

Chapter Fourteen

Preparing for re-education 上山下乡再教育 (1968-70)

The evening of 21 December 1968 was dump cold and dark. All the finalists of secondary schools in Shanghai were asked to gather at their local schools to listen to an important instruction of Chairman Mao on radio. Although I was not a real secondary school finalist, I went along with the usual crowd: Afu, Flat Head and the others. As not many students turned up for the occasion, the music teacher let us use the dimly lit small assembly room, which was normally used as a music room. We sat there chatting while waiting for the broadcasting. As soon as the radio beeped for seven o'clock, a voice spoke in a solemn tone, "The supreme instruction from the Great Leader Chairman Mao, 'It is very necessary for the educated youths to go to the countryside to be re-educated by the Poor Peasants. We should persuade city cadres and the others to send their children, who have graduated from secondary schools and universities to the countryside. We should mobilise them. The comrades in the countryside should welcome them¹.'..." That was the end of the supreme instruction, which we had been waiting for. The radio newsreader continued to read the related materials that were like People's Daily editorial article to explain the practical implication of the instruction. The concept of the re-education programme was to ask the educated ones to learn from the working class. Only then, students would realise the knowledge that they had learned should serve the people and the country. It was said that all the educated youth should be re-educated by the leading class of the country, which was the proletariat, formed by workers, peasants and soldiers. Only with the approval of the leading class and the needs of the work units, the students would be allowed to receive further education at the university level. However, they must bring back the knowledge that they had learned to serve their work places. The broadcasting implied that from then onwards all the secondary school leavers not only should work in factories but should also be encouraged to go to countryside to be re-educated by peasants.

In the previous year, the secondary school leavers were allocated to work in Shanghai factories, but from then on, students would be allocated to the countryside. After listening to the broadcasting, some of the students in the room were rather anxious and worried about

¹伟大领袖毛主席最高指示：知识青年到农村去，接受贫下中农再教育，很有必要。要说服城里干部和其他人，把自己初中、高中、大学毕业的子女送到乡下去，来一个动员。各地农村的同志应当欢迎他们去。

their residential rights in Shanghai, but I was somehow, intrigued by the idea of going far away from home.

A few months later, (it must be in the spring of 1969) Xiaowu 小五, who lived on the first floor of number 17 in our lane, was the first friend of mine to be allocated to the countryside in Jinagxi province. Xiaowu was very bright, and was definitely a high-achiever. He studied at one of the Shanghai city key-schools for the brightest students, and he was a good pianist. I often heard him practising the piano when walking pass under his window, on my way to empty the rubbish bin. He had to through away his past and had to leave everything that he knew well behind to face his new life. I could imagine the difficulties. It would be extremely hard for him to process all of that. The week before his departure, he asked his mates to come to his flat to watch and listen to him playing the piano. He carefully went through all the pieces that he had learned, from Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt to Tchaikovsky. His playing was so meticulous and the notes were clearly projected, as if he was nostalgically hanging on to each of them and was unwilling to let it go.

“Let me play the *One-minute Waltz* again. Please time me and see if I can really finish it within one minute,” he asked me, so I watched the clock on the wall.

...

“You are nearly there. You did it just over a minute,” I said. Then I tried to reassure him “I can promise you, after a week’s practice you’ll definitely play it within one minute. No problem!”

“I don’t think so. If I can’t do it now, I’ll never be able to do it again,” he said with a little sadness.

After going through all the piano pieces, Xiaowu brought out his best brush calligraphy writings and handed them out to us as souvenirs. Looking at his writing scripts, each brush-stroke was beautifully placed, as if I could feel the painstaking effort that he had put onto the writing paper; I could imagine the countless hours of practice that he had put into his Chinese calligraphy. I was deeply moved and at the same time, I felt sad for him.

Xiaowu’s mother brought out some snacks for us. They were beautifully wrapped Hundun 馄饨, the Shanghai style dumplings with pork mince and green vegetable fillings accompanied by the delicious broth with the fragrant of sesame oil and spring onions. It smelled especially

mouth-watering. Maybe it was because of the music that he played for us had stimulated our taste bud.

A week later Aliu, Afu and I went to see Xiaowu off. When he walked out his block, an awkward expression appeared on his face. He was wearing a huge red flower made of ribbon. He was so quiet and did not say a word. We all walked with him shoulder to shoulder, behind a pedal-powered tricycle, on which three Chinese percussionists stroked the drum, gong and cymbals with mighty force and produced tremendous rhythmical beats that somehow speeded my heartbeat. On the tricycle, there were also two red flags with yellow Chinese characters. One of them was written, “Bon voyage educated youths 欢送知识青年” and the other was written, “Train your loyal heart in the vast countryside 广阔天地练红心”. We did not talk but just walked together. Anyway, how could our voice compete with the noise that the percussionists was making in the front? I felt my brain was numb and could not think of anything to say. An hour later, we reached the Hongkou Stadium 虹口体育场 where many of the educated youths from different schools gathered. After the official speeches that were made by the Revolutionary Committee of Shanghai City and were followed by the energetic slogan shouting, we watched the educated youths being huddled onto a line of buses. Thirty minutes later, a convoy of buses were slowly driving out of the stadium and heading for the Shanghai North Railway Station. The pedestrians on both sides of the streets were waving goodbye and cheering at them.

Xiaowu had left and I did not know what to think, but I realised that the following year, it would be my turn to leave Shanghai, just like he did. I thought that at least I did not have the artistic skills and academic achievements to leave behind.

Since the publication of the “supreme instruction”, some of my classmates became very excited and romanticised the beautiful countryside. Somehow, we convinced each other that we should all go to a place faraway from Shanghai, away from the city, home and parents. I imagined the vast countryside somewhere in the northeast of China, where the land was still covered by the deep forests and it snowed every winter. How wonderful and exciting, if we could all go out to hunt wild animals, such as bears and tigers in the winter forests with our peasant educators. It would be so cosy to sit by the bonfire in a night of dark forest to listen to the stories of peasants’ life, just like the descriptions that we read in novels. Of course, my parents were not happy with my crazy idea of going to a faraway place. Although they never

said that I should not pursue the idea, they indicated that I should go somewhere as close to home as possible, when I had to leave Shanghai.

The time for me to leave finally came in 1970. The central government told us that in my year, every able secondary school-leaver in Shanghai must go to the countryside without exception and nobody in my year should remain in the city. At that time, the slogan was “Going up to the mountains, settling down in the countryside and to be red all over 上山下乡一片红”. The word “red” was a most positive description for anything that was good and revolutionary or something that must be supported. The word “all over” meant that the policy applied to everybody without exaction. However, it made the majority population in Shanghai rather uncomfortable, as it affected too many families regardless their class background. Some school-leavers were simply not ready for it or did not want to leave Shanghai, but the central government’s policy must be implemented. The neighbourhood committees and the work-units, to which the students’ parents belonged to, would start propagating governments’ policy and would be doing their “ideological work” 思想工作 day and night on those who refused to leave home. Someone would say that it was like a brainwashing exercise. The members of the neighbourhood committee would come to the targeted families with the percussionists twice a day to talk to those school-leavers and tried to persuade them to leave Shanghai. The Shanghai local governments felt the pressure from up and down. They finally had found a compromised solution for the population in Shanghai and they told us that if one of the children in a family had left for the countryside and the rest of the children could stay in Shanghai. As I was ready to go anywhere as far away as possible, I did not need persuasion or the ideological work from my neighbourhood committee. My parents knew that forcing their idea on me would never work, so they asked other people such as our Japanese neighbour family to persuade me to give up the idea of going somewhere too far.

Opposite of our flat lived a Japanese couple with two daughters. Before the Cultural Revolution, we did not have much to do with them. Maybe it was partly because of the language problem. The couple did not speak much Shanghai dialect and the two daughters were older than us, so we did not share many common interests. We were just very polite to each other and occasionally my siblings would go to their flat to visit. Only after our family was purged by the Workers Rebel Team in the Cultural Revolution, had we realised that our Japanese neighbours were the most kind-hearted people, who we had ever encountered in the

neighbourhood. As they were foreign citizens, they were not affected by the political movements in China. Over the Cultural Revolution, they would often go out of their way to protect us from the unexpected attacks of the Red Guards. The husband, (大规武史), whom my siblings and I called Opposite-Door-Papa (ODP), was an engineer for rubber production industry. His wife (小島角子) whom we all called Opposite-Door-Mama (ODM). She stayed at home most of the time and hardly walked out of her front door. ODM told me that a Japanese friend of theirs, who was a member of Japanese Communist Party, had persuaded them to stay in China after the Communist took over the power in 1949. The Chinese governments appreciated ODP's contribution and paid him ten times more than a normal Chinese person's salary for his expertise. When Father's salary was cut down to the minimum and we could not afford to buy meats, ODP would take us in turns to his favourite place, Eastern Sea Restaurant 东海饭店 in East Nanjing Road 南京东路 to have Japanese meals on his days off. ODM would organise New Year parties to cheer everyone up. She would give my sisters and bother some money to buy presents for each member of our family and taught us how to wrap up the presents before giving them out. ODM was a very superstitious woman and she believed in fortune telling. Of course, Father normally would be snooty about people like her. He always thought that superstitious people were ignorant. However, ODM was so sincere and she was determined to rid of the "bad luck" that had been cursed onto our family and she hoped that Father would be rehabilitated soon. Father also realised that under such a difficult circumstance, ODM's superstitious thoughts and practice possibly were the only mental comfort that the members of my family could enjoy, so he kept quiet.

Both my parents would like ODM to persuade me not to go too far away from home. However, ODM did not say much, but she told me very sincerely that she would like to do one thing for me, which would also make her feel at ease. She said that it did not matter where I wanted to go, but she insisted on giving me the train fare to return to Shanghai, in case the place did not turn out as I had expected. Her sincerity triggered my feeling of guilt. I realised that I was too selfish to think what I wanted in life and had no consideration of my family's and friends' feelings. Anyway, a train journey from the far northeast China to Shanghai would probably cost her about 100 Yuan. It would be a lot for ODM to pay for.

I had a few serious discussions of the destinations with Afu and Flat Head. At that time, we were given a choice of four provinces and five places including the northeast, Heilongjiang

黑龙江; the southwest, Yunnan 云南; Jiangxi 江西 and Anhui 安徽. When facing the reality, my friends and I were actually quite sensible. Our final decision was made based on some very practical reasons and we were considering the distance from Shanghai and the hardship of the life, such as the local diet and the physical work of the agricultural production in the areas. North of Anhui was the final decision for both Afu and me, because it was one of the closest places to Shanghai. As the place did not produce rice, the physical demand of the agricultural work was not too tough for us to bear. Flat Head wanted to go to Jinaxi, because his sister went there the previous year. Afu and I did not choose Jianxi, because we thought that although the dietary there was similar to the one that we had in Shanghai, growing rice was a labour intensive work. The rationale behind our decision was that our families might be able to help us to go through the initial stage of the hardship. For instance, our food supply could be helped by our families, if we were in a place with a poor dietary. However, our families would not be able to help us to do the heavy physical work in the paddy-fields under the scorching sun. The most painful part of the decision for me was to leave the violin behind. As the violin represented the western culture and I thought that, it would not go down well with the local peasants during my initial stage of the re-education programme. Only then, I felt much more sympathetic towards Xiaowu. He was so reluctant to leave his piano behind, before leaving for Jiangxi. I knew that I would be the same and I would miss my violin very much.

My parents were happy with my final choice for the destination and felt a bit more comfortable that I decided to go to Anhui. Mother asked her medical friends to get hold of some commonly used medicine and some antibiotics. I was also advised to get some tablets for malaria, as we all knew that the medical services in the countryside were often extremely poor.

As the Shanghai local governments would pay for transporting two pieces of large luggage for each student, my parents decided to let me have the large chest as my main luggage, so that I could store as much provision as possible. ODM asked Peipei, one of her two daughters to buy chocolate bars and tins of smoked sea-eels in vegetable oil from the special shops that supplied goods for foreign citizens. My family too, started to save up the “luxurious foods” for me to take away. The chest soon cumulated a great deal of “goodies”. Watching it happening, Gujing, my eight-year-old brother said quietly in the background, “When I grow up, I will go to countryside too.”

“Why did you say that?” asked Linlin.

“Because I’ll have chocolate and a lot of goodies as well,” he said sincerely.

After wrapping it well with strew mats and ropes for the transport, and with the help from my friends, I took my large chest to school to be transported to the destination. The following day I took my family residential register book to the local police station in Haimen Road 海门路 to unregister myself as a Shanghai city resident. China had the household registration system to control the flow of the population within the large cities. It was extremely difficult for outsiders to obtain residential permits in Shanghai.

Opening up the registration book, after my parents’ pages it was my page, which had my name and description of my relation with my parents: the first son of... The police officer looked at it and asked, “Are you Shio-yun Kan?”

“Yes.”

He did not even look at me and put a big cross on my page and stamped it, which said, “This person has moved out of Shanghai permanently.”

“You can go now.” the officer said emotionlessly and handed back the registration book to me.

Looking at the wet red stamp mark on the page, I realised that I was no longer a resident of Shanghai city anymore. From then onwards, I would only be a visitor to my family when I returned. The house, which I was born and grew up, would be no longer my home. Only then, the idea of leaving home sank in. I suddenly appreciated the importance of my family and I understood the feeling of those who desperately tried to stay in Shanghai.

When I walked out of the police station, I felt that I was a different person. I was a guest of my family and a visitor of Shanghai city. I would be just like Xiaowu going to a strange place to start my new life and would leave behind everything that I was familiar with: my family, friends, and the violin. Well, I thought that at least the action of mine had prevented my siblings leaving home for the poor areas in the countryside, as the Shanghai government had promised us. Before walking into our lane, I could already hear the sound of drums and gongs. It must be the neighbourhood committee coming to persuade more students to go to the countryside.

Those who wanted to stay behind would find any excuses. Poor health and disabilities were the common reasons for not leaving home. Although I understood their feeling, I thought they were making a wrong decision. After all, life did not always flow smoothly along with our desire. If those students stayed at home, it might gain the temporary comfort of the familiarity, but they would not be able to do anything decent in Shanghai. They would be cut off from the norm and would miss out any possible opportunities that might pave away for our future. I realised that the re-education programme was just like the second round of the Cultural Revolution for the youngsters like us. If I did not follow the trend, I could be left behind or could even become a victim of the Revolution. Once again, I let the force of a political power push me along, at the same time I also understood the insignificance, helplessness and vulnerability of an individual without the support of a group. When I was walking in the same street where some Red Guards cutting people's hair and trousers legs at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the vivid images reappeared in my mind. Maybe we were programmed to belong. Maybe there was no true individualism in China. My eagerness of becoming a member of the Communist Young Pioneer, a Red Guard and my willingness of joining the queue for the re-educated programme, all of these were because I wanted my country and my community to accept me and to recognise me.

ODM gave me 40 Yuan as the emergency return train fare as she had promised. I did not talk much the week before my departure. My mind had already left home. At one of the evening meals Mother asked,

“Are you not in the mood to talk to us?”

“Of course, I am.”

“But your conversation has become monosyllabic.”

“Really? How come I haven't noticed that myself? By the way, I don't mind you coming to see me off at the station, but I just hope you won't be like the other parents crying and yelling their head off, as soon as the train starts moving.”

“Yes, my friend told me, she went to see her brother off the other day. As soon as the train moved her mother lost control and cried out loudly ‘Amao, Amao, don't leave ...’ it was really funny.” Duoduo said. We all laughed loudly.

“I certainly won't be like that!” Mother felt undignified.

The day I left, Mother and my siblings went to Shanghai North Railway Station to see me off. However, Father did not say much either and he decided to stay at home, but he stood by the sitting room window and watched me disappearing at end of our street.

I did not have the same treatment that Xiaowu had, with all the fuss of a ribbon flower and red flags from the neighbourhood committees. Maybe the local governments had run out of energy and enthusiasm. I got onto the train which was specially arranged for taking the educated youths to Bengbu 蚌埠, a city in north of Anhui province. It was very strange to see a train that was packed with the passengers of the same age. I was allocated a window seat, but as Afu got on the train first and occupied my seat.

“That is Yungyung’s seat.” Mother told Afu.

“Yes, I know, but I’m just sitting here for a while.” He replied.

Actually, he never moved from my seat. Afu’s behaviour did not go down well in Mother’s book. She also worried about my unknown life ahead without her protection.

An hour after the expected departure time, the train was finally pulling out of the station. The relatives on the platform started to walk along with the moving train and the sound of yelling and crying was rather overwhelming. Mother did not cry, just as she had promised. She stood there waving at me to say goodbye.