

FOREWORD BY JANET YELLEN

WEIJIAN SHAN

OUT

OF THE

GOBI

MY STORY OF CHINA AND AMERICA



WILEY

Out of the Gobi



Source: WorldAtlas.com

Note: China, with a landmass of approximately 9.6 million square kilometers (3.7 million square miles), is about the same size as the United States (with its landmass of 9.8 million square kilometers, or 3.8 million square miles). China's population of about 1.4 billion (in 2016) is more than four times that of the United States (325 million). The shape of the country reminds one of a rooster. The Gobi Desert is located on the back of the rooster, in the north. The Great Wall, shown as a dotted line, stretches from the throat of the rooster near Beijing all the way to the west, roughly parallel to the rest of the Gobi Desert for 6,259 kilometers (3,889 miles), but its total length, including all its branches, is 21,196 kilometers (13,171 miles). The Yellow River, part of which flows close to the southern edge of the Gobi Desert, is the second-longest river in China and the sixth-longest in the world, with an estimated length of 5,464 kilometers (3,395 miles).

Out of the Gobi

*My Story of China
and America*

Weijian Shan

WILEY

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*To my wife, Bin Shi, and to our son,
Bo, and daughter, LeeAnn*

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Foreword | ix |
| Acknowledgments | xi |
| Author's Note | xiii |
| Prologue | 1 |
| Chapter 1 Man-Made Famine | 5 |
| Chapter 2 School Cut Short | 21 |
| Chapter 3 Storm of Revolution | 35 |
| Chapter 4 Turmoil Under Heaven | 53 |
| Chapter 5 Exiled to the Gobi | 77 |
| Chapter 6 Digging for Potatoes | 93 |
| Chapter 7 War Is Coming | 109 |
| Chapter 8 Repairing the Earth | 123 |
| Chapter 9 Battling Frozen Lake | 137 |
| Chapter 10 The Longest Night | 159 |
| Chapter 11 Unforgettable Movie Night | 173 |
| Chapter 12 Barefoot Doctor | 185 |

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 13 | Brickmaking the Ancient Way | 213 |
| Chapter 14 | Petition to Mao | 237 |
| Chapter 15 | Pigs Don't Fly | 249 |
| Chapter 16 | Half the Sky | 267 |
| Chapter 17 | Desert Dreams of College | 281 |
| Chapter 18 | Last Convulsions of the Revolution | 305 |
| Chapter 19 | Roads to Rome | 331 |
| Chapter 20 | Old Gold Mountain | 345 |
| Chapter 21 | The People's Republic of Berkeley | 379 |
| Chapter 22 | Ivy League Professor | 403 |
| | Epilogue | 437 |
| | Index | 445 |

Foreword

The manuscript of Weijian Shan's book arrived on my desk at a hectic time: I had commitments for weeks to come. But when I finally picked up the manuscript, I was so gripped by his stories that I could hardly put it down.

I have known Shan for 36 years, since he first showed up in my office on a sunny September day in 1982. He struck me as a charming young man, full of smiles, but in need of a good meal and a new haircut. He had arrived at Berkeley to start his Ph.D. program, and I was his academic advisor. I was stunned to discover that he had no formal math training. All the math he knew he had learned by himself, by candlelight. Over time, I learned a bit about Shan's unique and extraordinary background growing up in China, where he was denied an education for 10 years after elementary school.

Yet I was fascinated to read his detailed account of a China gone mad during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution, of the severe hardship he and his generation had endured, of his relentless pursuit of an education through reading whatever books he could find while serving as a hard laborer in China's Gobi Desert at a time when almost all books were banned, and of how, against all odds, he was able to get out of the Gobi and eventually find his way to America to attend graduate school.

He recounts a contemporary history of China rarely told in the English literature from a personal perspective, a history that paralleled our own tumultuous period in the 1960s and 1970s in America. His keen observation of the United States from the viewpoint of someone with a totally different cultural, political, and economic background is unique, insightful, heartwarming, and often funny. He recounts his stories with vivid clarity, short, punchy sentences, and light and dark humor. They captivate the reader, who feels as if he is watching a movie, anxious to know how the plot will unfold and where it will all end.

After earning his doctoral degree, Shan received offers of professorships from some of the most renowned American universities, including MIT and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. I remember him calling me for advice, asking which school he should choose for his academic career. I told him he couldn't go wrong at any of these top schools. As I remarked to one of my Berkeley colleagues at a celebration party on the occasion of Shan's graduation in 1987, I found it mind-boggling how far he had journeyed—from working as a hard laborer without a secondary education and with no command of English to becoming a professor at one of America's most prestigious universities, all in about ten years.

Shan's story shows the crucial role that education plays in the success of individuals and society as a whole. Moreover, Shan's life provides a demonstration of what is possible when China and the United States come together, even by happenstance. It is not only Shan's personal history that makes this book so interesting but also how the stories of China and America merge in just one moment in time to create an inspired individual so unique and driven, and so representative of the true spirits of both countries.

Particularly now, the people of both nations have much to learn from and teach one another. I hope that Shan's book will serve as a cornerstone in that ongoing conversation.

Janet Yellen
Federal Reserve Chair (2014–2018)
Eugene E. and Catherine
M. Trefethen Professor of Business and
Professor of Economics Emeritus,
University of California, Berkeley

Acknowledgments

This book is a memoir, not an autobiography. The distinction may be blurred at times, but my idea has always been to tell stories that I consider reflective of history as I lived it, both in China and in America.

By coincidence, the release of this book will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the start of my life in the Gobi Desert in China's Inner Mongolia. My generation in China is truly a lost generation, because for 10 long years the vast majority of us were deprived of a formal education and many were unable to make up for the lost years later in life. I dedicate this book to my friends of the Gobi days and to the people of my generation who shared similar ordeals.

I am immensely grateful to Dr. Janet Yellen for providing the foreword for this book.

I began to write this book in 1990, and after a few months I completed about 100 pages, which included my recollections covered in Chapters 5 through 7, 9 through 13, and 15. Dr. Judy Shapiro at the University of Pennsylvania helped me edit those pages. Before I was able to finish them, I became extremely busy, and by good fortune I remained so for the next 26 years. On New Year's Day 2017, at my son's home in California with our family, I decided to pick it back up again.

I wish to thank Bill Falloon, my editor at Wiley, who, in addition to his editing work, made good suggestions from which the book benefited immensely. It is based on his suggestion that I include a prologue for each chapter, to provide historical background and context for the ensuing story. I also thank the Wiley teams in copyediting, design, production, and marketing for an excellent job in turning the book into a beautiful product.

I owe my gratitude to my other editors, Mark Clifford, Jill Baker, and Tim Morrison, for their encouragement and their essential help editing, fact-checking, and suggesting numerous good ideas to improve the quality of the manuscript. I thank my assistant Rachel Kwok for helping me in countless ways related to this project.

The stories in the book are based on recollections of my own experiences, and on rare occasions those of others, woven together into a coherent narrative. I have incorporated materials and data from historical research, but do not otherwise provide sources and citations as you might find in a more formal work of history. I have made an effort to check multiple sources to determine the accuracy and reliability of the data included here. I along with my editors have made our best efforts to fact-check all material information in the book. The responsibility for any errors is mine alone.

My good friend Liu Xiaotong, a self-taught photographer who owned a rare 135mm camera, took many of the photographs of us in the Gobi, including the photograph on the cover showing me running in the Gobi. He would have been an accomplished musician and multi-talented artist if not for the Cultural Revolution.

I am deeply indebted to my wife, Bin Shi, for her support and sacrifice as I devoted almost all my spare time to this project, and to my children, Bo and LeeAnn, whose fascination with the stories of my past strongly motivated me to write and complete this book, and whose critiques helped improve it greatly.

Weijian Shan
October 17, 2018
Hong Kong

Author's Note

Chinese names are written and spoken with the surname or family name first, followed by the given name. Take, for example, the most famous Chinese names of the twentieth century: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chiang Kai-shek—all are written with the family name first.

Western-educated Chinese tend to adopt the European way to write their names in English (i.e., putting the given name first and family name last). My name as presented in Chinese is Shan Weijian. In English, it is Weijian Shan. In mainland China today, a woman does not adopt the family name of her husband, so there is no distinction between a “maiden” and a “married” name as in the United States or Europe. Some Chinese women living outside mainland China, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, adopt their husbands’ family names. My wife’s given name is Bin and her family name is Shi. In China, it is written as Shi Bin, but in America her name is written as either Bin Shi or Bin Shi Shan, the latter adopting my family name.

In this book, all Chinese names are presented in the order of family name first, followed by the given name, and are indexed in this way as well.

I refer to some characters in the book by their given names and others by their family names, with or without an honorific or professional title (Mr., Mrs., Dr., or Professor). This largely depends on how I would greet them in real life, as such references come naturally to mind when I write. It should be noted that it is common in Chinese culture to greet someone by putting either “lao (Old),” which is a form of respect, or “xiao (Little),” which is a form of endearment, in front of their family name. In this book, I use this in referring to Old Yi, Old Cui, Old Huang, and so on, because this is how they were addressed by the people around them.

China uses a traditional system of measurement as well as the metric system. The Chinese system can be easily translated into the metric system in whole numbers. For example, one kilometer is exactly two Chinese *li*, one meter is exactly 3 Chinese *chi*, one kilogram is exactly two Chinese *jin*, one hectare is exactly 15 *mu*. In the book, I provide the imperial equivalent when a unit of measurement is presented in the metric system or Chinese system, for example, 100 kilometers (~62 miles) or 100 kilograms (~220 pounds).

I make an effort to minimize the use of acronyms, abbreviations, or untranslated Chinese terms to make it easier for the reader to understand. For example, I use the “Nationalist” Party or the “Nationalist” government to refer to Chiang Kai-shek’s organization, instead of “Kuomintang” or “KMT,” which are loanwords based on Chinese phonetics often seen in the English literature of Chinese studies.

Prologue

On September 15, 1950, UN forces commanded by General Douglas MacArthur made an amphibious landing at the port of Incheon, on the west coast of Korea, about 40 kilometers from Seoul. The operation involved more than 260 naval vessels, including 6 aircraft carriers, and 75,000 troops, the largest deployment of firepower since the D-Day landing at Normandy. North Korean forces had squeezed the opposing UN troops to a toehold around Pusan, in the southeastern corner of the Korean Peninsula, and threatened to push them into the Pacific Ocean. For the North Koreans, victory was in sight. The Incheon landing, however, was a complete success: It put MacArthur's troops well behind the North Koreans' front lines and turned the tide of the Korean War. By October, UN forces crossed the 38th parallel dividing North and South Korea. By the end of the month they were within striking distance of the Yalu River, which demarcates the border between North Korea and China. General MacArthur declared that the war would be over by Christmas.

On November 1, advancing US troops were halted at the Battle of Unsan some 200 kilometers from the Chinese border and repelled by Chinese forces, which eventually pushed all the way back across the 38th parallel and recaptured Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

As his troops lost ground, US president Harry Truman declared that he would take whatever steps necessary to win the war in Korea, including the use of nuclear weapons. In April 1951, he sent nine nuclear bombs with fissile cores to Okinawa, along with nuclear-capable B-29 bombers. In October, Operation Hudson Harbor conducted mock nuclear bombing runs across the war zone, preparing to rain fire on a huge swath of northeast Asia, including parts of China and Russia if necessary. Fortunately, they never had to. By that summer the war had largely devolved into skirmishes in a narrow zone around the 38th parallel, and armistice talks were under way.

I was born in October 1953 in China's Shandong Province, one of the two primary target areas for the planned nuclear strike. I was lucky to have been born.

★ ★ ★

My parents' generation, and the generation before theirs, had lived through numerous wars, each more devastating than the last, with almost no respite or peace in between. Tens of millions of people died in China in those wars and in famines during the century before my birth.

The last Chinese dynasty, the Qing, was overthrown in October 1911. Prior to this, the country had been repeatedly ravaged by foreign invasions and peasant uprisings.

In the First Opium War of 1840, Britain invaded and defeated China for refusing to allow British merchants to sell opium to China. The Second Opium War followed, from 1856 to 1860, during which the joint forces of the British and French empires marched all the way to Beijing to force China to legalize the opium trade and open its ports to foreigners. They burned down the magnificent Old Summer Palace, said to be many times larger and grander than its replacement, which itself is still considered one of the greatest imperial palaces in the world.

Between 1851 and 1864, there was a massive peasant uprising known as Taiping Rebellion. About 20 million people perished in the seesaw battles between the peasants and government forces before the rebellion was brutally crushed. The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) led to another invasion of China and the occupation of Beijing by the joint

forces of eight foreign powers, which included European countries, the United States, and Japan. In 1894, Japanese warships obliterated the newly formed Chinese navy off China's northeast coast, clearing the way for Japan's colonial occupation of Korea. The ground battle of the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) was fought in the Chinese port city of Lushun, known at that time as Port Arthur, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilian deaths.

By the beginning of twentieth century, the Qing dynasty was rotten to the core, and the country was on the verge of being torn apart by foreign powers. The 1911 Revolution marked an end to the imperial era and gave birth to the Republic of China. But it did not bring either peace or a stronger nation. The country soon fractured into many different territories, controlled by warlords who relentlessly waged bloody wars against each other, causing numerous deaths and much misery.

In 1927, a Northern Expedition Force led by Chiang Kai-shek marched from the southern city of Guangzhou, fought its way north against the warlords, and eventually brought the country under one flag, albeit extremely tenuously. Along the way, Chiang carried out a purge of Communists, his former allies in the fight against the warlords. Thousands were massacred by Chiang's Nationalist troops, and the rest either went underground or led uprisings against the new regime. In August 1927, Zhou Enlai, who later became the first premier of the People's Republic of China, led an armed uprising in the southern city of Nanchang, which marked the founding of the People's Liberation Army. In autumn 1927, Mao Zedong led what became known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising, establishing the first Communist base in the mountainous areas of Jiangxi Province. This began the first civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists; it would last for the next 10 years.

In 1931, Japanese troops invaded northeast China and captured a territory about twice the size of France, turning it into a puppet state they called Manchukuo. In 1937, Japan launched an all-out war against China and occupied all the coastal cities and some inland provinces. By various estimates, Chinese casualties from the time of Japan's invasion to its surrender in 1945 numbered between 20 and 30 million, the vast majority of which were civilian deaths.

The Nationalists and the Communists cooperated in the war against Japan, but as soon as hostilities were ended, their own conflict

was rekindled. In the ensuing war, Communist forces led by Mao Zedong rapidly grew in strength to rival and eventually overwhelm the Nationalist troops. Between 1947 and 1949, the Communists won three decisive battles, each of which eliminated about half a million Nationalist troops, sealing the fate of Chiang Kai-shek's Old China. Chiang fled to Taiwan with what was left of his troops and his government, taking with him tons of gold and all movable treasures from Beijing's Forbidden City.

Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. This was to be the New China: finally unified, free of the yoke of imperial and colonial aggression, marching forward into a promising future.

★ ★ ★

I was born into this New China, a country that had finally begun a period of sustained nation-building after a hundred years of tragic upheaval and war. It is for this reason my parents named me Weijian. The Chinese character *wei* means "great," and *jian* means "build" or "construct." They certainly had great hopes for nation-building, for peace, and for a better life for their children.

But it was not to be. Not, at least, as they had hoped.

Chapter 1

Man-Made Famine

On March 10, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote a letter to Mao Zedong, the leader of Chinese Communist forces in the war against Japan. "My Dear Mr. Mao," Roosevelt wrote, "I received your letter of November 10, 1944 upon my return from the Yalta Conference and appreciate very much receiving your personal views on developments in China." Roosevelt noted Mao's emphasis on the unity of the Chinese people and expressed his hope that Mao and the Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, could find a way to work together to defeat the Japanese. Roosevelt concluded by saying: "The friendship of the Chinese people and the people of the United States is, as you say, traditional and deep-rooted, and I am confident that the cooperation of the Chinese and American peoples will greatly contribute to the achievement of victory and lasting peace."

It was rather extraordinary that Roosevelt should have written to Mao at all. At the time, Mao was mainly known as a Communist guerrilla leader with a force far smaller and worse equipped than that of Chiang's Nationalist government; few would have predicted that he would seize national power only four years later. But Mao went out of his way to make overtures to the US president. In 1945, months before the Japanese surrender, Mao offered to visit Roosevelt in Washington, but the offer was spurned by the US ambassador at the time, Patrick J. Hurley, who never delivered Mao's offer to the president.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949, Chiang Kai-shek's remaining forces fled to the island of Taiwan. Although the United States continued to recognize Chiang's government as the legitimate government of all of China, it seemed that it was not prepared to throw its lot in with the defeated Nationalist government altogether. On January 5, 1950, President Harry Truman announced that the United States would not intervene in the event of an attack on Taiwan by the PRC, indicating that while it remained wary, the United States had not entirely ruled out a relationship with the Communists, who had cooperated effectively with the Americans in the war against Japan.

But if Mao had cherished any hope of a good relationship between his New China and the United States, it was dashed six months later with the outbreak of the Korean War. On June 27, Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait, declaring that a Communist takeover of the island would constitute a "direct threat to the security of the Pacific area." The United States also imposed a total trade embargo on China. From that point on, Mao's China leaned inexorably into the camp of the Soviet Union. But that friendship proved to be short-lived as well.

In the United States, the political discourse in the 1950s became focused on "who lost China"—as if the US had ever owned it. In an era when McCarthyism dominated the US scene and all the "China hands" in the State Department saw their careers trashed or worse, any relationship with "Red China" was out of the question. The "Red scare" with respect to China would persist long after Senator Joseph McCarthy was discredited and disgraced. It would take 20 years, and a staunch anti-communist Republican president, to break the ice in the US relationship with China.

Meanwhile, the China Mao had conquered remained a country in dire poverty. Outside the major urban areas, it was largely a preindustrial society; by the estimates of British economist Angus Maddison, China's per capita GDP in 1950 was about \$450, less than 20 percent that of the United States in 1870 (in 1990 dollars). Mao's New China began economic reconstruction in earnest when peace finally came after the end of the Korean War in 1953. That same year, China adopted its first five-year economic development plan and began a

process of rapid industrialization, with the help of the Soviet Union. Between 1953 and 1957, China's GDP grew by about 50 percent, or more than 9 percent a year.

But Mao still thought the pace of growth was too slow. In 1958, he launched the "Great Leap Forward," a social and economic campaign to mobilize the entire nation to massively increase industrial and agricultural production in an effort to catch up with the more developed countries. I turned five in October of that year, and so began my earliest recollections and memories as a young child in China.

★ ★ ★

When I first met my late mother-in-law, who was a dentist in a military hospital, she could not find anything good about me except my teeth. To this day, I cannot truly explain why I was blessed with such nice teeth and the smile of an optimist, or why that was my one redeeming feature in her eyes. I comforted my future wife she should be encouraged by her mother's comments, because the only way to tell the quality of a horse was by its teeth. "I am not dating a horse," she retorted, laughing.

I suffered my fair share of malnutrition, occasional starvation, and poor oral hygiene in my formative years, so it is a little bit of a mystery where I got my unusually good teeth. The only reason I can think of is all the vitamin D I got from being exposed to sunlight in the little one-room home in Beijing where I spent my infant years. The window faced south, and filled the room with sunlight and brightness. My first memory is of my mother bringing my newborn brother home from the hospital in 1957, when I was about three and a half years old.

My parents had come to Beijing from Shandong Province when I was about a year old, and we lived in that sun-drenched room until just before my fifth birthday. That year, 1958, we moved to a new home in a walled residential compound located approximately a mile east of Beijing's Tiananmen Square. There were a few residential buildings of different vintages and styles in the compound where, I would guess, 50 to 60 households resided. Our family shared our dwelling with more than 20 households under one tiled roof of a dilapidated, probably 100-year old Chinese-style house that used to be the office of Old China's customs administration. Each household occupied one or two rooms and

all the families shared the only two toilets located on each side of the building. There was a relatively new, gray-colored, four- or five-story apartment building on one side of the compound, and there were some buildings that looked like military barracks on the other. At the very far end of the compound was an auditorium, no doubt built for the official function of the old customs administration but now used for occasional movie showings. In the center of the dwellings was an open, irregular-shaped space the size of about three tennis courts with a few old trees growing here and there.

The year 1958 turned out to be eventful and pivotal in the history of the New China. Even though I hardly remember anything of our personal life at home, I vividly remember taking part in what was happening around us. Those episodes and activities were so unusual and so tantalizingly exciting to a child that they left an indelible impression on me.

The Great Leap Forward, a campaign launched that year by China's charismatic leader, Mao Zedong, became a mass movement that touched everyone in the country. The policies of the Great Leap Forward were designed to mobilize China's masses and resources to drastically accelerate China's economic growth, to increase agricultural and industrial production, and to propel China quickly into the ranks of more developed economies. This would pave the way for China to move from the "stage of socialism" to the "stage of communism"—the classless, materially abundant utopia that was Karl Marx's ultimate vision.

Mao effectively aimed to accomplish in a few years what it had taken Europe more than a century to develop. But he was confident. After all, the Communist Party had grown from nothing to become the masters of the world's most populous nation and had won victory after victory against overwhelming odds. China could achieve anything by mobilizing and motivating its masses. His Great Leap Forward would be a people's war to accelerate China's economic development and drastically increase its production of all things. His goal? "To surpass Britain in 15 years and to catch up with America in 20 years" in steel production, considered the main barometer of industrialization.

In 1957, China produced less than a quarter of the steel that Britain did, and less than half as much iron. Surpassing Britain in 15 years was a colossal task. But as a 1958 publication of Beijing's

foreign-language press put it, “To the emancipated Chinese people nothing is impossible.”

Some people believed that making iron and steel was not so hard. It was suggested that iron and steel could be made anywhere with simple homemade tools and methods. It required no more than a small blast furnace made of bricks and clay, fired by coal and fed with scrap metal.

The small blast furnace I saw, built in the open space of our residential compound, was only a couple of meters tall, in size and shape very much like the smallest camping tents in today’s sporting goods stores. Soon there was a frenzied effort to build such homemade blast furnaces everywhere throughout China, in the backyards of homes, in schools and in villages. It was later reported that at least 60 million such blast furnaces had been built. The nationwide campaign, known as “mass steel-making,” became so feverish that people toiled at their furnaces day and night as fire and smoke bellowed out of the small chimneys. All families were expected to contribute to steel production. To demonstrate their enthusiastic support, people donated whatever metal they had in their possession, eventually including their cooking pots and pans. I followed some activist adults in our compound and went door-to-door to collect anything made of iron or steel.

The only iron we had at home was our stove, which was stripped of its ornamentation; children helped adults carry the metal parts to the blast furnace to be melted. The fire, the smoke, the piles of scrap, the busy crowd carrying pieces of metal or doing this and that—and above all the noise—were all very exciting. Children ran around the makeshift blast furnaces more excited than on Chinese New Year. I do not know how many days or weeks this went on, but it must have gone on for a long time to leave a lasting impression on me. I do not know how much iron and steel the blast furnace in our yard produced. In the end, as I later learned, the steel production campaign was a total failure. Well, it was a big joke: Anyone with any knowledge of metallurgy would know that you can’t just toss scrap metal into a backyard furnace and expect it to produce durable, high-quality steel. People destroyed or damaged useful metal things and burned tons of wood and coal to produce only waste, as the output from the small blast furnaces was completely useless.

In the end, China only produced about 10 percent more steel in 1958 than in 1957, but nobody knew how much of that increased production was usable. An estimated 100 million farmers, government employees, schoolteachers, and students went into the backyard steel production in that year, diverting resources and manpower from the production of other goods (including food). As a result, there was a shortage of farm labor and 15 percent of the grain crop rotted in the fields because there was no farm labor available to harvest it, which directly contributed to the Great Famine that engulfed the country.

★ ★ ★

To boost agricultural production and to improve health, another campaign was waged in 1958 simultaneously with the Great Leap Forward. It was called “Eradicate the Four Pests”—mosquitoes, flies, rats, and sparrows.

The whole country was mobilized to kill the four pests. Beijing used to have many flies and mosquitoes. Our home was sprayed with pesticides and fumigated from time to time. When this happened, we would stay outside, running and horsing around. Our building was very old and in need of repairs, and there were rats in the roof. I could sometimes hear them rustling around at night. Rat traps and poison were used to kill them. Sometimes we were warned to stay indoors as the entire city was blanketed by insect-killing smoke. We also used ingenious flytraps made with a see-through screen stretched over a pyramid-shaped frame with an opening at the bottom. We put a piece of rotten fish head in the bottom to attract flies. They had no trouble getting into the pyramid, but when they took off they were trapped; flies do not know how to fly sideways.

But the most exciting and memorable thing to a child was the campaign to capture and kill sparrows. The alleged crime of sparrows was the theft of grain. For this offense, Mao decided to condemn them all to heaven. Between March 14 and 19, 1958, a national “Coordination Conference for the Great Leap Forward to Eradicate Four Pests” was held in Beijing. For the purpose of killing off sparrows, Beijing established a command center, and a vice mayor, Wang Kunlun, was appointed the commander-in-chief of the effort. On the day of the action, April 19, 1958, it seemed that the entire population of the city

came into the streets. Some people carried long sticks with colorful rags tied on the tips, or held flags on long poles. People beat drums, gongs, and pans so loudly the noise was deafening. Initially, startled birds were flying everywhere. Whenever a bird flew over our heads, people would make even louder noises and wave their flags more wildly to prevent the bird from landing.

Sparrows are short-distance fliers. Big as the city is, there was no place for the birds to hide or land as there were multitudes of people everywhere, making loud noises and waving flags. The commotion sent birds into a panic and they flew like shooting arrows here and there in search of safety. Sometimes a bird would land on a roof corner, exhausted. But there were people on the roof, and under the roof, and the crowds would rush toward the bird or throw stones at it, forcing it to take off again. After a while, exhausted birds began to drop from the sky, one after another. Whenever a bird fell, crowds would cheer and swell forward to capture it. I have never seen anything like this before or after. I had a great time with other children running around, yelling, and throwing stones at the birds.

Poor birds. This was a doomsday they had never dreamed of. For all I knew at the time, the campaign was successful. The *People's Daily* reported on April 20, 1958, that three million people in the capital participated in the operation on April 19, and by 10 p.m., 83,000 sparrows perished in the waves of the people's war. In three days, the residents of Beijing killed more than 400,000 sparrows.

Birds basically disappeared from Beijing from that time on. This was a nationwide campaign, so similar operations were carried out in other population centers in China. I don't know what they did in China's rural areas where there was more land than people. But later I saw posters depicting farmers and their children laying traps on their threshing ground to capture sparrows. Indeed, there was no escape.

It was soon learned that sparrows and other birds were actually "good" birds, not pests, because they do not eat only grain but also crop-eating insects such as locusts. When the birds were killed off, the insects lost their natural enemies and their population exploded, causing damage to crops.

When presented with reports to that effect by researchers from China's Academy of Sciences, Mao ordered that sparrows be struck off the list of the Four Pests and replaced with bedbugs instead.

At least in Beijing, the population of birds never fully recovered. When I was small, swarms of swallows visited the city every spring. They flew everywhere. Historic buildings such as the Imperial Palace had to be protected with wire mesh to prevent swallows from building nests under their eaves. Today, swallows are rarely seen in Beijing. Neither are bats. Beijing used to see numerous bats in the summer, flying around at dusk and into the night. There were also many dragonflies that flew around in small clouds when it was about to rain. Swallows, bats, and dragonflies have all disappeared from Beijing. I think flies and mosquitoes have largely disappeared as well, but nobody misses them.



In 1957, the Soviet Union became the first nation to successfully launch a satellite into orbit. China celebrated this achievement by its socialist brothers and henceforth labeled every major achievement as having “launched a satellite.” The Great Leap Forward produced numerous “satellites” in the form of record-breaking feats of production. The numbers stretched credulity. A mu of land, about the size of three tennis courts, typically produced at most 400 kilograms (~880 lbs) of grain. But some places were reporting 5,000 kilograms (~11,000 lbs) per mu or more. It appeared that the productivity of the masses had been unleashed on an unimaginable scale. All the provinces, counties, and villages reported record harvests and agricultural output. These reports poured into Beijing, leading Mao to worry about too much food. “What do we do if there is too much grain?” he wondered aloud.

Mao’s confidence was boosted. He said, “Now it seems it will not need to take 15 years to surpass Britain and 20 years to catch up with America.” He declared in meetings with senior leaders that it looked as if China would transition into the true communist society that Marx had envisioned much sooner than thought, and even ahead of the Soviet Union. But Mao wanted to be humble: “Even if we entered communism sooner than the Soviet Union, we shouldn’t announce it,” lest China should embarrass the USSR, the big brother in the camp of socialist countries.

Since food was thought to be plentiful, communes in the countryside throughout China set up mass dining halls where farmers and their families ate for free. Farmers who had previously only been able to eat what they could grow now consumed with abandon. China doubled its grain exports. During a visit by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Mao asked him if the Soviet Union had had experience in dealing with a huge food surplus. Khrushchev answered that his country had never had such a problem.

It turned out that almost all these claims to have “launched a satellite” were made up or vastly exaggerated. Instead of a huge surplus, there was a food shortage in China. Officials at different levels falsified their numbers to show the success of the Great Leap Forward and to please their superiors. Since peasants were required to sell a proportion of their harvest to the government at proscribed prices, which was a form of taxation, this falsified reporting led to overcollection and overexporting of grain. Local officials sometimes resorted to coercion, forcing peasants to sell their grain even if there was not enough left to feed their families. In extreme cases, they were forced to sell the seeds held back for the next growing season.

At the time, the severe food shortage was not obvious to a child like myself. Although I did not experience hunger, I knew there was not enough food at home. I could see it in the patterns of our daily lives. My mother was always the last to eat. Although I did not realize it, she was famished. I could see my mother’s face and legs gradually turn puffy and her skin translucent. She showed me that if she sank the tip of her finger into the flesh of her leg, the dent would stay there for a long time, as if her flesh was made of dough. Now I know she was suffering from edema, an inflammation and swelling sometimes associated with severe malnutrition. She never complained of hunger, however, not even once. So out of curiosity, I would push the tip of my finger into her flesh to see the dent, the likes of which I could not create on myself.

I did help my mother to get more food, however, always sensing it was needed. There were a few elm trees in our compound. We learned that elm seeds could be eaten. I picked up the seeds shaken down by bigger children and brought them home. My mother would mix them with flour and cook them. I probably got a bite or two, but I do not remember really eating them. I also went around to find edible wild plants in every corner to collect them and bring them home. I am sure

that those elm seeds and wild plants helped my mother, although I did not fully understand or quite appreciate it at the time. I also remember when her relatives from her home village in Shandong asked someone to bring her a bag of dried turnip strips. Every little bit of food helped.

One day, my father came home with a pair of small gray-colored rabbits. I loved them. We built an enclosure against the wall where the covered walkway ended and kept the rabbits there. My father and I went out to all the corners of the compound where wild grass grew and brought the grass back to feed the rabbits. From then on, every day I helped my father pull and collect grass, hay, and other vegetation to feed the rabbits.

Soon the rabbits were grown. Before long, the female gave birth to a litter. When the litter was grown, my father would slaughter one rabbit on a Sunday and my mother would cook it for us. So we had meat to eat from time to time during the Great Famine. My father loathed slaughtering animals as he had a tender heart. He had no choice. But he refused to eat rabbit meat and never shared in the feast.

I don't know how other families in Beijing coped, but I knew many friends later told me their parents suffered from edema as well. If food was in such short supply in the nation's capital, I can only imagine how bad it became in the rest of the country.

When senior leaders finally learned the truth about the Great Famine, most were reluctant to share the news with Mao for fear of appearing critical of his policies. The only one to speak out was Peng Dehuai, the defense minister, who had commanded the Chinese troops during the Korean War. He told Mao the truth, in a long letter of more than 10,000 characters. He criticized the Great Leap Forward as "more losses than gains," although he was careful to only blame overly zealous local government officials. Mao, who had heard some troubling reports through his own channels, was already considering changing course. But he was furious with Peng's criticism. He fired Peng from his position, along with those senior government officials sympathetic to Peng's views, and doubled down on his radical policies. Peng was first allowed a low-level job in a province in southwest China, but in the next political campaign, which took place about seven years later, he was severely beaten by mobs and eventually died in prison.

The famine continued unabated, then got worse. Before 1958 was out, there were already widespread food shortages in vast swaths of

China's countryside. Millions of people would die of starvation in the next few years. Reliable studies estimate that 20 million to 36 million people, 3 to 5 percent of the Chinese population, died during between 1958 and 1962.

As a child, I was oblivious to most of this. My parents must have cut down on their own meals to make sure there was enough for us children. But there was not enough to go around. Once my mother pulled me aside and snuck a boiled egg into my hands, telling me to eat it immediately without letting others know.

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The children in our compound often played together. I don't remember toys of any kind but there were sticks, pig knuckles that we could roll like dice and play games with, and cigarette boxes that opened up and folded into triangular shapes. We chased one another around in the compound, playing hide and seek and war games with little sticks, pretending they were guns or swords. I remember rolling around in a pile of "rock cotton," which felt like cotton and had shiny fibers, near a building site. Now I know it was a pile of asbestos, a commonly used construction material at that time. Maybe I have tough lungs, or maybe I was lucky. In any case, I am not aware of any harmful health effects to me from playing in asbestos.

My parents were both born to poor peasant families in Shandong Province, on the east coast of China. My father received some basic education, probably no more than elementary school. Still, he was proficient in Chinese language and literature. He was an avid reader of Chinese classics and history books from different Chinese dynasties. He wrote well, and his calligraphy was excellent.

Shandong was a dirt-poor province. In the Old China, it was frequently struck by famine, and each outbreak launched a mass migration of people from Shandong into the less populated northeast of China in search of food and work. Many people went all the way into Korea, about 400 kilometers away by sea. When I first visited South Korea in 1987, I was surprised to hear restaurant owners speak the same dialect of Chinese as my parents. My father left Shandong during one of these mass migrations in the late 1930s or early 1940s; I do not know how old

he was at the time. But the war had come to China's northeast by that time, and my father joined the Communist anti-Japanese forces in 1944, one year before Japan's surrender.

My father worked in the Customs Administration, a department of the Ministry of Foreign Trade, as a deputy division chief.

My father had no hobbies that I know of, other than reading Chinese classics, such as the official histories of the 24 dynasties. I think I owe my interest in reading to him. I still have some of his history books on my shelf.

He read us some books when we were small, which I enjoyed immensely. But that didn't happen often. He was a chain smoker. He often lit a new cigarette with the butt of the one he had just smoked. When he read us stories, he would smoke continuously. I often fell asleep engulfed in the thick smoke from his cigarettes as he sat next to me.

He was a man of few words. Once as a teenager, while telling him something I had experienced, he asked me if anyone had told me I was verbose. From then on, I have tried not to waste words, although I have not always been successful at it. I always had a strong desire to please him and to make him feel proud of me. I could sense that he was pleased with every little achievement I made, although I don't recall any personal praise from him that he shared with me.

My mother also grew up in a poor village in Shandong. She never told us why she left home, although I think she ran away to escape an arranged marriage. In 1947, at a young age, she joined the Communist forces, which were active in the areas surrounding her home. My mother was about 10 years younger than my father; she told us he might have understated his age by a couple of years when he asked her to marry him. She also worked in the Ministry of Foreign Trade, as a secretary.

My mother was the gentlest woman I have ever known. She was kind and literally would not harm an insect—and would not let me, either. She had a strong sense of right and wrong, which influenced me greatly and made a lasting impression on those around her. She always worked hard, both at work and at home. At every meal, she would eat very slowly, using her chopsticks to put food into our bowls and waiting for her children and my father to stop eating before she finished up what was left on the table. I learned to wash clothes and to cook at a young age to help her because I felt bad watching her always work so hard.

Like my father, my mother probably received the equivalent of an elementary school education. But she writes well, and her handwriting is unusually beautiful. At that time the weekend consisted of only Sunday, and on that day she would handwash the clothes of the entire family, often in cold water, summer or winter. She also cooked for the family. So she did not have time to take us children on outings. I remember only once in our childhood, when I was about nine, she took my little brother and me to Beijing's Beihai Park on a Sunday and we had a picture taken of the three of us in front of a lake.



Because of the size of our family we were given an extra room, for a grand total of two. Both of our two rooms faced south, so sunlight came in through the glass especially in wintertime. There was one bare 25-watt bulb in each room and a reading lamp on the desk in the larger room.

My parents, my brother, and I shared the bigger room. The other room was half the size and was partitioned with a curtain. My paternal grandfather, who had moved in with us from his home village in Shandong, slept behind the curtain. In front of it was the family dining table, surrounded by a few wooden stools and a wooden food storage cabinet about 4 feet tall, 2 feet wide, and 1 foot deep. This room would also hold my older sister's bed after she joined us in 1960 from my mother's home village in Shandong.

There was no kitchen. My mother cut vegetables and prepared food on the dining table and then took everything out to the covered exterior walkway to be cooked on the small coal stove that each family had outside its door. Cooking outdoors in winter was unpleasant, so you wanted to get it done as soon as possible. The top of the stove could fit one cooking pan or pot. Waiting in that freezing walkway for the pot to boil felt like watching grass grow—a slow, painful ordeal. If you ducked back inside for warmth, as I sometimes did when I learned to cook, the rice might burn or the soup might boil over, not only spoiling the family dinner, but also possibly extinguishing the fire, either of which would be quite disastrous.

The food cabinet and the dining table were always infested with roaches, too many to kill. I imagine that since we applied roach poison

everywhere, on the table and in the food cabinet, we probably consumed a fair amount of it ourselves. In retrospect, the roaches probably were less harmful than the poisons we inadvertently absorbed. But what did we know at the time, and what else could we do?

Our small coal stove burned round coal cakes honeycombed with small, circular holes; we called these briquettes “beehive coal.” Two or three coal cakes were stacked in the stove with the holes aligned so that air could pass through. When a cake was about to burn out, a new coal cake would be placed on top, again with holes perfectly aligned, so the fire would continue to burn.

China started a rationing system for rice, wheat flour, edible oil, and cloth around the time I was born. Each person was issued coupons every month; these entitled the bearer to purchase (with money) a fixed amount of the item listed on the coupon. Sometimes meat was rationed as well, but few could afford buy much of it anyway. Nobody could buy rice, wheat flour, or cotton clothes without coupons, even if he or she had the money.

We grew up not knowing there was such a thing as a refrigerator. We had to buy fresh vegetables every few days, as there was no place to keep them cool. Fresh meat is impossible to keep at room temperature for long, but it can be kept for a few days if cooked. My mother would store the cooked meat in a jar kept in the food cabinet to be taken out a little at a time, to put into the wok and stir-fried together with some vegetables. Sometimes, especially in summer, meat would go bad and change flavor if kept too long. But I don’t remember ever throwing any meat away.

There was no running water inside homes. About a dozen families shared one outdoor water spigot where residents fetched water for all their needs. Winter in Beijing can be harsh, with temperatures frequently dropping below freezing. The exposed water pipe connecting the spigot had to be wrapped with thick layers of straw rope to keep it from freezing. Otherwise the pipe would burst. To fetch water in wintertime, we had to carry a kettle of hot water to pour on the spigot to unfreeze it before water would come out.

The same dozen or so families also shared an outside, one-hole public outhouse. In winter, the call of nature had to be resisted until it

became more unbearable than the punishing cold in the toilet. When the weather was too rough, children were allowed the privilege of using a chamber pot indoors.

Without running water at home, we fetched water from the public spigot, boiled it on the stove, and washed ourselves using a washbasin filled with a mixture of hot and cold water. My parents bathed my brother and me at home when we were small. When we grew older, we would go with them to a public bath.

I would be amiss not to mention the history of our neighborhood, which is unique and interesting even for an old city like Beijing, although growing up there, I was oblivious of its history. The narrow lane in front of our compound used to be named Rue Hart, after Sir Robert Hart, a British diplomat who had served the Chinese imperial government of the Qing dynasty as head of its customs service for an incredible half century, from about 1861 until his death in 1911. The sign for Rue Hart is still visible today, engraved into a wall on the northwest corner of the lane.

It was no accident we lived there. My father worked for the customs administration and the old building where our home was used to be part of Old China's customs administration, where Sir Robert Hart probably had worked. In the nineteenth century, during Hart's time, the neighborhood became known as the Quarter of Foreign Legations, where the first foreign embassies were located. This was the place besieged by the Boxers during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), which led to the invasion of Beijing by the joint forces of eight foreign powers.

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China's Great Famine of 1959–1962 claimed millions of lives, more than any war in memory. In the summer of 1962, Liu Shaoqi, China's president (Mao was the chairman of the Communist Party), said to Mao, in a rare moment of fluster: "So many were starved to death; history will record you and me [as being responsible]. Man eating man, it will be recorded in the annals of history." His disagreements with Mao would eventually prove to be his undoing, leading to his downfall and tragic death about seven years later.

Chapter 2

School Cut Short

Reports of widespread famine and death finally filtered through to China's top leadership, and the Great Leap Forward was brought to a halt around the end of 1960. It was the year when I reached school age. The severe food shortages the Great Leap Forward created continued until after 1962. The failure and futility of Mao's radical policies dealt a blow to his reputation within the Communist Party; some senior colleagues began to question Mao's "mistakes," which he himself ultimately acknowledged as well. But there was never a serious challenge to his supreme authority. In January 1962, the Chinese leadership held a meeting in Beijing attended by more than 7,000 government officials from around the country. The Meeting of 7,000, as it became known, lasted for more than a month, as the party leadership reflected on their policy failures and the attendees "vented their anger," in the words of Mao, over the man-made disaster of the Great Leap Forward. After the meeting, Mao, who was chairman of the Communist Party but otherwise held no official government position, took a step back from running the country. He left the job to a trio of his senior comrades: Liu Shaoqi, China's president, Zhou Enlai, the premier, and Deng Xiaoping, the general secretary of the Communist Party. The three adopted moderate policies beginning in 1961 to normalize the economic affairs of the country. After a couple of years, the food shortage gradually eased.

From the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the end of the 1950s, China maintained a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Europe part of the Soviet bloc. But around 1959, ties with the Soviets began to fray. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev spoke critically of Mao's policies during the Great Leap Forward, including the large-scale collectivization of farming—known as the people's commune system—that eliminated farmers' private ownership of land. Mao also suspected that Khrushchev was trying to bring China into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, as it had with the rest of the Eastern Bloc countries. During a state visit to Beijing, Khrushchev proposed that China and the Soviet Union establish a joint navy fleet, a proposal Mao considered a disguised means of Soviet control of China. He thought that Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership had betrayed the doctrines of Marxism and Leninism by denouncing Joseph Stalin and by promoting "peaceful coexistence" with the West. In 1960, to put pressure on Beijing to toe the Soviet line in international affairs, the Soviet Union abruptly canceled all economic aid programs to China, withdrew all its technical personnel, and demanded the immediate repayment of the debts incurred by China during the Korean War. All these moves dealt a heavy blow to China's development and exacerbated its economic woes just as the country was struggling to cope with the disasters of the Great Leap Forward.

After 1960, the split between China and the USSR was complete. Beijing officially labeled the Soviets "revisionists" who had betrayed the true tenets of Marxism and Leninism. The relationship between the two countries grew ever more hostile. After its split with the USSR, China became almost completely isolated, with its only ally the tiny Balkan country of Albania, which unequivocally sided with China in the ideological fight within the socialist camp.

Mao despised Khrushchev for his efforts to reduce tensions with the West, especially the United States. After an American U-2 spy plane was shot down in Soviet airspace, Khrushchev's attempts to improve relations with the United States suffered a severe setback. In 1962, as the United States and the Soviet Union almost

turned the Cold War into a hot one during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Mao remained scornful of Khrushchev's conduct. He was an "opportunist" for stationing nuclear missiles in Cuba in the first place, Mao declared, and a "capitulationist" for withdrawing the missiles under US threat. (At the time the quid pro quo, in which President John F. Kennedy agreed to withdraw US nuclear arms from Turkey, was not disclosed; Khrushchev had gotten something from the United States after all.)



I started school in autumn 1960, when I was about to turn seven years old. On the first day of school, my mother put some nice clothes on me and gave me a multicolored cloth schoolbag, which she had probably sewn together herself, as a real schoolbag would have been quite expensive. I thought the bag was too girlish and was afraid I would be laughed at. I made a fuss, refused to take it, and asked instead for a real, green-colored schoolbag like everyone else was carrying. My mother insisted I take the one she made until I threatened to throw it away as soon as she was out of sight. I did not really mean it, but I also knew she feared I might follow through on my threat. She gave in and got me a real schoolbag.

The Elementary School for Children of the Ministry of Foreign Trade was located in the western suburbs of Beijing, about 40 minutes away from our home by bus. The schoolyard was very big to my eyes. There was a redbrick two-story building in the center, a soccer field and playground to the south side of the building, and a canteen on the north side separated from the main building by a road and an open space.

The elementary school was relatively new, built in 1955. It was a boarding school, so we spent the week at the school, going home only for Sundays.

My sister, Weimin, who is one year older than me and whom my parents had left in the care of our maternal grandmother, arrived from Shandong to live with us. She ended up going to a day school two blocks away from our home.

In many ways, the children who went to boarding schools like ours were privileged. The school was well funded by the ministry to make

sure that we received a first-rate education, and we were well taken care of. During the day, we had regular teachers for classes ranging from mathematics and Chinese to arts, music, and physical education. In our spare time and in the evenings, “daily-life” teachers took over to make sure that we washed ourselves, changed our clothes, and went to bed at specific hours. They even came around every night with a chamber pot to help those who still wet their beds. Other than studying, we never worried about anything at all.

Every week, we went home by school bus on Saturday after lunch and returned to school on Sunday before dinner. Every Saturday I was excited to go home. I was just as reluctant to return to school on Sundays.

The school bus dropped us off inside the entrance of the ministry. Every Saturday, after getting off the bus, I went to the office of either my mother or father to wait for them to finish work and take me home.

My father had a modest-size office, but he had a swivel chair. I twirled around and around in one direction until it would go no further. Then I would twirl in the other direction. My father’s desk drawer was usually messy, but I enjoyed finding something in it to play with, like a lighter or even an invitation card for certain events. When my parents finished their work, they would often take me to the canteen to have dinner or buy food before we went home together. I loved the ice cream there.



I was assigned to classroom no. 1. There were about 30 pupils in the class, half boys and half girls. The classrooms and dormitories were in the main building, classrooms on the first floor and dormitories on the second. All the boys in my class slept in one big room with 15 or 16 beds. There was a big common washroom and a common bathroom on each side of the floor, one on the boys’ side and one on the girls’ side.

Most of my classmates were several months older than me; we were all six or seven years of age. It did not feel hard to live away from home, even at that young age, and soon I became quite used to the routine of living together with other children. The daily-life caretaker I remember

most clearly was Zhou Xiuchun. Adults called her Ah Chun. We called her Auntie Zhou. Short and hunchbacked, she always looked severe. I never saw her smile, not even once. All of us thought she was scary. She would punish in her own way whoever got into trouble with her. I managed to avoid her wrath and never got into trouble with her, thankfully.

Once she got angry with all of us, probably because she caught some of us being naughty for something I don't remember. That night in the study room after dinner, she announced she would punish us all by requiring us to copy one chapter in our language-study textbook 100 times. Nobody could leave the classroom to go to bed before finishing.

She sat in a chair at the door to check our work and would not allow us to leave the classroom until she was satisfied with our work. One chapter in the elementary textbook was probably one or two pages long in big characters. To write 100 pages would be a lot of work. It was unbearably tedious. We collectively moaned but we had no choice. I was writing as fast as I could but there seemed no end to it. Finally, I decided to take a shortcut. I knew she would not read more than a few characters. So I began to copy only the first and last few sentences of the text each time and soon I was done. She took a quick look at my neat writing and her facial muscles relaxed. She praised my work and let me out. My classmates all raised their heads to watch me leave. They were astonished I could write so fast. I enjoyed a good evening to myself as my classmates labored away. I didn't consider what I did cheating because I thought she was unjust and unfair, and she deserved to be tricked even though I loved her in general. I have defied authorities from time to time in my life when I thought the authority was stupidly unfair with its demands.

Auntie Zhou was also in charge of our personal hygiene. She was strict and never wavered in her requests. We were required to wash our face, hands, and feet every day before bed. There was no hot water in the washroom, but the rumor in the boys' dormitory was that the girls were provided hot water in their washbasins to wash their butts. All the boys hated washing, especially in wintertime when the water was stinging cold.

Auntie Zhou would sit at the entrance of the washroom to check our hands and feet to make sure we had cleaned ourselves well. She

would send us back to rewash ourselves if we did not pass her test. But she would only check one hand and one foot. Therefore, I often washed only one hand and one foot to pass her examination and to save myself the unpleasantness of the freezing water.

For all her sternness, Auntie Zhou took good care of us. Some boys still wet their beds. So every night, during the wee hours, she would come into our room with a chamber pot and a flashlight, repeatedly calling the likely offenders in a loud voice in her Shanghai dialect, to wake them up to pee one by one.

There was a public bath in the back of the schoolyard. We were required to take a bath every week. All the boys would line up naked to go through a pool of steaming hot water. Auntie Zhou stood on the side of the pool and washed each of us one by one thoroughly with a towel soaked with soap. After she was done, we each looked like a cooked prawn (I did not know there was such a thing as lobster at that time). We would proceed to the next pool to rinse ourselves off.

We had our three meals a day in the school canteen. Despite the famine in the country and the food shortage in Beijing, we always had enough to eat. Though I knew food was rationed, I only became aware of the catastrophic scope of the Great Famine later in life. Even though I was not picky about food, I knew the menu was simple and rarely changed from week to week. I still do not like ribbonfish, seaweed, or carrots, because these were served so often in those years I became literally fed up with them.

I later learned we owed our food supply to Principal Li, who worked tirelessly and went out of her way to use her connections at high levels to ensure there was enough food for her pupils. From time to time, we were each given some vegetables and other kinds of food to bring home on Saturdays, because every family in the school was short of food.

At one time, the school canteen served the meat of “yellow goat,” or wild Mongolian gazelle. The gazelles used to roam, in great numbers, throughout the grasslands on the Loess Plateau, which extends from Gansu Province in the west through Ningxia, Shanxi, and Shaanxi Provinces into Inner Mongolia. During the Great Famine, the gazelles were hunted for their meat. Many organizations in Beijing sent special teams to Inner Mongolia to join the hunt. They were armed with rifles and rode in jeeps equipped with spotlights for night hunting. Trucks

brought gazelle carcasses back some 700 kilometers (~430 miles) to Beijing. I saw truckloads of the stocky, fawn-colored animals arriving in the compound where we lived and at our school.

The organized hunt was a catastrophe for the animals, as they were slaughtered by the thousands. I think the hunt made these animals almost extinct and it stopped only because they could not be found anymore. As this hunt took place on the Chinese side of the border with Mongolia, the gazelles were able to maintain their range in Mongolia, and their numbers have gradually recovered.



The head teacher of my class was Ma Yaxian, a tall and elegant woman with smooth skin and dark hair. She was from Shanghai and spoke the same Shanghainese dialect as Auntie Zhou. She stayed with us from the day we started until we left elementary school. She taught us all subjects, except physical education and music. Teacher Ma was always patient and kind to students. Every day she taught us how to read and write and, in later grades, more advanced language and calligraphy. She would put a red circle on each of the characters we wrote if she approved of the calligraphy. I tried to get as many red circles as possible on my character worksheet.

Each day, there were classes in the morning. We studied Chinese language, including classical Chinese, writing and brush calligraphy, arithmetic, and geography. We all went to the canteen for lunch. After lunch, there was one hour of nap time back in the dormitory. Auntie Zhou walked around to make sure we were quiet and sleeping before sitting down by the door to do her knitting. In the tall trees outside the windows of our dormitory floor, cicadas chirped loudly, especially when the sun was bright. In summertime we napped with the loud and constant choir of cicadas droning in the background.

Afternoons were devoted to less important subjects, such as arts and music. Classes ended with physical education. Boys frequently played soccer in the full-size soccer field. The girls did something else, but whatever it was I wasn't paying attention.

There was a school clinic on the first floor of the main building, which was attended by a nurse. I was frail as a child and was frequently

sick, typically with a headache for no particular reason I, or any doctor, could ascertain. So I occasionally spent time lying on the bed of the clinic chatting with the nurse. She asked me what I aspired to do when I grew up. I told her my ambition was to become a zookeeper, so I could see and take care of all kinds of animals. Alas, my ambition remains unfulfilled.



Elementary school was a breeze. I never felt learning was difficult and I was a good student. I usually received full marks. All the marks and grades were published for all the students to see, so everyone knew who was a good student and who wasn't. I do not remember anyone being bothered by that system of transparency or no privacy, maybe because I didn't have anything to worry about. Not until I went to graduate school did I notice that US schools do not publicly disclose all grades for all students. In the Old China, the results of imperial exams were also published for all to see. I suppose it was the same tradition when it came to our school. Those students who did not do well were frequently required to do make-up homework. I was quick with my schoolwork, so I was usually among the first ones to finish and go out to play.

There was not much effort to teach the kids to be creative at our school. I don't remember doing creative projects or making anything, with the exception of art classes. For drawing, we went to the nearby Beijing Zoo and painted animals. I remember painting a tiger together with one of my classmates, Liu Wanyi. I had no sense of three dimensions or perspectives. So my tiger looked like a squashed omelet whereas his looked like, well, a tiger, with its head and tail in the right proportions.

During summer and winter breaks, we would be sent home. Summer vacation was about one-and-a-half months. Winter break was much shorter, just a couple of weeks long. We would be assigned daily homework covering the whole summer. I would finish all my assignments within the first three or four days, so I did not have to worry about it for the rest of the summer. My parents never supervised or helped with my homework. It was not necessary, but it also seemed to me that in those days teachers did not expect parents to help their children with teaching and homework as they do today.

After I had learned enough characters, my parents bought or borrowed small illustrated storybooks. They were no bigger than the size of my two palms and the best ones told stories with characters from Chinese classics such as the Monkey King and General Yue Fei fighting invaders from the kingdom of Jin. Each page was a picture vividly depicting a scene from the story with captioned words below. I loved them. I would be absorbed in these stories throughout the summer. I suppose kids today get the same satisfaction by watching television dramas, but in my opinion, they don't read enough. Nothing ignites the imagination more than good stories complemented with illustrations that bring characters and events vividly to life.

My friends and I also went to public swimming pools to escape Beijing's summer heat. They were usually packed. My parents bought me a life preserver, a flotation device like a thick rubber belt, which was a big expenditure for them. I was proud to own it and learned how to swim with it.

A lake called Yuyuantan was located not far away from our school, and I went there with some friends to swim. There was a wooden platform in the middle of the lake and people swam back and forth between the beach and the platform. I had just learned to swim but I could not swim well, or for long. I swam with friends, with the life preserver around my waist, to the platform. Then someone took my life preserver and left for the shore.

I was stranded on the platform with only one friend, a boy named Gao Jianjing, and I did not think I could make it back to the shore without my life preserver. We waited and waited until it was getting late. So I decided to try to swim back without the preserver. Halfway to the shore, I was completely exhausted and I began to sink. I only had strength left to yell "help!" Gao swimming next to me was yelling for someone to help me as well. But as I still managed to keep my head above water, people around us at first did not think there was an emergency. Fortunately, a strong swimmer came to my rescue just when I was about to drown, and soon a boat came alongside us. That, I suppose, was my rite of passage for swimming; after that I did not need my life preserver anymore.

My love of reading continued as I grew older, and I began to read more extracurricular stuff. I particularly loved popular science books written for children. There was a series titled *One Hundred Thousand Whys* that was like an encyclopedia. I learned why daytime was long in summer but short in winter, why there were seasons, why airplanes could fly, why ice was slippery, and why water pipes might burst in cold weather. I learned most of my science at an early age from those books. I also remember another book, *Scientists Talk About the 21st Century*. It was a collection of articles written for children by well-known scientists who envisioned the world of the next hundred years. It talked about wireless communication, supersonic jet travel, nuclear energy, semiconductors, electronics, and agriculture without soil. I was also fascinated by popular books on astronomy, man-made satellites, and space travel.

I enjoyed science fiction, too. I was particularly fond of the translated works of the French author Jules Verne. I was mesmerized by his *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and my mind followed Captain Nemo in the depths of the sea in his submarine, the *Nautilus*, all over the world.

I dipped my toes into applied science by joining the Children's Palace of Science and Technology when I was in the fourth or fifth grade. This was a permanent establishment, but it functioned like a camp. It offered activities in science and technology for a couple of hours per week to a select group of a few hundred students, mostly teenagers. I was accepted even though I was an elementary school student, probably with a recommendation from my school. I think they made exceptions for some younger students considered to have potential in science. Each of us joined one of the specialized groups in the camp, such as physics, chemistry, astronomy, telecommunications, and wireless control (which built models of wirelessly controlled boats and airplanes, now called drones). I joined the wireless communication group.

The camp was located in Beihai Park. Beihai means "North Sea." The beginning of the park traced back to the Jin dynasty rulers in 1179. It was progressively built up over the centuries by various ruling dynasties as part of the imperial park. It occupies an area of about 70 hectares (~170 acres), half of which was a man-made lake. There is a tall hill in the middle of the lake with many ancient temples, palaces, pavilions, and buildings scattered around its slopes.

On the very top of the hill, overlooking the city, stands a very large white Tibetan Buddhist pagoda.

On the north bank of the lake, there are five large pavilions by the water, collectively known as the Five Dragon Pavilions. Next to the pavilions but standing in the middle of nothing is Nine Dragons Wall, a large wall of green- and blue-glazed tiles with the pattern of nine yellow dragons on it. Behind the Five Dragon Pavilions there are stone stairs leading up to what used to be a temple by the name of Chanfusi, or Enlightened Happiness Temple. The temple occupied a large area with many buildings, some of which were burned down or collapsed long ago, but a few remained standing. That was the site of the science camp and all camp activities took place inside what used to be the temple. It was secluded, spacious, and beautiful. Not only was there much open space outside the buildings, but also it was right by the lake where the remote-control group would sail their model boats and fly their model planes. There was even a small hydropower plant built by the students near there.

The membership card for the science camp allowed us to go in and out of Beihai Park freely, without having to pay the two-fen entrance fee. On camp days, I would take a trolley bus from our school to Beihai. Past the entrance, there was a long but pleasant walk along the lake to get to the camp. The lake bank was lined with willow trees whose long, thin, hanging branches provided shade for visitors. Under the willows, people sat by the lake with fishing rods. The lake was stocked with fat carp, and for a fee people could fish there.

I learned to build a radio in science camp. We started with a simple crystal radio. It required only a small crystal encased in a tiny glass tube with two wires sticking out and some simple connectors and an earphone. It received broadcast signals without the need for any power. Once we mastered the crystal radio, we advanced to building radios with diodes. Finally, we began to build radios with transistors. There were no integrated circuit boards at that time, so all the transistors, diodes, and batteries had to be connected with wires and resistors that we soldered together ourselves.

It gave me a feeling of accomplishment once my hand-built radio worked. At the time, the best commercially sold radios I knew of had eight transistors. The most sophisticated one I attempted to build, with

the help of a friend, was a six-transistor radio. In 1971, the first-generation Intel processor had 2,300 transistors. Today, a single microchip can have a transistor count in the billions. This kind of processing power was beyond imagination when I soldered my first single transistor on a board.



Back in school, I got into trouble for the first time in my life. I was walking one day in the hallway of the main building, and I passed some girls jumping rope. The girl jumping swung her thick wool scarf around her neck and it hit me in the eye. I was startled and annoyed, so I pushed her and walked by. It turned out she was a tattletale and soon I was hauled into the office of the director of school affairs, Mr. Huang Liquan.

Mr. Huang would not listen to my explanation and suspended me from class. I became upset and poured ink onto his desk. The next thing I knew, my mother showed up. She had been summoned by phone by Mr. Huang and she had to find someone with a motorcycle equipped with a sidecar to take her to our school. She collected me and took me home by bus. I was afraid I was in big trouble. If my father heard of this, he probably would spank me.

Instead of punishing me, my mother took me to a Shanghai-style restaurant close to our home. It was the first time in my memory I ever ate in a restaurant. I don't think my parents could afford to eat in restaurants. I thought the food was delicious, like nothing I had tasted before.

To this day, I don't know why my mother did not punish me. I could only guess she knew that by personality I would not yield to punishment, but I would give in to a soft approach. Indeed, I felt so guilty to have brought shame to my mother that I was determined not to repeat silly behaviors like this.

The school, however, disciplined me with one demerit in my record. I thought Mr. Huang was unfair because he refused to hear my side of the story. I decided to be defiant. During one class, I stood up while the teacher was lecturing and left the classroom by jumping out of the window (as I mentioned, the classrooms were on the first floor). My classmates were shocked that I pulled such a stunt. The school,

however, did not punish me further. I think the school authorities must have calculated that another demerit so immediately after the first one would only demonstrate such penalties were ineffective or counter-productive. I ended my resistance movement and went back to class the next day.

Other than this incident, I was a good student, consistently earning top grades. I loved school and most of my teachers. Probably for these reasons, the school authority let me off the hook lightly and ignored my defiance after giving me that one demerit. But I was worried that the demerit in my record would affect my chances for the best middle school I was aspiring to attend. It turned out that my worry was unnecessary, because soon my entire school record would become completely irrelevant and would never be referred to again in my life.

