

Chapter Seven

Mother's family 树大招风猪怕壮 (1898-1935)

There was a large framed portrait photograph hanging on the north side of the wall in Grandmother's bedroom. It was a man in his 30s, in Japanese-style clothes. I was told that the person in the picture was Grandfather, Lin Zunxiong 林遵雄, whom I had never met. Whenever I asked Grandmother about Grandfather, she would change the subject. However, later I found out about his story from Mother and my uncle Lin Shengshi 林圣时.

The Lin family story¹ goes back as far as the late 19th century.



¹ This story was based on reminiscences by my uncle Lin Shengshi 林圣时 (my mother's oldest brother) and Lin Shengdan 林圣丹 (my mother). It was noted down by Lin Fengqian 林凤千 who is the daughter of Lin Shengshi. Some of the facts were amended by my uncle Lin Shengqing 林圣清 (my mother's youngest brother).



Lin Chunsheng 林春生, my great grandfather's family had a shop called Qiankunhe 乾坤和 (lit. Peace of the World) that sold goods such as Meili brand 美丽牌 cigarettes, matches, candles, paraffin, soaps, writing paper and some imported goods. Lin Chunsheng was able to have the expensive western education in Shanghai. He studied law at St John's University in Shanghai. After graduation, great grandfather worked for the local authorities, transporting salt to Shanghai from elsewhere (possibly from Huaiyin). He was a very capable and ruthless businessman. A few years later, having had all the right experiences and had built up his networks, he became a salt dealer in Shanghai. As a result, he was very rich. It was said that for Chinese New Year the Lin family gave children and servants red packets that contained shoe-shaped gold ingots 金元宝. Like any parent, great grandfather Lin Chunsheng wanted his (only) child, Grandfather Lin Zunxiong, to receive the best education possible, so he sent him to Tongji German Medical School 德文医学, the present Tongji University 同济大学 in Shanghai to study medicine.

It is fair to say that Grandfather was brought up in a “westernised bourgeois environment with Chinese characteristics”. In other words, he was westernised, but at the same time, was very Chinese. Both my grandparents were of the same age, which was quite unusual

by Chinese standards of those days. The day before they got married, a fortune-teller looked at Grandmother's eyebrows and told her that she would go through a big change in her life when she reached thirty-three. Somehow, the prophecies later became true.

After his graduation, Grandfather became a qualified doctor. He happily set up a clinic to practise medicine in Shanghai, and everything went famously. However, it was said that the turning point in Grandfather's life happened a few years later, when he caused a medical accident. One of his patients reacted badly to the medicine that he had prescribed and became very ill. He had to compensate the patient and his family. The incident damaged his reputation and confidence. As a result, he was extremely upset and became depressed. He began to doubt that he could become a successful doctor in Shanghai. Although someone like Grandfather could always work for his father in the family business, he was an idealist, and did not want to walk into that kind of life without putting up a fight. In fact, he wanted to do something good for the majority of the population, and to make living using his own abilities.

Grandfather's classmate was a son of the north-eastern warlord. He asked Grandfather to work for him in Zhangjiakou 张家口, Hebei. He took up the offer and went there, but not long afterwards, he had to leave as war broke out in northern China.



Meanwhile, great grandfather Lin Chunsheng had a new idea: he wanted to set up a shipping company. He thought that the medical accident had given him an opportunity to

talk his son out of carrying on with his medical practice. Naturally enough, he wanted his only child to take over his business when he got old. When my grandparents came back from the north, he offered Grandfather an opportunity to go to Waseda 早稻田, a well-known Japanese university to take a business course in management of shipping industry. Very reluctantly, Grandfather obeyed his father, went to Japan and left his family behind. It was said that Mother's older sister was a beautiful and friendly girl, who was much loved by everyone in the family. As she looked like a doll, and at the time she was the only daughter in the family, she was called Dolly 洋囡囡.

Grandmother's maiden family was well respected in Shanghai during the late Qing Dynasty. Grandmother's grandfather, Jing Yuanshan 经元善 was a high-rank official under the Emperor Guangxu 光绪. He was in charge of the telecommunications and production bureaux in Shanghai when he was in his 40s. Jing Yuanshan was also a great philanthropist and the first promoter for women's education in China. Although Jing Yuanshan died at beginning of 20th Century, his extended family lived in his big mansion which later became the Shanghai Number Nine People's Hospital 第九人民医院.



Grandmother often took her children (two sons and one daughter) to visit her father Jing Hengmu 经亨沐 there. As Dolly was a very adorable and was loved by all the relatives, great grandparents asked Dolly to stay for a few days when Grandmother was about to take her children home. Grandmother's youngest siblings were very pleased when they

heard that Dolly was going to stay with them and they planned many interesting games for their beautiful niece to play in the following day.

The following morning, Grandmother's youngest brother decided to hold a "secret" barbeque to entertain Dolly. He and his friend took Dolly to the storeroom at bottom of the garden to fetch some paraffin for lighting the barbeque. As he could not find any opened paraffin containers, he unsealed a full paraffin tank and poured some out into a small tin. In the process of doing this, he panicked and spilled some on the ground. Of course, he wanted to cover up his naughty deeds, so he decided to reseal the paraffin tank with wax. He asked his friend to close the storeroom door so that no adults could see them. When he lit the wax, the matchstick with flame fell into the paraffin tank and big fireball roared out like an angry animal. A second later, the whole storeroom was on fire. As the door was shut, no one could escape. When the adults realised what was going on at bottom of the garden, it was too late, and all three of them were burned to death.

It all happened when Grandfather was in Japan studying. The family decided not to tell him the tragic incident, because it would upset him deeply and most importantly, it might affect his study in Japan. However, when he came home, the first thing he asked was "Where is Dolly?"

Everyone was silent. No one said anything.

"I had a nightmare when I was in Japan, and Dolly was hurt in a fire."

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It was said that Grandmother had ten children among which only five survived. The other four all died in their infancy. Some superstitious people said that the Lin family could not have daughters. Therefore, when Mother was born, a fortune-teller told Grandmother to put the new born baby in a bamboo chicken cage to avoid the same fate.

After coming back from Japan, Grandfather went into the family business. It was said that in 1930 great grandfather was engaged in a dispute over a piece of land with an old powerful businessman Yu Qiaqing 虞洽卿, who had connections with many types of Mafia in Shanghai and was a powerful character in the logistics business. As a result, great grandfather broke off with Yu Qiaqing, and he set up a shipping company called

Hefeng 和丰 with Mr Wang 汪, another salt dealer from Yangzhou. The Hefeng Company asked Grandfather to buy some ships abroad. Grandfather went to Germany where he bought five ships and named them with the Chinese character “he”和 (peace) in each one: Chunhe 春和; Zhonghe 中和; Shihe 时和; Tonghe 通和; and Qinghe 庆和.



One morning in May, after a business meeting in a hotel, great grandfather and Grandfather were being driven back to their company office. When the car reached west side of Xiafei Road 霞飞路, the present West Huaihai Road 淮海西路, a gang of three men stopped the car, jumped in and ordered the chauffeur to drive on.

Great grandfather asked the kidnapers, “Why do you want to kidnap us? Presumably, you will be asking for money. If this is what you are going to do, then you should let one of us to go to get the money for you.” The kidnapers let Grandfather out of the car in Hongqiao Road 虹桥路.

Initially, the kidnapers asked for a million silver dollars 银元 of ransom. After two weeks of hard negotiation with the kidnapers, Grandfather reduced the ransom to 200,000 dollars. The incident was kept away from the police.

At that time, the Lin family house was two semi-detached buildings linked by an internal door. The house was in Xinglong Cun 兴隆村, Chongqing Road 重庆路. At about 2-3 pm, the day before the ransom was delivered, an armed gang of five came through the front door and bolted door behind them. They cut off the telephone line and went into a room on the ground floor. After that they went into a room on the first floor, where great grandmother Jiang Nianci 江念慈 was sitting. As she was in a plain blue dustcoat, the robbers thought she was one of the house servants. However, when they saw her sister who came to visit, in very smart clothes, they mistook her for the owner of the house.

At that moment, both grandparents were on the second floor sitting room in the west part of the building. Realising that some intruders were in the house and the telephone line had been cut, Grandfather immediately closed the partition door of the two buildings. As the robbers could not get into the other half of the building, they came and pointed a pistol at great grandmother's sister's head.

“Where is Xiao K (young master)?”

Looking nervously at great grandmother, she pointed to the west part of the house.

The robbers tried to force the partition door open. The situation became very tense. My grandparents knew that it was only a matter of time, before the robbers getting into that part of the building where they were. They had to seek help urgently. Grandmother quietly opened the sitting room window and saw a person sweeping the street below. While she was climbing onto the windowsill to catch the attention of the person, Grandfather quickly wrote a note, folded it up and threw it down at the road-sweeper. Grandmother desperately but quietly signalled a plea to this person to alert the police. As the road-sweeper could not read, he took the note to the owner of the cake shop 糕团店 round the corner.

“Yes, this IS strange. The Lin family doesn't normally close their front door during the day.”

The moment he had read the note, the cake shop owner immediately took it to the policeman standing outside the Jiuda 九大 Pawnshop down the road.

As Chongqing Road was in the French Concession, the police responded very swiftly. Within a few minutes, a police van arrived in the street. The armed police surrounded the house. Some of the robbers panicked and tried to escape. One of them ran into the room of my second uncle, Lin Shenghe 林圣和, undressed and got into Lin Shenghe's bed. Another ran into my great grandmother's room, threw his pistol under the bed and tried to hide, but was caught by the policemen, who walked straight in. One of the robbers tried to escape via the roof of the house but was later caught by a neighbour. The other two tried to walk out through the front door by telling the police that there was a robbery going on inside the house, but they were arrested on the spot. The police asked the family members to stay exactly where they were, searched every room, and tried to find anything that might have been left by the gang. When they went into second uncle's room they saw a robber lying in bed. The police asked him who he was.

"I am the nephew of my aunty Nianci."

"Why are you in bed?"

"...I came to visit my aunt this morning. As it was a long journey and I didn't get any sleep last night, I took a nap after lunch."

"Did you hear anything suspicious?"

"I didn't hear anything, as I was very tired and fast sleep."

"OK, can you take me to see your aunt?"

The robber walked into the sitting room and stood in front of great grandmother's sister, saying in a threatening tone of voice, "Aunt Nianci, tell them I am your nephew!"

The police asked my great grandmother who were sitting at the corner of the room if she knew him. She hesitantly said yes.

The policemen laughed.

“Aunty, I am your nephew!”

Although the robber realised he was talking to the wrong “aunt” he still cried out desperately when he was dragged away.

Only when the situation was under control did Grandfather open the semi-damaged partition door.

Early in the morning of the following day, well before six, someone banged loudly on the front door. It was a police officer, who brought back great grandfather.

The ending of this kidnapping episode was rather strange, but all the evidence showed that great grandfather was extremely talented at persuading people. During these twenty-one days in captivity, Lin Chunsheng was kept with other three rich businessmen: his poker friend Zhou Xiangyun 周藉云 who was in the paint business; Gu Xingyi 顾兴一; and Mr Fei, who owned one of the biggest taxi companies in Shanghai. During their captivity, they were all well treated and fed, and spent a lot of time playing mah-jong. After being released from captivity they paid off the debt that they owed each other from the mah-jong games and became even closer.

During the time they were hostages, my great grandfather somehow established a good relationship with one of the young kidnapers, who had been brought to Shanghai from the countryside by the gangsters.

“You are so young and could have a great future ahead of you, so why do you want to risk your life doing this type of things, which is no good for anyone. And I’m sure your parents would be extremely worried about you at home if they’d found out what you are doing now...” “It must terribly hard for your parents to bring you up in such harsh conditions in the countryside. I am sure you want to show some filial obedience to your

parents and make their life better. At the very least, you should not make them worry about you. I am willing to help you, if you can get me out of here.”

Lin Chunsheng managed to persuade the young man to abandon the gangster lifestyle, and promised to help him to start a proper business in his hometown. Later the young man sneaked out and reported to the police. As a result, the police raided kidnappers’ house and released great grandfather and the other captives. Great grandfather was lucky to come home unharmed.

The police made 13 arrests in that raid. Three of the arrested were executed later, as they were involved in other murder cases. After the incident of the robbery, the Lin family employed a security guard to man the front door. Family life gradually returned to the normality.

In August 1933, when grandparents were 33, the family moved to a house in Bushi Road 薄石路. One day, not long after they had moved into their new home, Shanghai city was under curfew, and many people took the day off work. As one of his ships was about to leave Shanghai and needed a signature from the owners, Grandfather had to go to the office to sign the document. As it was the family chauffeur’s day off, he had to drive himself to the office.

When he stopped for the road works at the end of Bushi Road, two strangers jumped into the car and kidnapped him. The incident was witnessed by the family chef, who was on his way back from his daily food shopping. He rushed back and told great grandfather.

“...Sir, I saw young master being kidnapped at the end of the road...”

“Are you sure it was him?”

“I noticed the car ...and... young master was at the driver seat.”

Not long after that, the duty clerk in the office phoned up to say that Grandfather had not turn up to sign the document.

That evening the kidnappers contacted the family by phone and said that for the safe return of Grandfather, the family would have to pay 700,000 Yuan. Great grandfather immediately contacted his “protectors”, Mr Du Yuesheng 杜月笙 and Mr Huang Jinrong 黄金荣, the two top “God-fathers” in Shanghai. However, they both denied having anything to do with this. Great grandfather begged Mr Du to use his influence to find the kidnappers and to solve the case for him. Mr Du asked one of his underlings, Mr Zhang Jiaping 张嘉平 to deal with the case. After a little while, Mr Zhang made contact with the kidnappers and started negotiations. Two months later, Mr Zhang came to see great grandfather.

“Mr Lin, you know, it was very hard, but I’ve got the ransom down to 70,000 Yuan.”

“Good work! I am very grateful to you and Mr Du. When it is over; I’ll thank you both properly.”

“Don’t worry about this, Mr Lin. We are good friends, aren’t we? Anyway, get the money ready and I will do my very best to deliver it.”

“Good. I’ll get it ready by this afternoon.”

“Mr Lin, you will have your son back by tomorrow evening.”

Great grandfather was very happy, and was looking forward to seeing Grandfather. He immediately got the money ready and asked his concubine, Gao Yunzhen 高月珍 to take it to Mr Zhang to deliver to the kidnappers.

The evening the kidnappers called. Great grandfather’s concubine, Gao Yuezhen, answered the phone, but she didn’t say a word and went out with the money without returning. Later great grandfather got a phone call from the kidnappers.

“The ransom was 8,000 Yuan short. Mr Lin, what we are doing is dangerous and we are putting our lives at risk, so we never allow mistakes. It was your family member who gave rise to this unfortunate outcome!”

“Don’t! ... We can negotiate...”

The phone was cut off before great grandfather could finish his sentence. The great hope of having Grandfather back flew out of the window. The Lin family did not know why Gao Yuezhen went away without saying anything. Mr Zhang Jiaping also simply disappeared from the scene. No one knew what happened after that.

You might be asking how on earth great grandfather got to know his concubine Gao Yuezhen.

Gao was a prostitute whom he visited regularly in a brothel. She was pretty and was liked by Zhou Xiangyun, another rich man. Zhou and great grandfather were poker friends. As they both wanted Gao, they agreed that whoever won a poker game could take Gao home. Zhou lost that game to great grandfather. As a result, Gao became great grandfather’s concubine. Zhou and great grandfather often played card games for properties. It was said that great grandfather once lost 120 pieces of salt field in Chongming Island to Zhou over a poker game.

Great grandmother felt rather uncomfortable about her husband visiting brothels. She often encouraged my oldest uncle Lin Shengsi who was only in his early teens then, to accompany great grandfather and to keep an eye on him. Grandmother could not say no to my uncle’s special “mission”, although she was not at all happy about her son going to a brothel.

When the kidnapping incident went wrong, Gao Yuezhen went to hide in Zhou’s house, as she knew that as an old lover Zhou would feel sympathetic towards her.

Great grandfather exhausted all the possible channels that might get his son back. The situation became very desperate. A month later, the family received a parcel, which contained Grandfather's leather belt and his empty wallet. The Lin family was devastated. Only then did they report the kidnapping case to the police.

Great grandfather became very ill from the pressure, worry and developed a stomach problem. He was probably suffering from stomach cancer, and died a year later.

Although the police blamed the family for not reporting the kidnapping incident earlier, they took on the case and investigated it. They interviewed everybody they could find, and also issued a wanted warrant for Zhang Jiaping, the person who had been supposed to deliver the ransom. Later, the police arrested 20 people and asked Grandmother and great grandmother to go to the police station to identify these people.

The two women were shocked when they arrived at the police station, as most of those arrested were close family relatives, including my great grandparents (grandmother's parents). There was also Jing Guangfu 经广馥, Grandmother's brother who was a cinematographer, and his wife Jiang Naifang 蒋耐芳, who was a famous film actor. What was more, there were relatives of the Lin and Jiang families, such as great grandfather's cousin, Lin Huaide 林怀德, his sister, and great grandmother's three nephews, including Jiang Songquan 江松泉 who then was working for the Hefeng shipping company.

"This must be a serious mistake. It's not possible that all my relatives are involved in kidnapping my husband," Grandmother was desperately explaining to the police.

The police insisted that as well as Zhang Jiaping, Jing Guangfu was another prime-suspect, as he was the person who had "discovered" Grandfather's car in the suburb, and had cleaned it up before driving it back home. Any possible trace of the kidnapers in the car had been destroyed by him.

With her family background, Grandmother had a very strong sense of "face". It would be a catastrophe for her if it was publicly known that the well-respected Jing family was

involved in the kidnapping. She asked the police to drop the investigation immediately and spent over 30,000 dollars guaranteeing her family members' innocence, allowing them to be let out of police detention.

Great grandmother died not long after that. At that time, my oldest uncle Lin Shengsi was only 16 years old. The family did not have an adult male to run the business any more. In 1937, the Japanese invaded Shanghai. One of the company's ships was sunk in the mouth of the Yangtze River in Wusongkou, and the other four were taken by the Japanese. The company manager Mr Dong Haoyun² 董浩云 managed to maintain the company for three more years, but he had to close it down after that. According to him, many of the family members who worked in the company took advantage of this "sinking ship". Some of these "family workers", such as Jiang Songquan and Shen Zunfu, were sacked by Dong Haoyun because of their corruption.

Later, whenever these relatives claimed that they had seen Grandfather somewhere, Grandmother would raise her hopes and would spend money asking them to look for him. The hope of getting Grandfather back went up and down like a yoyo. Grandmother even let Gao Yuezhen come back home and treated her well, as she believed that one should treat people kindly and it did not matter what they had done in the past. She also hoped that Gao might tell the family of Grandfather's whereabouts. Gao was a very manipulative character. When she came back she quickly established her social space in the family and persuaded many family members to be on her side, but her tricks never worked on my mother.

It was said that Grandmother's brother Jing Guangfu was a drug addict. His taking of opium and the "white powder" destroyed his well-respected career in the film industry, and he abandoned his family. Whenever he came to visit Grandmother, all the family servants would have to keep a close eye on him, otherwise he would take anything that he could get hold of from the house and sell it to satisfy his habit. He ended up in the street and became homeless. It was said that Jing Hengmu, grandmother's father was very

² His son, Dong Jianhua (董建华) became the governor of Hong Kong in 1997

depressed about his family members' behaviours. One day he was found hanging in his bedroom.

I was told said that after losing his job, Jiang Songquan was offered a place to stay with the Jing family, but he did something that was regarded as indecent in those days. He had an affair with a widowed relative and divorced his own wife Zhao Yaqiu. As a result, he was on both the Jing and Lin family blacklists. Strangely enough, after 1949 his fortunes turned. As his daughter joined the Communist Party and took part in the struggle against the KMT government, after the communists came to power in China, she became a government official and asked her father Jiang Songquan to live with her.

The Lin family moved to a Shikumen 石库门 house in 37 Cité Bourgogne 步高里, south of Shaanxi Road 陕西南路, where the family stayed until the late 1970s, after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Grandmother spent the rest of her life looking for Grandfather and hoping that one day he would come home. In order to remember Grandfather, the children of my oldest uncle, Lin Shengsi call Grandmother 'Grandfather' 爷爷. Uncle Lin Shengsi, his wife and two of their younger children went to Hong Kong immediately after the Communist taking over the power in China and left two of their older children with Grandmother. Maybe it was the traditional Chinese view, maybe it was her terrible life experience, Grandmother was always put the needs of the male children before the female ones. However, in 1965 Lin Chnegde, her oldest grandson was given the permit to visit his parents in Hong Kong. So he left Shanghai. Grandmother always expected her grandson to return. One day we visited Grandmother and saw there was a white goose in her courtyard. Linlin asked Grandmother why she wanted to keep a goose at home. She told Linlin that she was fattening the animal up to cook a "welcome home" meal for my cousin's return. When my cousin reunited with his parents in Hong Kong, he did not like the life style there at the beginning and he missed Grandmother terribly. Although he tried to return to Shanghai, he was stopped by his family. In those days, the permits of visiting relatives abroad were like lottery tickets, which completely depended on one's luck. When a

Chinese person had permit to visit his relations abroad, it was most unlikely that he would come back to China again. Grandmother had a stroke and died in late autumn 1965, just before her 66 birthday. She did not see her oldest grandson again.

The human mind is a very strange thing. Today, after so many decades, the next generation of the Lin family carries on looking for Grandfather and his ghost stays with us. Cousin Lin Chengde's wife, Zhonghua (仲花) has a conspiracy theory about the disappearance of Grandfather which goes like this. Grandfather could not take any more the pressure from the business and from his father. He escaped from home by faking the kidnaping case. In 2004, when my sister Linlin and her son, Menzai 文仔 were visiting Japan, they saw an old lady who looked exactly like my mother. If Zhonghua's theory is correct, it might be that Grandfather went to Japan and started another life there. We would all like to know what happened to Grandfather. Maybe the police files in Shanghai would reveal some of the mysteries of Grandfather's disappearance.