

Chapter Eleven 苦斗究竟为何因

Father's Story

There was an ominous incident, which happened on Father's fiftieth birthday, just before the Cultural Revolution. It was the time before mobile phones and it was a typical case of miscommunication. We looked forward to a family treat in a good restaurant in Shanghai main shopping street to celebrate that important event. Father told Mother to meet him outside a restaurant and he would come to join us for his birthday meal after work. That evening, Mother and the children were waiting for him in one place while Father was waiting in another. It ended up with no one had anything and went home hungry. We all thought that it was a bad sign for the family.

In 1967, a year after the Cultural Revolution started, Father was not so jolly anymore. The incidents of the Workers Rebel Team raiding our home 抄家, the humiliation of a neighbour trying to snatch one of our bedrooms 抢房子 and reduction of his pay made him very unhappy and depressed. However, something else hurt him much more deeply than any of the incidents put together and it made Father extremely disappointed with the communist government. I was sure that he must have questioned himself about the purpose of coming back to China at the beginning of 1950s.

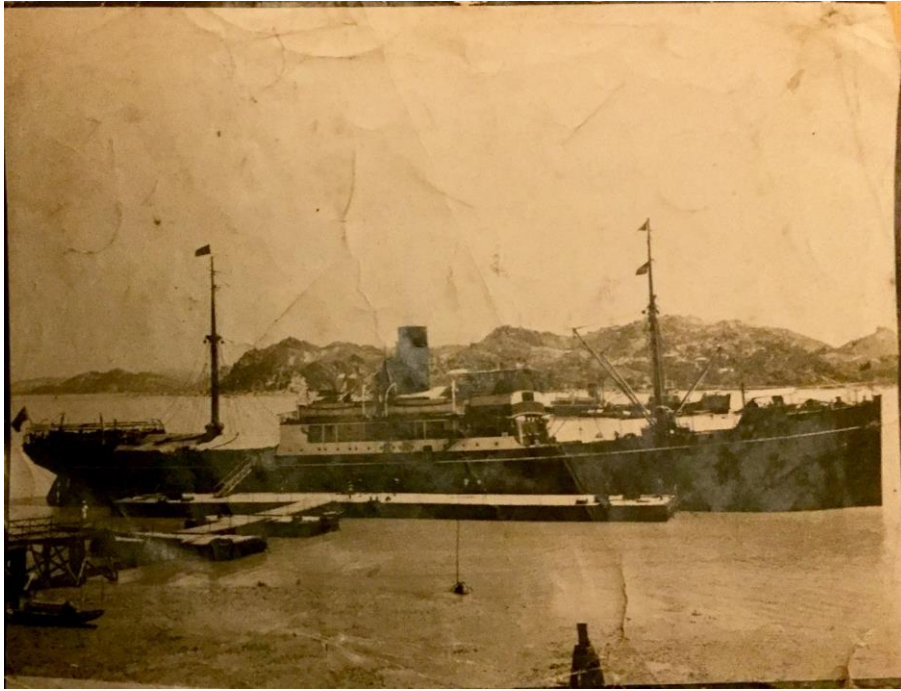
A few days after the "room snatching" incident, there was a Big Character Poster pasted on the wall of the factory, which directly involved Father, but more importantly, it revealed something about his life that he did not know of.

Father's story should really start with my grandfather.

Towards the end of 19th century, China's coastal areas started to develop. My grandfather, Gan Rushan 干如山 came from a humble family background, in a village called White Stone Temple in Zhenghai, Ningbo 宁波镇海白石庙. Grandfather was the third child of five in his family. When he was just a young teenager, he was recommended by a relative to come to Shanghai to work on a ship, which belonged to Butterfield and Swire Company, a British company in the Far East.

Grandfather was one of the three apprentices of the ship cabin manager, who was responsible for looking after passengers' food drinks and accommodation on journeys. Although Grandfather did not receive much education when he was a young boy, and he could not read

and write well when he started his job, he was obedient and hard working. As a result, the manager liked him very much and taught him to read Chinese and English languages and the necessary skills that he needed for promotion. The other two apprentices were Zheng Xiaokun 郑孝坤 and Zhou Fuyou 周福有. As three of them were all working for a British company, they were very well paid compared with those who were working for Chinese firms.



However, when both Zheng and Zhou earned enough money and as soon as saw their business opportunities, they “jumped ship” and left the company. Zheng started his business in Hankou by supplying food to an Italian-owned open-air-cinema that showed silent films. When the Italian owner left China, Zheng took over the cinema business. At that time, the cinema industry was booming in China. Gradually he built a few modern cinemas and bought properties in the major cities along Yangtze River such as Shanghai and Hankou. He became a very wealthy man. From time to time, he would invite Grandfather to his villas in some scenic spots in China for holidays.

After leaving the company, Zhou opened a store supplying food for the Swire shipping company in China. Later he started Meilin Canned Food Company, which became one of the most important canned food industries in China.

Grandfather was contented with his lot and easily taken in. He stayed on working for the same company. When Grandfather was 18, the cabin manager retired. The company thought

that Grandfather was the most suitable candidate to take over the job. Grandfather spent most of his life on the ships which travelled regularly between the ports of Tianjin 天津, Weihai 威海, Qingdao 青岛, Ningbo 宁波, Shantou 汕头 and Hong Kong 香港. Later he also worked on the ships, which went along the Yangtze River between Shanghai 上海 and Hankou 汉口. Because of the nature of his work and the network of his fellow apprentices, grandfather knew many food and groceries suppliers in major cities along the coast of China and Yangtze River. Grandfather was comfortably wealthy when he became the ship cabin manager. He married Grandmother Zhang Manjia 张满嘉 who was from a family of better background. Grandmother was a more sagacious character.

Grandfather used to be a very good-looking young man. Because of that, Grandmother was not happy for him to work away from home for a long time without her being there. She said that she had to accompany Grandfather everywhere to stop him spending money on other people and on gambling. Although both of my grandparents did not receive much education, they took their only child, my father's education very seriously. As Grandmother had to travel with Grandfather all the time, Father was sent to a boarding school in Shanghai. When Grandfather's ship arrived in Shanghai, Father would board the ship to have a full English breakfast with his parents. Father liked being on the ship that Grandfather was working for and was especially impressed by the high-standard of hygiene. Father told us that everything in the kitchen was cleaned, scrubbed and polished after each use, unlike Chinese kitchens, which were always unhygienic, greasy and grubby. Grandfather loved Father very much and he would buy Father some presents, which most young boys would like to have, such as bicycles and toy cars, but he hardly spent any time with Father. When his ship was anchored in Shanghai, he would have to order the supplies for the following trips and would leave Father wandering around the ship by himself.

After finishing his secondary school, Father got into the law school of Dong Wu University 东吴大学 (Soochow University). It was an American-run university, where many young people with influential background studied. One of his schoolmates was Chiang Wei-kuo 蒋纬国, the second son of Chiang Kai-shek, the President of China.

Father was very good at his academic work, but because of his upbringing, he was not keen on socialising with his contemporaries. He did not like dancing, drinking and having a good time as the normal youngsters would do at the time. Instead, he read many serious books

including the philosophical and political ones. He especially admired Karl Marx's ideology and his analysis in the development of human society.

As both grandparents travelled round places, Father did not have a proper home to go back to over the vacations, so he rented a room in a storehouse 栈房, but when Japanese invaded Shanghai, he lost that room too and became "homeless". As a result, Gan Huixiang 干慧香, Grandfather's younger sister, my great-aunt, offered Father to stay with her family over the vacations and weekends.

It was commonly known that the people from Ningbo were conscientious, able to take hardship, good at planning and very careful with money. With all those qualities, many of them, like grandfather's fellow apprentices, Zheng and Zhou became very successful business people in Shanghai and everywhere in the world. Great-aunt and her husband Yu Rupin 虞如品's business was another success story of this kind. Like Grandfather, they were from a humble background and received no education, but later they became a very rich in Shanghai.

Yu Rupin was a quick-witted person. At beginning, he worked as a male servant in a westerner's household in the Shanghai French Concession. As a young man, he did shopping, housework and cooking for the family. He regularly purchased food from Wanxing Grocery Shop 万兴杂货店 and inevitably he became a good friend of the shop managers, Mr Yang 杨 and Mr Wu 吴.

At that time, the present Shanghai main shopping street, Xiafei Road¹霞飞路 was just about to develop and there were many building sites around the area. One day, after ordering his foodstuff, Great-uncle Yu asked the manager, Mr Wu:

"I'm sure you must be fed up with all the building works around this area"

"Fed up? How can I be fed up?" Looking at Great-uncle with a semi joking expression, Mr Wu continued.

"Having more buildings means to have more business; to have more business means to have more money; to have more money means to have a better life. So, why should I be fed-up?"

¹ In 1950 it became Haihai Road 淮海路

“You are right. After all, you are a clever businessman and you can see much further ahead than I can.”

“Come off it, Rupin, you can be successful too. You are clever and hardworking. Maybe one day you will be more successful than me” Mr Wu laughed.

“Don’t pull my leg! How can I? I am only a servant. Besides, I don’t know anything, apart from looking after someone else’s family.”

“Come over here.” Mr Wu pointed at the building site and said seriously. “Look at the other side of street. Can you see those workers?”

“Yes I can, but so what?”

“So what?! Come on! It’s money!” Mr Wu continued. “These workers need to eat during their breaks. Why don’t you open a little shop and supply whatever they need?”

“How can I open a shop, I can’t even read... I don’t know anything about bookkeeping...” Great-uncle Yu did not know what else to say.

“Don’t worry about that. I can teach you. It’s not difficult at all.”

“Really?”

“Of course, we are friends aren’t we?”

“I’d be really grateful, if you could help me.”

With the help that he got from Mr Wu and Mr Yang, Great-uncle and Great-aunt set up a small stand by the building site, selling fried soybeans and other simple foods for the workers of the building site. That business started with Great-aunt running everything. When the business took off properly, Great-uncle left his regular job and started running the business full time. Gradually they opened a grocery shop. As Great-uncle Yu was good at responding to demands, within a few years his food store, Yuyongxing 虞永兴 expanded so much and became one of the biggest grocery shops in the main shopping street, on the corner of Xiafei Road and Ya’erpei Road 亚尔培路 (later it became South Shaanxi Road 陕西南路). That shop occupied a space of eight successions of street numbers. Great-uncle Yu also extended their business into catering and owned a few restaurants in the same district. They bought a

three-storey modern house as their family home in Nanchang Road 南昌路 which was a very posh residential area. The relatives often said to Great-aunt with admiration:

“Look at you now. You are a woman of a rich family now. What a life achievement!”

“Come off it. ...A woman of a rich family? You must be joking. I am just running round like a head of the servants in the house all day.”

Maybe it was the traditional Chinese culture or maybe it was his success in the business, it made great-uncle Yu behave differently and he did something that caused some troubles in his family life. One day Great-aunt discovered that her husband had another woman and a family outside their marriage. Great-uncle Yu wanted to take his lover as his concubine. This made Great-aunt extremely unhappy. She was so angry that she took an overdose of sleeping pills. Luckily, she was found by a family servant and was taken to hospital. After coming out of the hospital, she was very depressed and she went to stay with her sister. Great-uncle came to visit her and to apologise for his bad behaviours, but he would like to discuss with Great-aunt a solution. He would like to make it fairer for both families. Great-aunt was an open minded, forgiving and generous character. Finally, she agreed to take two of the concubine's children under her roof and agreed to buy a house for her husband's lover. As a result, there were five children in Great-aunt's household, of which two were the children of her husband's lover's. People who did not know the background would think that all the children were from the same family.

Not long after the incident, her sister whom she stayed with when she was depressed died of cancer. In order to repay her sister's kindness, Great-aunt adopted her sister's only daughter Li Fengyi 李凤仪.

Great-uncle Yu was a patriot. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, he helped with the Chinese secret network system to protect the people who were involved in the resistant movement behind the enemy line.

The Far East Occidental Restaurant 远东西餐厅, one of his restaurants on Xiafei Road, had a secret room, which was used as a hiding place for those who were sent to Shanghai by the KMT government from Chongqing. From outside it looked like an ordinary wall, but it had a hidden room behind. One day the Japanese spies found out it. The restaurant was placed under surveillance. As soon as they saw a KMT liaison officer went into the restaurant, the

Japanese police raided the restaurant. Although it was lucky that the Chinese liaison officer escaped, Great-uncle was arrested by the Japanese military police. He was taken to a notorious prison from where many Chinese had “vanished”. He was interrogated and tortured with a torture-rack and had chilli water poured into his nose. During the interrogation, he was adamant that he did not know anything about the secret room in his restaurant. He was detained for a good few months and not until Mr Wen Lanting 闻兰亭, a well-know figure in Shanghai at the time went to see the Japanese authorities to guarantee that Great-uncle was an innocent man, only then he was released from the prison. After that, he never talked anyone about his ordeal in the prison. When the World War II ended, he was invited to go to Nanjing, then the capital of China and to be received by Chiang Kai-shek, the President of China. When he came back to Shanghai, he became a special officer of Shanghai Social Bureau 上海市社会局, an office for trade and industries in Shanghai.

Great-uncle and Great-aunt treated Father like his own child. Great-uncle only respected two people in the family, one was Father and the other was Bao Shangde 包上德, the husband of my second Great-aunt’s daughter Li Fengyi, as both of them were university graduates. Father had been living alone most of his life since he was a child. When he stayed with Great-aunt’s family, as if he was still living on his own, he was extremely polite, but never wanted to trouble anyone. He did not socialise with the members of the family very much, but occasionally he helped his cousins with their homework and their revisions at home. One day Great-aunt asked a tailor to make a suit for Father. When the tailor came to measure Father, Father just ran away. This kind of behaviours of Father often made Great-uncle and Great-aunt feel awkward.

Father was graduated in 1940. As he did not want to work for the Japanese authorities in the occupied areas, he went to Chongqing, the temporary capital of China during World War II. He setup a factory with some friends, producing shore polishers. When the factory needed dyestuff and he discovered that Bondmen Company in Shanghai had the stock. Because of the blockade, Father had to fly to Hong Kong and then took a boat to Shanghai to get the material. Not until he arrived in Shanghai did he realise that the material was embargoed by the Japanese. Father was stuck in Shanghai, unable to return to Changqing.

After the Japanese surrendered, the first job he had was working in the office of China Shipping Company 中华轮船公司. Later he changed to an extremely well paid job working

for China Merchants Logistic Company (CML) 招商局. As the inflation shot up like a rocket in Shanghai over the China's civil war in the late 1940s, the CML paid Father's salary in gold instead of money. Just before the communist army arrived in Shanghai, the CML decided to send Father to work in its Hong Kong office.

Before leaving Shanghai, Father went to say goodbye to Great-uncle and Great-aunt. Great-uncle took Father to their roof garden to watch the artillery fire on the horizon of Shanghai.

"The communist artillery fire won't land on my house." Great-uncle said with confidence.

"Really? Why do you think so?" Father was not so sure about his judgement of the situation.

"Because the communists have to eat too, so they need me." He laughed.

Later Father told us that someone came to inform Great-uncle that the communist army was about to arrest him, only then he left Shanghai for Hong Kong empty handed in a hurry.

After 1949 the Gan family moved to Hong Kong. Grandparents were wealthy enough to look after themselves and Father had a very comfortable life with a well-paid job and had no family to support. Father setup his life in Hong Kong he and made some new friends. He often went out for dinners with three of his closest friends from Ningbo, Xu Weizhen 许维桢, Chen yuelai 陈悦来, and Xin Xinlai 忻信来 who were property developers in Hong Kong. After dinners, when they walked out of restaurants, Father often saw beggars in the cold streets asking for small change, but the rich people completely ignored them as if they did not exist. Father felt rather uncomfortable to be in an unequal society. He would like to see a much fairer world. The gap between rich and poor at that time made him look for answers. He read more books of Marx's theory and the easies of Mao Zedong. He believed that Marx's ideas of the development of human society were logical and the communist society would eventually replace the capitalist one. He admired the courage of the Chinese Communist Party who was trying to create a better country for the people of China. He believed that there was a hope for China and even for the entire human race.

When the Korean War broke out, Father was openly supporting the communist China and tried to persuade people in Hong Kong do the same. Although Father's friends really admired him for his knowledge and liked to listen to his views, they thought that Father might be a communist agent working in Hong Kong.

Father felt more and more frustrated when living in Hong Kong. He thought that Hong Kong was too materialistic and he thought that he could offer the world much more than just creating wealth for himself. Without telling my grandparents, he abandoned his privileged job and went to China to help to “construct the socialist country”. It sounded like a story that came out of a Chinese propaganda newspaper, but it really happened to Father. He sincerely believed in the communist ideology. Maybe at that time he was even more communist than a member of communist party was.

He went to Shanghai full of hope for both China and his own future. He thought that he could offer his knowledge of the legal systems to work for the communist China. With his enthusiasm, he took the examinations, which were required for obtaining a job in the judiciary offices in China. Father told me that the examination had two parts including the general professional knowledge and some political questions. Father was happy with all the answers that he wrote in both parts of the examinations and came out of the examination hall smiling. He thought that he just had to wait for the results and a job. Time went by, but nothing was heard from the authorities. In fact, they never contacted Father again.

Father had no job for a while in Shanghai. One day he went to see an old friend of his, who had a factory making sawing machine parts. When the friend heard his story, he offered Father a job immediately.

“Why don’t you work for me as an accountant here while you are waiting for the news from the judiciary offices?”

“I am not a trained accountant. Maybe you should ask someone else, who is more qualified for the job.”

“I think that you are over qualified for a humble job like this and it isn’t an idea job for you either, but it’s just for a short time. I really need someone to look after the accounts of the factory.”

“OK, just for a short time.”

“That’s great! I’m really grateful to you.”

“Thank you for offering me the job.”

After one year, Father still heard nothing from the judiciary offices. He was disappointed and thought that maybe he did not do as well as he had thought after all. As he still loved China, he wanted to contribute his bit for the country.

The owner of the factory was trying hard to ask Father to take the job permanently.

“I would like you to stay here. If you agree, I am prepared to offer you the shares of my company.”

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t like to be one of the owners. It’s simply against my principles.”

“OK, whatever you like. I’ll pay you higher salary. Anyway, I would like you to stay.”

Gradually Father’s ambition of working in the Chinese judiciary offices disappeared. He thought that working in factory with the workers was better than going back to Hong Kong to make himself a rich man. As a result, he accepted the factory job offer. Not long after that, the factory was nationalised and it became Shanghai Number Seven Sawing Machine Factory.

Father liked working with the workers in the workshops during the daytime and he did his duty of sorting out the factory accounts in the evenings.

He believed that having basic education was important for workers’ life, so he setup a weekly after-work evening class to teach them to read. It was well received by the attendees. Everyone respected him and called him “Mr Gan, the teacher”. When the Cultural Revolution started although Father became a target of the Revolution, his student-workers were trying as hard as they could to protect him. During the raid of the flat, it was Master Lou, who handed the Omega watch to Father. Master Lou used to be one of the attendees in the evening class. Moreover, it was his student-workers’ idea to deposit all the valuables in the bank.

The Big Character Posters of the Cultural Revolution revealed many secrets from the past. They were also the “killing machine” of the Revolution, but sometimes they could also be entertaining too. Only after reading one of the Big Character Posters in the factory, Father realised that he actually did his judiciary examinations extremely well. His answers were so good that the local communist governments thought that Father might be a trained KMT agent to be planted in the mainland judiciary offices. As they could not find enough evidence to prove their suspicion, they decided to ignore him completely. After discovering the truth, Father was very upset. Of course, who would not? He abandoned his wealthy life style in Hong Kong and spent most of his life in China devoting himself wholly to a much fairer

socialist society, but the Chinese government was suspicious about his motivation and had never given him a chance to prove himself. He felt as if he suffered from an attack of rejection from someone whom he had loved deeply.

Father's story reminded me of the story that Father told us about Great-uncle Yu, who thought that he could contribute his expertise under the communist rule, but he was wrong. How ironic, Father actually made the same mistake and thought that the communist China would need him. Maybe both Great-uncle and Father were politically naïve, but they both did so for the love of their country.

Father should be allowed to feel bitter about this. However, he never showed his regrets.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Gan family left China again. Nearly forty years after the ordeals of the Cultural Revolution, one day Duoduo asked Father in one of the usual family "intellectual interrogations", in other words, a family meeting of analysing ideas.

"You spent most of your life in China, but the communist government never trusted you. As a result, you couldn't offer China your best knowledge. Do you regret that?"

"I don't regret it."

"Why?"

"It is true that I couldn't serve China with my best ability, but I spent the best part of my life working for China, which I'll never regret."

As usual, Duoduo always wanted to have a logical and satisfactory answer to her questions, so she asked again. "If what you've said is your true feeling, why did you come out to Hong Kong again after your 60's birthday?"

"I've made my choice for my life, but I wouldn't like to see that the choice of my life affects my children's future. They should be allowed to make their own choices for their life. If I had stayed in China, my children would've no chance to make such choices. Now you are all out of China. You can choose to go back or to stay out as you like."