

Chapter Twelve

A shelter in the storm 风暴巧遇避难亭 (summer 1967)

After my family had become a target of the Revolution, we felt humiliated. I was ashamed of being born into a family that was an enemy of the Cultural Revolution. Anyway, who would like to be a loser in the world? I decided to find my own way to join the Red Guards.

Mother was an accountant for four primary schools, which were run by the local neighbourhood committee 居民委员会. Wang Jixiu 王积秀 was a teacher in one of those four schools. Wang's husband, Xu Chengjie 许承杰, was a PE teacher at a nearby state primary school. By the way, at that time, a state school in China was much more superior than the ones that were run by the neighbourhood committees. When the Cultural Revolution started, I did not know how, but Xu Chengjie got involved in the Red Guards of Beijing Northeast District. He began to organise the Red Guard groups for the local kids in our area. As he was willing to accept me as a member, I was very happy. As long as I could have a red armband with the three yellow characters of Red Guard written on it, and as long as I could use the armband to wipe off my family shame, I did not care if it belonged to Beijing or Shanghai. Besides, I used to be a member of Communist Young Pioneers and I felt that it was my duty to join a revolutionary organisation.

I was told that the tasks of my Red Guard team were to wave a red flag and to disseminate Mao's thoughts and ideas 毛泽东思想宣传队; to teach the public to sing revolutionary songs and to dance 跳忠字舞 on the street corners platforms, in order to show our loyalty to Chairman Mao, our great leader. The function of the street corner platforms somehow reminded me of the amphitheatres in ancient Roman time, which were used for condemning enemies and entertaining citizens. Although we did not have the grand performances of loins eating Capitalist Roaders, anyway, getting the public involved in the Struggle Meetings we certainly had to stir up public's excitement. We were asked to arouse people's mind and to prepare for the climax of the day, which was the Struggle Meeting against capitalists and the Capitalist Roaders on the street platforms.

The loud speakers in the streets were constantly pushing out revolutionary songs.

“Sailing on the great ocean relies on the helmsman,
Just like many living creatures relying on the light of the sun.

Rain and dew urge crops to grow,
Just like the revolution that need the guidance of Mao Zedong's thoughts.
Fish needs water, flowers need sun,
Just like the revolutionary masses need the leadership of the Communist Party.
Mao Zedong's ideology is a never-setting sun.”¹

We were occasionally asked to make speeches criticising China's Capitalist Roaders, if the local work places could not be bothered with providing their Capitalist Roaders for the struggle meetings on the street platforms. One day I was given a task to get onto a platform in front of a crowd to criticise the writings of Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 who was the President of China before the Cultural Revolution. (Later he became the enemy of the Chinese Communist Party and was labelled as China's Khrushchev and a Revisionist.) Liu was the foremost Capitalist Roader in China. I had never studied any of his speeches or written works, and had no idea of his political views. Looking through the titles of his essays and books, something caught my eye. “Good Communist 论共产党员的修养 (lit. How to accomplish oneself as a member of Chinese Communist Party)” I never read the book and could not even work out the meaning of the book title. After reading the first few sentences of the book, I misread and misunderstood the Chinese word of “accomplishment and self-cultivation” for “recuperation”. I thought that Liu only talked about recuperation and enjoyment in life, but did not have the spirit of conscientiousness. Of course, only the bourgeoisie would put enjoyment and comfort before anything else, therefore Liu Shaoqi must be a capitalist agent within the Chinese Communist Party. No wonder he was bad for the Chinese Communist Party and he deserved to be criticised by Chinese people. As a result, I decided to criticise Liu's materialistic view of the world and his pursuing enjoyment in life. As I could not even understand the book myself, I did not think that any of my audience understood what I was talking about. Nevertheless, as I had blamed everything on Liu and aroused public's hatred of him, my nonsense speech was well received. After my speech, the loudspeakers started to deliver another “loyalty songs”,

¹大海航行靠舵手，万物成长靠太阳
雨露促长禾苗壮，干革命靠的是毛泽东思想
鱼儿离不开水，花儿离不开阳
革命群众离不开共产党
毛泽东思想是不落的太阳

Dear Chairman Mao, you are the Red Sun in our hearts
Dear Chairman Mao, you are the Red Sun in our hearts
There is so much true feeling that we want to tell you
There is so many passionate songs that we want to sing to you
Ten million hearts are beating in excitement
Ten million smiling faces greet the Red Sun
We sincerely hope that your years of life²

When coming to the back stage I saw Mr Xu was in his green army uniform, conscientiously practising his dancing movements in front of a mirror for the performance of “*The Red Guards from Grasslands Met Chairman Mao 草原上的红卫兵见到了毛主席*”³, one of the “loyalty songs”. I nearly laughed out aloud and I could tell that he had never danced, as his movements were as stiff as a puppet. Now I come to think of it, his movements were very much like Michael Jackson’s. Besides, I thought that he was too old to dance with the kids in public.

“Mr Xu, I didn’t know that you were going to dance on the stage as well.”

He took my comment as a criticism and defended himself immediately. “There is no age difference when showing one’s loyalty to Chairman Mao. You should learn to dance too.”

“Yes, indeed.” I replied but thought that I would prefer to stick to playing my mouth organs in the band. Dancing on the stage would be a terrible embarrassment for me.

²敬爱的毛主席, 我们心中的红太阳
敬爱的毛主席, 我们心中的红太阳
我们有多少贴心的话儿要对您讲
我们有多少热情的歌儿要给您唱
千万颗红心在激烈地跳动
千万张笑脸迎着红太阳
我们衷心祝愿您老人家万寿无疆

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqadFlyl_A8

As our performance took place in the area of Shanghai Number Five Logistic Unit 上海运输五场, which was about five a minute-walk from my flat, the team asked me to keep the red flag for the night. I was so happy. I went home and erected the Red Guard flag in the veranda so that everyone in the street could see that I was a Red Guard too. As if, the flag would wipe off the shame of the family. I wanted to show the people in my streets that I was a victor of the Cultural Revolution too. However, my parents were more worried about bringing back the flag.

After joining Red Guard, fights broke out more frequently. This time the fights were no longer over some trivial processions such as materials for printing propaganda leaflets, but the fights were more serious and politically driven. The targets of the Revolution had been switched to those who were in the management authorities. Some of the Loyalists 保皇派 of the old authorities, tried their best to protect their bosses, the local Capitalist Roaders, when they were attacked by the Rebels 造反派. Those fights were getting increasingly nastier. Sometimes the weapons that were used in fighting were more serious than knives and iron bars. As some people had the access to the old military firearms that were kept by the militia of the work units, the fights could involve the use of guns, explosives and acid, which caused serious casualties. Later this type of the violent had to be resolved by the People's Liberation Army (the PLA).

Father and Mother, of course were more cautious and were not happy with my "revolutionary" activities. They thought that it was too dangerous to get involved in such chaotic political storm. Anything could happen to anyone at any time. They thought that I should have kept in a low profile, despite of my enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution. As an old Chinese proverb would say, "Shoot the bird that takes the lead" 枪打出头鸟 which implied that the outstanding usually withstood the worst of attack. My parents reckoned that it was wrong that I joined the Red Guard and it was wrong that I attracted attention by making speeches in public meetings. However, they could not express their views directly to their teenage son, as this kind of actions firstly could be regarded as a "counter-revolutionary" and secondly it might also trigger my rebelling feeling towards them. They just told me that they did not like Mr Xu's personalities and they thought that I should not get too close to him. They even suspected him of being a child molester.

Father's situation in his work place was getting worse and he had to report to his work unit of his presence on the daily base because of the possible criticisms that he might receive from the local Red Guard or the Workers Rebel Team. Father had to prepare himself to be dragged onto the platforms in the street for the public criticism. He certainly did not want to his children to witness such ugly scenes. My parents had to find a way to get me out of my involvement in the Red Guard activities fast, before it was too late. They knew that if they both were locked up by the Red Guards and could no longer protect us, Shanghai could be a very dangerous place for children who were not experienced enough to fend themselves.

In the summer of 1967, Mother asked Aunt Yang, an old colleague of her for help. Aunt Yang was from a working class family background, a member of Chinese Communist Party and she was from the same region as our family in Ningbo. Aunt Yang suggested that her brother, a Korean War veteran should take the three older children: my sisters and me to my great-aunt Sun Caifeng, 孙彩凤's home in Xiaogang Zhenghai Ningbo 宁波镇海小港. We should stay with my great-aunt for a little while until the situation in Shanghai calmed down. At that time Gujing, my brother was too young to leave home and he needed to be with Mother.

The journey from Shanghai to Ningbo was an overnight voyage on the East China Sea. We waved goodbye to Mother and Gujing, who were anxiously standing on the dock.

The ship left the dock in the late afternoon. That journey was like a pilgrimage to my grandfather who had made the same trip in countless times when he was a boy, a young man and later an older man. Linlin, Duoduo and I were so excited, because it was our first time to go to our hometown in Ningbo and, it was our first time to be on a ship too. We walked up and down the decks and nosed around. Finally, we reached the back deck of the ship. Standing together, watching the hazy sun going down behind the buildings of Shanghai city and imagining grandfather working on ships as a cabin manager drinking black coffee and eating western style meals... Gradually the city and the civilisations were swallowed up by the vast yellow water. Above the horizon the only visible thing was the dark grey sky with a blanket of menacing black clouds. As the ship was approaching to the open sea, it gathered wind and chill. We went inside to look for our seats and to prepare for a nightlong choppy voyage. As we were much poorer, my parents could only afford three fifth-class children's tickets. Our seats, or I should say our space, was a strip of a metre wide floor area below the lower-deck, in a dimly lit open-plan cabin with about over a hundred other passengers.

After a night on the rocking sea, we arrived in the sunny and cheerful looking port of Ningbo city in the following morning. We were fetched by Aunty Asan 阿三 who took us to our great-aunt's house in Xiaogang 小港.

The life there was very normal, like the life that I had known before the Cultural Revolution. First, there were no Red Guards walking about, no slogans on the walls and there was not even a squeak of revolutionary songs. Secondly, people were polite. They greeted and chatted when they bumped into each other.

Under the scorching sun, farmers in straw hats were carrying loads with flexible bamboo poles and trotting along on the narrow paths between the paddy fields. Occasionally a welcoming gentle breeze would brush through the top of green rice crops making beautiful waves. In the distance there were green-blue hills weaved into each other to form different shapes. Aunty Asan pointed at one group of the hills and said. "Look, these are Eagle Hills."

"Eagles? Do you have eagles here?" Linlin asked.

"Yes, but we call them Eagle Hills, because the shape of hills looks like an eagle..."

"Can you see?" Aunty Asan bended down to Linlin's level and pointed into the distance. "The middle part of the hill looks like the eagle's head and body..." Then she pointed the lower hills on both sides of 'eagle's body' and said. "These hills are like the wings of the eagle. Look, as if the eagle stretches out its giant wings."

"Yes, indeed, it does look like a flying eagle." Duoduo was very excited.

The hills in the distance looked like a giant blue eagle gliding away over the sea of green paddy-fields. Suddenly the countryside inspired me, as if there were many mysteries that had been buried inside these hills and were waiting for me to discover.

Great-aunt lived in one of a large traditional courtyard house, which was shared by four families. Her place was located on the first set of rooms on the right when walking through the main entrance to the courtyard. Her living area consisted of a big sitting-dining room, two bedrooms: one large, one small and a kitchen. Our three siblings shared the big bedroom, while great-aunt used the small one at the back. Comparing with the size of the houses, the courtyard was rather small. It was dominated by four gigantic water vats. Each one had a pipe that stretched down from the eaves of the roofs. They were the drinking water supply for the

four families in the compound. There were over a dozen people, who lived in the other three neighbouring families.

Looking out the Chinese style window of the large bedroom, on the right lived a couple in their thirties: Mr Wo 沃, the headmaster of the local secondary school. He was a graduate of Zhejiang University. His wife was a primary school teacher. As Mr Wo's school was closed for the summer (or it was closed, because of the Revolution), he was at home all the time when we were there. Mr Wo was a knowledgeable and impressive teacher. My first impression of him was serious, solemn and rarely smiled. Later I found that he was kind, calm and humble.

Mr Wo sometime took me out for hill walks. I told him what I had seen and experienced in Shanghai. He listened carefully. At beginning, he was cautious when he made his comments about the Cultural Revolution, but he was not very judgmental about my actions. He said that young people were easily influenced by their surroundings and sometime they might make a wrong decision because of the confusion or misinterpretation of a situation.

I had told him the story of my father. I said that Father should have joined the Communist Party as soon as he came back to China. I told Mr Wo "If he had done so, we wouldn't have become the target of the Revolution."

"I disagree. I think what your father did was right," Mr Ao suddenly responded.

"Your father likes the communist ideology and wants to use his knowledge to help China. It doesn't mean that he must join the Chinese Communist Party." Mr Wo continued calmly, "I'm a member of Chinese Communist Party, but it doesn't mean that I won't be a target of the Cultural Revolution..." He paused a little, "When we are in a confused situation, we should always be guided by our moral awareness."

I was not sure if he was talking about my father or me, so I asked, "In this case, do you think that MY desire of joining the Red Guard was a wrong decision?"

"I'm not saying that your decision was wrong, but you might have been influenced by a strong political trend and you might have felt the urge to belong to that political power. Many youngsters often interpret the situation in a more simplistic way." He paused a little and continued to explain, "When we are in a difficult situation, in order to survive, we often prepare to accept some actions that we would not normally approve of."

“I thought the violent actions of the Red Guards were wrong right at the beginning, but the certainty of their actions and their determination of making a better world for people have convinced me that they must be right.” I tried hard to think back the day when I first encountered the Red Guards in our streets on my way home from school.

“Yes, indeed.” Mr Wo commented, “If we are not vigilant, we might follow the others without thinking. If an action that is going against your moral awareness and you can’t stop it, at least you can do is to avoid taking part in it.” He saw that I was a little upset and said “Of course, it’s easy for me to say. Anyway, it would be hard for us all to think objectively at the present situation.” He continued, “You thought that it was your duty to make the world a better place... So that was a good intention,” he thought for a little while and carried on, “In the past, many people also had good intentions to make the world a better place and indeed many good deeds were done. Now we can’t look back and just say that everything from the past was bad.” He suggested that I should judge historical people and events based on the circumstances at the time, instead of taking them out of the context. I thought that Mr Wo was very brave to argue like that. It seemed that he did not bow to the main political stream at that time. Then I also realised that he must have trusted me enough to share his views about the Cultural Revolution.

That summer Mr Wo also taught me to read music and to play the violin. He lent me his own violin for me to practise.

Occasionally he would buy a duck from the farm of the local People’s Commune to share it with my sisters and me. My great-aunt was a strict vegan and she did not eat with us. Mr Wo made me feel not so guilty when enjoying life moderately. Consequently, he helped me to extend my ability to appreciate the world much more. Mr Wo said that if one just complained about life without doing anything to improve it, then it could be harmful to one’s soul. His attitude toward life was to accept what life offered him and to make a good use of it, but he did not raise unrealistic expectations. Mr Wo told me that I should never lose the sight of humanities, especially in a difficult and highly charged situation like then. Gradually I began to think that apart from fighting for the baggies of Communist Young Pioneer and the armbands of the Red Guard, there were plenty more aspects in life that were worth exploring.

Mr Wo taught me the names of the local plants, wild berries and the characteristics of the local wildlife. Sometime he took me to the beaches to collect shellfishes for dinners. I was fascinated by and curious about many species of the wildlife in the local area. Wall geckos

would protect their life by sacrificing their tail in a life-threatening situation. A type of local amphibious black fish 黑鱼 (mudskipper), about ten centimetres long with two tiny fin-legs, could survive on the muddy beach and in the sea. Some mud sea snails 黄泥螺 with semi-transparent soft-shell, which lived in the muddy beaches. I was also taught how to identify a poisonous snake from a non-poisonous one... The animal surviving skills in many ways were similar to ours. In order to survive, they developed the skills according to the environment that they lived in. I should develop the skills to think and to analyse my own surroundings properly; or I would be easily fooled or misled by some superficial attractions.

Asi 阿四, a boy next door, who was the same age as I was. As I taught him to swim in the river where the local people washed their clothes, in return he taught me and my sisters the skills to look for the small pale-pink, thin-shell clams 海瓜子 in the muddy beaches and to catch the amphibious mudskippers that lived in the muddy holes by the sea. After spending later afternoons on the beach we would often come home with a mug full of shell fish each for our supper. It was so delicious when great-aunt fried them in omelette for us.

Occasionally, early in the morning, great-aunt would take us to the market. Before starting her daily food shopping, she would treat us breakfast in one of the market restaurants. She would order some savoury light-donut sticks 油条 that had just been lifted out of the boiling oil and the delicious soybean curd soup with seaweed and shrimps 紫菜虾米豆腐花.

The day we arrived, Aunt Asan promised us that she would take us to visit great-aunt's sister, who lived just under the Eagle Hills. It was a place full of wildlife. We were told that some unwelcome animals often visited the houses in the night, such as yellow weasels and foxes from the forest hills. The wild animals stole chickens and eggs from the village and they were almost unstoppable. On our way back in the evening we had to use a stick to beat the path in front to frighten off the snakes that might be lying on the warm path in the dark.

When I came back to great-aunt's house, I was excited. I told Mr Wo about the yellow weasels and foxes. He smiled a little and brought out a book from his bookshelves. It was one of the *Liaozhai collections* 聊斋. *Liaozhai* was a well-known Qing Dynasty classical novel, which I was never allowed to read. It was banned by Father first and later it was banned by the Cultural Revolution. I was so surprised when Mr Wo handed over the book and I was also surprised that he did not get rid of it when the Cultural Revolution started. I was very sure that Father destroyed his copy on that "recycling day".

“Maybe you are old enough to appreciate this.” He hesitated a little.

“Although the author portrays the cunningness of foxes that can manipulate their victims by using their skills of seduction, he tells the stories in a metaphorical way. Many people believe that the book is actually talking about some bad elements in human nature and in our society that can deceive us.”

“Yes, they are beautiful and interesting...” He flipped through the book. I was not very sure if he was referring the beauty to the stories in the book or to the foxes and weasels.

Mr Wo continued, “People are fascinated by their beauty and human-like cleverness...Because of that fascination, the author humanised the foxes in a rather negative way...” He turned more pages. “There are some detailed descriptions of the animal’s cunning behaviours and they can turn themselves into beautiful and attractive women to cheat young scholars 书生...” He looked at me and continued, “You might be able to understand the intentions of the author. For example, nowadays many young students who are attracted by some ideas and they thought that they had found the truth of life. But they don’t think through the consequences of their actions...” He finally handed over the book to me before finishing his sentence.

In the evenings, all the neighbours would come out of their houses, carrying stools to sit in the nearby threshing ground under the flickering stars against the dark blue sky. Mr Wo was a typical teacher, he would make use of the opportunity to explain to my sisters and me the history of the Chinese Qixi Festival which was a Chinese version of Valentine’s Day. Pointing at the stars in the sky, Mr Wo told us the ancient romanticised folk stories of Niulang and Zhinü 牛郎织女. How the stories connected to some of the brightest stars, Vega, Altair and the Milky Way in the night sky.

A bunch of dried herbs would be lit, lying on the ground and glowing in the dark。 It looked like a giant python puffing out a column of white smoke to chase away mosquitoes. The neighbours would share jokes, stories and riddles under the cool evening breeze. The most popular jokes were about some silly and stupid son-in-laws 赘婿 or the carefulness and meanness of people in Ningbo. One of the stories went like this. There was a stupid son-in-law, who had been asked to enter a poetry competition, as he was the only man in the family. His mother-in-law tried hard to coach him after supper and asked him to repeat a poem, sentence by sentence after her.

“The sun rises from the east, painted the dark sky red.”

“The sun rises from the east, painted the dark sky bright red.” The son-in-law shouted earnestly after his mother-in-law with his loudest voice. “Shush.... The great-uncle next door can hear you practising,” she whispered. “Shush.... The great-uncle next door can hear you,” the son-in-law repeated every word loudly without hesitation. “You’re a fucking stupid idiot, aren’t you? Get lost!” It really made his mother-in-law so angry that she shouted at him and walked away. She completely lost hope of her son-in-law winning the competition and went to bed instead. However, the son-in-law tried hard to remember every word that his mother-in-law had taught him. He went to the competition with great confidence. When it was his turn to recite his poem, he proudly stood up spoke with his loudest ringing voice.

“The sun rises from the east, painted the dark sky bright red.” Nobody had expected him to produce such a poetic line. The audience were so surprise by his grand opening of his poem and applauded with great enthusiasm. Everyone was anxiously waiting for his next line.

“Shush.... The great-uncle next door can hear you.” The audience thought that he was telling them to be quiet. No one talked and the auditorium was dead silent.

“You’re a fucking stupid idiot, aren’t you? Get lost!” The son-in-law spoke with passion and he shocked his audience.

The threshing ground was often covered by the sound of laughter. One of the neighbours nicknamed “Firewood” 柴样, who was a single mother of five boys. I was told that every boy had a different father. Firewood was the one who would always tell sex related jokes and riddles every night. She never had enough of it.

Even today, I can remember the pleasantly cool evening air with the smell of the smoke accompanied by the sound of laughter.

Great-aunt was the widow of my grandmother Zhang Manjia’s brother. Her husband died of typhoid fever just a few months into their married life. She thought that her sad life was a punishment for something bad that she did in her previous life. In order to make her next life better she accepted to live through widowhood all her life. She became a Buddhist and a strict vegan. In old China, it would be impossible for a bound-feet woman to survive without a husband. Father took the responsibility for her living expenses and supported her by sending

her money every month. After Mother gave birth to Gujing, great-aunt came to Shanghai to look after us for a while.

Aunty Asan was great-aunt's niece who lived in a nearby village and would come to help great-aunt with some of the housework. Aunty Asan loved Duoduo most. Once she said to Duoduo. "I wish I'll be lucky enough to have a daughter-in-law as clever and as beautiful as you are." Duoduo had no idea what daughter-in-law meant. When we paid Aunty Asan a visit at her home, as soon as Duoduo saw her, Duoduo rushed up to Aunty Asan with her both arms wide open and shouted. "Aunty Asan, come on, give your daughter-in-law a hug." Aunty Asan was so happy and held Duoduo tight. Everyone could not stop laughing, but poor Meihua 梅华, Aunty Asan's son, his face went bright red. Meihua was an only strong young man in the house, who did all the heavy chores such as carrying water and grain for his relations. He often brought us some melons when we were staying with my great-aunt. These melons were unique in that area. They looked like a cross between cucumber and melon. They were not very sweet, yet full of juice with a much firmer and crispier flesh. They were wonderful fruits to quench one's thirst and to cool down the body temperature in a hot summer day.

A month later Mother came with Gujing to stay for a few days with us. After that, she took my sisters and Gujing back to Shanghai, but I stayed on for two more weeks.