns, and depressions.

One evening Xiao-her was sitting with about a thousand soldiers and

officers, and the officers' families, watching an open-air movie.

Suddenly submachine-gun fire crackled out, followed by a huge

explosion. The audience scattered, screaming.

The shots came from a guard who was about to be discharged and sent

back to his village, having failed to get into the Party and thus to be

promoted to officer grade.

First he shot dead the commissar of his company, whom he held

responsible for blocking his promotion, and then he fired at random

into the crowd, tossing a hand grenade.

Five more people were killed, all women and children from officers'

families. Over a dozen were wounded. He then fled into a residential

block, where he was besieged by fellow soldiers, who shouted at him

through megaphones to surrender. But the moment the guard fired out of

the window, they broke and ran, to the amusement of the

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hundreds of excited onlookers. Finally, a special unit arrived. After

a fierce exchange of fire, they broke into the apartment and found the

guard had committed suicide.

Like everyone else around him, Xiao-her wanted to get into the Party.

It was not such a matter of life and death for him as for the peasant

soldiers, since he knew he would not have to go to the countryside

after his military career.

The rule was that you went back to where you came from, so he would

automatically be given a job in Chengdu whether he was a Party member

or not. But the job would be better if he was a Party member. He

would also have more access to information, which was important to him,

since China at the time was an intellectual desert, with almost nothing

to read apart from the crudest propaganda.

Besides these practical considerations, par was never absent. For many

people, joining the Party was rather like taking out an insurance

policy. Party membership meant you were less distrusted, and this

sense of relative security was very comforting. What was more, in an

extremely political environment like the one Xiao-her was in, if he did

not want to join the Party it would be noted in his personal file and

suspicion would follow him: "Why does he not want to join the Party?"

To apply and not be accepted was also likely to give rise to suspicion:

"Why was he not accepted? There must be something wrong with him."

Xiao-her had been reading Marxist classics with genuine interest they

were the only books available, and he needed something to satisfy his

intellectual thirst. Because the Communist Party charter stated that

studying Marxism-Leninism was the first qualification for being a Party

member, he thought he could combine his interest with practical gain.

But neither his bosses nor his comrades were impressed. In fact, they

felt shown up because, coming mostly from peasant backgrounds and being

semiliterate, they could not understand Marx. Xiao-her was criticized

for being arrogant and cutting himself off from the masses. If he

wanted to join the Party, he would have to find another way.

The most important thing, he soon realized, was to please his immediate

bosses. The next was to please his comrades. In addition to being

popular and working hard at his job, he had to 'serve the people' in

the most literal sense.

Unlike most armies, which assign unpleasant and menial tasks to the

lower ranks, the Chinese army operated by waiting for people to

volunteer for jobs like fetching water for morning ablutions and

sweeping the grounds. Reveille was at 6:3o a.m.; the 'honored task' of

getting up before this fell to those who aspired to join the Party. And

there were so many of them they fought each other for the brooms. In

order to secure a broom, people got up earlier and earlier. One

morning Xiao-her heard someone sweeping the grounds just after 4 a.m.

There were other important chores, and the one which counted most was

helping to produce food. The basic food allowance was very small, even

for officers. There was meat only once a week. So every company had

to grow its own grain and vegetables and raise its own pigs. At

harvest time the company commissar would often deliver pep talks:

"Comrades, now is the time of testing by the Party!

We must finish the

357whole field by this evening! Yes, the work needs ten times the

manpower we have. But every one of us revolutionary fighters can do

the job of ten men!

Communist Party members must take a leading role. For those who want

to join the Party, this is the best time to prove yourselves! Those

who have passed the test will be able to join the Party on the

battlefield at the end of the day!"

Party members did have to work hard to fulfill their 'leading role,"

but it was the aspiring applicants who really had to exert themselves.

On one occasion, Xiao-her became so exhausted that he collapsed in the

middle of a

field. While the new members who had earned 'battlefield enrollment'

raised their right fists and gave the standard pledge 'to fight all my

life for the glorious Communist cause," Xiao-her was taken to a

hospital, where he had to stay for days.

The most direct path to the company had several dozen of unequaled

place in the hearts

Party was raising pigs. The these, and they occupied an of the

soldiers; officers and men alike would hang around the pigsty,

observing, commenting, and willing the animals to grow. If the pigs

were doing well, the swine herds were the darlings of the company, and

there were many contestants for this profession.

Xiao-her became a full-time swineherd.

to mention the psychological pressure.

It was hard, filthy work, not

Every night he and his colleagues took turns to get up in the small

hours to give the pigs an extra feed. When a sow produced piglets they

kept watch night after night in case she crushed them. Precious

soybeans were carefully picked, washed, ground, strained, made into

'soybean milk," and lovingly fed to the mother to stimulate her milk.

Life in the air force was very unlike what Xiao-her had imagined.

Producing food took up more than a third of the entire time he was in

the military. At the end of a year's arduous pig raising, Xiao-her was

accepted into the Party.

Like many others, he put his feet up and began to take it easy.

After membership in the Party, everyone's ambition was to become an

officer; whatever advantage the former brought, the latter doubled it.

Getting to be an officer depended on being picked by one's superiors,

so the key was never to displease them. One day Xiao-her was summoned

to see one of the college's political commissars.

Xiao-her was on tenterhooks, not knowing whether he was in for some

unexpected good fortune or total disaster. The commissar, a plump man

in his fifties with puffy eyes and a loud, commanding voice, looked

exceedingly benign as he lit up a cigarette and asked Xiao-her about

his family background, age, and state of health. He also asked whether

he had a fiance to which Xiao-her replied that he did not. It struck

Xiao-her as a good sign that the man was being so personal. The

commissar went on to praise him: "You have studied Marxism-Leninism-Mao

Zedong Thought conscientiously. You have worked hard. The masses have

a good impression of you. Of course, you must keep on being modest;

modesty makes you progress," and so on. By the time the commissar

stubbed out his cigarette, Xiao-her thought his promotion was in his

358pocket.

The commissar lit a second cigarette and began to tell a story about a

fire in a cotton mill, and about a woman spinner who had been severely

burned dashing back in to rescue 'state property." In fact, all her

limbs had had to be amputated, so that there was only a head and a

torso left, although, the commissar stressed, her face had not been

destroyed, or more important her ability to produce babies. She was,

said the commissar, a heroine, and was going to be publicized on a

grand scale in the press. The Party would like to grant all her

wishes, and she had said that she wanted to marry an air force officer.

Xiao-her was young, handsome, unattached, and could be made an officer

at any time .... Xiao-her sympathized with the lady, but marrying her

was another matter. But how could he refuse the commissar? He could

not produce any convincing reasons. Love?

Love was supposed to be bound up with 'class feelings," and who could

deserve more class feelings than a Communist heroine? Saying he did

not know her would not get him off the hook either. Many marriages in

China had been the result of an arrangement by the Party. As a Party

member, particularly one hoping to become an officer, Xiao-her was

supposed to say: "I resolutely obey the Party's decision!" He bitterly

regretted having said he had no fiance. His mind was racing to think

of a way to say no tactfully as the commissar went on about the

advantages:

immediate promotion to officer, publicity as a hero, a fulltime nurse,

and a large allowance for life.

The commissar lit yet another cigarette, and paused.

Xiao-her weighed his words. Taking a calculated risk, he asked if this

was already an irreversible Party decision. He knew the Party always

preferred people to 'volunteer." As he expected, the commissar said

no: it was up to Xiao-her.

Xiao-her decided to bluff his way through: he 'confessed' that although

he did not have a fiancte, his mother had arranged a girlfriend for

him. He knew this girlfriend had to be good enough to knock out the

heroine, and this meant possessing two attributes: the right class

background and good works in that order. So she became the daughter of

the commander of a big army region, and worked in an army hospital.

They had just begun 'talking about love."

The commissar backed off, saying he had only wanted to see how Xiao-her

felt, and had no intention of forcing a match on him. Xiao-her was not

punished, and not long afterward he became an officer and was put in

charge of a ground radio communications unit. A young man from a

peasant background came forward to marry the disabled heroine.

Meanwhile, Mme Mao and her cohorts were renewing their efforts to

prevent the country from working. In industry, their slogan was: "To

stop production is revolution itself." In agriculture, in which they

now began to meddle seriously: "We would rather have socialist weeds

than capitalist crops." Acquiring foreign technology became 'sniffing

after foreigners' farts and calling them sweet." In education: "We

want illiterate working people, not educated spiritual aristocrats."

They called for schoolchildren to rebel against their teachers again;

in January 1974, classroom windows, tables, and chairs in schools in

Peking were smashed, as in 1966. Mme Mao claimed this was like 'the

359Learning English in Mao's 14ake 610 revolutionary action of English

workers destro~4ng machines in the eighteenth century." All this

demagogueD' had one purpose: to create trouble for Zhou Enlai and Deng

Xiaoping and generate chaos. It was only in persecuting people and in

destruaion that Mme Mao and the other luminaries of the Cultural

Revolution had a chance to 'shine." In construaion they had no

place.

Zhou and Deng had been making tentative efforts to open the country up,

so Mme Mao launched a fresh attack on foreign culture. In early 1974

there was a big media campaign denouncing the Italian director

Michelangelo Antonioni for a film he had made about China, although no

one in China had seen the film, and few had even heard of it or of

Antonioni. This xenophobia was extended to Beethoven after a visit by

the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In the two years since the fall of Lin Biao, my mood had changed from

hope to despair and fury. The only source of comfort was that there

was a fight going on at all, and that the lunacy was not reigning

supreme, as it had in the earlier years of the Cultural Revolution.

During this period, Mao was not giving his full backing to either

side.

He hated the efforts of Zhou and Deng to reverse the Cultural

Revolution, but he knew that his wife and her acolytes could not make

the country work.

Mao let Zhou carry on with the administration of the country, but set

his wife upon Zhou, particularly in a new campaign to 'criticize

Confucius." The slogans ostensibly denounced Lin Biao, but were really

aimed at Zhou, who, it was widely held, epitomized the virtues

advocated by the ancient sage. Even though Zhou had been unwaveringly

loyal, Mao still could not leave him alone. Not even now, when Zhou

was fatally ill with advanced cancer of the bladder.

It was in this period that I started to realize that it was Mao who was

really responsible for the Cultural Revolution. But I still did not

condemn him explicitly, even in my own mind. It was so difficult to

destroy a god! But,

psychologically, I was ripe for his name to be spelled out for me.

Education became the front line of the sabotage by Mme Mao and her

cabal, because it was not immediately vital to the economy and because

every attempt at learning and teaching involved a reversal of the

glorified ignorance of the Cultural Revolution. When I entered the

university, I found myself in a battlefield.

Sichuan University had been the headquarters of 26 August, the Rebel

group that had been the task force of the Tings, and the buildings were

pockmarked with scars from the seven years of the Cultural Revolution.

Scarcely a window was intact. The pond in the middle of the campus,

once renowned for its elegant lotuses and goldfish, was now a stinking,

mosquito-breeding swamp. The French plane trees which lined the avenue

leading from the main gate had been mutilated.

The moment I entered the university a political campaign started up

against 'going through the back door." Of course, there was no mention

of the fact that it was the Cultural Revolution leaders themselves who

had blocked the 'front door." I could see that there were a lot of

high officials' children among the new 'worker-peasant-soldier'

360students, and that virtually all the rest had connections the peasants

with their production team leaders or commune secretaries, the workers

with their factory bosses, if they were not petty officials themselves.

The 'back door' was the only way in. My fellow students demonstrated

lit He vigor in this campaign.

Every afternoon, and some evenings, we had to 'study' turgid People's

Daily articles denouncing one thing or another, and hold nonsensical

'discussions' at which everyone repeated the newspaper's overblown,

vapid language.

We had to stay on the campus all the time, except Saturday evening and

Sunday, and had to return by Sunday evening.

I shared a bedroom with five other girls.

There were

Learning English in Mao's Wake 62 I two tiers of three bunk beds on

opposite walls. In between was a table and six chairs where we did our

work. There was scarcely room for our washbasins. The window opened

onto a stinking open sewer.

English was my subject, but there was almost no way to learn it. There

were no native English speakers around, indeed no foreigners at all.

The whole of Sichuan was closed to foreigners. Occasionally the odd

one was let in, always a 'friend of China," but even to speak to them

without authorization was a criminal offense. We could be put into

prison for listening to the BBC or the Voice of America.

No foreign publications were available except The Worker, the paper of

the minuscule Maoist Communist Party of Britain, and even this was

locked up in a special room. I remember the thrill of being given

permission once, just once, to look at a copy. My excitement wilted

when my eyes fell on the front-page article echoing the campaign to

criticize Confucius. As I was sitting there nonplussed, a lecturer

whom I liked walked past and said with a smile, "That paper is probably

read only in China."

Our textbooks were ridiculous propaganda. The first English sentence

we learned was "Long live Chairman Mao!" But no one dared to explain

the sentence grammatically. In Chinese the term for the optative mood,

expressing a wish or desire, means 'something unreal." In 1966 a

lecturer at Sichuan University had been beaten up for 'having the

audacity to suggest that "Long live Chairman Mao!" was unreal!" One

chapter was about a model youth hero who had drowned after jumping into

a flood to save an electricity pole because the pole would be used to

carry the word of Mao.

With great difficulty, I managed to borrow some English language

textbooks published before the Cultural Revolution from lecturers in my

depa~unent and from Jin-ming, who sent me books from his university by

post. These contained extracts from writers like Jane Austen, Charles

Dickens, and Oscar Wilde, and stories from European and

American history. They were a joy to read, but much of my energy went

toward finding them and then trying to keep them.

Whenever someone approached, I would quickly cover the books with a

newspaper. This was only partly because of their 'bourgeois' content.

It was also important not to appear to be studying too conscientiously,

and not to arouse my fellow students' jealousy by reading something far

beyond them. Although we were studying English, and were paid par fly

361for our propaganda value by the government to do this, we must not be

seen to be too devoted to our subject: that was considered being 'white

and expert." In the mad logic of the day, being good at one's

profession ('expert') was automatically equated with being politically

unreliable ('white').

I had the misfortune to be better at English than my classmates, and

was therefore resented by some of the 'student officials," the

lowest-level controllers, who supervised political indoctrination

sessions and checked the 'thought conditions' of their fellow students.

The student officials in my course had mostly come from the

countryside. They were keen to learn English, but most of them were

semi-literate, and had lit He aptitude. I sympathized with their

anxiety and frustration, and understood their jealousy of me. But

Mao's concept of 'white and expert' made them feel virtuous about their

inadequacies, and gave their envy political respectability, and them a

malicious opportunity to vent their exasperation.

Every now and then a student official would require a 'heart-to-heart'

with me. The leader of the Party cell in my course was a former

peasant named Ming who had joined the army and then become a production

team leader. He was a very poor student, and would give me long,

righteous lectures about the latest developments in the Cultural

Revolution, the 'glorious tasks of us worker peasant-soldier students,"

and the need for 'thought reform." I needed these heart-to-hearts

because of my

Learning English in Mao's Pl~kc 02.;

'shortcomings," but Ming would never come straight to the point. He

would let a criticism hang in midair "The masses have a complaint about

you. Do you know what it is?" and watch the effect on me. He would

eventually disclose some allegation. One day it was the inc~itablc

charge that I was 'white and expert." Another day I was 'bourgeois'

because I failed to fight for the chance to clean the toilet, or to

wash my comrades' clothes all obligatory good deeds. And yet another

time he would attribute a despicable motive: that I did not spend most

of my time tutoring my classmates because I did not want them to catch

up with me.

One criticism that Ming would put to me with trembling lips (he

obviously felt strongly about it) was "The masses have reported that

you are aloof. You cut yourself off from the masses." It was common

in China for people to assert that you were looking down on them if you

failed to hide your desire for some solitude.

One level up from the student officials were the political supervisors,

who also knew little or no English. They did not like me. Nor I them.

From time to time I had to report my thoughts to the one in charge of

my year, and before every session I would wander around the campus for

hours summoning up the courage to knock on his door. Although he was

not, I believed, an evil person, I feared him. But most of all I

dreaded the inevitable tedious, ambiguous diatribe. Like many others,

he loved playing cat and mouse to indulge his feeling of power. I had

to look humble and earnest, and promise things I did not mean and had

no intention of doing.

I began to feel nostalgia for my years in the countryside and the

factory, when I had been left relatively alone. Universities were much

more tightly controlled, being of particular interest to Mme Mao. Now

I was among people who had benefited from the Cultural Revolution.

362Without it, many of them would never have been here.

Once some students in my year were given the project

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of compiling a dictionary of English abbreviations. The department had

decided that the existing one was 'reactionary' because, not

surprisingly, it had far more 'capitalist' abbreviations than ones with

an approved origin.

"Why should Roosevelt have an abbreviation FDR and not Chairman Mao?"

some students asked indignantly. With tremendous solemnity they

searched for acceptable entries, but eventually had to give up their

'historic mission' as there simply were not enough of the right

kinds.

I found this environment unbearable. I could understand ignorance, but

I could not accept its glorification, still less its right to rule.

We often had to leave the university to do things that were irrelevant

to our subjects. Mao had said that we should 'learn things in

factories, the countryside, and army units." What exactly we were

meant to learn was, typically, unspecified. We started with 'learning

in the countryside."

One week into the first term of my first year, in October 1973, the

whole university was packed off to a place on the outskirts of Chengdu

called Mount Dragon Spring, which had been the victim of a visit by one

of China's vice-premiers, Chen Yonggui. He was previously the leader

of a farming brigade called Dazhai in the mountainous northern province

of Shanxi, which had become Mao's model in agriculture, ostensibly

because it relied more on the peasants' revolutionary zeal than on

material incentives.

Mao did not notice, or did not care, that Dazhai's claims were largely

fraudulent. When Vice-Premier Chen visited Mount Dragon Spring he had

remarked, "All, you have mountains here! Imagine how many fields you

could create!" as if the fertile hills covered in orchards were like

the barren mountains of his native village. But his remarks had the

force of law. The crowds of university students dynamited the orchards

that had provided Chengdu with apples, plums, peaches, and flowers. We

transported stones from afar with pull carts and shoulder poles, for

the construction of terraced rice paddies.

It was compulsory to demonstrate zeal in this, as in all actions called

for by Mao. Many of my fellow students worked in a manner that

screamed out for notice. I was regarded as lacking in enthusiasm, par

fly because I had difficulty hiding my aversion to this activity, and

partly because I did not sweat easily, no matter how much energy I

expended. Those students whose sweat poured out in streams were

invariably praised at the summing-up sessions every evening.

My university colleagues were certainly more eager than proficient. The

sticks of dynamite they shoved into the ground usually failed to go

off, which was just as well, as there were no safety precautions. The

stone walls we built around the terraced edges soon collapsed, and by

the time we left, after two weeks, the mountain slope was a wasteland

of blast holes, cement solidified into shapeless masses, and piles of

stones. Few seemed concerned about this.

363The whole episode was ultimately a show, a piece of theater - a

pointless means to a pointless end.

I loathed these expeditions and hated the fact that our labor, and our

whole existence, was being used for a shoddy political game. To my

intense irritation, I was sent off to an army unit, again with the

whole university, in late 1974.

The camp, a couple of hours' truck journey from Chengdu, was in a

beautiful spot, surrounded by rice paddies, peach blossoms, and bamboo

groves. But our seventeen days there felt like a year. I was

perpetually breathless from the long runs every morning, bruised from

falling and crawling under the imaginary gunfire of 'enemy' tanks, and

exhausted from hours of aiming a rifle at a target or throwing wooden

hand grenades. I was expected to demonstrate my passion for, and my

excellence at, all these activities, at which I was hopeless. It was

unforgivable for me to be good only at English, my subject. These army

tasks were political assignments, and I had to prove myself in them.

Ironically, in the army itself, good marksmanship and other military

skills would lead to a soldier being condemned as 'white and expert."

I was one of the handful of students who threw the wooden hand grenades

such a dangerously short distance that we were banned from the grand

occasion of throwing the real thing. As our pathetic group sat on the

top of a hill listening to the distant explosions, one girl burst into

sobs. I felt deeply apprehensive too, at the thought of having given

apparent proof of being 'white."

Our second test was shooting. As we marched onto the firing range, I

thought to myself: I cannot afford to fail this, I absolutely have to

pass. When my name was called and I lay on the ground, gazing at the

target through the gunsight, I saw complete blackness. No target, no

ground, nothing. I was trembling so much my whole body felt powerless.

The order to fire sounded faint, as though it was floating from a great

distance through clouds. I pulled the trigger, but I did not hear any

noise, or see anything.

When the results were checked, the instructors were p"7~led: none of my

ten bullets had even hit the board, let alone the target.

I could not believe it. My eyesight was perfect. I told the

instructor the gun barrel must be bent. He seemed to believe me: the

result was too spectacularly bad to be entirely my fault. I was given

another gun, provoking complaints from others who had asked,

unsuccessfully, for a second chance. My second go was slightly better:

two of the ten bullets hit the outer rings. Even so, my name was still

at the bottom of the whole university. Seeing the results stuck on the

wall like a propaganda poster, I knew that my 'whiteness' was further

bleached. I heard snide remarks from one student official: "Humph!

Getting a second chance! As if that would do her any good! If she has

no class feelings, or class hatred, a hundred goes won't save her!"

In my misery, I retreated into my own thoughts, and hardly noticed the

soldiers, young peasants in their early twenties, who instructed us.

Only one incident drew my attention to them. One evening when some

girls collected their clothes from the line on which they had hung them

to dry, their knickers were unmistakably stained with semen.

In the university I found refuge in the homes of the professors and

lecturers who had obtained their jobs before the Cultural Revolution,

364on academic merit. Several of the professors had been to Britain or

the United States before the Communists took power, and I felt I could

relax and speak the same language with them. Even so, they were

cautious. Most intellectuals were, as the result of years of

repression. We avoided dangerous topics. Those who had been to the

West rarely talked about their time there.

Although I was dying to ask, I checked myself, not wanting to place

them in a difficult position.

Partly for the same reason, I never discussed my thoughts with my

parents. How could they have responded with dangerous truths or safe

lies? Besides, I did not want them to worry about my heretical ideas.

I wanted them to be genuinely in the dark, so that if anything happened

to me they could truthfully say they did not know.

The people to whom I did communicate my thoughts were friends of my own

generation. Actually, there was little else to do except talk,

particularly with men friends.

To 'go out' with a man being seen alone together in public was

tantamount to an engagement. There was still virtually no

entertainment to go to anyway. Cinemas showed only the handful of

works approved by Mine Mao.

Occasionally a rare foreign movie, perhaps from Albania, would be

screened, but most of the tickets disappeared into the pockets of

people with connections. A ferocious crowd would swamp the box office

and try to tear each other away from the window to get the remaining

few tickets. Scalpers made a killing.

So, we just sat at home and talked.

We sat very properly,

as in Victorian England. For women to have friendships with men was

unusual in those days, and a girlfriend once said to me, "I've never

known a girl who has so many men friends. Girls normally have

girlfriends." She was right. I knew many girls who married the first

man who came near them. From my own men friends, the only

demonstrations of interest I got were some rather sentimental poems and

restrained letters one of which, admittedly, was written in blood from

the goalkeeper on the college football team.

My friends and I often talked about the West.

the conclusion that it was a wonderful place.

By then I had come to

Paradoxically, the first people to put this idea into my head were Mao

and his regime. For years, the things to which I was naturally

inclined had been condemned as evils of the West: pretty clothes,

flowers, books, entertainment, politeness, gentleness, spontaneity,

mercy, kindness, liberty, aversion to cruelty and violence, love

instead of 'class hatred," respect for human lives, the desire to be

left alone, professional competence .... As I sometimes wondered to

myself, how could anyone not desire the West.}

I was extremely curious about the alternatives to the kind of life I

had been leading, and my friends and I exchanged rumors and scraps of

information we dug from official publications. I was struck less by

the West's technological developments and high living standards than by

the absence of political witch-hunts, the lack of consuming suspicion,

the dignity of the individual, and the incredible amount of liberty. To

me, the ultimate proof of freedom in the West was that there seemed to

365be so many people there attacking the West and praising China. Almost

every other day the front page of Reference, the newspaper which carded

foreign press items, would feature some eulogy of Mao and the Cultural

Revolution. At first I was angered by these, but they soon made me see

how tolerant another society could be. I realized that this was the

kind of society I wanted to live in: where people were allowed to hold

different, even outrageous views. I began to see that it was the very

tolerance of oppositions, of protesters, that kept the West

progressing.

Still, I could not help being irritated by some obser~'ations. Once I

read an article by a Westerner who came to China to see some old

friends, university professors, who told him cheerfully how they had

enjoyed being denounced and sent to the back end of beyond, and how

much they had relished being reformed. The author concluded that Mao

had indeed made the Chinese into 'new people' who would regard what was

misery to a Westerner as pleasure.

I was aghast. Did he not know that repression was at its worst when

there was no complaint? A hundred times more so when the victim

actually presented a smiling face? Could he not see to what a pathetic

condition these professors had been reduced, and what horror must have

been involved to degrade them so? I did not realize that the acting

that the Chinese were putting on was something to which Westerners were

unaccustomed, and which they could not always decode.

I did not appreciate either that information about China was not easily

available, or was largely misunderstood, in the West, and that people

with no experience of a regime like China's could take its propaganda

and rhetoric at face value. As a result, I assumed that these eulogies

were dishonest. My friends and I would joke that they had been bought

by our government's 'hospitality." When foreigners were allowed into

certain restricted places in China following Nixon's visit, wherever

they went the authorities immediately cordoned off enclaves even within

these enclaves. The best transport facilities, shops, restaurants,

guest houses and scenic spots were reserved for them, with signs

reading "For Foreign Guests Only." Mao-tai, the most sought-after

liquor, was totally unavailable to ordinary Chinese, but freely

available to foreigners. The best food was saved for foreigners. The

newspapers proudly reported that Henry Kissinger had said his waistline

had expanded as a result of the many twelve-course banquets he

enjoyed

630 "Sniffing after Foreigners' Fans

during his visits to China. This was at a time when in Sichuan,

"Heaven's Granary," our meat ration was half a pound per month, and the

streets of Chengdu were full of homeless peasants who had fled there

from famine in the north, and were living as beggars. There was great

resentment among the population about how the foreigners were treated

like lords. My friends and I began saying among ourselves: "Why do we

attack the Kuomintang for allowing signs saying "No Chinese or Dogs"

aren't we doing the same~'

Getting hold of information became an obsession. I benefited

enormously from my ability to read English, as although the university

library had been looted during the Cultural Revolution, most of the

books it had lost had been in Chinese. Its extensive English-language

collection had been turned upside down, but was still largely intact.

The librarians were delighted that these books were being read,

366especially by a student, and were extremely helpful. The index system

had been thrown into chaos, and they dug through piles of books to find

the ones I wanted. It was through the efforts of these kind young men

and women that I laid my hands on some English classics.

Louisa May Alcott's Little Women was the first novel I read in English.

I found women writers like her, Jane Austen, and the Bronti~ sisters

much easier to read than male authors like Dickens, and I also felt

more empathy with their characters. I read a brief history of European

and American literature, and was enormously impressed by the Greek

tradition of democracy, Renaissance humanism, and the Enlightenment's

questioning of everything. When I read in Gulliver's Travels about the

emperor who 'published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon

great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs," I wondered if

Swift had been to China. My joy at the sensation of my mind opening up

and expanding was beyond description.

Being alone in the library was heaven for me.

approached it, usually at dusk, anticipating

My heart would leap as I

Learning English in Mao's P~ake 63 i the pleasure of solitude with my

books, the outside world ceasing to exist. As I hurried up the flight

of stairs, into the pastiche classical-style building, the smell of old

books long stored in airless rooms would give me tremors of excitement,

and I would hate the stairs for being too long.

With the help of dictionaries which some professors lent me, I became

acquainted with Longfellow, Wait Whitman, and American history. I

memorized the whole of the Declaration of Independence, and my heart

swelled at the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

men are created equal," and those about men's 'unalienable Rights,"

among them "Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These concepts were

unheard of in China, and opened up a marvelous new world for me. My

notebooks, which I kept with me at all times, were full of passages

like these, passionately and tearfully copied out.

One autumn day in 1974, with an air of extreme secrecy, a friend of

mine showed me a copy of Newsweek with pictures of Mao and Mme Mao in

it. She could not read English, and was keen to know what the article

said. This was the first genuine foreign magazine I had ever set eyes

on. One sentence in the article struck me like a flash of lightning.

It said that Mme Mao was Mao's 'eyes, ears, and voice." Up fill that

moment, I had never allowed myself to contemplate the obvious

connection between Mme Mao's deeds and her husband. But now Mao's name

was spelled out for me. My blurred perceptions surrounding his image

came sharply into focus. It was Mao who had been behind the

destruction and suffering. Without him, Mme Mao and her second-rate

coterie could not have lasted a single day. I experienced the thrill

of challenging Mao openly in my mind for the first time.

27.

"If Thb Is Paradise, What Then Is Hell?

"The Death of My Father

(1974-1970)

All this time, unlike most of his former colleagues, my father had not

been rehabilitated or given a job. He had been sitting at home in

Meteorite Street doing nothing since he came back from Peking with my

mother and me in autumn 197z. The problem was that he had criticized

Mao by name. The team investigating him was sympathetic and tried to

ascribe some of what he had said against Mao to his mental illness. But

the team came up against fierce opposition amongst the higher

367authorities, who wanted to give him a severe condemnation. Many of my

father's colleagues sympathized with him and indeed admired him.

But they had to think about their own necks. Besides, my father did

not belong to any clique and had no powerful patron which might have

helped get him cleared. Instead, he had well-placed enemies.

One day back in 1968, my mother, who was briefly out from detention,

saw an old friend of my father's at a roadside food stall. This man

had thrown in his lot with the Tings. He was with his wife, who had

actually been introduced to him by my mother and Mrs. Ting when they

were working together in Yibin. In spite of the couple's obvious

reluctance to have anything to do with her beyond a brief nod, my

mother marched up to their table and joined them.

She asked them to appeal to the Tings to spare my father.

After hearing my mother out, the man shook his head and said, "It's not

so simple .... Then he dipped a finger into his tea and wrote the

character Zuo on the table. He gave my mother a meaningful look, got

up with his wife, and left without another word.

Zuo was a former close colleague of my father's, and was one of the few

senior officials who did not suffer at all in the Cultural Revolution.

He became the darling of Mrs. Shau's Rebels and a friend of the Tings,

but survived their demise and that of L'm Biao and remained in power.

My father would not withdraw his words against Mao.

But when the team investigating him suggested putting them down to his

mental illness, he acquiesced, with great anguish.

Meanwhile, the general situation made him despondent.

There were no principles governing either the behavior of the people or

the conduct of the Party. Corruption began to come back in a big way.

Officials looked after their families and friends first. For fear of

being beaten up, teachers gave all pupils top marks irrespective of the

quality of their work, and bus conductors would not collect fares.

Dedication to public good was openly sneered at. Mao's Cultural

Revolution had destroyed both Party discipline and civic morality.

My father found it difficult to control himself so that he would not

speak his mind and say things that would incriminate him and his family

further.

He had to rely on tranquilizers. When the political climate was more

relaxed, he took less; when the campaigns intensified, he took more.

Every time the psychiatrists renewed his supply, they shook their

heads, saying it was extremely dangerous for him to continue taking

such large

634 "If This Is Paradise, What Then Is Hell?"

doses.

But he could only manage short periods off the pills.

In May 1974 he sensed that he was on the verge of a breakdown, and

asked to be given psychiatric treatment.

This time he was hospitalized swiftly, thanks to his former colleagues

368who were now back in charge of the health service.

I got leave from the university and went to stay with him in the

hospital to keep him company. Dr. Su, the psychiatrist who had

treated him before, was looking after him again. Under the Tings, Dr.

Su had been condemned for giving a true diagnosis about my father, and

had been ordered to write a confession saying my father had been faking

madness. He refused, for which he was subjected to denunciation

meetings, beaten up, and thrown out of the medical profession. I saw

him one day in 1968, emptying rubbish bins and cleaning the hospital

spittoons. His hair had turned gray, though he was only in his

thirties. After the downfall of the Tings he was rehabilitated. He

was very friendly to my father and me, as were all the doctors and

nurses. They told me they would take good care of my father, and that

I did not have to stay with him. But I wanted to. I thought he needed

love more than anything else. And I was anxious about what might

happen if he fell down with no one around. His blood pressure was

dangerously high, and he had already had several minor heart attacks,

which had left him with a walking impediment. He looked as though he

might slip at any time.

Doctors warned that a fall could be fatal. I moved into the men's ward

with him, into the same room he had occupied in summer 1967. Each room

could accommodate two patients, but my father had the room to himself,

and I slept in the spare bed.

I was with him every moment in case he fell over. When he went to the

toilet, I waited outside. If he stayed in there for what I thought was

too long, I would start to imagine he had had a heart attack, and would

make a fool of myself by calling out to him. Every day I took long

walks with him in the back garden, which was full of other psychiatric

patients in gray-striped pajamas walking incessantly, with spiritless

eyes. The sight of them always made me scared and intensely sad.

The garden itself was full of vivid colors. White butterflies

fluttered among yellow dandelions on the lawn. In the surrounding

flowerbeds were a Chinese aspen, graceful swaying bamboos, and a few

garnet flowers of pomegranates behind a thicket of oleanders. As we

walked, I composed my poems.

At one end of the garden was a large entertainment room where the

inmates went to play cards and chess and to flip through the few

newspapers and sanctioned books.

One nurse told me that earlier in the Cultural Revolution the room had

been used for the inmates to study Chairman Mao's works because his

nephew, Mao Yuanxin, had 'discovered' that Mao's Litfie Red Book,

rather than medical treatment, was the cure for mental patients. The

study sessions did not last long, the nurse told me, because 'whenever

a patient opened his mouth, we were all scared to death. Who knew what

he was going to say?"

The patients were not violent, as their treatment had sapped their

physical and mental vitality. Even so, living among them was

frightening, particularly at night, when my father's pills had sent him

into a sound sleep and the whole building had become quiet. Like all

the rooms, ours had no lock, and several times I woke with a start to

find a man standing by my bed, holding the mosquito net open and

staring at me with the intensity of the insane. I would break into a

cold sweat and pull up the quilt to stifle a scream: the last thing I

wanted was to wake my father sleep was vital to his recovery.

369Eventually, the patient would shuffle away.

After a month, my father went home. But he was not completely cured

his mind had been under too much pressure for too long, and the

political environment was still too repressive for him to relax. He

had to keep taking tranquilizers. There was nothing the psychiatrists

could do. His nervous system was wearing out, and so were his body and

mind.

Eventually, a draft verdict on him was drawn up by the team

investigating him. It said that he had 'committed serious political

errors' which was one step away from behind labeled a 'class enemy." In

line with Party regulations, the draft verdict was given to my father

to sign as confirmation that he accepted it. When he read it, he

wept.

But he signed.

The verdict was not accepted by the higher authorities.

They wanted a harsher one.

In March 1975, my brother-in-law Specs was up for promotion in his

factory, and the personnel officers of the factory came to my father's

depa~UHent for the obligatory political investigation. A former Rebel

from Mrs. Shau's group received the visitors and told them my father

was 'anti-Mao." Specs did not get his promotion. He did not mention

it to my parents for fear of upsetting them, but a friend from my

father's department came to the house and my father overheard him

whispering the news to my mother. The pain he showed was harrowing

when he apologized to Specs for jeopardizing his future. In tears of

despair he said to my mother, "What have I done for even my son-in-law

to be dragged down like this? What do I have to do to save you?"

In spite of taking a large number of tranquilizers, my father hardly

slept over the following days and nights. On the afternoon of 9 April

he said he was going to have a nap.

When my mother finished cooking supper in our small ground-floor

kitchen, she thought she would leave him to sleep a little longer.

Eventually she went upstairs to the bedroom and found she could not

wake him. She realized he had had a heart attack. We had no

telephone, so she rushed to the provincial government clinic one street

away and found its head, Dr. Jen.

The Death o My Father 637 DrJen was extremely able, and before the

Cultural Revolution he had been in charge of the health of the elite in

the compound. He had often come to our apartment, and would discuss

the health of all my family, with great concern. But when the Cultural

Revolution started and we were out of favor, he became cold and

disdainful toward us. I saw many people like DrJen, and their behavior

never ceased to shock me.

When my mother found him, Dr. Jen was clearly irritated, and said he

would come when he had finished what he was doing. She told him a

heart attack could not wait, but he looked at her as if to say that

impatience would not help her. It was an hour before he deigned to

come to our house with a nurse, but without any first-aid equipment.

The nurse had to walk back to fetch it. Dr.

few times, and then just sat and waited.

Jen turned Father over a

370Another half an hour passed, by which time my father was dead.

That night I was in my dormitory at the university, working by

candlelight during one of the frequent blackouts.

Some people from my father's department arrived and drove me home

without explanation.

Father lay sideways in his bed, his face unusually peaceful, as though

he had gone to a restful sleep. He no longer looked senescent, but

youthful, even younger than his age of fifty-four. I felt as if my

heart was torn into fragments, and I wept uncontrollably.

For days I wept in silence. I thought of my father's life, his wasted

dedication and crushed dreams. He need not have died. Yet his death

seemed so inevitable. There was no place for him in Mao's China,

because he had tried to be an honest man. He had been betrayed by

something to which he had given his whole life, and the betrayal had

destroyed him.

My mother demanded that DrJen be punished.

negligence, my father might not have died.

If it had not been for his

Her request was dismissed as a 'widow's emotionalism."

She decided not to pursue the matter. She wanted to concentrate on a

more important battle: getting an acceptable memorial speech for my

father.

This speech was extremely important, because it would be understood by

everyone to be the Party's assessment of my father. It would be put

into his personal file and continue to determine his children's future,

even though he was dead. There were set patterns and fixed

formulations for such a speech. Any deviation from the standard

expressions used for an official who had been cleared would be

interpreted as the Party having reservations about, or condemning, the

dead person. A draft speech was drawn up and shown to my mother. It

was full of damning deviations. My mother knew that with this

valedictory my family would never be free of suspicion. At best we

would live in a state of permanent insecurity; more likely, we would be

discriminated against for generation after generation. She turned down

several drafts.

The odds were heavily against her, but she knew that there was a lot of

sympathy for my father. This was the traditional time for a Chinese

family to engage in a bit of emotional blackmail. After my father's

death she had had a collapse, but she ban led with undiminished

determination from her sickbed. She threatened to denounce the

authorities at the memorial service if she did not get an acceptable

valedictory. She summoned my father's friends and colleagues to her

bedside, and told them she was putting the future of her children in

their hands. They promised to speak up for my father. In the end, the

authorities relented.

Although no one yet dared to treat him as rehabilitated, the assessment

was modified to one that was fairly innocuous.

The service was held on 21 April. Following the standard practice, it

was organized by a 'funeral committee' of my father's former

colleagues, including people who had helped to persecute him, like Zuo.

371It was carefully staged down to the last detail, and was attended by

about 500 people, according to the prescribed formula. These were

apportioned between the several dozen departments and bureaus of the

provincial government and the offices that came under my father's

department. Even the odious Mrs. Shau was there. Each organization

was asked to send a wreath, made of paper flowers, the size of which

was specified. In a way, my family welcomed the fact that the occasion

was official. A private ceremony was unheard of for someone of my

father's position, and would be taken as a repudiation by the Party. I

did not recognize most of the people there, but all my close friends

who knew about my father's death came, including Plumpie, Nana, and the

electricians from my old factory. My classmates from Sichuan

University came as well, including the student official Ming. My old

friend Bing, whom I had refused to see after my grandmother's death,

turned up and our friendship immediately picked up where it had left

off six years before.

The ritual prescribed that one 'representative of the family of the

deceased' should speak, and this role fell to me. I recalled my

father's character, his moral principles, his faith in his Party, and

his passionate dedication to the people. I hoped that the tragedy of

his death would leave the participants with plenty to mull over.

At the end, when everyone filed past and shook hands with us, I saw

tears on the faces of many former Rebels.

Even Mrs. Shall looked lugubrious. They had a mask for every

occasion. Some of the Rebels murmured to me, "We are all very sorry

about what your father went through."

Maybe they were. But what difference did that make? My father was

dead and they had had a big hand in killing him. Would they do the

same thing to somebody else in the next campaign, I wondered.

A young woman I did not know laid her head on my shoulder and sobbed

violently. I felt a note being tucked into my hand. I read it

afterward. On it was scribbled: "I was deeply moved by the character

of your father. We must learn from him and be worthy successors to the

cause he has left behind the great proletarian revolutionary cause."

Did my speech really give rise to this, I pondered. It seemed there

was no escape from the Communists' appropriation of moral principles

and noble sentiments.

Some weeks before my father's death, I had been sitting in the Chengdu

railway station with him waiting for a friend of his to arrive. We

were in the same half-open waiting area where my mother and I had sat

nearly a decade before when she was going to Peking to appeal for him.

The waiting area had not changed much, except that it looked shabbier,

and was much more crowded. Still more people thronged the large square

out in front. Some were sleeping there, some just sitting, others

breast-feeding their babies;

quite a few were begging. These were peasants from the north, where

there was a local famine the result of bad weather and, in some cases,

sabotage by Mme Mao's coterie. They had come down on trains, crammed

onto the roofs of the carriages. There were many stories about people

being swept off, or decapitated going through tunnels.

On our way to the station, I had asked my father if I could go down the

Yangtze during the summer vacation.

372"The priority in my life," I had declared, 'is to have fun."

He had shaken his head disapprovingly.

"When you are young, you should make your priority study and work."

I brought up the subject again in the waiting area. A cleaner was

sweeping the ground. At one point her path was par fly blocked by a

northern peasant woman who was sitting on the cement floor with a

tattered bundle next to her and two toddlers in rags. A third child

was suckling her breast, which she had bared without a trace of

shyness, and which was black with dirt. The cleaner swept the dust

right over them, as though they were not there. The peasant woman did

not move a muscle.

My father turned to me and said, "With people living like this all

around you, how can you possibly have fun?" I was silent. I did not

say, "But what can I, a mere individual, do? Must I live miserably for

nothing?" That would have sounded shockingly selfish. I had been

brought up in the tradition of 'regarding the interest of the whole

nation as my own duty' (yi tian-xia wei fi-ren).

Now, in the emptiness I felt after my father's death, I began to

question all such precepts. I wanted no grand mission, no 'causes,"

just a life a quiet, perhaps a frivolous life of my own. I told my

mother that when the summer vacation came I wanted to travel down the

Yangtze.

She urged me to go. So did my sister, who, along with Specs, had been

living with my family since she had returned to Chengdu. Specs's

factory, which should normally have been responsible for providing him

with housing, had built no new apartments during the Cultural

Revolution. Then many employees, like Specs, had been single, and

lived in dormitories eight to a room. Now, ten years later, most of

them were married and had children.

There was nowhere for them to live, so they had to stay with their

parents or parents-in-law, and it was commonplace for three generations

to live in one room.

My sister had not been given a job, as the fact that she had got

married before she had a job in the city excluded her from employment.

Now, thanks to a regulation which said that when a state employee died

one of their offspring could take their place, my sister was given a

post in the administration of the Chengdu College of Chinese

Medicine.

In July I set off on my journey with Jin-ming, who was studying in

Wuhan, a big city on the Yangtze. Our first stop was the nearby

mountain of Lushan, which had luxuriant vegetation and an excellent

climate. Important Party conferences had been held there, including

the one in 1959 at which Marshal Peng Dehuai was denounced, and the

site was designated as a place of interest 'for people to receive a

revolutionary education." When I suggested going there to have a look,

Jin-ming said incredulously, "You don't want a break from

"revolutionary education"?"

We took a lot of photographs on the mountain, and had finished a whole

roll of thirty-six exposures except for one.

373On our way down, we passed a two-story villa, hidden in a thicket of

Chinese parasol trees, magnolia, and pines. It looked almost like a

random pile of stones against the background of the rocks. It struck

me as an unusually lovely place, and I snapped my last shot. Suddenly

a man materialized out of nowhere and asked me in a low but commanding

voice to hand over my camera. He wore civilian clothes, but I noticed

he had a pistol. He opened the camera and exposed my entire roll of

film. Then he disappeared, as if into the earth. Some tourists

standing next to me whispered that this was one of Mao's summer villas.

I felt another pang of revulsion toward Mao, not so much for his

privilege, but for the hypocrisy of allowing himself luxury while

telling his people that even comfort was bad for them. After we were

safely out of earshot of the invisible guard, and I was bemoaning the

loss of my thirty-six pictures, Jin-ming gave me a grin: "See where

goggling at holy places gets you!"

We left Lushan by bus. Like every bus in China, it was packed, and we

had to crane our necks desperately trying to breathe. Virtually no new

buses had been built since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution,

during which time the urban population had increased by several tens of

millions. After a few minutes, we suddenly stopped. The front door

was forced open, and an authoritative-looking man in plainclothes

squeezed in.

"Get down!

Get down!"

he barked.

"Some American guests are coming this way. It is harmful to the

prestige of our motherland for them to see all these messy heads!" We

tried to crouch down, but the bus was too crowded. The man shouted,

"It is the duty of everyone to safeguard the honor of our motherland!

We must present an orderly and dignified appearance! Get down! Bend

your knees!"

Suddenly I heard Jin-ming's booming voice: "Doesn'T Chairman Mao

instruct us never to bend our knees to American imperialists?" This

was asking for trouble.

Humor was not appreciated. The man shot a stern glance in our

direction, but said nothing. He gave the bus another quick scan, and

hurried off. He did not want the "American guests' to witness a scene.

Any sign of discord had to be hidden from foreigners.

Wherever we went as we traveled down the Yangtze we saw the aftermath

of the Cultural Revolution: temples smashed, statues toppled, and old

towns wrecked. Litfie evidence remained of China's ancient

civilization. But the loss went even deeper than this. Not only had

China destroyed most of its beautiful things, it had lost its

appreciation of them, and was unable to make new ones. Except for the

much-scarred but still stunning landscape, China had become an ugly

country.

At the end of the vacation, I took a steamer alone from Wuhan back up

through the Yangtze Gorges. The journey took three days. One morning,

as I was leaning over the side, a gust of wind blew my hair loose and

my hairpin fell into the river. A passenger with whom I had been

chatting pointed to a tributary which joined the Yangtze just where we

were passing, and told me a story.

In 33 ~c, the emperor of China, in an attempt to appease the country's

powerful northern neighbors, the Huns, decided to send a woman to marry

the barbarian king. He made his selection from the portraits of the

3743,000 concubines in his court, many of whom he had never seen. As she

was for a barbarian, he selected the ugliest portrait, but on the day

of her departure he discovered that the woman was in fact extremely

beautiful. Her portrait was ugly because she had refused to bribe the

court painter.

The emperor ordered the artist to be executed, while the lady wept,

sitting by a river, at having to leave her country to live among the

barbarians. The wind carried away her hairpin and dropped it into the

river as though it wanted to keep something of hers in her homeland.

Later on, she killed herself.

Legend had it that where her hairpin dropped, the river turned crystal

clear, and became known as the Crystal

River. My fellow passenger told me this was the tributary we were

passing. With a grin, he declared: "Ah, bad omen!

You might end up living in a foreign land and marrying a barbarian!" I

smiled faintly at the traditional Chinese obsession about other races

being 'barbarians," and wondered whether this lady of antiquity might

not actually have been better off marrying the 'barbarian' king. She

would at least be in daily contact with the grassland, the horses, and

nature. With the Chinese emperor, she was living in a luxurious

prison, without even a proper tree, which might enable the concubines

to climb a wall and escape. I thought how we were like the frogs at

the bottom of the well in the

Chinese legend, who claimed that the sky was only as big as the round

opening at the top of their well. I felt an intense and urgent desire

to see the world.

At the time I had never spoken with a foreigner, even though I was

twenty-three, and had been an Englishlanguage student for nearly two

years. The only foreignersI had ever even set eyes on had been in

Peking in 1972.

A foreigner, one of the few 'friends of China," had come to my

university once. It was a hot summer day and I was having a nap when a

fellow student burst into our room and woke us all by shrieking: "A

foreigner is here! Let's go and look at the foreigner!" Some of the

others went, but I decided to stay and continue my snooze. I found the

whole idea of gazing, zombie like rather ridiculous. Anyway, what was

the point of staring if we were forbidden to open our mouths to him,

even though he was a 'friend of China'?

I had never even heard a foreigner speaking, except on one single

Linguaphone record. When I started learning the language, I had

borrowed the record and a phonograph, and listened to it at home in

Meteorite Street. Some neighbors gathered in the courtyard, and said

with their eyes wide open and their heads shaking, "What funny

sounds!"

They asked me to play the record over and over again.

Speaking to a foreigner was the dream of every student, and my

opportunity came at last. When I got back from my trip down the

Yangtze, I learned that my year was being sent in October to a port in

the south called Zhanjiang to practice our English with foreign

sailors. I was thrilled.

375Zhanjiang was about 75 miles from Chengdu, a journey of two days and

two nights by rail. It was the southernmost large port in China, and

quite near the Vietnamese border.

It felt like a foreign country, with turn-of-the-century colonial-style

buildings, pastiche Romanesque arches, rose windows, and large verandas

with colorful parasols. The local people spoke Cantonese, which was

almost a foreign language. The air smelled of the unfamiliar sea,

exotic tropical vegetation, and an altogether bigger world.

But my excitement at being there was constantly doused by frustration.

We were accompanied by a political supervisor and three lecturers, who

decided that, although we were staying only a mile from the sea, we

were not to be allowed anywhere near it. The harbor itself was closed

to outsiders, for fear of 'sabotage' or defection. We were told that a

student from Guangzhou had managed to stow away once in a cargo

steamer, not realizing that the hold would be sealed for weeks, by

which time he had perished. We had to restrict our movements to a

clearly defined area of a few blocks around our residence.

Regulations like these were part of our daily life, but they never

failed to infuriate me. One day I was seized by an absolute compulsion

to get out. I faked illness and got permission to go to a hospital in

the middle of the city. I wandered the streets desperately trying to

spot the sea, without success. The local people were unhelpful: they

did not like non-Cantonese speakers, and refused to understand me. We

stayed in the port for three weeks, and only once were we allowed, as a

special treat, to go to an island to see the ocean.

As the point of being there was to talk to the sailors, we were

organized into small groups to take turns working in the two places

they were allowed to frequent: the Friendship Store, which sold goods

for hard currency, and the Sailors' Club, which had a bar, a

restaurant, a billiards room, and a ping-pong room.

There were strict rules about how we could talk to the sailors. We

were not allowed to speak to them alone, except for brief exchanges

over the counter of the Friendship Store. If we were asked our names

and addresses, under no circumstances were we to give our real ones. We

all prepared a false name and a nonexistent address. After every

conversation, we had to write a detailed report of what had been said

which was standard practice for anyone who had contact with foreigners.

We were warned over and over again about the importance of observing

'discipline in foreign contacts' (she waifi-lu). Otherwise, we were

told, not only would we get into serious trouble, other students would

be banned from coming.

Actually, our opportunities for practising English were few and far

between. The ships did not come every day, and not all sailors came on

shore. Most of the sailors were not native English speakers: there

were Greeks, Japanese, Yugoslavs, Africans, and many Filipinos, most of

whom spoke only a little English, although there was also a Scottish

captain and his wife, as well as some Scandinavians whose English was

excellent.

While we waited in the club for our precious sailors, I often sat on

the veranda at the back, reading and gazing at the groves of coconut

and palm trees, silhouetted against a sapphire-blue sky. The moment

the sailors sauntered in, we would leap up and virtually grab them,

while trying to appear as dignified as possible, so eager were we to

engage them in conversation. I often saw a pn7~led look in their eyes

376when we declined their offers of a drink. We were forbidden to accept

drinks from them. In fact, we were not allowed to drink at all: the

fancy foreign bottles and cans

The Death of,~y leather 647 on display were exclusively for the

foreigners. We just sat there, four or five infimidatingly

serious-looking young men and women. I had no idea how odd it must

have seemed to the sailors and how far from their expectations of port

life.

When the first black sailors arrived, our teachers gently warned the

women students to watch out: "They are less developed and haven't

learned to control their instincts, so they are given to displaying

their feelings whenever they like: touching, embracing, even kissing."

To a roomful of shocked and disgusted faces, our teachers told us that

one woman in the last group had burst out screaming in the middle of a

conversation when a Gambian sailor had tried to hug her. She thought

she was going to be raped (in the middle of a crowd, a Chinese crowd!),

and was so scared that she could not bring herself to talk to another

foreigner for the rest of her stay.

The male students, particularly the student officials, assumed

responsibility for safeguarding us women. Whenever a black sailor

started talking to one of us, they would eye each other and hurry to

our rescue by taking over the conversation and positioning themselves

between us and the sailors. Their precautions may not have been

noticed by the black sailors, especially as the students would

immediately start talking about 'the friendship between China and the

peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America."

"China is a developing country," they would intone, reciting from our

textbook, 'and will stand forever by the side of the oppressed and

exploited masses in the third world in their struggle against the

American imperialists and the Soviet revisionists." The blacks would

look baffled but touched. Sometimes they embraced the Chinese men, who

returned comradely hugs.

Much was being made by the regime about China being one of the

developing countries, part of the third world, according to Mao's

'glorious theory." But Mao made it sound as if this was not the

acknowledgment of a fact, but that China was magnanimously lowering

itself to their level. The way he said it left no doubt that we had

joined the ranks of the third world in order to lead it and protect it,

and the world regarded our rightful place to be somewhat grander.

I was extremely irritated by this self-styled superiority.

What had we got to be superior about?

Our population?

Our size? In Zhanjiang, I saw that the third world sailors, with their

flashy watches, cameras, and drinks none of which we had ever seen

before were immeasurably better off, and incomparably freer, than all

but a very few Chinese.

I was terribly curious about foreigners, and was eager to discover what

they were really like. How similar to the Chinese were they, and how

different? But I had to try to conceal my inquisitiveness which, apart

from being politically dangerous, would be regarded as losing face.

Under Mao, as in the days of the Middle Kingdom, the Chinese placed

great importance on holding themselves with 'dignity' in front of

foreigners, by which was meant appearing aloof, or inscrutable. A

377common form this took was to show no interest in the outside world, and

many of my fellow students never asked any questions.

Perhaps partly due to my uncontrollable curiosity, and partly due to my

better English, the sailors all seemed keen to talk to me in spite of

the fact that I took care to speak as little as possible so that my

fellow students had more chance to practice. Some sailors would even

refuse to talk to the other students. I was also very popular with the

director of the Sailors' Club, an enormous, burly man called Long. This

aroused the ire of Ming and some of the minders. Our political

meetings now included an examination of how we were observing 'the

disciplines in foreign contact." It was stated that I had violated

these because my eyes looked 'too interested," I 'smiled too often,"

and when I did so I opened my mouth 'too wide." I was also criticized

for using hand gestures:

we women students were supposed to keep our hands under the table and

sit motionless.

Much of Chinese societ)' still expected its women to hold themselves in

a sedate manner, lower their eyelids in response to men's stares, and

restrict their smile to a faint curve of the lips which did not expose

their teeth. They were not meant to use hand gestures at all. If they

contravened any of these canons of behavior they would be considered

'flirtatious." Under Mao, flirting with./bre/gners was an unspeakable

crime.

I was furious at the innuendo against me. It had been my Communist

parents who had given me a liberal upbringing.

They had regarded the restrictions on women as precisely the sort of

thing a Communist revolution should put an end to. But now oppression

of women joined hands with political repression, and served resentment

and petty jealousy.

One day, a Pakistani ship arrived. The Pakistani military attache came

down from Peking. Long ordered us all to spring-clean the club from

top to bottom, and laid on a banquet, for which he asked me to be his

interpreter, which made some of the other students extremely envious. A

few days later the Pakistanis gave a farewell dinner on their ship, and

I was invited. The military attache had been to Sichuan, and they had

prepared a special Sichuan dish for me. Long was delighted by the

invitation, as was I. But despite a personal appeal from the captain

and even a threat from Long to bar future students, my teachers said

that no one was allowed on board a foreign ship.

"Who would take the responsibility if someone sailed away on the ship?"

they asked. I was told to say I was busy that evening.

As far as I knew, I was turning down the only chance I would ever have

of a trip out to sea, a foreign meal, a proper conversation in English,

and an experience of the outside world.

Even so, I could not silence the whispers. Ming asked pointedly, "Why

do foreigners like her so much?" as though

65o "If This Is Paradise, What Then Is Hell?"

there was something suspicious in that. The report filed on me at the

end of the trip said my behavior was 'politically dubious."

378In this lovely port, with its sunshine, sea breezes, and coconut trees,

every occasion that should have been joyous was turned into misery. I

had a good friend in the group who tried to cheer me up by putting my

distress into perspective. Of course, what I encountered was no more

than minor unpleasantness compared with what victims of jealousy

suffered in the earlier years of the Cultural Revolution. But the

thought that this was what my life at its best would be like depressed

me even more.

This friend was the son of a colleague of my father's.

The other students from cities were also friendly to me. It was easy

to distinguish them from the students of peasant backgrounds, who

provided most of the student officials.

The city students were much more secure and confident when confronted

with the novel world of the port and they therefore did not feel the

same anxiety and the urge to be aggressive toward me. Zhanjiang was a

severe culture shock to the former peasants, and their feelings of

inferiority were at the core of their compulsion to make life a misery

for others.

After three weeks, I was both sorry and relieved to say goodbye to

Zhanjiang. On the way back to Chengdu, some friends and I went to the

legendary Guilin, where the mountains and waters looked as though they

had sprung from a classical Chinese painting. There were foreign

tourists there, and we saw one couple with a baby in the man's arms. We

smiled at each other, and said "Good morning' and "Goodbye." As soon

as they disappeared, a plainclothes policeman stopped us and questioned

us.

I returned to Chengdu in December, to find the city seething with

emotion against Mme Mao and three men from Shanghai, Zhang Chunqiao,

Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen, who had banded together to hold the fort

of the Cultural Revolution. They had become so close that

The Death of My Father 65 I Mao had warned them against forming a "Gang

of Four' in July 1974, although we did not know this at the time.

By now the eighty-one-year-old Mao had begun to give them his full

backing, having had enough of the pragmatic approach of Zhou Enlai and

then of Deng Xiaoping, who had been running the day-to-day work of the

government since January 1975, when Zhou had gone into a hospital with

cancer. The Gang's endless and pointless mini-campaigns had driven the

population to the end of their tether, and people had started

circulating rumors privately, as almost the only outlet for their

intense frustration.

Highly charged speculation was particularly directed against Mine Mao.

Since she was frequently seen together with one particular opera actor,

one ping-pong player, and one ballet dancer, each of whom had been

promoted by her to head their fields, and since they all happened to be

handsome young men, people said she had taken them as 'male

concubines," something she had openly and airily said women should do.

But everyone knew this did not apply to the general public. In fact,

it was under Mme Mao in the Cultural Revolution that the Chinese

suffered extreme sexual repression. With her controlling the media and

the arts for nearly ten years, any reference to love was deleted from

the hearing and sight of the population. When a Vietnamese army

song-and-dance troupe came to China, those few who were lucky enough to

see it were told by the announcer that a song which mentioned love 'is

379about the comradely affection between two comrades." In the few

European films which were allowed mainly from Albania and Romania all

scenes of men and women standing close to each other, let alone

kissing, were cut out.

Frequently in crowded buses, trains, and shops I would hear women

yelling abuse at men and slapping their faces.

Sometimes the man would shout a denial and an exchange of insults would

ensue. I experienced many attempted molestations. When it happened, I

would just sneak away from the trembling hands or knees. I felt sorry

for these men.

They lived in a world where there could be no outlet for their

sexuality unless they were lucky enough to have a happy marriage, the

chances of which were slim. The deputy Party secretary of my

university, an elderly man, was caught in a department store with sperm

oozing through his trousers. The crowds had pressed him against a

woman in front of him. He was taken to the police station, and

subsequently expelled from the Party. Women had just as tough a time.

In every organization, one or two of them would be condemned as

'worn-out shoes' for having had extramarital affairs.

These standards were not applied to the rulers. The octogenarian Mao

surrounded himself with pretty young women. Although the stories about

him were whispered and cautious, those about his wife and her cronies,

the Gang of Four, were open and uninhibited. By the end of 1975, China

was boiling with incensed rumors. In the mini-campaign called "Our

Socialist Motherland Is Paradise," many openly hinted at the question

which I had asked myself for the first time eight years before: "If

this is paradise, what then is hell?"

On 8 January 1976, Premier Zhou Enlai died. To me and many other

Chinese, Zhou had represented a comparatively sane and liberal

government that believed in making the country work. In the dark years

of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou was our meager hope. I was

griefstricken at his death, as were all my friends. Our mourning for

him and our loathing of the Cultural Revolution and of Mao and his

coterie became inseparably interwoven.

But Zhou had collaborated with Mao in the Cultural Revolution. It was

he who delivered the denunciation of Liu Shaoqi as an "American spy."

He met almost daily with the Red Guards and the Rebels and issued

orders to them.

When a majority of the Politburo and the country's marsh Ms tried to

put a halt to the Cultural Revolution in February 1967 Zhou did not

give them his support. He was Mao's faithful servant. But perhaps he

had acted as he did

The Death of Mr. Father 053 in order to prevent an even more

horrendous disaster, like a civil war, which an open challenge to Mao

could have brought on. By keeping China running, he made it possible

for Mao to wreak havoc on it, but probably also saved the country from

total collapse. He protected a number of people as far as he judged

safe, including, for a time, m?

father, as well as some of China's most important cultural monuments.

It seemed that he had been caught up in an insoluble moral dilemma,

although this does not exclude the possibility that survival was his

priority. He must have known that if he had tried to stand up to Mao,

380he would have been crushed.

The campus became a spectacular sea of white paper wreaths and mourning

posters and couplets. Everyone wore a black arm band a white paper

flower on their chest, and a sorrowful expression. The mourning was

par fly spontaneous and partly organized. Because it was generally

known that at the time of his death Zhou had been under attack from the

Gang of Four, and because the Gang had ordered the mourning for him to

be played down, showing grief at his death was a way for both the

general public and the local authorities to show their disapproval of

the Gang.

But there were many who mourned Zhou for very different reasons. Ming

and other student officials from my course extolled Zhou's alleged

contribution to 'suppressing the counterrevolutionary Hungarian

uprising in 1956," his hand in establishing Mao's prestige as a world

leader, and his absolute loyalty to Mao.

Outside the campus, there were more encouraging sparks of dissent. In

the streets of Chengdu, graffiti appeared on the margins of the wall

posters and large crowds gathered, craning their necks to read the tiny

handwriting. One poster read,

The sky is now dark, A great star is fallen... Scribbled in the margin

were the words: "How could the sky be dark: what about "the red, red

sun"?" (meaning Mao). Another graffito appeared on a wall slogan

reading "Deep-fry the persecutors of Premier Zhou!" It said: "Your

monthly ration of cooking oil is only two liang [3.2 ounces]. What

would you use to fry these persecutors with?" For the first time in

ten years, I saw irony and humor publicly displayed, which sent my

spirits soaring.

Mao appointed an ineffectual nobody called Hua Guofeng to succeed Zhou,

and launched a campaign to 'denounce Deng and hit back against a

right-wing comeback." The Gang of Four published Deng Xiaoping's

speeches as targets for denunciation. In one speech in 1975, Deng had

admitted that peasants in Yan'an were worse off than when the

Communists first arrived there after the Long March forty years before.

In another, he had said that a Party boss should say to the

professionals, "I follow, you lead." In yet another, he had outlined

his plans for improving living standards, for allowing more freedom,

and for ending political victimization. Comparing these documents to

the Gang of Four's actions made Deng a folk hero and brought people's

loathing of the Gang to the boiling point. I thought incredulously:

they seem to hold the Chinese population in such contempt that they

assume we will hate Deng rather than admire him after reading these

speeches, and what is more, that we will love them!

In the university, we were ordered to denounce Deng in endless mass

meetings. But most people showed passive resistance, and wandered

around the auditorium, or chatted, knitted, read, or even slept during

the ritual theatrics.

The speakers read their prepared scripts in flat, expressionless,

almost inaudible voices.

Because Deng came from Sichuan, there were numerous rumors about him

having been sent back to Chengdu for exile. I often saw crowds lining

the streets because they had heard he was about to pass by. On some

occasions the crowds numbered tens of thousands.

381At the same time, there was more and more public animosity toward the

Gang of Four, also known as the Gang from Shanghai. Suddenly bicycles

and other goods made in Shanghai stopped selling. When the Shanghai

football team came to Chengdu they were booed all the way through the

game. Crowds gathered outside the stadium and shouted abuse at them as

they went in and came out.

Acts of protest broke out all over China, and reached their peak during

the Tomb-Sweeping Festival in spring 1976, when the Chinese

traditionally pay their respects to the dead. In Peking, hundreds of

thousands of citizens gathered for days on end in Tiananmen Square to

mourn Zhou with specially crafted weaths, passionate poetry readings,

and speeches. In symbolism and language which, though coded, everyone

understood, they poured out their hatred of the Gang of Four, and even

of Mao. The protest was crushed on the night of 5 April, when the

police attacked the crowds, arresting hundreds. Mao and the Gang of

Four called this a "Hungarian-type counterrevolutionary rebellion."

Deng Xiaoping, who was being held incommunicado, was accused of

stage-managing the demonstrations, and was labeled "China's Nagy' (Nagy

was the Hungarian prime minister in 1956). Mao officially fired Deng,

and intensified the campaign against him.

The demonstration may have been suppressed and ritually condemned in

the media, but the fact that it had taken place at all changed the mood

of China. This was the first large-scale open challenge to the regime

since it was founded in 1949.

In June 1976 my class was packed off for a month to a factory in the

mountains to 'learn from the workers." When the month was up, I went

with some friends to climb the lovely Mount Emei, "Beauty's Eyebrow,"

to the west of Chengdu. On our way down the mountain, on 28 July, we

heard a loud transistor radio which a tourist was carrying.

I had always felt intensely annoyed by some people's insatiable love

for this propaganda machine. And in a scenic spot! As though our cars

had not suffered enough with all the blaring nonsense from the

ever-present loudspeakers. But this time something caught my

attention.

There had been an earthquake at a coal-mining city near Peking called

Tangshan. I realized it must be an unprecedented disaster, because the

media normally did not report bad news. The official figure was

242,000 dead and 164,000 badly injured.

Although they filled the press with propaganda about their concern for

the victims, the Gang of Four warned that the nation must not be

diverted by the earthquake and forget the priority: to 'denounce Deng."

Mme Mao said publicly, "There were merely several hundred thousand

deaths. So what? Denouncing Deng Xiaoping concerns eight hundred

million people." Even from Mine Mao, this sounded too outrageous to be

true, but it was officially relayed to us.

There were numerous earthquake alerts in the Chengdu area, and when I

returned from Mount Emei I went with my mother and Xiao-fang to

Chongqing, which was considered safer. My sister, who remained in

Chengdu, slept under a massive thick oak table covered in blankets and

quilts. Officials organized people to erect makeshift sha~, and

detailed teams to keep a round-the-clock watch on the behavior of

various animals which were thought to possess earthquake-predicting

powers. But followers of the Gang of Four put up wall slogans barking

"Be alert to Deng Xiaoping's criminal attempt to exploit earthquake

382phobia to suppress revolution!" and held a rally to 'solemnly condemn

the capitalist-roaders who use the fear of an earthquake to sabotage

the denunciation of Deng." The rally was a flop.

I returned to Chengdu at the beginning of September, by which time the

earthquake scare was subsiding. On the afternoon of 9 September 1976 I

was attending an English class. At about 2:40 we were told that there

would be an important broadcast at three o'clock that we were all to

assemble in the courtyard to listen. We had had to do such things

before, and I walked outside in a state of irritation.

It was a typically cloudy autumn Chengdu day. I heard the rustling of

bamboo leaves along the walls. Just before three, while the

loudspeaker was making scratching noises as it tuned up, the Party

secretary of our department took up a position in front of the

assembly.

She looked at us sadly, and in a low, halting voice, choked out the

words: "Our Great Leader Chairman Mao, His Venerable Reverence

[ta-lao-ren-jia] has..."

Suddenly, I realized that Mao was dead.

28.

Fighting to Take Wing (1976-1978)

The news filled me with such euphoria that for an instant I was numb.

My ingrained self-censorship immediately started working: I registered

the fact that there was an orgy of weeping going on around me, and that

I had to come up with some suitable performance. There seemed nowhere

to hide my lack of correct emotion except the shoulder of the woman in

front of me, one of the student officials, who was apparently

heartbroken. I swiftly buried my head in her shoulder and heaved

appropriately. As so often in China, a bit of ritual did the trick.

Sniveling heartily she made a movement as though she was going to turn

around and embrace me I pressed my whole weight on her from behind to

keep her in her place, hoping to give the impression that I was in a

state of abandoned grief.

In the days after Mao's death, I did a lot of thinking. I knew he was

considered a philosopher, and I tried to think what his 'philosophy'

really was. It seemed to me that its central principle was the need or

the desire? for perpetual conflict. The core of his thinking seemed

to be that human struggles were the motivating force of history and

that in order to make history 'class enemies' had to be continuously

created en masse. I wondered whether there were any other philosophers

whose theories had led to the suffering and death of so many. I

thought of the terror and misery to which the Chinese population had

been subjected. For what?

But Mao's theory might just be the extension of his personality. He

was, it seemed to me, really a restless fight promoter by nature, and

good at it. He understood ugly human instincts such as envy and

resentment, and knew how to mobilize them for his ends. He ruled by

getting people to hate each other. In doing so, he got ordinary

Chinese to carry out many of the tasks undertaken in other

dictatorships by professional elites. Mao had managed to turn the

people into the ultimate weapon of dictatorship.

That was why under him there was no real equivalent of the KGB in

China. There was no need. In bringing out and nourishing the worst in

people, Mao had created a moral wasteland and a land of hatred. But

383how much individual responsibility ordinary people should share, I

could not decide.

The other hallmark of Maoism, it seemed to me, was the reign of

ignorance. Because of his calculation that the cultured class were an

easy target for a population that was largely illiterate, because of

his own deep resentment of formal education and the educated, because

of his megalomania, which led to his scorn for the great figures of

Chinese culture, and because of his contempt for the areas of Chinese

civilization that he did not understand, such as architecture, art, and

music, Mao destroyed much of the country's cultural heritage. He left

behind not only a brutalized nation, but also an ugly land with lit He

of its past glory remaining or appreciated.

The Chinese seemed to be mourning Mao in a heartfelt fashion. But I

wondered how many of their tears were genuine. People had practiced

acting to such a degree that they confused it with their true feelings.

Weeping for Mao was perhaps just another programmed act in their

programmed lives.

Yet the mood of the nation was unmistakably against continuing Mao's

policies. Less than a month after his death, on 6 October, Mme Mao was

arrested, along with the other members of the Gang of Four. They had

no support from anyone not the army, not the police, not even their own

guards. They had had only Mao. The Gang of Four had held power only

because it was really a Gang of Five.

When I heard about the ease with which the Four had been removed, I

felt a wave of sadness. How could such a small group of second-rate

tyrants ravage 900 million people for so long? But my main feeling was

joy. The last tyrants of the Cultural Revolution were finally gone. My

rapture was widely shared. Like many of my countrymen, I went out to

buy the best liquors for a celebration with my family and friends, only

to find the shops out of stock there was so much spontaneous

rejoicing.

There were official celebrations as well exactly the same kinds of

rallies as during the Cultural Revolution, which infuriated me. I was

particularly angered by the fact that in my department, the political

supervisors and the student officials were now arranging the whole

show, with unperturbed self-righteousness.

The new leadership was headed by Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng,

whose only qualification, I believed, was his mediocrity. One of his

first acts was to announce the construction of a huge mausoleum for Mao

on Tiananmen Square. I was outraged: hundreds of thousands of people

were still homeless after the earthquake in Tangshan, living in

temporary shacks on the pavements.

With her experience, my mother had immediately seen that a new era was

beginning. On the day after Mao's death she had reported for work at

her depas'uuent. She had been at home for five years, and now she

wanted to put her energy to use again. She was given a job as the

number seven deputy director in her department, of which she had been

the director before the Cultural Revolution. But she did not mind.

To me in my impatient mood, things seemed to go on as before. In

January 1977, my university course came to an end. We were given

neither examinations nor degrees.

Although Mao and the Gang of Four were gone, Mao's rule that we had to

384return to where we had come from still applied. For me, this meant the

machinery factory. The idea that a university education should make a

difference to one's job had been condemned by Mao as 'training

spiritual aristocrats."

I was desperate to avoid being sent back to the factory.

If that happened, I would lose any chance of using my English: there

would be nothing to translate, and no one to speak the language with.

Once again, I turned to my mother. She said there was only one way

out: the factory had to refuse to take me back. My friends at the

factory persuaded the management to write a report to the Second Bureau

of Light Industry saying that, although I was a good worker, they

realized they should sacrifice their own interests for a greater cause:

our motherland would benefit from my English.

After this florid letter went off, my mother sent me to see the chief

manager of the bureau, a Mr. Hui. He had been a colleague of hers,

and had been very fond of me when I was a baby. My mother knew he

still had a soft spot for me. The day after I went to see him, a board

meeting of his bureau was convened to discuss my case. The board

consisted of some twenty directors, all of whom had to meet to make any

decision, however trivial. Mr. Hui managed to convince them that I

should be given a chance to use my English, and they wrote a formal

letter to my university.

Although my depa~iment had given me a hard time, they needed teachers,

and in January 19771 became an assistant lecturer in English at Sichuan

University. I had mixed feelings about working there, as I would have

to live on the campus, under the eyes of political supervisors and

ambitious and jealous colleagues. Worse, I soon learned that I was not

to have anything to do with my profession for a year. A week after my

appointment I was sent to the countryside on the outskirts of Chengdu,

as part of my 'reeducation' program.

I labored in the fields and sat through endless tedious meetings.

Boredom, dissatisfaction, and the pressure put on me for not having a

fiance at the advanced age of twenty-five helped push me into

infatuations with a couple of men. One of them I had never met, but he

wrote me beautiful letters. I fell out of love the moment I set eyes

on him. The other, Hou, had actually been a Rebel leader.

He was a kind of product of the times: brilliant and unscrupulous.

was dazzled by his charm.

I

Hou was detained in the summer of 1977 when a campaign started to

apprehend 'the followers of the Gang of Four." These were defined as

the 'heads of the Rebels' and anyone who had engaged in criminal

violence, which was vaguely described as including torture, murder, and

destruction or looting of state property. The campaign petered out

within months. The main reason was that Mao was not repudiated, nor

was the Cultural Revolution as such. Anyone who had done evil simply

claimed that they had acted out of loyalty to Mao. There were no clear

criteria to judge criminality either, except in the case of the most

blatant murderers and torturers. So many had been involved in house

raids, in destroying historical sites, antiques, and books, and in the

factional fighting. The greatest horror of the Cultural Revolution the

crushing repression which had driven hundreds of thousands of people to

mental breakdown, suicide, and death was carried out by the population

collectively. Almost everyone, including young children, had

participated in brutal denunciation meetings. Many had lent a hand in

385beating the victims. What was more, victims had often become

victimizers, and vice versa.

There was also no independent legal system to investigate and to judge.

Party officials decided who was to be punished and who was not.

Personal feelings were often the decisive factor. Some Rebels were

rightly punished.

Some got rough justice. Others were let off lightly. Of my father's

main persecutors, nothing happened to Zuo, and MrsShau was simply

transferred to a slightly less desirable job.

The Tings had been detained since 1970, but were not now brought to

justice because the Party had not issued criteria by which they could

be judged. The only thing that happened to them was having to sit

through nonviolent meetings at which victims could 'speak bitterness'

against them. My mother spoke at one such mass meeting about how the

couple had persecuted my father. The Tings were to remain in detention

without trial until 1982, when Mr. Ting was given twenty years'

imprisonment and Mrs. Ting seventeen.

Hou, over whose detention I had lost much sleep, was soon set free. But

the bitter emotions reawakened in those brief days of reckoning had

killed whatever feeling I had for him. Although I was never to know

his exact responsibility, it was clear that as a mass Red Guard leader

in the most savage years he could not possibly have been guiltless.

I still could not make myself hate him personally, but I was no longer

sorry for him. I hoped that justice would be done to him, and to all

those who deserved it.

When would that day come?

Could justice ever be done?

And could this be achieved without more bitterness and animosity being

stirred up, given that there was so much steam already? All around me,

factions that had fought bloody wars against each other now cohabited

under the same roof. Capitalist-roaders were obliged to work side by

side with former Rebels who had denounced and tormented them. The

country was still in a state of extreme tension. When, if ever, would

we be rid of the nightmare cast by Mao?

In July 1977 Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated again and made deputy to

Hua Guofeng. Every speech by Deng was a blast of fresh air. Political

campaigns were to end. Political 'studies' were 'exorbitant taxes and

levies' and must be stopped. Party policies must be based on reality,

not dogma. And most importantly, it was wrong to follow every word of

Mao's to the letter. Deng was changing China's course. Then I started

to suffer from anxiety: I so feared that this new future might never

come to pass.

In the new spirit of Deng, the end of my sentence in the commune came

in December 1977, one month short of the original one-year schedule.

This difference of a mere month thrilled me beyond reason. When I got

back to Chengdu, the university was about to hold belated entrance

examinations for 1977, the first proper examinations since 1966. Deng

had declared that university entrance must be through academic exams,

not the back door. The autumn term had had to be postponed because of

the need to prepare the population for the change from Mao's

policies.

I was sent to the mountains of northern Sichuan to interview applicants

386for my department. I went willingly. It was on this trip, traveling

from county to county on the meandering dusty roads, all on my own,

that a thought first occurred to me: how wonderful it would be to go

and study in the West!

A few years before, a friend of mine had told me a story.

He had originally come to 'the motherland' from Hong Kong in 1964, but

had not been allowed out again until 1973, when, in the openness

following Nixon's visit, he was permitted to go and see his family. On

his first night in Hong Kong, he heard his niece on the phone to Tokyo

arranging a weekend there. His apparently inconsequential story had

become a permanent source of perturbation to me. This freedom to see

the world, a freedom I could not dream of, tormented me. Because it

had been impossible, my desire to go abroad had always remained firmly

imprisoned in my subconscious. There had been odd scholarships to the

West at some other universities in the past, but, of course, the

candidates had all been chosen by the authorities, and Party membership

was a prerequisite.

I had no chance, being neither a Party member nor trusted by my

department, even if a scholarship were to fall from heaven onto my

university. But now it began to bud somewhere in my mind that since

exams were back, and China was shedding its Maoist straitjacket, I

might have a chance.

Hardly had I begun to dream this than I forced myself to kill the idea,

I was so afraid of the inevitable disappointment.

When I came back from my trip, I heard that my department had been

given a scholarship for a young or middleaged teacher to go to the

West. And they had decided on someone else.

It was Professor Lo who told me the devastafng news.

She was in her early seventies and walked unsteadily with a stick, but

was nonetheless perky and almost impetuously quick in every other way.

She spoke English rapidly, as if she was impatient to get out all the

things she knew. She had lived in the United States for about thirty

years. Her father had been a Kuomintang high court judge, and had

wanted to give her a Western upbringing. In America she had taken the

name Lucy, and had fallen in love with an American student called Luke.

They planned to get married, but when they told Luke's mother, she

said, "Lucy, I like you very much. But what would your children look

like? It would be very difficult .... '

Lucy broke with Luke because she was too proud to be accepted into his

family with reluctance. At the beginning of the 195os, after the

Communists took over, she went back to China, thinking that at last the

dignity of the Chinese would be restored. She never got over Luke, and

entered into a very late marriage with a Chinese professor of English,

whom she did not love, and they quarreled nonstop. They had been

thrown out of their apa,iment during the Cultural Revolution and were

living in a tiny room, about ten feet by eight, crammed with fading old

papers and dusty books. It was heart-rending to see this frail

white-haired couple, unable to bear each other, one sitting on the edge

of their double bed, the other on the only chair that could be squeezed

into the room.

Professor Lo became very fond of me. She said she saw in me her own

vanished youth of fifty years before when she had also been restless,

387wanting happiness out of life.

She had failed to find it, she told me, but she wanted me to succeed.

When she heard about the scholarship to go abroad, probably to America,

she was terribly excited, but also anxious because I was away and could

not stake my claim. The place went to a Miss Yee, who had been one

year ahead of me and was now a Party official. She and the other young

teachers in my deparhnent who had been graduated since the Cultural

Revolution had been put in a training scheme to improve their English

while I was in the countryside. Professor Lo was one of their tutors;

she taught partly by using articles from English-language publications

she had procured from friends in the more open cities like Peking and

Shanghai (Sichuan was still completely closed to foreigners). Whenever

I was back from the country, I sat in on her classes.

One day the text was about the use of atomic energy in US industry.

After Professor Lo explained the meaning of the article, Miss Yee

looked up, straightened her back, and said with great indignation,

"This article has to be read critically! How can the American

imperialists use atomic energy peacefully?" I felt my irritation

flaring up at Miss Yee's parroting of the propaganda line. Impulsively

I retorted, "But how do you know they can't.}' Miss Yee and most of the

class stared at me incredulously. To them, a question like mine was

still inconceivable, even blasphemous. Then I saw the sparkle in

Professor Lo's eyes, the smile of appreciation that only I could

detect. I felt understood and for lifted

Besides Professor Lo, some other professors and lecturers wanted me,

not Miss Yee, to go to the West. But although they had begun to be

respected in the new climate, none of them had any say. If anyone

could help, it had to be my mother. Following her advice, I went to

see my father's former colleagues, who were now in charge of

universities, and told them I had a complaint: since Comrade Deng

Xiaoping had said that university entrance was to be based on merit,

not the back door, surely it was wrong not to follow this procedure for

studying overseas. I begged them to allow me a fair competition, which

meant an exam.

while my mother and I were lobbying, an order suddenly came from

Peking: for the first time since 1949, scholarships for studying in the

West were to be awarded on the basis of a national academic

examination, and it was soon to be held simultaneously in Peking,

Shanghai, and Xi'an, the ancient capital where the terra-cotta army was

later excavated.

My deparunent had to send three candidates to Xi'an.

It withdrew Miss Yee's scholarship and chose two candidates, both

excellent lecturers around the age of forty, who had been teaching

since before the Cultural Revolution.

Partly because of Peking's order to base selection on professional

ability, and partly because of the pressure from my mother's campaign,

the depa~hnent decided that the third candidate, a younger one, should

be chosen from among the two dozen people who were graduated during the

Cultural Revolution, through a written and an oral examination on x8

March.

I received the highest marks in both, although I won the oral test

somewhat irregularly. We had to go one at a time into a room where two

examiners, Professor Lo and another elderly professor, were seated. On

388a table in front of them were some paper balls: we had to pick one and

answer the question on it in English. Mine read: 'what are the main

points in the communiqu~ of the recent Second Plenary Session of the

Eleventh Congress of the

Communist Party of China?" Of course I had no idea, and stood there

stupefied. Professor Lo looked into my face and stretched out her hand

for the slip of paper. She glanced at it and showed it to the other

professor. Silently she put it in her pocket and motioned with her

eyes for me to pick another. This time the question was: "Say

something about the glorious situation of our socialist motherland."

Years of compulsory exaltation of the glorious situation of my

socialist motherland had bored me sick, but this time I had plenty to

say. In fact, I had just written a rapturous poem about the spring of

x 978. Deng Xiaoping's right-hand man, Hu Yaobang, had become head of

the Party's organization Department, and had begun the process of

clearing all sorts of' class enemies' en masse. The country was

palpably shaking off Maoism. Industry was going at full blast and

there were many more goods in the shops. Schools, hospitals, and other

public services were working properly. Long-banned books were being

published, and people sometimes waited outside book shops for two days

to obtain them. There was laughter, on the streets and in people's

homes.

I began to prepare frantically for the examinations in Xi'an, which

were not quite three weeks away. Several professors offered their

help. Professor Lo gave me a reading list and a dozen English books,

but then decided I would not have time to read them all. So she

briskly cleared a space on her crowded desk for her portable

typewriter, and spent the next two weeks typing out summaries of them

in English. This, she said with a mischievous wink, was how Luke had

helped her with her examinations fifty years before, as she had

preferred dancing and parties.

The two lecturers and I, accompanied by the deputy

Party secretary, took a train to Xi'an, a day and a night's journey

away. For most of the journey I lay on my stomach on my 'hard

sleeper," busily annotating Professor Lo's pile of notes. No one knew

the exact number of scholarships or the countries for which the winners

were destined, as most information in China was a state secret. But

when we arrived in Xi'an we heard that there were twenty-two people

taking the exams there, mostly senior lecturers from four provinces in

western China. The sealed exam paper had been flown in from Peking the

day before. There were three parts to the written exam, which took up

the morning;

one was a long passage from Roots, which we had to translate into

Chinese. Outside the windows of the examination hall, white showers of

willow flowers swept across the April city as if in a magnificent

rhapsodic dance. At the end of the morning, our papers were collected,

sealed, and sent straight to Peking to be marked together with the ones

done there and in Shanghai. In the afternoon there was an oral exam.

At the end of May I was told unofficially that I had come through both

exams with distinction. As soon as she heard the news, my mother

stepped up her campaign to get my father's name cleared. Although he

was dead, his file still continued to decide the future of his

children. It contained the draft verdict which said he had committed

'serious political errors." My mother knew that even though China was

389beginning to become more liberal, this would still disqualify me from

going abroad.

She lobbied my father's former colleagues, who were now back in power

in the provincial government, backing up her case with the note from

Zhou Enlai which said that my father had the right to petition Mao.

This note had been hidden with great ingenuity by my grandmother,

stitched into the cotton upper of one of her shoes. Now, eleven years

after Zhou had given it to her, my mother decided to hand it to the

provincial authorities, who were now headed by Zhao Ziyang.

It was a propitious time Mao's spell was beginning to lose its

paralyzing power, with considerable help from Hu Yaobang, who was in

charge of rehabilitations. On 12 June, a senior official turned up at

Meteorite Street bearing the Party's verdict on my father. He handed

my mother a flimsy piece of paper on which it was written that Father

had been 'a good official and a good Party member." This marked his

official rehabilitation. It was only after this that my scholarship

was finally endorsed by the Education Ministry in Peking.

The news that I was to go to Britain reached me through excited friends

in the department before the authorities told me. People who barely

knew me felt hugely pleased for me, and I received many letters and

telegrams of congratulations. Celebration parties were thrown, and

many tears of joy were shed. It was a gigantic thing to go to the

West. China had been closed for decades, and everyone felt stifled by

the airlessness. I was the first person from my university and, as far

as I know, the first person from the whole of Sichuan (which then had a

population of about ninety million) to be allowed to study in the West

since 1949. And I had earned this on professional merit I was not even

a Party member. It was another sign of the dramatic changes sweeping

the country. People saw hope and opportunities opening up.

But I was not entirely overwhelmed with excitement. I had achieved

something so desirable and so unobtainable for everyone else around me

that I felt guilty toward my friends. To show elation seemed

embarrassing or even cruel to them, but to conceal it would have been

dishonest.

So subconsciously I opted for a subdued mood.

thought about how narrow and monolithic

I also felt sad when I

China was so many people had been denied opportunities and their

talents had had no outlet. I knew that I was lucky to come from a

privileged family, much though it had suffered. Now that a more open

and fair China was on its way, I was impatient for change to come

faster and transform the whole society.

Wrapped up in my own thoughts, I went through the inescapable rigmarole

connected with leaving China in those days. First I had to go to

Peking for a special training course for people going abroad. We had a

month of

Fighting to Take Wing 67x indoctrination sessions, followed by a month

traveling around China. The point was to impress us with the beauty of

the motherland so we would not contemplate defecting.

All the arrangements for going abroad were made for us, and we were

given a clothing allowance. We had to look smart for the foreigners.

The Silk River meandered past the campus, and I often wandered along

390its banks on my last evenings. Its surface glimmered in the moonlight

and the hazy mist of the summer night. I contemplated my twenty-six

years. I had experienced privilege as well as denunciation, courage as

well as fear, seen kindness and loyalty as well as the depths of human

ugliness. Amid suffering, ruin, and death, I had above all known love

and the indestructible human capacity to survive and to pursue

happiness.

All sorts of emotions swept over me, particularly when I thought of my

father, as well as my grandmother and Aunt Jun-ying. Until then I had

tried to suppress my memories of them, as their deaths had remained the

most painful spot in my heart. Now I pictured how delighted and proud

they would be for me.

I flew to Peking and was to travel with thirteen other university

teachers, one of whom was the political supervisor. Our plane was due

to leave at 8 p.m. on 11 September 1978, and I almost missed it,

because some friends had come to say goodbye at Peking Airport and I

did not feel I should keep looking at my watch. When I was finally

slumped in my seat, I realized I had hardly given my mother a proper

hug. She had come to see me off at Chengdu Airport, almost casually,

with no trace of tears, as though my going half a globe away was just

one more episode in our eventful lives.

As I left China farther and farther behind, I looked out of the window

and saw a great universe beyond the plane's silver wing. I took one

more glance over my past life, then turned to the future. I was eager

to embrace the world.

Epilogue

I have made London my home. For ten years, I avoided thinking about

the China I had left behind. Then in 1988, my mother came to England

to visit me. For the first time, she told me the story of her life and

that of my grandmother. When she returned to Chengdu, I sat down and

let my own memory surge out and the unshed tears flood my mind. I

decided to write Wild Swans. The past was no longer too painful to

recall because I had found love and fulfillment and therefore

tranquillity.

China has become an altogether different place since I left. At the

end of 1978, the Communist Party dumped Mao's 'class struggle." Social

outcasts, including the 'class enemies' in my book, were rehabilitated;

among them were my mother's friends from Manchuria who had been branded

counterrevolution ari in 1955. Official discrimination against them

and their families stopped. They were able to leave their hard

physical labor, and were given much better jobs. Many were invited

into the Communist Party and made officials. Yu-lin, my great-uncle,

and his wife and children were allowed back to Jinzhou from the

countryside in 198o. He became the chief accountant in a medicine

company, and she the headmistress of a kindergarten.

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Verdicts clearing the victims were drawn up and lodged in their files.

The old incriminating records were taken out and burned. In every

organization across China, bonfires were lit to consume these flimsy

pieces of paper that had ruined countless lives.

My mother's file was thick with suspicion about her teenage connections

with the Kuomintang. Now all the dan ming words went up in flames. In

391their place was a two-page verdict dated zo December 1978, which said

in unambiguous terms that the accusations against her were false. As a

bonus, it redefined her family background:

rather than the undesirable 'warlord," it now became the more innocuous

'doctor."

In 1982, when I decided to stay in Britain, it was still a very

unusutal choice. Thinking it might cause dilemmas in her job, my

mother applied for early retirement, and was granted it, in 1983.

a daughter living in the West did not bring her trouble, as would

certainly have been the case under Mao.

But

The door of China has been opening wider and wider.

My three brothers are all in the West now. Jin-ming, who is an

internationally recognized scientist in a branch of solid-state

physics, is carrying out research at Southampton University in England.

Xiao-her, who became a journalist after leaving the air force, works in

London. Both of them are married, with a child each. Xiao-fang

obtained a master's degree in international trade from Strasbourg

University in France, and is now a businessman with a French company.

My sister, Xiao-hong, is the only one of us still in China.

She works in the administration of the Chengdu College of Chinese

Medicine. When a private sector was first allowed in the 198os, she

took a two-year leave of absence to help set up a clothes design

company, which was something she had set her heart on. When her leave

was up, she had to choose between the excitement and risk of private

business and the routine and security of her state

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post. She chose the latter.

local bank.

Her husband, Specs, is an executive in a

Communication with the outside world has become part of everyday life.

A letter gets from Chengdu to London in a week. My mother can send me

faxes from a downtown post office. I phone her at home, direct dial,

from wherever I am in the world. There is filtered foreign media news

on television every day, side by side with official propaganda.

Major world events, including the revolutions and upheavals in Eastern

Europe and the Soviet Union, are reported.

Between 1983 and 1989, I went back to visit my mother every year, and

each time I was overwhelmed by the dramatic diminution of the one thing

that had most characterized life under Mao: fear.

In spring 1989 I traveled around China researching this book. I saw

the buildup of demonstrations from Chengdu to Tiananmen Square. It

struck me that fear had been forgotten to such an extent that few of

the millions of demonstrators perceived danger. Most seemed to be

taken by surprise when the army opened fire. Back in London, I could

hardly believe my eyes when I saw the killing on television. Was it

really ordered by the same man who had been to me and to so many others

a liberator?

Fear made a tentative comeback, but without the all pervasive and

crushing force of the Maoist days. In political meetings today, people

392openly criticize Party leaders by name. The course of liberalization

is irreversible. Yet Mao's face still stares down on Tiananmen

Square.

The economic reforms of the 198os brought an unprecedented rise in the

standard of living, par fly thanks to foreign trade and investmenc

Everywhere in China officials and citizens greet businessmen from

abroad with overflowing eagerness. In 1988, on a trip to Jinzhou, my

mother was staying at Yu-lin's small, dark, primitive apartment, which

was next to a rubbish dump. Across the street stands the best hotel in

Jinzhou, where lavish feasts are

676 Epilogue laid on every day for potential investors from overseas.

One day, my mother spotted one such visitor coming out of a banquet,

surrounded by a flattering crowd to whom he was showing off photographs

of his luxury house and cars in Taiwan. It was Yao-han, the Kuomintang

political supervisor at her school who, forty years earlier, had been

responsible for her arrest.

May 1991The End...........

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