

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Capstone Project

FRACTURED LIVES
PERSONAL NARRATIVES FROM THE
CHINESE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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For as long as I can remember, my family's photo album has included a large black and white picture of my father walking barefoot behind a water buffalo, tilling a field. The photo was taken in a village in Yunnan province, where he had been sent *xia xiang* during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This village, he was fond of telling me, is where he would send me if I wasn't sufficiently obedient, diligent, or appreciative of our material comforts. A village where "there were no toilets. No electricity. No comfortable beds. Then you'd learn what it means to truly *chi ku*¹." While I vaguely understood that my parents had experienced something not quite normal when they went *xia xiang* and that it entailed doing farm work in a rural village, like most children I dismissed the stories they tried to tell me about their past as boring and useless. Imagine my surprise when the reaction from my Fletcher classmates to my family's history was without exception, "You *need* to write a book!"

After apologizing to my parents for ignoring their stories for the past three decades, I started interviewing as many family members as possible. I visited my parents for spring break in 2015, then in July spent ten hectic days in China that was part research trip and part family reunion. My grandparents all passed away years ago, but I was able to speak with some of their surviving siblings as well as various cousins, aunts, uncles, and old family friends. In some ways, this project is an attempt to make up for the conversations I should have had with my grandparents while they were still alive.

When possible, I've verified the information that I obtained in interviews with other sources. However, most of the stories aren't in recorded history and in many cases I've had to rely on decades-old memories that are recalled, filtered, and informed by personal experiences and biases. Most of the time I present the information without commenting on its reliability or

¹ *Chi ku* – literally to "eat bitter," meaning to suffer and or/work hard

accuracy, though in some cases when there are obvious biases I make clear it is from a certain individual's point of view.

A Ten-Year Disaster

The Chinese Cultural Revolution has been described as “a cataclysm,”² “a historical tragedy”³, and “a chapter in human history of extreme suffering inflicted by extreme cruelty”⁴.

Launched in 1966 by an aging Mao Zedong who felt increasingly sidelined on the domestic front by his colleagues' more liberal economic policies and unnerved by news from abroad of Krushchev's denouncement of Stalin, the Cultural Revolution lasted ten years and wreaked enormous physical, economic, and psychological damage on China and its population. The government has never released official statistics of deaths or injuries but estimates of “abnormal deaths” vary from 500,000 to 8 million, with up to 100 million, or one-ninth of the total population suffering in some way⁵.

Mao perpetuated a paranoid vision of Chinese society in which Nationalist spies, rightists, capitalist-roaders, counterrevolutionaries, and class enemies lurked everywhere, including in the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Under the guise of reducing corruption, he sought to create a power structure that bypassed the CCP and was answerable only to him. To do this, he encouraged the masses to “make revolution” and “seize power” – identify those in authority over them who have “rightist tendencies,” humiliate, harass, and detain them, then take over the structures of authority themselves⁶. In this atmosphere, thousands of long-serving CCP

² MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

³ Song, YongYi. “Chronology of Mass Killings during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).” Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence.

⁴ Su, Yang. *Collective Killings in Rural China During the Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Song, YongYi. “Chronology of Mass Killings during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).” Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence.

⁶ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

members found themselves denounced, detained, and humiliated. Those members included my maternal grandfather and grandmother.

Born in 1920 in the city of Kaifeng, Henan province, my grandmother was the second oldest of six children and widely considered to be the leader amongst her siblings. Her older sister, self-conscious about smallpox scars on her face, withdrew from school as a teenager. Previous generations of my great-grandfather's family had produced only sons, so my grandmother was particularly treasured for being a girl – an anomaly in early 20th century China. She and her sisters were treated very differently than their mother who had married into the family. While the children joined their father and grandparents at the table for meals with guests, their mother was not invited. She didn't even have the luxury of her own name and was instead called Sun Guo Shi, the combination of her birth family's surname (Guo) and her husband's family surname (Sun)⁷.

My grandmother is universally described by my family as having a strong personality – someone who didn't hesitate to break tradition or act on her own. Women in China at the time were subject to two key restrictions regarding their appearance: their feet were bound at a young age and their hair was never to be cut. My grandmother defied both. When her parents tried to bind her feet, she ripped off the bandages that were applied each morning until they gave up, sparing her two younger sisters the process entirely. After getting a short revolutionary-style hair cut at school, my grandmother went home and cut her older sister's hair without asking anyone's permission. "She got into a huge fight with our father, but what could he do? The hair was already cut," my grandmother's youngest sister chuckled⁸. My grandmother's tendency to act unilaterally went beyond matters of appearance: one day while walking home from a friend's

⁷ 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

⁸ 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

house with that same sister (eleven years her junior), my grandmother happened upon an elementary school that was recruiting new students. She signed her sister up on the spot, saying “don’t bother asking the rest of them at home”. That’s how my great-aunt found herself attending first grade at the age of five⁹.

Because her father’s younger brother was childless, my grandmother had been “adopted” into his family. The two families continued to live in the same compound, but the titles by which the family members addressed each other changed. Even here my grandmother asserted her independence. She was supposed to call her uncle “father,” but she had little respect for him and continued calling him “uncle” while reserving “father” for her biological parent. On the other hand, she had a close relationship with her uncle’s wife and called her “mother” while addressing her biological mother as “da da”, a variant of a respectful term for an older woman. Her contempt for her uncle only increased when he took a second wife and she was determined to fight for her beloved adopted mother’s honor. This took the form of slights against the second wife, whom she refused to address by anything besides “Hey.” When an older female relative died and the family formed the funeral procession, the second wife was pregnant and was carried in a sedan out of fear that riding in a horse carriage would lead to a miscarriage. This was a sign of honor that my grandmother didn’t think her second aunt deserved, and therefore demanded that she herself also ride in a sedan. The sight of a young teenage girl riding in a sedan confused the rest of the village, but was just one more manifestation of my grandmother’s strong personality¹⁰.

But my grandmother’s biggest act of rebellion was leaving home to join the Communists to fight against the Japanese. It was 1937, just a few months after the July 7 Incident which

⁹ 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother’s youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

¹⁰ 7 July 2015 dinner conversation with my grandmother’s youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

marked the official start of the second Sino-Japanese war. Scores of Chinese students were joining the fight against the Japanese and my grandmother was no different. One of the teachers at her all-girls boarding school was a Communist and had arranged for her and several classmates to join the Party. My grandmother had a well thought-out plan before she left. During a visit home from school, she brought her comforter and told her mother that she needed it washed. In the meantime, she asked to borrow her younger brother's wool blankets (since they were easier to carry on the road), saying she would use those at school until her comforter was ready. To this day, the family laughs about how she stole her younger brother's blankets. She also got in one last dig at her uncle's second wife: on the pretense that she was attending a classmate's wedding, my grandmother borrowed two of her aunt's biggest gold rings and sold them along the way to pay for travel expenses¹¹.

With blankets and jewelry in hand, my grandmother set off at the age of seventeen for Yanan, the CCP's operating base. That was the last time her parents saw all six of their children together. The following year my grandmother paid a man to escort her older sister to Yanan so she could also join the revolution. Wary of making the journey with a man and lacking my grandmother's independent spirit, she decided to stay in their home village where she lived out the rest of her life. Their younger brother, the third of the six children and the oldest son, went in her place. After that, each of the younger children left home to join the revolution as they came of age, scattering as far Tibet, Hong Kong, and Beijing. They credit my grandmother with blazing the trail. The next (and last) time all six siblings were together was in 2007, when they gathered in Kaifeng for their oldest sister's 90th birthday celebration¹².

¹¹ 7 July 2015 dinner conversation with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

¹² 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

In Yanan, my grandmother met and married my grandfather who was born in Fujian province and had joined the CCP in 1929. He spent a stint in jail for underground Communist activities as a student, but was able to get out with the help of an uncle who was a local government official. They were assigned to Chongqing in 1944, then moved to Shanghai in 1946 as post-WWII hostilities resumed between the Nationalist and Communist parties, and ultimately travelled to Hong Kong. On the way to Shanghai, my grandmother visited her hometown for the first time since she ran away and left her oldest daughter, who had been born in 1941, in her parents' care. My grandmother's youngest and only surviving sister, the source of many of these stories, was in 12th grade at the time and took on much of the responsibility for taking care of my aunt. The family house was directly behind the local Nationalist headquarters, so when the CCP conducted an experimental attack on Kaifeng, the entire family fled to the countryside. My grandmother's sister held my aunt's hand as they fled, telling her "hurry, keep going" when she tripped over a dead body in the alleyway¹³.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, my grandparents settled in Beijing with their two children, my uncle having been born during their time in Hong Kong. My grandfather rose quickly to become dual-hatted as Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department as well as the Ministry of Culture, and my grandmother built a strong reputation for her work in youth education¹⁴. The next decade and a half were a period of relative stability for the family; they were largely insulated from the deprivations of the Great Leap Forward, the turmoil caused by violent land reform, or purges within the CCP. My mother was born during this time, in 1953. The family first lived in *Zhong Nan Hai*, a former imperial garden where many of the senior CCP leaders lived, then later moved to a traditional Chinese residence that

¹³ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

¹⁴ 14 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

once belonged to a prince during the Qing dynasty, sharing the compound with three deputy directors of other government organizations. Each deputy director's household had two phone lines – one regular and one secure, on which senior officials like Mao Zedong or Zhou En Lai could use to summon them for meetings. These summons occurred at all hours of the day or night and each deputy director had a dedicated chauffeur who lived in a smaller, neighboring courtyard and was constantly on call. My aunt recalls my grandfather frequently knocking on his chauffeur's door after receiving a call at midnight, often not returning until sunrise¹⁵.

As a Deputy Director in the Ministry of Culture and Central Propaganda Department, my grandfather was high ranking enough to have participated in many of the documented events of the Cultural Revolution but not prominent enough to be mentioned by name. This allowed me to cross-reference my family's stories with published historical works, filling in the details of my grandparents' lives like a jigsaw puzzle. He was at the expanded Politburo meeting of May 1966 where the “four big families” of Peng-Luo-Lu-Yang were denounced, marking the “last of the CCP's great pre-Cultural Revolution purges and the first of the Cultural Revolution itself.”¹⁶ Going into the meeting, he and his colleagues were cheerful and unaware of what was to come. They were shocked and discomfited to see Lin Biao pounding the table denouncing Zhu De, the aged commander-in-chief of the Eight Route Army and the People's Liberation Army. The first day, he and his three neighbors had decided to carpool to save gas. After the meeting, no one said a word on the ride back and from then on they all rode separately to avoid accusations of collaborating¹⁷.

After that meeting, everything changed for my family. As an official closely involved in arts and culture, my grandfather was immediately identified as one of the *niu gui she shen* –

¹⁵ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

¹⁶ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ 9 July 2015 interview with my maternal aunt in Beijing, China

“cow ghosts and snake demons” - who needed to be denounced and purged. In June, workers arrived at their door to rip out the phone lines, a tangible sign of my grandfather’s fall from grace. As my aunt tells it, my thirteen year-old mother was the only one home and watched in silence as they worked¹⁸, but my mother has no memory of the event. Instead, she remembers her parents warning the children not to let their father’s impending denouncement affect their schoolwork and later my grandmother shaving my grandfather’s head over his protests, so that his tormentors couldn’t pull his hair during struggle sessions.¹⁹

The family was also forewarned in July when the People’s Daily newspaper published a list of names of people to be targeted. My grandfather was on that list²⁰. The situation became increasingly tense as the Cultural Revolution evolved from an internal political campaign to a mass movement. Classes and college examinations were suspended as students – some as young as elementary age – were encouraged to rebel against their teachers. What started as wall posters denouncing school officials quickly degenerated into imprisonments, beatings, and even killings. Students formed gangs of “Red Guards,” breaking into homes and subjecting targeted individuals to verbal and physical abuse. Rule of law broke down as the police were instructed to “protect and support the Red Guards” instead of controlling them²¹. In this chaotic environment, Red Guard groups often split into rival factions. My grandfather was soon caught up in their power struggle as the groups used control of high profile prisoners as a means to compete for power and influence.

One night in December 1966, a group of student Red Guards climbed over the wall surrounding my grandparent’s compound, cut the phone lines to the guard station, and opened

¹⁸ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

¹⁹ 10 April 2016 phone interview with my mother

²⁰ 10 April 2016 phone interview with my mother; 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

²¹ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao’s Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

the gates to let in the rest of the group. They had reconnoitered the area earlier that afternoon but had been chased away by the gate guard, an old crusty PLA veteran who took his duties seriously. But the reconnaissance mission had been sufficient – they went straight to my grandfather’s bedroom and pulled him out of bed. Had it not been for my grandmother’s insistence that he be allowed a coat, they would have hauled him away in the middle of winter in just his pajamas²². Shortly after, cars carrying the family members of other kidnapped government officials began to arrive, all of them trying to exchange information about their loved ones. Approximately thirty people were taken by the students that night including, according to my aunt, the four key figures of Peng-Luo-Lu-Yang. As the families frantically reported the kidnappings to Zhou En Lai, he realized the gravity of the situation. One minister had already died at the hands of the Red Guards and as Premier he had a vested interest in keeping his employees alive. The next day, Zhou met with the students and demanded that they turn the prisoners over to him. If the students wanted to hold a struggle session, he told them, they just had to notify him and he would make the prisoners available. The students agreed. That same day, a military official arrived at my grandparents’ house to retrieve some of my grandfather’s personal belongings. He had been taken into “protective custody” by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and his family would not see him again for the next six years²³.

Unbeknownst to my family, for the next several days the prisoners were moved every night due to fears that another Red Guard faction would attempt to seize them. They were kept in make-shift solitary cells in schools and office buildings. All reading material was prohibited and the prisoners weren’t allowed to converse with each other or the guards. Though my grandfather’s family had no knowledge of his whereabouts or condition, his situation was at least

²² 14 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

²³ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

safer than being at the whims of the Red Guards. They found solace in the idea that “he might suffer, but at least he won’t die²⁴.”

My family was right in that my grandfather would suffer. After the Cultural Revolution, my grandfather spoke about his experience just once to my aunt. He didn’t want to think about those days and was still troubled by nightmares. The Forbidden City had been closed off to protect it from destruction by the Red Guards and thus made a perfect place for beatings – from outside the thick walls, no one could hear the screams. Once, my grandfather was beaten so badly that he couldn’t take his shirt off for a month – the blood from his wounds had dried and crusted, causing the shirt to stick to his skin. Another time, having been beaten into a daze inside the headquarters building of the National Ballet of China, he jumped on a windowsill and tried to throw himself out. His captors panicked and quickly dragged him back in – they wanted to beat and humiliate, not kill him. One of the people who had personally beat my grandfather went on to become the director of the ballet company. Years after the Cultural Revolution ended and my grandfather had returned to his position in the Ministry of Culture, he was asked by a member of the ballet company when he would return to oversee their activities. Never, he replied. He was never setting foot in the ballet company’s building ever again²⁵.

The ballet company director wasn’t the only example of professional courtesy and friendships being discarded in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guard group that seized my grandfather was led by Ye Xiang Zhen, the daughter of Marshal Ye Jian Ying, a PLA general who – ironically – later led a group of generals in arresting the Gang of Four and ending the Cultural Revolution. Ye Xiang Zhen had been close to my family for years, often visiting their home to borrow from my grandfather’s impressive book and music collection. Because

²⁴ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

²⁵ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

Marshal Ye was relatively unscathed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, his daughter felt safe to participate in the Red Guards and denounce others. In December 1966, Jiang Qing had a meeting with student Red Guards from various cultural and arts institutions across Beijing. During the meeting, the Red Guards complained that many people such as my grandfather needed to be punished but were impossible to catch. Jiang Qing replied that the Red Guards needed to figure it out themselves. This was enough to encourage Ye Xiang Zhen to lead a Red Guards “combat team” to kidnap my grandfather. She had little trouble finding the house, since she had been there as a visitor as late as May 1966²⁶.

Some members of my family claim that the real reason my grandfather was kidnapped was a perceived insult to Jiang Qing, despite years of close and cordial relations between the two families. Both my grandparents had known Jiang Qing quite well from their time in Yan’an. Jiang Qing was a classmate of my grandfather at a CCP cadre school and had been roommates with my grandmother. They even shared a *kang* – a raised wooden bed heated by a stove, meant to sleep several people. The four girls who shared a room with Jiang Qing used to tease her when she went to Mao’s quarters on Saturday – they were married but only spent weekends together – and asked her to bring them back good food. She would return with slices of fried wheat buns and dates, considered delicacies at the time²⁷.

The two families maintained close personal and professional ties after they settled in Beijing. As a child, my aunt remembers being invited to Jiang Qing and Mao’s residence to watch movies with their children. In turn, my aunt often invited their youngest daughter Li Na, who was a grade ahead of her and loved music, to attend concerts using free tickets that my

²⁶ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

²⁷ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

grandfather received as part of his job in the Ministry of Culture²⁸. My grandfather and Jiang Qing worked together closely for several years. Jiang Qing is widely known as the architect of “model theater,” eight performance pieces that modernized traditional Beijing opera into glorifications of the CCP, PLA, and Mao Ze Dong Thought. Unsatisfied with the team initially assigned to her, Jiang Qing complained directly to Zhou En Lai. He responded by assigning my grandfather to the project, telling Jiang Qing that if she was still dissatisfied he would personally work on the plays with her. My grandfather would go on to play a key, but widely unacknowledged, role in the development of the ballet *Hong Se Niang Zi Jun* – “Red Detachment of Women,” one of the model plays that is still performed today – ironically, by the very ballet company where he was beaten²⁹.

My grandfather is consistently described as having a keen intellect, excellent work ethic, and strong principles, but this wasn’t enough to prevent Jiang Qing from taking offense when he turned down an invitation to attend a speech she was giving to PLA members about the importance of cultural work. My grandfather had originally accepted the invitation, but before the date of the speech Peng Zhen, the not-yet-purged mayor of Beijing, sent my grandfather a copy of the text. Thinking that the content was the most important issue, my grandfather read it and told Jiang Qing that there was no need for him to attend in person. When Peng was denounced, Jiang Qing berated my grandfather for snubbing her invitation while reading the copy that Peng had sent; that was enough to place him firmly in the Peng-Luo-Lu-Yang camp³⁰.

In February 1967, a Red Guard tabloid published a political cartoon titled “Portrait of an Ugly Bunch,” showing thirty-nine “black gang members” and “capitalist-roaders”. The captions at the top read “Never forget class struggle!” and “Destroy all cow ghosts and snake demons!”

²⁸ 9 July 2015 interview with my maternal aunt in Beijing, China

²⁹ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

³⁰ 9 July 2015 interview with my maternal aunt in Beijing, China

This was essentially a hit-list of people marked for humiliation and torture and my grandfather was on it. My grandmother's father saw the cartoon and was so worried that he had a stroke and later died³¹. When my uncle came across and bought the cartoon decades later, my grandmother refused to look at it, blaming it for killing her father.

While my grandfather was the most obvious target in the family, my grandmother's career put her in a dangerous position as well. Shortly after arriving in Beijing, she had turned down a prominent position in the All-China Women's Federation and instead dedicated her career to youth education. In the 1950s she served as the principal of *Shi Da Nu Fu Zhong* - Beijing Teacher's University Girls' High School, one of the premier all-girls high schools in the city – and had overseen the schooling of many senior government officials' children. Before the start of each school year, the secure phone would start ringing off the hook – not for my grandfather for whom the phone was intended, but rather for my grandmother from government officials seeking advice on the best schools for their children. My grandmother used to joke that she could hold a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee at her parent-teacher conferences³².

My aunt even credits my grandmother with helping pick a college major for Li Na, Mao and Jiang Qing's youngest daughter. Li Na had attended Beijing Teacher's University Girls' High School while my grandmother was the principal, and when it was time for her to apply to college Mao and Jiang Qing invited my grandmother to their house to discuss what Li Na should study. Jiang Qing wanted Li Na to study shipbuilding whereas Mao wanted her to be a teacher. According to my aunt, Mao most respected teaching as a profession, though this raises the question why teachers were one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution. My grandmother

³¹ 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

³² 18 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

offered her opinion that studying shipbuilding would put Li Na far away from Beijing, which was not ideal given her delicate health. But since her older sister was already a teacher, there was no need for Li Na to become one as well. If you want Li Na to stay close to you when she starts working, my grandmother suggested, why not history? Mao and Jiang Qing agreed, and Li Na joined the history department at Beijing Normal University³³.

Luckily, before the Cultural Revolution started my grandmother had been transferred to a staff job in the Ministry of Education, a position far less likely to draw attention than the highly visible leadership role of high school principal. In fact, the first victim of the Cultural Revolution was Bian Zhong Yun, the acting principal of my grandmother's former school. The students subjected Bian, along with two other vice principals and two deans, to various types of humiliation and torture including hanging boards on their necks, hitting them with nail-spiked clubs, and scalding them with boiling water. Bian lost consciousness after three hours and died after being left in a garbage cart for two hours³⁴. A crowd from that school even showed up at my family's home looking for my grandmother while she was at work. Panicked, my mother and uncle rushed to the bus stop to warn her to stay away. She replied that if they really wanted to get her, there was nowhere she could hide³⁵.

My grandmother was indeed detained in 1968, though not by the students of her old school. Her sister guessed that it was due to guilt by association with my grandfather and her connections to Jiang Qing³⁶. My aunt has a more specific story – two of my grandmother's former students, then at Tsing Hua University, had been labeled as counterrevolutionaries and “confessed” during interrogations that they had been influenced by my grandmother. My

³³ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

³⁴ <http://www.cnd.org/CR/english/articles/violence.htm>

³⁵ 01 February 2016 phone conversation with my mother

³⁶ 8 July 2015 interview with my grandmother's youngest sister in Kaifeng, China

grandmother was already being subjected to “struggle sessions” at her office and on the day that the students arrived to “expose” her, members of her office forcibly took her to the police station and turned her over³⁷. My mother has yet another story, gleaned from her *dang an* - official records that constituted a paper trail of her life. The records noted that her mother was accused of contributing to a book of poems discovered in their home during a Red Guard raid. The book was deemed to be counterrevolutionary, and so was my grandmother³⁸.

When my mother and uncle went to inquire about my grandmother, they were told that she was being detained for investigation but that they were allowed to bring her clothing. They continually requested to see her, but after awhile were told she was no longer even in Beijing and given no further information. They would later find out that she had been transferred to Shanxi, the same province where they themselves would be sent in a few months. While in prison, my grandmother did experience some instances of kindness. One of the prison guards had participated in the Communist revolution in the 1930s like my grandparents. Though she didn't know my grandmother personally, she decided that my grandmother didn't look like a counterrevolutionary and took steps to help her, such as buying her cod liver oil and bringing her newspapers³⁹.

The day my grandmother was taken to the police station, another student who had accused her didn't even show up to give testimony in person. She was good friends with my aunt and her mother had worked with my grandmother. Today, she lives in the same apartment complex that my grandparents did for over thirty years before they died. These betrayals from people who had been close to our family – Jiang Qing, Ye Xiang Zhen, and other classmates –

³⁷ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

³⁸ 10 April 2016 phone interview with my mother

³⁹ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

have made my aunt especially contemptuous of those who gave up names under interrogation. She herself was detained by her work unit in mid-1968, shortly after my grandmother was jailed. Instead of being allowed to work, she was pressured daily to write confessions denouncing her parents and naming other people as counterrevolutionaries. She resisted, insisting that she had nothing to confess. When told that my grandfather had gotten his positions by dishonest means, she replied, “he was assigned by the Central Committee, not by his own choice. If they couldn’t find anything, how can I?”⁴⁰

While she was never beaten, my aunt did have to perform manual labor such as sweeping the floor or shoveling coal. After about a year and no results, my aunt was allowed to return to work. She is especially proud that for the entire time she was under investigation, she never named anyone else. But the humiliation didn’t stop after that year. Even though she could go back to work, she was often pulled on stage during struggle sessions in which her parents were denounced. “At least they didn’t make me wear a sign around my neck,” she told me. Though the Cultural Revolution was ostensibly a movement of the masses, it was the *lao bai xing* – the commoners who were supposedly the most oppressed by urban elites like my aunt – who treated her the best. When she was forced to take her meals at the cafeteria after everyone else, the cook showed his sympathy by giving her more food than she “could possibly eat.”⁴¹

With my grandfather, grandmother, and aunt all in custody, my mother and uncle were left to fend for themselves at the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. “That was when I learned how to cook,” my mother told me during one of my visits. “Your uncle sat there with a cookbook reading, ‘the chicken has to be cut from the back!’ ”

⁴⁰ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

⁴¹ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

“You were lucky to even have chicken to eat,” my dad interjected.⁴²

But my mother and uncle weren't on their own for long. In late 1968, they received word that they, like millions of urban students ranging from middle school to university graduates were being sent *shang shan xia xiang* – “up to the mountain and down to the villages”. Having told the Red Guards in 1966 that “to rebel is justified,”⁴³ Mao found that he had unleashed a violent force he could no longer control. The Cultural Revolution had quickly spread to all sectors of society. Armed Red Guard factions fought each other in the streets while workers, farmers, and even government officials accused their supervisors and colleagues of having rightist tendencies and secretly working against the CCP. Even a high ranking government official with a spotless record had no way to defend against these accusations: one line of reasoning was that some enemies of the CCP would act like good Communists in order to bring down the Party from within - they would “wave the red flag to oppose the red flag, and speak of Marxism-Leninism and Mao ZeDong Thought--speak of socialism--while doing all the capitalist stuff”⁴⁴. Those unfortunate enough to be the targets of these accusation became the victims of group violence - their homes were raided, their families ostracized, and they were often detained and publicly humiliated to the extent that some chose to commit suicide instead of suffering continued abuse. With Mao's whims as the only criteria for who counted as a good Communist, many of the initial perpetrators of violence were themselves labeled as rightists in subsequent rounds of persecution and suffered the same fate they had imposed on others⁴⁵.

In this atmosphere, the hunt for rightist elements often degenerated into revenge for personal grievances or outright sadistic violence. My paternal grandfather, while not a CCP

⁴² 18 March 2015 interview with my parents in Orem, UT

⁴³ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

⁴⁴ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

⁴⁵ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

member, was highly respected as the head of dentistry at a renowned hospital in Beijing and for inventing an artificial eye that didn't shatter when dropped. He had developed the process for making the artificial eye to treat injured workers from mine explosions and taught it to my grandmother. In keeping with proper Communist expectations, he had turned over the fruits of his labor to the city's prosthetic factory free of charge and my grandmother became an employee there, manufacturing the artificial eyes. However, this didn't protect my grandfather from workers at his own hospital who, in 1968 stormed his house while accusing him of being a Japanese spy. He had spent a year studying dentistry in Japan over two decades earlier. They dug up the beautiful tile work in the house (which, rare for its time, had indoor plumbing) looking for covert communications equipment, detained my grandfather, and forced the rest of the family to move into a smaller, shabbier house⁴⁶. My grandfather was imprisoned and brutally tortured for the next five years. One torture method involved four people, each one holding an arm or leg, flinging him up and down into the low ceiling and floor. Like many others in his situation, my grandfather contemplated and actually attempted to commit suicide, but his only option was his shoelaces which broke when he tried to hang himself. He decided that he wanted to live after all⁴⁷.

Down to the countryside, up to the mountains

The *shang shan xia xiang* policy, in existence since 1964 as an “important step in carrying out a cultural revolution in the countryside”⁴⁸, was massively scaled up in 1968 in an attempt to disperse the various Red Guard factions. Between 1967 and 1974, 12 million urban “educated youth” were sent to the countryside⁴⁹. Technically one child from each family–

⁴⁶ 22 March 2015 interview with my father in Orem, UT

⁴⁷ 18 March 2015 interview with my father in Orem, UT

⁴⁸ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

⁴⁹ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard University Press.

typically the youngest girl, as was the case with my father's youngest sister – was allowed to remain in the city, but with everyone else in the family imprisoned there was no one to advocate for my mother or uncle. The best they could do was request to go to the same village. Students were usually assigned to villages by school, but given my mother's young age my uncle requested permission to go to her assigned village instead. Requests for siblings to accompany each other were fairly common and usually granted because it was assumed that two siblings going to the same village could save on costs⁵⁰.

At the time, it was assumed that the moves to the villages were permanent. My mother and uncle were part of a group of students ranging in age from 15 to 22. As the train filled with the “educated youth” pulled away from the station in Beijing, everyone – family members on the platform and the students themselves – burst into tears⁵¹. It was a far cry from the propaganda posters depicting exuberant, rosy-cheeked students excitedly waving Little Red Books from train windows⁵². The teacher escorting my mother and uncle advised the younger students to remain hopeful that they could leave the village someday. The older ones, the teacher told them, were probably stuck for life, infuriating those students when they heard about the conversation. Regardless of age, most of the students didn't accept the permanence of their new circumstances. A few female students married villagers, but most refused any sort of attachment, knowing that if they married a local they would forfeit any chance of returning to Beijing⁵³. Even my uncle's wife, who developed such close bonds with the locals that decades later she helped them travel to Beijing for medical treatment, maintained that it was “completely unthinkable” for her to

⁵⁰ 14 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁵¹ 17 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁵² <http://chinese posters.net/themes/up-to-the-mountains.php>

⁵³ 2 July 2015 lunch conversation with Gu, my uncle, and other relatives in Ping Di Quan village, China

contemplate marrying one of the villagers – the type of person who “didn’t even brush their teeth every day.”⁵⁴

Many families used whatever connections they could to bring their children back from the countryside. If that failed, some students resorted to subterfuge and bribery - a diagnosis of chronic illness was a ticket back to Beijing and doctors were often sympathetic, since their children were being sent *xia xiang* as well. Many would look the other way while students smoked a cigarette before a lung exam or pricked their fingers and squeezed a drop of blood into their urine sample. “You’re too honest,” a cadre member had told one of the students in my mother’s group when he didn’t use such tactics. “Of course,” he reminisced years later, “the rules changed so it became impossible – you had to be the first to break the rules to reap the benefits.”⁵⁵

My mother and uncle arrived at *Ping Di Quan* – “flat-ground spring” – village in Shanxi province in December 1968. It was cold and the wind was blowing. The village had sent a truck to carry their luggage, but they had to walk the approximately three miles from the train station to the village. When the students first arrived, they moved in with various villagers who had spare rooms. My mother stayed with a family that was relatively well off, as evidenced by the fact that none of them worked in the fields. The four sons were, from oldest to youngest - an accountant, a tractor driver, a carpenter, and a teacher. The only daughter was the commune women’s society director⁵⁶.

The students were quickly integrated into work teams and learned all the tasks associated with planting and harvesting corn, sorghum, and wheat. Harvesting wheat required a special technique in which one held down a large section of stalks with a hand and leg, then cut them in

⁵⁴ 1 July 2015 interview with my maternal uncle’s wife during train ride to Ping Di Quan village, China

⁵⁵ 2 July 2015 lunch conversation with Gu, my uncle, and other relatives in Ping Di Quan village, China

⁵⁶ 6 August 2015 skype interview with my mother

one long smooth motion using a scythe in the other hand. The newbies didn't know where to put their hands and often cut themselves instead of the wheat. There was, of course, no stopping work to tend to the cuts. Not used to eating the coarse meal ground from sorghum or corn, the students asked for permission to try planting rice and were allocated a small plot of land. Planting rice meant standing for hours in the water barefoot, braving ice shards in the spring and leeches in the summer. Since they had to stand still to tend to the plants, the leeches had plenty of time to feast. The rice crops yielded a moderate but insubstantial harvest since it had to be divided amongst the entire village⁵⁷.

After about two years, the students built and moved into their own houses, one for the males and one for the females. This was partially because the government had allocated funds for the students' housing and partially because of the trouble caused by some of the more rambunctious boys. At one house, four male students had moved into the room that had been prepared for the family's son and his soon-to-be bride. One night, in an attempt to warm up the room, they had overstuffed the stove connected to the *kang* with firewood. While they slept, the fire grew too hot and cracked the *kang*.⁵⁸

Along with the new houses, the students also built new latrines. The girls' latrine consisted of two deep well-like holes with a brick wall in between for privacy. The holes were each connected to a sloping ditch that allowed human waste to run down into the hole. "It was built pretty well," my mother told me. The boys' latrine was a different matter. It was a pit about 2 meters in diameter with two wood planks balanced across the opening, on which the boys were expected to squat. After enough waste accumulated, it would be covered with a layer of dirt. One unfortunate student who was visiting from another village fell in while using it but luckily for

⁵⁷ 14 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁵⁸ 2 July 2015 conversation during visit to Ping Di Quan village, China

him, fresh dirt had just been spread that day⁵⁹. When the pit was almost full a specially assigned team would dig up the contents, add hay, and allow it to compost into fertilizer. Nothing could be taken for personal use – not even the contents of the latrines, which were valuable as fertilizer. The same thing happened with the girls' latrine, though the walls were steeper and they didn't spread dirt so the process was a bit messier. While the students didn't have to dig up their own feces, they did have to spread the composted fertilizer in the fields, which still smelled bad. The fertilizer was delivered via horse cart, with piles dropped off every few feet and people following on foot to spread out the piles with shovels. There is a certain technique to shoveling and spreading that when mastered, results in a thin and even layer. A poor technique means one large clump on the ground or, if the wind is blowing just right, a face full of composted human waste⁶⁰.

My mother's village was fairly relaxed about holding struggle sessions, but the Cultural Revolution's attitude of deliberate destruction manifested there too. Once, my mother was part of a work team whose job was to flatten the mounds of earth from ancestral graves to re-purpose the land for farming. One day, her team of four – three female students and one local villager in charge of them – had finished early and were chitchatting in the field instead of returning to the village to be assigned more work. They had left one small mound as proof that they had cleared the others, and propped the handles of the wheelbarrow against it. As they were chatting, one of the students noticed a hole near the wheelbarrow that hadn't been there before. As the villager moved the wheelbarrow, the ground around the hole collapsed, revealing a stone hut with a coffin inside. The villager immediately jumped down to investigate. It was common in those days, when villagers heard about a tomb discovery, to rush in to claim valuables. The village was relatively prosperous, and some tombs contained jewelry and a coffin made with high-quality

⁵⁹ 25 August 2015 phone call with my mother

⁶⁰ 17 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

wood. My mother was even a beneficiary of this grave-robbing phenomenon. One of the villagers had seen her struggling to use a poorly made hoe. “What kind of terrible handle is that?” he told her. “I’ll give you a better one.” The new tool had a smooth, slender handle that was cool to the touch and didn’t cause blisters on her hand. Years later, the villager told her that the handle was made from salvaged coffin wood⁶¹.

In other instances, the destruction of graves was more malicious. Some of the younger villagers took corpses that weren’t entirely decomposed and hung them on trees next to the train tracks. Conductors of passing trains could be heard furiously blaring their horns in protest. Though the destruction of graves was considered highly disrespectful, few dared to stand up against it. During the Cultural Revolution when any sort of wealth was damning evidence, any family whose ancestors’ graves appeared prosperous kept quiet, hoping to avoid persecution as a “landlord” or “rich peasant” instead of protesting the disrespect towards their forebears⁶².

While life in the village was hard, it was not a firm exile. It was actually relatively easy to return to Beijing, albeit temporarily. The villages didn’t depend on the students’ labor and absent students didn’t earn work points, leaving more food and money to be divided amongst everyone else at the end of the year. In 1971, my aunt, having been released from her own detainment a few years earlier, gave birth to her daughter. With no one else around to help, my mother returned to Beijing and stayed for over a year to help raise my cousin, curiously paralleling my grandmother’s sister caring for my aunt decades earlier.

In 1972, my uncle had also returned to Beijing to visit and the three siblings started a letter writing campaign requesting to see their parents, neither of whom had been heard from since their detentions years ago. They wrote a letter every day, purposely mailing it from the post

⁶¹ 17 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁶² 17 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

office immediately outside of *Zhong Nan Hai*, where the key leaders of the Communist Party lived. In the beginning, they wrote long letters detailing their family's circumstances. Eventually the letters boiled down to two points: 1) Where are our parents – we don't even know if they're dead or alive. 2) If they're alive, can we see them? After several weeks, they were suddenly notified that they could see their father⁶³. At the first meeting, which included my mother, her siblings, and my one year old cousin, my grandfather couldn't speak. During his imprisonment he had stayed silent for so long that he had essentially forgotten how to talk⁶⁴.

After the meeting with my grandfather, my mother and her siblings shifted their attention to my grandmother. Several months went by without any news, until they were suddenly notified that they could see her; she had been brought back from Shanxi in response to their requests. When they saw her, my grandmother weighed less than eighty pounds. "She was impossibly thin," my aunt recalled. "When she sat, it seemed like her legs weren't even there." After the meeting my grandmother was sent to recuperate in a hospital in Beijing where she stayed for three months, watched over by two female guards. She might have stayed longer but was discharged when her bed was needed for an inmate who had tried to commit suicide by swallowing needles. Following a short stint in a Beijing jail, my grandmother was released after more than four years of captivity. The only notification her children had was a phone call the day prior, telling them to tidy up the house⁶⁵.

After my grandmother was released, she did something unexpected – she insisted that my mother and uncle return to Shanxi. "You have nothing to do in Beijing," she told them. "No school, no job – you can't just hang around here." But a few months later she visited them in the village and saw my mother's legs scratched to shreds from the itchy bites left by swarms of tiny

⁶³ 14 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁶⁴ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

⁶⁵ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

black insects. “You can’t stay in a place like this,” she told them and mobilized her siblings to help. Her youngest brother used his connections to get my mother transferred to a factory job in Datong, a nearby city⁶⁶. While my mother went to Datong, my uncle went back to Beijing, taking advantage of the rule that let one child per family stay in the city. By all accounts it should been my mother since she was the youngest and a girl, but my uncle had been in bad health since he was electrocuted earlier that year. He had been working in a field when he raised a wet tool overhead and accidentally made contact with a low hanging, high voltage electric wire. The next thing he remembered was waking up in the field, lying on his back. One of his classmates had been nearby and used a piece of dry wood to break the contact, saving his life. My grandmother felt guilty asking her to make the sacrifice, but my mother readily agreed⁶⁷. This act of caring for a sibling would have far-reaching consequences: my father had been transferred to Datong after several years in Yunnan, and if my mother had returned to Beijing they might have never met.

In Datong, my parents worked in a train repair facility. At the time, it was considered a *tie fan wan* – “iron rice bowl” – a good job that guaranteed a salary. When a train arrived, they inspected it and repaired any damage, starting with the interior such as chairs and tables, then checking the exterior components such as water pipes and connection hooks. Trains requiring extensive repair would be referred to the maintenance depot, but more often than not if the wheels and water pipes were okay the train kept running. My mother worked on passenger trains while my father worked on cargo trains⁶⁸.

As my father tells it, he used a “small trick” to talk to my mother away from the factory since it was prohibited for workers to date each other. He knew that my mother walked by a particular spot every day, so one day he loitered there with a newspaper until my mother

⁶⁶ 14 March 2016 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁶⁷ 17 March 2016 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

⁶⁸ 17 March 2015 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

approached. They had seen each other at work and struck up a conversation. This turned into a secret relationship, characterized mostly by shared meals at the cafeteria⁶⁹. In contrast, my mother simply remembers my father as one of several young men who gathered around her and two female classmates when they reported for training and made no mention of the “trick” that my father claimed had kick-started their relationship⁷⁰. I’m undecided whether this speaks to the effectiveness of his trick, or the lack thereof.

In 1975 my grandfather was released from detainment, but instead of being allowed to return home he was sent to Jiangxi Province where he had some freedom but was effectively in exile. According to my aunt, the reason for this stemmed from Bo Yibo, father of the notorious Bo Xilai, of corruption and murder scandal fame. He had been the first of several prisoners, including my grandfather, to be released with the understanding that he could spend a few days with his family in Beijing and then leave for the countryside. However, once he was released his family advised him to stay in Beijing. Whether he stayed or went, he was probably going to be stripped of CCP membership, they argued, so why go? Due to Bo’s refusal to leave Beijing, the rest of the prisoners were sent directly to the countryside without their families being notified. When my grandmother and uncle learned about my grandfather’s whereabouts from a work colleague, they immediately took a train to Jiangxi and arranged for my mother to be transferred there⁷¹.

Shortly after she arrived, it was announced that the *gao kao* – the annual exam that determined where students would attend college – was being reinstated. For the millions of educated youth that had been banished from the cities, this was the golden ticket home. If a student could get accepted by a college in a major city, he or she could leave their assigned

⁶⁹ 22 March 2015 interview with my father in Orem, UT

⁷⁰ 10 April 2016 phone call with my mother

⁷¹ 5 February 2016 interview with my maternal aunt in Wilton, CT

village and legally have their *hukou* – the household registration system that controls access to services based on residency status – transferred to that city. My grandparents had told my mother that while it would be wonderful if she was accepted by a college in Beijing, they were not going to pull any strings or use their contacts to get her *hukou* transferred if she didn't. She was on her own⁷². From that point on, my mother and father focused all their energies on preparing for the test. They had both used precious luggage space to take books when they went *xia xiang*, and now it was paying off. My mother also got tutoring help from a local elementary school teacher, who had graduated top of his class but had been assigned to Jiangxi instead of a major city because of his undesirable family background. “Did you talk about trying to go to college in the same city?” I asked my father. He chuckled, “We didn't dare think about it. We would have been grateful to get into any school.”⁷³

Back to Normal?

The results turned out to be better than anyone expected – my father was accepted into a medical school and my mother got into not one but two colleges, all in Beijing. My uncle, who had thought he was too old for college but later changed his mind, also took the *gao kao* and was accepted. Both sets of grandparents were rehabilitated and returned to their former jobs. In my mother's official file, there are documents overturning the charges against my grandparents and instructions that the accusations not be used against their children⁷⁴. It appeared that, at least on the surface, life had simply resumed where it left off.

But some memories are powerful, even when they're decades old. This summer, I had the opportunity to visit the village where my mother and uncle went *xia xiang*. My mother couldn't make the trip, but my uncle and a gregarious gentleman named Gu – the classmate who had

⁷² 9 July 2015 interview with my maternal aunt in Beijing, China

⁷³ 22 March 2015 interview with my father in Orem, UT

⁷⁴ 10 April 2016 Phone interview with my mother

saved my uncle's life when he was electrocuted – went with me. I encountered a fascinating mixture of nostalgia and cognitive dissonance, fueled in part by the government's choice to focus on maintaining its legitimacy instead of candidly confronting the mistakes of its past. We arrived at the station before dawn and Gu immediately started reminiscing. "We were here over forty years ago!" he told a train station employee. "You weren't even working here back then, anyone who knows about this has to be over sixty." In a few sentences, Gu laid claim to a village he hadn't seen in half a century, establishing his credibility by virtue of age and time. Unlike that day in December 1968, we took a taxi, reaching the village in about twenty minutes. Instead of highways and skyscrapers, there were dogs lounging on dirt roads flanked by fields of corn and sorghum. The houses were built in the traditional Chinese style - a courtyard with rooms on all sides, surrounded by a high wall and an impressive gate. Many of them appeared to be brand new - slick lines and clean white tiles on the walls - but we were more interested in the old, run-down buildings made of mud bricks.

With the help of some curious and friendly villagers, my uncle and Gu found all the key sites, starting with the students' living quarters. The original buildings had been replaced, but that didn't stop my uncle and Gu from reminiscing in detail:

"The male students lived on this side, the female students on the other..."

"There was a well over there..."

"That was the main gate. These stairs weren't here before..."

We didn't know the owners of any of the compounds; Gu simply knocked on the gate and asked to be let in. Without exception, the residents dropped whatever they were doing to show us around, sometimes even pressing on us gifts of plums, apricots, and intricate handicrafts made from cigarette cartons. We were introduced to "the oldest man in the village," who turned out to

be the accountant whose family hosted my mother when she first arrived. He remembered my mother and took us to visit the house where she and two classmates had lived. The courtyard had been split into two, but the original building was still standing, with their bedroom converted into a storage room. My mother remembered a *kang* with beautiful drawings on the wood, but that was long gone⁷⁵. We took pictures and texted them to my mother. The accountant, my mother responded, was not as good looking as he used to be. We even found the compound with the broken *kang* and met the woman who was the intended bride. She had arrived and married the son months after the incident and had no knowledge of it; my uncle and Gu lost no time regaling her with the story.

While most of the people I talked to were willing to speak about the physical hardships and mental agony of being sent to a village or having a family member imprisoned, they also tried to affix a veneer of positivity to the experience. While waiting for the train back to Beijing, my uncle intercepted me as I was coming out of the bathroom.

“I need to talk to you,” he said before I even had a chance to get to the anti-bacterial hand gel in my purse. “You heard Gu talk about how terrible it was, but you need to understand that it wasn’t all bad.” Even though it was hard for the students, he said, it helped them understand how the farmers lived. After all, farmers make up the majority of China. Gu and my uncle both seemed to wear their time *xia xiang* as a badge of pride, as if it proved their strength of character to be able to survive the experience and excel.

This is also a political tactic used by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who presents his time *xia xiang* in Liangjiahe, a rural village in Yanan as a source of credibility. In a 2004 interview, Xi reminisced about learning to embrace the hard life of a farmer and forming close relationships with the local villagers, who surrounded his cot at night asking him about the outside world. Xi

⁷⁵ 14 March 2016 interview with my mother in Orem, UT

calls his time in Yanan transformational, claiming that he “is who he is now” because of his experience there⁷⁶. This appears to have at least some resonance with the general population. While talking through the village, Gu reminisced that while life was hard in the village, it could have been much worse: he always had enough food to eat even if he didn’t like it, whereas his wife’s assigned village was constantly worried about going hungry. This village was the same area that Xi Jinping had been sent. “This is why Xi Jinping understands the common people!” he declared. “He suffered just like them.” The villager who had appointed himself our unofficial tour guide agreed enthusiastically.

My uncle was especially dismissive of those who claimed that the Cultural Revolution ruined their future – in response to an essay written by a man who claimed that his time *xia xiang* ruined his chances for college and a good job, he retorted, “true gold will always shine.” This sentiment is perhaps unsurprising given that most of my family were able to get into college shortly after the Cultural Revolution ended, but in the broader context of my family’s experience during that time, nonetheless a bit unsettling. The same aunt who told me that our family’s greatest piece of good fortune was that no family members died during that time also said that Mao was trying to do the best for the country when he started the Cultural Revolution. He was, she said, “trying to give the CCP a bath.”⁷⁷

I had started my research with the idea that the Cultural Revolution was an unmitigated disaster, constituting ten years of pointless misery for everyone involved. However, once we arrived at the village it quickly became evident that wasn’t the case. The village clearly held some nostalgia for Gu and my uncle – and my mother as well, if her immediate text message responses to my aunt were any indication. And if I really think about it, the Cultural Revolution

⁷⁶ Xi, Jinping. “I am a citizen of Yanan.” sina.com.cn.

⁷⁷ 9 July 2015 interview with my maternal aunt in Beijing, China

very well could have made my family's life in the United States possible. Though both of my parents were close to their families and had promising careers in China, they nevertheless chose to uproot themselves, moving literally to the other side of the world with (as my father tells it) \$40 in their pocket. Without such a negative experience during her teenage years, my mother might not have been as willing to travel to the United States for graduate school and my father might not have been as amenable when she expressed a desire to stay permanently. I would not have grown up to serve in the U.S. Air Force and my little brother would have never even existed under the one-child policy.

There was clearly some sort of emotional connection for the villagers of *Ping Di Quan* as well. As our visit drew to a close and I climbed into our hired van to depart for the train station, the accountant walked up to the van and reached for my hand through the open window. "Give your mother my regards," he said. "Tell her to come back to visit."