

Chapter Five

Family life 阶级观点辨别仪 (1960-)

Before the Communist taking over China in 1949, Flat Head family was reasonably wealthy. His father was an owner of a textile company in Changzhou 常州, north of Shanghai. In the 1950s although the company was then jointly owned by the state 公私合营, his father must have made a good deal with the local communist government, as their living standard was much higher than the average Chinese people's.

Flat Head family occupied two flats on the ground floor of number 8 in our street, with a large back garden and a garage, which was used as a family storeroom. Although their south-east facing garden did not have any beautiful plants and flowers, it was a most fascinating ground for children like us to explore, especially when we wanted to find some small animals and insects such as toads and crickets. During the *Three-Year of Natural Disasters* 三年自然灾害 in China, from 1959 to 1961, many rural people were starving. Flat Head's family still ate well and as if, nothing had affected their life. Sometime I thought that he was rather insensitive and was showing off without realising it himself, just like that morning at school, he was chewing away a huge lump of good quality chocolate while the most people in China had to queue for their monthly ration of plain hard boiled sweets in shops. However, Flat Head was a good natured and fearless boy but he was also cheeky and inventive. Unlike me, who worried about homework and examination results, Flat Head just did not care about these things. Maybe everything came to him too easily he was always extremely generous to all of his friends. The strange thing was that none of his friends had ever taken advantage of his generosity.

My parents, especially Mother was against me spending too much time with Flat Head.

“He is a bad influence on you,” Mother would say whenever I asked her if I could go out to play with him for a little while.

My parents thought that children should learn their life through the hard way. We should not be provided for all the time. During the difficult period of the early 1960s my grandparents in Hong Kong would often send us food parcels of very good quality fruit

sweets and Swiss chocolates. Mother would always mix the sweets from Hong Kong with the terrible Chinese sweets and told us that they were all Chinese. Somehow, she thought that we would not notice them.

In the early 1960s, most households in China had no washing machines and many households did not even have a bathtub. However, we had a helper, who did general housework for us. My siblings and I called her Washing Mamma 洗衣服妈妈. The funny thing was that I did not even know Washing Mamma's real name. In fact, knowing her name was not important. Although Washing Mamma did not sound like a very respectable name, it sounded polite enough when we stressed the word "Mamma". When it came to showing respects, Chinese people often put the age seniority after their "job description". Therefore, if I addressed somebody a generation or two above me, such as aunties or uncles and even great-aunties or great-uncles, it sounded respectable and socially acceptable. When I called the street cleaner "Ground Sweeping Old Great-Uncle 扫地老公公", he was so happy and felt that he was fully respected.

Washing Mamma came to our flat three times a week to do household chores, such as washing clothes, cleaning the rooms and doing some food shopping for us. Mother was adamant that I should learn how to wash clothes properly from Washing Mamma. At beginning of the winter vacation of primary year four, I was asked to spend a day to watch her doing the washing and to spend the rest of that week working with her as her apprentice.

Washing Mamma taught me all sorts of tricks of doing washing by hand in a most economical and affective way. When she arrived in the flat, she would empty all the hot water thermoses to soak the light coloured washing in the hot soapy water, and then she would put a large kettle on the gas stove to boil more water while she was cleaning the flat. She told me that I should soak the clothes in hot soapy water for at least twenty minutes before brushing the collars and cuffs with a wooden brush. She told me that in order to rinse beddings properly I must ring the sheets well after each washing and rinse. As I did my apprentice's job in the middle of the winter, after two rinses in the freezing cold water, my hands and arms went bright red. I was so cold to the extent that I could

not even feel anything in my hands. As a result, I refused to do the third rinse. Washing Mamma kindly took over and did the rest of the work herself effortlessly. She told me that we were lucky to have a bathtub to do the washing indoor. In the place where she lived, she had to go out to a public tap in the open air to do all her family washing in a much smaller washing tub. It often took her five or six rinses to rid of the soapy water.

Father would hold a family discussion meeting once in a fortnight to see how my two sisters and I had understood the meanings of different ideologies. One day we were talking about how the bourgeoisie ideology reflected in our daily life. Father asked us, “How could you tell if someone who has been heavily affected by bourgeoisie ideology?”

I was desperately trying to explain that it was something to do with material world, ownership of properties and capital investments... I exhausted all the knowledge that I had learned at school, but I could not grasp the point of the question. My five-year-old youngest sister, Duoduo was as bright as a button and answered the question immediately with a smile in her twinkling eyes.

“People who are excessively interested in nice clothes, nice food and put their enjoyment first, must have been affected by bourgeoisie ideology.”

Everyone laughed. She was very observant of the environment that we were living in.

Father said that her explanation was short and effective; therefore, she was the one who gave the best answer to the question.

My parents did not want us to take our good life for granted. They would like to teach us to cope with life without the privileged protection. They wanted us to respect our surroundings and did not want us to look down on those who were less privileged like Washing Mamma and her family.

Washing Mamma came from a place called Yangzhou 扬州, which situated on the north side of Yangtze River. In the early twentieth century, as many Yangzhou people who came to Shanghai to work in the service industry such as public bath places, barber shops and cheap hotels, Shanghai local people often looked down on them and thought that they were stupid. Although the new government of Chinese Community Party advocated a

classless and equal society, the old culture in the communities was still there and people looked down on certain social groups. When seeing a Yangzhou person in the streets, cheeky children would often mock and laugh at them with the Yangzhou accent.

“Favus-head’s mother is thick as a plank. She can only produce baby planks.”¹

Father would not allow us to mock people like that. He also said that people from that area were just as intelligent, if they were given the chance to education and the opportunities. He tried to prove his point by saying, “Look, Premier Zhou Enlai is from Yangzhou and he is one of the most skilful leaders that China has ever had.”

I was told by Mother to make friends with Changyi, Washing Mamma’s son, and to help him with his math homework. Changyi was a very quiet character, just like his mother. As he was the only son in the family, he was expected to achieve more in life, so that he could change his family social status. He was given all the best things that his family could afford. In fact, he had more fashionable trainers and school bags than I had. Many parents felt that it was much easier to show their affections by giving their children better material things than mental support.

¹ 癩痢妈妈不开花, 开花生个小娃娃