

Chapter Nineteen

Stepping up 陪琴伴曲黄粱梦 (1975-)

The PAG Production Team in residence had a composer, a writer, a theatrical director and two orchestral conductors. They wrote and produced some of the programmes and operas. The themes of their works were often about the stories of the Chinese working class, such as the Ma'anshan steel workers' selfless attitude at work to meet the national production targets. When a music score was completed, the orchestral section parts would be hand-copied out by the musicians before rehearsing, as we did not have photocopying machines. Occasionally the PAG put on some of the well-known productions, such as the ballet, *Red Detachment of Women* and the opera, *The Red Guards on Honghu Lake* to attract more audience.

Apart from putting on shows for the local residents, the Ma'anshan PAG toured twice a year. The places that we normally went were the cities in Anhui and the neighbouring Jiangsu province, but the destinations were always in the rich south. As a result, I never had a chance to go anywhere near to the place where I was re-educated. I realised that the northern part of Anhui, especially the north of Huai River 淮河 was regarded as a no-go-land for many people in China and it had a nickname of Little Siberia. However, the landscape in the southern regions of Anhui was different from the one in the north. It looked richer and greener. The southern countryside of Anhui reminded me of my own hometown where I visited in 1967, but somehow it looked much more Chinese. The rocks and the pine trees of Huangshan (Yellow Mountains) in the southern region of Anhui were frequently depicted in the traditional Chinese landscape paintings and were often described in traditional Chinese poems.

Once a year, very young musician of the PAG had to have a performance assessment. The assessments results would relate to our (insignificant) pay-rises and the desk positions in the orchestra, especially for the stringed instrument players. When we were on tours, we had to share accommodation with those who were older and married. To our surprise, we discovered that the older members of the orchestra actually did not at all practise their instruments at all, but they would often sit in the panels to judge the performing skills of the younger musicians. The pieces that violinists would use for the assessments were often those well-known classic repertoires, such as Brahms, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky's violin concertos or Bach Partitas for solo violin. Many of us thought that it was unfair to ask those who never practised to

judge our performing techniques. Some of us even wanted to challenge the older members for their music skills. However, those who were on the receiving end of the assessments would be timid and argue on behalf of the older ones.

“...but their quality of sound is very good. It'll certainly take me at least another ten years of practice to reach their standard... And their experiences are much better than ours,” a young trombone player said.

“Rubbish!” Chen Jian'an shouted. “Anyway, they don't even know anything about Bach or Mozart. If you think that is right, you must be mad...”

After a little while, this type of heated conversation would calm down. As we all knew that whatever and however we complained, nothing would change for us. I also believed that putting the emphasis on improving young players' music techniques was a sensible and effective way to improve the general performing standard of the orchestra. This so-called method of madness was actually quite wise. The problem for the management team was that how to deal with the resentment among the younger musicians. The older members of the orchestra could obviously sense the anger.

Mr Guo the old French horn player who would often come to work in his ironed earth-yellow woollen army uniform. He was very outspoken in many political meetings. When he spoke, he would stand up with a serious authoritarian facial expression. Sometimes I thought that he should really consider himself lucky that he did not get into any political trouble. However, it was very true that Mr Guo could actually produce a beautiful and noble quality sound on the French horn. He was normally quiet when people having casual conversations, but I remember once, when we were chatting away during a break of an orchestra rehearsal. He suddenly stood up and said in a loud and bossy voice.

“The fact is that, the older people have much more life experiences and are always more superior than the younger ones. There is an old Chinese saying. It goes like this, “when you need a strong drink in the winter, you should always have Erguotou, as it has been distilled twice, so it's much stronger. It goes the same as marrying a widow is a wiser choice, as she has already lost one husband, consequently she'll look after her second one much better.” 喝酒要喝二锅头，老婆要讨寡妇妻. His lecture went on. “...I can tell you something that you don't know. Women's lovemaking need much longer time than men. My experience is to think about something else when making love, so you can prolong your time.”

We were completely shocked and did not know what to say. I thought he was drunk, but he was deadly serious. Someone asked him very cheekily.

“Really, Mr Guo? What DO you think when you are making love to your wife then?”

“I would think...” He paused for a little while and said, “For example I would concentrate on thinking about my French horn practice.” Mr Guo answered question without a smile on his face.

“Oh my God, no wonder he doesn’t need to practise anymore.” Chen Jian’an muttered quietly in the back.

Exploring local food was something that we liked to do on the tours. The most memorable one was that when we reached Yangzhou 扬州 and Zhenjiang 镇江 areas, we had plentiful of delicious steamed buns with fresh-water crabmeat and pork 蟹黄包. Chen Jian’an could consume a whole basketful of (normally a dozen) buns by himself. When we arrived in a new place, food tourism became our priority and we were less bothered with local cultural sightseen.

I taught Sima Jing the violin fortnightly. Zheng Binghui, her boyfriend would make some comments on her progress from time to time. She was doing well. One day, during the lesson, her face suddenly went white as a sheet and she was about to claps. I immediately stopped and asked her to sit on the bed.

“Are you OK, Xiao Sima?”

“Yes, I am fine... I just had a terrible stomach pain... Maybe ...”

“OK, let me fill a hot water bottle for you.”

The dormitory accommodations had no heating system, so in the winter it could be very cold. As we did not have any proper cooking facilities, every morning we had to fetch the boing hot water from the “Tiger Stove”¹ 老虎灶 up the road with our own large thermos. I filled up a hot water bottle and handed it over to her. She placed it on her stomach. After a little while, she looked a bit better.

¹ It was an ancient tradition in southern China, especially in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Due to coal shortage in the area, and to save the cost, people would take their large thermoses to buy boiling hot water in a local “tiger stove”. It was said that the shape of the original stoves that was used to boil large quantity of hot water looked like a tiger. As a result, it was called tiger stove.

“OK now?”

She looked at me, but did not say anything.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You know what?” She suddenly asked.

“What?”

“Today is the first time you called me by my name.”

“Really?”

“I never heard you call me by my name until today.”

“I don’t know why that is,” I said.

“But you did it just now.”

“Maybe I was panicking about your health, as you were so pale.” I laughed.

She did not say anything. Suddenly she changed subject. “You know what? Many people have said that we both look alike. Some of them thought that you were my brother, but I told them that I don’t have one.”

“It must be hard for you that you don’t have any siblings.” I said in a sympathetic way.

“Yes...Sometimes...” She stopped for a little while. “We can continue the lesson now.”

“But how? You’ve got a stomach pain.”

“I’m better now. I can carry on playing the violin sitting down with the hot water bottle on my tummy.”

“No, I don’t think it would be a good idea. Try to get better properly first and we can carry on another day.” I insisted.

As I never charged her for the lessons, Sima Jing would occasionally bring me some nice biscuits or other good quality food to show her gratitude.

I had not contacted Dingding since I started looking for an orchestra job, because I thought that in order to help her to go back to Wu Xunguang, her boyfriend I must keep silence and I never told her that I had the job in Ma'anshan either. One day, to my surprise, I received a letter from her. I did not realise that she had become a good friend of Zheng Ni, Zhneg Binghui's sister who was working for the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing. Dingding managed to get hold of my address through her. In Dingding's letter, she did not mention anything about our relationship, but said that she still wanted to keep her promise to help me to get a better job in China's musical world. She invited me to go to Beijing to audition for one of the Army or Navy Political Department Song and Dance Troupes. She told me that she had already started networking there and contacted people who work in these fields. Dingding offered me a very attractive chance to be in a better place for my music development. I thought I should take the opportunity. I discussed this with Chen Jian'an who fully supported me to go to Beijing.

"Are you going to see your Aunt Dingding in Beijing?" Sima Jing saw me standing outside the front door of the dormitory and asked me in a cheeky tone with a testing smile. I knew that she must have got hold of some information about my relation with Dingding.

I did not answer just looked at her accusingly.

"Zheng Ni has told Binghui the story of yours."

"Really? What story? How did Zheng Ni know that?"

"Your Aunt Dingding and Zheng Ni are good friends now. She asked Zheng Ni to find the right people in her unit to help you. Your Aunt Dingding must like you very much." She smiled again. I did not say any more, but I knew that by telling me the information, she was trying hard to find out my feeling for Dingding. I did not want to reveal anything to her. When we were talking, Zheng Binghui walked into the room and looked at me in a strange way.

"Zheng Ni told me that Dingding asked her to make some contacts in Beijing... It'll be good for you to try out a few PAG in the army units in Beijing. Even if you don't get in, it'll be a good experience for your career development." Zheng Binghui had no mention of my relation with Dingding at all. "You should be prepared for a tough competition, but you shouldn't be put off by any of your competitors either. You just have to concentrate on what you can do."

“Thanks for the tips.”

“No worry. What piece are you going to play for auditions?”

“Sarasate’s *Zigeunerweisen*.”

“... It’s a good choice for showing your capability of the violin technique, but you must demonstrate that you have mastered the piece well. It can also show your weakness, if you don’t feel comfortable with it.” Zheng Binghui said it in a very honest and frank way. As an experienced musician, Zheng Binghui had met many good students of his father’s in Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. He probably had guessed that it would be very hard for me to compete for a place at the national level, but in the same time, he also believed that a good network could play a very important part in securing a job.

In the early spring of 1976, I had a week break in Shanghai for the Qingming Festival². It was reported in the national papers that there was a big gathering in the Tiananmen Square. In Beijing, people from all the sectors came to the Square to remember the Ex-Premier Zhou Enlai who died in January that year. The remembrance soon turned into a political movement accusing the policies that were formulated by the leadership of the left-wing Communist Party. When I was in Shanghai, Dingding suddenly appeared at door of my flat. At that time, Cheng Jingde, my clarinettist colleague was with me. Somehow, Cheng very quickly detected who Dingding was. He made an excuse and left, so that Dingding and I could have a chat. Her surprise visit stirred my feeling of guilt and awkwardness. I did not know how and what to say to her, so I started conversation by asking her the political movement that was unfolding in Beijing. She told me that it was a power struggle within the central government, which spilled into the streets of Beijing. She thought that if it went on for too long, it could end up in bloodshed. In some way, her predicament was right. Not long after we met in Shanghai, the central government decided to order the Capital Militias to clear the Tiananmen Square. The brutal results were that many people in the streets were hurt and Deng Xiaoping, the Vice-Premier who was under house arrest again, not long after his rehabilitation. Anyway, that day Dingding somehow detected that I was trying hard to avoid the topic of our relationship. I was surprised that she was not angry with me, but on the contrary, she talked to me as if nothing had ever happened. She did not ask me why I had ignored her, but instead she talked about helping me to audition for the military PAG in Beijing. We finally decided

² A traditional Chinese festival for remembering the dead

that autumn or early winter would be a good time for me to go to Beijing. She asked me to write to her and let her know my time of arrival in Beijing so that she could meet me at the station and could arrange my stay. However, I sensed that she was a little guarded. When she was about to leave, I thanked her for everything that she did for me. “I’ll keep my promise to help you,” she said it as a matter of fact. I was moved and I felt very bad to treat her like that. Dingding left and went away just like she did eighteen months before, when she was boarding the plane, she did not turn round to say good bye.

Not long after I went back to Ma’anshan, a serious earthquake struck Tangshan 唐山, a city near Beijing. I was told that earthquake was so strong that the whole Tangshan city was almost buried under huge rubble on 28 July, 1976. As it was happened in the early hours of the day, most victims died in their sleep. The rescuer teams in Tangshan had to work extremely hard day and night, as the summer temperature was high and the decomposition of the bodies could cause serious health hazard in the area. The earthquake was clearly felt in Beijing too. It left a huge crack on the north-side wall of the Great Hall of People, the Chinese Parliament Building. Dingding’s family had to evacuate to a new location, as the aftershock left some damages to the building that they lived in. Although Ma’anshan was about 600 miles away from the epicentre, we were instructed to spend nights outdoors in a large stadium next to the PAG dormitory. We were given some transparent plastic sheets to make tents over our beds to stop the rain. The PAG’s Production Team was urgently asked to compose an opera on the theme of Chinese people fighting against earthquakes. The PAG was instructed to put on a performance within two weeks to show our effort in fighting against the natural disaster. As a result, we also worked day and night for the production. That earthquake caused the biggest death toll in the living memories and it badly affected Chinese people’s morale. Within one month after the disaster, the earthquake was still the main topic of conversation. However, just when people were about to relax a little, another horrific news hit China again. On 9 September 1976, we heard a newsreader’s voice on the loud speakers in the stadium.

“Something major has happened...” Chen Jin’an anticipated.

Chairman Mao, The leader of the Chinese Communist Party died. ... After the news was announced, Mr Guo, the French horn player said in his serious manner, “The earthquake was a bad omen. Look, the most important historical figures of this century died one after another within the year. Today our leader died. This marks the end of era ...”

He paused a little. “In the past, when an important emperor died, he would take many lives with him... That was why the earthquake struck in Beijing area in the summer...”

As the nation was still moaning for its leader, we were spared from putting on performances for celebrating the National Day in 1976, on 1 October. Not long after the National Day, the Gang of Four³, the leadership of the left-wing Chinese Communist was arrested under the order of Hua Gufeng, the new leader of China. While the national political situation was rather chaotic, I asked the permission to leave for a week, although I did not give any clear reason for it. The PAG authorities said yes. Therefore, I bought a train ticket for Beijing and phoned Dingding to tell her my plan and the time of arrival.

Dingding met me at the station. She told me that as the earthquake damaged parts of her home building. So her family had temporarily moved from Dongsì 东四 to Sanlihe 三里河 area. As it was my first time in Beijing and I had never been to her old house, everything was new to me, anyway. At that time, only her parents, her oldest brother’s family and Dudu, her sister lived at home. The whole family stayed on the ground floor while I was using one of the guestrooms on the first floor, where I could shut the door to practise the violin. On my arrival, I went to say hello to her parents and we all had a chat about having auditions in Beijing. As I only had less than a week in Beijing, Dingding arranged auditions in four different places for me. I had to practise hard and could not socialise much with other members of her family.

The first evening at my arrival, Dingding brought me some tapes of Mozart’s and Beethoven’s violin and piano sonatas that were played by Yehudi Menuhin. They were inspiring. I especially liked Menuhin’s phrasing, interpretation and his clarity of tones. Dingding stayed with me listening to the music for a little while, but we did not talk much. As I had an early start the following morning, I went to bed reasonably early.

The first audition was at the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe. There were a few competitors waiting outside the audition room. I was told that they only needed no more than two violinists. It was Zheng Ni, who took me into the audition area and introduced me to her friends, some of whom were going to be in the audition panel. Then I was left in a practice room waiting for my turn to play. As the walls of the practising rooms

³ The Gang of Four was formed by Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen.

were not very well soundproofed, I could hear my competitors practising. Most of them were technically very competent. I knew that I would have to face a tough competition just as Zheng Binghui had warned me in Ma'anshan. Luckily, I did not hear anyone who was going to play the same piece that I was going to do.

When it was my turn, I delivered my *Zigeunerweisen* as well as I could manage. Mr Xu, the Music Director showed no expression on his face. I could tell that he was not impressed. I walked out the audition room. Zheng Ni was waiting for me outside.

"Well done. I heard you playing. It sounded good," Zheng Ni tried to say something nice and positive.

"I'm not so sure about this. Mr Xu wasn't very impressed," I replied.

"We'll see... Dingding cares about you very much," she suddenly changed the subject.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"She has been talking about you all the time. I think that she is deeply in love with you. You should know that," Zheng Ni spoke boldly and she continued. "She thinks that you are in love with her too."

"Really?"

Zheng Ni paused a little and said, "She showed me some of the letters that you've written to her. To my eyes, they were quite repetitive, but she can't see them in the same way. Although your relationship is not my business, I just think that ... it should be fair. If you don't love her, you should let her know... I hope you don't mind me being so direct."

"No, not at all..." But I was actually quite shocked by her criticism. Then I thought that she had summoned up her courage to say this to me, it must be important or something that I could not see.

Dingding took me to the other places for auditions. Actually, the entire audition trip was quite humiliating until I went to the Navy Political Department Song and Dance Troupe. First, the father of the deputy leader of the symphony orchestra was the teacher of Zhao Yixuan, my colleague, the violinist, the "friendly Paganini" player in the Ma'anshan PAG. Therefore, we

had some common language to share. He was also a violin repairer too and, he helped me to fix the rattling noise of my E string. When I was practising in home of the music director, someone came in and asked who was playing the wonderful music. I was encouraged and the conductor of the orchestra was friendly too, unlike the one in the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe. After the audition, Dingding told me that she had told the conductor that who her father was. I assume that after the previous humiliating auditions, Dingding must have realised that she had to do something to “help”.

Dingding and I went back home immediately after the audition. As I had to catch a train, the following day and I had no mood for sightseen in the afternoon. However, that evening I took some members of her family out for a meal in the New Overseas Chinese Hotel to thank the family for their hospitality.

“I think you did well this time and the chance of getting into the navy orchestra is very high,” Dingding said it with confidence.

“How come you are so sure about this one?” I asked.

“I can tell,” she smiled. “I’ll make it happen, don’t you worry.”

The following day, before leaving for Ma’anshan, Dingding’s mother cooked me an early lunch: two fried eggs with noodles. I felt rather awkward to be at Dingding’s home, as everyone in the family liked Dingding’s boyfriend very much and both families had been socialising a lot. I felt that my sudden appearance in Beijing must have caused a great deal of anxiety for everyone. I was sure that Dingding’s mother (my great-aunt) must be relieved to know that I was leaving then.