

Chapter Six

Summer Time 共产理念的幻想(1960-)

After the end-of-year examination, Shanghai primary schools and the Children's Palaces often jointly arranged some activities for some members of the Young Pioneers. I can still vividly remember a particularly event that took place in the year after joining the Young Pioneers.

When I walked into the Shanghai Municipal Children's Palace, I felt as if I was in the heaven. The Palace occupied a large park and an extremely grand-looking western-style manor house¹. It offered us a variety of activities that any children would hope for.



It was in the early summer of my primary year five. I went there with a group of the Young Pioneers from school to see the projects that other Young Pioneers in Shanghai had been working on. I was deeply moved to the extent that I was nearly in tears. We were told that all the exhibits were made by schoolchildren of my age. The most

¹ "Marble Hall". It was the Kadoorie family's mansion in Shanghai

impressive things were the remote-controlled robots that could talk and walk. Looking at these clever machines, Flat Head brother's fancy gadgets suddenly became rather insignificant. When I was listening to the music from outside the concert hall, I thought it was coming from a radio, but when I walked into the grand hall, I saw the Young Pioneer Symphony Orchestra and Chorus were rehearsing. It immediately made my school band sound rather feeble. The top standard oil paintings, watercolours and all sorts of pictures and artworks were carefully displayed along the Long Gallery. I was told that those were all produced by primary school children. The paintings depicted vivid life of young Chinese, unlike the lugubrious poster of a kneeling Jesus that I saw in Victoria's sitting room. The Palace grounds even had their own miniature transport system with traffic lights. It was managed by the Young Pioneer traffic police officers. The bikes there were the right sizes for children, unlike Flat Head brother's bike that I damaged a few months before.

At lunch, Mr Zhang, our school supervisor for the Young Pioneer Brigade was eating with us at the same table.

"Can we take part in the activities?" I asked him.

"Of course, all the Young Pioneers will have the same opportunity to learn anything that the Palace offers."

"Really? What should WE do here?" I asked. The supervisor looked at our group and said,

"You know, you are the bosses of the Palace. We, the adults are here to assist you to achieve what you want to achieve. This is your world and you are in charge here."

"Our world, a world without teachers and parents bossing us around? It must be a wonderful world", I thought.

Two weeks later I was fortunate enough to be selected to take part in the Palace camp activities. On the first day, I was spoiled with choices: from sports, military training, science and technology, to art and music.

From my very early age, I was always given good quality wooden bricks, books, and many different types of toy cars, but I was never allowed to have toy guns at home. Because of that, I was fascinated by weaponry. As the Palace offered me an opportunity to receive a real military training, I delightedly accepted it.

There were only six of us who signed up for the training. Our trainer was a fully equipped PLA² soldier. I was extremely excited when I saw his Russian-style semi-automatic rifle with the bayonet folded in.

“My name is Li Fenglin, and I’m a platoon leader in the PLA. I’ll be your instructor for the training over the next few days. I’ll teach you how to look after your weapons and how to use them like a real soldier.” Mr Li sat us down on the ground and talked to us in a very friendly manner.

“But we don’t have a gun like yours...” one of us said.

“Don’t worry, you will have one.”

“Will it be like the one that you’ve got?”

“It depends.”

“Do you mean it could be better than yours?” another asked.

“Will we learn everything, including shooting?” I was keen to know.

² PLA: People’s Liberation Army, the Chinese Communist Army

“Of course, but the most important thing for being a soldier is that you must learn to obey orders. Do you all agree?”

“Yes,” everyone said loudly together.

He asked us to stand up in a line. Pointing at a pile of wood planks and bamboo, he said in a commanding tone of voice, “You are all soldiers now. Your first task is to make your own rifles with the materials over there.” We followed the direction that his finger was pointing. We saw materials and some tools.

“Oh, no, I want to have a real gun,” one of us shouted.

“Don’t you remember what you have just agreed? You **MUST** obey my orders,” he continued. “Here are your instructions. You only have it until 6 o’clock this evening to produce your best and strongest rifles for the training. Don’t forget your weapons will be your loyal friends in a battle field; so you have to do your best to look after them. We’ll gather here again with your new rifles to start the training at eight a.m. tomorrow.”

He asked me to be responsible for the team. I had to make sure that everyone in the team was OK at every stage of the training.

My choice of weapon was a Second World War type 38 rifle, as it looked simple and solid. I had read many books, which described this type of weapon that was used by the Japanese army in World War II. I expected that we might have to use my rifle to practice bayonet fighting. I was right about that, as we did use our “weapons” to practise the techniques of the bayonet drill. Over the training session, we also practised grenade throwing with dummy grenades and target shooting with small-bore rifles in a target practice range. Mr Li was a patient instructor. He explained how a bullet travelled from the barrel of a gun to a target and how one should aim differently according to the distance of the target, if a weapon did not have a distance setting on the aiming mechanism.

Apart from doing “soldier things”, Mr Li told us the stories of Lei Feng 雷锋, a normal PLA driver who died in 1962. Lei Feng always wanted to help others. He put people’s needs before his own. Lei Feng kept a diary in which, he said that we the individuals were just like the nuts and bolts of a huge machine. Without nuts and bolts a strong machine would simply fall apart. An individual looked rather insignificant. However, he was one of those individuals who held our country together. Lei Feng wanted to be an imperishable cog in the huge machine of our socialist country. Mr Li told us that a good soldier should know how to fight in battles and should also be able to identify good and bad. He told us that soldiers had two types of weapons; one was the weapon in our hands and the other was in our heads. In order to fight well, we needed both.

A week of activities went by quickly. The summer camp ended with a fancy-dress dance next to a huge bonfire. We were asked to make our own outfit for the evening event. The activities were jolly, wonderful and enjoyable. It caught children’s imaginations. I felt that we were able to create a better country and a better world for the future and I believed that when we became adults, our dream of a communist society would not be too far away.

My first experience of the activities in the Municipal Children’s Palace made me understand the roles of the Young Pioneers. I felt proud to be a member, but what I wanted to achieve was not just for my own benefits. Somehow, it made me appreciate the greatness of socialism and I made me feel that I was willing to take the responsibility for my country. Being a member of the Young Pioneers was no longer a matter of having a competition between classmates, but it was about political ideologies and it was about the devotion and loyalty to my country. I felt that only under such a great system, individuals would become a meaningful being. We, the people of new China must work hard for achieving a communist society, just like the Anthem of the Yong Pioneers, which was performed by a group of individual musicians of the Palace Symphony Orchestra. I suddenly felt that the word “love” in “...*love our country and love our people*...” carried much more meaning and weight.

Not until much later, I discovered that all the exhibits in the Municipal Children's Palace were selected from the works that were created by the most talented children in Shanghai and they were not the outcome of the projects that were carried out by normal school children. The music that I heard was played by the orchestra of the Junior Department of Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The Chinese authorities just used those images and activities to stimulate young people's mind and to motivate us for a political reason.

When the school summer holiday started, Mother often sent me to stay with my maternal grandmother for a few days. I loved visiting my grandmother. She was the only grandparent who I could visit, as Father's parents lived in Hong Kong. At that time, Hong Kong was just like a remote foreign country, and one would have to apply for a special permit from a district police station to visit relatives in Hong Kong, but such a permit was rarely granted.

Grandmother lived in Cité Bourgogne 步高里, the west district of Shanghai, which was the French Concession before 1949. I always looked forward to the wonderful treats that I had in grandmother's home, but I was not so keen on spending too long there.



Grandmother's house was old, dark and frightening, packed with antique furniture. The black double front doors were permanently shut, and everyone had to use the back door as the main entrance to the house. The back door led into a dark and damp kitchen. In a gloomy corner of the kitchen there was a badly fitted tap with a black rubber tube attached to its end, "drip, drip, drip..." the dripping sound was there all the time.

I remember before the gas pipes were installed, there was a small old portable coal-burning stove that was used for the family daily cooking. Grandmother had a live-in helper. Her name was Zhang Ma who was in her early 50s. Zhang Ma was the one who had to light the stove outside the backdoor in the lane every early morning. I would never forget the image of her bending forward, frantically waving a half-burned, broken banana-leaf fan to squeeze as much oxygen as possible into the hole at the bottom of the stove in order to light the fire. The angry thick grey smoke gushed out from the top of the stove that made her tears streamed down on her cheeks. The combined smell of the smoke and the damp air of the kitchen created an unforgettable childhood memory of my grandmother's house.

The thing that I dreaded most in Grandmother's house was going to the lavatory. The toilets were barrel-shaped wooden tubs with the wooden lids that were carved with the patterns of beautiful flowers. But the strong smell of mature human waste in those tubs was simply unbearable. I felt that it was almost impossible to sit on it, let alone do my "business" on it. I often constipated after staying there for a few days, as I often tried to avoid going to the lavatory. No wonder Father would never even have a pee in grandmother's house. When he came to visit, he would rather go out in the rain to a public lavatory in the street.

The wooden lavatory tubs would be left outside the back door every night for a night soil collector to empty. Early morning before lighting the stove, Zhang Ma would collect a bucketful of clean water from that dripping tap, and would go out the back door to brush and rinse the wooden tubs with a long-handle hard bamboo brush by the gutter. I was often woken up by the rhythmic sound of brushing the tubs in the morning.

However, Grandmother's high-ceilinged dining room were spacious. It was full of old furniture: a unit shelves for displaying antique porcelain, a huge glass cabinet, a hard wood Baxian table 八仙桌 and eight imposing dark wood chairs with black and white marble pieces on their backs. The layout of the room was formal, solemn, harsh and unapproachable. I often felt lost and exposed when sitting in one of those chairs. In the

summer, at least, they were nice and cool. In the winter, Grandmother had some thin cotton mats on them, so that they were slightly more comfortable to be sat on.

Grandmother knew that I liked eating watermelon in the hot weather and she believed that eating a large quantity of watermelon in the mid-summer was good for me. Therefore, before my arrival she would ask Zhang Ma to get hold of a big variety of watermelons and would store them under the glass cabinet in the dining room to keep them cool. I was always looking forward to having different types of watermelons in Grandmother's place. Some of them had orange-coloured flesh and some were red or yellow with different fragrances. It was so satisfactory just by watching Zhang Ma cutting a watermelon after a sticky hot summer lunch. When the tip of a sharp knife was gently pushed into the skin of a watermelon, it made a cracking sound and the melon would burst into two halves. A delicious refreshing fragrant would rush out and occupied the space of the whole dining room. I could immediately anticipate the sweet and cool taste of the watermelon flesh.

Grandmother decided that whenever we had watermelon, one half (of course, the small half) would always be reserved for me and the other half would be shared out by the rest of the family. The strange thing was that I did not feel guilty about it, and the other members of the family did not feel jealous either. We all accepted that it was part of life: it should be like that, as Grandmother had said so.

Summer in Shanghai was very hot. The temperature could easily reach 40°C. Even when standing in front of an electric fan, one would still be sweating away, as the wind that blew onto my face was hot and humid air. Because of that, my cousin Lin Chengde 林成德, who was seven years older than me, would often take me to a grand cinema in the afternoon to cool ourselves down. In those days, the only air-conditioned public places were the top rank cinemas and theatres. I watched many films with him including those that one had to wear special 3D glasses. The problem with watching those films was that I had to hold up the big spectacles with my hand, or they would simply fall off from my nose.

I still remember some of the films that I watched with my cousin, such as *The Three Musketeers*, *The Kite* and many Chinese comedies films. After eating an ice cream and watching a film in an air-conditioned cinema, I often felt cold and was ready for the hot air outside. When coming out the cold cinema to see the evening twilight feeling comfortably warm.

After dinner everyone would take a stool to sit in the lane outside the back door to catch the cool evening breath before going to bed. Grandmother's house became spookier in the dark. My cousins, uncle and aunt told me many stories about haunted houses, including Grandmother's. The most vivid story was the one that was told by my uncle Lin Shengqing 林圣清.

When he was in his early twenties, the family members went away to attend a funeral in Huangzhou 杭州, which was about four hours away of train ride. He somehow had to stay behind on his own. The following morning Uncle was woken by a noise next to his bedroom. He thought it was a burglar. As a result, He got up and grabbed a stick. He went out of the room, and saw a figure of a young woman with a pigtail, rushing down the stairs. He followed her. She ran very fast and disappeared into the room next to the bottom of the stairs. Uncle went down after her. Only when he reached that room did he realise that its door was padlocked from outside: no one could possibly get in there. Uncle said, that was the actual moment the burial took place in Hangzhou.

Aunt Lin Shengyuan 林圣元 was a primary school teacher. She told me that one of her pupils has a granny who was a street-peddler, selling freshly-cooked pancakes. One day she went out and did not return. A week later her body was discovered by her granddaughter. The old woman had been murdered and dumped behind a metal fence. Her face was somehow painted with red paint.

Those horror stories were told in the late evenings just before going to bed. I often dreaded to go into the house on my own and I always needed someone to go in with me. Grandmother would tell Uncle and Aunt off for upsetting me with such horrible stories.

She reassured me that there were no ghosts in the world and that I should not be afraid of them.



Another very strange thing that puzzled me a lot in Grandmother's was that my cousins called Grandmother 'grandfather'.

³ The one who sat in the middle was my grandmother



4

⁴ This sitting room was similar to Grandmother's, but her sitting room was bigger and grander looking.