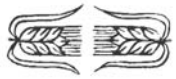

Touch the Body, Touch the Soul

The Life of an Educated Youth during the Cultural Revolution

by
Fang Yuan

Edited by
Timothy D. Liebermann

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Written by Fang Yuan
Edited by Timothy D. Liebermann
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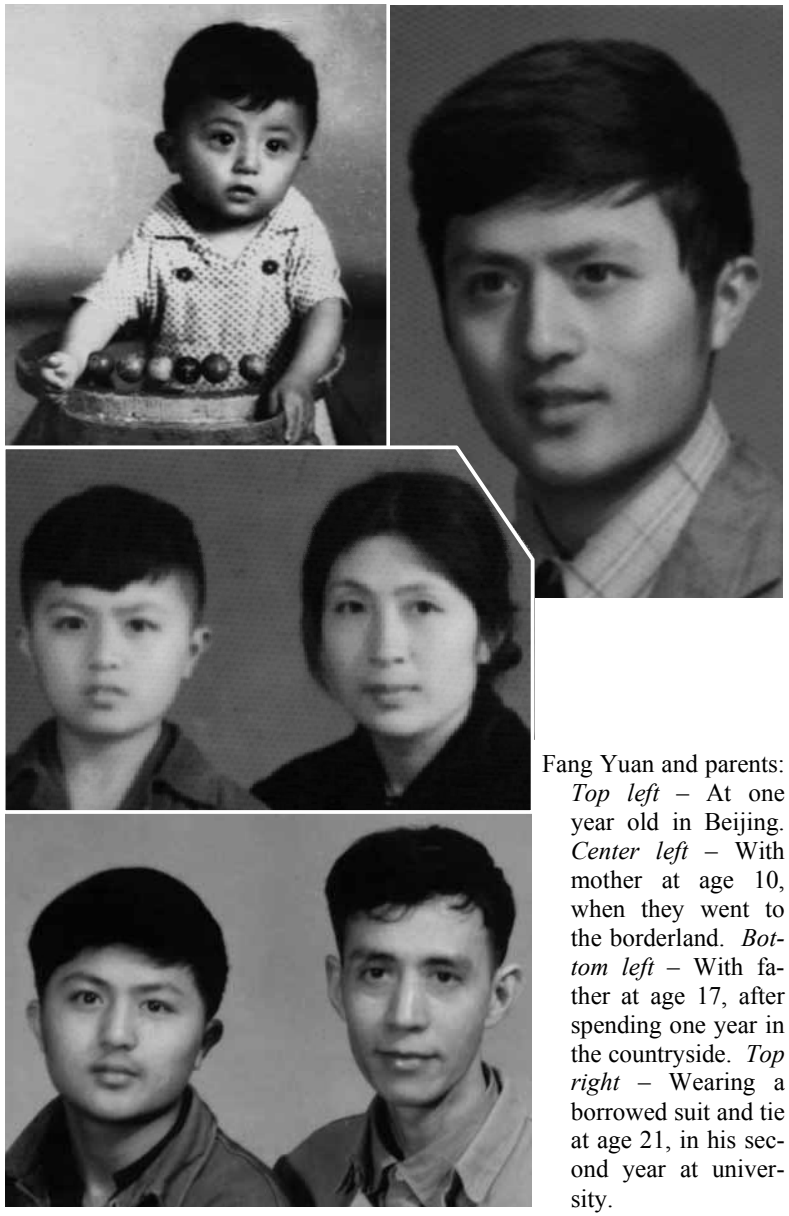


Fang Yuan and parents: *Top left* – At one year old in Beijing. *Center left* – With mother at age 10, when they went to the borderland. *Bottom left* – With father at age 17, after spending one year in the countryside. *Top right* – Wearing a borrowed suit and tie at age 21, in his second year at university.

Xiangtan during the Great Leap Forward: *Top* – Aerial view of Ming Zhu (Democracy St.) residential district. *Bottom* – Central post office building. Slogans on left and right read, "Great liberation in ideas, great leap forward in production." *(Top photo from early 1960's, bottom from 1958)*

Middle-school students share heavy labor during the Great Leap Forward: *Top* – Pouring molten iron from a "backyard furnace." *Bottom* – Using a forge and sledgehammers to make farm implements. *(Photos from 1958)*

Touch the Body, Touch the Soul

Early days of the Cultural Revolution: *Above* – Former government officials are criticized at a meeting on the largest public square in Xiangtan. Banner across the top reads, "Mass meeting for thoroughly criticizing [names of three officials], who have committed sky-reaching crimes in Xiangtan." On left and right are lines from a Chairman Mao poem: "We shouldn't follow the example of the old emperors who sought to be kind; we should use our valor to pursue our exhausted enemies." The crowd is holding aloft copies of the Little Red Book. *Top of next page* – The bell-tower building at the middle school. It was used as a headquarters for factional gangs during the Cultural Revolution. *Bottom of next page* – Class photo taken inside the main gate of the middle school. Students are wearing Chairman Mao badges and holding the Little Red Book. Several PLA soldiers are in the second row. Mural of a younger Chairman Mao, wearing an eight-angled hat, is painted on concrete. Inscription contains lines from a Chairman Mao poem: "When the army and the people are united as one, no enemy can defeat us." *(Photos from 1966, early 1970's, and 1969)*

Preface

Touch the Body, Touch the Soul is the uniquely Chinese story of my early life. It begins with my father's experiences during World War II and the Great Leap Forward and continues with my earliest memories—memories of hunger. The focal point of the book is the 10-year period known as the Cultural Revolution. During that time millions of "educated youth" were moved from the cities to the Chinese countryside, where they labored in the fields and were "re-educated" by the peasants.

I have described the events of those troubling and chaotic times through the lens of my own eyes and emotions. Although many of the stories may seem ridiculous or farfetched in the light of today, nevertheless, they are true reflections of my experiences. The great majority of my memories concern sadness, hardship, and endless tedium. I have winnowed those memories into a narrative framework and placed them within an historical perspective. In addition, I have given the reader my humorous and joyful moments, for these are such as make the hard times bearable and give meaning to our lives.

At the beginning, it often was said that "the Cultural Revolution will be a soul-touching movement." This promise was printed in the newspapers and proclaimed from the loudspeakers that hung at the corners of the sports ground of my school. The phrase was coined by some of the "ruffians of words" to fill our minds with revolutionary ideas.

I adopted the title of this book from that phrase. "Touch the body" refers to the hard life of heavy physical labor and poor living conditions that the Chinese people were made to bear. It also refers to the physical punishment and hardship that were inflicted on those who were labeled as "class enemies."

By the words "touch the body, touch the soul" I'm referring to the full range of physical and psychological methods that were employed during the Cultural Revolution to control and manipulate the Chinese people. By observing the criticism and punishment of the "bad elements" in society, we were trained to accept violence and hatred and to become indifferent to the suffering of others.

At its fundamental level, "touch the soul" translated into a loss of individuality and freedom of thought, a loss of our spiritual qualities, and the removal of higher beliefs and aspirations.

Life was hard. Everyone endured physical suffering and mental anguish, but the worst damage was to the collective spirit of the Chinese people. Humans are born with the spirit to persevere, sacrifice, and work to make a better life. This noble and creative spirit was wrongly used by the Gang of Four. As a result, our spirits were damaged and our society lost its soul.

As a young boy, I adapted to my surroundings. I accepted the suffering and didn't spend much time seeking explanations. As I grew a little older, the Cultural Revolution began. The disorder quickly engulfed every aspect of our lives. My father was persecuted, and the schools more or less were closed. As conditions grew more bizarre, I began to observe more closely what was happening to society. The situation was tragic and horrific, but there was no chance to escape or alter my fate. Though I found ways to divert myself, I felt that my spirit was empty. Eventually I was sent to live as a peasant in the countryside, with no prospect of return. I lost hope; I was one of the educated youth.

The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution movement [1] was like a dome that shielded China from the outside world and kept it from developing. Young people were encouraged to make revolution, and they created an environment of chaos. The leaders of the movement purged their perceived enemies and attempted to re-establish class struggle as the permanent occupation of the masses of society.

The bad elements of society, those people with poor family histories or who were considered untrustworthy, were criticized and given

[1] 1966 to 1976. See Appendix III for more information.

the most menial and degrading jobs. They were reduced to sub-human status. The purpose was to touch the bodies and souls of all the people—to encourage the bad elements to purge themselves of their past associations and to harden the masses against liberal thinking.

We were content simply to survive. We were powerless and vulnerable. Any deviation from the expected behavior carried a big risk. No one wanted to be criticized. Though the Chinese word *pi pan* is usually translated as "criticizing," no single English word conveys the full meaning. In addition to censure, criticism usually was accompanied by vitriolic harangues, public humiliation, and physical punishment.

We knew nothing of the outside world. Western books were forbidden. Even the Chinese classics were removed from the curriculum on the grounds that they glorified feudalism and contained no revolutionary ideas.

All of our thoughts and activities were organized around the concept of class struggle, of the battle between the proletariat and bourgeois capitalism. We were trained to do without, even to mistrust, physical comfort. We were told to wash away our bourgeois ideas with the sweat of our labor. There was no room for anything else: beauty, art, philosophy, or religion.

Our concept of soul was strictly non-religious. We were taught that spirit was simply a function of our brain and that all religious ideas resulted from psychological defects. Only our strength of will and dedication to revolutionary principles were considered important.

During the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, many young people joined the Red Guards to rebel and make revolution. Their disruptive activities brought the country to a standstill. Production was on the brink of collapse, and job prospects for young people were bleak. Chairman Mao dissolved the Red Guards and sent the excess youth to the countryside under the high-sounding ideal of serving society and becoming tempered and re-educated. Once there, they were ignored.

When I finished middle school, I was sent to the country as an educated youth. For three years I served an apprenticeship of physical hardship and spiritual vacancy. In 1976 the dome of the sky finally changed. The Gang of Four was smashed, and the Cultural Revolution ended. Hundreds of millions of people were affected. Most of the educated youth in the countryside could look forward only to dull factory jobs or common labor. I was one of the lucky ones, though, and a door of opportunity opened for me. I was among the first to leave the countryside and enter college.

A voice for writing

Following the Cultural Revolution a group of young authors in China became known as the "educated youth writers." These men had shown literary talent in middle school, but had had no opportunity to go on to college. Instead, they had been sent to northern China or Yunnan province to work on huge farming communes, which held 100,000 people or more. Even so, they harbored literary ambitions, and many kept daily journals of their experiences.

For the most part, they wrote semi-autobiographic novels about educated youth in the countryside. They wrote for a Chinese audience; to my knowledge, none of their works have been translated into English. A few of the novels were made into Chinese-language films. For example, one film tracked the lives of several young men from Shanghai who were sent to a large plantation in Yunnan. Within a few years they all got married and settled down to family life. After the end of the countryside movement, some of them divorced their wives, abandoned their children, and returned to the city to seek a different future.

My experiences were quite different. In general, the educated-youth writers were older than myself, had gone to the countryside early in the Cultural Revolution, and had stayed there for six or eight or even ten years. I was sent to a small commune near my home. I lived for a while with a peasant family. I stayed in the countryside for only three years and did not get married. Later I attended college and studied English. At the time, I had no ambitions as an author.

By the time I moved to Hainan province, I had matured mentally and had found a voice for writing. I prepared for years, until I felt qualified as a full "professor of educated youth." I studied original materials and the histories and analyses about that period, and I read the novels of the educated youth. I collected the stories of friends and colleagues. I knew that my personal experiences and perspectives were unique, and I wanted to share them with readers in the West.

In writing this book, I have drawn about 90 percent of the material from my personal experiences. The remaining 10 percent are drawn from the memories of people with a similar background or from Chinese-language references. Some of these are incorporated into the story, and the rest are included as footnotes or in the appendices.

My father's story

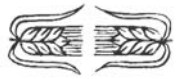
My father's troubles began in 1959 when his cousin naïvely mailed him a letter from Taiwan. My father was called in for questioning and was dismissed from his job. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, my father's link with Taiwan branded him as a spy and a bad element in society. He was criticized, humiliated, stripped of his teaching job, and forced to live in a shed and do hard labor.

In 1987 my father's cousin finally was allowed to travel to Hong Kong to meet some of his relatives from the mainland. Word came back to my father that his cousin had asked about him and had cheerfully sent him his regards. The cousin still had no idea that the innocent letter had caused so much trouble and hardship. My father sat for awhile and looked through the window into the distance. "Thanks to my cousin's letter," he grumbled to me, "we have suffered so much."

Since that day my father hasn't tried to contact his cousin. He cannot forget those years of persecution, and his heart has never since been at peace. The ruffians of the Cultural Revolution had bent his body and scarred his soul forever. For him, paradise can exist nowhere except in the distant memories of his childhood.

No matter how much hardship and suffering I may have endured, my father's trials and disappointments were far greater than mine. It is to him and my mother that I gratefully dedicate this book.

Fang Yuan
August 2001



Editor's Note

Two years ago Fang Yuan, whom I know by the name of Frank, invited me to edit his collection of folktales called *Small Windows*. As we talked of many subjects, I realized that his interests in Chinese culture and history extended far beyond traditional folklore. For many years he had been collecting information about the Cultural Revolution and the movement known as "go up the mountain, down to the countryside." He had vivid memories of those troubled times, and he wanted to draw a picture of them to share with others. Eventually we decided to collaborate on an English-language book based on his experiences.

At first I knew little about the Cultural Revolution, except that it had been a turbulent period of political and social unrest. It was difficult to grasp the meaning behind the slogans and jargon of the day, and Frank's stories often seemed more absurd and frightening than a Kafka novel. Frank was patient and humorous as he provided a cultural and historical perspective for his tales.

Late last summer Frank offered to show me the nine-mu platform, the farm where he had labored as an educated youth. He said he had not seen it since the day in 1978 when he had tossed away his straw hat, washed the mud off his feet, and left the countryside to go to university. We took a taxi to the edge of the city and walked down the dusty dirt road that still ran along the top of the levee. On one side the levee sloped down to the Xiang River, where a few barges plied their way upstream. On the other, a patchwork of fields, brick farmhouses, and nondescript buildings stretched toward the horizon. After awhile Frank stopped and looked around, slightly puzzled.

"I know it should be near here," he said, "but everything looks completely different now."

We came to the gates of a disused factory and approached the

gatekeeper. He offered us tea, and Frank talked and joked with him for a few minutes. We offered our thanks, and entered the factory grounds. As we walked along, Frank related what he had learned.

"He said this factory occupies the old land of the nine-mu platform. The factory was built to process some kind of mineral from ore that's brought in by river barge. He said the bosses of the factory stole all the retirement money, so all the old workers are unhappy. I asked about the dormitory that we built, and he said it's still standing."

Behind the main factory building was a tidy, two-story brick building. It was well maintained, and the doors and windows were solid. "It's been fixed up quite a bit since we built it," Frank remarked. "For years it was used as office space for the factory officials."

"See these bricks?" he went on, pointing to the wall. "We made all these bricks by hand, stacked them into a huge pile, and fired them. They originally were yellow, but someone since has painted them red."

I stood in the shade of the trees and studied the building. It was the only trace left here by the educated youth. How many of them had ever returned to see it again. How many preferred to completely forget those years of hardship? Finally Frank broke the mood and said, "Now, let's go and find Mrs. Lu. I still have a promise to keep."

We left the factory and walked down to the fields where he had lived for a year with the farm family. The old houses had been torn down and replaced by brick farmhouses with cement floors. The basic layout of the houses had remained the same, but they were sturdier, brighter, and larger. We asked directions and soon found the home of Mrs. Lu. She was now the grandmother of several children who were scampering about. One mischievous grandson reminded Frank of the boy's father, who often had hidden Frank's shoes and played other tricks on Frank and his companions. After sharing the customary summer hospitality of hot green tea and watermelon, we were invited to stay for lunch. The kitchen was still primitive, with an open, brick-and-earth stove and twigs for fuel, and it still connected in the back to the pig sty. Mrs. Lu's daughter arrived. She had been only a small child during the countryside movement. When she saw Frank, her eyes lit up and she squealed his name. Frank exchanged news and stories of old times as we shared a traditional pepper-laden, Hunan-style meal.

As we left, I looked around at the cluster of farmhouses, the unpaved footpath, and the expanse of rice and vegetable fields. These people were not rich, but they were not starving, either. Most of the children would have an opportunity to make a better life than their parents, and some of them would take it. Some would show an interest in the lessons of the past, but for most, their knowledge of the Cultural Revolution would encompass no more than a few lines in their school textbooks.

It is clear, however, that the self-inflicted wounds of the Cultural Revolution have not all healed. For example, some people link the apparent decline of morals and behavior with the anti-Confucius movements of 1966 and 1974. Traditional wisdom was ridiculed, and students no longer memorized or practiced the maxims of Confucius or Mencius. The model that for thousands of years had provided the moral underpinnings of society was destroyed overnight. Once lost, such a model, like a fragile ecosystem, cannot be easily or quickly restored.

Some 20 years ago China began to open its doors to the outside world. Today China plays a significant role in the global economy. Western merchandise, culture, and concepts circulate freely. The Chinese people are more interested in practical, peaceful development than in ideology and struggle. Unquestionably, China has made great progress. It is my sincere hope that the back-breaking, mind-numbing, soul-stifling darkness that the Cultural Revolution brought has been banished forever from the yellow earth of China.

All of the photographs in this book are authentic to the story. Except for one childhood photo of Fang Yuan, all the photographs were taken in or near Xiangtan during the period spanned by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Some of the photos are drawn from the collection of the Number-Two Middle School in Xiangtan

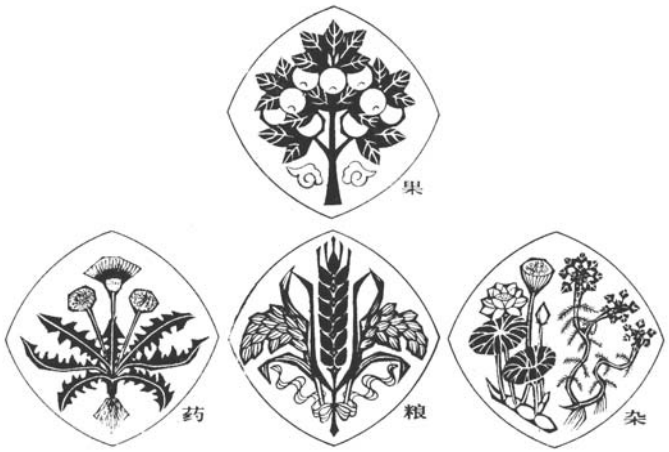
The cover was designed by Zhou Jidong. The incidental artwork throughout the book is from a 1974 publication titled *Art Reference File—Headline Designs: A People's Art Publication, Farm Edition*. It was a collection of designs to help "propagandize revolutionary ideas in the countryside. … The main focus is for those intellectual youth who have gone 'up the mountain, down to the countryside,' for cadres working in the basic production teams, for teachers, and for farmers."

A few Chinese units of measurement are used throughout the book. Conversions are given in footnotes and in Appendix I.

Appendices II and III contain concise summaries of events related to the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, respectively. The material is drawn primarily from standard English-language reference sources. The summaries are included to provide an additional historical perspective within which the reader can interpret Fang Yuan's experiences.

Tim Liebermann
December 2001

Part II



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Beginnings of Chaos

The Cultural Revolution[1] came suddenly to our city and school. The old textbooks were cast away, and the political articles and quotations of Mao Zedong replaced our normal lessons. Every morning before classes began, we all faced Chairman Mao's portrait, waved the Little Red Book,[2] and wished him a long, long life. We were taught how to wave—"not too far above the head, and keep the book close to your chest to show a loyal heart."

We saw Chairman Mao's words painted on walls everywhere. The quotations became part of our daily life and conversation. Everyone was required to carry the Little Red Book at all times; otherwise, one could be criticized for being disloyal. Before getting on a train, a person might be challenged by the conductor to show his book and recite some quotations. If he could not, he was not allowed to board.

All the students in my school were confused by the political jargon. We were told that there was a big time-bomb next to Chairman Mao,[3] but I was too young to understand political symbolism. I tried to picture a big bomb sitting next to him, but it was useless.

Events grew more curious. Some of my classmates changed their names. Their given names, which I had come to use by habit, now

[1] 1966 to 1976. See Appendix III.

[2] *Quotations from Chairman Mao*. This small book was created before the Cultural Revolution by Lin Biao, an old general who eventually replaced Liu Shaoqi. He adopted the ancient Buddhist practices of collecting short passages from religious classics and encouraging rote memorization and recitation. The Little Red Book helped to exalt Chairman Mao and his sayings to quasi-religious status.

[3] This refers to Liu Shaoqi, Mao's apparent successor. The implication was that Liu's policies were dangerous and would eventually destroy Mao and all he had worked for.

were shunned by their former owners. Later I realized their parents were trying to protect them by adapting to the developing situation. For example, someone named Meili (beautiful) might transform herself into Aihong (love red). Some of the names were quite strange and inventive—Tang Hongxin (red heart), Zheng Hanma (protecting Marxism), and Li Yaowu (want force). One classmate even changed his birthday to December 26, in imitation of Chairman Mao.

These relatively harmless symptoms of political instability soon began to exhibit a more sinister nature. Often we heard the leaders of our school telling us to take up our pens as swords and fight to the end against capitalist influences. We were told, "Don't be a tame lamb to capitalism. Grow horns on your head and thorns on your body." We were encouraged to be tough against anyone who had shown capitalist tendencies or had an unclean history.

Teachers with complicated histories were punished. They were paraded on the stage during assemblies at our primary school. Exemplary teachers, those who were fortunate enough to have clean histories, criticized them. Their heads were pressed down and their arms were pulled up and back. The position was called "doing the airplane." These "bad elements" were humiliated, punished, and forced to confess their anti-revolutionary behavior.

One teacher had been the wife of a KMT official, but she had stayed behind when her husband left in 1949. As she stood in front of us with head bowed, the students in our primary school shouted slogans at her, such as "Down with the wife of the KMT. If she doesn't surrender (confess), she will be destroyed." In reality, there was not much for her to confess. All she could say was that she had believed in the Party and had refused to follow her husband to Taiwan.

The school authorities weren't satisfied with her answer. Suddenly an oversized boy from the sixth grade came up to the stage and slapped her face. After that, other sixth-graders went up and pulled her hair. Another shouted that she was a "black ghost"[4] and poured a bottle of classroom ink over her face. Then paper was pasted onto her clothes, with large Chinese characters that slandered her family history and personal character. A long tail was bundled together from straw, soaked in black ink, and attached to her behind.

[4] A strong insult, but not necessarily political.

Another time I saw a crowd of people in front of her home. I worked my way to the front and saw that people were pasting a big-character poster[5] onto her window. A big poster-board was hung around her neck. On the board, her name had been crossed out with a big red "X," and the name "Black Ghost" was written below. The crowd forced her to walk around and beat a gong, saying "I'm an evil woman."

At this time, big-character posters were appearing everywhere. One teacher had come back to China after living for a few years in Macau. A poster appeared about her: "Why did you give up your comfortable life in Macau? You must be a spy of the western powers. Confess your real intention or there will be no road left for you to follow."

In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, I was shocked by what I saw. Gradually my shock was replaced by horror, as everything around me became like a strange and terrible dream.

Sudden changes occurred within my family. My father was taken out and criticized as a traitor and spy, because it was known that he had a relative in Taiwan. Along with about ten teachers from his middle school, he was labeled as a bad element. Whenever he was outside, he had to carry a big poster that hung on his chest. He was no longer trusted to teach his "revolutionary students." Instead, he was given all the dirty jobs around the school. He worked in the schoolyard, hoeing weeds and watering the vegetables and trees.

Though my father worked every day in the schoolyard, he never became good at the heavy physical labor. In summer he had to carry pails of water on a shoulderpole.[6] His mealtimes were reduced from the standard two hours to 30 minutes. Whenever he delayed returning to work, someone called his name from downstairs. Then he would lay aside his bowl and chopsticks, open the door, hang the poster around his neck, and go back to his heavy work.

[5] Big-character posters were ubiquitous during the Cultural Revolution. Criticisms, abusive labels, and caricatures were painted onto large sheets of paper. The posters were pasted on buildings or draped around the necks of "bad elements" in society.

[6] Shoulderpoles have been used for centuries to carry heavy loads. A strong piece of split bamboo rests on the shoulders, and a basket or pail hangs from each end of the pole.

As elsewhere across China, the official leaders of the Xiangtan City government were replaced by a Revolutionary Committee. The old officials were labeled as followers of Liu Shaoqi, strongly criticized in mass meetings, and lampooned in cartoons. The mayor of Xiangtan committed suicide. The new leaders had little experience or interest in government management. Following the directives of Chairman Mao, their policy was simply to cast out the old leaders and make revolution.

The relative peace of my father's school was ruined by the Red Guards.[7] One movement during that time was to destroy the "four olds"—old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits. The Red Guards could come into a home at any time and search it. They especially targeted the homes of people who had been prosperous. Paintings, statues, vases, a grandfather clock, an old fan, costumes from the Beijing opera—all were confiscated and piled in the middle of the sports ground. The offending objects then were smashed to bits in front of a crowd.

A teacher of English at the middle school was targeted because of a casual remark he had made before the Cultural Revolution began. He had commented innocently that Western people did not make slurping noises when they drank soup or ate noodles. Someone remembered this and the Red Guards criticized him. A big-character poster stated: "When we, the proletariat class, drink soup and eat noodles, we are proud to make a big slurping sound. Silent eating is the decadent lifestyle of the bourgeoisie."[8]

One night we were awakened by loud noises from downstairs. We left our second-floor apartment and saw crowds of students, wearing Red Guard armbands and squeezing into the large hall of the middle school. They had come from another province and were on a "revolutionary march." They were on their way to visit Shaoshan, the birth-

[7] Revolutionary youth who wore red armbands. See Appendix III.

[8] Marxism was based on the concept of permanent class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In Marxist terms, proletariat refers to the property-less working class—including farmers, workers, and soldiers—and bourgeoisie refers to the capitalist employers and land owners.

place of Chairman Mao,[9] and had stopped in Xiangtan overnight. They carried a large banner that identified them as the "Red Battle Team."

It was common for groups of Red Guards to move around and visit sites with a revolutionary history. This night they had arrived too late to hold a big meeting, so they simply went to sleep. In the morning I went downstairs to look around. I noticed that one young Red Guard woman was carrying an urn. She explained that her twin sister had died of encephalitis and that she was carrying her sister's ashes as she marched to all the revolutionary sites. She was admired by her companions for showing such devotion to Chairman Mao during her bereavement.

The Red Guards traveled wherever they liked and did not need to buy tickets for trains, buses, or boats. They didn't need to pay for medical care or lodging, and they paid very little for their rice coupons. Every city had a Red Guard reception station to assist in accommodating their needs. If the station was unmanned, the Red Guards left a note stating how many rice coupons they had taken and promising that "Everyone will be paid when the revolution wins its final victory."

Another evening as we were having supper, a Red Guard knocked on our door and asked to borrow a pair of scissors. In a few minutes I heard shouting. I was curious, so after I finished eating I went outside to where a crowd had gathered. I was terrified to see that the Red Guards had grabbed a young woman. Two of them were pulling her hands up and back. The one who had borrowed the scissors was cutting off her hair. He sheared one side of her head and left the other untouched.[10] She wept bitterly but did not protest. The Red Guards were responding to a report that she had worn red panties and had therefore insulted the color of the revolution with her private parts.

Fighting broke out between factions of Red Guards, and the sound of rifles became commonplace. Schools were essentially closed, and some of the classrooms at our middle school were occupied by

[9] Chairman Mao was born near the village of Shaoshan, about 45 kilometers west of the city of Xiangtan. Shaoshan is in Xiangtan County, and Xiangtan is well known within China as Chairman Mao's hometown.

[10] This was called "yin-yang head" and was a symbol of degradation and punishment.

Red Guards. Many of the older students from the middle school became Red Guards themselves. I first saw a weapon in the spring of 1967. On my way to the public W.C., I passed by a classroom. The window was open, and I saw a Red Guard cleaning off a grenade with a rag.

One morning I was awakened by an explosion. I hurried to the sound and came to the school's pond. A friend told me that a Red Guard had thrown a grenade into the pond to kill the fish.

Later that day I saw a group of Red Guards wandering around the school grounds with rifles, searching for something to destroy. One of them looked up at the curved eaves of an ancient school building and announced, "That is one of the old things." He aimed at a ceramic dragon and fired. Broken pieces flew into the air. One by one, they destroyed all the ornamentation on all four corners of the building.

My father's middle school was very beautiful. The grounds were filled with flower gardens, tall trees, and fruit orchards. The camphor trees were hundreds of years old. Long-necked cranes nested in those trees, and I loved to watch them at dawn and sunset. The Red Guards used the birds as targets and killed many. The survivors flew away and never returned.

Because they had rifles, it was easy for those young people to take revenge on anyone. The Red Guards from our middle school punished many of their former teachers. One summer afternoon I was wandering around in the classroom building. I found a colleague of my father; he was kneeling on the floor. I stepped back in shock when I saw a long, dead snake wrapped around his neck.[11] He had bruises on his forehead and blood on his face. Some guards were sitting nearby, watching as the teacher's sweat mixed with the dead snake's blood.

Another day I was playing near the pond. In the distance across the pond, I saw several Red Guards blindfold two female teachers. Without warning, one guard quickly raised his rifle and fired. One of the teachers fell to the ground. I ran closer and saw that the guards

[11] The Cultural Revolution adapted images from classical literature and gave political meaning to phrases such as "cows, ghosts, snakes, and demons." Untrustworthy people were described as snakes. Thus the Red Guards had searched the school grounds for a snake, to add to the teacher's humiliation.

were laughing. They had tricked her. She hadn't been hurt, only frightened out of her wits. I soon learned that this was called "false shooting" and was a common practice.

A large old church building stood on our school campus. It had been built by missionaries during the colonial period and had a small bell tower at the top. Several Red Guard factions in succession seized it as their headquarters. The entrances were fortified with sandbags and were relatively easy to defend. Occasionally I heard the electric alarm and the hand-pulled bell summoning the faction members to ward off attackers with sticks and bricks.

Gunfights between factions of Red Guards were common. Each side claimed that it stood firmly on the side of Chairman Mao and accused the other of being anti-revolutionary and a threat to Mao's safety. Occasionally a Red Guard was killed. His comrades paraded the body through the streets and swore to take revenge.

One day two Red Guards were killed in a gunfight and their bodies were displayed in honor at another middle school. One youth, who had not been allowed to become a Red Guard because of his poor family history, had been out fishing. On his way home he heard the news. As he passed the gate of the middle school, he muttered to himself, "It serves them right." A nearby guard heard his remark. He grabbed the boy by his collar, dumped all the fish from his basket, and slapped him hard across the face. Other Red Guards joined in. They demanded that the boy pay for what he had said by asking pardon from the bodies of those revolutionary heroes. They forced him to kneel for several hours beside the bodies. During this time, half the city heard of the incident. I joined the crowd and saw the miserable young man as he knelt, friendless and helpless.

Occasionally an innocent person was injured in the fighting. I heard of a baby that had been killed by a stray bullet. After that, whenever there was the sound of gun fighting, my parents draped a blanket over the table and made me squat underneath until the fighting ended.

During this time the whole society was divided into factions. It was dangerous to try to remain nonaligned and, therefore, without protection. One faction was named "sons and daughters of revolutionary cadres"; other factions were composed of workers or farmers or students. In choosing a faction, one's daily associations were more important than the actual ideology, which was quite confused. Each faction occupied a section of the city and took over a few buildings. Members stood guard and even wired the metal doors with high voltage to electrocute intruders. Passwords were employed; usually these were slogans taken from a revolutionary movie.

My parents aligned themselves with the "common people" faction. It occupied the Xiangtan Hotel, the tallest building in the city, and used it as a headquarters. One afternoon we got news that another faction was going to storm the building. My parents were worried. After dinner we went up to the roof to watch the action, which was about a block away to the east. The streets around the building were thronged with people. They were carrying homemade spears or long, stout sticks. Light reflected off of their makeshift helmets.

The defenders threw down heavy tiles from the roof. They even had some sulfuric acid that they poured into bottles and threw into the crowd. After a few hours, though, their arsenal was depleted, and after midnight they waved a white flag of surrender. Some tried to escape by wrapping themselves in bed quilts and jumping from the lower stories. A few got away by crawling through sewer pipes. It was a sad night for me. The next day, we heard that two people had been killed in the fighting.

Battles like this occurred about twice a month. When they weren't using weapons, the factions armed themselves with slogans from the Little Red Book and staged shouting battles in the street. Each Red Guard convinced himself that he was the most loyal to Chairman Mao.

Once I went to the train station with my mother and was surprised to see barricades and fortifications. They had been erected for defense against a possible invasion by factions from other cities. The four towers of the main bridge that crossed the Xiang River also were sandbagged and manned with machine guns. It appeared that a major battle might start at any time.

Another day I was playing on the sports ground and heard a very loud, low, rumbling sound. We all went out to the street and saw a new battle tank. Everyone along the street stared at it and wondered where it was going. When the tank began to cross the Xiang River bridge, the bridge began to shake ominously under its weight, so the tank headed off in another direction. Everyone was surprised to see a big tank in our city. We had seen tanks only in the movies about the

anti-Japanese resistance war, and those had looked old and slow in comparison.

Later I heard that the tank had been loaded onto a train and carried across the river on the railroad bridge. It was used in a factional battle between Xiangtan and Changsha. The two factions agreed to fight midway between the two neighboring cities. The Xiangtan faction arrived for the battle with a new 30-ton battle tank. When the Changsha guards saw the size and speed of the tank, they turned and fled for their lives.

The police were disorganized and ineffective during this chaotic time. They didn't interfere with any of the Red Guards' activities. The military stood on the sidelines and did not back one faction against another. Acting on local orders, soldiers sometimes appeared on the streets and imposed a curfew or some measure of peace, but sooner or later they were withdrawn.

In 1968 Mao decided to stop the fighting between the factions. He sent troops to the cities to restore order. He cautioned, "We want civil struggle, not military struggle." Some local factions were so convinced that they were the "true" defenders of Chairman Mao that they refused to cooperate with the PLA.

I remember the last fighting in my city, between soldiers of the 47th Army and a local faction. That afternoon my parents dragged me down to the first floor and we huddled in the corner of a windowless room. We heard the loud noises of a battle. After about 45 minutes, the fighting stopped. Armed with machine guns, the army troops had won. They took control of the city and stopped the fighting between the factions.

After some time the soldiers withdrew and returned to their barracks. The remaining Red Guards continued their revolutionary activities and factional quarrels, but they didn't fight with guns anymore.

A "searching house" movement prevailed for awhile. In cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou there had been big capitalist factories before 1949, with rich capitalists who ran them. Many of these former capitalists still lived in China. We occasionally saw stories that the Red Guards had searched a house and found treasure hidden in the walls or under the floors. I think the Red Guards in our city hoped to find something exciting, such as gold bars, old promissory notes, or old

property deeds. These papers were called "sky-changing notes," meaning that they were being held in the hope that the sky would change some day: that Chiang Kai-shek would return and they could reclaim their lost wealth or property.

The Red Guards were mostly youth of middle-school or college age. Many older people also wanted to prove their revolutionary zeal. If a person's father had served as a PLA soldier or suffered at the hands of landlords or capitalists, he could claim to have "red roots." A person with red roots qualified as a true revolutionary fighter, as long as he had no ties to Taiwan, capitalism, or intellectualism.

The Red Guards and the "red roots" often combined to search houses for incriminating materials. Young boys like myself always followed the searchers around to see what might happen.

One day I followed a group to the home of teacher Li. She taught English at my father's school. She had two sons, and her husband was a mining engineer. They had returned from Canada in the early 1950's to serve the new country. A few Red Guards forced the family to stand in a circle while others searched the house. They didn't find any anti-revolutionary material, but after about ten minutes they emerged with a foot-treadle sewing machine.

The leader of the group was a red-roots teacher. She said to teacher Li, "Don't think you can hide from us. We know you must be a spy. Now we will expose your secret before your eyes."

Then the leader ordered the guards to disassemble the sewing machine. They acted as if it were some tricky espionage device for sending secret messages. They meticulously took it apart, examining every piece. I thought to myself that they had been watching too many movies. They couldn't find anything except sewing-machine parts. They huffed quickly away, leaving all the pieces scattered on the ground.

Because the cap of spy and traitor rested uncomfortably on my father's head, it was inevitable that our house would be searched. My father was clever, and he prepared for that day. He destroyed all of the old letters he had saved. Any offhand comment or minor complaint in a letter from a friend might be used as proof of an anti-revolutionary attitude. It was difficult to predict what might be considered harmless or not, so the safest course was to destroy everything.

My father was afraid to burn the old papers, because the smoke might draw attention. Instead, he boiled and shredded them. Then,

little by little, he put the remains at the bottom of our chamber pot and disposed of them down the toilet at the public W.C.

My father had an old spoon. On the back were the words, "Made in USA" and "Stainless Steel." For years we had used that spoon and thought nothing of it, but when the Cultural Revolution came, my father threw the spoon into the pond to avoid trouble. Several times he told me it had been a good spoon, but that we could not dare to use it now.

My father also had a little money and a few food-ration coupons that he had saved. The rice coupons were distributed according to a person's work. An adult was rationed 32 jin of rice per month for physical labor or 29 for "brain labor." Children were given a smaller ration. It was not illegal or anti-revolutionary to save up money and coupons, but he knew the Red Guards would not leave him with anything if they found them.

One day in 1967 he took me into his confidence. He said that a place open to the public eye was often the best place to hide something. He showed me that he had pinned some money and rice coupons onto the underside of a low stool. This was not a typical Chinese hiding place. Usually people hid things under floorboards or in a false hole in the wall. He instructed me that when the Red Guards came, I should act casually and not look at the stool. He also showed me that he had hidden more money inside one of the hollow legs of a bamboo chair.

One day the Red Guards finally came to our door. The three of us were dragged out, and we became an object of curiosity to the neighborhood children. The leader was a red-roots teacher of politics at the middle school.

"You are a deep-hidden spy!" she shouted angrily at my father. "You have connections with Taiwan. You think we don't know your past history, but you're wrong. We revolutionaries are armed with Mao Zedong Thought and are sharp-eyed. None of your tricks can escape us. Today, before we search your house, if you will confess what has been hidden from us, you will have a road open to you. If not, our revolutionary masses will crush your dog head.

"You'd better tell us," she demanded. "What do the 'canola seeds' mean in the letter that came from your cousin in Taiwan? He said: 'When I lived in Hunan, I grew canola. Those seeds were really

good. On the island I can't find such good seeds. Please save some for me.'"

My father was totally perplexed. He knew nothing about any canola seeds. He knew she must be talking about the letter that had caused all the trouble in Beijing in 1959. He had never seen or read the letter, though. It had been intercepted by the PSB, and he knew nothing of its contents. Each work unit had a complete political record of every worker; thus the woman had access to his history, including the letter.

"I never even saw the letter. How would I know what he was talking about?"

"Don't try to pretend," the red-roots patriot countered, "that you are so honest. We have investigated that letter and arrived at our own conclusions. The 'canola seeds' can only refer to bullets. Confess where you have hidden them. Since you have bullets, you must also have a gun to use them. You see, your only way out is to make a clean confession of everything."

"I swear by Chairman Mao," said my father, "that every word of mine is true. I have no idea what my cousin was talking about."

"Stop it!" the woman shouted. "How can a black ghost like you swear by our great leader, Chairman Mao? You are not qualified to use his name. If you use it again, we will break your teeth!"

With the preliminary conversation finished, the search began. They searched the bed and all the bedding, between the covers of books, and even inside the water jugs. I suppose they had learned a lot of tricky hiding places from their other searches. They searched for about twenty minutes while we waited outside. Finally they came out, looking disappointed at not finding any bullets or other evidence to connect my father with spying.

The woman was unwilling to go back empty-handed. Suddenly she noticed a basin holding a live fish we had bought in the market. I saw the sparkle in her eyes as she whispered to the Red Guards around her. One guard took the fish out of the basin and carried it inside. She followed and closed the door. Several minutes later they came out.

"We didn't find anything," she began, "but that doesn't prove you are not a spy. I tell you, you are not allowed to leave the school grounds. If you want to leave, you must get permission from us first. Even then, if you stay out longer than an hour, you will be punished."

They left, and we went back into our apartment. The fish had been cut open. My father said they thought he had hidden some secret spy film inside the fish. Everything in our home was disordered. They hadn't found the money or rice coupons, though, and they never searched us again.

Before much longer, my father and the other dishonored teachers were not allowed to stay in their homes. They could come home only on Saturday to spend two hours with their families. At other times, if they wanted to visit, they always were followed by Red Guards, and they could not stay more than ten minutes. I often heard them shout my father's name angrily from outside, ordering him to leave.

The teachers who had been determined to be spies or believers in capitalism stayed in a shack that had held farm tools. It was a low, wooden structure, popularly called a cowshed.[12] They did their physical labor by day and were organized to study Chairman Mao's quotations by night. Whenever a new policy was issued, they were required to listen to the radio and study the pronouncements from Beijing.

In his spare time, when the weather was not good for working outside, my father made a deck of playing cards. He painted Chinese characters on the cards. He also painted a portrait of Chairman Mao and hung it in a place of honor in the cowshed. Non-revolutionary art was prohibited. One could paint only portraits of Mao, people studying Mao's quotations, factory workers, scenes from revolutionary history, or a red sun shining—the symbol of Mao's glorious ideas.

Sometimes my father was awakened at midnight by crowds of Red Guards shouting slogans on a faraway street. The slogans usually began with the words "Down with …" He listened carefully to make sure he was not the target of that night's "Down with …" After a moment of breathing easier, his thoughts drifted to the past and the odd events that had shaped his destiny.

Sometimes he thought about the cousin whom he had persuaded to remain on the mainland. "Did I really help him?" he wondered. "He had made all of his preparations to leave. It was only because of me that he stayed. Now he's probably living in a cowshed. He may hate me for the rest of his life."

[12] The terms "snake" and "cowshed" gained political meaning after they were used in editorials in People's Daily, the official newspaper.

The teachers in the cowshed were not allowed to go out and buy their own food. Instead, someone led them to the students' canteen. Before every meal they were told to stand below Chairman Mao's portrait and recite quotations. They were considered "politically inferior" to normal people, so they could eat only when everyone else had finished and left.

My father lived in the cowshed for a year and a half. During that time I couldn't visit him. I saw him only on Saturday nights.

One of his dishonored colleagues went up to the roof of the classroom building one day, calmly took off his glasses, and climbed out onto a ledge. Perhaps he didn't want so much to kill himself as to show others how much he was suffering. Anyway, he climbed down until he was holding on only by his hands. He couldn't will himself to let go, though, so he hung there for a few minutes. Finally he lost his grip and fell. Instead of coming to give first aid, the Red Guards kicked at and spat on him.

"Don't try to threaten us!" they shouted. "Your life isn't worth anything. If you die, it doesn't matter to us."

He wasn't badly injured and soon returned to work. One morning as he was laboring in the schoolyard, he threw down his shoulderpole and ran into the pond to drown himself. The bank was too shallow, though, and he came to a stop in water only up to his waist. He dunked himself again and again, but succeeded only in losing his glasses. The Red Guards pulled him out, slapped his face, and dragged him around the yard.

He had to submit to a big-character poster stating that he was a traitor to the people for trying to kill himself. Other cartoons were drawn that criticized his actions. One was of a dog holding onto a ledge with two paws, and another was of a big black tortoise tumbling in the water.

These were the final humiliations that the man endured. One day he asked for a few minutes of leave and went back to his apartment. Alone and in the dark, he finally succeeded. He tied a long piece of electric wire around his neck and electrocuted himself. Though he left no note behind, everyone knew that he had been pressed too hard. He found death preferable to his personal hell.

My father told me the history of this unfortunate man and added two stories abut how he had come to be labeled as a bad element. He

had attended university before 1949 and, thus, had been educated within the KMT system. At the time of the liberation, he chose not to go to Taiwan or Hong Kong, but to stay on the mainland and help rebuild his country. He had become a teacher and always tried to be a good influence on his students.

This man was very nearsighted. One day before the Cultural Revolution began, he was walking home in the fading light. He brushed against a wooden electrical pole. Thinking it was a man, he said, "Sorry, sir, I couldn't see clearly."

A farmer was a few steps away, selling baked sweet potatoes on the sidewalk. He heard the teacher's apology, laughed, and called him a crazy man. Thinking the potato-seller was the man he had brushed, the teacher said indignantly, "Just now I apologized. Why are you scolding me?"

The farmer simply shook his head and moved along, but two students had witnessed the whole episode. Soon he was known around the school as Mr. Sorry.

The second story took place around the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. He was grading papers and marked a large "X" over a mistake on the front of a student's page. He didn't notice that the X showed through and crossed out the characters "Chairman Mao" on the back of the page. Another teacher in his section who was politically aggressive *did* notice it, though. He reported it, and it was used against the man. Mr. Sorry was criticized, and eventually he was sent to the cowshed.

Nearsightedness and a misplaced X had ended his career and ruined his family. Later I went to junior middle school with his son. He wasn't allowed to go on to senior middle school, because his father had betrayed the Party and the People by committing suicide. Recently I heard what happened to the son. He had a miserable life. He couldn't find a decent job and never married. He went mad and died before he was forty.

6
Weeds and Flowers

During the Cultural Revolution, literally everything had a political meaning. We were warned frequently to distinguish between the sweet flowers of socialism and the poisonous weeds of capitalism. Beauty itself was attacked as a symbol of decadence. All flowers and plants were labeled as poisonous grass. At our school the Chinese roses, tulips, and oleander were pulled up, hoed to pieces, and left to die.

One slogan exhorted us to "Cut the poisonous grass; pull it up by its roots." Another proclaimed that "Good smell and flowers are anesthesia to the revolutionary will." The idea was to eliminate capitalism entirely. It was considered a weakness to grow flowers, because the grower would come to love things that were outwardly beautiful and become unable to nurse hatred for the bad elements in society.

Two very beautiful osmanthus trees grew in front of our building. In mid-autumn they bloomed, and each tree was covered with tiny yellow flowers. The blossoms differed slightly in color; we called one tree "silver" and the other "gold."

The trees grew in huge pots made from bricks. Each pot was about two meters across and had Chinese carvings on the sides. The school had been a huge garden around the turn of the century, so it had many beautiful and unusual trees. These slow-growing trees were more than 50 years old, and the trunks were more than 20 cm in diameter.

Before the Cultural Revolution the two trees gave the entire school pleasure. Autumn was always the best season in Hunan, especially on a cool moonlit night when the breeze carried the nectar bouquet to every family in the area. Teachers gathered around the trees after preparing their next day's lessons. The trees were known

throughout the city for their size and beauty.

In the autumn of 1967 the trees bloomed as they always had, and their light fragrance filled our school. Little girls came onto our campus to pick the fallen blossoms and put them in their handkerchiefs.

One day my friends and I were playing outside. We watched a short old man as he shouldered two big pails of nightsoil[1] from the W.C. He approached the trees, set down his pails, and ladled the nightsoil with a helmet attached to a long pole. Instead of spreading it underneath as fertilizer, to our great surprise he began to fling the nightsoil up into the branches of the trees. In ten minutes the trees were covered.

I felt that my life had been changed forever. The sweetness of the world was lost and replaced by stink and crudity. I still remember the smell from that day. We had to close the windows and doors before we could eat. As it happened, it rained heavily that night. The next morning the wonderful fragrance had returned.

Though I loved that delicate fragrance of osmanthus as much as my own youth, someone else couldn't bear the thought that it existed. When I came home from downtown a few days later, the trees had been cut down. With a broken heart I saw the branches lying on the ground; only the bare trunks remained. The trees never grew back.

Because most of the fruit trees and flowers were dead, it seemed as if all the joy had gone out of our lives. Before the Cultural Revolution, the kids always looked forward to the different fruit seasons—orange, peach, pomegranate, plum, grapes, and so on. The school sent people to pick the fruit, and each family got a share. Now most of the trees in the orchard had been cut down or died from neglect, and the orchard became a wild place. The one type of tree that seemed to thrive was the fig. These trees had no beautiful flowers or fragrance to draw the attention of the Red Guards, and they needed no special care, so they survived. For boys of my age, the fig trees gave great pleasure. We were just the right size to climb the trees and avoid the prickles and stickiness. We looked forward to fig season as our only time to get fresh fruit.

The figs grew in a corner, against the back wall of the fruit yard. My good eyesight helped me to find the red-and-purple ripe fruit hidden among the leaves. Every morning we went and looked for figs that were newly ripe. I got up early, as soon as I could detect the light of dawn at the window, to be the first boy at the fig trees. Sometimes I awoke too early. I would get up anyway and wait under the trees until I could see well enough. If I were lucky, I could pick ten large, ripe figs. It was well worth a little lost sleep. I peeled them and ate them slowly, enjoying the taste and texture of each one. Then I went home, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and ate my normal breakfast of steamed bread.

[1] Human excrement, normally used as on the fields as fertilizer.

One summer there was a flood, and the fruit storehouse by the river was threatened by rising water. Workers moved hundreds of crates of oranges to the big gymnasium of our middle school. Only one old man was left behind to guard this mountain of oranges. It was a challenge that we couldn't resist. I was too young to do something on my own, but some bigger boys took me into their group and told me their clever plan. They promised me a share if I played my part. They assured me that the risk of being cudgeled would be theirs, not mine.

My role in the scheme was simple and safe, they explained, and they told me how to divert the old man's attention. I climbed up the outside wall of the gym and stood on the window ledge, looking in. I made a lot of noise at the window. Then I said loudly, as if to someone below, "Quick! Pass the oranges before he comes!"

The crates were piled high, and the old man couldn't see from a distance whether or not there had been a break-in by young thieves. He ran out the door and, with a wooden rod in his hand, hurried to my window. I didn't run. He saw that I hadn't broken the window. He searched my pockets. As he questioned me, I knew the older boys had slipped into the gym.

"Are you trying to steal my oranges, boy?"

"No. I'm not big enough to do anything. Even if I tried, I couldn't break the window."

"Then why are you here on the ledge?"

"Well, I wanted an orange and I climbed up, but I couldn't get through the window. I'm just sitting here, imagining that I'm eating oranges."

"OK, then, just sit here and imagine your fruit."

He walked back into the gym. As soon as he was out of sight, I

jumped down and fled to the secret hideout. Soon the rest of the gang arrived and I got my share. They told me how they had stuffed their pockets and shirttails and gotten cleanly away.

A few days later they asked me to help them again. I knew the old man would not be fooled a second time, so I declined. They found another stooge to replace me. When he tried the same trick I had used, the old man dragged him down and paddled his rear end with the heavy rod. His companions heard the loud cries and beat a hasty retreat after grabbing only a few oranges. As they gave him his small share at the hideout, he boasted that the beating had not been all that painful. He said he had cried loudly only to warn them.

During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao's image dominated everything. Everyone wore a badge of Mao. Some wore their badges willingly and with pride. Teachers, intellectuals, and other bad elements were careful to wear badges as a first line of defense against criticism. It became a fashion and hobby to collect, compare, and trade badges of Chairman Mao. The badges usually were made of metal, porcelain, wood, or plastic. Plastic badges were preferred by many, because they did not break easily if they fell on the ground. If anything happened to a person's Chairman Mao badge, it was considered to be an act of disrespect against Chairman Mao himself, and might incur serious consequences.

One day in late autumn I went to Rain Lake Park. I saw some people posing for a group photograph in front of the island gardens. One student accidentally brushed against a tree and his badge fell into the lake. Others had seen the badge fall. Without hesitation he took off his coat, shoes, and trousers and jumped into the lake. He dove down more than ten times before he finally found the badge. Though half frozen, with pale face and purple lips, he smiled in satisfaction.

Another time I was walking past a bookstore. I saw a crowd of people in front of the counter. They were eagerly buying a newly designed porcelain badge. A middle-aged man was lucky to get one, but his joy ended quickly. He dropped the badge and it broke into several pieces. Instantly the crowd hushed. Each person held his breath and looked down at his own badge to see that it was still safely in place. The man immediately knelt down beside the broken pieces of Mao and pleaded, "Chairman Mao, I'm sorry. I'm guilty."

Officials of the bookstore came and hauled the man away into a room. Later I heard that they had called his work unit[2] to check his background. Fortunately for him, he wasn't associated with an intellectual or rich family. He was from the working class, so he was released.

When I told this story to my father, he took away my old badge and gave me a different one. Instead of Chairman Mao's face, it was a design of the great rostrum at Tiananmen Square. If I dropped it, he said, it wouldn't cause as much trouble.

Once a Red Guard gave a speech at the stadium of the middle school. He wore an old blue uniform. He opened his military jacket and we saw that he had pinned Chairman Mao's badge through the skin of his chest. He claimed that when he thought of his great leader Chairman Mao, he didn't feel any pain.

People were proud to own and wear many badges. Each city had its own designs, so there was an endless variety to collect or trade. Badges ranged from thumbnail-size to as large as 8 cm across. One place in Xiangtan became the center for trading badges. Badges were pinned to a long strip of cloth that could be rolled up for carrying. Scores of people stood along the sidewalk, holding out their strips to make trades or comparisons. Because it was considered irreverent to buy or sell Chairman Mao, people exchanged badges. Some people pinned their badges inside their coats. When they saw a badge that they wanted, they opened their coat and offered to trade. My friends and I were fascinated by all of this. It was too risky for a child to engage in trading there, so we simply watched.

Once I saw a Red Guard soldier on a "long march." He was making a solitary journey to Shaoshan. His clothes were dirty and smelly. He offered to exchange badges with me, so he could remember his stay in Xiangtan. I was sympathetic and, what's more, he didn't give me much chance to refuse. I gave him my Tiananmen rostrum badge and in return he gave me a very large badge with Chairman Mao's face on it. When I came home with the large badge on my chest, I saw several emotions pass across my father's face.

"You won't be safe with such a big badge," he decided. "It's heavy and you're a wild child. When you run, the pin might pull

[2] Place of employment, the basic economic and political unit of society.

through the cloth of your jacket. As long as you have that badge, I don't want you to run fast on the sports ground."

The next day I tried my best to trade away the big badge for a smaller one made of plastic. Eventually I found a five-year-old boy who was willing to trade. With a small badge on my jacket, I felt safe, and I was glad to be allowed to run fast again.

It became fashionable to carve Chairman Mao's quotations onto the cap of a fountain pen. One day my friend complained that someone had taken advantage of him on his way to school. In front of the gate a man had asked to borrow his pen. The man turned his back for a few seconds; then he turned back and told my friend that he must pay 1 jiao.[3] He claimed, "I have revolutionized your pen."

On the cap was the slogan "Serve the people," in an imitation of Mao's own handwriting. The man had practiced this skill and made a living with his tiny carving knife. No one could deny that he was serving the revolution. My friend was happy to pay the man for his work, but resented that he had been duped.

Life beyond the school grounds was unsettled and unpredictable. A friend advised me never to use the word "buy" in connection with Chairman Mao, because it would be disrespectful. If I went to the bookstore to buy his portrait, I should say, "Please, Chairman Mao's portrait." My neighbor told me that a man went to the bookstore, "pleased" Mao's portrait, and then asked the saleslady to roll it up and wrap it for him. He was taken into the office, where the store officials questioned him and lectured that wrapping the portrait was disrespectful. They telephoned his work unit and enquired into his family history. Because he was from a poor peasant family and had no ties to any reactionary movements, he was allowed to take the portrait and leave.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, pork was rationed. In fact, virtually everything was rationed. Each person was allotted a half jin of pork per month. Xiangtan—indeed, all of Hunan province—was well-known for its pork. It was a big industry, complete with breeding programs and state-owned pig farms. At the slaughterhouse, no part of the pig was wasted. The head was crushed with a press into a thin layer, with the ears still attached, and then smoked. It looked a little

[3] One tenth of a yuan, equal to ten fen. See Appendix I.

like a huge butterfly, and it was known locally by that name. No one was willing to accept a butterfly as his official ration of pork, so butterflies were not rationed. They could be bought at the State-owned shop without a ration coupon.

One day I was walking past a grocery and noticed many people queued up to buy something. A woman was telling the shop assistant that she wanted to buy a butterfly. She was from the north and had a standard Mandarin accent.[4] The assistant spoke with a strong Xiangtan accent. The woman handed over the correct price, but did not understand the assistant when she said, "Our great leader Chairman Mao teaches us …"

The woman waited, but the assistant would not give her the pig's head. A young local woman quickly stepped in front of her and supplied a suitable quotation: "The masses are the real heroes."

The assistant gave the head to the younger woman. The northern woman argued a bit and then said, "Please, let me do it again. I know many quotations from Chairman Mao."

The shop assistant repeated: "Our great leader Chairman Mao teaches us …"

"All reactionaries are paper tigers!" said the woman loudly. Having provided an acceptable password, the woman finally was rewarded with her butterfly.

During the Cultural Revolution it was considered laudable to be able to write a big-character poster. My mother suggested I should learn calligraphy. My mother's father had been good at it, so she knew some of the skills of writing with a Chinese brush. She told me stories about famous scholars and master calligraphers in ancient China. She often told me about one popular calligrapher who spent so many years in painstaking practice that the pond in front of his house became dark from rinsing the ink out of his brush.

She asked me to follow her father's practice: stand up straight and hold the brush straight-up-and-down. She put an egg in the hollow of my hand, to force me to pay attention to holding the brush correctly. My forearm was never allowed to touch the table. She asked me to practice all through the summer holidays. I didn't darken the pond, but

[4] Mandarin, called Putonghua within China, is the standard Chinese dialect spoken in Beijing and northern China.

I did sweat so much that after two hours there was always a pool around my feet. To encourage me, she gave me three fen, or pennies, every time we practiced. I confess that I had little interest in calligraphy, but I endured the lessons in order to buy a little treat of sweetened ice to suck on.

We could not afford to buy calligraphy paper, so my mother got a sheet of glass. I would cover the surface of the glass with characters, mop the ink away, and write again. Ink runs very easily on glass, and she said if I could write good characters on glass, I would be especially good on paper.

When my calligraphy had improved enough to please her, she bought me a few standard children's practice notebooks. The paper was ruled into squares, usually 12 to a page. I wrote my characters on the page with the big brush. My mother graded each character. If she put a red circle around a character, I knew it was good.

After a year of daily practice, she said I was good enough to copy big-character posters. She never failed to stress the importance of good penmanship and remark that a man who had good penmanship would have a good fate. Sometimes she added that Chairman Mao's calligraphy was quite beautiful. He had practiced in his youth and look what he had become!

She told more penmanship stories. A math teacher named Sheng had earned extra food during the three years of natural disaster.[5] Because of his good calligraphy, he was given the job of writing the posters outside the biggest restaurant in Xiangtan. He became famous locally because people liked his style. All the stores invited him to prepare their announcement boards. He always accepted jobs at restaurants. Instead of accepting cash, though, he would ask to bring his family for a meal. At other stores he asked them to invite his family to a restaurant as his pay.

During the Cultural Revolution, this same man was criticized. Caricatures were drawn of his family with ugly faces, gobbling down food with huge knives and chopsticks. He was criticized for exploitation and was told he should have done all the work for free as a service to the people. When the cartoons came out, my mother stopped reminding me of that story. Sheng was a friend of my father. Later his

[5] The official euphemism for the Great Leap Forward.

son and I went to the countryside together and were best friends.

I continued to practice until, one day, my mother gave me a small job. She wanted to write a letter of praise for the students of her school. She wrote out her small characters and asked me to copy them onto a large poster of red paper. I was so careful that it took more than an hour. When the letter was posted on the wall of my mother's primary school, the teachers all praised my penmanship. My mother came home, told me the news, and smiled. All those countless hours of dull, sweaty, rigid practice were paid in full by that one satisfied smile.

Beijing opera was popular, and many parents wanted to send their children to a professional trainer. With the universities closed and few good jobs available, singing Beijing opera was an admirable profession. In the mornings we saw many parents taking their children to practice their singing. I showed no talent for singing, nor for any musical instrument. It was just as well; I had no interest in it, either.

My talent was directed toward ping-pong. The first floor under our apartment served as the ping-pong training ground for the middle-school students. It was one of the few pastimes that the children of the teachers could draw pleasure from. We often played until midnight in the large, well-lighted room. In summer we wore only our shorts, sweating and shouting as we practiced our slams. The punishment for losing a game was to crawl under the length of the table.

Mr. Ding, who taught physics at the middle school, was good at ping-pong. The game was part of his life, especially as teaching had lost its importance to him during those years. His father had been a traditional Chinese-medicine herb doctor. Mr. Ding was spiritually restless and found a release from his worries by playing. He refused to be aggressive at chastising people for anti-revolutionary activities, and being active at ping-pong was a good way for him to avoid criticism.

He was so absorbed in the basic skills that he always carried his paddle to class along with his physics book. Whenever he relived one of his previous matches, he unconsciously took out his paddle and waved it to and fro. Whenever he walked to school, he lifted his feet and swung his paddle for exercise.

One day we heard a funny story about Mr. Ding. Early in the morning a woman was on her way to work. She was carrying her baby on a tiny child seat on the back of her bicycle. The baby faced back-

wards as the woman pedaled. During the Cultural Revolution, many people did not perform much actual work and took their young children with them to their jobs. She met a friend along the way, so she dismounted and walked along, talking merrily.

Mr. Ding was walking in the same direction and was just behind the bicycle. By accident he had left his paddle at school the day before. Without warning, he began to wave his hand vigorously in the gesture of the classic slamming arc. The baby broke into loud, fearful crying. The two ladies looked back and saw Mr. Ding. He was still practicing his slamming motion and seemed not to have noticed the baby's cries. The other woman recognized the teacher and knew he was exercising for ping-pong. As the mother comforted the baby, she said with mock seriousness, "Just think about how sad the teachers must be. Even when they are on the street, they instinctively protect themselves from the beatings of the Red Guards."

When we heard this story, we all laughed uproariously. We tried to persuade Mr. Ding never to do that again, but he refused to listen and went his own way. Because of the unusual habit of practicing his slam in public, he became well known in the city. Few knew his name, but everyone knew him as "the man who does *this*" (accompanied by a sweeping motion).

When I grew older and went to middle school, Mr. Ding was my physics teacher. Although we did not attend regular classes, we still had exams in our subjects. Most students decided that cheating was the most sensible solution to this unfair predicament, and most teachers turned a blind eye to it. For one thing, they were very susceptible to punishment, even from their own students.

Mr. Ding came to supervise our final physics test for the year. If he thought that someone was trying to cheat, he would cough loudly or say, "I'm a good ping-pong player, so I have very sharp eyes." When Mr. Ding stood in the front of the room, few people dared to copy. When he stood at the back or walked in the aisles, cheating stopped altogether. It was our first year of middle school, and we all feared him.

Without giving any reason, he suddenly walked out the classroom door and into the hallway. About half of my classmates began to cheat openly. After a while, one student looked up and said, "Look, who's that up there?"

We all looked up and saw Mr. Ding through the high window of the classroom. His nose was pressed against the glass. We all broke into laughter. He was trying to spy on us, but, unfortunately for him, the light was such that we could see him much better than he could see us. He was squatting on the very narrow sill of the window. Obviously his perch was precarious and he was quite uneasy. In a few moments he began to look even more uncomfortable. He looked down; his face flushed and he looked worried. He appeared like a trapped and caged animal. A student in the back row began to giggle. He said, "I took away his stool, so he can't get down."

We could not help but laugh loudly now, and one might truly say that pandemonium reigned. Then the monitor of the class, who had been selected as a trustworthy student, went out to the corridor and helped our teacher down. When the other teachers heard the story, they teased him severely and asked if he planned to get up in the window for his next test.

Many years later I attended an anniversary at the middle school. An old graduate asked about one of the teachers. "How is he getting along? I've forgotten his name, but he was quite funny. He was a great ping-pong fan, and he was always doing *this*." He made a vigorous sweeping motion with one hand.

Half the people in the group laughed and said, "Ah, that's Mr. Ding."

I regret slightly that I have strayed ahead in my narrative. When I became distracted with Mr. Ding, I was describing my life in the third grade. Our classes were irregular because they were considered less important than political or social work. We had classes only in the morning. Any time a quotation from Chairman Mao was released or there was a criticizing meeting, classes were canceled.

Sometimes we were sent to help at one of the People's Communes on the outskirts of town. Our job was to carry manure to the commune. We brought ashes from our homes and mixed them with nightsoil from the school's W.C. to make manure. Then we carried the manure to the commune using shoulderpoles and wicker baskets.

We also collected waste materials—mostly pieces of wire and scrap metal. All the students of the school did this together. We wandered around the streets and carried our finds to the city's trash-collection station, where it was sold. The money was used to buy ink,

pens, paper, and, of course, portraits of Chairman Mao. Each classroom had a big portrait above the chalkboard.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao swam down the Yangtze River for three hours. Newspaper articles proclaimed, "Chairman Mao's health is our greatest happiness." Every year on the anniversary of that swim, every city held a big celebration. In Xiangtan, the organizers asked for good swimmers to represent each primary and middle school. They gathered at the river and studied Chairman Mao's quotations. Then a starting gun was fired, and hundreds of people dove into the water and swam to the other side. Small boats usually followed to give assistance. The primary-school swimmers were brought back by bus, but the others were expected to swim back across.

We often received notice that the next day we would stand on the streets of our city and welcome Chairman Mao's distinguished guests. They were usually leaders from socialist countries, such as Korea, Vietnam, or Albania, the "bright torch of Europe." Sometimes they belonged to delegations from African countries. All were on their way from Changsha to Shaoshan on the obligatory pilgrimage to Mao's birthplace, 45 kilometers away.

No one knew exactly when the motorcade would pass by, and sometimes we stood for three hours along the road. Each of us was given a triangular Chinese flag, reminded to bring our Little Red Book, and told to wait. Each school had a propaganda team, made up of students who could sing, dance, or lead slogans. They stood in the front row. When the cars came, we beat drums and gongs. The slogan leaders shouted their slogans and we repeated them. We pressed the Little Red Books to our hearts and waved our flags as we shouted.

This activity always made me feel sad. We were especially curious to get even a glance of a foreign face. Many times we stood for hours, but only once did anyone look out at us. One lady brushed aside the curtain and gave us a brief smile. All the others kept their curtains closed and drove on. The expensive cars passed without slowing down. We were always hungry, thirsty, and tired of standing. Politics, however, required that we smile through our sadness.

7
Revolutionary Acts

About 100 boys and girls between 8 and 15 years old lived at the Number-Two Middle School. We were the children of the teachers there. Any youth older than 15 was likely to be a Red Guard. Our parents attended political-study classes in the afternoons, and we were left on our own.

Chairman Mao had written: "To fight against heaven gives me boundless joy. To fight against earth gives me boundless joy. To fight against men gives me boundless joy." The political meaning of this saying was that he wanted a continuous revolution in his country. We were instructed in class to be "pathbreakers of the revolution." If we were timid in our actions, we might be labeled as "lambs of capitalism."

Boys of my age might have been too young to fight; nevertheless, we wanted to show that we had revolutionary spirit. Soon we found something to accommodate the hot blood that was surging within us—crickets.

Cricket fighting and cock fighting were pastimes for the lords of ancient China. We could not afford cocks and, besides, crickets were more our size. Early every morning we searched for crickets among the holes and cracks of the foundations of old buildings. We learned to judge a cricket's fighting potential by its song. When we heard the right music, we lay down and patiently lured the cricket with a straw until it came out of its hole.

We took good care of our little paladins. We gave them choice pieces of vegetables or apple. Before a big fight, we brushed their mandibles with a straw that had been dipped in hot pepper, to bring out their fighting spirit.

Older boys who seemed to know told us that the most powerful

Part IV

11

Down to the Country

Twenty million people were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. For most of them, it was a nightmare of hardship and lost opportunity. Many never came back. When the others returned to the cities, most had to accept factory jobs with low pay and poor working conditions. They could afford little comfort and had little hope of advancement for themselves or their children.

The slogan "go up the mountain, down to the countryside" conformed to classical norms for idiomatic expressions. It contained two phrases of two characters each. The phrases included natural images and made a good rhythm when pronounced. The slogan contained no political symbolism; it simply meant, "go to the country."

After graduation from middle school, most of my classmates expected to be sent to the countryside. We knew we would be separated, and we prepared our minds to accept this fate. Gradually I stopped seeing my friends and lost track of their activities.

Around this time, my father finally was allowed to resume his teaching work. With both parents teaching and myself idle, I took over the cooking duties. I spent most of my time at home. Sometimes I fingered through my old textbooks. It seemed that no road was open to me. My only escape was to indulge myself in the simplified-English novels that I found in the middle-school library.

My parents worried about my situation. There were many stories about the hard life of the educated youth, and most of them were sad. Some of my classmates went directly to the countryside. Some who had a good family history were able to find work in a factory. My family had no influence and was vulnerable to political attack, so it seemed to be only a matter of time until something unfortunate happened to me.

As I waited for fate to take note of my existence, I found a job that no one else wanted. A new teachers' apartment building was being built, and someone was needed to guard the steel bars, planks, and other construction materials at night. The pay was miserable—only one yuan for the evening shift and one-and-a-half yuan for the graveyard shift. I was assigned to the latter. Every evening I woke before midnight and walked to the construction site. Most of the site was cloaked in ominous shadows; a single bulb lit the entire area. The night wind was chilly, and I watched from the corner of an unfinished room, cold, sleepy, and hungry.

Fearing that thieves might come, I collected pieces of broken bricks into piles. At intervals I tossed a stone up on the masonry scaffolds to make noise and, hopefully, scare aware any thieves without giving away my position. I stayed with the job for a month and never saw a thief. The work was boring, and every day I felt more listless. I grew tired of shivering in the wind and decided that, perhaps, life would be better in the countryside.

One of the leaders at the middle school, who had enthusiastically supported the Cultural Revolution, came to our house one day with good news. She said the education bureau was planning to create a new farm in the suburbs, especially for the children of teachers in the city. She said it was my best chance and that, if I did not accept it, I probably would be sent to a more remote area later. My father thought for a long time. He felt it a pity that all of my English and ping-pong efforts would be wasted on a dull life in the countryside. He delayed making a decision for so long that I missed my chance to go to the new farm.

One day my mother took me aside when she returned from her primary school. She had been talking with a friend who already had seen her three daughters go to the countryside and was hoping to keep her son in the city. The day before, some politically aggressive people from the woman's work unit had threatened her. They said that the countryside was the only road open to a bad-element family such as hers. They said if her son didn't go voluntarily, they would drive him there with a rifle. They also said that, if he didn't go, it would show that the family opposed Chairman Mao's policy.

"Yuan, I think you should go as soon as possible," my mother advised. "Our family history is as bad as hers, perhaps worse."

In the end, then, there seemed to be no alternative except to go the countryside. Many people advised me that, the sooner I left, the sooner I could come back. In a few years, they said, I could return and get a factory job or even take over my father's teaching position when he retired. These cheerful encouragements gave me but little comfort, for I knew very well that Chairman Mao had never said anything about a return from the countryside.

Finally even my father suggested that I should go. He went to the person in his work unit who was responsible to see that young people were gainfully employed and told him that I was ready to go. A farewell meeting was organized for myself and another boy from the middle school. I read aloud a letter of resolution. I declared that I would follow Chairman Mao's wishes and go down to the country. I could not bring myself to say, however, that I intended to put down roots in the countryside. After my speech, a huge red flower was pinned on my chest as a symbol of honor.

The next day we reported to the city's education bureau. I was put into a group of six boys and one girl. All of us had missed the opportunity of joining the new farm in the suburbs, so we were assigned to another production brigade. We were each issued a "Glorious Card" that identified us as educated youth who had responded to Chairman Mao's call. We also were given the four-volume set of Mao's works. We were told that we would live with a family of farmers, share their house, and receive our re-education from them.

I knew my experience there would bear little resemblance to the year I had spent with my mother in the village on the border. I had seen that when large groups of youth had left for the countryside, they carried a banner with the slogan, "Wallow in the mud and temper a red heart." I prepared myself mentally for mud wallowing, but I wondered if my heart would survive the heat of the furnace.

On the day I left, my father walked with me along the bank of the river. It was a beautiful spring day; the water was rising and the fields showed a little green. Normally such a day would have put me in high spirits. My father gave me some words of advice and hope. He said that in three years or five, at the longest, I would come back. I wondered if he could predict the future. I doubted his words, but I was too respectful to disagree.

He quoted some of the ancient Chinese sages. He said, for example, "When heaven wants to entrust someone with a big task, it will prepare him with trials and troubles."

He also told me a fable that he had read in a foreign book. "Two men were walking along a path," he began. "Neither knew what lay around the next bend, because neither had traveled that road before. One believed it was the road to paradise; the other believed it led nowhere. It was the only road open to them, so they had no choice but to follow it. They experienced times of comfort and merriment, and times of hardship and danger.

"One man saw his journey as a pilgrimage. He believed that the lord of the paradise was training him to be a valuable citizen there. He accepted the good in his life as an encouragement and the bad as a test of his patience.

"The other man, however, saw his journey as nothing more than an aimless necessity. Because he had no alternative, he traveled. He enjoyed the pleasures and endured the troubles. He saw no purpose and expected no paradise. He saw only the road itself, the good weather and the bad, and the opportunities that came with each day."

These were my father's parting words, as I remember them. I believed he was telling me to be like the second traveler, to enjoy the good and endure the bad, and not to trouble myself with finding meaning or purpose in my life. Years later I happened to find the same fable. It had been written by J. Hick, an English philosopher.

After walking with my new companions for about two hours, we arrived at our production brigade. Grim reality immediately smashed any romantic illusions I still harbored about life in the countryside. I could find no beauty in the nature I saw there. The farmers seemed to be struggling for their very existence.

The members of the production brigade had cooked a big lunch for us. The farmers were friendly and treated us with hospitality. We saw kindness in their eyes and on their faces.

That afternoon we were subjected to a welcoming meeting. Women whispered in the corners. I imagined they were discussing our tender skin and how soon it would become tough. A few of the younger farmers had been lucky enough to attend middle school. I fancied a glimmer of satisfaction in their eyes. They seemed to say, "You didn't escape, either. Now you've been sent to join us, and we'll all wallow in the same mud."

Some farmers thought our assignment was temporary, that we were to be tempered quickly and then go back to more glorious tasks in the city. Others affected an air of indifference, as if to say, "Chairman Mao sent you, and he certainly knows what's best."

We carried our belongings to our new home. The six boys stayed with one family. The girl ate her meals with us but slept in the house of another family. The six of us were given one room to sleep in. The farmer woman was a deputy team leader. There were six in her family—Mrs. Lu and her husband, her three children, and her husband's mother. The house was made from mud bricks; it had three rooms and dirt floors. The family owned nothing of value. Their few pieces of crudely-made furniture were in the advanced stages of decrepitude. The children were poorly dressed in patched, hand-me-down clothes. The family had no cloth coupons, nor money to pay for it. When an article became too shredded or too small for the youngest child, it was used as a cleaning rag. Even rice seemed to be in short supply. Not much remained in the pot after the first helping, and sometimes the children fought over it. There were usually some vegetables to eat, but the children preferred the white rice.

The government gave each of us 52 yuan as a settling-down subsidy to buy the necessities for setting up a household: bowls, cooking pot, stove, blankets, mosquito net, and the like. We shared the kitchen with the farm family, but we had our own stove and were expected to cook for ourselves.

During the first year we also were given a food subsidy. A peasant's food ration depended on how many work points he earned. We were not expected to earn many points at first, and everyone sent to the countryside was subsidized for the first year by the government. Our monthly allowance of rice was 16 kilograms per person. We did not have to worry much about rice that first year, but we knew we had to prepare for later, when the subsidy expired.

Like millions of other educated youth, our number-one food problem was cooking oil. Our ration was only half a jin per month. Pork, including lard, also was rationed at half a jin. We were not very thrifty or experienced at cooking. No matter how well we planned, the oil and fat never stretched to the last day of the month. Often we cooked with water instead of oil. When we went home to visit our families, we carried a glass jar to bring back lard to our "settling spot." Our

parents did not have enough cooking oil either, so we took only a little. Sometimes we used lard for cooking oil, and sometimes we added it to our rice.

Whenever I visited my parents, I told them about my life with the production team. Usually I could stay only half an hour before returning. I always cleaned out the cupboard and ate all the leftovers. If there were no leftovers, I ate a few spoonfuls of lard.

We grew accustomed to the spare life of the countryside. We were always short of firewood, rice, cooking oil, and vegetables. We felt as if our spirits were similarly deprived of sustenance.

After a few months the novelty of our new life wore thin. Day after day, we turned our faces down toward the yellow earth and bent our backs toward heaven. Life for us was hard. Every day when we came back exhausted from work, we poked the cold ashes of the stove in vain, hoping for a spark of life. In a typical farm family the grandmother stayed at home, prepared the meals, and kept the stove burning. We were not so fortunate. The seven of us worked until dark and returned to a cold stove. We had only rice, some vegetables, and pickles to eat. When we had nothing better, we made hot-pepper soup. We made it triple hot, in the best Hunan tradition. It was so hot that it needed no other flavoring. We carried our bowls into our room and ate around a small desk. We sucked down the vegetables with our rice, eating quickly and noisily.

Because we had nothing better to eat, it was soup, soup, soup for every meal. We made up a song that satirized our plight and helped to maintain our good humor. In Chinese, the words were funny and rhythmical.

> Soup, soup, soup, revolutionary soup.
> The educated youth love their soup.
> In the morning, we drink our soup
> And face the rising sun.
> At midday, we drink our soup
> And become scorched under the sun.
> In the evening, we drink our soup
> And flood our hearts with moonbeams.

After supper we had time to talk and think about many things. We

sometimes discussed our future in those early days, but just as often we were silent. My comrades liked to smoke a cigarette in the evenings. They sat back and closed their eyes. They seemed lost in profound meditation as the smoke curled around them. Many people smoked as a diversion from boredom, especially during political meetings. The meetings were long, tedious, and unavoidable. If a person talked, ate, or dozed off, he would be criticized, but smoking was safe.

Cigarettes held no attraction for me, and I never picked up the habit. Instead I stared absently at the flickering flame of the small kerosene lantern on the desk. An hour might pass before someone spoke. Our souls were empty; all of us had followed the example of the second man in the fable.

Suddenly someone would break the silence and begin to hum a tune, usually to a melancholy Russian folksong. The others always stirred themselves and joined in the humming. We knew few other ways to drive away the bitterness of living with a dismal, uncertain fate.

My father had given me a harmonica. I kept it under my pillow and played it occasionally in the evenings. I played old tunes from Russian movies and, of course, the Chinese revolutionary songs that we all knew so well.

Sometimes when the moon was full, we left the lamp unlit. Lost in our thoughts, we stared at the dark shadows on the floor. I fancied that the patterns were a means of divination and attempted to interpret them as predictions of my future.

Sometimes when we were bored, we criticized the family's dog. It was a safe and humorous way to ease our frustrations. In turn, each of us composed and delivered a damning indictment of the dog's anti-revolutionary ways. We imitated the style and tone of the criticizing meetings that we attended weekly. The dog did not seem to mind much, nor did he ever complain to anyone about us. Generally speaking, he was a good companion. He enjoyed our humming and laughter, and he respected our silences.

As I gazed into the flame or pondered the shadows, I was bleakly pessimistic about my future. For one thing, I did not have the "red roots and upright shoots" that my society praised. I was simply a youth who could be educated to farm. I was lost in a vast sea of peasants. I had little chance of going into a factory or the army, much less

to a university. For another, I remembered the slogans of the model educated youth that were quoted in the newspapers. They proudly declared that they did not want to eat their rice idly in the city. No, they wanted to plant their roots in the countryside for 60 years. This implied that all the youth were being prepared to accept a lifetime of exile in the countryside.

I had no expectation that I would ever leave the farm and return to the city. The oldest in our group was 19. I was not yet 17 and did not want to get married and set up housekeeping. None of us wanted to put down roots; we all wanted to go back to the city.

I never had a chance to apply my knowledge of hand tractors. There was only one hand tractor in our production team. Only the senior, experienced farmers were allowed to plow the fields, whether with oxen or hand tractor. Actually, driving a hand tractor was a dangerous job. Once I saw a tractor pulling a cartload of people lose control and plunge into the river. Fortunately the guards on the bridge were close by and were able to save them. Because of this and similar incidents, I gave up all ambition to be a hand-tractor driver.

Given these prospects, for awhile I entertained two plans. The first was to ask my father to retire early and hope to replace him in his teaching position. In this way I could secure my rice bowl in the city. The other was to learn some basic knowledge of medicine and acupuncture in hope of becoming a barefoot doctor.

When I was younger, I had read a newspaper article about a brave barefoot doctor. He was determined to find a cure for deaf and mute people. Using his "silver needle," he had probed areas normally off-limits to acupuncture, using his own body in the experiments. He recorded his sensations in a notebook as he probed each new spot. Eventually he succeeded. The newspaper matter-of-factly reported that he found a way to make a deaf person shout out, "A long, long life to Chairman Mao!" I had read the article very carefully and been quite impressed by his heroic accomplishment. In an idle moment, I remembered this story and made up my mind to become a barefoot doctor and bring happiness to the handicapped.

During those years, we often were told that spirit could become material: that ideas could become reality. No matter how impossible something seemed, it could be achieved by proper thought. If we had the spirit to follow Chairman Mao's words, the glorious new society

would appear.

I thought that perhaps I had the proper spirit to become a barefoot doctor. I gained some medical knowledge by reading in the evenings. Besides basic medical readings, though, I diverted myself with other books. I read poems of the Tang dynasty and selected readings from the Chinese classics.

I also read historical leaflets printed by the Chinese government to explain the significance of Chairman Mao's words. For example, they might quote a passage from the period of feudalism and explain how it was anti-revolutionary and full of poison. I found these passages quite interesting. Occasionally I found something in English. For example, I read the story of a fishing village and how its people had fought against a storm at sea. At last they faced the rising sun, victorious, because they had been armed with Mao Zedong Thought. The story itself held little interest for me, but I analyzed the sentence structure and verb tenses as a way of retaining my English skills. Buried deep within and hidden from the eyes of all others, I still nursed an ambition to become an English teacher.

As the year wore on, my evenings thus became valuable to me. My comrades spent no time studying. Mostly they only smoked or sat quietly. A couple of them developed their skill on the erhu, a two-stringed bowed instrument.

As an old saying goes, "a person with great ambition wants little sleep." My ambition was, perhaps, not so great as that, but I slept less than my comrades. When they went to sleep, I took out my books. The nights were quiet. I heard only the soft gurgle of the brook behind the mud-brick house or sometimes the munching of the brigade's cows. With the wick of the kerosene lamp turned low, I lay on my bed, wearing my coat and holding my pages toward the weak light. I was able to catch up on most of the history and literature that I should have learned in middle school. Fortunately, kerosene was not rationed as cooking oil was. I tried to study two or three hours every night.

At first I studied physiology, but I doubted that I was as courageous as the newspaper acupuncturist. Besides, with my family background, if I harmed anyone by mistake I probably would be accused of trying to murder a class brother. I soon gave up the study of acupuncture. I continued to learn some medicine, but I spent more time studying English.

For the seven of us, the kitchen was the most important room in the house. At first our host gave us straw to use for our cooking stove, but soon we were left to fend for ourselves. We decided to pick up driftwood from the bank of the Xiang River every morning. This wood was always wet and gave off dense clouds of smoke. Our supply was too meager to allow us to stockpile and dry it. The kitchen had a small chimney, but it drew away little of the smoke.

When we came back from our work, we had to cook for ourselves. As we were always tired, it was a great burden. Cleaning the stove and washing the dishes were a continual drudgery.

At the beginning of summer, the mosquitoes massed their forces and attacked. Battalions buzzed in pursuit. We were forced into desperate hand-to-hand combat within our own quarters. We felt trapped behind enemy lines. When we walked quickly from room to room, waves of reserves took flight to slap against our faces. As we stood and washed dishes, we had to stamp our feet and mark time. Otherwise our ankles would be sucked dry by the bloodthirsty horde.

One comrade suggested that the person who finished his bowl last should have to clean up. This new regulation produced an immediate effect. Before, we had chatted to take our minds off the taste of the food, so it would go down easier. Now, no one lost any time. Firm friends became rivals. If we had only our triple-hot soup to go with the rice, we gobbled it down as quickly as we could and tried to ignore the fire alarms set off by our tongues.

Of course, the poor girl was usually the last to finish her meal. One night we saw her crying as she wiped off the stove. Our hearts softened and we repealed the regulation. After that we took turns cleaning.

The production team treated our group of seven as a family and allotted us several plots for growing vegetables. The rice in the fields belonged to the production team, but the vegetables that we grew were ours. Our neighbors helped by giving us seeds and young vegetable shoots. We planted long beans, eggplant, cucumber, and pumpkin.

On a typical day we rose at 5:30, worked in the fields until 8:00, and came in to cook breakfast. We returned to the fields around 9:00 and worked until noon. We took a two-hour break and then went back to the fields until sunset. After sunset we returned home and cooked our dinner, the biggest meal of the day.

If we were not needed for early-morning work, at first we collected manure for the garden. Armed with shovel, shoulderpole, and bamboo baskets, we set forth in search of cow dung and dog droppings. Later we spent more time tending the vegetables. Soon the garden was a mass of green leaves and spreading vines.

In this way, we grew enough vegetables for ourselves. We saw, however, that some farmers took vegetables to the black market in the city. This was the simplest and easiest way to get cash, and we decided to follow their example.

At that time there was no free market in China. The city maintained some large State-owned vegetable stores, but this was not sufficient to meet demand. In the early morning, farmers gathered at obscure places along back streets and sold their vegetables. Occasionally people wearing red armbands suddenly burst onto the scene. They stamped on the hand scales, trod on eggs, and smashed squash. Farmers were seldom arrested, but sometimes I saw them scatter at the sound of an approaching vehicle or the sight of a red armband.

The oldest among us was a natural leader. One day he told us that we were not making ends meet and that we needed to bring in some extra money. He said the black market was the answer. He said we need not fear the armbands. They naturally feared educated youth because of our reputation for fearlessness and willingness to take drastic action. Besides, we had nothing to lose. It was not difficult to persuade us. In our eagerness to enhance our lot, we gave little thought to socialist rhetoric. We embraced the capitalist dream. We even worked in our garden by moonlight.

According to regulations, all commodities were regulated and supplied according to plan. People who had influence or good connections were able to get what they wanted by making back-door arrangements. We had no key to the back door, and the State's plan seemed to have neglected our needs. It seemed that the only way to get what we needed was to sell vegetables on the black market.

Before long our leader made another suggestion. He said that we needed to go into the city and steal nightsoil. Our vegetable production would be greatly improved. A few nights later, we borrowed some pails and shoulderpoles from some neighbors. Leaving the girl behind, we set off for the city. As we walked, my eye wandered among the stars above. I felt sad, because that day was my seventeenth

birthday. Who would have imagined, years before, that I would spend it as a poor youth sneaking into town to steal nightsoil? I didn't tell my companions about my birthday; I preferred to bear my sadness alone.

The nearest trove of nightsoil was about 90 minutes away. We marched to our destination, the Number-Four Middle School. First we set down our pails by the outside wall and snuck inside. We found the W.C., but the door was locked. We looked warily around and, finding no one lying in ambush, we acted. We pried open the door with our shoulderpoles and filled our pails in a rush. We overcame the strong odor with visions of fat pumpkins. As we turned to make our getaway, we heard a gruff voice ordering us to stop.

A tall, husky man with a spear approached us. We could smell liquor on his breath. The hot sweat on our backs chilled instantly. We measured him with our eyes. He had heavy muscles and the confident authority of middle age.

"Either you put the nightsoil back or we fight," he vowed. "I leave the choice to you."

He appeared to me like a stalwart hero from an old novel, whose fist could support a man and whose arm could support a horse. We knew that our arms could not compete with his. After a few grumblings among ourselves, we returned the nightsoil from our pails.

With downcast eyes we shuffled away, but none of us was willing to return home empty-handed. We decided to try our luck at another school in the center of the city. Along the way, one of us recalled that his brother's friend was some sort of a local leader and had a good reputation for fighting. We sought out this budding chieftain, and he agreed to help us. Together we walked to the middle school and woke the farmers guarding the W.C. He discussed terms with them until they agreed to give us what we wanted.

No load is light when it is carried far, and these loads were heavy from the start. We panted and grunted all the way back to our farmhouse. We arrived before daybreak, put the nightsoil into our own holding sink, and went down to the beach to wash off in the river. Without the poles on our backs, we felt light and happy. We splashed about as the sky began to pale and the distant fields and farmhouses emerged from the shadows of the night.

Farmers say that if one uses enough nightsoil, he needs to know

nothing more about farming. We applied the treasure to our garden, and soon we had many extra vegetables to sell. For one jin we could get only about four fen (pennies), so a full load of vegetables might bring us 4 or 5 yuan. We made one trip a week to the black market. For several months we made about 20 yuan per month.

With this extra money, we improved our living conditions. Our perennially dry soy-sauce bottle was refilled. We even bought some MSG to add flavor to the soup.

We had been accumulating coupons for half a jin of pork per month, and now we had some cash to pay for it. Naturally we wasted no time in going to the pork market. We wanted to buy some lard, as well as treat ourselves to some meat. We decided to buy seven jin of pork, using two months' worth of coupons and about six yuan.

We planned our actions with the precision of experienced military campaigners. Four of us got up at midnight and left for the market. A heavy mist lay in the fields and on the beach, but the stars burned brightly overhead. We discussed alternative plans as we walked. We expected the queue to be boisterous, with lots of elbowing and shoving. We decided that two of us would provide protection for two primary agents. Our money and coupons were stowed deep in our pockets.

We arrived at the market at about 2:00, but eight or nine people were already there. They were all males. Some stood around and smoked, a few dozed on the ground, and some even had stools.

Around 4:30 we saw some sleepy-eyed teenagers walking along and carrying metal pots. We knew they were on their way to buy bean curd, one of the few supplies that were not rationed. Those shops opened early. By the time they returned home, the adults would be up and ready to cook breakfast, using the bean curd with garlic and sauce to make soup.

We stood sleepily until daylight. All buyers had to pass through two gauntlets. First was the office window, where they exchanged their coupons and money for a bamboo ticket. Next was the butcher's area, where the ticket was exchanged for meat.

Some big men showed up as replacements to their smaller partners who had held a place in line. It was a clever maneuver, because size and strength would be useful after the market opened. We were glad that we had four in our group. Many more people arrived and the

crowd began to swell.

As the time neared for the sales window to open, people from behind tried to crowd to the front. When the sales agent arrived, the stampede began, accompanied by a great amount of pushing, shouting, and general disorder. Elbows flew freely. Fortunately, our troop strength was sufficient to hold its position. We adopted plan B—three men to guard one agent. Once we had attained our main objective, the bamboo ticket, it was not difficult to reach the second target. We gave the ticket to a butcher. We pleaded for meat with extra fat rather than lean meat, and got it. We elbowed our retreat without meeting stiff resistance. Once we were out of harm's way, we looked at each other and laughed. We were covered with sweat and our hair was ruffled. We tallied our casualties—several jacket buttons lost—within acceptable limits for a successful mission. We returned home to a triumphant welcome.

Our leader suggested that we ask for leave from work that day. No one protested. We started a fire and someone went to pick vegetables. We even detailed someone to buy a bottle of wine from the commune-village store. By the time he returned, the kitchen was filled with an appetizing aroma. Compared to the pork, the other dishes that day had no taste. We sat around the desk, sipped wine, and ate big slices of meat.

We all joined in a toast. "Today, a victory. We'll get drunk and forget about tomorrow. This is our life."

When spring planting began, I learned how to do farm work. Every day at dawn we went into the fields and plucked the rice shoots from the seed beds. Mosquitoes continued their undeclared war. We bent over with our hands in the mud, and as we scratched, we soon became covered with mud all over.

Farm labor looked easy, but it was backbreaking work. It had its own skills and problems. When we plucked the shoots, we washed off the mud so they would be lighter to carry. We tried to wash carefully, to avoid attracting leeches. If I saw blood in the water, I washed away the mud and sometimes found a leech, half buried into the muscle of my calf. I reached down and pulled it out quickly. If I pulled too slowly, it would bite into my finger.

We tied the seedlings into bundles. Another farmer carried them

with a shoulderpole to the transplanting field and tossed the bundles into the wet paddy. After breakfast we transplanted the seedlings by poking them into the mud with the fingers of one hand.

The spring planting was not done in a great rush, and we had ample time to appreciate the humor of the farmers. One day two farmers began a battle of words. One joked that the other always used a syringe to make his squash heavier for the black market. The other countered that the first farmer always stuffed his pigs with food and water before selling it to the commune. He continued that the pig had not loved his master very much, because it had piddled furiously for several minutes when it was put on the scale, costing the man the price of at least three jin of pork.

As I listened to the farmers, I recalled that some time earlier a woman had asked me for a syringe so she could give an injection. She occasionally patched my clothes for me, so I managed to get her a syringe through a friend who worked at a hospital in town. I realized that her "patient" had been none other than a few squash. I also noticed that some farmers soaked their vegetables overnight to make them heavier for market.

One day our team leader said to a group of farmers, "You shouldn't rack your brains for new ways to cheat the scales. You should learn from the example of Granny Ou."

The farmers rolled their eyes in embarrassment. I thought Granny Ou might be a person on our team, but soon found that she was much more than that.

Every Wednesday night since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the team leaders had arranged a meeting. Among other things, someone was assigned to read the newspapers and search for editorials and articles about socially advanced people. One day a story appeared in the *People's Daily*, entitled "Granny Ou sells her hen." It reported that Granny Ou had taken a fat hen to her commune's poultry-collection station. Granny Ou asked the serviceman to weigh it for her. He carefully felt the hen's gizzard. Instead of being packed with grain or pebbles, he found it empty. He asked if the hen was sick, and Granny Ou said it certainly was not. He checked the hen carefully. The crest was red and everything about it seemed healthy. After he had weighed the hen, Granny Ou took a handful of rice from her pocket and fed it to her hen. According to the article, the man and others at the station were deeply moved by her selfless act. Granny Ou raised her Little Red Book and said, "It is Chairman Mao who taught me to be so good."

This article was cut out and pasted on the propaganda wall of the team's storehouse. After that I frequently heard the leader refer to Granny Ou when he reminded the farmers not to be selfish.

Other articles were posted on the wall. One told the story of a cowherd who had turned a lean cow into a fat one, solely because he had a bright red sun in his heart. Another described the "loyalty pig." It seems that some farmers had the inspiration to cut the hair on their pigs' foreheads to make a heart and the Chinese character for "loyalty." When they sold their pigs at the commune's pig-collection station, they were praised.

As time passed, my comrades and I avoided talking about the difficult subjects that troubled us. We had learned that it was wise not to question anything. Beyond that, we had very little basis for discussion. We had learned everything we knew from the newspapers, newsreels, or loudspeakers. We had little idea of the true conditions in other countries. We were teenagers, not very well educated, and not exposed to other points of view. At first we accepted most of what was told to us without questioning it deeply. Anything we said might be reported to the commune, resulting in punishment or having to remain in the countryside forever. Besides, I thought stubbornly, if the others could endure this life without complaining, so could I.

Our team was named the "Unity Production Team." After some time of observing life in the countryside, I began to draw some conclusions on my own. I saw that the farmers were condemned to a simple life and that it was a big burden on their shoulders. They had to toil on their own land for almost nothing in return.

I felt that everyone was being drained of their spiritual vitality because of the absurd theories that were pushed on us by the Gang of Four,[1] such as "We want only the grass of socialism. We don't want the nice shoots of capitalism." Anything productive was related to capitalism. Socialism should be concerned with class struggle instead

[1] The extreme leftists who were in control at this time. Only later were they identified as the Gang of Four. Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's wife, was the most famous of them.

of production. Only the politics of class struggle were important.

In short, the grass of socialism meant that the people were better off poor and half starved rather than comfortable. Surplus and abundance were shunned. Extra land was required to remain fallow, because vegetables were considered shoots of capitalism. The socialism of the times kept people's minds squarely on food and clothing. If people did not have to worry about these, they would lose their iron resolution to "fight against heaven, fight against earth, fight against people."

Before we went to the fields each morning, we gathered in the square in front of the production team's storehouse. First we learned or recited some quotations from Chairman Mao. To prevent the farmers from making a political mistake, the leader said many times, "Comrades, we all work for the commune. Exert all your efforts. Don't think about your private vegetable garden. Only when the production of the commune itself has been improved, can we have enough to eat. Only when there is enough in the big wok (the collective pot), will there be enough in your rice bowls (private consumption)."

Some of the farmers kept thinking about their own vegetables and pigs.

"The vegetables in your garden are mostly shoots of capitalism," the leader continued. "The pigs in your sties are growing fat, and their tails are wagging vigorously. You should remember that those are the tails of capitalism."

Some of the farmers smirked or exchanged a glance.

"Comrades, don't laugh. I am repeating the words from the newspapers and the commune radio. It isn't something to laugh at. It's political. You can't make fun of it and be on the right side of the line."

The practical situation, of course, was that there was not enough to fill the big wok, and the rice bowls were only half full. To make up for the shortage of food, farmers employed two methods. One was to have more children. Second was to use vacant land and grow more vegetables, pigs, hens, or ducks.

Many families attempted the first method. Population control was not an important issue in those years. Food distribution was based on the number of heads in the family. Every person, large or small, received seven shares. One could earn up to three more shares, depending on the number of work points one accumulated. The food unused by small children was shared by the older family members. This was a good method in the short term, but could pull a family deeper into the mud of poverty when the children grew larger.

Wiser farmers avoided extra children and put their energies into family enterprises. They spent a few extra drops of sweat on growing a garden or raising animals. Like we had done, they often tended to their private rice bowls by moonlight.

The production team allotted private patches of ground for each family, depending on the size of the family. It was acceptable to grow vegetables here. However, it was not allowed to grow vegetables elsewhere. Each family was allowed to keep one or two pigs, but no more.

The unauthorized vegetable patches often made the difference for a family on the margin. Squash and gourds were a good supplement to a rice diet. The black market could provide cash for the little necessities that had gone begging. With just a bit of extra money or an extra pig in the sty, a farmer could harbor a secret satisfaction.

The government fought these tendencies with a campaign called "cutting the tail of capitalism." Occasionally civilian soldiers and politically aggressive youth descended like a dark storm from the sky. These youth were keen to discover traces of class enemies wherever they went. This tail-cutting wind always created a big stir. The wind rushed into the village and, without a word spoken, the pirate gardens were chopped up with sickles until only scraps remained. Some of these youth carried a big tape measure on their belts, and they measured the size of the farmers' private vegetable patches. If a patch had grown from the previous year, they declared that the front of capitalism had pushed forward, and the extra area was destroyed.

Many people liked to grow their own tobacco on the unused land below the big levee on the river. These tobacco patches were destroyed. Sometimes hens fell to the sickles, and surplus pigs were chased away. When this wind blew, people with poor family histories worried, whether they had grown a capitalist tail or not.

Bad elements were continually subjected to criticism and humiliation. Perhaps they had a relative in Taiwan, perhaps their grandfather had been a landlord, or perhaps they had committed some error in judgment in the past. At every big production-brigade meeting, the

same bad elements always were criticized. Wearing their posters, they were put into a line, brought to the front, and made to stand on the platform for the duration of the meeting. Their heads were pushed down and their arms were drawn back as their crimes were announced and condemned. After the meeting they took off their big-character posters and stowed them in a special room in the storehouse. The door was never locked; even thieves shunned the posters. At the next meeting, the bad elements went to the room, got their posters, and stood in line to be criticized again.

These bad elements were labeled as ruthless exploiters from the old days. The speakers found ways to link them with even the most implausible acts. A local peasant might be called an active participant in Lin Biao's failed coup or, perhaps, a follower of Confucius. If a natural disaster occurred a thousand kilometers away, a local bad element might be blamed. No one made fun of these absurd claims. I tried to remain nonchalant, as if it were not my affair. Fortunately I was never singled out for criticism because of my family history or for bad behavior.

For each big meeting, each production team leader selected someone from his team for criticism. These unlucky people received a lesser degree of scorn and chastisement than the permanent bad elements. Usually they had been selected for a minor offense, such as having long hair or wearing overly clean clothes in the privacy of their farmhouse.

Our production-team leader had the headache of finding a short-term bad element for each meeting. He was adroit at the art of class struggle. He was leery of making new enemies and especially did not want to choose anyone for criticism who did not deserve it, so usually he kept choosing the same people. He even avoided mentioning people by name. He usually announced that the "same person as last time" had been chosen.

After a tail-cutting operation once, a big meeting was scheduled. Unfortunately for our team leader, no one from our team had been netted. He did not want to cause hard feelings, so this time he handed over the problem to the civilian soldiers of the production brigade. These were people who worked as farmers and also carried out militia duties. They generally held extreme views about the revolution and class struggle. Soon they came to our area, carrying ropes. First they

investigated the pig sties. In one they found a tail of capitalism that was wagging happily. That is, they found more than two pigs. They had their example.

I knew the family well. The farmer's ambition was to buy a Phoenix-brand bicycle, made in Shanghai. He had been working on the quiet and had refused no hardship. He grew extra vegetables, caught fish in the river, and grew pigs for sale. The militiamen destroyed the illusions of this farmer, who had aspired for nothing more in life than a bicycle. The team leader's headache was eased, but I grew more uneasy.

We all kept silent and shared our thoughts with no one. Protest or even discussion would have been pointless and potentially disastrous. After all, our purpose in the countryside was to wash the bourgeois stink off of our bodies and souls. If it was recognized that we had done this, then perhaps someday we might be allowed to return to the city and find a job.