

## Chapter Nine<sup>1</sup>

Red Guards were everywhere 心惊胆战无处藏 (1966)

My parents came home earlier than usual that evening. I could sense that they were as confused and frightened as we were.

Mother was puzzled and said, “They are from Beijing, so they won’t know much about our family background.” She paused a little and asked, “Are they just walking into people’s homes randomly?”

“I don’t think so. Look, they only attacked those who have some sort of ‘capitalist family background’.” Duoduo, my youngest sister explained. Although she was only nine, she was the most observant one in the family, and could usually pick up the political trend very quickly.

“They must have got the information locally,” Linlin, my other sister was also anxious. “Do you think it is someone in the neighbourhood committee, who has been telling the Red Guards the background of each family in the street?”

The image of Mr Wang, the downstairs neighbour spying on everyone by his bedroom-window suddenly re-appeared in my mind. I was very certain that he was the “prime suspect” for telling the Red Guards everything. Anyway, he was one of those who had nothing better to do after his retirement, but stirring up trouble within the neighbourhood.

“Do you think the old man, Mr Wang would...?” Linlin mumbled quietly, as if Mr Wang was listening downstairs. No one replied, but I could tell that we all agreed.

Father tried to break the stiff atmosphere and said in a light-hearted way, “I’ll start my bit of ‘Sweeping the Four Olds’ form my bookcases. If I think some of the books are too ‘dirty’ for the bookcase, I’ll certainly give them a good spring cleaning.”

He turned to his children and continued, “Anyway, tomorrow is Thursday, isn’t it? ... It’s the recycle collection day. We’ll be recycling massive old stuff, so that you can earn a lot of pocket money. Isn’t that nice?” We looked at each other and said nothing. We were all too frightened to appreciate his irony.

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<sup>1</sup> The picture in this chapter was taken by Menzai in January 2010.

Mother took out all the gramophone vinyl records and said in a grumpy tone, "I'm sure these are all 'Four Olds' too." She ordered me, "Yungyung, you get rid of them tomorrow!"

"But I like 'Fishermen's Evening Song' and the other traditional Chinese music...I really like..." I protested.

"This is not the time for keeping anything that you like. These are certainly not revolutionary materials, aren't they?" Her tone of voice became even more agitated and her volume was turned up. "Do you remember what has happened to Jiaqi's family? Do you want the whole family to face the same humiliation? Do you want us all line up in the street to watch the Red Guards destroying our stuff?"

"OK, OK!" I gave in.

As if she started the self-provoked Cultural Revolution purge at home, Mother switched on the light in servant room next to the kitchen, opened the window and started burning some letters and the materials that might not be suitable for the recycle collectors. After that, she flushed the ashes down the loo.

"Do you think the Red Guards will come here too?" Linlin asked, looking at the flame, as if she was mesmerised.

Father was still trying hard to soften the tension and said in a semi-joking way. "Don't worry. Even if they come, it'll make their job quick and easy, as we've already gathered all the 'Four Olds' for them."

"What should we do with the whisky and brandy?" I suddenly remembered that there were some expensive distilled beverages kept in the sitting room cupboard. They were brought back from Hong Kong by my grandfather over ten years before. As no one in the family drank, nobody had even remembered that we had those troublesome "foreign spirits" in the cupboard.

"Why don't you take them to Grandpa Cai?" Father suggested, "He would appreciate them... But I'm not sure ...if they are still drinkable... as they... have been sitting in the cupboard... for a long time..." Father's sentences were rather staccato, as he was concentrating on his "book purging" activities, and was enjoying his reading.

“Just pour them down into the drain! It’s too dangerous to take them out,” Mother said impatiently.

“Then... it’ll be a waste....” Father replied in a calm voice. He was still reading his books.

I did not like hearing the word “waste” and said, “I don’t mind taking them to Grandpa Cai. I can put all the bottles in my school bag.”

Grandpa Cai’s flat was about 50 metres away from us, and it was visible from the south facing bedroom window. “OK. You’d better be careful. You just act as normally as you can. I’ll be watching you by the window,” Father put down his books and said.

I went out and walked towards Grandpa Cai’s flat passing through some of people who were busy painting some slogans on the wall. I was lucky, as a loud speaker was broadcasting the revolutionary songs and it was so loud that no one could hear the clinking sound in my schoolbag.



Grandpa Cai came from Ningbo 宁波, the same hometown as our family. He used to be a labourer on a British ship, which travelled between Shanghai and the cities along the Yangtze River. He worked hard and earned enough money to buy a pharmacy shop in Shanghai just

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<sup>2</sup> Grandpa Cai’s house was demolished in winter 2009. Our flat was just behind the trees in the middle of the picture.

round corner from where we lived. When the Communists came, he had to give his shop to the state. As Grandpa Cai was no longer a shop owner, and furthermore, one of his sons was in the army, so the Red Guards did not bother him. Granny Cai was an experienced nurse. It was said that Grandpa Cai's first wife had an incurable illness. Before she died, she had made her husband to promise her that he would marry the nurse who was looking after her. That nurse was Granny Cai. I used to hate having injections, but Granny Cai could do it so well, before I noticed anything, it was over. So I did not mind to have injections if it was done by Granny Cai.

Their flat was on the first floor. I climbed up the dimly lit staircase with my hands firmly clutched on the bottles, so that the bottles did not make noise by hitting each other in my schoolbag. As I did not want to draw attention from the neighbours in the building, I knocked at the door very quietly.

"Who is that?" A voice asked, but before I could answer, the door was opened. It was Granny Cai.

"Oh, it's you, Yungyung. What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I've brought some good distilled beverages for Grandpa Cai," I said cheerfully and immediately took out the bottles from the schoolbag. I thought that she would be pleased to have them.

Granny Cai pushed me into their sitting room and shut the door behind her. She said apprehensively, "No, no, no, he doesn't drink these anymore... Look, it's very dangerous, if anyone sees him having any foreign alcohol at home, he will be in deep trouble... You'd better take them back and dispose them yourself."

"How could you ask him to go back with these bottles in the bag? It's far too dangerous." Grandpa Cai came out from his room. "Come here, Yungyung. Let me have a look."

"...It's nice..., Johnnie Walker Black Label Whisky... I haven't seen this stuff for ages... They must be your grandfather's, I guess." He looked at the labels of the bottles with a delighted expression on his face.

I was smiling too, as I was pleased to see that Grandpa Cai really liked them. I suddenly remembered that Father suspected the quality of the drinks. "Dad said that they might be too old to drink."

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that! It’ll be my pleasure to have them. Thank your dad for me.” He replied, but his sight still firmly fixed onto the bottles, as if he could taste the stuff with his eyes.

The following morning I had a great time. I was enjoying the unusual satisfaction of hearing the crackling sound when the 78-turn vinyl gramophone records were smashed onto the concrete ground. Each smash sound was cheered by the children who were watching and some of them were delighted to “help” me to finish off the job. I sold all the “old and bad” items including records, books and ornaments to the recycle collectors for over four Yuan of RMB, thinking that I had turned all the bad things into good. Everything went smoothly according to the plan.

Our school was closed and there were no examinations arranged until further notice. Anyway, the summer vocation was about to start. We had a few reasonably peaceful days without the Beijing Red Guards, although there were some families in the neighbourhood that were repeatedly bullied by the local kids. I saw a group of young teenagers went into number seven, the Xu family. As the family was targeted by the Beijing Red Guards a few days before, the people in Xu family were extremely frightened. These local kids could sense their weakness and vulnerability, so they pounced on them and went into the house demanding for some beddings and a camp-bed. They said that they need the stuff for the local Red Guards when doing their night duty at schools. These kids were more intimidating than the Beijing Red Guards and would not take no for an answer. I felt relieved that they did not come to bother us. However, the Revolution became increasingly confusing and frightening. Different type of Red Guards appeared in Shanghai streets and some of the groups targeted their victims based on the family background, but some also extended their targets to those who were born in the middle class family. They would stop young students like me in the streets and would aggressively ask, “What is your family background?” If you did not give the right answer, you might be beaten up. Those local Red Guards thought that only the children of the revolutionaries and working class families were the true Red Guards. They chanted slogans “fish mingles with fish; prawn mixes with shrimps and tortoises can only mate tortoises 鱼找鱼，虾找虾，乌龟总是找王八<sup>3</sup>.” I heard them singing proudly in the streets. The song went like this,

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<sup>3</sup> Tortoise is also a swear word in Chinese, which means bastard.

“If your father is a revolutionary, you are a hero too.

If your father is a counter-revolutionary, you are also a bastard.

If you want to join the revolution, you should follow Chairman Mao.

If you don't, fucking get out of our way!”<sup>4</sup>

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The summer in 1966 became the most frightening summer in my life. In July, People's Daily reported that the over 72-year old Mao swam across the Yangtze River. Most Chinese people were surprised by his determination and physical strength. This quality of his somehow had been transferred into his commitment for driving the Cultural Revolution even further.

One Monday in the summer, and it was Father's day off, a group of 16 Workers' Rebel Team<sup>5</sup> 工人造反派 from his work place came to search our flat 抄家. It was just like Father had said, both my parents put all the valuables and the things that they thought might not belong to the “revolutionary category” on the floor in the middle of the sitting room. These members of Workers' Rebel Team seemed to be much more “civilised” than the Red Guards from Beijing. They did not shout at us, but were very polite. One of them was earnestly writing down a list of the items that were laid on the floor; another one was checking them one by one; the third person was loading all the listed items into a container and then he put them all into a trunk. This was a very peculiar procedure, which was watched by the rest of the Rebel Team and the family. No one said a word and the atmosphere was sombre. I looked at the electric clock on the wall. It was midday, but the time seemed to move on very reluctantly.

When the procedure was nearly over, there was a sound of knocking at the door. One of the Rebel Team members opened door. It was the daughter of my maternal grandmother's brother, who had a parcel in her hand.

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<sup>4</sup>老子英雄儿好汉. 老子反动儿混蛋. 要是革命就跟着毛主席. 要是不革命就滚他妈的蛋!...

<sup>5</sup> The Rebel Teams were the equivalent to the Red Guards, but they were from work units (work places) instead of schools.

She looked around the room with a surprised expression and said. “My dad ...asked me to return these to the Gan family.” After handing the parcel over to the Rebel Team, she ran away as fast as she could.

Later I learned that Mother had taken all the jewelleries that belonged to her niece (my cousin), Pangpang 胖胖 to my great uncle for safekeeping at the early stage of the Cultural Revolution. I assumed that his family was facing a difficult situation as well, so that his daughter had to bring the stuff back to us.

“I forgot to mention that I had left these things with my uncle. Anyway, they don’t belong to us” Mother explained immediately.

This unexpected incident had brought us a serious consequence. The Rebel Team felt that they had been cheated, so they became more aggressive towards us.

“How come you have forgotten to tell us about these jewelleries? Who do you think you are kidding with?”

“I thought that the jewelleries must have been taken by the Red Guards who had come to search my uncle’s house. That’s why I never mentioned it to you.”

“Have you hidden anything else somewhere or do you have something else that you’ve FORGOTTEN to tell us?”

“No, I don’t have anything else hidden anywhere.”

“We tried very hard to be polite first, but you didn’t cooperate. Now we have to take the hard way. We don’t trust you anymore! You must confess!”

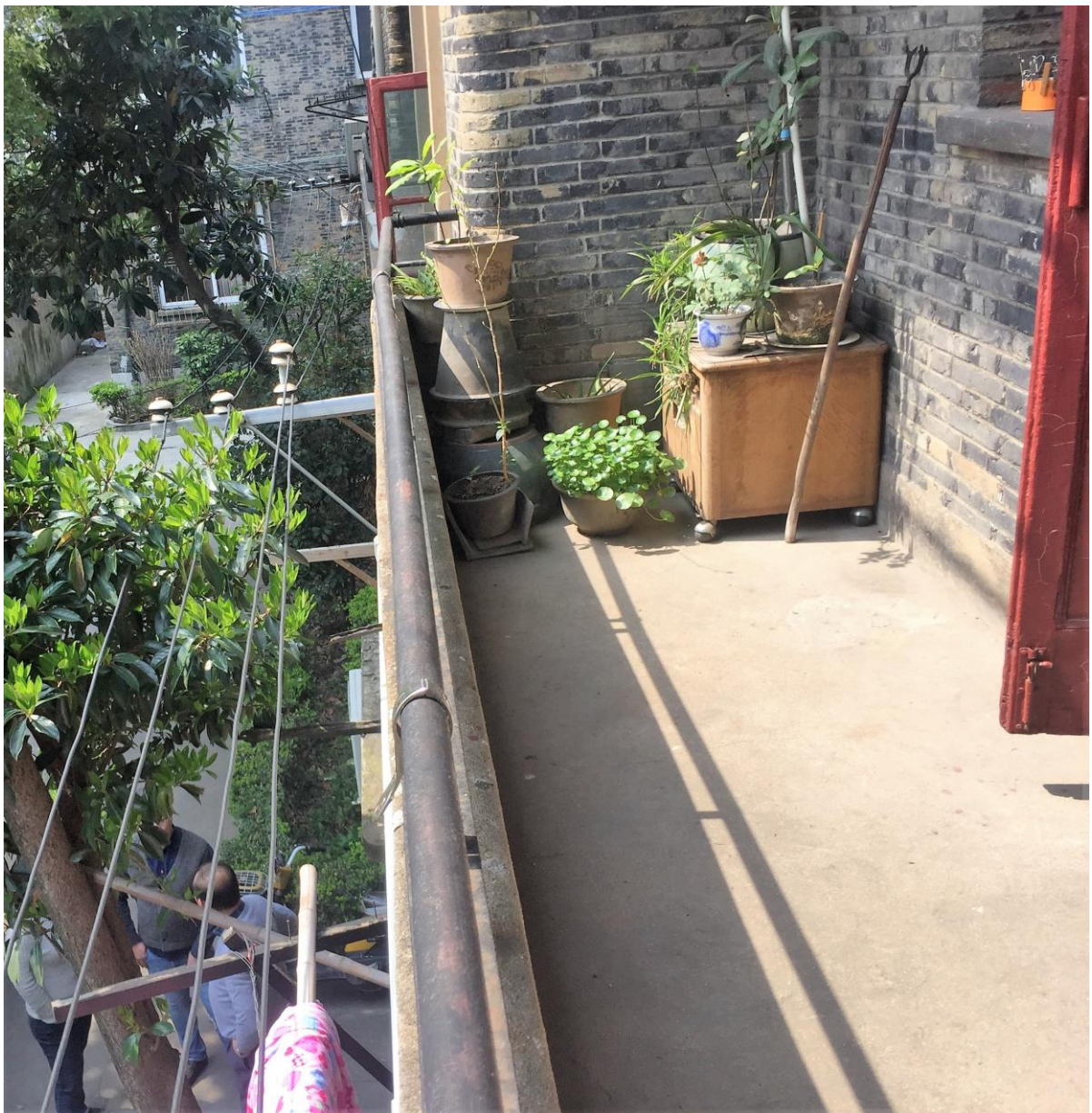
“I’ve nothing else to confess about.”

Some of the Rebel Team members got together and whispered to each other, as if they were having a meeting to work out their next step. After a little while, one of them made an announcement.

“We’ve decided to stay here for a few days to see if anyone else will be delivering more stuff. This time we’ll search the flat properly.”

The Rebel Team separated the family into two groups. My parents were asked to stay in their bedroom and the children were kept in the veranda with Little White Face (LWF) 小白脸,

one of the team members. LWF looked like a high school boy. His face was very pale but was a charming character. LWF told us many Kongfu stories and showed us some of his Kongfu tricks. While the search was going on in the flat, he played with us on the veranda. My sisters and brother were not afraid of him as if we had known him for a long time. We laughed and joked. The atmosphere on veranda was very different from the one in the flat. However, he did ask us what sort of relation the person who came to deliver the jewellery was. Later we realised that playing with the children in the veranda was one of the Rebel Team's tactics. They thought that if any relatives or family friends who were coming to "deliver more treasures", seeing the children playing happily on the veranda, they would not raise suspicion and would not run away.





From time to time, I could hear knocking sound in the sitting room. Peeping through French windows of the veranda, I could see that some of the floorboards were lifted up and some parts of the wall and ceiling were knocked open, as if they were really digging for “treasures” in the flat. I was wondering what would happen, if they had indeed discovered a few gold bars that were hidden in the flat by the previous owner of the property. I remembered that grandfather bought the flat and its content with a few gold bars from a Jewish dentist just before the Communist arrived in 1949. What would happen, if that dentist could not take the gold with him and had left the “nasty gold bars” under the floorboard? How could we explain it to the Rebel Team? Possessing gold, jewelleries and foreign money especially the US dollars was not just a burden, but it would be a terrible crime against the Revolution at that time.

The Rebel Team searched the flat day and night. In the evening, we were given a loaf of sweet bread for supper and slept in the sitting room with all the lights on. When the bedroom door opened a crack, I could just see Mother’s face with a distressed expression, but we could not talk to her. Late in the evening, another Rebel Team came to change the shift.

In the following afternoon after moving all the posh looking furniture and the valuable items into the south facing bedroom, which used to be my grandparents’ bedroom, the Rebel Team pasted strips of paper seals in crosses onto the bedroom windows and the door. On the strips, it was written: “This room is sealed by the Workers’ Rebel Team of Shanghai Number Seven Sawing Machine Factory” with a red stamp mark at the bottom.

Some Team members put all the jewelleries and watches into three metal boxes and then put the boxes into a large travel bag. Master Lou, one of the Rebel Team members, took out an Omega watch from one of the boxes and handed it over to Father, asked: “Mr Gan, this is the watch that you normally wear. Is that right?”

Father did not often wear his watch. He looked at him and nodded, but did not say anything. He took the watch from Master Lou and fastened it on his wrist.

Two team members took a travel bag went out of the flat with Father. Linlin was anxious and asked LWF, “Where are they taking him to?”

“Don’t worry. They are just going to the bank to put all the stuff away safely and will be back soon.” LWF answered very calmly.

The Rebel Team finally left. The two-day ordeal went on very slowly as if it was two months. It was not long ago, I was making choices for secondary schools, but a month later, our family was in a completely different situation: we were deeply humiliated, lost our belongings and one of the bedrooms was confiscated by the Rebel Team.

The family was together again. Everything happened so suddenly. We were all in shock and even forgot how to comfort each other. Staring at the two paper seals on the locked bedroom door, Mother could not take the humiliation any more. “Move the big cupboard over there! Block it! I can’t bear to see it anymore!”

Father and I did so. The symbol of the shame and humiliation on the bedroom door was blocked by the cupboard, and the strips of the paper seals were no longer visible within the flat, but the seals on the bedroom windows could still be seen from street. We could not do anything about it, but the only hope that we had was to urge the tree<sup>6</sup> below to grow fast, so that it would cover up the public humiliation of the family.

Hiding shame might be a very normal response in the situation like that. It was just like stretching out hands to stop one’s body falling onto the ground when one suddenly tripped over. When facing such political tornado, we were completely confused, because of its speed and power. It smashed everything that was on its path. We did not know what was right and what was wrong. All the old cultural value and civilization such as literature, music, arts and even some basic humanities that we were familiar with and had enjoyed, were all condemned. Father said that a certain type of culture and ideology represented a certain group of people. When the culture and ideology were under attack the real target was not the culture itself, but it would be the people and the social class that associated with it. We sincerely hoped that we were only on the fringe of the target, because our family was not a real capitalist. We were different from Jiaqi’s family that used to be the owner of a company before 1949. However, it was so hard to predict who would be attacked next? Of course, our first survival instinct was to disassociate ourselves from the condemned social groups as quickly as possible.

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<sup>6</sup> See the picture in this chapter, which was taken 43 years after the event. At that time the top of the tall tree in the picture was just under the first floor window.