

## Chapter Thirteen

To be enlightened 纠斜归正力从心 (1967-)

I had changed since I came back from my hometown. My urge to participate in the Cultural Revolution had extinguished. The Red Guards' role diminished significantly in Shanghai. Partly it was because some of the extreme and violent Red Guard groups were suppressed by the PLA under the central governments' order. Without the same kind of support from the central governments, the young student movement gradually ran out of steam.

However, many of my friends in Shanghai had also changed. First, I heard a piece of shocking news that Qili, Grandpa Cai's son, a PLA soldier was arrested and was put into a labour camp in Gansu 甘肃 province to serve his prison sentence. No one knew what sort of crime that he had committed. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards never touched Grandpa Cai's family, because Qili was in the Chinese Army. A soldier's family was never a target of the Revolution. Secondly, a group of friends, who had not been politically active at the beginning of the Revolution because of their "bad" family background, became more socially active. The day after I came home, Flat Head came to see me and told me that he became a good friend of Yellow Hair. Yellow Hair used to be a Shanghai Social Youth<sup>1</sup> 社会青年 who went to Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps 新疆生产建设兵团 in the early 1960s. He sneaked back at the end of 1966. I often saw him in green army uniform riding a shining Yamaha motorbike with a different girl sitting behind him each time.

Flat Head spoke to me in some incomprehensive expressions, "Yellow Hair is an old Dongjing 懂经, (and he knows his stuff). That's why many lassies want him. These lassies are really mad about him and they don't even mind to be Guasie 刮散 (seen publicly)."

I was so confused and had no idea what he was talking about. I could not believe that after leaving Shanghai for less than two months, I could not even understand my native language anymore.

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<sup>1</sup> Social Youths was a terminology for Shanghai secondary school leavers in the early 1960s. Those youths could not get into China's higher education system, but could not find a job in the city either. As a result, the Chinese governments sent them to the Army Production Farms in the Xinjiang Autonomy Regions to work.

“You know Dongjing, don’t you?” Flat Head said it knowingly. “He is good at all sorts of the tricks, you know? Some girls say that they want to have babies with him and they don’t mind to be discovered by the Neighbourhood Committees” He translated his words into the normal language for me.

Later I realised these were jargons of the new Shanghai gang culture. The word “lassies” meant girls who liked to sleep around with male gang members. Flat Head also told me very enthusiastically that a friend of his, who lived in the next street, could make the world most fashionable “trumpet trousers” (bellbottoms), if I bought the material, he would make it for me. I had no interests or desire to mingle with these people. What I wanted to do was to play the violin and to learn things like a normal student would do.

Father was very pleased that Mr Wo had pulled me back to the “right track”. Father would like to carry on doing the “good work” that Mr Wo had started. When he knew that I wanted to study, Father became a very good teacher. He was patient and was keen to help. The subjects that he was offering to teach me were math, the world history, English language and classical Chinese by using some of his old textbooks, which he did not get rid of at beginning of the Revolution. Father would spend about an hour and half every evening to teach me and set assignments for me to do in the following day. When he came home, after washing his hands and face, he would mark my work. Although the mathematic textbooks were old, they still covered algebra, geometry and trigonometry. I really enjoyed solving math questions, as they were logical and challenging. I also enjoyed his teaching of *Shiji* 史记<sup>2</sup>, an ancient history book written by Shima Qian 司马迁 in Han Dynasty, over two thousand years ago. I especially liked reading the stories of *Historical Assassins* 刺客列传

When I was in the primary school, Father did not help me very much in terms of my academic work. Mother was the one who kept an eye me by bringing back heaps of math exercises and the past examination papers from the schools that she was working for. I was always reluctant to do any extra work on top of my own school assignments. Mother would ask Father to help me, if I stuck with some difficult questions, but he would often say, “Leave him alone. If he wants to study more, then he will find a way to do it. No point to put more pressure on him.”

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<sup>2</sup> “The Scribe's Record” was written in 91 BC.

“We need to have some control over him. We can’t just leave him alone, or he won’t achieve very much academically. Remember, he has the secondary school entry examinations coming up?” Mother grumbled.

“Well, when I was his age, as my parents couldn’t read or write and they never got involved in my studies. I did everything myself,” Father continued. “The more we ask children to work hard, the less likely they would do so. Just leave them alone. They’ll make their own choice.”

Mother believed that Father’s attitude towards us was heavily influenced by his own upbringing. When Father was a boy, my grandmother did not spend much time with him. However, Father might be right in the general sense, but the large quantity of math exercises that Mother had brought home to ask me to do when I was at primary school, laid a solid foundation for the next level up.

My secondary school did not start properly at the beginning of the academic year of 1967-68. Later the main science subjects were resumed, but they were taught pragmatically and everything must be practically relates to industry and agriculture. For the traditional Chinese culture subjects, instead of having the normal classical Chinese texts of Confucius, we read some ancient texts of the Chinese Legalism, such as the anti-Confucianism text, *Book of Lord Shang*. It was written by Shang Yang, who was a political philosopher in the Warring States China and an advisor to Qin Xiao Gong (Duke Xiao of Qin State), who was the grandfather of Qin Shihuangdi, China’s first Emperor. For the ancient history lessons, we were taught the ideological struggle between the two schools of thoughts: the Confucianism and the Legalism.

Mother encouraged me to make some friends who were from working class background. She said that they were more honest and loyal. My classmate, Chan Jian, who was from a working class family of three generations. He used to be a local branch leader of Red Guard. Chan Jian was a year or two older, as he had to repeat the years when he was at primary school. Chan Jian asked me if I could teach him to play the violin. Of course, I was very happy to help him. He was so grateful to me. Another friend, Yu Maomao whose father worked on a large fishing boat. Yu would often bring me some fresh fish when his father’s ship docked. I had another working class friend, who was a “successful” pickpocket and he would often bring me some nice “presents”.

I would spend most of my daytime doing the “homework” that Father set for me and practising the violin, which was a ½-size instrument that Linlin had for her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday from Father, but Linlin did not like playing the violin. I was friendly with Aliu, who was slightly older than I was. Aliu lived on ground floor of number 17. He and I had decided to learn the violin together. Aliu’s full-size violin was given to him by his older brother just before the Cultural Revolution. It was bought in a nearby stationary shop, which was clearing out some old stock. A violin, a bow and a case that was made of cardboard, altogether only costed him six Yuan, which was the equivalent of £0.6. I must admit it was an extremely good deal. Mind you, the violin produced very harsh sound, as if it was made of cardboard too, but it was loud, and like a distorted trumpet. As we did not have a proper teacher, Aliu borrowed some violin studies by Kayser and Holman from his cousin and Li Xiaomei, who taught my sister violin for a little while after her tenth birthday. I shared with Aliu my knowledge of music reading that I had learned from Mr Wo and we helped each other to go through the violin studies. Although we were highly motivated, learning the violin without a proper teacher was an up-hill struggle. When we had trouble with some techniques, we had to ask Aliu’s cousin to demonstrate them on the violin for us. As he was a good few years older than we were and he liked showing off in front of us. Although it was strictly forbidden at the time, he would proudly play the theme tune of a Chinese violin concerto, *The Butterfly-Lovers* 梁祝 which was based on the theme tunes of the Yue local opera 越剧. We were so impressed by his playing, because he could do the vibrato! One day, as we could not understand a notation in one of the violin studies, we went to see him for advice. The written form of the music was two dots on top of each note with the broken semi-quaver lines underneath. He looked at the music and was puzzled too. Then suddenly he said with confidence, “This is called the hard-bowing 硬弓. Look, you have to play each note with a stiff forearm, like this.” He stood up and demonstrated the bowing, as if a zombie was playing the violin. We looked at each other and were not terribly convinced by his demonstration of the technique.

Aliu dragged me out of the sitting room and said in a very quiet voice, “Li Xiaomei said that we shouldn’t play any Chinese tunes at all, because it’ll definitely spoil our techniques.” Then he pointed at his cousin, “Look, he played *The Butterfly-Lovers* the other day. I’m sure his techniques have been spoiled already. He is no good for us and we shouldn’t listen to his advice anymore from now on.”

“Really?” Although I did not know much about violin techniques, I was fascinated by the idea of playing Chinese tunes could spoil one’s violin techniques.

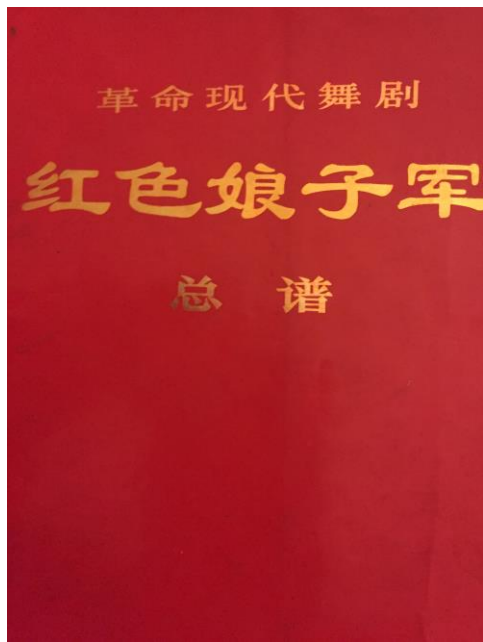
As we were not allowed to play and practise western music in public, I had to practise the violin studies and pieces in the bathroom with the all door and windows firmly shut. In addition, I put as many clothes pegs on the bridge as possible to mute the sound. Sometimes I would switch off the light and would make up tunes in major or minor keys on the violin according to my mood of the day. When I had enough of mucking about, I would remove all the clothes pegs from the bridge and would leave the windows wide open to play *The East is Red* 东方红 and *Sailing on the Ocean* 大海航行靠舵手..., so that the neighbours could hear that I was practising revolutionary songs.

One day Duoduo asked me.

“Why do you always make that ‘scratch, scratch’ sound at the end of each phrase in *The East is Red*?”

I was rather undignified and argued, “What ‘scratch, scratch’ sound? ... You don’t understand! I was imitating the sound of percussion instruments in an orchestra.” I was very proud of my own version of *The East is Red* in the style of Bach’s unaccompanied partitas.

It was not just my sister’s criticism that had made me worry about my playing, but it was Li Xiaomei’s theory of “spoiling the violin techniques” that made me even more puzzled. Maybe Li Xiaomei had heard me playing the Chinese revolutionary songs, the theme tunes of *The White Hair Girl* 白毛女 and *The Red Detachment of Women* 红色娘子军, (which were the productions that were closely supervised by Madam Mao). As result, she asked Aliu to warn me about techniques. However, my view was that these Chinese songs were important for me, as they projected my revolutionary image to the public. In other words, they were my PR. I was trying to tell people that I was not an enemy of the Revolution, but an activist. It was true that Li Xiaomei had never played any of the revolutionary songs, but only the western music. She often did her practice late in the evenings. Although she closed her windows when playing, everyone could clearly hear the music. It seems as if she did not care what people thought of her. I decided not to like her and told Aliu not to talk to her either.



Aliu and I were mad about the violins, or I should say that we were deeply in love with our instruments. Although I had a half size violin, the quality of sound was better than Aliu's full-size "trumpet". I liked the violin so much that I used floor-wax to polish the violin surface every day. At that time, I did not know that my love and care for the violin could badly hamper the musical instrument.

One day, Aliu and I discovered a photograph in the *People's Pictorial* 人民画报, of an Albanian folk fiddler playing the violin. We both loved that violin, as the middle part of the instrument was blackened by the accumulation of rosin dust.

"I'm sure it must be an antique violin," I said with confidence.

"I wish I had a violin like this. Look at the colour: it is so dynamic. The middle bit is so dark and it's as dark as lobster shell, unlike mine, which is pale yellow all over like a lemon," Aliu said with envy.

Our pleasure was going to the music instrument shops to look at the violins. Aliu's favourite places were the second hand shops in Nanjing Road 南京路 and Huaihi Road 淮海路, where they sold all sorts of old or second-hand instruments. Any stringed instruments that were not damaged by the Red Guards would all be sold there, because the owners could no longer keep them. Going to these shops and looking at these old instruments, made us happy and fulfilled.

In the evenings after marking my “homework”, Father would chat with me about life and philosophies. He thought that a person must learn some sort of special skills to offer the world that we lived in. I agreed. One day, I told Father, “Ma Sicong 马思聪, the Chancellor of the Central Conservatoire has said the same that one must have a special skill 一技之长, and I think that playing the violin is one of those special skills.” Father did not make any comment. I knew that he did not agree with what I had just said.

It was very strange that I had always been looking for Father’s approval since I was little. Father bought me a desk lamp for my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, yet he bought a violin for Linlin. I wanted to prove to him that I was musical too. I learned the mouth organ within one day. As soon as Father walked into the flat, before he could wash his hands, I played him the tune that I had just learned. He smiled, but said nothing. Father always hoped that I would make some academic achievements. That was the reason for getting me the desk lamp for my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Linlin’s ½ size violin was really getting too small for me. After showing my interest in playing the instrument, my parents decided to sell Linlin’s violin and to spend 30-40 Yuan to buy me a full size violin. At that time, 36.5 Yuan was a young worker’s monthly salary. The ½-size violin could not fetch very much money. Spending up to 40 Yuan was a big deal for my parents, as Father’s salary could only cover the family’s very basic living expenses. Mother had to sell some items that she had dug out from the chests. When we were in the local second hand shop, we saw an old violin. The asking price was 40 Yuan. Mother asked me to try it. It was a lovely old German instrument, but it was slightly beyond our budget, and it had no bow or case. Moreover, I had no experiences of examining old stringed instruments. Finally, Mother decided that it would be much safer for me to have a factory made new violin, which would have everything in the case. As a result, she bought one in a music instrument shop in Shaanxi Road 陕西路. As soon as I opened the violin case, I could smell the new varnish. Looking at the shining orange-red violin lying in the bright green soft fabric, I was so happy.

Father was finally persuaded by my devotion to the violin. Monday was his day off and he would often take me to the Number One Department Stores 上海第一百货公司 in Nanjing Road 南京路 to look at the violins that were made for the professionals. The price range of these instruments was between 350 and 700 Yuan. Each instrument had deep dark colour

with the stripy backs, like tiger skin. I would stand there looking at them and imagining the wonderful sound that they could produce. Father would often say, “When I am rehabilitated and get my salary back, I’ll buy you one of those violins.”

When Father saw anything that we liked, he would often say, “When I am rehabilitated and get my salary back ...” Somehow, this catchphrase made us all happy and hopeful, although we all knew that it was just a dream. However, the dream kept us going during that difficult period.

As I was very much wanted to learn the violin properly, Mother remembered that her uncle, Zhang Yuanji 张源吉 who studied fine art, music and, he played the viola. Although he was not a professional musician, Mother thought that he might know someone, who could help me. Great Uncle Zhang (GUZ) was originally married to Mother’s aunt. During the Second World War, when Shanghai was occupied by the Japan, GUZ was working in Chongqing, which was the temporary capital of China. Mother’s aunt came to Shanghai with her two children for a visit, but she was unable to travel back to her husband in Chongqing, because of the travel restriction. She was depressed and finally committed suicide in my grandmother’s house. After 1949, GUZ remarried to his colleague in the hospital where he was working as a hospital photographer and undertaker, who put on makeup on corpses.

GUZ was a very helpful and kind gentleman. He invited me to go to his home to meet some of his friends, who might be available to teach me. He lived in Shanghai Luwan District, which was quite close to the place where my grandmother used to live. I went there on a Saturday afternoon. When I was approaching the building, a sound of the string quartet spilled out of the flat. Gently I knocked at the door, and it was his wife, who opened the door and let me in. The flat must be a large sitting room that had been converted into a small one-bedroom living space, which was dark and squeezed. The quartet players could hardly move. Looking at GUZ’s facial expression it was not difficult to see that he was deeply enjoying the second movement of Tchaikovsky’s String Quartet Number One. I was moved by that piece too. The sound of string quartet was the most balanced and heavenly sound on earth. I could not believe that I was watching a group of Chinese musicians playing a western string quartet in the middle of the Culture Revolution! I stood by the door way and dare not to breathe. When they finished playing, coffee and biscuits were offered to the players. GUZ told me that Tchaikovsky heard a carpenter humming that folk tune when doing his woodwork. Tchaikovsky immediately wrote it down and used it as the theme of the second movement in



his first string quartet. I also noticed that all the music on the music stands were hand written. Actually they were all hand copied by GUZ. He introduced me to his friends. The first violin was Dr Hu, a doctor of Chinese medicine, who learned the violin with a French violinist before the 1949. The second violinist was Mr Ou, a primary school teacher who was a very humble man with a permanent smile on his face. The only professional musician was the cellist Mr Li, who worked as the principle cellist in Shanghai Opera House. Dr Hu was a virtuoso player and liked showing off a bit. He asked me what pieces I had been playing. As soon as I told him a name of the piece, he would start playing it on his violin and added on some fancy trills here and there.

“Why don’t you learn Romance in F by Beethoven? When you are ready to play, my wife will play the piano accompaniment for you.”

“Thanks. That’s really great. Is it very difficult to play?”

“No, not really. If you wish, you can copy my music with my fingerings on it.”

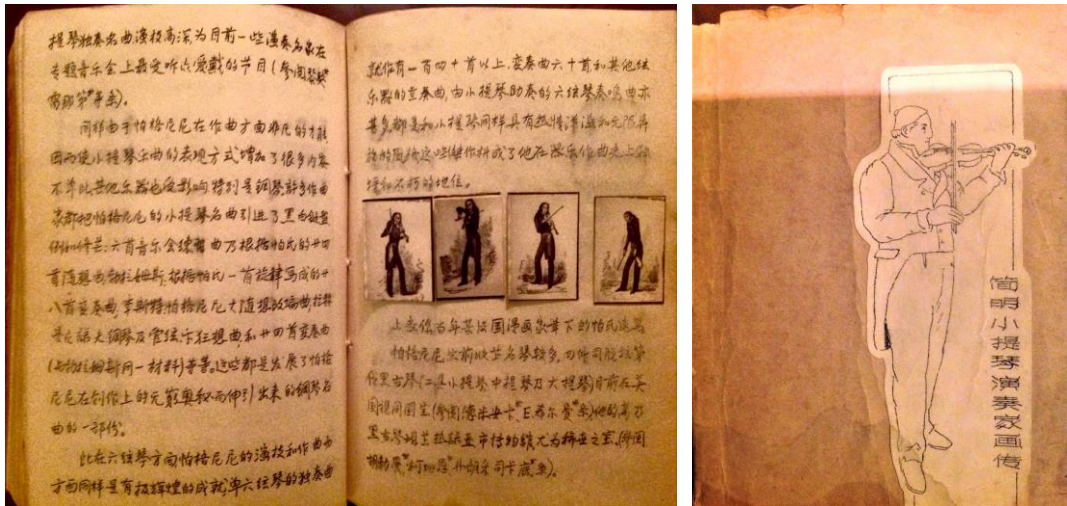
“Yes, please. That would be great. What sort of studies should I work at; I’ve just finished all the Kayser Etudes?”

“I think Mazas Etudes will be a good choice for you, as they are more melodic than normal violin studies.”

After I had learned Beethoven’s Romance in F, I went to see Dr Hu for a lesson. He had a large sitting room with a grand piano in the middle. His wife played the piano accompaniment for me. It was a very strange experience, as I did not know the piano part and had never played with a pianist before.

I did not have a regular teacher, but I occasionally had lessons with some of GUZ’s friends. Some of them were kind and helpful and some were nasty and dismissive, but I had learned a great deal from those musicians.

GUZ was very humble and always said that with his inadequate technique he was unable to teach me. In his spare time, GUZ composed music. He wrote many string quartets and piano pieces. He also wrote two books, one was called *The Masters of Violin Makers* and the other was *The Violinists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. He only made five copies of each book, which were all hand-written.



“Great Uncle Zhang, you are very experienced musician and have seen a lot. I am sure you can tell me how to become a successful violinist like Heifetz?”

GUZ looked at me, thought very carefully for a little while and said, “Genius violinist like Heifetz, who has the talent, the luck and the determination, so he deserves to be the greatest in the world. Out of three elements that he has, there is only one element that normal people can have too, that is the determination. Therefore, determination is one of the most important things in your life. If you have an idea, you must work hard for it. Don’t let other people disrupt you or put you off. For example, I know that you have many friends, who play the violin and I am sure every one of them wants to be a famous violinist like Heifetz. But in ten years time, how many of these people will still be playing the violin? What about in 20, 30 or even 40 years, how many of them will still keep the same dream? Well, I don’t think there will be any at all. In the normal world, whoever can sustain his or her ambition will be successful at the end.”

Father had got me ahead of my math work at school, so when we were given the textbook list for the new term, I always very quickly finished all the exercises in the math book. Our math teacher was a young man, a devoted teacher who graduated from the math department of Tongji University. He would give me some extra work to do, but I would finish them immediately and went back to ask for more. One day he said to me, “If you are only interested in pursuing the speed and quantity in life, then you might never be able to achieve anything at all, as the old Chinese saying goes: haste makes waste 欲速则不达。”

I must be a pain for him: I was too keen and was always trying too hard to prove myself.