

Chinese Dreams

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Introduction

I can't remember the first time I heard about The Cultural Revolution. It must have been much earlier than the first time I read about it in my middle school history book. The definition went something like this, "The Cultural Revolution was started by Mao Zedong's mistake and then used by the anti-revolutionary group, which led to a ten-year disaster for China".

I had never considered my grandmother to be part of history, since I thought only important leaders and groups carried historical events. My grandmother's narrative started and ended with no events of obvious historical importance. Her stories about The Cultural Revolution didn't start with the official beginning date of 1966, instead, it was "one day after the fall harvest."

"We were just back from the threshing ground from a long day threshing.

Someone came to the house and told us to come back for a night meeting. I saw XXX

and several other people standing at the front of the threshing ground. They used to be the landlords before the Land Reform. The leaders of the village began to kick them to their knees and were yelling at them to kneel down. XXX was a diligent and honest good man. Later, people began to shout slogans and the leaders beat XXX. 'Down with the anti-revolutionaries!' people shouted."

This was not the history I had learned about The Cultural Revolution in my textbook. My grandmother's story didn't start in May 1966 with Mao's big character poster and there was no indication that the anti-revolutionaries took advantage of this. The discrepancies between the history I read in books and oral narratives I heard from my grandmother and others led me to look more into the history carried by ordinary people. They are not the people who start or end historical events, and the history in their oral narratives often doesn't have a beginning, middle and ending, and has not necessarily been hammered into shape the way official histories have been. The history in my grandmother's narrative permeated her life. It did not

have a definite shape.

The collection of stories that follows is based on interviews I conducted in the winter of 2016 with five young artists who graduated from Tsinghua University and China Central Academy of Fine Arts. I recorded the interviews with a SONY PXW-Z150 video camera and a Tascam recorder. Each of the interviews lasted between 1 hour and 40 minutes and 2 hours. I conducted the interviews in the interviewees' studios, work places and homes in Beijing (except Yuying's interview which was conducted at my place because his studio was under renovation), and I asked the interviewees to choose the settings that they felt were mostly representative of them and their lives.

In the summer of 2017, I went back to Beijing to do a second round of interviews. I interviewed the four graduates from Tsinghua University in order to give them an opportunity to elaborate on certain themes that had surfaced in the first round of interviews. Two of interviews took place in their work places and the other two

were in an art studio. Each of the second round of interviews ranges from 50 minutes to one hour long.

The first interviews are structured in chronological order. I asked basic questions about their life stories and about their creative works in an attempt to understand how each of them had conceived of his or her identity as an artist. The questions of the second set of the interviews delve deeper into individual relationships, family background or history, and some of the reasons for their life choices, as well as their reflections on their experiences.

The four interviewees are from four areas of China. They are 30 years old and were admitted to the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University in 2005 and graduated in 2009. The four interviewees' lives converged in the year they were admitted to the university and began to be educated as artists. Their life stories have much in common with stories of most Chinese young people who were born in the 1980s and admitted to colleges in the 2000s. They are unusual at the same time in

that they are fine arts students and were admitted to Tsinghua University, the best university in China. Their life stories reflect the Chinese education system in the 1990s and the 2000s, but also contain implicitly the legacy of an earlier time, especially the change that has taken place over the past 40 years during the period of Chinese history that followed the implementation of the Open and Reform Policy.

The history of Chinese education can be divided into several stages. The Chinese Imperial Examination was introduced around 600 A.D. and was used in all the federal dynasties as the main way of choosing government officials, right up until it was abolished in 1905. The major content of Imperial Examination, Confucianism, and writing with rigid rules, was challenged by the western culture in the two Opium Wars (1840-1842, 1856-1860), which resulted in the education system being reformed eventually to the modern education system. The College Entrance Exam became the most significant criterion in determining whether or not a student would be given higher education.

The College Entrance Exam was suspended in 1966 and then its use was resumed in 1977 after The Cultural Revolution. It is, especially for the young people from the countryside, a way of changing their fate. And it becomes the primary qualifier for students who come from an agricultural background to settle in the cities. The increased university enrollment began from 1999, giving more hope to young people who want to change their future. Some of the students possessed of special talents chose to become arts or sports students in order to avoid the fierce competition among all of the students who take the College Entrance Exam. They will take a special art exam to get certification in the spring and take the College Entrance Exam with other students in June. Students who pass the certification and pass the cutoff score set for the special exam students will be admitted as arts college students.

The stories of these five art students focus on their education experience and their careers and highlight the relationship between the education, art and Chinese

society in the post-Cultural Revolution era. They raise the question of the role played by the education system in Chinese society, as well as how art is related to different aspects of the history of modern China.

The four artists I interviewed were not exposed to specific historical events, for instance, The Cultural Revolution, the first College Entrance Exam administered in 1977, or The Tiananmen Square Movement. But they carried history closely related to these events and they represent how history can be found within an ordinary life.

When I decided to write my oral history interviews into stories, I did so based on the assumption that the readers would take the stories as “real”, in contrast to those created by the writers of fiction. However, as opposed to creating the “momentary reality” of literary works in the realist tradition, I hope that readers might be left with questions about the “reality” described in the oral history testimonies I recorded.

I was inspired by Samuel Beckett’s works, the way in which he raises profound

questions about the language itself, and the basic elements of theater, including traditional approach to plot, and dramatic conflict. Similarly, I did not set out to strengthen the fantasy of “reality” in the stories I wrote based on oral history interviews; instead, I wanted the reader to understand the retelling as representative of a subjective world created by the interviewees’ memory and the interviewer’s questions and interpretation.

This collection of stories is written from the third-person point of view and includes various scattered narratives that I have culled from the interviews. After meditating for a long time on the question of how these interviews might serve as the basis of my thesis, I decided to take a literary approach by retelling some of the stories contained within them. I wanted to take this approach in part because of my own background in the study of literature as a graduate student at China University of Geosciences in Beijing. My particular focus there was on modern English literature but I have a natural affinity for and a wide-ranging knowledge of literary

history. I am familiar with literary techniques and devices, including the use of multiple perspectives, used to present and represent reality as something deeper than the simple plot of the story being told.

I felt the stories I recorded presented a unique opportunity to raise deep philosophical questions about the nature of reality, a tendency often found in 20th century literature and not necessarily in the literature of oral history.

I experiment in some of the following stories with the use of multiple perspectives, a literary device found in some of the earliest examples of Chinese novels. For example, one of the Chinese classics of the 18th century, *A Dream in Red Mansions*, many of the major clues concerning the fates of the main characters and the plots of the novel are told from the point of views of various minor characters. It is almost like a scene in a film in which every detail described contributes to the sense of “reality” and “the meaning of reality” represented in the scene. I should mention that I also studied film at Art College of Shandong. Multiple-perspective is one of the

major devices used to present reality in cinematic narrative, which at the same time often questions the concepts of “reality” and “event”. While people in modern days are celebrating the “objective” view brought by the camera technique, the representing of reality has new meanings, which are far beyond “what happened” and “what had been recorded”. Like the classic Japanese film *Rashomon*, the more information is given by the multiple perspectives and detailed narratives, the further away they go from the “objective and only truth” they seem to be pursuing. The pursuit of the infinite unknown and the objective history independent from the carriers creates an illusion of reality. In this collection of stories, I question not only the reality of particular event told from different perspectives, but also the wholeness of a story in presenting the history and the border of a history event. Films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Crash* contain “independent” stories, and the “wholeness” of reality relies on the meaningful fragments and the interplay of different scenes. The stories in my capstone will center on the topics of education and art, meanwhile

raise questions about conventional narratives of historical events. For example, they raise questions about where an event really begins and ends.

In my thesis for my master degree of English Literature, I discussed how the real world is presented in children's literature and how the traditions of fairy tale are used in the literary creation. I use the similar devices to present the fuzzy or blurry boarder between reality, dream, and illusion in storytelling, and in those stories taken from oral history interviews, I pay homage to many of the classic tales like *Alice in the Wonderland*.

After several attempts, I found a voice that I felt worked for the retelling of each of these stories in this new context. The voice is ironic, with an occasional Kafkaesque undertone of absurdity; it also echoes traditional stories and forms, most notably for me, the fable.

Chapter One

Hometown

Shaoyong's maternal grandparents left their hometown at midnight. They walked northwestward for seven days and nights and arrived at a small village surrounded by mountains. Shaoyong's grandfather had taken very few things with him, the most important of which was a scale. He was a street vendor and the one-catty-and-sixteen-liang scale was everything he needed for his livelihood. The vendor had fallen in love with a girl from a noble family in his hometown, and the girl's parents were decidedly against their marriage. So, they eloped and headed in the same direction, where thousands of families travelled in the years of famine. The village they decided to settle in was called Seven Strands of Fields, which was a realistic description of the barren land.

Shaoyong's mother was born in this village with very few cultivatable fields. She was a farmer and her only hobby other than the day-to-day farm work and housework was opera. When she was younger, there were six loudspeakers hanging on a pole in the center of the village, which played famous selections from eight different opera in a continuous loop all day long. She listened to them whenever she was working in the field or at home. And in the evening after a day's work, people gathered under the pole to sing operas. Shaoyong's mother was the best actress in the village. Her passion for the operas didn't fade when her favorite ones were no longer the only officially advocated amusement, not even when all operas fell out of fashion in the age of rock and roll and pop music. She still sang the arias of the heroines while washing the family's clothes in a big iron basin. The heroine's tones and moods were perfectly performed in her voice, as if she were the brave and smart underground intelligencer moving among the enemies.

The only electric appliance in Shaoyong's family was a radio. Shaoyong's mother

listened to operas every night after a day's work. When the village first got electricity, Shaoyong was a high school student obsessed with scientific discovery. He made a dimmer for his first lamp using the mechanism for the radio and ruined the radio in the process.

Shaoyong's great grandfather on his father's side was a local landlord. His son, Shaoyong's grandfather, was admitted to a college in the nearest city. But he soon ran back home to hide from the advancing Japanese troops.

Shaoyong's grandfather, the one-time undergraduate, spent the twelve years of the war in his hometown as a well-known literate farmer. He was chosen to be the manager of the cooperative in the town, which mean he was in charge of all the materials gathered from different families in the commune, including fields, oxen and other livestock and goods. People in Qigudi were all Catholics. While he served as cooperative manager, Shaoyong's grandfather got the news that the local priest was released from prison and had nothing to live on. He made a suit for the priest

with cloth from the cooperative.

Years later, the manager was promoted to a higher position in the government because he was literate and had very good handwriting. He moved to the town in order to perform his new job. A few days before he took office, he was accused of having used cloth from the cooperative to make clothes for the priest. It was both a serious political and economic crime. He lost not only the government position but also his job in the cooperative and was sent back to his village.

As a boy, Shaoyong's father never left this village. He began to work in the commune at a very young age to support his family. His future brother-in-law, Shaoyong's second uncle, was the leader of the commune. He was talented in many aspects. He could play instruments and do good calligraphy. However, his most useful talent was his eloquence during the harvest time. Nobody in the commune wanted to work more than others because no matter how much they worked, the result was predetermined. He spoke in the motivational meetings during harvest for

hours without so much as a script. His audiences were inspired by his speeches and ran to work in the fields with zeal.

From a very young age, Shaoyong stood in the crowd to watch his uncle doing calligraphy for people in their village. The villagers brought large sheets of red paper to Shaoyong's uncle and asked him to write the Spring Festival scrolls for their family. The red scroll with propitious couplets and beautiful script would be posted on gates and doors throughout the village to celebrate the most important festival of the year. People waited and watched with gratefulness and appreciation. Those moments observing his uncle's calligraphy appealed to Shaoyong. Inspired by his uncle, he spent hours absorbed in practicing his calligraphy, writing with brushes and water on the ground at home.

Shaoyong was born in the village where his mother's parents chose to settle and his father's family always returned to.

School

Shaoyong scattered the potato seeds every few seconds in the newly ploughed soil. His father led the ox with one hand and held the plough with the other. They walked slowly ahead of him and left a freshly dug furrow behind.

“Why do the trees near us look taller than the trees in the distance?” Shaoyong looked out and asked.

“It’s called perspective,” His father answered this non-work-related question tersely.

Shaoyong was six years old when his parents assigned him the task of cooking after they left for work in the field. He became the chef of the family after he learned how to make steamed buns (the traditional staple food of the family) out of flour at seven. Shaoyong’s parents had sent their promising first son to live in town with his uncle, who was a teacher at the school their son went to. They chose their second

son to help them support the family. But this second son showed no interest in the work that was so important and urgent for their livelihood. They believed his disobedient nature could hardly lead to anything good.

One summer morning, Shaoyong's mother took him to their vegetable field and left him alone to cut the extra branches of the tomato plants. The boy was bored by the dull work of snapping. He imagined he was a general in the traditional Chinese tales, wielding a spear on a steed and the tomato plants were his enemies charging towards him. He used a thin iron bar he picked on the street and imagined killing all of his enemies. Shaoyong's mother came back at noon and saw the dead tomato plants scattered in the field. She picked up the stems and beat Shaoyong's bare skin using her full strength.

Shaoyong assumed this might be one of the reasons that led to his first episode of dropping out.

The principal of the middle school in the town was checking the attendance of

newly enrolled students. He found that the student with the second highest score didn't show up after the beginning of school. He asked the head teacher to find that student. The head teacher found out this student was from Qigudi Elementary School, where his brother worked as a teacher.

"Do you know a student called Li Shaoyong?" the head teacher asked his brother.

"He is a student in my class," his brother said, "I know where his home is."

The head teacher rode a bike the next day to visit Shaoyong. This family was very ordinary by the standards of Qigudi: neither extremely poor nor rich. The old ox cart in the yard was newly fixed; the house was old, but clean, with little furniture inside. As with most of the families in this area, their house contained very few items that were not traditional tools. The sewing machine in the house was the product of the industrial age. He saw the boy but didn't notice any physical injury or discomfort in him. Shaoyong's mother told the teacher that they couldn't afford the boy's tuition fee. "We already have one boy going to school in town with his uncle. We cannot

afford for two boys to go school at the same time.”

“I can’t make the decision but I can ask the principal.” Shaoyong watched the head teacher ride his bike back to the town.

He came back the next day and said, “You don’t have to pay for Shaoyong’s tuition fee anymore because he got a very high score in the junior school entrance exam.” Shaoyong’s parents were surprised by their second son’s excellence. They were especially surprised by his award of financial savings.

The junior school was 3.5 kilometers from Shaoyong’s home. Students from the village walked three hours to school every two weeks. They climbed over several mountains, talking and laughing with bags of food and clothes on their backs.

Shaoyong’s talent for calligraphy was discovered in his first Chinese Language class. The teacher took his assignment to the principal: “Look at this student’s handwriting.”

The principal immediately called Shaoyong to his office and said, “Your

handwriting looks ugly, but there is power in your script. I think you have the potential to be a good calligrapher.” The principal, who had made posters during the Cultural Revolution, had an eye for calligraphy. Most of the poster makers were literate young men with high levels of political consciousness and good handwriting. Their main task every day was to create posters to propagandize the thoughts of party leaders, to expose antirevolutionary “crimes” and to criticize the backward minds of the landlords and rich peasants. He became the principal of the middle school of Xijingzi after the Open and Reform Policy and contracted the government’s propaganda assignments. The principal took Shaoyong as his assistant to write propaganda on the walls of villages: “Bear Fewer Babies and Plant More Trees”, “The Ways to Get Rich”, “To Conduct Birth Control Is the Basic Policy of the Country”.

In addition to his role in creating propaganda, Shaoyong was eventually put in charge of the blackboard in school, and was charged with transcribing files in the

school archive. He knew how many students' files were accurate and he knew which were forged to meet the minimum requirements of compulsory education. He also knew all the exam questions before taking exams.

In an age without computers or printers, the teachers at Shaoyong's school engraved the exam paper on a stencil and printed it by rolling ink onto the stencil. Shaoyong was chosen to make the stencil because of his good handwriting, though he was also one of the students would take the exams. All through his junior school years, Shaoyong was the top student and the secretary of the principal, who treated him as more than just a student. The principal would look for Shaoyong in the schoolyard when he prepared a good meal at home. Once he found Shaoyong fighting for food in the school canteen among crowds of hungry students.

"Shaoyong!" he shouted at the crowd, "Come to my home. I have made something good."

Shaoyong squeezed his way out and left his friends in the chaotic dining hall.

Shaoyong's parents changed their attitude towards this second son once the principal and his teachers confirmed that he was a good student. They began to expect that he might become somebody in the future. A teacher from the local technical high school went to Shaoyong's school to recruit students. Shaoyong was very interested in finding a job after a few years' technical training, as the school advertised he would be able to do. He ran home to ask his mother for a 10-yuan application fee. His mother scolded the excited young man with harsh words.

"Aren't you a high-minded young man?" She mocked Shaoyong with bitter contempt. "Is this what you expect to become in the future?"

Shaoyong didn't have a clue what his mother expected him to do or to be, but he was told he had to be the best, whatever he did in the future.

In the third year of junior school, Shaoyong's mother died of heart attack. It was a heavy blow to Shaoyong.

Shaoyong stopped paying attention in class after his third year in junior school.

He spent the last two years at that school in depression and pain. After the high school entrance exam, he believed it would be the end of his school days. However, he passed the exam. Shaoyong's uncle was a schoolteacher in the town where the school was. He persuaded Shaoyong to attend high school and paid for his tuition fee of the first semester.

Shaoyong became a high school student against all odds. And his talent for calligraphy was again discovered in high school by his Chinese Language teacher in their first class assignment. He told other teachers that Shaoyong's handwriting was "astonishingly good". Eventually the principal got the news and then the posters and slogans were all over again.

Not long after the beginning of high school, Shaoyong's father fell off a truck piled high with straw during harvest time. He fractured his back. Over the next eighteen months, he lay in bed, immobile after the surgery needed to repair the fracture. Shaoyong was the one left to take care of his father and to raise their family. His

older brother hadn't come back since he was sent to the school in town, for he was the promising one chosen by their parents to go to school and become somebody one day. The family's income, including the yield of the fields and the salary from his father's part time job in construction, was saved conscientiously for his further education. But he was not enrolled in college after high school. Like many young men of his age, he went to Baotou to learn welding technique and started to live independently.

Shaoyong found out that his family couldn't afford his father's medical fee for the surgery. And since his father was unable to work, all the funds for food, clothes and schooling were cut off. Shaoyong felt like the sky had fallen. He became the man of the house without any preparation. The first decision he made was to find a job in construction, carrying sand, slabs, and stone like his father, thus no one would be left to take care of his father. His uncle came to the hospital when Shaoyong and his father were at bay. He paid the medical fee and told Shaoyong to go back to school.

Art

During Shaoyong's first year of high school, the teachers of fine arts and music were motivated to recruit students for art exams two and half years later. The music teacher found that Shaoyong had a loud voice and predicted that he could be a good singer, while the fine arts teacher sensed his capacity for painting from his calligraphy. Shaoyong chose fine arts as his future career.

Shaoyong had a deep affection and gratefulness towards his head teacher. He was the first to know when Shaoyong's father got hurt and granted him leave to take care of his father. And he was also the one Shaoyong confided in about his dilemma in coming back to school. Shaoyong looked pretty normal to other people: He attended classes, and the principal took him to paint slogans in the rural area as usual. The head teacher often saw him writing on the school blackboards, sometimes during school hours, but he knew it wouldn't delay too much of

Shaoyong's study.

Not long after Shaoyong's return, the head teacher went to see the principal. He decided to apply for Shaoyong to get a tuition waiver.

"He has contributed a lot to the school. Why doesn't the school pay for his work by waiving his tuition fee? We won't hurt the kid's dignity like if we were to give him charity, it's something he has earned through his talent and work."

But Shaoyong didn't know the details of this award up until he was admitted to college. He enjoyed all the rewards he received throughout high school for his special talents. So, when he finally decided to explore his capacity in the field of fine arts, the first person he wanted to tell was his head teacher.

The head teacher replied in a seemingly excited tone,

"Good, good. Painting is good. You can open a decorative store after graduation, like the one near our school. You'll start a career like those artists, and earn a lot of money."

Shaoyong felt he had been hit by lightning, but, instead of heat, he felt ultra-coldness.

The decorative store was across the street from the high school. Unlike those stores that appeared later, the owner hadn't located the store near the market for construction materials, but rather it was right next to the town's most prestigious educational institution. Shaoyong passed by the store every time he went home. It was a small room crammed with rolls of sticky papers, scaffolding and bulky machines that smelled like ink and dust. He saw the works from the store everywhere in the town, which confirmed what the head teacher said, that it was a "profitable" business. Almost all the local restaurants and stores designed and printed their decorations in this store: Large, white characters printed on a bright red or yellow background, read "Sichuan Food", or "Roasted Lamb with Rice".

Shaoyong thought his future career could be more than that. He went to the teacher's studio after class. The fine arts teacher put several plaster cubes in front of

a blue curtain.

“Sketch from the pictures in the books,” he said.

Shaoyong looked around the room and found several books with sketches of similar plaster cubes. He didn't understand why they needed the real ones since there were many in books. Sometimes, the teacher didn't show up at all, but Shaoyong and his classmates sketched diligently. The teacher often came back during the class,

“Shaoyong, come with me.”

He also called several other students who were busy sketching to carry some scaffolding. When Shaoyong was painting signs on the scaffolding, he thought the head teacher was right - the work of fine arts was the same as the work at the decorative store.

Shaoyong quit the painting class not long after his talk with the head teacher.

During summer vacation after his second year of high school, Shaoyong took the

train to the capital city of his hometown. He went there twice a year. Over winter break, he sold his calligraphy couplets in the market and worked at construction sites in summer. He found a job carrying sand in a construction site that year.

In the evening, the contractor shouted, "Off work" from his office in the work shed. Shaoyong put down whatever was in his hands and walked out of the gate with the crowd. He saw a group of young people writing and painting on the wall of his work site. It was an "after" picture of the building he was working on. And there were slogans for the "tomorrow" of the community, "Happy Life, Sweet Home", etc.

He was attracted by their work and forgot his dinner.

"Your painting is good, but the calligraphy is so ugly," he commented.

The painters all looked down at him from the scaffolding.

"Little thing, can you write better than this?" one reproached.

"It's easy." Shaoyong took the brush and wrote several characters in the frame.

"Your handwriting is as good as the computer lettering," the group exclaimed in a

cheerful tone.

After a brief conversation, Shaoyong learned that they were graduate students from the department of oil painting at the local teachers university and they were contracted to do advertising for this new real estate program.

Shaoyong saw a young man come to him when he was loading sand onto the cart. He was one of the students Shaoyong met the night before.

“I have fired the man who was hired to do the writing on the wall. Do you want to work for me?” he asked.

“How much for a day?” Shaoyong asked.

“How much for a day carrying sand?” the young man looked around and asked.

“Thirty yuan a day,” Shaoyong answered with honesty.

“I will give you 120.” The young man offered a price, which was half of the pay his classmates received.

Shaoyong left the shovel burrowed in a pile of sand and quit his job. He followed

his new boss to the other side of the wall and started to work as a painter.

“What grade are you in?” the new boss asked. He was around twenty-five years old, but demonstrated a rich knowledge of society. “Have you begun to learn painting?”

“I don’t want to open a decorative store after graduation,” Shaoyong said.

“What nonsense. We were art students in high school. You can get into college by learning art.” He then explained to Shaoyong what an art exam was like, and what kind of colleges had fine arts departments. Shaoyong saw a vision of light for his life – he could get into college by learning to paint, he could get a diploma, which meant that he could find an official job, he might even be able to become a teacher or an artist someday.

Shaoyong earned more money that summer than ever. He went back to the fine arts teacher’s studio with more confidence. In the first week, he painted a skeleton and a head sculpture of Homer from copies in the book, but the fine arts teacher was

lucky to get more contracts for advertising, and as a result, Shaoyong was taken on to paint signs more often.

A few weeks before the winter break, Shaoyong received a phone call from the capital city.

“Have you learned painting yet?” the man asked him on the phone.

“Yes. From my fine arts teacher.” Shaoyong recognized that the person calling him was the man who hired him to paint the wall at the construction site.

“I have a prep school for painting. Come. We are friends, so you won’t have to pay any tuition fees,” the man said.

Shaoyong didn’t stay home long during the winter break, and his father didn’t ask where he would go, either. The old man had learned to stand back from all his son’s decisions after the back injury.

The prep school Shaoyong went to was near the university, which was under massive construction for its fiftieth anniversary. The painting class was much more

school-like than Shaoyong had expected. There were more students than there were at the studio in his high school, and the teacher actually taught him how to paint. The teaching assistant was a junior student, who was on her way to the graduate school of arts in the same university. She often gushed about theories Shaoyong had never heard and couldn't understand: the principle of proportion, perspective, the relation between blankness and reality, and space, etc.

“Look, this part of the object is not real in the painting.” She pointed at the plaster statue.

But in Shaoyong's eyes, the statue was as real as the young girl standing by him.

It had been late at night when they decided to leave. The teaching assistant had to pass through several construction sites to get to her dorm. They had heard that some college girls were sexually assaulted on the campus after the construction started. Shaoyong was responsible for escorting her back to her dorm every night. Eventually, the teaching assistant became Shaoyong's girlfriend.

The teachers in the studio saw the great progress Shaoyong had made after coming to the class.

“Work harder. Believe in yourself, and you will have a fair chance to get into the university.”

However, Shaoyong was tortured by the idea that he could never emulate his girlfriend.

“I am a high school student while she is in college. Even if I can get into college in a year, she will be a graduate student then. I will always be one step behind.”

The male chauvinism unbalanced him in this relationship like weight loss. After days of struggle, he made a decision to resume the order.

“If I were admitted to the best university in the country, I wouldn’t be lower than her, even if she were a Masters or PhD student,” Shaoyong thought.

Once he made up his mind, Shaoyong told the teacher that he needed to go back to high school and focus on improving his grades in general courses, because the best

arts college required a much higher entry score than others.

Chapter Two

The City

Yu Ying's parental grandparents were born in Yu Village, where all the families' surnames were Yu. His grandfather was a military surgeon, who followed the army, moving from one city to another, up until the Long March Hospital was founded in Shanghai. He worked in the hospital for many years and went back to his hometown after his retirement.

His wife wasn't with him in the army. She visited him when the army stationed in a city and they would live together for a while. She gave birth to three sons and brought them up in their hometown. Following the Confucius code, which asserted that "Lack of talent in a woman is a virtue", her family didn't send her to school. Though there probably weren't any schools for girls at the time anyway. She was

brought up to be a beautiful and elegant lady with all the traditional virtues. Her virtue of ignorance became a shame not only for her but also for her husband in the new age. Commune leaders in Yu Village persuaded her to take night school classes for illiterate women. After the classes, she could write her own name and knew several Chinese characters, which was a victory against illiteracy. She finally met the requirement for “New Women” in the new era. This was especially important for the wife of a surgeon in the army.

She visited her husband when the army was stationed in Jinan and gave birth to a girl there. That was their only daughter and the only child born in a big city. One day, the mother took her daughter to play in a park. The girl fell into the lake and drowned. The couple was devastated by the accident. The husband blamed the wife for not taking good care of the child and their relationship was seriously harmed by their daughter’s death. Although they had two other sons later, they didn’t have a girl of their own. But Yu Ying’s grandmother nominally adopted many neighbors’

and relatives' daughters from then on and it eventually became her favorite hobby.

Yu Ying's father didn't grow up to take his father's place at the Long March Hospital; instead, he got a job in the local government of his hometown. His younger brother was chosen by their parents to fill the vacancy. Yu Ying's grandfather brought his most promising son to the big city of Shanghai to pass on the opportunity that he had earned through life-long hard work and sacrifice. The only problem was that this intelligent young man had no medical training, so he was not able to succeed his father in the position of surgeon. The hospital assigned him to manage the storage of medical supplies. Nevertheless, he was in a state-owned organization that would give him a Shanghai Hukou and an "iron bowl". However, the young man didn't like his job as a storage manager. He was fascinated by electronic techniques and had a talent for making electronic items. After a long struggle with his family, he quit the job and got a college degree as an engineer. He became an engineer in a state-owned factory in Shanghai after graduation.

Ten years had passed since his father had brought him to Shanghai from Yu Village. The young man born with a silver spoon in his mouth was settled in Shanghai with a secure job, as his parents expected. But, his behavior became more and more eccentric. Some said he pretended to be abnormal to avoid his boring job at the hospital, and others said he had a free spirit. In any case, his abnormal behavior gave him a bad reputation. The charming college graduate with an “iron bowl” couldn’t find a wife at the age that his parents expected him to get married. A widow agreed to marry him but she couldn’t recover from missing her first husband. They had a child after they married but the wife insisted that the boy adopt her ex-husband’s surname. He couldn’t accept the fact that his wife never forgot her ex-husband and had taken him as a replacement. Their marriage lasted for several years with quarrels and conflicts until a forklift killed him on his way home from work. The construction company paid a huge compensation to his widow. She said that was the only good thing her second husband left for her. She changed their

son's surname to her ex-husband's not long after the accident.

The Hometown

The career of Yu Ying's father developed well since the businesses and construction projects in this small town had increased rapidly in the last ten years. The scattered villages soon merged into a city with nearly one million people. Yu Ying's father was cautious and conscientious with his work. He devoted all his time to the endless government affairs and business banquets after work, and also spared no effort in taking care of his family. Following tradition, he saw himself as the head of his family of origin; as a result, his mother, his older brother and, later, his older brother's family were all brought under his responsibility, even after he had gotten married and moved out of their old house.

Needless to say, Yu Ying's father was an able man. He knew the new government policies, and had powerful social ties, which guaranteed his family's privilege. His older brother, on the contrary, was not enthusiastic at work at all. Yu Ying's father

bought work-points for his older brother to fulfill his required work tasks on the commune so that he could get more allotted grains. Later, Yu Ying's father found a job in a state-owned factory in the town for his older brother and bought more working ages for him so that he could get a high salary and have an early retirement. His brother soon lost his "iron bowl" in the state-owned factories reforms. Yu Ying's father helped him invest in a chicken farm, which required almost no technical training or educational background. But the business failed after thousands of farmers and jobless workers followed the investment of chicken farms and, consequently, led to a dramatic decline in the market. Yu Ying's father bought old-age insurance for his older brother to guarantee his brother's annuity in old age.

Yu Ying's father was diagnosed with liver disease and he was told that it would not be a serious condition if he could stop overworking. The second attack happened after he hosted his nephew's wedding. He was transferred to many hospitals in big cities for better treatment but it got worse in a year. He was taken

back to his hometown and spent his last year of life in the local hospital. Yu Ying was sixteen years old when his father died.

Tombstone

Ying's father's coffin was lying on a long table in the center of their old house.

Ying's uncle took a group of relatives with the surname Yu to gather at the funeral.

He was officially the head of the family after his brother died. This group of Yu men

put a square table beside the coffin to make the morning hall a temporary council

chamber. The table was large enough to put their feast on it. Ying's uncle dug up all

his brother's wine collections: 1990 Maotai white wine and many bottles of

unfamiliar whisky and red wine. They opened them all, and identified the Maotai as

much more palatable than any other foreign wine. So, they drank the Maotai up at

the feast and discarded the others on the ground.

People came for the condolences, which were cried out in a loud voice. Ying and

his mother knelt near the coffin and bowed to each of the visitors. The boring sound

of crying mingled with the voices and laughter of a Mahjong game at the table.

“This family is over for sure.” They scoffed, “There’s no man in this family now.”

Ying’s uncle then proposed that he should own the house, since he was the only man in the Yu family, and others agreed.

While the group enjoyed their game and drinking, Ying came and flipped their table over. The men on the other side were not affected by the sudden attack. They were still sitting motionlessly with their hands hanging in the air without support, while the other group jumped to their feet to shove Ying in anger. Both of them were waiting for Ying’s uncle to take the first hit at the thoughtless teenager. The conflict didn’t escalate into a group fight, but Ying would no longer need to pretend to have a good relationship with them.

Ying and his mother left their old house after the event, and never went back. He fully immersed himself in the sorrow of losing his father, but in the meantime, he firmly believed his father would come back. Several weeks after the funeral, a sorcerer came to Ying’s home and said to him,

“Son, don’t go to Mount Tai when you grow up.”

“Why?” Ying asked.

“Because your father’s soul has fled to Mount Tai and he has become a Fairchild there. You know how much he loves you, so if you ever get near to that mountain, he will never let you go.”

Ying was not sure if he should fully believe the sorcerer’s words, but he never went to Mount Tai after he grew up. While waiting for his father’s return, he finished high school and was admitted to the two best arts colleges in the country. In choosing between the two, Ying’s mother insisted that choose the most well known one, which would allow for the more obvious success of her son. Ying understood that she wanted to prove to their relatives that they not only had a man in the family, but a promising and successful one. But he preferred the other one with an avant-garde and fine arts program from a professional perspective. On the selection form, Ying put down the school of his own choice, despite his mother’s opposition.

When Ying got home from school, he found that his mother had been to the local Education Bureau and changed the school in Ying's voluntary reporting form to match her preference.

Ying was extremely frustrated by his mother's arbitrariness. He shut himself in his bedroom for days. His mother kept trying to persuade him to be sensible and accept her choice outside of his bedroom door, which, on the contrary, incurred more fierce retorts. Ying's grandmother was restless in this long-drawn-out conflict. She should indisputably choose the mother's side to convince the young man it was all for his good. But the son's anger seemed fierce and real, which somehow proved he must have a justifiable reason to be disobedient. She listened to the quarrel in her house carefully, and quoted one or two aphorisms now and then in order to annotate the mother's points.

Ying went to the college his mother had selected, as she expected. His strong belief in his father's return faded. Once in a while, Ying thought that the absence of

his father in his life was good for his art career. It would have been impossible for him to go to an arts college and become an artist if his father was still alive. His father would make the decision for him, and as a result, he would most probably have become a government official.

Ying took the train home from college during school break. It was deep night when the train approached the station of Mount Tai. Ying struggled to stay awake so he could see Mount Tai from the window. Unfortunately, he fell asleep when the train stopped at the station. He dreamed of his father as he napped. When he woke up, he saw the train running at high speed again. The mount outside the window was receding fast and disappeared in the darkness soon.

Ying found his elementary school compositions in a drawer at home. His mother had collected them all and stored them carefully in Ying's room. Ying was brought to Shanghai by his grandparents at kindergarten age. The summer before his first year of elementary school, his mother taught him 3000 Chinese characters so he

wouldn't fall behind in first grade. And because of her efforts over the summer, Chinese reading and writing had always been Ying's strong suit throughout his school years.

The compositions were assignments for Chinese language class. The teacher gave them titles like "A Happy Day", "A Good Deed" or "My Dream", etc. Ying saw his handwriting hadn't changed a lot from what he saw in his old notebook, except that it was more mature and required less effort to make each stroke. The teacher had praised each of those compositions in class and told the students to take it as a writing model. Some of them were still interesting to Ying after fifteen years. Ying took several of the compositions back to school after the break, and made them like inscriptions rubbed from ancient steles, while he actually inscribed the one with the title "My Father" on a stone stele in big-seal characters, and asked a Mount Tai carrier to set it up on the top of the mountain, alongside many ancient steles written by emperors of successive dynasties in the Mount Tai worship ceremonies and

literary giants in Chinese history.

Years later, Ying had his own art studio after graduation. He redecorated it with ancient Chinese artwork before his first exhibition of modern art. He searched online for ancient rubbings of the Tang and Song Dynasty and found one rubbing with the title “My Father” in big-seal characters. It was a rubbing from the stele on Mount Tai for his father.

“My father is very tall. He had a pair of big eyes...He worked hard every day in the government... and took me to fly my kite in the spring...”

The style of Chinese characters 3000 years ago were only recognizable to epigraphists and Ying himself. He bought the rubbing and hung it on the central wall of his studio.

The Russian Hotel

Ying was born on a street named after an ancient temple, which got its name from the prominent tower in its yard. The temple had been ruined a hundred years ago when this area was brought into the city, and the streets nearby were simply referred as Tower Temple Streets. The house Ying's family lived in was in the shadow of that tower. At a certain moment during the day, the shadow would be projected into the yard and would penetrate into Ying's living room. A Han Stone Relief Museum and the museum of an ancient Chinese philosopher were a block away from Ying's home. Ying was brought to a big city by his grandfather at five years old, and for the first time, he saw malls and amusement parks. He had to admit that the big city was much more prosperous than the town he grew up in. But he secretly defended his hometown with its long history and many important historical figures, even though his grandfather had to mail the milk powder and other

children's food to Ying after he got back.

The Russian Hotel appeared across the street of Ying's home when he was five years old. On the front of the building, a large poster covered the most conspicuous part of the wall:

RUSSIAN WOMEN

EROTIC SHOW

LUXURY ENJOYMENT

Ying was extremely curious about the inside of the hotel,

“What does a Russian woman look like, what does erotic show mean, and how luxury can it be?”

Ying saw his father go into the hotel every day. He was a government official and socializing was a necessary part of his work and position. Unlike in the winter days, the noise in the hotel disappeared after the door shut, the hotel put a sound box outside in the summer evening and played loud music to attract passersby. When

the sun went down and the heat dispersed, the music was on. Ying ran out of their house to watch the neon lamps lighting up with dazzling colors and danced frantically to keep up with the music.

Three years later when Ying was about elementary school age, his mother decided to find a better living environment for him. She found a house near the elementary school Ying would go to and settled miles away from the hotel. During Ying's school years, he was invited several times to his classmates' celebration dinners of high school and college admissions. The dinners were all held in the hotel, since it was a symbol of luxury and upscale enjoyment in the town. But coincidentally, Ying was either out of town or had urgent things to do during those dinners. So up until he went to college, he never got the chance to set foot in the hotel once.

The illness of Ying's father brought him more leisure time than ever. During his last year of life, he managed to redecorate their old house across the street from the Russian Hotel and planned to move back the next spring. But the second attack was

so violent and sudden, that he didn't finish construction before he was sent to the hospital. Ying and his mother moved back two years later. He saw the Russian Hotel was in the process of being demolished. Ying felt lost that he would never see what the inside was like, even though he had imagined it thousands of times in his head.

Ying's mother found the owner of the hotel, who had just retired from the police force. Ying interviewed him about the details of the hotel: How it started, how it was decorated on the inside, and how he hired the Russian woman. The man found two photos that had been taken inside of the hotel fifteen years ago. One picture was a group photo of the owner and the Russian woman. They stood behind a large table, with their backs facing the window curtain. The woman was wearing a long woolen coat, and was chubby and stout. The decoration and furniture couldn't count as luxury items even in the countryside of the early 90s. The second picture was of the Russian woman teaching the waitresses Russian language. In it she stood in front of a little blackboard with several Russian words on it.

Ying walked out of the broken building with bitter disappointment and began to wonder whether the Russian Hotel had ever existed. In timing, the hotel appeared around the same time as the collapse of the Soviet Union. The hotel must be related to the historical event. But was it? Or did the collapse really happen?

Throughout his childhood and teenage years, Ying's image of the Russian Hotel had always been so vivid. Even after he became an artist, the luxury scene at the Russian Hotel wouldn't disappear from his mind. In creating artwork for his graduation, he proposed to recreate his imagined memory of the hotel, but he was denied permission to do so by his advisor, because the theme was not positive and the discussion not profound. He proposed the project again when he was preparing for his graduation exhibition in graduate school. He planned to rebuild two rooms from the Russian Hotel in his imagination, but was denied again. Eventually, the images of the hotel became more and more distinctive in his head like a home he had never lived in. It was like an incredibly desirable thing had appeared in his life but he

could never get near. He shot a movie called Russian Hotel for his exhibition, "A War
Never Happened".

Love Letter

The bookshelf in the room of Ying's father had six layers. Ying climbed on a chair and sneaked several from the top. He hid the books among his textbooks in a box and read with a flashlight under his covers at night. It had been several years up until Ying was detected myopic of 300 degrees for each eye. Ying didn't stop reading because he had trouble reading words clearly, while his mother was so desperate to cure his illness and that she was willing to try everything.

A store with treatments for myopia opened in the town. Their advertising said that they could cure pseudo-myopia in children and teenagers in one summer using a combination therapy of traditional Chinese medicine, advanced western technique and their own unique treatment. Many young people and their parents hesitated because of its appalling price, but Ying had already begun the complex treatment courses during his summer vacation.

The store prescribed a package of herbs for Ying to drink every day. In the early morning, Ying had to do a set of eye exercises and body stretching. After that, Ying put on a therapeutic eyeshade to look at anything green. It was said that the muscles inside of the eyeball would be relaxed by the electromagnetic and infrared radiation from the eyeshade. Every evening, Ying wore a pair of presbyopia glasses of 300 degrees to watch the sunset for at least half an hour. After one-and-a-half-months of treatment, Ying's myopic degrees tripled and developed to a steady true myopia.

Despite the decline of his eyesight, the books from the top shelf had kindled Ying's burning enthusiasm for writing stories. His dream was to write a pornographic book that people would still read after hundreds of years. Ying had written several during his first year of high school. He believed his books could be passed down like the classics, because his language was literary and the stories were similar to those in the books.

Ying's father passed away during his senior year of high school. During this time,

Ying fell in love with a girl. At the beginning, he wrote a letter to this girl every day, and eventually the writing escalated to ten letters a day in the second year. Ying didn't receive any reply at first, and then he received some but far fewer than the letters he sent out. Something deep inside drove him to write, and to write exhaustively, meticulously and passionately. Ying had devoted all his time to letter writing after class. He threw himself completely into the world he created for himself, one with endless goals that could only be achieved word by word.

The girl wrote back after the fourth letter. She suggested they should focus on the study, since high school was a battleground and every minute could determine their life and death in the College Entrance Exam. But she didn't mention if she had feelings to Ying. So, Ying kept writing up until he received the first "I like you" from her. In the next few letters, Ying proposed that their relationship could be closer than "we like each other". And the girl's response was they were too young to start a serious relationship.

Ying started a serious relationship with another girl while he was still writing letters to the other girl every day. Ying wrote the letters chronologically but some of them were structured with plots. Sometimes he wrote one and transcribed it again with better handwriting. The drafts with scrawl and profuse passion were all carefully preserved and became a full box of paper.

They finally got together when both of them were in college, nine days before the girl left for her study in Europe, and they decided to break up years later after the girl came back. Ying worked half a year in his classmate's painting class as a preschool teacher and saved enough money for his goodbye gift to the girl. He went to her college and told the school president that he was an artist from the arts college and planned to create an art installation about environmental protection on their campus. The college was in a coastal city well known for tourism, and the environment was a constant hot topic in relation to the city's image. The president happily agreed. He asked the student office to collaborate with the young artist for

the project. Ying finished the artwork with his team after several days of work. The support crew of the college built up the power units in the spots Ying chose for the installation and recruited many volunteers to set it up.

“This is a present for you,” Ying pointed to the giant white clouds “floating” over the campus, “Goodbye.”

The girl burnt up all the letters before her marriage. And the preserved ones were left plotless and disconnected in a box marked with “OLD STUFF” in Ying’s art studio.

The Breaking Through

Ying walked up and down in front of the monument in his college.

“No, I can’t accept this. I have to go back to high school, take the art exam and the College Entrance Exam again. Also, I will choose the college that I wanted to go to.

No one can stop me this time,” he thought.

He eventually knew the change of his application form was more than his mother’s decision. It was a plot; his mother, the high school, and even his grandmother, they played different roles in this plot against him. His mother’s intention was obvious, her son’s success determined her family status among the relatives, who they never wanted to meet again. Her role as the vice head of the family as well as a successful wife and mother should be left in those people’s mind. What Ying didn’t know was the collaboration of the local enterprises, the high school and his mother. The high school was desperate for a graduate who was

admitted to the top university in the country. It was shocking and more convincing than the enrollment rate or teaching quality. For the similar reason, the local enterprises would only fund the students who were admitted to that university. So, Ying's application never arrived to the Education Bureau, and had been changed in the high school right after he submitted it. Just as they expected, Ying was admitted to the university they chose.

It was supposed to be a happy ending, satisfaction of all. But Ying felt the adults bullied him. Everyone was benefited from his success except for himself. His grandmother said he's angry because he thought too highly of himself, and he should be grateful for the results.

After he had been in the college for months, he paced alone every evening around the school monument. Every time he would leave with a fully determined mind that he should go back to high school and retake the exams next year.

But he never did. The college was not a bad choice at all, except that it was not

what he wanted.

Ying's first two years of education crossed all topics of fine arts, until the new dean of the department decided to divide the students into concentration of oil painting and block print in their junior year. Ying was assigned to the block print, which was new in the department. Neither Ying nor his classmates knew what the class is about. When he saw the names on the poster and was shocked that he was not admitted to the oil painting class. Ying believed he was one of the best in his class, he chose oil painting as his major in the application form. Several students who had the same opinion with Ying decided to have a formal talk with all the instructors in their department.

"What 's the criterion?" The students asked.

Some of them got agitated and they were told to calm down.

"It's your performance in the oil painting class." One of the teachers said at the end of the meeting.

Ying felt this answer was susceptible yet acceptable. He believed his portrait in the oil painting class was one of the best because he saw many of his classmates failed to create a complete character, but the teachers might have a different opinion. Ying and his classmates began to doubt themselves.

One month after they started their block print class, the grades of their oil painting class were released. Ying found out that he was right. His score was one of the highest, so were the students who were assigned to the block print class. They requested another official talk with the teachers.

The meeting was held in a classroom with a long table. The students and the teachers sat face to face on the two sides. The students spoke first. Some of them had stuttered with angry words and expressions.

“Why can’t I be admitted to the oil painting class? My score is the highest and I am a good student.” One said.

“Why can’t our block print class have good students? We want good students, too.”

One teacher from the block print class said.

“But what about our choice?” Ying asked.

No one answered that question.

Ying walked out of the classroom with anger and depression. While he was walking through the campus, a steel bar fell on him from a delivery truck. Ying got injured in the accident.

In the last year of college, Ying and his team members rented a house in an artists' village far away from their college. They all chose oil painting for their graduation projects to show their talents and unstoppable passion for oil painting.

Ying's first idea was to make a film, which could be a powerful way to show the strong emotions surging inside of him. He changed to oil painting because he couldn't afford the expense of the film production. As a result, he used three frames imitating three movie scenes for a trilogy of oil paintings. The five characters in the first painting were portraits of his friends who had the long table meeting with the

teachers. The characters were talking and drinking inside of a cozy room identical to their rented house, while a blurred figure outside the window was aiming at them with a gun in the darkness.

The second one was a naked couple lying in bed, and many memorials of 89 movements were displayed in the room.

The third one was an exit identical to a slaughterhouse, and outside was ruined buildings. One man inside the room was on the phone.

The third one was not finished in the exhibition day and the second one was banned from the exhibition for its pornographic scene.

After graduation, Ying was admitted to another graduate school in the other college he had always dreamed to go to. Ying's first assignment in class was to make a self-introduction and then break through yourself.

Ying told a story:

"My father died young and I am going to die in five years...my lungs were half dead

and only one third of my liver is still working...I know this is a waste of time for me in the class, but I want to come..."

The whole class was sad in silence.

"This is a fake story," Ying concluded.

The instructor smiled and said,

"Ok, this is your work. But how do you break through yourself?"

He asked Ying to make an appointment with the Obstetrics and Gynecology department of a hospital, but the nurse rejected Ying because the doctor wouldn't diagnose a man.

The instructor said Ying had to make this happen and make people to believe Ying was pregnant.

Ying made a series of false evidences, including the urine of a pregnant lady, to tell the media that he was pregnant because of his special body, which caused many online discussions. Later Ying dressed like a pregnant woman to accept various

media interviews and soon became online famous.

Ying was so embarrassed by this public identity. He couldn't accept fame brought by being a special man who could bear children, or brought by a lie, "I am not that kind of person," Ying was especially tortured by the latter.

"Can I stop now?" Ying asked the instructor.

"But you didn't break through yourself yet." The instructor replied.

One day, the instructor received a call from Ying's mother in class. He passed the phone to Ying and asked him to tell his mother "the truth".

"How can you make a male student pregnant?" Ying's mother asked with a serious tone.

Ying took the phone,

"This is my choice, Mom. It's ME want to get pregnant. I chose to do the surgery, it's hard but it's my choice."

He heard his mother's heart breaking with loud noises and hanged up the phone.

“Your work is done,” the instructor said.

Chapter Three

Tradition

Mingqing's grandfather was the patriarch of the entire Wang family in his village. People of his generation called him Big Brother, and the second generation called him Father or Male Father, and his wife Female Father. His wife came to his family at eight years old and was brought up by his family as a child bride. She started to work like a servant from the day she came, carrying a baby on her back while working, and in that way, she brought up her husband's nine younger brothers and sisters. When the sons of the family all grew up to an independent age, they gathered in the central room to divide their ancestors' property among the different families. They shared the house by building up walls, some got the furniture and others were given the oil and grains. The oldest brother got a pan and half of a room

in this asset dividing. His wife put the pan on the stove at lunchtime as usual and found nothing to cook for their new family.

The couple's first and only child was aborted. They didn't wait long to adopt a cousin's son. The son was very obedient when he was young, and his adoptive parents loved him as their own child. The mother ate very little in the commune so that she could save her share of food for him. The father brought him up with traditional virtues, he focused especially on fostering his ability to be the head of a family: A man should have the integrity to win people's trust and the ability to support the family. The young man didn't disappoint his parents when he grew up. He became a proficient carpenter and took many disciples in his twenties. As his fame increased in the area, his temper got worse. His old man's words easily incurred his yard-chase-beating, and he treated the mother much more gently by no more than yelling and verbal attack.

Despite his son's disobedience, Mingqing's grandfather maintained his dignity as

the family head well. His wife served him like an emperor. She worked without a break in and out of the house, but was never late to cook for her husband. If he played cards with friends at home, she fed the other players. After they had grandkids, the man dined in a separate room at his own table. His wife delivered the meals to him on a wood tray like in an imperial court, except the food was very simple.

The old man was a proficient farmer when he was young. His display of cow training in the field could still attract a good crowd when he was in his eighties, though he had resigned from all work at sixty. Like a retired government official, he concentrated on being a respected patriarch. The virtues he valued and practiced all his life finally bore fruit in the third generation of his family.

Mingqing's two older sisters were the all-time highest scorers in the county exams. Their awards had fully papered the family's central room during their school years. The three grandkids' success could not be separated from their grandfather's

publicity. The whole village had known that Mingqing warmed his grandfather's feet in his arms in the morning before he woke up. And his affection to his loving grandparents was rewarded and praised as deeds of filial piety.

When Mingqing's two older sisters brought back their certificates as the top students in school, their grandfather realized that they would become government officials someday, despite the fact that they were girls. He spoke with the nine-year-old and the eleven-year-old: "Don't be corrupted officials when you grow up!" His constant warning worked so effectively that all his grandkids enrolled in colleges; otherwise, they would have inevitably ended up in the document forgery industry of their hometown, like most of their neighbors who didn't go to college, producing one third of the country's false documents every year. For some reason, Mingqing's grandfather didn't trust anything with the name "false", even though people in his hometown made their living with this work, and some made a fortune.

Some folk traditions were revived when Mingqing was a child. Young people came

before festivals to ask their Female Father the rules in Lion Dancing. Mingqing's grandmother served her husband all her life and later became the domestic helper when Mingqing's mother worked in the role of the workingman. She died when she was over eighty years old with "happiness and longevity", a year before Mingqing's mother died. " Her life was blessed." People believed. So her funeral was called "Happy Funeral".

The Iron Woman

Mingqing's mother was a well known "iron woman" in her village. She believed in nothing but hard work. When she cut more firewood than required for the commune in her younger days, she was rewarded one more work point. After some fields were contracted her family, she worked even harder, from dawn to night. She ran up and down the hills in the summer during the drought years to watch the water that was pumped into her fields. It was almost a gospel for her to know the private coalmine recruiting local workers. She carried coals in two baskets on a pole in the mine to support her family besides the income from the fields. She found another job in a private stone pit carrying stones for one point two dollars a day in order to prepare for her son's junior school expenses.

Her husband threw a bowl at her in a conflict and cut her head and neck open. The wound was so deep that people thought she wouldn't make it, but she did. The

accident didn't alert her to the fragility of life, but rather strengthened her belief in the invincibility of manpower. When her mother had a stroke, she made up her mind to cure her by careful nursing. Despite her tireless care in the hospital, her mother began to experience serious dementia half a year later. She was devastated by her mother's unstoppable decline in many aspects. For the first time in her life, she worked harder, but, instead of gaining, her mother declined more with every passing minute. She was too afraid to sleep alone during her mother's last days of life. Not long after her mother died, Mingqing's mother was diagnosed with liver cancer and died a few months later.

The Head of The Family

Mingqing got seriously sick at the age of five. His father made him a wood Mauser pistol to comfort him. His father was a carpenter working in the outside world to earn money, and only came home in the Spring Festival. His woodworking tools were left home on display on the tables and walls. Mingqing made a wood car with its gear wheels carefully uninstalled from lighters and the body was painted with doors and windows. Kids in his village gathered in Mingqing's home to listen to his stories based on the wood car. Sometimes Mingqing made the story too long so that the kids had to come four days in a row to know the ending.

Mingqing's father came home without a scheduled date. Sometimes he came back and saw Mingqing playing with his toy. He smashed whatever was in Mingqing's hands and beat him.

“Why didn't you study? Focus on your study.”

He then found out all of Mingqing's self-made toys, the swords embroidered with delicate patterns and elegant bands, and the truck he assembled together by the pieces from other kids' expensive toys.

One by one, his father found out and crushed by his giant feet.

Mingqing was disgusted by his father's bad habits he brought back from the outside. He played pokers all day when he was at home. He smoked and drank like a hoodlum. His home was so clean and neat organized by his grandparents and his mother. His grandfather's integrity made the abstract word home like their bright and spacious central room, in which every pillar was straight and tall, the rafters were thick and stable with their edges cut into each other in a precise and seamless fit. The floor was a perfect square with even sharp angles. His grandmother was the one soften all the sharp edges and warmed the cool faces. She mended the holes on their clothes with chunky knits and made the uneven face of their old pan shiny

His mother was the one who brought food back. She worked in the fields and

brought the crops back in gunny bags. His grandmother threshed them all and made food with the new rice. His two sisters were always studying in front of their only desk. Their awards had brightened the whole house.

But his father would come in the family every year, like the monster in the tale of the Spring Festival, demolishing and crushing his way into the room. He came sometimes from the rafters of the house, like a snake, half of his body in the air with his red tongue hanging out, twitching. He could pour in like muddy water and poisonous gas, which could ruin the house by tainting the wall and the floor, his grandparents managed to keep clean.

Mingqing saw his father beating his grandfather in the yard. The old man ran fast to avoid his son's fists. Mingqing ran away fast at the sight of his father. He also saw his father cut his mother's neck open with a bowl. The blood and the risk of losing his mother made his father pure evil. He wrote an article in his composition class under the title "My Father".

“He is a bad man, very, very bad. He would beat me whenever he saw me...”

Mingqing showed it to his mother and sisters. To his surprise, they got angry.

“How can make our father look so bad?”

Mingqing almost got a beating from his mother and sisters because of the composition.

Mingqing’s father made efforts to connect with Mingqing when Mingqing was in high school. They were sitting in their yard in the summer enjoying the cool of the night. Mingqing’s father moved his stool closer to Mingqing.

“Let’s have a talk,” Mingqing’s father said.

It was too stiff for Mingqing to believe those words were said by his father rather than recited the line from a movie or a book.

“Talk about what?” Mingqing asked.

His father paused for a while and said, “Let’s talk about your study.”

“What’s wrong with my study?” Mingqing asked.

His father paused again and then continued like a reciting robot with meaningless but extremely smooth words,

“You should study hard. You should really focus on your study...and then you can make money, make a lot of money if you study harder.”

Mingqing left his seat in the yard, and not long after that night, he left his home for painting class in the capital city.

Mingqing’s mother died in his first year of graduate school. The family fell apart because Mingqing and his father were left in their family after his grandparents and his mother passed away and his two sisters had new families.

Mingqing didn’t go back after graduation and his father never wanted to live with him in the capital city. His father called once in a while and, like years ago, he paused at the beginning, and then blurted out a long lecture repeating, “Study and make money”. But eventually, the pause before the rolling words became longer and longer. It seemed that he was trying to organize his own language but failed at the

end of the pause.

Chapter Four

The Landlord's Son

Zhijie's father was one of the two students in his village enrolled in college that year. This kind of event hadn't happened in this area for decades. People in his hometown believed he must have had extraordinary talents and have made enormous efforts to stand out from the countrywide competition of the College Entrance Exam. They didn't know how many difficulties this rural young man had faced, but they knew very few survived. It wasn't a total surprise for them until he was actually admitted to a college. His parents went as far as to allow him, a young laborer, to sit in school all day rather than gaining work points to support his big family. It was easy to understand when he was too young to be counted as an independent worker, but people thought there must have been something wrong

with his parents to let a sixteen or seventeen year old waste time in high school for nothing. The College Entrance Exam had been cancelled for ten years. Sooner or later, he would work at the same farm as his parents after graduation, no matter what he had learned in school.

The young man enjoyed his last few years in school despite occasional frustration. He was the best student according to the evaluations of his performance, but had never been selected as honorable student because of his family's class status. He had learned to live with being an outlier, excluded from all benefits and opportunities. As a result, when the College Entrance Exam resumed after years of political movements, he attended the exam without any expectation. He believed nothing good could happen to a landlord's son. However, luckily he passed the political investigation and was admitted to college.

Like a seed on an ever-shaking sifter, he successfully avoided the thousands of holes that he could have fallen into. After graduation, he was assigned to be a

teacher in No. 1 Mine primary school, where he met his wife, who was a teacher of the middle school in the same town.

His wife was born in the town. People migrated there from all over the country with the mine industry prospered from the 1950s. Her father was assigned to the local education bureau after graduating from a secondary school. The town was built for mines and later it was put under a city. Zhijie was born in the city, at a family dormitory building in his father's school.

KFC

Zhijie was left at home when her parents went to work. She played with dolls and puzzles and her favorite game was to play the bus conductor. She cut a pile of paper into neat pieces and exchanged them one by one for money. It was her dream job.

Every time her mother took her on the bus, she saw the conductor walk over to the passengers and exchange paper for people's money and then put all the money into a leather bag with metal clip. "That was the easiest way to get money in the world,"

Zhijie thought to herself while she longed for a watch she had long admired. Her mother had refused to buy the watch for her because it was too expensive.

Zhijie's father came back every forty-five minutes to check if she was safe. He taught in the elementary school where his office, classroom and family dormitory were staggered next to each other in the same schoolyard. Zhijie went to the same elementary school years later. When she was in the classroom, her father watched

her from his office. And anytime she was near the school gate during recess, her father called her back from a window of the office building.

Every morning Zhijie had the same breakfast: milk, two eggs and a main dish. She tried to reject the disgusting milk, but failed. Even though she would vomit after drinking it, she had to comply with her mother's demands to drink up a glass of fresh and expensive milk.

It was a small town with several streets and one polluted river. But Zhijie didn't have many chances to explore. The major parts of the town were coalmines and ceramics factories, which made the areas designated for living like a can for people to sleep. Zhijie's junior school was ten minutes away from her home. Her father listened carefully to the bell of the middle school next door and started to count the minutes until Zhijie arrived at home. Sometimes Zhijie walked slower, and took more than ten minutes, and she would meet her father looking for her on a bike.

The few trips she took were to her father's hometown, a village in the mountains.

But the long mountain drive made her sick. Even when the bus approached the village, Zhijie saw few things more than the bare mountain: shabby houses and narrow dirt roads pitted by hoof prints. The harsh environment depressed her physically and mentally. Her only long trip was to her paternal grandfather's hometown. It was on the other side of the mountain. The kids in the village ran after their car. Zhijie saw their excited faces bouncing outside the car window. The car splashed yellow water with mud and sand, and the drinking water was no better at all. It was drawn from an old well nearly dry. Zhijie hated to wait endlessly for a bowl of water for less sand in it.

Zhijie's parents had more chances to go out of their town for conferences for educators. They brought back candies with bright color wrapping paper, pencil case and backpack of vivid images.

"To be a salesperson is nice, too, if I can't be a bus conductor." Zhijie thought to herself, "At least I can see and touch a lot of good things from the outside world."

Zhijie thought.

Zhijie had trouble dealing with people around her. She could never tell who was the parental uncle and who should be called maternal uncle, since they were all the same age but had various Chinese addressing to indicate their roles in different family clans or social relationships. Moreover, these uncles and aunts (most of them were her parents' colleagues) were wild about commenting on her score in the exams, and it was not because they all had kids of the same age, but to put all the kids they knew in the same group to compare and appraise. Zhijie believed her performance in class and even her life were less relevant to her than to those adults. She never chose this world to live in, never was interested in anything, and never expected for anything (maybe the job of a bus conductor was one thing worth of expecting, only because of its fast money-making), but she had to carry out this life everyday with full gratefulness.

Something huge happened to the city near Zhijie's hometown. The first KFC

opened on the first floor of a mall. It soon became a festival-like event of the area, and the mall eventually became the center of the city. A crowd of customers looked curiously into the glass door, and most of them were taken aback by the price for one small bun with a slice of meat. The money could buy a piece of pork for a meal of the whole family, not to mention the huge amount of vegetables it could afford.

But the kids were crazy about this novel and fashionable foreign restaurant. Zhijie insisted on having lunch in the KFC when her mother took her to the city. Her mother hesitated for a while but failed to persuade Zhijie to go to another restaurant.

Zhijie ordered a hamburger and her mother ordered nothing. She chose a seat near the window and enjoyed her meal happily.

“Why didn’t you order anything?” Zhijie asked her mother.

“I am not hungry,” her mother said motionlessly.

After lunch, they walked around the city and arrived home in the evening.

Zhijie's father came to have a talk with Zhijie.

"Why are you always being so thoughtless? Do you know your mother starved all day?"

"But she said she was not hungry." Zhijie didn't want to defend herself, but was so confused literally by the question.

"She must think the KFC is too expensive and want to save everything for you."

Zhijie's father said.

"My family is poor." Zhijie woke up the first time with an unfamiliar fact.

"My family is so poor that my mother has to starve to save me a hamburger," she thought. In the meanwhile, something familiar occurred to Zhijie, like it had happened before - Her father was reading a piece of social news to her. The news was about a thoughtless and ungrateful girl who insisted on having lunch in KFC, but her family was too poor to afford it. The girl's mother starved to save money just to fill the girl's vanity. Her father was fiercely criticizing the girl in the news. He was so

angry that his hand ruffled the edge of the newspaper, and his index finger of the other hand was poking to the news rapidly. He then quoted this story to teach her a lesson of thoughtfulness and gratefulness, and he would also ask his students to use this negative example in their compositions, except that she was the girl in the story and the poor family was her family.

The Comic Books

Zhijie stopped writing assignments from her last year in junior school. She didn't even bother to make excuses to avoid the punishment anymore. Her teachers were her parents' colleagues, so it was impossible to escape their cross-examination.

Zhijie's grade was in the middle, so was her seat in the classroom. She obtained a new point view to her life because of the punishment. She stood in her seat and saw the heads of her classmates floating in lines. Zhijie's interest to her grade declined even more after she got to high school. Every time when the league table posted on the wall, she would look up from the bottom and feel satisfied if she didn't see her name in the bottom three.

Zhijie stood in her seat in class as usual. She saw her classmates busy taking notes and their heads changing angles slightly as the teacher moved on the platform. To her surprise, two students of "the bottom three" were sitting in their seats. One

looked blankly in one direction without blinking for a long time, and one sat motionlessly with his eyes looking down and his head tilting to one side. The other one hadn't showed up for days.

"Is he going to drop out?" Zhijie thought, "If so, it's a pretty good choice."

Zhijie never knew what would happen if she chose the other way at every crossroad of her life. She was the only one who could see the forks in her life from a lower, latter but unique angle, while her parents saw a perfectly straight road with maybe holes but never intersections.

The teacher' voices was the same drone as in the last class. Zhijie paid closer attention to what he was saying, but the noise of the voice was too loud that she couldn't tell one word from another.

A piece of newspaper stick out of the wall of books her deskmate neatly piled up. It must be used to wrap one of the most important study materials for the final exam.

Zhijie looked at the newspaper and unconsciously read it in her mind.

“The core of studying and acting in the spirit of the Sixteenth Party Congress, is to study and act in the important thoughts of ‘Three Represents Theory’; and the most important way to further study and act in the spring of the Sixteenth Party Congress is to rise the new climax of studying and acting important thoughts of the ‘Three Represents Theory’.”

It was an editorial of the daily. The article intrigued Zhijie, though the content didn't make any sense to her. The meaning of the words was palatable. Zhijie felt this moment was so familiar to her. She had dreams like this. In her dreams, she was fully aware what was happening around her, but couldn't see or hear clearly, no matter how hard she had tried. But she would awake at this point if this were her dream. And the editorial made it much easier to tell this was not a dream, because she could never create an article so terse and vigorous without any interpretable

meaning. The words looped and echoed like the patterns in a kaleidoscope. She smiled a little at the kaleidoscopic change of words in the editorial.

The gate of the high school was locked except for the day of opening every month. Very few individuals appeared in the schoolyard, instead they moved in student flows: flows to the cafeteria, flows to male dormitory and flows to female dormitory.

Zhijie got to her dormitory in one flow. She heard her roommates talking excitedly about the boys in their class and made comments on the looks of super stars. It was all from another world, which was not far away from her, but was constructed in a different way from her world. Zhijie didn't bother to tell the difference of their looks, or to put them together and appraise. Compared to those faces with full cheeks and round nose tips, she preferred comic books where people were lines and shapes.

Zhijie went to the bookstalls with all her pocket money saved for weeks. She spent hours going through them to find one that was closest to the original book among

hundreds of newly pirated copies, most of which were only identifiable to tell which part was a text and which part was a picture.

Zhijie's parents found all her collections and tore them into pieces. She dug them out from a trashcan after her parents went to bed and glued them back.

"This is the way my parents are. They are this kind of people," Zhijie thought.

Her parents were not utterly ignorant of Zhijie's talent at painting. Their colleagues of fine arts told them many times from Zhijie's elementary school to high school. But it was like the signs and stores alongside the road in a Racing Game, which contributed only to make the game more real, rather than the keys of the game like the car and the road. They took care of the "car" in their game carefully: One-gallon milk, if Zhijie ran out of energy in class; or a serious beating, if Zhijie did poorly in her final exam. So when Zhijie told them she wanted to take the painting classes in the capital city, they didn't fully understand what it meant to the "road" or

the “car” of Zhijie’s life. One thing they were assured of was Zhijie’s uncle could take care of her in the capital city and it was nice to have a hobby rather than have not.

Zhijie soon became the idol in the preschool of painting because of her extraordinary talents of mastering the skills the art exams required. She didn’t understand why all students should paint the same way, but she was admitted to the best university in the country one year later.

Her father called her regularly when she was in college.

“We still don’t understand how you can get to the best university in the country,” he said this a lot in different tones.

Some of Zhijie’s classmates in the preschool went to the same college with her. They found Zhijie eventually abandoned her masterful skills at oil painting, and the characters of her works became increasingly like those in comic books.

Zhijie chose to be a professional painter after graduation. She had no one to hire her and no company or organization to own her. Her father called her in the old tone, which he used before Zhijie was admitted to college.

“We have a new supermarket nearby, and if you can’t find a job, they are looking for cashiers.”

This was supposed to be an insult to Zhijie.

They also found out their daughter had no interest finding a boyfriend.

The road they planned for her didn’t extend endlessly to the distance. The end of the game came abruptly but not because they lost the game.