

Chapter Sixteen

Political mismatch 政实脱节盲目行(1971-)

The system of People's Commune in the early 1970s was different from the one that was established in the late 1950s when members of Communes had their meals together in village hall, free of charge and no individual households were allowed to keep cooking utensils. However, the idea of eating together was abolished in 1960s and the individual families had to manage their own meals. Although the land, large agriculture tools and the farming animals still belonged to the Communes and the peasants did not own anything apart from the house that they lived in, the system had some degree of incentive. The government's slogan was "the more you work, the more you earn 多劳多得". For example, when I was in Wangji Commune, it had the so-called Work-Point System (WPS) 工分制. After handing over the gains to the state as the agriculture tax 交公粮, the harvest would be divided into a ratio of 7:3 三七开. The 70% of the gains and food was equally distributed among the population of the village, but the 30% was divided according to the quantity of the WPS. For example, in the village that I lived, a man could earn a maximum of thirteen work-points a day: three points before breakfast and another ten points for the work in the morning and afternoon. However, a woman could only earn ten work-points, as they were physically not as strong as men.

The peasants who lived in Xiangzhuang certainly knew how to play the system. They thought that it would be much better for them to produce more children than earning the work-points in the field, as each child would be given the same amount of gains and food as an adult from the 70% of the harvested pot. As a result, it was quite common for a family to have five or six children. Most people did not send their children to schools. When children were old enough, they would help to earn the work-points for their families by cutting grass to feed the village's farming animals. In order to get cash, peasants would have to sell their food or grains. As the majority of the agriculture products were sweet potatoes in that area, the value of a day's work was worth about eight cents of the RMB (equivalent to 0.8 of a penny). When I was working in the fields there were no Sundays and every day was a working day, although those who worked in the Commune offices and the salary earners such as tractor drivers and agricultural machinery operators had Sunday off every weekend.

The Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of the Production Brigade (which controlled about three or four villages) would decide what types of crops to grow for each village. The decisions were based on the quotas that were given by the Commune authorities. Xiangzhuang was asked to grow certain amount of cotton. The second year when I was there, I was asked to look after the village's cotton field with Mr You, who was a member of Chinese Communist Party and a member of the village production team committee. Cotton was difficult to grow, as it needed a lot of attention and different chemicals and pesticides throughout its growing seasons. Although it was not a labour-intensive job, I had to read the instructions of the chemicals very carefully: when and how to apply them throughout the spring and early summer. Mr You's role was to be there to supervise me. As I could read faster than him, I became a useful person. As he thought that I was there to be re-educated, I should be the one, who did all the hard work: to carry the spray tank and to spray the crop with the pesticides. I knew very well that Mr You was not very keen on handling with any toxic chemicals himself.

I was often alone working in the cotton fields and had no one to talk to. It was an opportunity for me to think. I had an idea and I thought that I should offer the villagers something that they needed and I was good at. I decided to teach them to read, especially to those youngsters who did not have the opportunity to go to schools. One day when I had a chance to do some work for the production team in the Commune headquarters, I walked into the offices of Wangji People's Commune to discuss with the Party officials of teaching reading skills in my village. I hoped that the Commune authorities would provide me with some suitable textbooks or reading materials that I could use for teaching, as most of the old school textbooks were destroyed at beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

The Party Secretary Zhao was an illiterate himself, but he pretended that he knew a lot. He liked the people to think that he was the boss of the area. Mr Zhao brought down two books from the shelves behind his desk and handed them over to me.

"Why don't you use these two books?" as if he was talking to one of his underlings.

I happily took the books and had a quick glance. One of them was the translated version of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and the other was *Anti-Dühring* by Friedrich Engels. I stared at both books for a while and did not know what to reply, but I tried to be as diplomatic as possible.

“I think these books are a little too difficult for the members of the People’s Commune to understand... And I don’t even know who Dühring was, let alone understanding his ideologies. How can I use these books to teach the villagers to read?” I hoped that my argument might change his mind for the unsuitability of the materials that he had already suggested.

But he determinedly replied with conviction, “ These are very important books which consist of the true revolutionary ideologies. They are precisely the reading materials that the members of the Commune must learn,” he paused a little and carried on. “You should study them first and after that, you can teach the people in your village. I believe you can do it well.”

I was very sure that Mr Zhao, the Party Secretary of Wangji Commune had not read these books himself. Anyway, how could he? The fact was that he could not read. However, I had to obey his order to use the materials for my evening reading class in Xiangzhuang village. I had to do my best to explain the meanings of these words, the concepts of class struggle and progression of societies to the local peasants.

The reading class started with quite a few participants in the village barn: old, young, male and female. Men would squat in corners puffing away their tobacco pipes and spitting saliva on the ground. Of course, after a day of hard labour, they were half-asleep and semi-detached from the real world or were thinking of something else. After the first class, I asked my “students” for feedback and tried to find out if they really understood what I had said.

“Good, brilliant and sensational. 怪嘚了¹.” One of them said automatically as he was walking out of the room. I had no idea, if his appraisal aimed at Marx’s concepts of progression of human societies or if it was aimed at me of running the class in an arousing way. Gradually the number of attendees dropped. At the end, only the young people attended the class regularly.

One day Xiaogouzi 小果子, one of my next-door neighbours, an evening-class participant came to teach me to make noodles. He was about two years younger than me. When I was preparing the food and kneading the dough, there were many flies flying about by the

¹ Usually this expression implies sexual sensations. The expression was used by men only in that area.

kneading table, which really annoyed us. Afu was in his usual knowing way explaining to us why flies reacted much faster than humans did.

“You see,” he said in a smirk manner. “A fly has two eyes, but each eye has thousands of lenses. As a result, they can see almost 360-degree around them. We have two eyes, but can only see ahead. Therefore, flies can see many things before we can. I bet you, no human can catch a fly with his bare hands.”

“I can,” Xiaogouzi argued.

“Don’t be a ridiculous and showing-off,” Afu criticised him with an authoritative tone.

“Look,” Xiaogouzi opened his palm and showed us a dead fly.

“This must be a coincidence. I bet you can’t catch another one,” Afu did not believe his eyes.

But Xiaogouzi did it again. It was cool.

“How did you do that?” Xiaozhong asked enthusiastically.

“Although you can’t kill them at the place where they’ve landed, you can catch them when they are taking off,” Xiaogouzi explained. “You have to anticipate which way they might be taking off and grab them in the mid-air, above their taking-off places.” While he was explaining, he caught another one. It was a perfect demonstration.

“Of course, you have to practise,” he added calmly.

Xiaozhong immediately put the theory into practice. After a few goes, he caught one too. He was over-joyed for his achievement.

“You see, although flies have more lenses, humans have more brains,” I said with a smile, but Afu said nothing.

We had spent many years leaning at schools, but the local people had the practical experiences that we could learn from. Only when we lived in their environment long enough, we would properly appreciate their skills.

When I told the village production team committee that I had received some basic military training when I was at primary school, Mr Xiang, the battalion commander of the militia for the Brigade Production Committee immediately brought me a self-loading-rifle, of course, without ammunitions and asked me to train the youngsters in Xiangzhuang village. (Mr Xiang was the person who was alleged to have an affair with a female educated youth.) Every ten days in evening, after my reading class, the same lot of the youngsters would follow me to the threshing ground for their “military training”.

At that time most marriages were arranged by heads of families. Boys and girls were not usually allowed to talk to each other. The training and reading class were the opportunities for the young villagers to talk to each other in an unthreatening environment without the older generation watching over their shoulders. There was an attractive, quiet and hard-working girl, who was very obedient when she was in the fields during the daytime. When she was with the boys in the threshing ground, her character changed and became less attractive. She would complain all the time to get the attention. Otherwise, the evenings were filled with laughter. These young villagers certainly deserved this kind of opportunities, considering the same age city-people were enjoying much more personal freedom in the early 1970s.

The first real task that we received from the Brigade Militia Battalion was to kill all the dogs in the surrounding areas. There were no reasons given, but we had to follow the order. The only official message was that keeping dogs was a capitalist habit. My guess was that there must be a hidden agenda for such unusual and drastic action. It was possibly to stop rabies spread in the area. The dog killing team was led by Mr Xiang, the Brigade Battalion Commander. No guns were used, partly it was because for the safety and partly because the Commune militia wanted to save bullets. At that time, almost every family had a dog or two. Most families dealt with the killing themselves. Our job was to deal with those dogs that their families did not or could not bring themselves to do so. Among the members of our team, those who feared dogs most, were the most vicious in the killing actions. Some of them became trigger-happy, although the only weapons that were used were heavy wooden sticks. When I walked into Wangzhuang village, I saw a group of young men shouting and laughing at a pair of dogs that were mating. When the group rushed towards dogs; the female dog was frightened and tried to run away by dragging the male dog behind her. The pair could not escape far before being destroyed by their predators. One of the team members was

explaining knowingly, “When dogs are mating, a female dog’s vagina locks male dog’s penis tightly. So this has made our job much easier. We killed two dogs with one stick 一箭双雕.” During that campaign, we did not have to work in the fields, but instead, we walked from village to village to carry out the killing order. As my leg had not fully recovered, I was allowed to come home earlier to prepare suppers and practised my noodle making technique.

Xiaozhong, brought a good shortwave radio from Shanghai. When we were all in bed late in the evening, he would often tune his radio to “Voice of America” (VoA) in the dark and would secretly listen to the evangelic programmes of the VoA. The lyric of the theme tune at the beginning of programme went like this.

“I’m travelling,

To every corner of the world.

I’m singing,

To every step that I stroll.

I’m your Lord

Follow my steps”

The feeling of secretive and excitement urged me to imagine the world that was beyond China and the ideas outside of Maoism.

In the first summer, Jiang Fan - the person whom we met on the train from Shanghai suddenly turned up in our village with two girls, who were supposed to be his “cousins”. They were originally allocated to the next village, Wangzhuang. As that village had not prepared the accommodation for them, they had to stay with us temporarily. Mr Wang asked some of the young villagers to demolish the stove in our house and to build a separate kitchen outside the main house, so that Jiang Fan and his “cousins” could move into the ex-donkey-house with us. We were all helping to build a three metre-by-three metre small kitchen. Someone brought a few cartful of clay-like mud. We mixed the mud with wheat straws and water until it was in the right texture. Not much foundation was laid, when the young villagers started making the wall by piling up the mixture with digging forks to form a three-

feet-thick wall, guided by a string that was placed horizontally from one end to the other side of the wall. A skilled builder (who was also a carpenter; who had made our beds) used a sharp spade to cut the wet muddy wall in a neat straight line. I was helping to make blocks with a wooden mould by using the same mud mixture. The blocks were going to be put onto the gables for the beams of the building. The whole project took us about a month to complete, as we had to wait for the blocks and the wall to dry properly. Maohai, one of the young men in the building team was a pleasant, cheerful and friendly character. He was always smiled and helpful. I wondered why he was not married as he was in the right age. Xiaogouzi told me that Maohai was from a bad family background; therefore, no girl was willing to marry him. Maohai's father used to be the local landowner before 1949. After the Communist Army took over the area, he led an uprising against the local Communist government. Later the uprising was suppressed. Maohai's father was caught and consequently was executed by the county government on the bank of Reviver Guo. The family was told to pay for the bullets for his execution.

During the period of our kitchen building work, we had to use the neighbours' cooking facility. Our neighbours would often bring some food to share with us. Other people's food always tasted better, especially their noodles that were so finely, regularly cut and looked as if they had just been brought back from shops.

Jiang Fan and his cousins stayed at home while Afu, Xiaozhong and I were working in the field. He said that they would work properly when they moved to Wangzhuang, as Xiangzhuang was not their official allocated village and it would be too difficult to transfer their Work Points from one village to other. We had them stay with us for over a month. A few months after they moved to Wangzhuang, we noticed that a boy called Zhao Baogen replaced Jiang Fan's cousins. When I first met Zhao Baogen, he was cooking lunch in their kitchen. He sat in front of the stove feeding some dried plants and straws into the fire. Gazing at the tongue of the flame, he said, "If you can smell an unpleasant body odour from your sexual partner, then your relationship is in trouble..." He carried on without saying hello to me. "My aunt who works in a gynaecology ward told me that some girls who have very beautiful faces, but when they take off their nickers, their unpleasant smell is unbearable." He was still staring at the fire. I was not sure if he was talking to himself or to me. Later I heard the rumours that Jiang Fan had made one of his "cousins" pregnant and had to go back

to Shanghai for abortion. As a result, the Commune did not allow mixed sex youths living in the same accommodation anymore.

There was a group of abandoned redbrick buildings about over one kilometre south of Wangzhuang where Jiang Fan and Zhao Baogen lived. The building structure looked strong and unlike the local mud huts. I was told that the place used to be a labour camp 劳改农场, which held over a thousand prisoners. Later the camp was moved elsewhere, but the buildings were left empty. The locals used the buildings for the Brigade's rally meetings.

Our Brigade often held "political" meetings on a regular base. One of these activities was "to remember the bitterness of the past and to appreciate the sweetness of the present" 忆苦思甜. The Chinese Communist Party used this method to teach the youngsters who did not know the "awful and bitter" past under the rule of the KMT governments before 1949. During such activities, a Poor Peasant 贫农 would be usually asked to share his or her bitter experiences from the past with the youngsters in the villages. It was our next-door neighbour Mrs You's turn to share her bitter story with us. Mrs You was a talkative old woman and was famous for "shouting abuses in public" 骂街. Once Xiaozhong nicked a few of aubergines from her vegetable patch for our supper. When she discovered that her aubergines disappeared from her plants, she walked through the whole village and shouted loudly in front of every house, "Whoever has eaten my aubergines is a bastard who will have no children. His mother was fucked by donkeys..." Anyway, that night Mrs You was in her usual form and vividly talked about her suffering that she endured in the past. With her tears on her cheeks, Mrs You was angrily animated. She shouted and described the hardest time that she had gone through.

She told us that during a terrible famine, the local people were worried about having big stomachs, thin arms and legs, because then it was the symbol of death. Hunger and death grabbed the whole area. Her eight-year-old son could not escape from the terrible curse. She continued, "There would be someone dying in the village or the villages around the area every day." As she refused to face the same fate of the others, she went out very quietly in the dark one night and dug out a dead body that was buried that afternoon, and would cut up the corpse. She took some human flesh home and secretly cooked it. But at that time no one was allowed to have cooking utensils. As she was still talking, then suddenly one of the committee members stood up and stopped her. She was escorted away. Another old man was asked to tell us his story. Afterwards I discovered that Mrs You's son would have been the

same age as me, if he had been still alive. Only then I realised that she was talking about the time when the People's Commune system was set up in 1958, which was the period under the Communist governments. No wonder the Brigade committee member had to stop her immediately.

Actually most peasants did not know much about politics. If they were asked to talk about the bitterness in the past, then they would tell us about the most terrible experiences that they remembered. Many villagers were not aware of the modern Chinese history and some of them did not even know the differences between the Communist and Nationalist KMT governments. Anyway, who could blame them? They could not read and could not even afford a radio.

Mr Zhao, the Party Secretary of Wangji Commune could not read either, but he did not want to admit his illiteracy to his colleagues or in public. One day, in September, it was my second year in Xiangzhuang, I went back to the commune headquarters to report the development of my reading class. Mr Zhao shut door behind me, and took out an A4 size booklet from his draw and said in a quiet but excited voice:

“Read this quickly and tell me what you think.”

I looked at the front page of the booklet. It was written in red Chinese characters: “Top Secret: Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC) Dossier.” He told me that he was informed briefly that Lin Biao, Chairman Mao's official successor was planning to assassinate Mao, but later Lin Biao was killed in a plane crash. Mr Zhao was instructed to hold a public meeting to deliver the message. As he was a member of administrative official in the Chinese Communist Party, he was given this dossier, which described the detailed account of the incident. However, that number-registered dossier was going to be in his possession only for one week and after that, it had to be taken back to the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee.

I had never seen a CCPCC document before. At the beginning, I thought it was going to be like *The Communist Manifesto*, but the more I read, the more interesting it became. It was almost like reading a novel with very detailed descriptions. I simply could not put it down.

Apparently, right at beginning of the Cultural Revolution Mao raised his doubts of Lin Biao's intention in the implementation of the personal worship of Mao. Even as early in July 1966, Mao wrote to his wife from Wuhan saying that Lin Biao's intention was to make use of his (Mao's) image to rid of the other top officials of the CCP. Mao also said that he had become the Head Ghost of the CCP in the sixties of twentieth century². Every household in China put up his portrait to frighten away the "small ghosts". Mao said that Lin Biao had exaggerated his little red book of quotations and Mao was put into an awkward position. Mao described himself as a monkey king in a mountain that had no tigers³. Later Lin Biao was criticized by Mao. Lin promised Mao to correct his mistakes, but he knew that he had lost Mao's trust. At that time Lin Biao's son, Lin Liguó 林立果, who was already high up in the Air Force of the People's Liberation Army. He had drawn a plan with a group of his military inner circle to assassinate Mao. The plan was called Project 571. The three digits made of the homophone of the Chinese words "Wuqi yi" 武起义, which meant military uprising. It was said that the assassination plan also involved many of Lin Biao's military colleagues, who were in charge of a number of departments in the Chinese army. The aim was to shoot Mao's personal train outside Hangzhou 杭州 with a missile when Mao was on his return journey to Beijing. Somehow the plan of the military activities was closely monitored by the spies of Premier of Zhou Enlai. Zhou phoned Mao and asked him to come back to Beijing a day earlier than Mao had originally intended. Mao did so. When Lin Biao discovered that Mao had already come back to Beijing, he realised that his son's 571 Project had failed. As a result, Lin Biao, his wife, Ye Qun 叶群 and Lin Liguó decided to fly out of China to the USSR. When Lin Biao's daughter Lin Liheng 林立衡 heard that, she informed Zhou Enlai the situation. Zhou ordered the Shanhaiguan military airport to stop Lin Biao's plane (which was a British-made Trident aircraft) taking off for the USSR. Lin Liguó shot the guard who answered phone. At that time, the plane was still refueling. Three members of the Lin family rushed onto the plane. Lin Liguó could not wait for the co-pilot to arrive and ordered the pilot to taxi the plane onto the runway. There was even a photo of a refueling vehicle parked on the runway with the top that was damaged when the plane left in a hurry. Although there was a jeep on the runway trying to stop the plane to take off, the plane left the airport. When the situation was reported back to Zhou, he phoned Mao immediately and asked for the permission to

² "我猜他们的本意，为了打鬼，借助钟馗。我就在 20 世纪 60 年代当了共产党的钟馗了"

³ 山中无老虎，猴子称大王。

shoot down the plane. Zhou said that the army that was deployed in the northeast China, on the China-Russian border were loyal to Lin Biao. It would be impossible for Zhou to reshuffle the armies from north to south within a few hours. When Mao heard the report, he sighed and said, “Just let it be⁴”. Later when the Chinese Ambassador in Mongolia phoned Zhou at the small hours of the following day to inform him that the plane had crashed, Zhou went to see Mao immediately.

“He (Lin Biao) fell to his death. This has solved our problem.”

When Zhou saw a bottle of Maotai ⁵茅台 on Mao’s bedroom table, he said, “We should have a drink to celebrate,” but Mao said nothing. Zhou hesitated and said, “Maybe not. Anyway, it isn’t fair to ask the workers to prepare some nibbles for us at this time of the night.” Mao looked at Zhou and said, “I have some peanuts in the cupboard. If you don’t mind, we can celebrate it with some peanuts and Maotai?”

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The following day Mr Zhao decided to order the branch Party Secretaries to hold some public meetings in the individual villages within the whole Commune. After supper, Mr Wang, the head of Xiangzhuang gathered everyone in the barn, which was lit by two paraffin lamps. The barn was dark and one could hardly see people’s faces. Mr Tao, the Deputy Party Secretary of the Brigade started to deliver the news of the down-fall of Lin Biao Anti-Party Gang 林彪反党集团, as they attempted to assassinate Mao, but failed. Three of Lin family members who were killed in a plane crash accident in Mongolia when escaping to the USSR. Mr Tao’s voice was solemn and slow, but there was no reaction from his audience. Some of the older men were still puffing away their pipes and women sat on their stools half asleep. I was puzzled and asked one of the men who was sitting next to me.

“Uncle You, do you know who Lin Biao was?”

⁴ 天要下雨，娘要嫁人 which implied that it was heaven’s wish and there was nothing that he could do to stop it.

⁵ A Chinese strong alcohol spirit

“Who?” Mr You opened his eyes and spat his saliva on the ground. He knocked his metal pipe-head on the side of his shoe sole a few times to empty out the hot tobacco ashes on the ground.

“You know, Lin Biao who used to be Mao’s successor.” I explained anxiously.

“No, I’ve no idea who he was,” he was a little puzzled.

“Do you know who Chairman Mao is?” I could not believe what he had just said.

“Of course, I know Chairman Mao. He is our leader,” Mr You looked at me indignantly. To many of the old generation in the village, Mao was just like another emperor.

As the You clan occupied the west part of Xiangzhuang where our house was situated, we naturally socialised much more with them. One evening You Sanzi came to see me in a hurry.

“Quickly come to the storeroom with me. My brother is trying to kill himself by taking strong pesticide.” I followed him and rushed to the storeroom in the threshing ground. Somehow, the door was not locked and we saw him sitting on the ground of the storeroom holding a bottle. We rushed in and snatched the pesticide bottle from his hands. The bottle was half-full with the lid firmly on.

“Can you remember how full the bottle was? You Sanzi asked, as he knew that I was using the pesticide in the afternoon.

“No, I can’t remember.” I answered.

We both looked at his brother and he looked at us rather surprised. We felt relaxed a little, as we reckoned that he had not yet taken any poison from the bottle.

You Lao’er was another man in the village, who did not smoke apart from Mr Wang, the leader of the production team. You Lao’er was very close to a woman in the village, whose husband was working away from home in Qinghai province in west China. I did not know the real name of the woman, because she was known as Qinghai’s mother in the village. Qinghai was her five-year-old son, who was named after the place where his father was working. You Lao’er looked after both the mother and the boy very well when the husband was absent from

their life. He was upset that the villagers were gossiping about their relationship behind his back. He was so hurt that he threatened to kill himself.

You Sanzi was the youngest brother in his family. His oldest brother was the one who challenged me for a wrestling match and caused my knee injury not long after I had arrived in the village. He actually was a nice and most normal family man among the three brothers. He had a wife and five children. You Sanzi was about four years older than me and was the most educated one in his family as he could read a few words of Chinese. In our second year in the village, You Sanzi suddenly got married very quietly. His wife was from a nearby village. She was a really weird and showing off character, although she was more educated than most women in the village. One day, during a break, we were all sitting at the end of a sweet potato field; she was boasting her sexual capacity in front of some much younger girls, saying that she could make love with a dozen men one night. She said that it was easy, after making love with each man, she just had to squat there for a little while to get rid of his semen and then she would move on to the next one. That evening You Sanzi came to our house and wanted to talk to Afu or me.

“Is Xiaozhong a moral person?” He asked.

“Why do you want to know that?” I asked him.

“When I came back home this evening, I saw Xiaozhong burying his head between my wife’s breasts, when she was lying in bed...”

“Really? That’s no good,” Afu interrupted. “I’ll talk to him.”

“How is your relationship with your new wife?” I asked suspiciously. “You both seemed to get married very quickly.”

“Yes, after falling in love for a month, we decided to get married.” You Sanzi tried hard to use the modern words “to fall in love” to convince me. Actually, the word “love” never existed in the vocabulary of marriage in the area. I told him what his wife said to the young girls that afternoon. I said that we would talk to Xiaozhong about his bad behaviour, if he could have a word with his wife about her behaviours in public.

In Xiangzhuang there was one person, who had a different life style from the rest of us. He earned money instead of work-points. His name was Tian Shan 田山, the barber. He would go to the nearby villages carrying his barber box every day to provide haircutting and

massaging services for men and even gave people healthcare advices. He was the person who told me a few very strange traditional healthcare methods, among which the most memorable one was that the local contraceptive method for men was to tie a string at the root of an erected penis to stop semen coming out. He was also the source of local gossips, just like a living tabloid newspaper. However, the locals treated him like a family guest. If Mr Tian came to provide the services for them, they would get the drinks ready to play the drinking game with him after the haircut. Once I was walking pass a house where Mr Tian was having a good time with his host family, I was dragged in to join their drinking game, which was to guess the total number of the fingers that you and your opponent put together. It was just like playing hammers, scissors and paper game, but one had to anticipate the numbers well. The rule of the game was simple: the loser had to drink the alcohol, which was a type of very strong colourless spirit made of sweet potatoes. The problem of the game was that the more you lose, the more you drink, but the more you drink, the more you lose. They expected me, the new player, to end up on the floor. Luckily, I had a towel around my right wrist that day. After each drink, I pretended to wipe my mouth, but I spat all the alcohol into the towel. I was glad that I survived that challenge. They all thought that I could drink a lot.

One day I heard that Mr Kui, the head of Wangji Commune Militia was arrested for having an affair with one of the female educated youths. Mr Kui was a Korean War veteran and a retired soldier, a member of Chinese Communist Party and was an important official in the People's Commune Party Committee. When we first arrived in Wangji, Mr Kui was very keen on organising activities of entertainment. A few gatherings were arranged for the educated youths in the neighbouring villages. Once there was a girl who sang a Chinese revolutionary song with a deep mellow voice. I simply could not believe that she had an affair with old Mr Kui. In my impression, she was a quiet and self-contained type. Before the news was spread out, the girl had disappeared. There was no detailed explanation of their "affair".

I had participated in one of the major entertainment activities that were organised by Mr Kui. It was in 1973, the third year I came back from Shanghai after the Chinese New Year season. I brought my violin (a "western capitalist musical instrument") with me to the village. I thought that after working hard in the field for a long period, I had obtained the trust of the peasants and I felt that it was politically safe for me to introduce my violin to the countryside. Of course, the villagers were fascinated by the shape and the sound of the instrument. The arrival of the violin in the village encouraged many "ex-musicians" (one of them was You

Sanzi) to dig out their Chinese violins 弦子 to play with me. Of course, they did not know any of the western music and they could only play some of the old Chinese tunes and the tunes from the well-known Huangmeixi 黄梅戏, the local opera. However, I found it hard to play the provincial music. It was not because of the technical difficulties, but because of my snobbish mind-set. I thought that as a violinist, I should play music that was written by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and maybe a little bit of the revolutionary ballet music but not the old Chinese local operas. It was hard to convince myself to be re-educated in that way, but I forced myself to do so. Finally, I was recommended by Mr Tao, the Deputy Party Secretary of the Brigade to play in the event that Mr Kui had organised in the Commune. I was given fifteen days off from working in the field with the full Work Points. In other words, I was given on-paid-leave. Moreover, I was allowed to stay in the Wangji Commune headquarter compound where I shared a house with two girls who were the local opera singers. I was told that they were from the Commune secondary school. I assumed that they were Wangji local girls. The girls used the inner room of the house and I slept in the outer room. They were obviously good singers and actors. We had a rehearsal every morning. Mr Lu, the opera teacher was a Chinese violin player who worked for a local secondary school. Mr Lu was in his 30s. He coached the girls singing and patiently taught me to play the local opera properly. I was certain that he could tell my reluctance, but he dealt with me in a calm and business-like manner. The result was effective: I did not feel embarrassed to play the tunes with him.

The girls and I were allowed to eat free of charge in the official Commune canteen where the food was amazing compared with the food that I had in the village. We had steamed buns and vegetable dishes with some meat every meal. The commune chef cooked the most mouth-watering steamed belly pork 粉蒸肉 that I only had it once or twice when I was in Shanghai. I certainly had the most “luxurious” fifteen days in Wangji, where I met many of the Commune officials including Mr Kui.

That was my first close contact with Mr Kui. He was a nice and friendly old guy. As he was the head of the Commune Militia, he had the access to all the weapons that the commune had kept. When Mr Kui heard that I was training the village young militia, he became very excited and showed me a Mauser C96: a Second World War German-made semi-automatic pistol.

“This is a powerful weapon,” he handed the pistol over to me. When I held it in my hand, I could feel the weight and the solidness of the piece.

“You can try it, if you want,” he loaded two bullets into the magazine and took me out by the river. He handed the weapon over to me and ordered:

“Aim at the riverbank and shoot.”

I was holding the pistol, but unable to squeeze the trigger. I could only visualise the execution of Maohai’s father and the blood from killing of the dogs. Mr Kui laughed and took over the pistol and casually fired two shots at the riverbank. Looking at the two big bullet holes on the muddy riverbank, I was completely shocked and mesmerised.

Mr Wang, the Commune Accountant, was a tall and handsome man in his 40s. He spoke with a loud ringing voice that was good enough to be a western opera singer. Mr Wang was the only one in the Commune Committee, who had received some form of education in the past, so he was capable of looking after the accounts for the whole area. One day when the girls and I were eating with some of the commune officials in the canteen, Mr Wang sat with us and commented on our characters. He gave quite detailed character descriptions of the two girls. Then he looked at me, thought for a while, and said it in a riddle without explanation,

“When a blind man eats dumplings, he is counting the numbers in his mind 瞎子吃饺子，心里有数。” It was a rather ambiguous comment that could be interpreted either in a positive or in a negative way.

Anyway, the performance of the local opera was for limited audiences: the Commune officials and some official-looking people whom I had never met. It was certainly not for the ordinary peasants.

In many ways, I should be grateful to Mr Kui. After working for him once, he remembered me and tried to help me to improve my music development. One day he asked Mr Xiang, the Brigade Battalion Commander to bring me a document and to tell me that Shanghai Conservatory was coming to northern Anhui province to recruit students and he thought that I should give a go. At that time, China’s higher education institutions were not allowed to recruit students through examinations. Students must be recommended by their work units. Those type of university students in China were known as Students of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers 工农兵学员. As conservatories could not recruit students who had no music knowledge, each applicant was asked to prepare a simple western classical music piece for the audition. Mr Kui was kindly allowed me to stay in the commune official accommodation

for my audition. I did not bring many western classical sheet music with me. The only piece that I could remember by heart was Vivaldi violin concerto in A minor which I learned from Great Uncle Zhang's hand copied collection of sheet music in Shanghai. When I arrived in the Commune, I was mesmerised and felt as if I was in a different world. A sophisticated looking young man was practising the solo trumpet piece of Napoleon Dance from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake Act III in the earthy square of the Commune. He did not look like someone who had been working in the fields. A girl who stayed opposite my room was practising Brahms Hungarian Dances on her accordion with her fingers flying everywhere on the keyboard. After two days of auditions, I tried my best on the Baroque piece, but I did not get in.

When I went back to Xiangzhuang to work, I could sense the feeling of jealousy and envy from my housemates. They thought that I had an easy way to avoid the hard work in the fields. They did not talk to me much in the house. When we were having a rest by the end of the fields, my housemates would not talk to me but talked to the people who sat next to them. Some of men took off their padded cotton jackets under the late-autumn warm sun and looked for lice along the inner seams of their jackets. When they found one, they either would squeeze it between two thumbnails or would bite it with their teeth. It would make a click noise. Mr Tao, the Brigade Deputy Branch Party Secretary came over to talk to me.

“Xiao Gan, you can play the violin. I think that...it would be very useful to us... Would you be willing to stay here over the winter season? Anyway, spending the New Year season with us will be a good test for your re-education programme.”

“What will we be doing in fields over the winter season?” I was puzzled and started to imagine that he might be testing me for my commitment of living in the village or he was trying to get me into the labour force for the winter irrigation projects. If I passed all the tests, he might introduce me to join the Chinese Communist Party... However, originally Afu, Xiaozhiong and I had planned to go back to Shanghai together for Chinese New Year...

“Would you like to join us to beg in the cities in the winter? I am sure with your violin playing, we will be able to beg for much more, over the winter season.”

Although I was committed to the re-education programme and felt proud to be a peasant, I was not prepared to go so far as to be a beggar as well. I was rather taken-back when a

Chinese Communist Party Secretary did not only feel that begging was a shameful practice, but felt that it was a normal activity that one should feel proud of.

Actually begging was part of the local tradition. In winter, many people would go out to the nearby cities to beg and to be fed by the city people, so they could save up their foodstuff at home. When they came home in the spring, they would sell the food that they had saved up over the winter for cash.

“Sorry Mr Tao, I will have to go home for Chinese New Year this year, as some of my relatives will be coming to spend the New Year with us. Should I do this with you next year?” I told a white lie to reject his “kind” offer.

In the late autumn of that year, Afu often went to Mengcheng County to see an older Shanghaies girl, who had just been recruited by the Mengcheng County Grain Warehouse from a nearby village. I was told that the girl really admired and fancied Afu. When a girl of a higher social status looked up to him, it certainly made Afu feel good about himself.

I suddenly realised that I was sitting on the bottom level of the Chinese social class. In other words, I was a real peasant. When I went Mengcheng, the county town for the production team with Mr You, one of the villagers, I felt that as if I had arrived in a big city and everything that I saw there was sophisticated and was out of my reach. Mr You suggested that we should go and see a show that the County Acrobatics Troop had just put on, because the announcer of the show was a very beautiful woman from Shanghai. To my complete surprise, that alleged beautiful woman was Yang Huiyao 杨惠耀, my classmate from primary school. She used to be an unassuming character and not many of my classmates had noticed her at all. After doing her announcement at the beginning of the show, I rushed to the back stage to talk to her. Mr You laughed, “I knew that you would fancy her.”

“Yang Huiyao, I didn’t believe that you came to Mengcheng as well.” She certainly did not expect to see me there and said, “I went up to a village in the north, then the Mengcheng Acrobatic Troop asked me to be their programme announcer last year and I accepted their offer.”

“I’m really surprised that your Mandarin is so good...” I said, but she was very quiet.

“So life must be better for you now...Do you have any news about other classmates?” I asked.

She looked at me as if she had too much to say.

“Do you know that...” she paused a little. “Zhang Qiyao 张启尧 is dead.”

“Dead?... When?... How?” I remembered that Zhang Qiyao and I joined the Young Pioneers together and we both became the team leaders for our class.

“Yes, it was a very sad incident. It happened last autumn.” Yang Huiyao told me what happened.

Zhang lived in the same street as Yang Huiyao, but he went to Jianxi 江西 province for his re-education programme. Last year he was looking forward to going Shanghai after harvest. He got everything ready for home. The night before his departure he was cooking himself a simple supper. As the wok was slightly slanted on the stove, he put a solidly rusty Second World War hand grenade that he picked up from the nearby riverbed under the wok to balance to it. The head of the village militia was there and said, “You should not put a rusty grenade under there. It might explode.”

“It’s rusted through like a piece of stone,” Zhang Qiyao was arguing.

After saying that, the head of militia was called back for supper by his wife. A minute later, there was a big explosion and Zhang Qiyao was killed instantly.

“That’s really sad.” I was shocked.

“Yes, indeed. I’ve heard that there were two more deaths in our class...” Yang Huiyao continued.

Another classmate of mine, whose nickname was Thick Melon, as he was from a less privileged family background and did not do terribly well in his academic work at school. He was sent to southern Anhui province to be re-educated. As he did not have money to buy a train ticket to go home, he attempted to jump onto a cargo train, but miscalculated its speed. As a result, he was killed by the train.

Zhu Jiayin, one of my study-group mates, was a quiet and self-contained girl who was very much like Yang Huiyao in class. She went to northeast China for her re-education programme. As she had an unhappy and rather unfortunate relationship was raped by a local guy in her village, she committed suicide.

I had never thought about death and I thought that we were invincible, but after talking to Yang Huiyao and hearing those horror stories about my classmates, I felt life was so fragile and so precious. I started to doubt the re-education programme and thought that the Cultural Revolution guided us to create a new and better world, which the working class would lead, but the reality was not so. People superficially followed the political ideology of the Central Government, but city people still looked down on the uneducated and the poor.

When the harvest was over and it was getting colder day by day. As we did not have much work to do in the fields, we felt a bit homesick. The Brigade Party Committee was always very sympathetic towards us and thought that we should go back and visit our families in Shanghai for Chinese New Year. They wanted us to bring back some of the agriculture products that the village had produced to show the city people the good and positive side of the countryside. Many villagers gave us some good quality agriculture products, such as freshly roasted and crushed sesame oil, large size dried soybeans, black sesame seeds and so on. The Brigade told us that it should be fine if we returned just before the busy planting season in the early March.