

## Chapter Eighteen

### Make a living of violin playing 音随江流顺风舟 (1974-)

The letter exchange between Dingding and I gradually became public. At one stage, she wrote to me almost daily. Somehow, there was no obvious negative force from either side of the families to stop the relationship going further. Father had a talk with me, which I thought it might be vaguely related that issue. He told me a story about one of his secondary schoolmates, who went out with an older woman and most of his friends thought that it was inappropriate. I would say that if that was an attempt to prevent my relationship with Dingding, then it was a rather feeble one. In fact, the real threat to the relationship was me. To start with, I found it too hard to drop the word “Aunt” at the beginning of each letter that I wrote to her. Later when Dingding told me that she was going to tell Wu Xuan’guang, her boyfriend about our relationship, I panicked and went completely silent. I did not reply any of her letters after that point. I was cowardly running away from the reality and just dropped her like that. I thought there were too many facts that were unsuitable in that relationship: we were related with one-generation difference according to the family tree and we were from different social class backgrounds. If I let it develop any further, I might damage her future. I thought that my silence would persuade her to go back to her boyfriend again, but much later, I found out that this behaviour of mine had caused her pain and agony.

Although my parents were against the idea of me playing the violin in a professional orchestra, they thought that being a peasant working in the fields was a much worse option. They reluctantly agreed that I should pursue a job as an orchestral player in any possible cities in Anhui province, as it would be impossible for me to get out of the province without a very strong reason at that time.

During one of the visits to his cousin, Father mentioned the idea of me auditioning for an orchestra.

“Although it’ll be difficult for Yungyung to leave Anhui, it’d be good, if he leave the countryside at least.” Father was trying to find a good solution for my immediate future.

“As Yungyung plays the violin, maybe the first step is to help him to find a job in a city orchestra in Anhui... Actually Changde (her husband) has relations who work in some of the southern cities of Anhui,” my aunt replied.

“That’ll be brilliant. Ideally it should be somewhere that is close to Shanghai...” Father added another condition onto his list.

“My niece Shudu and her husband live in Ma’anshan 马鞍山 city. Her husband is an iron-steel engineer who works for Ma’anshan Iron and Steel Company. Ma’anshan is a city by the Yangzi River and it is quite close to Shanghai.” Uncle Chnagde added.

“Yes, it would be wonderful if Yungyung can work in Ma’anshan. Don’t you think so?” Aunt asked.

“Axiao is in Dangtu 当涂 which is just outside Ma’anshan,” Peipei, my cousin added. “We can try to look for performance groups over there too.”

“Maybe Yungyung should try them all,” Father smiled and was rather pleased with their suggestions.

“Peipei, you’ll accompany Yungyung to go there for auditions, won’t you?” Aunt forcefully asked her son.

“No problem,” Peipei replied without hesitation.

“I think that Ma’anshan is a much better place where I have two families of relations who will be able to take care of Yungyung,” Uncle Changde said confidently.

“Should we go there now?” Peipei asked with enthusiasm.

“Let me write to Shudu first and explain the situation, so that her family will be prepared for the visit,” Uncle Changde said with caution.

“Then in this case I shouldn’t go back to the countryside until the auditions are over.” I was keen to make any excuse to stay in Shanghai for a little longer, so that I could have more violin lessons and practice to improve my techniques.

“No, you should just do everything as normally as possible; otherwise the people in your village will start to get suspicious,” Mother said.

“When I’ve had a reply from my niece, I will let you know.” Uncle Changde added.

I went back to the countryside as usual. Unlike before, I was in a much better mood the week before leaving for Xiangzhuang. I could eat normally; felt more relaxed to talk to the members of the family and relatives. Somehow, I knew that a good future was waiting for me ahead. As far as I was concerned, leaving the countryside for a better life in a city was not my priority, but becoming a professional violin player was my dream.

On my way to Xiangzhuang, everything looked different: although I politely greeted all the familiar faces as before, the landscapes of the countryside and the people became detached from me, as if I was watching a film in which the people's life and their future had nothing to do with me anymore. I kept my "escaping" plan away from Afu and Xiaozhong, my housemates.

When Uncle Changde received the reply from his niece, Mother was still worried that the authorities in Wangji Commune might not let me leave. As a result, she bought a lot of presents and foodstuff in Shanghai and asked Linlin to bring them to me to "distribute" among the "relevant" people in the Commune in order to "pave" my way out. Aunt thought that was a bad idea, as it was unsafe for a young girl to travel to an isolated place like that on her own. Uncle Changde suggested that Peipei should immediately go to Xiangzhuang instead of Linlin. In addition, he said that Peipei should pretend to be an official from the Ma'anshan Performance Groups to go to Wangji Commune to invite me for an audition. Then it would look more convincing to the commune officials and the villagers. Uncle Chnagde's "escaping" plan was quite credible, as many city work units in Anhui province were given the permission to recruit 招工 from the re-education programmes in People's Communes' production teams.

About a month after I had returned to Xiangzhuang, Peipei, the "official" from the Ma'anshan Performance Groups came to Wangji People's Commune to invite me for an audition in Ma'anshan.

When Peipei met Mr Zhao, the Party Secretary of Wangji Commune, he introduced himself, "I am the representative of the Ma'anshan Performance Groups. Our work units are expanding and we would like to recruit a few young players from the re-education programme. We believe that the best candidates are the people who have been re-educated by the members of the People's Communes, as they are politically reliable and trustworthy. We've heard Xiao Gan playing the violin before, so we would like to invite him to come to

Ma'anshan for an audition and to take part in our selection process," Peipei explained the intention of his visit in a most official-like manner. It was either because of his convincing performance, or it was because the commune officials did not care about us leaving anymore, to Peipei's surprise, Mr Zhao believed him and said yes, without even asking for his ID or an introduction letter from Ma'anshan.

Peipei came to Xiangzhuang to fetch me and secretly handed me over the goodies that he had brought with him from Shanghai. My housemates were not suspected of anything either. I prepared myself as quickly as I could, took my violin, some light luggage and left the village.

Just about a week before that, Mr Wang, the leader of Xiangzhuang production team told me that the village had decided to buy a light tractor and would like to ask me to take the responsibility for looking after the machine. Of course, I would have been over the moon for their trust of me, but then I was not so bothered with it. In order to act "normally" like Mother had instructed, I took this task with a great enthusiasm.

Peipei and I went to Dangtu to see his younger cousin Axiao first. Dangtu was a county town. It did not look like a place that could afford a proper performing company, so we decided to leave for Ma'anshan.

After we arrived in Ma'anshan, we stayed with Shudu, Peipei's cousin. Shudu worked as an accountant in one of the district governments in the city of Ma'anshan, while her husband was working as one of the principle engineers in the Ma'anshan Iron and Steel Company. They had two children: a boy and a girl. They were both younger than me. The boy was older and had already started working in a local factory. The girl was still at a local secondary school. There was also an old lady in the family. She was Shudu's mother-in-law. All the family members were very hospitable. Their son gave up his bedroom for Peipei and me. Peipei and I occasionally ate with them in the evening. Before we had arrived in Ma'anshan, Shudu had already done some background checking for me and had found out the location of the Ma'anshan Performing Art Groups (PAG), which was situated in the Yangjiashan 杨家山 area. I was lucky: according to a friend of Shudu, who was working for the city Arts Council, the orchestra of the PAG was looking for orchestral players. The following day, I went to the PAG and tried to book an audition. The orchestra of the PAG occupied a few simple functional redbrick buildings, which scattered around about over an acres of land. I met He Wangjing, the head of the orchestra trustee, who was also a trumpet player. To my surprise,

he spoke Shanghainese. He told me that he could not fix an audition slot for me, as the principle conductor of the orchestra was on a business trip. However, he asked me to go back the following week. Actually, I was quite pleased, as I had one more week to practise my audition pieces.

I played the violin in the mornings. Peipei and I went out for lunch in the nearby restaurants and explored the city in the afternoon. Although the all buildings in Ma'anshan city were new, unsophisticated and some of them were even very crude, we both found that the city of Ma'anshan was very much suitable for young people from Shanghai like us, because it was cheap to live in and it had some hidden Shanghainese culture. In the evening, when Shudu's family came home from work I would play my audition pieces in front of the family to get used to performing in front of audience. One of the audition pieces that I prepared for was called The Age-Old Iron Cycad in Blossom 千年的铁树开了花, which was a violin solo piece with very demanding techniques. The theme was based on a Cultural Revolution story, which was told by a permanently dumb young girl who lived in an isolated minority region of China. She was grateful to the Chinese military doctors who cured her illness and enabled her to hear again. I thought that with this type of political theme, I should make a right impression for the job. I did not prepare any of the western classical violin repertoires for my audition. I really appreciated Peipei and his cousin's family who listened to me playing and made constructive suggestions for improvements. As I went to the orchestra every day just to show my presence, I met many orchestra players. I liked the atmosphere there, as most of the young musicians were from Shanghai and they were slightly older than I was. I envy their life. However, everyone was friendly and made me feel at home. They all wanted to help me to get the job. Zheng Binghui, the flutist was a natural networker and fixer. He told Mr He Wangjing and Mr Tian, the leader of the orchestra how good I was. Mr He, Mr Tian and the other six brass instrument players were the older generation in the orchestra. They were originally from the PLA Military Band in Beijing. Mr Tian used to be a bassoon player. In the early 1960s, the Band had to cut down the number of players. As result, they were reallocated to Ma'anshan, which was a newly established industrial city. As it desperately needed to develop its art and music, they were asked to work in the orchestra.

The younger generation of the orchestra was formed by a group of young musicians from Shanghai. Many of them were from musical families. Zheng Binghui's father was the principle viola player in the Shanghai Philharmonic. Chen Jian'an, the oboe player, his

brother was a flutist in the Shanghai Ballet Company, which was the home of The White-haired Girl Ballet, one of the eight model productions that were strictly controlled by Madam Mao. Cheng Jingde, the clarinetist, his mother was a famous opera singer in Nanjing City and his brother was a bass player in Nanjing Symphony Orchestra. One of the violinists, Zhao Yixuan was a few years older than me. She always locked herself in her room practising Paganini's D major violin concerto and Chaconne of Bach's Partita in D minor. Although many of the musicians were at a higher level and were much better than I was, they were not the showing off type, but were rather unthreatening and friendly. Zhao would call me Xiao Ghee in Ningbo pronunciation, as I told her that my family was originally from Zhenhai Ningbo. The time for my audition was postponed a few times. Two weeks after arriving in Ma'anshan, the orchestra authority asked me to help with hand-copying the orchestra parts from the music scores that had just been composed by the composer-in-residence for the orchestra to perform. Sometimes I was even asked to take part in some of the public performances, as they needed more violin players. I asked Peipei to go back to Shanghai as he had kindly taken time off from his work in the small workshop 生产组, which was run by the neighbourhood committee in his area. I moved into the orchestra bachelor's accommodation and shared a room with three wind-instrument players.

Although Shudu introduced me to other orchestras that were in the nearby cities, I liked Ma'anshan city much more. I could see myself living there and working as an orchestral player. The environment suited me well as I shared the common interests with many of the young players at the PAG. Because of that, it made me more determined to get the job. Another week passed by, I was still staying at the orchestra dormitory and I even attended their political meetings in order to obtain some experiences of a full-time employee there. At that time, there was another national political campaign in China. It was known as "The Campaign for Criticising Lin Biao and Confucius" 批林批孔. I simply could not see any connection between these two people: one was a condemned top rank military officer in the Chinese Communist Party, who died in a plane crash when escaping to the USSR and the other was an ancient Chinese philosopher who lived over two thousand years before. When I asked a question about the connection between these two, Mr Guo, a middle-aged horn player stood up and spoke in a highly charged emotion.

"What is the connection? Let me tell you what the connection is. Some people in the central government want to attack our Premier Zhou Enlai and they describe him as Confucius in the

Party. They want Premier Zhou to hand over the power to them, so that they can bring the country to its knees again 唯恐天下不乱!...”

After finishing his speech, he sat down in the chair, but I could almost visualise his anger that was squeezed out from his heavy breathing.

“What did I say that has upset him so much?” I quietly asked Zheng Binghui who was sitting next to me.

“Don’t worry. He isn’t angry with you, but the government. It was very stupid of him to make such a statement in public. He is looking for trouble!” Zheng Binghui whispered to me. The reality was that when China was gradually becoming “normal”, some of the left-wind politicians in the Central Government interpreted the normality as a hidden restoration of the capitalist ideology 资本主义复辟. The Campaign for Criticising Lin Biao and Confucius aimed at Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier who was a representative of the moderate political force within the central government. Unlike before, I became less interested in political ideology. At the time, I felt that I was just an outsider of the PAG and it was not my place to join any political discussion. Maybe my “opium” was the violin, which removed me from China’s politics. Anyway, that political campaign was short lived and it only lasted for a few months.

Not until the audition day, only I heard that there would be another violinist, who was a young girl of 16, from Nanjing. She was keen to get this job too. Her audition piece was Bruch violin concerto in G minor and she brought a piano accompanist with her. Zheng Binghui went around the PAG telling the people who were in the selection panel that the girl was too young to be employed by the orchestra. He even went to see Wang Ping, the Director of the City Arts Council and tried very hard to influence him. Zheng had a special one-to-one chat with Liu Ping, who was a violinist and a member of the selection panel. I asked Zheng why he did that. He told me “Liu Ping can’t be trusted; as he likes young girls, he might give a biased view on the selection panel.”

At last, the decision was made by the City Arts Council. I was informed that the job was offered to me. What a relief! It was a piece of good news for me and for the people, who had been fighting hard all the way. As I did not have Ma’anshan residential permit, the first thing the orchestra management committee had to do was to take me back to Wangji People’s

Commune to ask the Commune's permission for me to leave the countryside, so that I could be registered in Ma'anshan city. Mr Chen, one of the (younger) horn players who went down to Wangji Commune with me on behalf of the orchestra to deal with the formalities of transfer. This time Mr Chen went there as the real representative of the Ma'anshan orchestra.

I only took my necessary luggage from Xiangzhuang with me and distributed the rest of my possessions among the friends in the village. I even gave my big chest that I brought down from Shanghai to our neighbour, Xiaoguozi, as I had to share a room with three other musicians, and had no space for furniture in the Ma'anshan bachelor's dormitory.

For the last time I looked at the vast fields of sweet potatoes and the patch of the cotton field, which I had looked after. That was the place where I had spent nearly five years of my life. Everything looked somehow dark, distant and hollow, even under the warm early summer sun. The villagers politely said goodbye to me, but engaged me with no proper conversations. It would be too hard for me to explain my new job to them. When people asked me where I was going, I told them that I would be working in a city factory, as their concept of a paid job was working in a state-owned factory. For nearly five years, I lived with the villagers day and night. A great effort was made on both sides: the villagers and I had formed a good friendship. They looked after me when I had my kneecap injury; they included me; shared their culture with me and taught me their agricultural skills. In return, I shared my life with them and taught some of them to read. Maybe they were upset that I abandoned them just like that, or maybe they suddenly realised that the countryside was not a real home for the educated youths as the central government originally intended. After all, people like us belonged to cities.

"City people always live in cities," Mr You, one of my neighbours finally said it all. I felt that my original "mission" failed. I selfishly abandoned them for my personal goal that was to become a violinist. Anyway, I had to close that chapter of my life, as the great political ideology of working class leading our country had already been semi-buried.

My new life in Ma'anshan started. The first task was to choose a violin for my work. Chen Jian'an, my roommate volunteered to go to the orchestra storeroom with me to help me to select a suitable instrument. There were some old stringed instruments made in the European countries, but a Chinese Golden Bell grade-four violin in the corner of the storeroom immediately caught my attention. It reminded me of the darkest period, when Father took me



to the Shanghai Number One Department Store to look at the Golden Bell professional violins at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. He would say in a dreamy way, "When I am rehabilitated, I'll buy you an instrument just like that one." However, he did not do so. I looked at the violin and decided to have that Golden Bell as my work violin, because it symbolised the realisation of my dream.

The following week, I was taken to a tailor to have my Chinese suit made for performances. Of course, everything was paid by the orchestra authority. To my surprise, the orchestra even paid for my haircut too. I did not have to spend money on accommodation and medical care there. Everything was covered by the orchestra. The only expense that I had to pay for was the food that I ate. As I mostly ate in the canteen where the food was extremely cheap: it usually cost me 0.30 RMB a meal.

When my first monthly payday came, most colleagues of mine went to the office to collect their salary in the morning. Chen Jina'an asked me, "Have you got your pay yet?"

"No."

"Why not? Go and get your money, so we can go out for a meal together this evening," Chen said it as a matter of fact.

I could not make myself go to the office to collect the salary, as I was never paid in cash for any work that I did in the Commune. I was just given the agriculture products that the production team had harvested. If I needed cash, I had to sell something in a market. I found it strange and shameful to go to the office to collect money.

"Go on. Get it."

"No, I am not going to. It looks silly."

"You are silly. Come on. I'll take you there." I reluctantly followed him to the cash office.

Mr Jia, the one-eyed accountant took out a book, looked with his good eye at the number 36.5 RMB next to my name and said, "It was decided that your first year's monthly salary is 36.5 RMB. After ten months, your monthly salary will increase to 42 RMB, as I was told that you worked for us for nothing before. As a good gesture, the orchestra management committee

has decided to bring forward by two months for your higher payment.” He pointed at the person who was sitting opposite and said, “The cashier will give you the salary. Please count the notes very carefully.” I followed his instruction with a red face. I came out of the office felt humiliated. Collecting my first payment was a traumatic experience.

Mr Zhang, the janitor of the PAG was in his fifties. He lived in a small room of the gatehouse on his own, guarding the entire compound. He was often drunk and was as mad as a dog, barking at everyone whoever came into the premises. We just had to ignore him.

Within the premises of the Performing Art Group, there was a large dancing studio with mirrors on one side of the walls. The dormitory for the single young performers was a two-floor building block with eight large rooms on each floor. Each room could accommodate four people. The rooms on the ground floor were for the male members and the first floor rooms were for the female members. There were three taps with three large concrete sinks in the paved courtyard next to the dancing studio for us to wash clothes and to do the washing up. There were two public toilets and a shower facility with cold water only on the other side of the studio. If we wanted to have a bath, we had to go to a public bath place a few streets away. There was no personal space for single people, not even for some of the married couples. I remember that although the cook of the PAG was married, as his wife lived in the countryside, he was only allocated a shared-room. It must be terrible for him: when his wife came to visit him, they had to use the shared-room with his roommate. Only those married couples who both had the city residential permits, the City Art Council would allocate them unshared accommodation in the nearby streets.

Sima Jing, Zheng Binghui’s girlfriend was a dancer who shared one of the rooms with three female performers on the first floor of the dormitory. I was told that she was a local girl, but when I talked to her, she spoke perfect Shanghainese. Later I discovered that her family used to live in Shanghai. In 1959, her father was persecuted as a Rightist. As a result, his political rights was stripped off, the whole family moved to Ma’anshan. I met her mother, but I never met her father. I was told that her father was still in a labour camp somewhere in Anhui, a type of prison that was similar to the one that was close to Wangzhuang in Wangji Commune. I could not ask her too many questions about her family background, as it might cause upset or embarrassment. She started working for the Ma’anshan PAG after finishing her secondary school, so she moved into the dormitory of the PAG. I could not understand why a girl, who was the same age as me, could escape from going to the countryside to be re-educated by

peasants. Maybe she was the only child who had to look after her mother. Maybe as she lived in a small city like Ma'an Shan, her mind was not as corrupted as mine was and did not need to be re-educated by peasants. Another thing that made me puzzle was that all the young musicians of the PAG were from Shanghai and had never worked in the countryside or factories. Maybe people could always find a way to avoid the hardship. In fact, I was the same too, as I escaped from being a peasant.

One day Sima Jing asked me if I could house-sit her mother's place for a few days, as her mother was away (possibly visiting her father in the labour camp). Normally Zheng Binghui would do this kind of chores for her, but as he was away in a business trip for the PAG, she had to ask me for help. Her home was in a rough area. She told me that if there was no one lived in the house, it could be an easy target for burglars. Burglary had happened to her neighbours many times. She took me to her mother's place just after six in the evening. It was a simple dark room with living, eating and sleeping areas all together.

"The bed has got clean sheets on. I changed them myself this morning," she carried on talking. "Just help yourself, if you need anything... By the way, Mr Chen, the cellist and his family live in number six, a few doors away from here. If you come across any problem, you can just go and look for him. I hope you sleep well and see you in the morning."

"OK. Thanks. See you tomorrow," I replied feebly.

"I should say thank you." She handed over the house key to me and went out.

"Are you OK to walk back to the dorm on your own?" I asked, because I was worried about her walking in dark in the rough area.

"Yes, no problem. I'm quite used to this," she smiled.

I was rather anxious about burglars coming into the room in the middle of the night. I thought I should fully prepare myself for intruders, so I was desperately searching for a suitable "weapon" that I could use in an emergent situation. I looked through their kitchen utensils and thought that it would be odd and uncivilised for me to keep their chopping knife under my pillow. After a little search, I finally found myself an appropriate "weapon" that I would feel comfortable to apply in a situation. It was an iron bar taken from the middle section of a music stand. I felt much safer and comfortable with a "civilised" weapon under my pillow.

Anyway, the housesitting event went without any incident and I slept well every night, did not even touch the “weapon” once.

Almost every instrumental player of the PAG had a few students for earning extra income, especially the string players. As I was a new comer, I did not have a single student. Zheng Binghui asked me if I could teach Sima Jing, his girlfriend the violin. They assumed that a dancer’s career was much shorter than an instrumental player in a place like the PAG. In order for her to carry on working in the PAG, it would be wise for her to learn a musical instrument. Of course, I agreed, after all, Zheng helped me to get my job. This was something that at least I could do for them in return.

Duoduo came to visit me and brought Zheng Binghui some presents from Mother to thank him for helping me to secure the job. Sima Jing and I took a day off to show Duoduo round Caishi Rock 采石矶 by the Yangzi River. It was one of the most beautiful spots along the river. It was said that Li Bai, the famous Chinese poet in Tang Dynasty was drowned there when he was trying to embrace the reflection of the moon on the river. A pavilion by the river was built in the memory of that great poet. I thought that it was most likely he fell into the river when he was completely drunk.

As soon as Duoduo walked into a Caishi Rock tourist shop and saw some cans of condensed milk, she was so excited that asked the shop assistant in Mandarin with a very strong Shanghainese accent.

It sounded like, “Tenderness might bore mine? (dàn de liànrǔ mài bu mài)” What she tried to ask was that if the shop would be willing to sell her any of the unsweetened condensed milk on the shelves.

The shop assistant could not understand her and looked very puzzled. She muttered to Sima Jing and me,

“Which foreign language is she speaking?”

“It was Mandarin... She was asking if you were selling any of the unsweetened condensed milk on the shelves.” Sima Jing explained to the shop assistant.

Duoduo was so excited about discovering the condensed milk to the extent that she had forgot that her poor Mandarin pronunciation might cause misunderstanding and even to her embarrassment in public. She told me that she had been looking for them everywhere in Shanghai for ages but she could not get hold of them at all. I could tell that her greatest achievement of the day was obtaining a few tins of condensed milk but it was not her visit to the famous historical sight.

A part from practising our instruments, we often walked round the local hills, which were still covered by some rather unspoiled woods. Chen Jian'an bought himself a powerful air-rifle to shoot birds and pigeons on the walks. He would bring the dead birds back home and would gut and cook them on an oil lamp. Actually, they were too tough to eat and, after a little while, he realised that it was not worth the effort. As a result, his air-rifle immigrated to the underneath of his bed.

My roommates and I made a friend, a young chef, Xiao Chen, who worked in a big local Chinese restaurant next to the theatre where we put on performances regularly. Chen Jian'an, Cheng Jingde and I would often have our "mid-night feasts" there, after the evening performances. Xiao Chen would always cook the dishes in the way that we preferred. In return, we would sometimes provide him with free tickets for the performances. After a little while, Xiao Chen became a regular visitor to our dormitory. However, his real intension was to pursue one of the female dancers in the PAG and he asked Chen Jian'an to help them to get together. However, the girl was not interested in going out with a restaurant chef. Xiao Chen blamed Chen Jian'an for not making enough effort to help him, so he stopped giving us special treatment when we ate in the restaurant. Chen Jian'an felt rather bitter about it and thought that it was a very childish behaviour of Xiao Chen. When Zheng Binghui heard that, he laughed and said that Chen Jina'an had tasted his own medicine. "You see, this kind of thing can't be forced and it doesn't work if only one side wants to have a relationship."

Zheng Binghui's younger sister, Zheng Ni was very pretty and she was a singer of the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing. Chen Jian'an really fancied her and asked Zheng Binghui to help. Zheng Ni was not at all interested. Chen Jina'an blamed Zheng Binghui for not helping him.

However, Chen Jian'an had his own moral stance for this kind of relationship. He took a very dim view on a 40-year-old violinists went out with an 18-year-old female prentice of the PAG.

Mr Cui, the electrician of the PAG was a short man, wearing a pair of thick-lens glasses that mounted onto a large black frame. As he had a record of "political offences", he kept himself very quiet at work. I was told that he was classified as a "Rightest" in the past. When he had an affair with a young married woman, he was arrested by the police and was later handed over to the authorities of the PAG. Mr Cui was locked in a room to be interrogated by a teams from the management committee of PAG. He was asked to write a confession for his "new offences". The following morning, Mr Cui was discovered hanging in the room. He was immediately taken to hospital, but he never regained consciousness. Some of us had to take in turns to do the suicide-watching duties in the hospital bed, in case he woke up and tried again, but he died a week later. Xiao Dong, the viola player and I were on one of the suicide-watching shifts in hospital together. Xiao Dong was wearing a large surgical-mask all the time.

"Why are you wearing that?" I asked curiously.

"Why? To prevent diseases," he answered earnestly.

"He doesn't have an infectious disease," I explained.

"But he is dying,"

"I am sure you can catch a cold, but you can't catch a death," I laughed.

The strange thing was that at that time, I never questioned about the punishment of stripping off individuals' basic rights, if one had convicted political offences, namely, if anyone who had said or did anything that was against the governments' policies. My understanding was that stripping off one's freedom was a part of the punishments for the offences that they had committed.