Grow Up Files in China

Dr. Jack Liu

Oral History
Grow Up Files in China

Dr. Jack Liu
Author’s Note

*Grow UP Files in China* is a work of nonfiction. Names and identifying characteristics of the people who appear in these pages have been changed.

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Village Life
Chapter 1
One Child Policy

When my mom was 31 years old, she gave birth to me in May 1973. My mom remembered the moment when I was born, the nurse had called out “lunch time.” Chinese people have a tradition of naming their children based on the time at which they were born. For instance, if boy was born during the Chinese New Year, usually parents would name him as “New Year.”

Fortunately, because my parents were not very fond of this tradition, my name was not “Liu Lunch.” My name was Liu Hui. Hui means brilliant. In Chinese, the last name is used first. In English, my name is Jack Liu.

My hometown, Shenze County of Hebei Province, is located in the north of China. Shenze is 130 miles south of Beijing, the capital of China, and is about 30 miles east of Shijia Zhubang, the capital of Hebei Province.

My zodiac sign is buffalo, but I never saw a water buffalo in my hometown. In China, people from north of the Yangtze River are deemed as being from the north of China and are called northern people. In northern China there was not much water; I was commonly thought to be a Northern Ox instead of a Southern Water Buffalo, because I was born in the year of the ox in 1973. I love Northern Ox.

The Chinese Zodiac is a 12-year cycle that relates each year to an animal: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. Each Chinese zodiac sign represents a different type of personality. People born in the year of the Ox are dependable, ambitious, born leaders, patient, hardworking, and modest. However, Ox people can be stubborn, rigid, narrow-minded, and they hate to fail or be opposed. For instance, I cried loudly and nobody could stop me.
In the 1960s to the 1970s, the average Chinese family had 3 to 4 children. I am the fourth child in my family, and I have three elder sisters: Zun, Ping and Qiao. My sisters’ names all have special meanings: Zun means respect, Ping means peace, and Qiao means smart.

Mom and dad grew up in Shenze county but lived 20 miles apart, separated by two different towns. My parents had never met before they went on a blind date, which was arranged by my father’s second aunt.

They came from very different family backgrounds. My mother was the granddaughter of a local government accountant. On the other hand, my father was the oldest of three children; his family was categorized as 'lower-peasant'. Father’s family was truly poor. My mom needed to work in the factory and it was tough to ask permission to leave for checking my father’s “poor house.”

When the factory that mom used to work at collapsed in 1961, she became a peasant. At the time of my birth, my father was working in a city named Shijiazhuang. As a firefighter, dad could not even take a leave of absence to come see me when I was born.

Mom could not work in the fields the ways others could; she had four kids to take care of.

As grandmother always said, “Cry louder, higher status.” It means that if a baby boy’s cry is louder, his political status will be higher. I cried a lot in my hospital bed.

With other 20 other babies in the room, my cry slowed down when mom fed me.

“Stop feeding him, Comrade!” cried a terrible voice. A woman in a dark blue uniform entered the hospital room and stood in front of Mom’s hospital bed.

Mom recognized that she was the director of the Birth Control Committee and thought that she would need my name for my identification card.

“My son’s name is Liu Hui.”

“I don’t want to know your son’s name. Why did you give birth?” said the woman.

“I got pregnant,” Mom answered.

“Did you not know that Chairman Mao called for birth control to keep the population from increasing? Our country will implement the one-child policy. How dare you not obey Chairman Mao’s policy?”
“I really wanted to, but it was too late,” Mom timidly explained. “I had been pregnant for five months already when the policy was announced,”

“You didn’t obey Chairman Mao’s policy. You should have taken care of your son. There will be no benefits and food for him,” said the director in the blue uniform.

“It’s unfair; the government encouraged giving birth and said that each new communist baby would automatically receive food from the communist government.” Mom tried to sit up in the hospital bed.

“The policy has changed,” the woman in the blue uniform pointed to my head and made an announcement.

“Nurse, this is an illegal boy. He will not receive a citizen identification card and will not receive health benefits and food from the government.” She addressed my mom again, “Get out of the communist people’s hospital. You and your illegal boy should not stay here.”

Just a matter of hours after giving birth, my mom and I were forced to leave the hospital. It was raining outside. Mom carried me and we went back to our tiny house. When the rain poured, water flowed in through the broken roof. As I mentioned before, my father’s family was really, really poor.

Two days later, dad rode a bicycle and came back home from Shijiazhuang. He and Mom went to the local government and said that they were informed of the new policy when my mother had already been pregnant for 5 months.

The local secretary of the communist party checked the policy and said, “Oh, it was only an oral policy that Chairman Mao presented at the communist party central committee conference. It was not a formally documented policy yet. You son will be fine, but I need to write a report to the County People’s Commune Committee.” Finally, I received my ID card and benefits nearly two years later.

People had no choice but to obey Chairman Mao’s One Child Policy.

My eldest sister Zun started to speak around 20 months earlier than other kids. One day, Zun even could say the sentence “Long live Chairman Mao”. That surprised the neighbors. But it was understandable, because every day the peasants, workers, and soldiers across the country were to read Chairman Mao’s books and say, “Long live Chairman Mao,” or, “Chairman Mao can live ten thousand years.”
Chapter 2

Mom

Mom had great self-respect and she never begged for anything from anyone, even though my family’s financial situation was terrible for a family with four children. She had established a reputation for herself in the village because she had brought up four children by hand with my father’s help. She was tall and bony, around 5.7 feet, with black hair and eyes.

“Get up, get up,” said Mom. "Don’t be lazy. If you cannot get up, you will feel sleepy and will be unable to get up for the whole year.” Five days before the Spring Festival, the traditional Chinese New Year, mom led the four of us kids in cleaning the house inside and out. Mom wore a mask and passed each one of us a mask. She gave us each an assignment, such as cleaning doors, the ground, windows, fans, desks, or throwing out old newspapers and magazines.

Then mom cleaned the kitchen and cooked Spring Festival meat for us. She had to sew our clothes all day and all night. Before the New Year we tried them on. Mom put them in the cabinet, and in the morning we opened the cabinet and put on our new clothing.

In the early morning, she got up around five o’clock and cooked dumplings for us. I felt my shoulder being shaken by Zun, my elder sister. The first day of Spring Festival, kids were not allowed to get up late and could not be woken up; they need to get up early by themselves, mom said.

Of course I would get up early since I was eager to wear my new clothing and shoes. Another reason I wanted to wake up was so that I could spend more time with my father. But, father was called on fire duty most Spring Festivals. The fireworks often caused fires at that time.
I hoped my father would eat dumplings with the family, but he could not come home to celebrate Spring Festival with us. Actually, we could only eat dumplings and meat once or twice per year.

According to tradition, relatives gave me red envelopes with some money in them. Usually, we had to give our envelopes to Mom. Mom saved every penny for the future.

At that time, the Communist Party Secretary of the Commune determined how to distribute the food based on labor. The Communist Party controlled each person through the food distribution system. Each person needed to get their meals from the Communist Party. To get food Chinese either had to work in the field or in a factory, which earned the food from the commune.

If you wanted to buy clothing, you had to ask the local Party Secretary to deduct food and give you cash.

My mom knew we would not receive enough food from the commune. We had to pay the commune for the food, but we didn’t have very much money. My grandpa had lung cancer, and we had to pay the hospital first.

One day, Mom, her girlfriends, and I went to a county superstore to buy clothing. I smelled the delicious aroma of the You Tiao (fried doughnut bar), and I really wanted to eat it, but it was out of my mom’s budget.

I slowed down as we walked and stared at the fried doughnut bar. Mom knew what I was thinking. She said nothing but grabbed me by the arm. However, the tempting smell of the food prevented me from moving on.

“I want You Tiao, Mom,” I said. Mom pretended she had not heard me.

“Mom, I want to eat You Tiao,” I repeated loudly.

“No way,” she said.

“No. I want it, I want it.”

My mom’s three girlfriends helped me try to convince her, “buy one for your kid. Just buy one for your kid.” My mom felt shame in the company of her friends. She grabbed me by the arms.

She sternly said, “Mom cannot indulge bad habits.” This was meant for me and also for her girlfriends. I struggled out of my mom’s grip, then I threw myself on the ground and rolled around. Some people surrounded me and watched me as they chided me.
“Do it again, please,” they encouraged me.

In their eyes, my pain was unimportant; they were entertained watching me rolling on the ground like a monkey. My mom said goodbye to her girlfriends and just stood outside of the circle of people. She was so angry. We were poor, but my mom never wanted to show this to the public.

I was tired. I rushed beyond the people to my mom. Mom held me and we went home. I stopped crying and knew she would hit me. When I went home, as I expected, Mom spanked me. I knew that I deserved it.

Mom cried as she told me her family’s story. She also felt sorry there was not enough money to support her Children.
Chapter 3
Mom’s Grandma

Mom has one younger brother and four younger sisters. Chun Gang, Mom’s younger brother and she shared one teacher. In other words, one teacher taught students of three different grades in one classroom. My mom said Chun Gang always slept in the classroom. She had to wake him up when the teacher walked towards him.

There were no paper and pencils for students at that time. The students brought their own little blackboards. When they finished writing the Chinese characters, they erased them and started writing again.

Mom told me that the teacher assigned each student a square on the ground outside of the classroom. The students wrote Chinese characters in the dust of their own squares using sticks. When they were finished, their teachers would grade them by using sticks or the point of their shoes to put a checkmark in the square.

Mom’s family could only support one child's education after several years of learning in elementary school. Because of this, my mom had to quit going to school.

When my mom first heard her parents’ decision, she cried and felt upset and unfairly punished.

She became a worker at the age 13.
In the morning, both my mom and her brother, Chun Gang, got up and finished their breakfast—carrot soup. They said goodbye in front of the house. My mom told her brother,

“Gang, I cannot go to school with you. You should take the opportunity to study hard and go to college for me and our family.”

My uncle changed his study habits and cherished the opportunity to study. After he graduated from a top high school, he received admission to a college and became an engineer in Tianjin, a big city.

The first day on the job, mom felt excited about working at the textile manufacturing factory. She met plenty of girls like her and made some good friends. It was common that the boys could continue their studies, but the girls had to quit school to support the family. After work, she also attended evening literacy classes with her girlfriends. After the first month she received payment for the first time. She was so happy and bought dim-sum for her beloved grandma.

Mom’s grandma loved my mom. Her grandma was sick in bed, so mom showed her the cash she had earned and said, “Grandma, you will be well. See, I have money and dim-sum for you.”

Grandma said. “I will definitely not die. I am so lucky to have such a loyal granddaughter. I promise to seek a handsome, kind and rich man for you before I go to heaven.” Grandma couldn’t eat anything. In fact, there was nothing to eat. All of the village peasants were involved in Great Leap Forward of making iron and steel. None had time to plant wheat.

My mother’s grandfather was a local government accountant. He had died earlier in the China-Japan war (1937-1945) during part of World War II. Mom’s grandmother did her best to raise her family on the run down property.

In 1949, four class statuses were created based on the occupations of previous generations of family by the communist government:

Landowners
Rich peasants
Middle-peasants
Poor peasants
Mom’s family was ranked in the middle-peasant class, and their property was taken away by the public commune. Mao’s communist government announced that all the property belonged to the central government in the city and public communes in rural areas, meaning that a community of village people with 60-100 families would share properties and work together as representatives of the central government.

Wealth was tough to measure, but poverty was an easier measure of equality. The government took the property from the exploited classes, people such as landowners, rich peasants and middle peasants. Then, the central government distributed the newly public property and the political rights to the people.

Peasants overthrew landowners in the countryside; the working class fought the educated class in the cities and sent them to labor camps in the countryside. However, the working class abused their rights and destroyed people’s families, lives, and the order of China’s society.

Based on the Soviet Union’s communist society model, Chairman Mao used China's vast population to rapidly transform China from a primarily agrarian economy into an industrialized one. Mao saw steel production as a key pillar of economic development. He forecasted that within 15 years of the start of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), China's steel production would surpass that of the UK and the United States.

Peasants had to divert from agriculture to steel production and construction projects; much of the harvest was left to rot, uncollected in the fields. This scarcity of food was exacerbated by a devastating locust swarm, which was caused when their natural predators were killed off as part of the Great Sparrow Campaign. Although actual harvests were reduced, local officials, under tremendous pressure from the central government, falsified reports of record harvests in response to the new innovations. The commune leaders sent all of the wheat that they managed to save to the central government.

An estimated 2 million people, including mom’s beloved grandma, were killed by starvation from the crop failures.

One day, Grandma said she wished she could eat some cake, but cake was so expensive. My mom wanted to come home early, but she could not break the rules at the factory. She waited for the bell to ring, and she collected her income. She ran to the market and bought several small cakes and ran back home.
“Grandma,” she called as she opened her grandma’s door.
“’I got a gift for you,” Mom continued loudly and happily.

The room was so quiet. Mom’s parents and siblings and relatives were all standing beside Grandma’s bed. Grandma had just then passed away.

Grandma could never eat my mom’s cakes, listen to her, or find the handsome, kind and rich groom for her.

She died because she had no medicine, no food, and no money. Mom cried. She didn’t want to go to work; she really wanted to attend her beloved grandma’s funeral.

But she couldn’t. If she asked for time off, the Communist Party secretary in the factory would criticize my mom for not devoting her enthusiasm to the Great Leap Forward movement and he would write down these words in her personnel file. If anyone had such a “black file” with negative comments from the Communist Party, he or she would be fired immediately and would be unable to find a new job.

The next morning, Mom got up earlier. She put the cakes in front of Grandma’s coffin and went to work.

After she told me that, I didn’t roll on the ground anymore. Mom asked my eldest sister, Zun, to fry an egg for me in a big spoon. Eggs were also expensive at that time. Peasants would hand in most of their eggs to the commune, and the communes sent them to the cities.

Suddenly, Zun said, “Mom, listen to the commune speaker. He said you didn’t work for the commune and did not hand in the eggs to the commune. What should we do?”

“Leave it alone. Someone must have reported it to the commune. My first priority should be your survival. When we reunite with your father, it will be fine.” Mom smiled and asked me, “Does egg taste good?”

I said, “Yes.”
“Do you want to eat fried egg every day?”
I said, “I do.”

“You should study hard and go to college like your uncle and have a better life.”

I nodded my head.
Chapter 4

Father’s File

I still remember a children’s song that sister Zun taught me to curse U.S. President Truman. When I was young, we sang together:

Tiger Eats Truman
One Two Three Four Five (12345)
Let’s fight the mountain tiger together (上山打老虎)
The tiger will not eat us (老虎不吃人)
The tiger will only eat American Truman (专吃杜鲁门)

Every Chinese kid knew about the evil Truman. But I had only seen his cruel and ugly cartoon propaganda pictures rather than real pictures of him. In my mind, we did not need to be scared of the United States’ nuclear weapons because the weapons’ owner, Truman, was a favorite food of tigers.

The song was for the Korean War (1950-1953), a civil war that originally started between communist North Korea and capitalist South Korea. During the war, both sides were supported by allied countries. It became a war between two superpowers.
In the U.S., the war was officially described as the Korean Conflict because it lacked the legitimate declaration of war by the U.S. Congress. It was also called the “Forgotten War,” unlike World War II (1939-1945) and the Vietnam War (1968-1975).

During the Korean War, the Soviet Union provided air support for Chairman Mao’s People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) against the South Korean military, which was supported by U.S. President Truman and the United Nations.

In 1952 after years of fighting, Chairman Mao and U.S. forces signed the Truce Agreement at Panmunjom, but the Korean War had not yet been truly stopped. North Korea and South Korea are still testing their missiles to fight each other.

After the Korean War, John Foster Dulles (1888 – 1959) served as U.S. Secretary of State under President Dwight Eisenhower from 1953 to 1959. He met Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Geneva Conference in 1954, but he refused to shake Zhou Enlai’s hand. Premier Zhou and his 400 million Chinese people felt insulted by the U.S.

Ten years later in 1964, the Chinese government successfully created their own nuclear weapon. After this, no country in the world, including the two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, could interfere with or insult China.

Nuclear weapons were a major reason for Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution. In reality, it was an anti-cultural movement that Chairman Mao had started. With his newfound authority, he put the intelligent people into prisons or labor camps. He wanted to control all of China like an emperor and extinguish those who were against him and those who might potentially be against him.

Mao still said there would be a War; each Chinese citizen lived in fear. And every adolescent wanted to be a soldier.

Father’s dream was to be an army soldier. When my father was 17 years old, some soldiers came to the village commune office. They posted the soldier recruitment policy in their office to recruit new soldiers.

Soldiers were given special priorities in China:
Priority to eat the government’s food no matter how bad the economic situation was.
Priority to join the Communist Party.
Priority to stay in the city and find a job, after their commitment was over.
My father and his friends came into the office and wrote down their names. The local Secretary of the Communist Party strongly recommended my father for military service and said, “He is the best young man in our public commune.”

The female army representative was happy and told my father to participate in the physical examination. She had short black hair and wore a faded green army uniform. On her head was a matching hat with a red star pinned to the front. She vigorously shook my father’s hand.

“Why do you want to join the People’s Liberation Army?”

“I want to devote my life to the country and Chairman Mao,” said Father.

“Good answer, you are exactly the kind of young man that Chariman Mao and the Communist Party needs. You should do well. I hope in the future you will become a member of the Communist Party. Your answers will be recorded in your file with your signed application forms. When you would like to join the Party, I would be happy to recommend you. Today is an important day in your life. Your parents and whole village will be proud of you. Be proud of your choices.”

My father did not release the good news to his father. Although he believed Grandpa would be proud of him, he also worried about the strong competition. He feared he might not be recruited.

Fortunately, his physical examination was excellent; he passed it and was selected as a candidate to join the army. He opened the door and was excited to make the announcement.

“Father, I have good news. I will join the People’s Liberation Army and will go to Beijing. I will see Chairman Mao.”

“What are you talking about? You cannot go. You are the only son in my family.” Grandpa was shocked.

He locked my father in a small room. Grandma sent food to him three times a day. Several days later, the commune and army representatives sent someone to Grandma’s house to check on my father’s situation. Because he was a volunteer soldier, the decision was up to my father; Grandpa could not stop him otherwise he would have been punished for disobeying the Communist Party policy.
Grandpa told them, “My son will make his decision tomorrow afternoon before you leave.” My grandpa released his son,

“You are an adult, you can go. It’s good to be a soldier and become a citizen and live and work in a big city. But do you know what will happen to you before you become a citizen? There will be a war, a world war between the Soviet Union’s army and the U.S. army. My father, your grandfather, joined the army. He hated fighting. After the war, he came back and smoked opium to forget about the war. He told me not to fight. He told me to live a peaceful life. Now, you can make your final decision.”

My father did not want to disappoint his father. When the lady came to the house, he said, “Sorry. I cannot go. You said that it was volunteer soldier recruitment, right?”

“Do you know how dangerous your decision is? You did not obey the Communist Party and Chairman Mao’s call.” The female army representative was angry and yelled at my father. She was really worried that father had refused to be recruited.

She left.

Later, Father was admitted to a technical school, but he never gained his certificate. He followed the needs of the steel industry in the Great Leap Forward and became a steel worker in a factory and then a firefighter.

Dad married Mom in 1961; Dad was 22, and Mom was 19 years old. Later, the factory Mom used to work in collapsed, so she and my sisters lived in the countryside. At the same time, father was still working in the city.

They did not share much with us, their children, about their romance. But my mom saw my father’s good looks and his position as a firefighter in the city; she ignored his family background. Actually, there was no rich family or rich man for her as her grandma had promised in communist China.

He was such an excellent firefighter that he applied to join the Communist Party. He wrote an application letter to bring Mom and my sisters to the city to reunite with him. He wrote several times, but all of his applications were rejected. Nobody gave him explanations why.

Every week at the end of the weekly meeting, the secretary of the Communist Party announced, “We have an important Communist Party document to study and discuss. Communist Party members, please stay. Non-Communist Party members, please leave.”
Father found out that some workers who were inferior to him became Communist Party members. Father always complained to Mom that the reason he could not join the Communist Party was because Mom’s grandpa had worked for the capitalist government as an accountant in the 1930s.

Joining the Communist Party is the starting point for a future career, promotion, salary increase, and everything else. It is called “your second life.”

Each time his application was rejected, he would get very angry and get drunk. He quarreled with Mom for the whole night.

One night, he got drunk and rode his bicycle all night from the city to his mother-in-law’s house. He knocked on the door loudly and cried.

“Why? Why are you keeping me from joining the Communist Party?”

His mother-in-law simply said, “Sorry.”

Then my father left.

He could not stand the Communist Party members’ ignorance. He thought about quitting his job to reunite with us in the countryside, but Mom stopped him. She believed that we could reunite in the city.
Chapter 5

The Fire Truck Driver’s File

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), life was chaotic. Based on their files, most intellectual people and upper-class rich people were put into labor camps or prisons.

Father’s boss, the Communist Party secretary of the fire department, suspected a fire truck driver because there were no records for where he learned how to drive. Someone reported that he was rich and had driven his own car before the liberation in 1949. The Communist Party secretary of the fire department sent my father and a Communist Party member to the office of the Personnel File Bureau to check the truck driver’s file.

There were no copy machines or computers at that time. Father was instructed to find the driver’s file and copy the information it contained.

Father thought he was instructed to do this because he was trusted by the Communist Party. Also, he was literate and had beautiful Chinese handwriting.

In front of the office, an office clerk asked them to sign in first. While he was entering the file building, Father could not believe he was allowed to be there despite the fact that he was not a Community Party member.

The Communist Party member accompanied the file office clerk and signed and checked the records that indicated the files had been opened and copied.

The fire truck driver’s files were complex, for he had changed workplaces multiple times. My father needed to copy the files under the supervision of the office clerk and the Communist Party member. The Communist Party member would move to another desk and start chatting with the office clerk because both of them were from the same village.
The key to open the file cabinet was in the office clerk’s hands. It was lunch time. The clerk left for lunch and gave the key to the Communist Party member who would take out what father needed.

Father had almost finished his file-copying job, except for the section containing the driver’s work file in his hometown, which was locked in another cabinet.

The Communist Party member opened it, and father suddenly found his own file packet next to the driver’s file. He hesitated for a short while. He was terrified to see what was written in his file. Nobody ever had an opportunity to see his own file. He noticed that the party member was drinking his tea and sitting in front of another desk.

He carefully put the driver’s file and his file together and took them out. He opened the driver’s file first and copied the information. When he found that the Communist Party member was not paying attention to him, he quickly opened his own file.

Father’s file recorded many details, starting from before he was working in the city to the present, including his daily conversation about the Cultural Revolution. His file had two sections: one in which people had praised his excellent performance and another in which there were some negative comments.

Most of the comments were praise that said, “This comrade is an excellent worker and a potential leader.”

There were only a few negative remarks. For instance, “… he had once questioned the Cultural Revolution and expressed his wishes that it would end.”

Father remembered that he had only discussed the matter in his dormitory with some roommates and friends before sleeping. It was just casual chatting. The good thing was that there were no negative comments above those words from his current boss.

Father scanned his file faster because the office clerk would return anytime. He found a sentence in black ink that provided the critical evidence against him.

“Never allow this person to join the Communist Party.”

Who wrote this sentence? Why? Why?

He recognized that the signature was from the army representative. Finally, my father uncovered the secret. His refusal to volunteer for the army was what triggered his rejection from the Communist Party. This was also why his applications for his family members to reunite with him in the city were rejected.
Suddenly, he felt someone put a hand on his left shoulder. He almost jumped. It was the member of the Communist Party who had come with him standing behind him. Father worried that the Communist Party member would report his undisciplined performance to the Communist Party secretary, and he would be punished or fired.

The party member looked down and compared the two files and father’s copying carefully, but he did not appear to be surprised at all.

He said, “You write so neatly and your handwriting is excellent.” Father realized that the guy who was sent with him was an illiterate person. He could not read or write.

Father said, “Ok. I am done, and we can take them back to the party secretary.” Father put the files back and locked the file cabinet. He sat down in a chair for a while. His heart could not stop pounding.

On the way back home, my father came to realize that by registering using his name and not joining the army, the whole rest of his life had been ruined.

But that was a merely the act of an immature 17-year-old boy. He and his family ultimately paid for the act through continued unfair treatment. Spending years apart was brutal.

It was his fault, though. After work, he rode his bicycle for a whole day to his mother-in-law’s house.

“I am sorry, please forgive me. I was wrong. It was my fault. I didn’t know my black file was the reason for my rejection from the Communist Party.”

His mother-in-law and father-in-law forgave him. They were common people and could only follow communist commands and policies.

Father felt that his case was hopeless. He planned to never again submit an application letter.

One evening near the end of the Cultural Revolution, my father encountered the army representative who had written his black file on the road. She was beaten by some workers because this evil woman was also a secret policewoman and had written many bad words in many peoples’ files, destroying their careers and families.

My father squeezed his fists and wanted to beat her. He glared at her. She ran away. My father did not chase her.
Father let his resentment about all the unfair treatment he had endured subside.
Chapter 6
My Life in Preschool

I started Yu Hong Ban (Red Educational Preschool) when I was 3 years old. My teacher took care of about 40 kids from ages 3 to 6 years old, as well as several 7- and 8-year-old boys who could not pass the exam to enter first grade. The school was located in the west corner of the village and served kids from different communes. There were two rows of classrooms in the school. The first row was preschool to grade 3 and the second was grade 4 to grade 5 and teachers and staff offices.

In front of the principal’s office, a bell hung on a big tree by a rope. The principal was in charge of the bell. When the principal struck the bell, we knew that serious things were about to happen, such as the reading of central government notes or the announcement of public discipline issues.

Students were seated in chairs of various shapes and sizes that we brought from our homes. In the front of the classroom, there were rows of propaganda pictures of revolutionary leaders: Karl Marx (revolutionary socialist), Friedrich Engels (revolutionary socialist), Vladimir Lenin (founder of the former Soviet Union), and Joseph Stalin (Lenin’s successor) hung on the walls. In the middle of the second row, there was a picture of Chairman Mao.

One of my best friends, Xiao Wei, noticed that Chairman Mao could never grow a mustache, but nobody dared to talk about it. It was too embarrassing because only women should be unable to grow mustaches.

There were no desks for the kids in the classroom. The only desk was for our teacher Ms. Guo Jen. Her father was the leader of the commune. Even though Guo Jen had
only finished elementary school herself, she was allowed to be an elementary school teacher. It was very ironic.

Guo Jen was not forced to go work in the field like the other citizens. Her teaching time was transferred to field workload points. Guo Jen was tall and wore beautiful leather shoes. Her father had good relationships with professionals and was able to buy fabric and leather shoes from Shanghai. We almost never saw leather shoes at that time. Guo Jen would walk several steps and then brush off her black leather shoes using the back of her pants.

Guo Jen was also the daughter-in-law of the Communist Party Secretary of the county revolution committee. The revolution committee had rights to sentence anyone and arrest anyone at any time.

Guo Jen had just had a baby. She brought her baby into the class. Any time when her baby was hungry and cried, she would stop her teaching and breastfeed him in front of us.

“Put your heads down and copy Chinese characters,” she would say, before pulling up her clothing and feeding her baby.

Only one or two boys dared to look, such as Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng. But Guo Jen could see them too.

Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng were good buddies. Neither of them liked Guo Jen.

“I order you, put your heads down,” Guo Jen angrily said. But she could not do anything about the students’ stares while she breastfed her baby. Her only other option was to turn around and face the blackboard. However, if she did this, she would have to breastfeed in front of the pictures of Chairman Mao and the world’s greatest communist leaders. Those men, except for Chairman Mao, all had thick mustaches.

Guo Jen knew every student’s family background from information given to her by her father and father-in-law. So, if any student did not obey her orders, she would talk about the student’s background in class. After she breastfed her daughter, she turned back.

“Xiao Wei, copy the text 10 times. What a bastard you are. Your mother was the daughter of a landowner. Actually, I want to tell you all, his mother was the daughter of a landowner and a maid. Am I right? How dare you not obey my orders?”

“Ming Sheng, your father stole the commune’s food. Shame on you. Your father was a soldier in the capitalist party army, the enemies. Your uncle escaped to
Taiwan.”

Every student was scared of Guo Jen. She was the evil queen of the classroom and school. In addition, she punished students who did not follow her orders by forcing them to stand outside of the classroom until she calmed down. But most of time, she forgot to call them back in. She didn’t care whether it was sunny, cloudy, hot or cold.

Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng were punished and forced to stand in the sun outside of the classroom. After two hours, they could no longer tolerate the bright sun. They escaped by running off the school grounds.

This was not the first time that they had escaped from the school. The next day they would always come back and apologize to Guo Jen, saying, “I’m sorry, I was wrong.”

I was jealous of these two brave kids because they could start playing games earlier than everyone else. Usually, after school, the rest of us would join them.

After school, some boys and I brought our own toys and played with Ming Sheng and Xiao Wei. I did not have many toys. My parents seldom bought toys for me, but my father bought some picture-books for me. It was difficult to find a kid to play with you when you had only one shabby toy.

I appreciated my uncle, my mom’s younger brother who was from Tianjin, a big city near Beijing; he gave me a small plastic helicopter. That was the only toy I could show to the other kids and let them play with in hopes of gaining their friendship.

“Anyone who plays with me can play with my toys. Come to my house,” one rich boy spoke aloud in public. I seldom was invited. When the other boys left me, I would play with sand and my small helicopter. Sometimes the party in the boy’s house would end early, and when they came out, I could join them.

There was some fighting because of the toys. Some of the strong older kids stole some of the younger kids’ toys. We had to fight with the older kids to protect our toys. For us younger kids, it was safer to play together than alone.

Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng both liked to play with me. They had some toy weapons. They played as the capitalist enemies and communist red army soldiers. They exchanged their weapons with me and other guys. I was proud that I had a plastic helicopter, even though it was small – about the size of my father’s hand. Lots of kids had no clue about
helicopters. They said to me, “My machine gun toy is stronger than your helicopter because your toy is small.”

I said, “That is because you can only see it from the ground when it is in the sky. A real helicopter is very big like a cow cart. When fighting, my helicopter can drop bombs.”

They could not believe it. I said my uncle had taught me about helicopters. He was an engineer in Tianjin, a big city. Some of them tried to understand, but most of them didn’t agree.

Xiao Wei suddenly pointed to the sky, and we saw a helicopter. I showed them my helicopter and pointed out that some parts were the same, like the wings and tail.

“The helicopter in the air looks like the size of our palm,” I said.

Only Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng believed what I said and respected my helicopter. We played our battle game. They asked me to hold the helicopter so I could fly on both sides, the capitalist enemy and the communist red party, pretending that I was in the sky.

Later, I received another toy weapon - a plastic tank. Every kid liked my tank. My father gave the toy plastic tank to me with some candy. I ate all of the candy and put the tank in the water. All the kids laughed at me.

“No tanks can go in the water. It will sink, man.”

Xiao Wei supported me. He said his older brother had told him there was a tank that could be used for both water and land. We all knew that his brother wanted to be a soldier the following year. We trusted his brother’s knowledge of weapons. We all knew Xiao Wei’s dream was also to be a soldier or pilot and have real guns to protect Chairman Mao in Beijing. If he did a good job, he would receive a medal from Chairman Mao’s hands in Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

We played with our toy weapons close to the road and waved our hands to greet the people on any kind of transportation: cow cart, horse cart, donkey cart and tractor. We were told that if we went straight along the road, we could arrive in Beijing and see Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square.

I always wondered what was at the end of the road. Only those with vehicles could find out the answer. How lucky those people were.
For the Spring Festival, I took a cow cart to my grandma’s house. It took the whole morning. It was just my grandma’s house, but I was still really excited to go. I loved taking the cow cart. I wished my grandma lived further away so I could travel near Beijing.

One day, we saw a black car that drove fast in another direction.

“Look, the car head and tail are the same. I think the driver can sit in the backseat when he wants to drive backward,” Ming Sheng said.

“If there were two drivers, one in the front seat and another in the back seat, what would happen? Would it break in half?” It sounds ridiculous,” Xiao Wei said. We all laughed.

“Believe it or not, I saw a train. The tail can be changed to the head. How do you explain that?” Ming Sheng asked.

“I believe I will sit in and drive a real car one day.” Xiao Wei

Unfortunately, we never had any opportunities to see a stopped car in our village. We did not know that a car had only one steering wheel.

Before, we said goodbye, Xiao Wei said “there will be a Dianying (movie) in commune square, will you guys be there?” Ming Sheng proudly said, “I will.”

Usually, kids were not allowed to watch the movies with their parents because they would slumber and cry.
Chapter 7

Public Enemy

I had no clue about movies, because I had never watched one. Literally, movie means “electricity shadow” (Dian Ying) in Chinese. When other kids talked about movies, they all looked happy. One day, my mom and my three sisters finished dinner earlier than usual. Even Qiao, my third older sister cleaned the table, washed the dishes and smiled at me. Usually, she was a little bit lazy at home and did not like me as much as our other sisters.

Then, Mother put me in my bed while she patted my back. I fell asleep right away. I woke up a little later, and it was dark, and nobody was in the room. I looked at the pictures of Chairman Mao and the army heroes on the wall painting, and they appeared to glare at me. I was scared and cried.

“Mom, where are you?” I cried loudly.

“Don’t cry, baby. Your mom and sisters went to watch a Dian Ying (movie) and you are locked in. I will call your mom,” a neighbor, Aunt Wang, called from outside the door.

Finally, my mother opened the door and held me. She apologized, “I am so sorry, Hui. Next time I will take you to watch the movie.” Late in the evening, my three sisters came back home.

“Don’t take Hui to watch a movie. He will cry. I don’t want to see people’s dirty looks,” my third-eldest sister said.
“No, I can get him to sleep. You brother is heavy, so each of you should take turns holding him,” Mom said.

The movie was shown in a big square. During the day, the area was used to fight landowners. At night, people watched movies there.

People could draw a circle or square on the ground and write down their names. They would put chairs there to reserve the space. If nobody watched over your reserved space, someone would throw your chair away and erase the name. Then they would add their own names.

The movie started at 8:00 p.m. It was dark, but people began reserving their spaces at 3:00 or 4:00 p.m.

What would happen if someone did not reserve a place? People had to stand far away from the screen or stand behind the screen to watch the movie. The picture was the same, but it was flipped like a mirror image.

The farmers were excited to find the people talking to them via a white screen. But I didn’t know the people on the screen. Most movies were black and white, since most of movies available in China were made in the 1950s.

My mom and two sisters arrived at the commune square around 7:30 p.m. We found my eldest sister Zun sitting in our reserved place, where she had been for almost 4 hours. My second-eldest sister brought some food for her.

I saw that Ming Sheng and his elder brother occupied the central place of commune square, the best place to watch movie. Ming Sheng’s brother was pretty strong; I wished that I had a strong brother. At least one brother is better than nothing.

Two adults walked toward them and asked them to leave the place of the square that he had reserved. That happened regularly, but that only happened between teenagers. Seldom were adults bullying young people. Ming Sheng’s brother wearing an old green army uniform, stood up and said, “No way, man. I will not leave. It belongs to my family. I have been here reserving it for my family for over 5 hours.” The men said, “This place is for the movie projector. If we cannot set the machine here, nobody can see the movie. We’ll watch you two dumb boys. Do you think you are movie stars.” All the peasants laughed. Those poor guys had to move to the opposite side of the screen to watch the movie.
The movie started at 8:00 p.m., and I was excited to see that the first image they projected was the Chinese flag: big, red, and with five shining stars. Then some people on the white screen started walking, talking, talking and walking. Then, one actor in the movie whose character was a landowner appeared to be very scared as horror music played. I started to cry immediately. Some people gave us dirty looks, as my sisters worried. My mom patted my butt and put me on her shoulder. I saw the people’s dirty looks, and some of them made faces at me while I rested on my mom’s shoulder. I cried again.

The first movie I watched was The White-Haired Girl (白毛女, Bái Máo Nǚ). The film was made in 1950. The movie was based on a legend about life in a poor country village of Hebei province. The story described the misery suffered by local peasantry, particularly the misery of the female peasants.

On the eve of the Chinese Spring Festival, the peasant girl, Xi’er, was waiting for her father to return home to celebrate the Spring Festival. Yang Bailao, Xi’er's father, had been away avoiding the debt collector and the despotic landowner, Huang Shiren.

Yang Bailao returned home at midnight with no gift other than a red ribbon to tie to Xi’er’s hair for the spring festivities. The landowner and the debt collector came for the farmland rent which Yang had been unable to pay. They killed Yang Bailao. And they took away Xi’er to the landowner’s house, where Xi’er was forced to work day and night as a slave.

With the assistance of a servant, Xi’er escaped to the mountains and lived in a cave. She ate food from a nearby temple and fought off wolves and other beasts. After several years, her hair turned white.

At last, her fiancé, Wang Dachun, joined the Communist Party army and returned with his army to fight Huang Shiren, the landowner, in public. Wang Dachun finally found Xi’er in the cave. They reunited and got married.

I was so frightened by the landowner in the movie. The landowner was cruel, ugly and mean. Mom said that when the movie was shown to the military, one soldier stood up and shot at the landowner in the movie. Since then, the audience had to endure a bullet hole on the screen.
Fortunately, it was not a play. Nobody died or was hurt, although the screen had a hole. Once the movie ended, people cried, “Kill landowners!” I woke up and continued to cry.

This kind of Chinese movie was one of the powerful propaganda tools used to spread the Communist Party’s ideas to all people, even children at a very young ages. The purpose was to convince people that communism was the ideal form of government, and that all landowners were evil. All the landowners and capitalists were enemies. The movie showed viewers the way to fight all the landowners.

This was one of the big reasons that peasants would fight their landowners in public. They believed all landowners, like Huang Shiren, killed the peasants and raped their daughters. Only the Communist Party could save them and give back their lands.

As Guo Jen said in the classroom, Xiao Wei’s mom was the private daughter of a landowner and his maid. She was seen as a bad woman. Someone said Xiao Wei’s mom was a landowner’s adopted daughter.

On September 9th 1976, the commune would show Communist Party’s Daughter. As usual, mom and my sisters brought chairs to the commune square. Suddenly, the speaker made an announcement “attention, attention, tonight movie was cancelled. Everyone please stay on the square. The secretary of the community party will make a Central Official Announcement, attention, attention…. “

That day’s announcement was that Chairman Mao died.

The commune hosted a big, sorrowful memorial meeting to mourn Chairman Mao’s death. Everyone needed to wear a white flower on the left side of their shirts and bow to Chairman Mao in front of his picture. But Xiao Wei’s mom had been busy cooking for her two sons and husband, and she forgot her white flower in the kitchen.

Guo Jen’s father, the secretary of the Communist Party, noticed.

“People in the world are mourning our greatest leader; there is only one person I saw who did not care. Should this person not be reprimanded?”

“Yes.” All the peasants were mad. “Who is it?”

“This person is standing among you. She did not wear her white flower. She must be laughing in her mind. She is our public commune enemy.”
People started to look around and check each other to see who was not wearing a white flower. Xiao Wei’s mom also checked others, but she was caught by a young man. He held her by the hair.

“I got the class enemy. She is not wearing the white flower. She is the landowner’s daughter.”

Guo Jen’s father was satisfied. People started to push her, hit her and spit on her. She was mad and looked for Xiao Wei’s father. She hoped that her husband could save her and help her.

When she found her husband, he was silent and stood away from her. A young man turned to him and started to say, “Your wife is the daughter of our enemy. You should be away from her. Fight her.”

Xiao Wei’s father raised his hand and said “Long Live Chairman Mao, fight the daughter of the landowner.” He slapped his wife’s face. Xiao Wei’s mom suddenly stopped crying and began to scream. She lost consciousness. When she woke up, she lost her sanity.

Xiao Wei’s father had to join in fighting his wife, otherwise, his family would have been killed by the mad peasants. Xiao Wei’s mom laughed hysterically and would not stop for the whole day. Xiao Wei’s mom became a lunatic.

Xiao Wei’s father knew why Guo Jen’s father hated his wife. Xiao Wei’s mom had told him that Guo Jen’s father stole chickens from Xiao Wei’s grandpa. Guo Jen’s father was found out, but Xiao Wei’s grandpa forgave him.

Because of his unstable mom, Xiao Wei and his brother were often beaten up by their peers. They had to learn how to protect themselves. They hit back when people attacked them. When Xiao Wei complained that someone was beating on him, his brother would fight back right away.
Chapter 8
Eggplants

When Xiao Wei’s mother went mad, she couldn’t cook for the family. Xiao Wei’s father became a man with a bad temper. He always beat Xiao Wei when Xiao Wei could not finish his homework or if he made any mistakes. For instance, if he found out Xiao Wei was not in school, he would beat him.

Xiao Wei didn’t eat breakfast one day, and he felt hungry around 10 a.m. Since Ming Sheng was his close friend, they escaped from school together.

They were happy and went to the eggplant field to play the “hide and go seek” game. They played at the end of the eggplant field beyond the peasants. They needed to make sure the adults could not find them. Otherwise, the adults would tell their parents where they were. The most important thing was to make sure Xiao Wei’s father was not there.

“I am so hungry. How about you?” Xiao Wei asked.

“Me too. My mom cooked corn soup for me this morning, but I am starving.”

“How about we eat an eggplant?” Xiao Wei suggested.

“No. Our teacher said that each eggplant is public property, and all the public property belongs to the commune. Chairman Mao said, “We should protect public property,” Ming Sheng responded.

“Come on. How come Guo Jen said that your father stole the commune’s food? Is that true?” Ming Sheng was quiet and his face turned red.

“I am so sorry. I knew Guo Jen was a liar,” Xiao Wei apologized to his best friend.
“Xiao Wei, I know what you guys think about my father and me. It is true. My father took the commune’s food, public property. Do you know why he did it? He did it to save my life. I was sick, but our food from the commune had run out. The commune and our relatives did not want to help us. My father was the commune food safe guard, and he did it. He took it.” Ming Sheng wiped his tears.

Ming Sheng asked, “Xiao Wei, let me ask you a question. Is your mother a landowner’s daughter?”

“I am not sure. Maybe. Anyway, I am confused, too. My father said when I grow up, I will understand,” Xiao Wei said.

“My mom said that all landowners in our commune were dead. Even landowners’ wives, daughters, sons were all dead. No landowners in our commune. You mom is alive, so she is not a landowner’s daughter,” Ming Sheng said.

“That’s right!” Xiao Wei became happy. His mom was alive, and her being alive was more important than anything. And his mom was not a landowner’s daughter.

They continue to play the hide and go seek game.

“Hey, listen to my stomach. I feel really hungry. Would you allow me to eat one? Don’t tell Guo Jen and my father,” Xiao Wei pleaded.

“In the name of Chairman Mao, I will not release this secret. Just one. Ok?” Ming Sheng swore to Xiao Wei.

“I trust you. Could you help me keep watch?” Xiao Wei begged. Xiao Wei quickly took one eggplant and bit into it. “You should have taken a smaller one. It is the commune’s property,” Ming Sheng stayed on his knees and said lightly.

“I thought about it. But small eggplants are green. They are bitter, man. Purple eggplants are mature.” Xiao Wei laughed at Ming Sheng’s poor knowledge of agriculture.

“Hey, Ming Sheng, come here. Nobody will notice us. I have almost finished it. Do you want some?”

Ming Sheng could not resist the temptation and ate what was left of the eggplant. Xiao Wei found that after Ming Sheng ate his eggplant, he took another one quickly.

“You are so hungry. You even ate the skin of the eggplant,” Ming Sheng said.

“You are picky. I don’t want to waste public property. But the skin’s taste is weird and a little bitter.”
“You don’t have to eat it,” Xiao Wei reminded Ming Sheng.

Suddenly, Xiao Wei held his stomach and rested on his knees, “Oh my god. My stomach. It’s painful.”

“Are you ok? No kidding?” Ming Sheng was eager to know what had happened to his buddy. Xiao Wei was not pretending like he usually did when they played the weapon toy game. Usually, Xiao Wei pretended he was sacrificing himself for the new China liberation war. But this time, Xiao Wei’s face became pale with tears and sweat.

“I am in so much pain,” Xiao Wei said. Ming Sheng was scared and also cried. He stood up from the eggplant fields and cried loudly.

“Come on. Don’t cry. Don’t let the others know that we ate eggplants. Keep our secret. You promised me.”

Xiao Wei’s moan and Ming Sheng’s cry got the peasants to run toward them. All the peasants wore masks. They were spreading 666 pest-control poison on the eggplants. The peasants took off their masks and protective clothing.

“Oh, Jesus. This kid ate poisoned eggplants,” said one peasant.

“It’s Big Chen’s second son.”

“Hurry. Send them to the commune clinic,” an elder peasant suggested.

“Ok. I will look for Big Chen,” one young peasant run out of eggplant field. The elder peasant put Xiao Wei on his back and went to the commune clinic. Ming Sheng cried and followed along with another two peasants.

“Please look at this kid. He ate eggplants in the field,” peasants begged the doctor in the clinic.
Chapter 9
Fake Doctor

The clinic was close to the Office of the Village Communist Party Committee. It was only a big room with a bed and a cabinet with some pill bottles.

“Who allowed the children to eat commune eggplants? The eggplants cannot be distributed to commune members until they are mature. Don’t you know they are national property?” The clinic doctor with white clothing yelled at the peasants and Ming Sheng.

This clinic doctor actually was not a real doctor. He was the husband of our teacher, Guo Jen. His father was the leader of the county, and he had sent him to a clinic school for three months of training. He just learned how to perform basic injections and use cotton to bandage cuts.

One peasant was angry. He yelled to him, “Dr. Wang, the poor boy ate the poisoned skin of the eggplants. It’s really serious. He will die if you don’t help him.” Dr. Wang lit a cigarette, and enjoyed his smoking. He knew Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng because his wife regularly complained to him about their lack of discipline. Usually, peasants needed to bribe him with cigarettes, some eggs, meat or vegetables, begging him for a sick leave notice or some pills. Dr. Wang was waiting for that.

“Are you going to help him or not? Tell me.” Another peasant became angry. He did not call him “Dr. Wang” any more.
Dr. Wang recognized the serious situation, which was different than before. He stamped out the cigarette, “Ok, let me check it.”

He looked terrified when he saw the sweating, pale face of Xaio Wei. All the peasants realized that this “smoking doctor” with his three-month medical background could not do anything for Xiao Wei.

“Honestly, I don’t know how to deal with it. This is only my first month,” Guo Jen’s husband murmured.

“Anyone else here?”

“Yes. Maybe Dr. Bai will know what to do,” he added.

Doctor Bai had studied at a medical school in the U.S. and worked in a private hospital until 1949. Although he was not a landowner or rich farmer, he was accused of being a supporter of capitalism. He was forced to do physical labor in the field and he was replaced by Guo Jen’s husband. After Doctor Bai was removed, the Communist Party secretary arranged instead for his inexperienced son to work in the clinic.

The peasants ran out of the clinic and found the doctor in the field.

“Dr. Bai, help,” they called. Doctor Bai went back to the clinic, “I order you, take a look at this kid who ate public property. This little bastard ate poisoned eggplants,” Dr. Wang ordered Dr. Bai. Dr. Bai was quiet and did not even look at him. Dr. Bai put on his glasses and listened to Xiao Wei’s heart.

“The kid’s heart is still jumping.” He turned to Ming Sheng, “Could you let me know, how many eggplants did he eat? And when?”

“One, oh, two, no. no, no. He ate one and a half.” Ming Sheng worried about the punishments.

“Did you eat too?”

“Yes, some.” Ming Sheng did not dare say he had also eaten half an eggplant.

“How long ago did you spread the pest-control poison?” Dr. Bai asked the peasants.

“Maybe only 30 to 40 minutes before they ate them.”

“Didn’t you see these two kids?” Dr. Bai asked.

“We didn’t. We moved from the back to the front of the field wearing masks. They hid at the end of the eggplant fields,” the peasants answered.
“What’s the poison’s name?” Dr. Bai asked.
“666, American imported pesticide,” the peasants answered.
“It is a serious poison. He needs to wash his stomach. But we don’t have an operation station here. Send him to the county hospital as soon as possible,” Dr. Bai said.
“Can you go with us,” Dr. Bai hesitated. “I should go, but I cannot,” he cast a sidelong glance at Dr. Wang. “You guys should go. Hurry up, please!”

There were no cars in the commune. Only a tractor was available. Xiao Wei was laid down in the cart of the tractor. It was a bumpy ride, but he couldn’t feel it.

Xiao Wei found the white clouds and blue sky moved with him. It was so bright. Those clouds were different pictures, such as tanks, guns and helicopters. He dreamed that he moved with clouds in a car, in train, ship and airplane, all his favorite toys. Right now his dreams came true. He was moving right along with the clouds on the real fast tractor. He was eager to tell his best buddy, Ming Sheng, about this.

He tried his best to turn his head and look for Ming Sheng. He found Ming Sheng’s face was stained with tears. He wondered why Ming Sheng did not feel happy. Flying together was their dream. They lied down on the ground and talked about flying in an airplane again and again. Ming Sheng must be so happy he was crying. Xiao Wei figured he could share the story with their classmates the next day during the break time. Ming Sheng would be his witness.

Suddenly Xiao Wei felt very cold.

He wanted to go to a warm land where his mom would smile at him. His father and brother would both work in the yard and stand up to smile at him. “Xiao Wei is home. I’ve cooked delicious dumplings for us all,” his mom would wave her hand and call him. However, he did not eat his mom’s dumplings for long time.

The blue sky turned grey and dark. The white clouds disappeared. There would be a thunderstorm.

“I want to go home. Mom will worry about me.” He moaned. Finally, they arrived at the county hospital.

“I can’t heal him. Why didn’t you send him faster? You sent me a body,” the doctor said.
“Xiao Wei, don’t die. Wake up. Wake up,” Ming Sheng cried and shook Xiao Wei.

Ming Sheng fell down on the floor and said, “Help, my stomach is in pain.” Ming Sheng was sent to the operation room. The doctor operated on him. Fortunately, Ming Sheng was saved.

Both Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng’s parents arrived at the hospital. Xiao Wei’s father held Xiao Wei’s cold body and cried, “My son. My dear son. I am a bad father. I did not take care of you. I am sorry. I should not beat you. Come home with your father.”

Some people who were passing by in the hallway said, “See? His son stole the commune’s public property… Now he is dead.”

“What a terrible dad.”

“I heard his mother was the daughter of a landowner. Is that true? …” Xiao Wei’s father glared at those cold-hearted people with tears in his eyes. He said, “My poor son’s mom is a mental patient. My kid was starving and ate two eggplants that I planted. What’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with that?”

Both Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng’s seats were occupied by other students. When we sat in the classroom, we all heard fireworks outside the classroom. It was Xiao Wei’s funeral.

“Teacher Guo, can I see Xiao Wei outside?” I asked.

“See him? Do you want to die like Xiao Wei or go to the hospital like Ming Sheng? They are bad boys. If my husband had not sent them to the hospital, they both would have died right away. They deserved it. Everyone stay here. If anyone wants to go out and doesn’t obey my orders, Xiao Wei and Ming Sheng can serve as your examples.”

Neighboring classes with older students, Xiao Wei’s brother’s classmates, all ran out of their classrooms.

We didn’t know who the first brave student in my classroom was. That student ran out from our classroom. Then other students ran out right after. Guo Jen couldn’t stop us because she had to hold her baby in her arms.

Most of the girls and some of the boys cried. We saw a small black coffin. Xiao Wei was lying in it wearing new clothes.
Xiao Wei’s mother did not cry and laugh like before. She had no clue what exactly had happened. She asked the crowds of people,

“How do you know where my son is? Xiao Wei is my good boy. When it gets dark, he always comes home with me. Where is he? I cooked delicious food for my son. Where is he?”

I remembered Xiao Wei.

He was in heaven. There were no poisoned eggplants there.

This is the end of the first part of the Secret File
Glossary

B
Beijing The capital of the People’s Republic of China. It is also the second largest city in China after Shanghai. It was where 2008 Olympic Games was held.

C
Capitalism An economic and social system. Investment and ownership of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained by private individuals or corporations.

Chairman The highest office of an organized group. The chairman presides over meetings of the assembled group and conducts its business in an orderly fashion. Mao Zedong was the first chairman of the Communist Party of China.

China Communist Youth League A youth movement of the People’s Republic of China for youth ages of 14-28. It was functioned as an all-purpose school for party members.

Class Status Also known as social status or social class in the United States. A group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status. Americans believes in a three-class model that includes the “rich,” the “middle class,” and the “poor.”
Communism  A social structure in which classes are abolished and property is commonly controlled. A system of social organization in which all economic and social activity is controlled by a totalitarian state dominated by a single and self-perpetuating political party.

Communist Party  A political party advocating the principles of communism. The name originates from the 1848 tract *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels.

Cultural Revolution  A period of widespread social and political upheaval in the People’s Republic of China between 1966-1976 which resulted in nation-wide chaos and economic disarray.

D
Deng Xiaoping  A Chinese politician, statesman, theorist and diplomat. He was a leader of the Communist Party of China and became a reformer and led China towards a market economy.

F
Face Losing  (Losing face) meaning a sense of worth that comes from knowing one’s status and reflects concern with the congruency between one’s performance or appearance and one’s real worth. To lose status or become less respectable.

Files  These personnel files were used by the Communist Party to record each Chinese citizen’s performance. For example, when people sought new jobs or wanted to join the Communist Party, their files would be checked first.

G
Glossary  An alphabetical list of terms in particular domain of knowledge with the definitions for those terms.
Grade Rankings  (Ranking) is a relationship between a set of items such that, for any two items, the first is either ‘ranked higher than,’ or ‘ranked lower than’ or ‘ranked equal to’ the second.

Great Leap Forward  is a campaign in Chinese history that was undertaken by the Chinese communists between 1958 and early 1960 to organize its vast population, especially in large-scale rural communes, to meet China’s industrial and agricultural problems.

K
Korean War  A military conflict between the Republic of Korea, supported by the United Nations, and the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union.

L
Landowner  A holder of the estate in land with considerable rights of ownership.

Lantern Festival  A Chinese festival celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunar year in the Chinese calendar.  Based on history, at this day, people will try to solve the puzzles on the lanterns and eat glutinous rice ball to gather the family around for a joyful atmosphere.
Lei Feng  A soldier

Li Bai (701 -762)  Chinese famous poet in Tang Dynasty

M
Moon Festival  (Mid-Autumn Festival) also known as Moon Festival is a popular harvest festival celebrated by Chinese and Vietnamese people (although celebrated differently), dating back over 3,000 years to moon worship in China’s Shang Dynasty.
One-Child policy  The population control policy of People’s Republic of China. It restricts the number of children married urban couples can have to one.

Open-door policy  Deng Xiaoping opened China’s market to the West and began diplomatic relations. Chinese students were sent to other universities, and Chinese universities accepted students from around the world.

People’s Liberation Army  The unified military organization of all land, sea, and air forces of the People’s Republic of China. It is the world’s largest military force with approximately 3 million members.

Ping Pong Diplomacy  refers to the exchange of ping pong players between the United States and People’s Republic of China in the 1970s.

Proletarian  A member of the lowest social class. It was originally identified as those who had no wealth other than their sons.

Propaganda  A form of communication aimed at influencing the attitude of a community toward some cause or position. It presents facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis, or uses loaded messages to produce an emotional rather than rational response to the information presented.

Public Commune  Several peasant families made up a public commune, and each commune had a party secretary in charge of food distribution and citizenship.

Pu-yi  The last Emperor of China. He was 12 and the final member of the Qing Dynasty to rule over China.
R

Richard Nixon  He was the 37th President of the United States and was the only president to resign the office and also the only person to be elected twice to both the Presidency and the Vice Presidency.

S

Secret Policewoman  (Espionage) involves an individual obtaining information that is considered secret or confidential without the permission of the holder of the information.

Secretary of the Communist Party  the highest ranking official within the Communist Party of China and heads the Politburo of the Communist Party of China.

Shanghai  The largest city in China with over 20 million people.  It is located on China’s central eastern coast just at the mouth of the Yangtze River.

Soviet Union  It was a constitutionally socialist state that existed in Eurasia from 1922-1991.  USSR was established in 1922 as a Communist state.  Official name Union of Soviet Socialist Republics also called Russia Soviet Russia.

Spring Festival  The most important Chinese holiday and is often called the Lunar New Year, especially by people in mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

T

Taiwan  The largest island of the Republic of China in East Asia and is also known as Formosa.  It is located east of the Taiwan Strait, off the southeastern coast of mainland China.
Vietnam War  Was fought between the communist North Vietnam, supported by its communist allies, and the government of South Vietnam, supported by the United States and other anti-communist nations.  It is also known as the Second Indochina War.

Watergate Scandal  a political scandal in the United States in the 1970s.  It was resulted from the break-in into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C.

Young Pioneers  an organization for children operated by a communist party.  Usually the child enters into the organization during elementary school and continues until their adolescence at 14 years old.
Outstanding Teenagers Students’ Files in China
Chapter I
First Day of Middle School

On the first day of the middle school orientation, students were ordered to line up. Principal Mu read the list of names. I had been selected to go to an honor class. Eric Wong was also in my class, so we became classmates again. I also met some new classmates from different elementary schools, including Wong Faye, the announcer of song competition. However, I could not have an opportunity to talk to her.

We had new teachers with different courses, including Chinese, math, English, history, political science, geology, biology, music, drawing, and physical education.

On September 10, it was Teachers’ Day.

Mrs. Zhang, the new teacher, said that good students could join the China Communist Youth League. The Communist Youth League of China, also known as the China Youth League, was a youth movement of the People's Republic of China for people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. The league was organized based on the party pattern and run by the Communist Party of China. The Communist Youth League was responsible for guiding the activities of the Young Pioneers (for children below the age of fourteen).

“To become a member of the League is an honor, since it is so competitive and the records will be put in our files forever” Mrs. Zhang asked. “Who is planning to join the Communist Youth League?”

Everyone raised their hands, including Eric, Faye and me.

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Questions for Dr. Jack Liu

Q: Why did you choose A Child Left Behind as the title of your book?
Dr. Liu: I am starting from where I think a lot of Americans start, the No Child Left Behind policy. Ironically, I found that the grade ranking did get children “left behind.”

Q: When did you start to write this book? Why?
Dr. Liu: In 2004, I gave a speech about China at Creaked Crook School in Indiana. After my lecture, I talked to American children and answered their questions. I found that their minds were like mine when I was a child, regarding teachers, grades, friendship, the possibility of being held back, courage and parents. After so many years of dedication, I showed my potential for success in many ways. One of my dreams was to write a book that shares my childhood experiences in China with young readers. Now my dream has come true.

Q: What are the unique features of your book?
Dr. Liu: This is a book regarding courage, friendship, perseverance and honesty. This is also a book regarding Chinese education, culture and history. It doesn’t only focus on what happened in China in its communist times. I believe that young readers are eager to know why these things happened.

Q: How did you structure the story?
Dr. Liu: This book is based on the communist system development. My classroom was like a small society that exactly reflected the Chinese society at that time. Everyone lived under the control of the Communist Party, including kids.

My father struggled to join the Communist Party, and I also struggled to join the Young Pioneers. Every Chinese lived under the communist system. Anyone could be a secret policeman and report other people’s performance to gain a better record in their own files.

My father could not reunite with my mom for almost twenty years because of political faults he made that were recorded in his file. The same unfortunate circumstance
occurred for my music teacher, Mr. Ma. He lost his life before he could reunite with his wife and son in Beijing. In addition, Sara’s parents wanted to move back to the big city, Shanghai, but they had to officially move their files first.

The file was like an individual’s fate being held in the hands of the Communist Party.

**Q: Describe the main characters in your book.**

Dr. Liu: The three primary characters are Jack Liu (me), Eric Wong and Sara Lee. Each of these students represents a different category of academic achievement ranging from low-achieving, average, and high-achieving. It shows how each child struggled with pressures from teachers, parents, and classmates.

Sara is a beautiful girl from Shanghai, a big city. Both Sara’s mother and father were intellectual people who had graduated from the same university in Shanghai. But the government sent them to Northern China, where they were treated as unskilled workers and were paid meager salaries. Both of Sara’s parents wanted a son, but Sara was a girl. Their parents still treated her like a boy.

Later, Sara transferred to Shanghai for middle school. In some ways, Sara relived my story as a transfer student, but she went from being a high-achieving student to a low-achieving student, while I went from being a low-achieving student to a high-achieving one.

Eric Wong was an average student who loved learning to use computers. His mother died in the Cultural Revolution. He had a cruel stepmother. When Sara and Eric Wong became class cadres, their friendship was beyond me. However, when they lost their political positions, they became my friends again.

**Q: How would you evaluate your father?**

Dr. Liu: My father played the role of an angry firefighter. Later on in life, he played the role of my tutor. Usually, double roles are challenging for parents. Parents can spoil their children, but teachers should not spoil their students. If a student does not finish an assignment, a father will say ok, and then the teacher will punish the student. Parents are not teachers; they use their authority to scold their children and add more pressure to their
children’s lives. The parents’ and teachers’ first task is to know and understand a student’s specific “problems” through observation. Unfortunately, in my situation, they didn’t.

**Q: How did your father do later on in life?**
Dr. Liu: When he got older, he quit his job as a firefighter and later worked for my school. Because he was a firefighter, he was an expert using water. He was in charge of the school water and heating system until he retired.

**Education Questions**

**Q: What’s the difference between teacher and student?**
Dr. Liu: Teachers know the answers and students do not. As a matter of fact, a good teacher should teach students to find the answer by themselves, also known as problem solving skills. I believe education is an interaction between teacher and student.

**Q: What are problem solving skills?**
Dr. Liu: Problem solving skills are knowledge about how to find results. My teachers usually taught based on the assumption that students were full of knowledge about things they had already learned. When they found that students could not keep up with the teaching, they would give up on them.

According to the education psychologist, Vosky said that the heart of problem solving is matching skills. Students match the mistakes that they made to the answers from teachers or reference books. Matching skills can be treated as a capacity of imitating and modeling.

**Q: What’s the ideal learning environment?**
Dr. Liu: Teachers and parents should build an environment that ensures learning will be “fun” and “interesting.” Then, kids’ behavior will be better. Children’s academic success or failure is determined by encouragement from teachers and parents.

**Q: What would you suggest for other teachers?**
Dr. Liu: A teacher’s role is to connect with parents, not only to provide report cards, but also to provide the strategies, solutions, and students’ development/achievement that she/he created and observed. My parents had worried too much about their “face” and were too afraid of being embarrassed. Parents should pay more attention to their children’s problem solving skills and how they face their problems, attitudes, and actions.

**Q: The Cultural Revolution has been over for many years. Do you think it still influences people today?**

Dr. Liu: Yes. Recently, I went back to China, and I found a linguistic issue. During the Cultural Revolution, people greeted each other not like English, “How are you doing?” but instead asked questions regarding people’s privacy. In China, one of the common greetings is “Where did you go?” This is one of the typical examples of the Chinese practice to observe other people’s lives. Everyone wants to know where you have been. You should respond quickly that you went to the supermarket to buy groceries or that you went to the post office. Usually, they will continue to ask further questions, such as inquiring about to whom you wrote the letter.