

## Chapter Eight

### A gust before the storm 山雨欲来风满楼 (1966)

In April 1966, some official Chinese Communist Party newspapers published a front-page article, *Criticising Three-family Village* 评三家村, which was written by Yao Wenyuan 姚文元 (who later became one of the Gang of Four<sup>1</sup>) condemning three of the high rank Communist Party officials in the Beijing Municipality<sup>2</sup>. At the beginning of June, *People's Daily* 人民日报, suddenly published a bloodcurdling and warmongering editorial *Sweep Away all the Monsters and Demons* 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神 supporting a so called Big-Character-Poster<sup>3</sup> which was written by Nie Yuanzi 聂元梓 an academic of Peking University. She openly criticised the ideology of the university management team. Many of us could sense that a big political storm was looming in China.

It was nearly the end of my primary school years and the time for the final examinations was approaching. Maybe I was nervous about taking the exams, or maybe I was anxious about leaving the school that I had known for six years, I felt that there was a tension and unfriendly competitiveness in the atmosphere.

One normal early June afternoon it was sunny and warm. It must be not long after first June, the International Children's Day. I was walking home from school thinking hard about my choices of secondary schools. "It really depends on the results of the exams..." I said to myself.

That morning Old Leaf told me that his choices of the secondary schools were the best key schools in Shanghai, such as Shanghai Middle School 上海中学 and Fuxing Middle School 复兴中学. As if he wanted me to know that with his intelligence and brilliant abilities, he deserved any places that wanted. He was always the best for everything. Yes, indeed, he was good at all the subjects at school. Of course, he was confident enough to choose anything to his liking, but his arrogant attitude and the

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<sup>1</sup> The four leading figures of the left-wing Chinese Communist Party over the Cultural Revolution 1966-1976

<sup>2</sup> 邓拓, 吴晗, 廖沫沙 Deng Tuo, the Deputy Party Secretary of Beijing; Wu Han, the Deputy Mayor of Beijing and Liao Mosha, the Director of Beijing Office for United Front

<sup>3</sup> 大字报 posters with large hand written Chinese characters that express individuals' views

sneering expression really irritated me. I just could not wipe off his smirks in my mind.

As far as my own future was concerned, I realised that if I was lucky enough, I might get into the Number 58 Middle School or even Jiguang Middle School 继光中学 which Xiaming, my downstairs neighbour went. Anyway, both schools were the most popular key schools in the district.

“These two schools that I would really like to go to and they are very close to home too.” I thought.

“Hi, Yungyung, have you decided where you want to go yet?” Victoria caught up with me and asked in a sincere tone.

Everyone was thinking about the same thing. I did not reply. Anyway, she carried on.

“The Number 58 Middle School is my top choice. What about you?” she asked again.

I did not want commit myself to a particular place yet, and I especially did not want to tell her where I would like to go. Besides, it was annoying of her to keep badgering me about making decisions.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” I thought my answer would block further questions from her, but she said firmly, “I think YOU should go to Number 58 Middle School too. Your general results are good enough...”

“Yes, yes, you bossy boots.” I thought.

She carried on, “My older brother is there now and he says that the school is planning to build more sports facilities and to improve their teaching buildings. I think it’ll be a wonderful place for the pupils like you and me too... I hope a lot of us will be able to go there... It’ll be nice to have some old faces in a new place. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes.”

“So you will put the Number 58 Middle School down as your first choice?”

“No, I haven’t decided yet.”

“Then will you put it down as your second choice?”

“No..., I don’t know.”

“Well, let me know when you’ve made up your mind, but you’d better be quick.” She quickly walked ahead, possibly to “harass” other “old faces”.

I did not like being pushed into a corner or to commit to something that I did not know very well myself. Yes, indeed, it was frightening to go to a new environment leaving behind everyone and everything that I had known. I agreed with her that it would be nice to see some old friendly faces in a new place.

As I was crossing Gongping Road 公平路 (lit: road of fairness), I could hear a gust of rhythmic marching song in the distance ahead.

“...Marxist’s theories... in brief ...”

When I approached the Number Two Trolleybus Depot opposite the lane where I lived, I saw a group of youths in the green-yellow army uniform, wearing red armbands on their upper left arms. One of them was writing some slogans with a large red paintbrush on a white wall outside the depot.

“Heavens! Are they out of their mind? ... How can they be allowed to graffiti on a public property? Surely, they’ve been taught at schools, one should protect the public properties. Aren’t they the members of the Communist Youth League 共青团?” I muttered to myself.

Suddenly one of these boys grabbed a female passer-by and another one started cutting off her beautiful perm hair with a pair of large scissors that looked like a garden shears, shouting in Mandarin with a strong Beijing accent.

“Rid of her capitalist hairstyle!” The shouting was echoed by the rest of the group.

Looking at her embarrassed and wry smiling expression, I realised that the poor woman was so shocked that she did not even know how to react. While she was walking away like a clipped-sheep, I saw three of these youths push a smartly dressed young man onto the ground while another was cutting open his narrow trouser legs with a pair of scissors.

“You are a fucking petty bourgeois bastard,” one of the youths shouted.

“Down with the petty bourgeoisie!”



One of the young man’s friends tried to rescue him from the brutal behaviour of these youths, but he was hit on the head by the metal knuckle of an army belt. Blood immediately poured down his face.

“Revolution is not a crime!” One shouted and it was followed by the rest.

“It’s right to rebel!” ...

The singing started again. This time I could hear the words with heart throbbing rhythm loud and clear.

“Marxist theory in brief

There is only one clear message, it says that

It’s right to rebel! It’s right to rebel!

We rebel and we fight with the guidance of this theory,

In order to create a true socialist country...”<sup>4</sup>

A clearly red visible slogan was painted on the white wall, which read:

“Revolution is not a crime! It is right to rebel!” 革命无罪! 造反有理!

“How can this type of actions be tolerated?” I thought. “Who do they think they are?”

“We are the Red Guards from Beijing!” One of the Red Guards shouted through a pyramid-shaped metal megaphone.

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<sup>4</sup> “马克思主义的道理，千头万绪，归根结底，只有一句话，造反有理！造反有理！根据这个道理，于是就反抗，就斗争，就干社会主义...”

“Our great leader, Chairman Mao has sent us to Shanghai to ignite the fire of the Cultural Revolution.”

“Long live the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution!”

“Long live Chairman Mao!”



The singing started again.

“Pick up pens, use them like guns to aim at the bad gangs.

Dare to think, dare to speak and even dare to rebel.

We are the path-makers of the Cultural Revolution.

Loyal to the revolution, loyal to the Party. The Party is my birth parents.

Whoever dares to challenge the Party, We will send him to hell.”<sup>5</sup>

A Red Guard shouted, “Those who support the Revolution follow us. Those who don’t, fucking get out of our way!” 要是革命就跟着我们走，要是不革命就滚他妈的蛋!

The shouting was loud, rude and shocking. These young people seemed to be truly angry and shameless.

At the time, I did not realise that it was just the beginning of my new “education”. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, I lived my life differently, and it allowed me

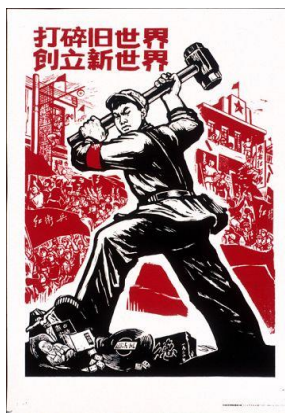
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<sup>5</sup>拿起笔，作刀枪，集中火力打黑帮。敢想、敢说、敢造反，文化革命当闯将。忠于革命忠于党，党是我的亲爹娘。谁要敢说党不好，马上叫他见阎王。

experience the human nature of fighting for survival in a confusing political environment. It was something that one could not learn in classrooms or from textbooks.

Suddenly the orderly world that I knew of and from which I had been brought up had just been smashed apart right in front of my eyes just like a piece of porcelain. Who would imagine that it just happened on my way home from school in a peaceful afternoon? The bombardment of the Cultural Revolution was so vigorous and violent that it came with the speed of lightning. The “three dimensional” attacks were physical and at the same time, it invaded my vision, my senses and mind. The things that had been right a few minutes ago were no longer right, and the things that had been wrong before were no longer wrong. The conversation that I just had with my classmates five minutes before seemed to be far away in the past. The discussion for my choices of secondary schools and Old Leaf’s smirking expression was no longer relevant anymore.

As soon as I walked into our lane, I noticed that there were more slogans and pictures that were drew on the wall. They were cleverly done in the artistic style of woodcut: the bright red Chinese characters on the white wall, strong, clear and almost beautiful. Next to the slogans there were some large-scale pictures painted with black thick lines. One of them depicted an angry Red Guard smashing some ugly and unrecognisable objects with a sledgehammer. He just looked like the ones who I had just met in the streets. These pictures were attractively simple and clear. They must be painted by someone who had professional training. I wished I could do something like that.



A crowd of people had gathered outside number four in our lane. It was Jiaqi’s 嘉祺 house. Like any curious person, I went into the crowd and had a look. There was a

pile of books, gramophone records and nice looking antique furniture that was like the one in Grandmother's house. Everything was smashed up or twisted. I could smell paraffin. My attention immediately went to a large carved dark-wood water buffalo with an inquisitive expression and two broken legs lying on the top of the pile. It was a beautifully carved hardwood antique. I remembered it standing on the side table in Jiaqi's sitting room. Jiaqi had told me that his grandfather left it to him, because ox was Jiaqi's Zodiac Animal. I had not realised how heavy it was until he had asked me to pick it up.



However, all the valuables in Jiaqi's home were going to disappear forever. The atmosphere at that moment was surreal: people were happily clapping hands and laughing, including Jiaqi's family members, as if they had won a lottery. A Red Guard threw a lit match onto the pile. Within one second, the pile turned into a huge fireball. Everyone cheered and applauded. Everyone was in a jolly party mood. The slogan-shouting started again.

“Smash the Four Olds!” “Establish the Four News!” 破四旧，立四新！

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<sup>6</sup> Revisited the same place 52 years after the incident.



A group of Red Guards began to dance to a song of Mao's quotation, which went like this.

“A revolution is not a dinner party, is not writing an essay, or painting or embroidering, it cannot be so elegant, so leisurely and gentle. A revolution is an insurrection and it is a violent action of one class overthrowing another.”<sup>7</sup>

A banner was unfolded, and on it, the “Four Olds” were described. They were: old ideas; old culture; old customs; and old habits<sup>8</sup>. Although it was clear to me that Red Guards had destroyed the Four Olds, I was not at all clear about the tangible content of the “Four News” that they wanted to establish. Anyway, logic was not something that I had to worry about then.

I rushed back to our flat. My sisters and brother were already at home. They were very frightened. We looked at each other and did not know what to say. It was so noisy outside - shouting, screaming, laughing, crying, applauding and singing. I gently and quietly closed all the windows and watched the revolution unfolding below.

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<sup>7</sup>革命不是请客吃饭，不是做文章，不是绘画绣花，不能那样雅致，那样从容不迫，文质彬彬，那样温良恭俭让。革命是暴动，是一个阶级推翻另一个阶级的暴烈的行动。

<sup>8</sup>旧思想，旧文化，旧风俗，旧习惯



Through our north-facing window I could see Mrs Xu, the neighbour in number seven wearing a tall pyramid-shaped white paper hat on which was written, “Down with the pharmacy owner bitch” with her name crossed out in red. She was standing on a tall stool, in the middle of the lane and was watched by a crowd of people. A Red Guard started shouting the slogans.

“Down with the capitalist shop owner!”

“Down with the Five Black Elements<sup>9</sup>!”

“Down with Landlords; Rich Farmers; Counterrevolutionaries, Bad elements and the Rightist!”

“Hand over your money and possessions,” one of the Red Guards shouted, pointing at her nose.

“I don’t have anymore to handover to you... I beg of you... It’s the truth.” Her weak voice could barely be heard.

“How dare you, bitch? If you don’t hand your money and possessions over to us, we won’t let you come down today. We’ll struggle you to death,” replied one of Red Guards.

“The capitalist shop owner must confess!” shouted Mrs Xu’s youngest daughter.

Mrs Xu was standing on the tall stool sobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

Red Guards shouted, “The children of capitalists must draw a clear line between themselves and their capitalist family background.”

“Down with capitalists!”

The Red Guards started singing again.

“Heaven and earth are not as great as the Chinese Communist Party.

Parents are not as close as Chairman Mao is to us.

Any goodness is not as good as our socialist country.

Rivers and oceans are not as deep as the friendship of the working class people.

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<sup>9</sup> 黑五类 Landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists 地,富,反,坏,右

Mao Zedong Thought is the treasure of revolution.

Anyone who is against it is our enemy.”<sup>10</sup>

Only then did I understand why Jiaqi’s family had joined the Red Guards’ “bonfire party” and had to thank them for destroying their antiques, books and furniture. I was very frightened, hiding behind the curtains. I was afraid that someone, especially the Red Guards below, might notice me watching.

“Will our family face the same fate as the neighbours? Do we belong to that so-called Five Black Elements 黑五类?” I asked myself, but I dared not to think about it anymore. It was getting dark, but we did not switch on the lights. The atmosphere was tense. We were waiting quietly for the return our parents.

I felt as if I was left a jungle of chaos. I was confused and frightened. I tried to pinch myself and I sincerely hoped it was just a bad dream, so when I woke up everything would be normal again. It was a very strange feeling of being in the middle of that storm. I could not describe it by words.

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<sup>10</sup>天大地大不如党的恩情大。爹亲娘亲不如毛主席亲。千好万好不如社会主义好。河深海深不如阶级友爱深。毛泽东思想是革命的宝，谁要是反对它，谁就是我们的敌人。