

## Chapter Seventeen

New aspect of life 雨过日出又一天 (1973-4)

I always looked forward to going back home for Chinese New Year celebration. I felt proud to show my family some of the agricultural products including livestock. In particular, many of the items that I brought home were difficult to obtain over the period of food rationing. Going home with the products that I harvested, really gave me a sense of achievement. I felt that I was able to contribute to the atmosphere of festivities.

That uplifting feeling put a smile on my face in every late December in the early 1970s. That was because Xiaozhong, Afu and I set off together from Xiangzhuang Village in the early morning cold breeze. We walked for about six kilometres on a mud track with heavy luggage to the bank of River Guo 涡河, where we caught a boat to the city of Bengbu. The boat journey took whole day. By the time we reached Bengbu, it was dark. We took an overnight train from Bengbu to Shanghai. Because of that, we always arrived in Shanghai in the following morning.

I felt it was a real luxury when taking a city bus from Shanghai North Railway Station to home. However, the passengers on the buses could immediately tell our “occupation” from our appearance: long hair, dark-toned skin and speaking loudly with excitement. People like us were given the nicknames of Chaxiong 插兄<sup>1</sup> or Chamei 插妹 which meant “brothers or sisters from agricultural production teams”. These terms were euphuisms of “peasants”. At that time, people in Shanghai were sympathetic towards us, because nearly every household had one or two Chaxiong or Chamei. Shanghai in the 1970s was literarily a mono coloured city. Ordinary people dressed in dark blue. Occasionally, one could see a few people who were wearing grey colour, but when I arrived in Shanghai from the countryside, I was mesmerised by the colourfulness of the streetlights, traffic lights, lights from houses and buildings. Even the surface of tarmac gave me a sense of the material sophistication and the civilization of a modern world.

After spending most of the year in the wild countryside, when I walked into my Shanghai family flat, it appeared to be small, insignificant in size and I even felt a little claustrophobic. However, it was clean, and sophisticatedly beautiful. My siblings looked forward to

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<sup>1</sup> 插 is short for 插队落户 which means that go down to the countryside and become members of production teams in People’s Communes

welcoming their “peasant” brother back home. I was very pleased to share the “goods from the countryside” with my family. Although Father did not show his emotion easily, I could tell that he was very pleased to see me. Once Father made a humorous comment, “The chickens from Anhui are light-weighted and can fly too. They are flying-chicken 飞鸡/飞机. The Chinese pronunciation of the word flying-chickens was the same as the word of aeroplanes. As if he was saying that I had brought back home some aeroplanes from Anhui.

I looked forward to seeing my family, friends, to having a rest and to having a change of life style. Moreover, my family treated me like a guest, who came from far away. They saved up the family chocolate ration and other goodies for me to take back to the countryside, as everyone thought that my life in the country must be extremely tough. No wonder Gujing, my younger brother would prefer to go to countryside for the sake of getting the “nice food” from home.

Yet, my feeling of returning to the countryside was hard to describe. Every year, about a week before leaving Shanghai for Xiangzhuang, Mother would often say that I became increasingly silent. When I was getting ready to leave Shanghai, I often had a numb feeling: I did not know how to think and what to think. It was difficult to detach myself from home again. Maybe I was not ready to leave home in the first place. Sometime my mind was so preoccupied that I did not even feel like eating the food that my family had specially prepared for me. A few days before going back, Linlin would get up early in the morning to go to the food market to queue for some “yellow croaker 黄鱼”, in order to cook (supposedly) my favourite dish. Anyway, there was a strange story behind “eating fish”. When I was little, I was a true meat-eater and I hated fish, as I could not stand the smell of fish. Just before leaving Shanghai for the re-education programme, I did various mind exercises to prepare for my new life. I had to train my feeling and control my anxiety. One of the exercises was that I forced myself to hate meat, but to love fish. I did not only tell myself that, and I also made all the family members, relatives and friends believe that I had changed from liking meat to liking fish. I told myself that I loved the smell of the fish, as if I had to tell myself that black is white and white is black. Strangely enough, I gradually became to like eating fish more and was less keen on meat.

After every Chinese New Year season, most Educated Youths were going back to countryside from big cities. Therefore, it was the busiest time for the Chinese railways network. Some of the nightmare journeys of going back to the countryside did not help my

family's anxiousness of knowing me living there. When Linlin and Father saw me off at the railway station in my second return journey to Xiangzhuang, the platform was so crowded that we lost each other. Linlin finally found me on the train and she only managed to squeeze through and handed me over my violin. The train started moving just after she managed to get off. She did not even have a chance to say goodbye. (I can still remember the anxious expression on her face now.) The train was so crowded that I had to stand all the way to my last stop, Bengbu.

When I came back to Shanghai for the Chinese New Year in 1972, I felt that Shanghai looked very different from before. It was partly because of the contrast from the countryside, and it was partly because the government of Shanghai city carried out the restoration work on many historical buildings, especially those large traditional Chinese and European buildings for Nixon's first visit to China. The old material worlds that had been removed or smashed by the Red Guards, not only reappeared, but became back even more glorious, colourful and looked outstandingly brilliant. I should have been more excited about the changes, but instead, I felt a sense of loss, sadness and even betray. I asked myself why did we revolt against the old system and destroy China's tradition in the first place. I thought that we did it because we wanted to create a new world, a different world and a better world, but an old world was creeping back again. The fighters of the revolution became the victims of the new changes. The great communist ideology had abandoned us and, in city people's eye, our generation had become the pathetic peasants again. People in Shanghai felt sorry for us, because we, Chaxiong and Chamei were still their direct relatives. I knew that if the old traditional ideology came back, the offspring of Chaxiong and Chamei would become the real peasants again.

After following the puritanical ideology for many years, Nixon's visit in February 1972 certainly had wetted Chinese people's appetite for beauty and colourfulness. First, I could not believe my eyes when I saw the photograph in the front page of *Jiefang Daily* 解放日报, the Shanghai official newspaper, Zhou Enlai, China's Premier and Richard Nixon of the US President shaking hands on the tarmac of the Beijing airport. In my mind, Nixon represented the world of capitalism that we had been trying very hard to fight against, although some Chinese people felt that it was OK to have a little bit of the materialistic desire at that time. When my Chaxiong friends: Flat-head, Afu and the others gathered in the street looking at the photo in the newspaper, we thought we were dreaming.



Flat-head opened his mouth first and spoke with his self-comforting tone, “Look at Nixon, he stretches out to shake hands with Premiere Zhou, but Premiere Zhou doesn’t stretch out his hand. This means that the Americans desperately want to join our Socialist Camp, but we are not really bothered with them.”

“Yes, ‘A Q’, you are right!” I responded in a sarcastic way. He was just like A Q, a character in one of Lu Xun’s novels: when facing with a total defeat and humiliation, A Q would still find a way to deceive himself. Flat-head’s interpretation of the newspaper photo reminded me of another incident of his A Q mentality. When we were in the first year of primary school, Flat-head kept a good quality pen-brush in his pencil case, although there were no calligraphy lessons for us. The whole class laughed at him for being pretentious. Facing the humiliation, his feeble explanation was that he needed the pen-brush for dusting off the dirt on his exercise books. However, the more he explained the more we laughed.

In 1973, the national newspapers published an article, which quoted Mao’s views on the implementation of the re-education programme. The story went like this. A county primary school teacher, Li Qinglin 李庆霖 wrote a letter to Chairman Mao to complain about his son’s terrible life and poor living conditions in the countryside where he was sent to be re-educated. I was rather suspicious about the story. First, I could not understand how the letter had reached Mao, and secondly, to everyone’s surprise, Mao wrote back to him and admitted the nationwide problems of the negligence in the re-education programme. Mao promised to solve the problem nationally. In addition, Mao even sent Mr Li 300 Kuai RMB of his own money as compensation for the hardship that Mr Li’s son had to endure. 300 Kuai RMB was a lot of money in those days. The impact of Mao’s action on the incident was very significant. After reading the article, I was confused to the extent that I had lost my sense of political

direction. I thought that being able to take hardship was part of the re-education programme. I felt as if I was a piece of political debris tossing about in the changeable storm of the Cultural Revolution.

Shanghai was not like the city when I left in the early 1970. At the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, cinemas in Shanghai only showed political documentaries, such as Chairman Mao received the Red Guards in Tiananmen Square and the film of China's successful tests of the hydrogen bomb... However, when I came back to Shanghai, there were many feature films available to the public. Most Chinese feature films carried strong political messages. For example the feature film *Break* 决裂 demonstrated that the new higher education system was much better and more practical than the old system. However, in 1973 most city people preferred to watch "foreign films". Apart from old Soviet Union films such as *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918*, China also imported a few late 1960s and early 1970s' Eastern European films. They were mostly from Albania, which was the only country in the world that shared the similar ideology with China. The Chinese government must have thought that these films were politically safe for Chinese people to watch. Of course, when my friends came back to Shanghai from different parts of countryside in the winter, the first thing that we did together was to go out to watch foreign films. I remember after watching *Lenin in October*, we discussed how beautiful the "Swan Lake" scenes in the film. I especially loved the violin solo part in "Swan Lake". In the film, a Bolshevik army officer interrupted the performance by walking onto the stage to announce that Tsar, the Russian Emperor and his family were killed. I still remember my disappointment in his interruption of the performance.

We also watched the Albanian film *Trauma*. After coming out of the cinema, my friends could not help but commented on the hairstyle and the beauty of the main female actor in the film. What really puzzled me was the way that the film described the family life in Albania. It also gave the impression that schoolchildren's priority was to study and to pass their examinations, which we had destroyed with vigor during the early stage of the Cultural Revolution. I asked myself, how could Albania, a true socialist country still maintained this kind of old aspect of life?

People in Shanghai were talking about having a better or more comfortable life style. Father was rehabilitated by his work unit in the autumn of 1973. He was given his old job and salary back. All the deducted salary over the previous six years were also paid back. The things that had been confiscated from our family were given back too. However, the condition was that

we were no longer allowed to keep the gold-bars and jewellery and they had to be sold to the governments. Father was paid back by cash. He was told to collect the money from the bank that his work unit used and then deposited all the cash into his bank. As Duoduo carried a traveller-bag 旅行袋 to help Father to “transfer” the money, later she told me that she had never seen so much cash in her life. Father’s work unit came to our home to unseal the bedroom that was shut by the Workers’ Rabble Team for six years and returned us all the furniture and content. I was given my grandfather’s Rolex watch, which he bought in Hong Kong in the year before I was born.

In order to follow the trend of the material rush in Shanghai, to fulfil the dreams that the family had held on to over the darkest period of our life and to celebrate Chinese New Year in a happy way, I was asked to be in charge of redecorating the whole family flat. We decided to paint the sitting room in creamy-white; the south facing bedroom in light-blue and the north facing room in light-pink to create a warm feeling. The household equipment that symbolised the modern life gradually appeared in the flat. Mother bought a 16-inch black-white television set, a transistor radio and a fridge. Father even bought a gas heater to fight off the dampness and chill of the Shanghai winter. One day Father came back with a large modern looking battery-operated clock, which he had always wanted. During the difficult time, dreaming of buying modern-looking things was his way of escaping from the humiliations and the depressing realities. Whenever he had his day off from work, he would take me to the Shanghai Number One Department Store. Looking at the modern style clocks and he would say, “When I am rehabilitated, I’ll buy one of these clocks. They do look elegant, don’t they?” Over that six years, when we did not often have meats in the family meals, Father would often take me to look at different types of cooked meats that were displayed in the shop windows of Shanghai Food Store. Father would say, “The enjoyment of food is based on its appearance, smell and taste. Although we can’t afford to eat meat, we can still smell and look at them, so we can imagine the tastes.”

Not long after Father had his salary recovered to the original level and his back-pay sorted, I was asked to choose a handmade violin from the Suzhou Violin Makers. Although it was not like the stunning Golden Bell professional violins with dark stripes of wood-mark, that were displayed in the counters of the Shanghai Number One Department Store, it was at least six times more expensive than the one that my parents bought for me at beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Duoduo was keen on learning the cello, as Xu Yao, one of her competitive

friends had also started learning the cello. Father bought her a cello from the same place in Suzhou. Mother bought a Yongjiu light-style bike 永久轻便车 for the family members to share. The fact is that, no one in the family needed a bike. Apart from my brother and I, no one could ride a bike. As I was in the countryside most time of the year, I did not need one. My brother, Gujing was too young to ride it in the streets of Shanghai, the bike was sitting on the first floor landing most of the time.

Two weeks before Chinese New Year, Mother asked two tailors from Changzhou 常州 to make clothes for everyone in the family. The tailors were recommended by a family friend. They stayed and ate with us for a week and worked extremely hard, so that everyone in the family could have specially made new clothes for the Chinese New Year's Day. Anyway, wearing new clothes on the first day of the year was a traditional symbol for a good new beginning.

Our family really felt grateful to our Japanese neighbours who helped us so much throughout the difficult six years of the Cultural Revolution. As they all adored Mother's cooking, Mother decided to invite them for the Chinese New Year celebration meal which consisted of at least twenty courses.

As there were limited supplies in the usual food stores, everyone had to try hard to obtain good quality foodstuff from other sources for the New Year. In order to buy some decent sweets, Linlin would go out early in the morning to the shops in Huaihai Road to queue. She was the one in the family, who had the knowledge and the abilities to get hold of some good foodstuff.

On one of his off-work days, Father went a market in Shanghai suburb to get some fish and a leg of pork. Food products there were not within the government's rations and were fresh, but were much more expensive. Two weeks before the Chinese New Year I helped Mother to prepare the food by making some homemade Chinese sausages; rubbing salt and spices into the leg of pork and salted some sea-eels. After that, I hang them all out in a draft and cold place for two weeks.

People in Shanghai had changed. They became even more materialistic than they were before the Cultural Revolution. They had desires for better and more and became very competitive too. On the other hand, people were more cynical about ideologies. They knew how to say the right things at right time, but not necessarily believed in it anymore.

Once again, playing the violin became my comfort and escape. When I came back to Shanghai, I went to see Great Uncle Zhang and had some violin lessons with his friends. Playing western music and string quartets were no longer the underground activities. The quartet playing in Great Uncle Zhang's home became more frequent. He also wrote some string quartets based on some of the Chinese folk songs, which were never published. Anyway, it would be very difficult, even if he had wanted to do so. However, his music scores were circulated among some family members and close friends.

The Chinese New year celebrations were just like before the Cultural Revolution but without the ceremony of remembering ancestors. Our relatives and friends took in turns to cook celebratory meals and invited each other throughout the holiday period. The common conversation topics at the dinner table were about sharing cooking recipes. The New Year period had a positive competitiveness among the relations. Father's cousin, my aunt described how she made her wonderful "pearl meat-balls" which were steamed meat-balls coated with the polished glutinous rice. The taste of that dish reminded me of the delicious steamed belly-port 粉蒸肉 that I had in the canteen of Wangji Commune.

Not long after the New Year season in 1974, I was told that Dingding 汀汀, a relative from Beijing was coming to stay with us for a week or two. Dingding's mother was my maternal grandmother's first cousin. Although Dingding was only three years older than I was, I had to call her aunt, as she was a generation above me in our extended family.

The concept of family loyalty among our relatives was still very strong, especially those who were a generation above me. The close connection between Dingding's family and mine started a long time ago. Dingding's maternal grandfather, Jing Hengyi 经亨颐 was a left-wind politician in the Chinese Nationalist Party<sup>2</sup>, an educationist and was a well-known Chinese artist. When Japan occupied China, Wang Jingwei 汪精卫, the head of the Chinese puppet governments was in Shanghai. Wang used to be a good friend of Jing and was one of the leading figures in the Nationalist Government before the Japanese invasion. Wang was looking for all his old political allies to work with him in his government. Although Jing graduated in Japan, he was adamant that he did not want to work for the occupying force. When Jing came to Shanghai Guangci Hospital for his lung cancer treatment he stayed with his niece, my grandmother under a pseudonym name. When Jing was in hospital, Jing

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<sup>2</sup> It was known as the Kuomintang (KMT) of China. It was the ruling party of China before 1949



Puchun 经普椿, his daughter and Dingding's mother, who was with her husband, Liao Chengzhi 廖承志. As Liao was an organiser for the Chinese Communist Party underground work behind the enemy line, Jing Puchun was unable to take care of her father during the last days of his life. Anyway, Jing Hengyi had a son and two daughters. The other daughter was Great Uncle Zhang's first wife who committed suicide. Before Jing Hengyi died, his son and his family also came to Bugaoli, my grandmother's home to stay. However, Jing Hengyi had already disowned his son, as he was a bad character in their hometown. It was said that he used his father's name did many bad things. Jing could not forgive his son and did not want to see him again, not even by his deathbed. His son begged my grandmother to talk to his father for letting him see his father at end of his life.

"I would listen to your advice in any other matters, but not for this one. I don't want to see him at all." Jing Hengyi said while lying in the hospital bed. My grandmother looked after Jing Hengyi until he died in the hospital in 1938.

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When the Communist Party took over the power in 1949, Dingding's father, Liao Chengzhi was working for the Communist Central Governments in Beijing. Dingding's mother, Jing Puchun visited my grandmother in Shanghai a few times. When my grandmother died in 1963, Jing Puchun took my 18-year-old cousin Lin Fengqian 林风千 (nickname Pangpang), who had been brought up by my grandmother until then to Beijing to live with the Liao family. It seemed to me that both my grandmother and Dingding's mother had a very strong sense of family loyalty and duty to help each other when a member of the family was in difficulty.

My first time of meeting Dingding when I was ten. Her family came to visit Shanghai and stayed in a government guesthouse in a posh area of Shanghai. One evening Jing Puchun invited my mother and her siblings' families for dinner and afterwards asked us to watch two Hong Kong comedy films. It was a big family gathering and Dingding's father took many photos with a camera that had disposable flashing light bulbs. After each flash, he would give me the used light bulb to play with. Many of our relatives came that day. We were all sitting at three large round tables. Dingding and her siblings were together at one of the tables. Half way through the meal, suddenly I heard shouting and it was followed by a loud sound of

banging on the table, which made everybody jump. It was Dingding having an argument with one of her siblings.

Afterward I saw more of Dudu 笃笃, Dingding's older sister in Shanghai, as she came with my cousin Pangpang to stay with us in the summer vacation before the Cultural Revolution in 1965. Dudu was very quiet, and she would spend most of her time in her room reading books. She did not want to go out socialising with Pangpang's friends. However, Dingding's character was the opposite of her sister's. She was an outspoken, straight forward but warm-hearted person.

It was my sister, Linlin who told me that Dingding was coming to stay with us. Just before supper, a very elegant figure appeared at the door of our flat. It was Dingding, whom I had not seen for over ten years. At the dinner table, I started the conversation.

“When did you arrive in Shanghai, Aunt Dingding?”

“Last Saturday and I stayed with Maomao for a few days,” she answered without eye contact.

“Maomao is a good friend of Aunt Dingding. When Aunt Dingding comes to Shanghai, she often stays with Maomao's family.” Linlin explained. My sisters saw Dingding more often than I did, as I was in the countryside most time of the year.

“Aunt Dingding, did you catch a cold when you arrived Shanghai. You seem to have lost your voice,” I was quite bold and wanted to control the flow of the conversation.

“No, I didn't,” she still did not look at me.

“Aunt Dingding has come to Shanghai to see a specialist for her illness,” Linlin explained more.

Dingding said nothing.

I did not think that it was appropriate for me to ask questions about her illness. I was told that in the late 1960s she was working as a nurse in an army hospital in Yunnan when she developed lupus. After seeking for medications and taking some sterols, her illness was under control, but then she put on a lot of weight. However, the person who was sitting in front of me was a tall and elegant young woman. It was certainly not appropriate for me to comment on her appearance.

“How come you speak Shanghaies so well and you have no northern accent at all?” I changed the subject.

“Aunt Dingding’s boyfriend, Wu Xuanguang’s family was originally from Shanghai too, so she has picked up Shanghaies very quickly when spending time with the Wu family.” Linlin carried on explaining for Dingding.

“Very impressive,” I said. “I haven’t heard anyone from the north, who can speak Shanghaies like that.” I continued. I was not exaggerating. In fact, she was very quick with languages.

Dingding still said nothing. After dinner, we all followed her to the bedroom and she showed us some colour-photos of her family. There was one photo that caught my attention. It was a photo of her, sitting on a rock of Beidaihe beach against the light-blue sky and deep-blue sea. It was my first time to come across some coloured private photos.

“This is very beautiful.” I commented.

“It was taken by Wu Xuanguang, when he was in Beidaihe with us.” Dingding replied. I was surprised that she engaged me in the conversation.

Dingding shared the light-blue bedroom with Duoduo and Linlin, but she found it much easier to talk to Duoduo, my younger sister. Our neighbours in the street often confused Dingding with Duoduo, as they were very much alike looking from behind.

As I had more violin lessons, I had to practise a lot, maybe, sometimes four hours a day. It must be terrible for people who lived in the same flat to endure my practice.

One afternoon, about a week after Dingding’s arrival, she came back from Maomao’s place and brought a cassette tape recorder and many cassettes of classical music. Among the tapes there were Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsodies, Berlioz’s *Le carnaval romain*, Beethoven piano concerto number five, as well as two tapes of the great violinist, Jascha Heifetz’s show pieces, such as *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Airs), *Havanese* and *The Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*. There was also a tape of Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky violin concertos played by Pinchas Zukerman who was then a promising world-class young violinist. Finally, she handed out another cassette, which was *The Trout*, the Schubert Piano Quintet and a few blank tapes. She put everything on the sitting room table, pointed at the tape of the piano quintet and said, “This one is my own tape, but you can borrow it for now. Schubert’s *The Trout* is my favourite music. The rest are all yours, including the tape recorder.”

I was speechless. First, in the early 1970s, cassette tape recorders were rarely seen in China. Moreover, at that time these classical music tapes were unheard of in Shanghai.

After repeatedly listening to the eight Cultural Revolution model operas for over six years, when I heard the sound of Jascha Heifetz playing the violin, it simply blew my mind off. I had heard of Jascha Heifetz. He was admired by all the violin teachers who I had met in Great Uncle Zhang's place, but I had never heard him playing. I was completely mesmerised by Heifetz's magical way of playing the instrument. The clarity of the tone and the amazing speed were simply beyond this world. It was not just the quality of the sound and the technique that grabbed me, but it was the freedom of his expressions. When Heifetz played the violin, the violin became part of him. So many different expressions and colours poured out from the sound of the instrument. That kind of feeling of freedom had been hidden in the forbidden corners of my mind, where I had never dared to visit. Was playing the violin a new shining path for me to follow? Was music a replacement of political ideology? Was the music the light of a dark tunnel of my life? I asked myself. Somehow, Dingding had been observing me carefully and she seemed to understand what I wanted at the time, although she did not openly communicate with me very much before then.

I was so excited about having the tape recorder and the tapes. As from having nothing in the countryside to having the most advanced equipment and the magical music cassettes, I could not help, but desperately wanted to share my excitement with my fellow Chaxiong in the streets. I asked them to come to listen to the Beethoven piano concerto and the Mendelssohn violin concerto.

"Nice sound," Flat Head looked at the machine, "Of course, after all, it's a Sony, a famous Japanese brand... It's simply incredible. I've never seen anything like this. Just amazing..." Flat Head fixed his eyes onto the tape recorder. I felt proud of myself and, as if I had won another battle. I remembered that when we were at primary school, it was Flat Head, who showed me all the advanced fancy equipment of his older brother's, but at that moment, it became my turn to show off a bit.

"It can record your voice too," I put a blank tape into the recorder, recorded our conversation and played back to them.

"You didn't even use a microphone, but..."

"It has a built-in-microphone. You see." I pointed a small hole on the tape recorder.

“The microphone is so small and so neat, but the sound is so clear and undistorted. My God, Japanese are clever,” Flat Head continued.

Afu looked Flat Head and said quietly, “The music is more impressive than the machine itself.” He sneered at him, “You are a philistine.”

Afu was artistic, especially was good at oil painting. His mother was a catholic before the Communist took over China. His family was much westernised. Afu was the person who had introduced me the Italian Renaissance movement and had showed me the prints of the artwork that were created by Michelangelo and Leonardo de Vinci. Then I was so surprised to see those prints, as most of western art objects were destroyed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. However, as Afu’s family was not targeted by the Red Guards, the prints had survived.

I often asked myself, “Do we always wonder between the worlds of ideology and material?” Maybe we did. Even in the extreme political environment, Chinese people still wanted to possess better things. When years of Mao’s ideology dominated our soul and we were stripped off all the items that might give us the “capitalistic” pleasure, our desire for material items was replaced by a different format. At the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, many factories were making “revolutionary” badges for people to collect, to exchange and to possess. The badges were in different colours, shapes, sizes and forms to project the images of the Chinese Communist leaders. Some of the badges depicted and commemorated particular political events, such as the scenes of Mao receiving Red Guards in Tiananmen Square. So then possessing a tape recorder and some western classical music tapes did not make me feel too guilty, although they belonged to the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie.

The violin playing occupied most of my time in the winter season in Shanghai. I did not socialise much with my family members and our visitor, Dingding.

Dingding wrote to her boyfriend almost every day. Usually she wrote two pages and it would take her under twenty minutes to finish. One day, she was writing a much longer letter. At supertime, she put away her unfinished letter and joined us for supper.

“Aunt Dingding, are you writing a novel to Wu Xuanguang today?” I asked cheekily. “I can see you still haven’t finished it yet.”

She did not reply, but she looked at the dishes on the table and started talking about cooking. She promised to cook us shredded beef with ginger the following day.

“...No cooking oil is needed. You have to get rid of any excessive liquid after marinating ...The secret is that the wok has to be very hot.”

“Where did you learn all these?” I asked.

“I’ve learned this from Wu Xuanguang’s mother,” she answered.

Late that evening when I was asleep, Dingding quietly came to my bedside, put an envelope under my pillow and went away. Only then, I realised the long letter that she was writing that afternoon was to me.

I was quite shocked by her action and I did not expect that at all. Before I could finish reading her letter, I decided to have a talk with her the following day. It was not right in any circumstances and it must be stopped immediately... However, maybe it was unfair of me to blame her for this outcome. Had I sent her any wrong signals? Maybe I did. Maybe the way that I talked to her was rather inappropriate. Although I called her Aunt Dingding, my tone of voice was not like a younger generation talking to an older generation; and my showing off manner could be easily misunderstood as a flirtation, although I did not intend to do so. Or maybe I subconsciously did... It must be true that she thought I was badgering her for attention and she was resisting it by ignoring me or not replying to my cheeky questions. Was I blindly leading her on? ... Wait a minute... Anyway, she had a boyfriend already. I must ask her about these questions as soon as possible.

The following morning, I found a moment that there were no other members of my family at home. I handed the letter back to her and said, “I’ve read it. You can have it back now,” I said nervously.

“That is for you to keep.” Dingding explained.

“No, I think that you’d better to keep it.” As if I was hoping that had she took back the letter, everything would go back to the “normal” again. I was frightened and I could almost see everything in front of me would go against that relationship, if I let it carry on.

“Don’t you have any feeling for me? I thought you did,” she asked.

“...This has nothing to do with feeling. This is simply wrong...I’ve got a lot of questions for you ...”

“Then ask me. I am listening.”

“First of all, we are in different generations according to our family relation and what will other relatives think of us? What will our parents react to this? What about your boyfriend? ... I can give you a long list of ‘whats’.”

“I will answer your questions. By the way, my parents won’t be a big obstacle, but do you have any feeling for me?”

“I can’t... There are too many obstacles.”

Dingding started to tell me about the stories of her relationships. Her first boyfriend abundant her when her family was in the most difficult situation of the Cultural Revolution. His father was the Minister of the Public Security and was climbing up the political ladder fast. However, Dingding’s father was locked away to be interrogated in an isolated place for his “political mistakes”. In the late 1960s, Dingding was sent to the southwest China to work as a nurse in an army hospital. When she was there, she developed lupus. A few years later, after her father was released from the interrogation house and came back to the central government offices, only then Dingding came back to Beijing to study medicine and was seeking for medical help to control her lupus.

When Pangpang was in the countryside of Shaanxi, a relative in Shanghai tried to match-make her with a man who was a qualified medical doctor in a county hospital in Shaanxi. Pangang was not interested in him. When she went back to Beijing for Chinese New Year, the “potential boyfriend” went there to visit her, but Pangpang refused to come out of her room to see him. Dingding’s mother felt that the situation was rather awkward, so she asked Dingding to entertain Pangpang’s “potential boyfriend”, as she thought that Dingding was studying medicine and they might share some common language. However, the situation developed into an unexpected stage. The “potential boyfriend” of Pangpang secretly proposed to Dingding. Maybe it was out of her low-steam. After being abandoned by her first boyfriend and contracting the illness, when she saw someone who paid attention to her, she said yes. They married without telling the family. That episode might also upset Pangpang and affected her relation with Dingding. However, that new husband of hers had hidden an agenda. He wanted Dingding to use her family connection to get him to Beijing from the

county hospital in Shaanxi. In fact, he was in love with a wife of an army officer in the area that he worked. One day he was caught red-handed in a wheat field. As a result, he was arrested by the county police and Dingding was consequently informed. Being desperately upset, Dingding felt that she had been cheated and she wanted to divorce immediately. As she could not face him again, Dingding's older brother went Shaanxi on her behalf to complete the divorce procedure. She was demoralised and felt extremely low.

A year later, it was Wu Xunguang, then the new boyfriend of Dingding, who helped her to regain her confidence. Dingding gradually became herself again. Wu Xungunag was a hospital technician and his father was the head of a major hospital in Beijing. The members of Dingding's family were happy for her, as she had finally found someone who had a "well matched family background". Wu Xuanguang was very careful and strict with Dingding's medication. He was right, as when Dingding was seeking for the cure of lupus, she had used some strong medicine for too long, which might have caused some damage to her health in the long term.

"Wu Xuanguang is very caring and is nice to you. Don't you love him?" I asked.

"I do love him, but I am not in love with him. He is a very nice person, but he is trying too hard..."

"Surely he is right. It's all for your benefit. Isn't it?"

"Yes and no..." Dingding hesitated a little. "I know it is for my health he is doing this, but I need my freedom."

"Come on! How can you talk about freedom without health?"

"I want to have my freedom as well as health. Is that too much to ask?"

"..." I could not reply. I knew that she had the right to have her own choice.

"What do you feel about me, if you could ignore all the obstacles that you have listed?" Dingding asked.

"I don't know, as I am unable to remove the list of 'whats' from my head. Anyway, you have more freedom in your social background than most people in China. How could you ask for more?"



“We are not talking about the same kind of freedom. Actually, I have less than you can imagine. Anyway, never mind about that but I’ve told you my feeling about you in my letter. I know you can’t let me know your answer now, but I can wait.”

“This is not what I want to hear from you. ...I wish I could go back to the situation two days ago.” The fact was that I did not even have the courage to finish reading her letter, let alone to have the guts to accept her love. I was very much moulded by the environment and social pressure around me. I could only do what the society expected me to do. I simply could not operate beyond the “normal” circumstances. I always wanted to be accepted by the community that I live in: joining the Young Pioneer, Red Guards and taking part in the re-education programme without consulting my feeling. Then I was upset when Dingding questioned me about my real feeling, which I had been desperately avoiding all the time. I felt sad because I was incapable of examining my emotion. I could not even dare to think about the real meaning of freedom that she was talking about, as I would never and ever allow myself to go anywhere near to the forbidden corner of my mind. I simply could not tell if I really loved her or liked her. If the answer was no, then why did I flirt with her? Nevertheless, if the answer was yes, why could not I say so?

My attitude towards her was dismissive and cheeky but she took it well. The strange thing was that she was never upset by my terrible behaviours. Dingding wanted me to be with her in Beijing. She thought that my violin playing might get me out from the countryside and was willing to help. She asked me to promise her to go to Beijing to audition for the art performance groups of the People’s Librarian Army (PLA), as the Chinese military had the power to bring people to Beijing from anywhere in China, but it was much more difficult for any civilian work units to employ people from other part of China. She also asked some of our overseas relatives to send me some sheet music, which were unavailable in China then.

A few days later Dingding had to go back to Beijing. She asked me to promise her to write to her. She said that she would write to me very often. She left me the photo of her sitting on the beach of Beidaihe.

I did not know how, but Mother somehow bought her some fresh-water crabs for her to take home. It was not the season for this type of crabs. We all went to see her off at Shanghai Hongqiao Airport. She said goodbye in the waiting area and walked towards the plane did not even turn round to wave at us before boarding the plane.

“The luggage must be too heavy for her to carry.” As usual, Linlin jumped into the conclusion from her own interpretation on Dingding’s behaviour.

When I came home from the airport, I felt anxious and as if a huge part of my life had been torn away. She left some of her clothes in the flat, as she would come back for her hospital treatment again later that year. When I opened her draw, the smell of her perfume came out of her clothes. I really missed her. Looking at her photo of sitting on the beach against the vast blue sea, I could feel her loneliness. I had never had this kind of feeling about anyone in my life. I knew then I must have been in love with her. Why did not she turn round to wave at me before boarding the plane? Did not she miss me?

I could not help, but I started to write to her.

“Dear... Aunt Dingding.....” I struggled, but I felt that it was impossible for me to drop the word “Aunt”.