

Red Colored Glasses:

The story of a Chinese woman as
portrayed by propaganda versus
her lived reality

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The following is the story of one woman told in two different ways. The first perspective, in red text (the color of the Communist party), is in line with propagandist material from that time. In black is the story told from a richer, more realistic point of view. The stories here are inspired by various primary sources, including my own family members' experiences.

1941



Swear to defend the nation to the death. (ca. 1937)
(Note: this poster was made by the Nationalist party)

On our daily hour-long walk to school one day, my brothers suddenly broke out into a mock fight, with one pretending to be Japanese soldier, and the other pretending to be a soldier in the Nationalist Party. They used sticks as pretend guns, aiming them at each other while making shooting noises with their mouths.

“Stop messing around,” I admonished them. “You are going to make me late for school.” That was one thing that I could not tolerate. School was my favorite part of the day, and I wasn’t going to let my immature brothers prevent me from getting to class on time.

“If they ever called me to fight, I would drop everything immediately and join the war effort to defend our nation to the death,” my brother Yangfeng boasted, ignoring my protests.

“Of course you would,” I replied, rolling my eyes. Yangfeng could not even button his shirt up properly, much less fight against the Japanese. Plus, war seemed so far away, for we had never seen any fighting around us. While Yangfeng was not very serious, elsewhere real soldiers were defending our nation to the death. Thank goodness for the Nationalist Party that was working to beat back the evil and ruthless Japanese! If the Japanese ever made their way to where we lived, they might disrupt schooling for me!

I hate my ugly feet. Women and girls who were wealthier had bound feet, but as a poor farm girl, my family couldn't afford to have another mouth to feed that could not contribute to the farm and house work because her mobility was limited. I was jealous of the tiny feet of Wang Wenxiou, the daughter of our landlord. Not only were mine large, but they were also calloused and rough. Shoes were a luxury, and I was only allowed to wear the one pair I owned on special occasions and in school. I couldn't even wear my shoes on the way to school! The nearest school from our farm was an hour away on foot. Mother was scared that the soles would wear out from all that walking, so I made the trek barefoot, and then slid on my shoes when I got to the school building.

The callouses were worth it, though. I lived for school. My favorite subject was literature, and I love reading stories that transported me from my poor rural home to the world of heroes and princesses. As I fed our chickens, I imagined that I was a princess and the pecking chickens were my loyal subjects bowing down to me. As I helped hoe the ground to prep for planting a new crop of soybeans, I imagined that I was digging for buried treasure.

I feared that my days in school would come to an abrupt end. Father and the other farmers who lived near us would talk over tea and Mahjong about Japanese invasions, the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party. I only vaguely knew these terms, but it seemed like there was a lot of fighting going on. The violence hadn't reached our area, but what if it did? School would surely stop, and even if it didn't, Mother and Father would never allow me to walk so far away while war was breaking out nearby.

The biggest threat to my schooling, however, was that it was becoming increasingly odd for me as a girl to continue attending school. My two younger sisters had dropped out because they did not enjoy school very much. Instead, they watched over the other young children, and help out with the never-ending tasks around the home and farm. I was one of the few girls of my age, 12, left in my class.

One day, while Mother and I were each bent over a bucket washing the dishes, she asked me what I thought about school. I instantly tensed up, fearing that she would tell me it was time to stop with the books and help out with the farm. I looked up, only to find her staring intently at me. "I love it," I said softly. A smile broke out on Mother's lined face. She reached out and smoothed down a stray piece of hair tenderly, leaving a trail of soapy water along the side of my face.

"My smart daughter," she said. "If you continue to work hard, I will do whatever I can to make sure you go to school." Then she bent back over the bucket and continued to scrub chopsticks. "You are very lucky, you know that? I never got a chance to learn how to read. Even my brothers and your father never learned."

An idea suddenly popped into my head. "I can teach you, Mother!" I exclaimed.

But Mother just shook her head. "No, daughter. It is too late for me." She straightened up and hoisted up the bucket to dump out the dirty water. "Now run along and finish your homework. Leave the rest of the dishes to your old ma. She might not be able to read, but at least she does not leave crusted food in the bottom of pots." She looked pointedly at the pot that I had just finished rinsing off. Sure enough, an incriminating line of dried rice still remained.

1950



Celebrating the People's Republic of China's National Day (1950)

What a glorious day! Today, October 1st, 1950, marks the first anniversary of the People's Republic! The Communist Party, which first ousted the evil Japanese from our country and defeated the inept and terrible Nationalists, is now working hard to serve the common people of the country. Their leader, Chairman Mao has many great visions that he will implement to bring our country forward. He truly understands the plight of poor peasants, such as my family. I know that under his leadership and direction our lives will get better.

A parade was to be organized in the nearby village to celebrate the occasion. My brothers and sisters and I walked over early in the morning to be sure that we wouldn't miss it. Soon, we started to hear the beating of drums and people cheering! The parade moved down the main street, with flags of the Republic waving merrily in the wind. Someone also waved a sign with Chairman Mao's face plastered on it. Everyone wore red – the color of the Communist party but also the color of celebration! Everyone who came to watch the happy procession felt the same elation as I did – an excitement for a new future.

When I returned home from the parade, I was met with even more excitement. My father's old friend had gotten me a teaching job in a growing township! Father had mentioned to his friend that I had been a good student, and he thought that I would make a good candidate as a teacher. Under Chairman Mao's direction, schools and education were expanding, creating a need for teachers to fill the schools. Although I would have to leave home, I was so happy to be able to continue being in school, even after my own education had come to an end. The future looked very bright indeed.

What an exciting day! Today, October 1st, 1950, is the first anniversary of the People's Republic! The Communist Party leader, Chairman Mao, has many grand visions that will hopefully help out our country. Chairman Mao seems dedicated to helping out the plight of the common people. The lives of poor peasants, such as my family, are not easy. After school stopped because the Japanese had burned the building, I was forced to help out with the farm wherever I could and work on monotonous household chores. It was hard, tiring labor and nowhere near as stimulating as learning in the classroom. Sometimes, I tutored some of my younger siblings, but they weren't very interested in learning.

Thus, I was glad on this day for an excuse to do something different. My brothers and sisters and I walked over to the nearby village early in the morning to see the parade that was to be organized in honor of the anniversary. Soon, we heard the beating of drums and cheering of people in the streets. The parade moved down the main street, with flags of the Republic waving merrily in the wind. Someone also waved a sign with Chairman Mao's face plastered on it. We did not see these sorts of things often, so it was new and exciting for me and my siblings.

When I returned home, I was met with the best news I had ever heard. My father's old friend had found me a teaching job in the township where he lived! Father had mentioned to his friend that I had been a good student, and that I would make a good teacher. Now, because of Chairman Mao's goal to expand schools and education, there was a need for teachers, even if they had never taught formally before, like me. Although I would have to leave home, I was so happy to be able to continue being in school, but this time as a teacher!

Upon hearing the news, Mother started to tear up.

"Don't worry, Mother! I will visit you whenever I can!" I reassured her.

Mother sniffled. "These are tears of joy! I am so proud to have a daughter who is going to teach in a township! You are no longer a backward peasant girl!"

1951



Freedom of marriage, happiness and good luck. (1953)

Weimin and I traveled to my parents' home so that they could meet my soon-to-be husband. Weimin and I had met as teachers at the same school and had fallen in love. In the old days, our story would have been rare. But now, Chairman Mao has decreed that everyone, including women, has the freedom to choose whom they would like to marry. He has said before that "women hold up half the sky." What a respectful and righteous man! We are so lucky to have him as our leader.

I was shocked to see that much has changed at home in my short absence. My parents informed me that they were now landowners. Justice had been served by the Communist Party, who had taken away the land of our evil landlord and distributed it to other poor landless peasants like us. My family's life seemed so much better, with my parents at peace and well fed. They even had new clothes to wear because they were able to support themselves so much better under the reforms. After my parents learned that Weimin's family were poor peasants as well and loyal supporters of the Party, they gave their enthusiastic blessing. I left my childhood home deeply satisfied that they were doing so well. They had put up a poster of Chairman Mao over their kitchen table, and he truly is looking over our family and the other humble and good peasants who have long suffered under the hands of the rich landlords.

Our marriage back in our township was a simple affair. As we walked back to our home together to begin a new chapter of our lives, I felt immense hope and excitement for the future. How fitting it is that our lives as a married couple would begin as the People's Republic of China is beginning as well!



The life of the peasants is good after Land Reform (1951)

Weimin fidgeted nervously next to me on the bus. We were riding to my family farm so that my family could meet him before we married. Weimin and I both worked at the school and had become acquainted with each other because we both came from rural villages, in contrast to the other teachers who had grown up in townships. Soon, Weimin asked to marry me. I consulted Father's friend who had gotten me this job in the first place and had promised to look after me. He thought it would be a good match and gave his approval. Now we were on our way back to my home in the countryside so that my parents could give their blessing as well. This was a very different way of getting married than my parents were used to. My mother had never met my father until her wedding day. Everything had been set up by the local matchmaker and agreed upon by both their parents, and my mother and father had very little say in the entire matter. But now things were different. The Communist Party denounced these practices with the New Marriage Law. Chairman Mao once said, "Women hold up half the sky," a bold statement that made me proud to be a woman.

When we arrived, I was so glad to see my family again. They were happy to see me too and to meet Weimin. Everything look the same since I had left, except for a poster of Chairman Mao pasted on the wall over the kitchen table; that was new. We all sat together, with my mother fussing around and continuing to pour tea for Weimin. Because he wanted to be polite, he continued to drink cup after cup, and I thought his bladder would explode. My parents talked about changes that had occurred since I left, things I hadn't noticed. Under the New Land Reform, our landlord's property had been seized and redistributed to all the landless peasants. "This land is ours now!" my father bragged.

"What happened to our landlord's family?" I asked. I remembered his daughter, with her dainty feet. Of course, feet binding was no longer allowed.

"They are worse off than us! Reduced to nothing. Can you imagine?" my father laughed at the thought. I was glad that poor families like mine were given land, but it seemed unfair for it to be at the expense of someone else, especially when the reform did not appear to actually improve my family's standard of living.

Finally, the conversation turned to Weimin himself. He assured my parents that his family had been classified as poor peasants, just like ours. Overall, Weimin made a good impression, and my parents gave their blessing. Weimin was much more relaxed on the bus ride back.

The next week, Weimin and I registered our marriage officially. The other teachers at the school threw us a small party after school to celebrate the occasion, bringing in peanuts and candies as a special treat. Principal Zhang made a toast to our union, saying, "Cheers to the new couple! May you find happiness and harmony in your marriage. And may you have beautiful, healthy children who can help contribute to the noble revolution!" We all clapped vigorously.

As we walked back to Weimin's home, where we would begin our new life together, Weimin started to chuckle. "You know, thanks to Chairman Mao, you can divorce me whenever you get tired of me." I laughed too. I had heard about that part of the New Marriage Law as well. It was such a strange idea, for a wife to leave her husband. It seemed to me that only mentally unstable or loose women would do such a thing.

Weimin became serious again. "But these are changing times. Not just for us, but also for our entire country."

"Yes, but change can be good. The Communist Party will do a lot to help us out. I mean look at us, getting married by our own choice!"

Weimin was quiet for a moment. "Yes, I hope you are right."

1953



Everybody must take precautions against epidemics to smash the germ warfare of American imperialism! (1952)

Our son and second child, Zhixiong, was born at the beginning of 1953. Our first child, Meihua, was barely one when he was born. Weimin and I were so happy to welcome into the world another future worker for the revolution. As the war in Korea continues against the evil American imperialists, having members of the revolution who can support our cause is even more important.

As a wicked form of war, it is possible that the Americans are trying to start disease epidemics in China through the spread of germs. The Party has started a campaign to provide vaccinations to prevent people from getting sick. Although I was scared of the idea at first, I soon saw the merit and believed that the injections could grant immunity against certain diseases. Weimin and I received our vaccinations from a nurse at the local clinic. Later, I brought both Meihua and Zhixiong to be vaccinated as well. Boy did they cry! But sacrifices must be made for the sake of Chairman Mao's glorious vision, and they might as well start young.

Our son and second child, Zhixiong, was born at the beginning of 1953. The news of his birth was met by much more excitement on the part of Weimin than when our first child, our daughter Meihua, was born. Despite all the legal reforms for women and Chairman Mao's efforts to champion women, boys are still more desirable than girls. These beliefs are difficult to change.

Regardless, I loved both my children and took their wellbeing seriously. The Party has started a campaign to provide vaccinations that prevent people from getting certain sicknesses. The Americans may be trying to use germ warfare to hurt our efforts to support Korea in the war, thus the campaign is meant to protect us against biological war. Honestly, people have been getting sick for thousands of years; we can't blame Americans every time someone becomes ill! The idea of a vaccination seemed very strange at first, but we were assured of its safety. Weimin and I received our vaccinations from a nurse at the local clinic, with no ill effects other than a little pain from the needle.

After going through it myself, I felt better about getting Meihua and Zhixiong vaccinated. We waited in line at the clinic for an hour before we were able to be seen. The nurse prepped the needle and swiftly injected Meihua, who instantly burst into tears. "There there," the nurse cooed. "You don't want American germs to get you sick!" I chuckled at this thought. My poor daughter Meihua, whose face was as red as the Republic's flag, did not know what either America or germs were. All she wanted was the scary needle to go away and never come back again. After Meihua was finished, the nurse turned to Zhixiong. He was blissfully and obviously asleep. The poor guy never knew what hit him, as the nurse pushed the vaccine into his tiny arm.

1958



Blast furnaces rise in level ground releasing red rays everywhere. (1958)

Every neighborhood has been encouraged to have a steel furnace. Citizens can contribute whatever metal they can to the furnace so that we can produce steel to help China make a great leap forward. Our township cadre is so dedicated to the revolutionary cause that he even volunteered our school to have its own furnace! Our district cadre Comrade Wang himself gave us the great honor of a visit. With enthusiastic zeal, Comrade Wang assured us that our spirit and dedication to the Communist vision would allow us to reach and even surpass our production quota. He also promised to return when we had produced our first batch of steel to celebrate our efforts and contributions. Armed with this personal challenge, we were even more motivated!

We all had to make sacrifices to keep those large furnaces running. We contributed the metal from chalk boards, dining utensils from our cafeteria, and eventually even the student desks! Although it was difficult to have students sitting on the ground, at the end of the day I knew keeping the furnace running was helping to push China forward and surpass capitalist countries. When Comrade Wang returned to celebrate our first batch of steel, he praised us for a fine job well done. We all took turns laying our hands on the black metal, relishing in our ability to rally together for this final product.

One day, while I was walking back from the butcher with Meihua, we spotted a man standing on a ladder as he finished painting a large, colorful image of Chairman Mao on the side of a building. I greeted him, and complimented him on his good job. Meihua also pointed at the painting and squealed, "Pretty!" The man and I both laughed.

He said that he had been working on it all day with so much concentration that he hadn't even been to the commune canteen yet. I told him to come over to our home, and I would whip up something for him to eat. "We just bought pork with our rations," I said. "We would love to have such a talented artist and fellow comrade join us for dinner!"

With the new decrees, every neighborhood was encouraged to have a steel furnace. In a show of extra dedication and commitment, our township cadre also volunteered our school to have its own steel furnace. A big hulking furnace was brought in, and the district cadre Comrade Wang himself paid us a visit. Comrade Wang assured us that with the proper spirit and dedication to Communist ideals, we would surely reach our production quota. He also promised to return to our school when we had produced our first batch of steel to celebrate. Thus, we had no choice but to be successful.

Making steel requires two important things: metal and fuel. All the students pitched in, so we managed to collect enough spare wood to keep the furnace going for a while. The biggest problem was the lack of metal to melt down. During our weekly teacher meeting, we brainstormed sources of steel. Looking around the classrooms, we couldn't find much. After a pause, Teacher Lin spoke up. "Well, the student desks have metal bars and screws. And the wood from the desks can be burned as fuel..." he trailed off, knowing what the implications of his suggestion meant.

"But where will the students sit? How will they be able to concentrate on their studies if they must squat on the ground?" I blurted.

Principal Zhang put up his hand to stop my protestations. "It is for the good of the party. Everybody must contribute."

We all agreed that Chairman Mao's policies were wise, and that we must contribute. Looking around the classroom we were meeting in, the metal chalk tray running along the bottom of the chalkboard caught my eye. I quickly proposed to use the chalk trays as an alternative.

This was met by a lot of head nods and clapping. I think everybody was secretly relieved that the desks were spared, even Principal Zhang.

When we had finished producing our first batch of steel using the metal chalk trays, the cadre was invited to come back to visit our school so that we could present him with the fruits of our labor. A red ribbon was tied about the lumpy black mass and everybody clapped vigorously and cheered as the class heads presented it to the cadre.

The cadre raised his hand to silence the cheering. "This school has demonstrated just what can happen with strong dedication. Your country thanks you for the sacrifice and hard work you have done. But we cannot stop here. We must continue to produce more and more so that China can overtake the evil capitalist countries. Let us show the world that even a single school and its students under the guidance of Chairman Mao's wise decrees can accomplish more than America's factories!"

Unfortunately, enthusiasm does not materialize metal out of thin air. The cadre's grand words filled with idealist zeal left us all flailing in practice. So I soon found myself looking down on my class, with my students seated on the ground. A few students had brought floor mats made of fabric scraps to sit on. Many others who did not have fabric to spare sat on Xinhua newspapers. Their bottoms covered up reports about how the new initiative was increasing steel out exponentially thanks to Chairman Mao.

At the front of our classroom hung a large banner with a famous Chairman Mao aphorism: 好好学习, 天天向上 (Study well, make progress everyday. Translated word for word: Study well, face upward). Now, my students literally faced upward to look at the blackboard from their vantage point on the ground. I couldn't help but note the irony, but I kept such thoughts to myself.

After hearing about how our school had sacrificed our desks in order to keep the steel furnace running, our school was being used as an example of supporting the Communist party admirably! As a reward, the party leaders gave each teacher a bit of meat. It was barely any pork, but because both Weimin and I worked at the school, it was enough for me to cook one good dish. Thinking about all the dishes that I could possibly cook, I became so excited. I dreamt of pork buns, pork dumplings, pork noodles, and stir fried pork and leaks. The possibilities were endless! I did not particularly enjoy cooking, but this was a special occasion. Although many of the party leaders often stated that there would be endless meat and a good life for us under the new Great Leap Forward changes, we did not receive any meat as part of our rations. It had been a while since any of us had any actual meat, and I was determined to make a wonderful meal for my family.

My enthusiasm was curbed a bit after I realized our remaining wheat supplies were too thin for noodles or buns. I settled on a simple stir fried pork and vegetables dish – it would still be satisfying. As I was cooking, I heard the sound of a crash coming from outside. I paid no heed to the sound until I heard a familiar cry. Running out to the yard, I saw a Red Party Guard yelling at Meihua, who was sitting on the ground crying. I picked Meihua off the ground, trying to soothe her sobs.

“What happened?” I asked, patting her back gently as she cried into my shoulder.

“Is this your unruly daughter? The evil little brat ran into my ladder and knocked me off!” yelled the man.

“Yes. But she is just a child! She meant no harm.”

“I was trying to paint a new illustration of Chairman Mao and his sayings on the building. And now I cannot finish because she made me waste all the paint!!”

Looking up from my daughter, I noticed a ladder lying on the ground along with a paint can that had been knocked over.

“This is counter-revolutionary behavior! Not only have the resources of party been ruined, but she has also prevented the words of the noble Chairman Mao from being displayed for the education of the community,” he continued to holler. By now, a crowd was started to gather, looking on with interest.

“He yelled at me and then hit me on the head,” whispered Meihua. “It hurt.”

“Shhhh, it is okay,” I said and smoothed her hair.

I turned to the man. “I’m very sorry for my daughter’s behavior. I apologize on her behalf, and I will punish her for her unacceptable actions.”

“You better keep her under control,” he replied, glaring at me. “Bad habits start young, and children get such bad ideas from their parents.” With that he retrieved the ladder and walked away.

I brought Meihua back into our home and told her that everything would be okay.

“Am I really an evil little brat?” she asked, tears still on her eyelashes.

“No, you are not.” I replied. “Cheer up, we are having pork tonight!”

And then I remembered that the pot was still on the stove. I ran into the kitchen to find it filled with smoke. The precious meat was now only a shriveled up black hunk. Looking at the charred dish, I felt tears well up in my eyes. As my daughter continued to cry, I sobbed in the kitchen, my tears salting the last meat we would probably see in a long time.

1960



The commune's canteen is powerful, the dishes are deliciously made. You eat like you wish, production ambitions are rising. (1959)

Weimin and I were rationed flour, among other things, each month for our family. This was supplemented by meals at the school cafeteria, which serves as our communal canteen under the new social system. That is where our family takes our lunch each day. I wish we could eat breakfast and dinner in the canteen as well. The food was absolutely delicious – much better than I could make myself. I think Weimin secretly would rather eat more meals at the commune too, but he would never tell me that my cooking is bad because he is too kind. Meihua and Zhixiong are also growing rapidly thanks to the nutritious meals. Beyond the healthier and tastier meals it provided for my family, the communal canteen also relieved me of a lot of my womanly duties. Because I didn't have to spend as much time chopping vegetables, boiling water, washing dishes, and doing all the other time-consuming tasks that come with cooking, I had more time to devote to planning lessons for my students, spending time with my children, helping out with the school's backyard furnace, and more. With a full belly and more time to devote to other tasks, I felt that I could contribute even more to the revolutionary cause.

Weimin and I were rationed flour, among other staples, each month for our family. We were also issued meal vouchers to be used at the communal canteen, where we could eat one meal per day. Because we lived near the school, our assigned canteen was in the school cafeteria, where we received our lunch. More and more often, Weimin and I skipped breakfast and waited until lunch to eat our first meal. With two children in the family, our rations were not always enough to keep everyone's bellies full.

Sometimes while teaching, it took everything in me to stay focused. Hunger blurred the edges of my vision and made it difficult to stay sharp. All I could think about was lunch.

Unfortunately, the meals were not always very satisfying either, but at least it was something to fill the belly. We teachers were all required to help supplement the meal. Weimin and I were assigned to bring Quining, a plant that grew on a small, nearby mountain with relative abundance. Its roots looked like small potatoes and are fairly edible with enough processing. Weimin and I hiked up to the mountain whenever we had time. We collected as many Quining roots as we could find, then lugged them home. We let the roots dry, then pounded and grinded them into a kind of flour, and brought it to the school. It was bitter on its own, but the cafeteria chef mixed it with corn flour to make baozhi (plain buns), which masked the taste enough to allow us to choke down the baozhi.

The funny thing about Quining is that it is traditionally used in Chinese medicine as a mild laxative. The first week we consumed baozhi with Quining flour in it, we made more trips to the bathroom than usual. Emptying out our stomachs so often seemed counterproductive and only made us hungrier. However, eventually our bodies adjusted, and we were glad to have a larger meal. However, the effects of Quining were particularly strong for one teacher in particular. I would look out the window in the middle of a lesson to catch him crossing the school yard in a hurry to relieve himself. His body never seemed to become immune to Quining's laxative effects. Whenever Weimin and I grinded Quining, the bitter dust stinging out eyes, we would describe how he looked bent over, clutching his stomach and sprinting towards the outhouse in desperation. We would laugh and laugh, until we weren't sure if the watering in our eyes was from the Quining flour dust or from laughing too hard.

1961



The people's communes are good. (1958)



The Vegetables are green, the cucumbers plump, the yield is abundant. (1959)

Chinese New Year always makes me stop and appreciate just how lucky I am. With the factories churning out products and the farmers working the land to feed the nation, everything was truly in harmony. Society was organized, and everyone had their place, with the government providing for our needs. I was very grateful for the stability this social organization brought to my family.

On Chinese New Year, it is a tradition for everyone to return home and spend the holidays with their family. I was so excited to travel back home! Before catching our bus to the countryside, I stopped by the market to pick up some peanuts to bring to my extended family.

My brother Yangfeng came to pick us up from the bus station. He seemed so different, so confident. He told me that under the commune system, he had learned so many new farming techniques, and output had been tremendous! He loved that nobody owned the land, and instead everyone worked together towards the single goal of moving our nation forward. I was proud to call Yangfeng my brother. After all, hardworking farmers keep people like me in towns and cities fed!

The rest of the trip passed very happily for all of us. Meihua and Zhixiong had so much fun playing with their cousins, and I enjoyed being able to catch up on the family gossip with all of my siblings.

For Chinese New Year, we planned to go back to my family's home to visit. Usually we went to Weimin's family for Chinese New Year, but one of Weimin's uncles had been accused of being an anti-rightist several years back, and thus we had since been forced to distance ourselves from his family.

Before we left, I wanted to buy some peanuts to bring as a gift to my family. The market itself looked pretty meager as it always had of late, although one woman was actually selling sugared hawthorn berry pops, a traditional Chinese New Year treat. Where she got the sugar, I have no idea. I was sure, however, that I would not be able to afford to buy one for Meihua and Zhixiong. I walked around the market twice looking for peanuts, but could not find any. I sighed and settled on getting a ½ kg of mahua, or fried dough twists. It cost me more than I cared to admit, but it was the new year and I was in a good mood.

On the walk back, I passed by a beggar woman. The number of beggars has increased this past year. We were told that the Great Leap Forward was a building campaign, that some suffering might have to be endured, and some sacrifices might have to be made. Our family certainly felt the strain, but others were even more unfortunate. Perhaps it was the spirit of Chinese New Year, but I placed a handful of mahua into the woman's outstretched palms. Immediately, she started scarfing them down so quickly that I was scared she would choke. As I walked away, she didn't even notice.

My brother Yangfeng came to pick us up from the bus station. As the eldest brother of the family, he was now the head. Last time I had seen him was several years ago, at my mother's funeral. He seemed to have aged so much since then. Although he had always been slim, he looked much skinner than I remembered. I joked that his wife must not be a very good cook but he maintained his stony look. "She passed away last year," he said stoically.

"WHAT?? I am so sorry! Why did you not write and tell me?" I exclaimed.

"Much has happened, Sister. It wasn't worth the postage."

Before I could say anything else, my old family home came into view, distracting me. I felt extreme nostalgia for my childhood. My brothers and sisters all still lived there with their families. I missed the feeling of a large extended family working together. It was always loud and everyone was always in each other's business, but you never felt alone.

The whole family was waiting outside to receive us. I presented the mahua to my nieces and nephews, who eyed them with an expression that reminded me eerily of the beggar women. Giving everyone hugs, I noticed that my two sisters were missing.

"Where are Xiaoyan and Mingming?" I asked.

"The passed away as well," replied Yangfeng. "Like I said, much has happened."

I stared at Yangfeng, who seemed to have hardened into an emotionless lump of coal. My head was swimming, and I clutched Weimin's arm for support. Seeing my distress, Yangfeng's expression softened a bit, and he said, "Come inside, and I will tell you everything."

Yangfeng, in a low voice, told me about the bad weather and the changes in farming techniques they were required to implement. "We have not met our harvest quotas. Our commune's mess hall does the best it can to keep us fed, but there is never enough to go around." He looked over at my nieces and nephews playing with Meihua and Zhixiong. "They would not be here if it weren't for the sacrifices of their mothers."

The rest of the trip passed very somberly for me. I couldn't believe that my sisters and Yangfeng's wife were gone! I admired their sacrifice for their children. In cities, we might eat laxatives to keep our bellies full, but at least I can tuck my children into bed at night! Those in the countryside, the very people who produced the food we ate, seemed to be suffering a far worse fate.

1966



Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought - thoroughly smash the rotting counterrevolutionary revisionist line in literature and the arts. (1967)

A loud roar of noise interrupted my concentration as I planned lessons after class one day. Peeking out the classroom window, I saw the schoolyard filled with students, all with red armbands, yelling and waving their Little Red Books in the air. It was our school brigade of the Red Guard, conducting a rally in the schoolyard. They shouted out Maoist Quotes and praised Mao Zedong Thought. How wonderful it is to see young people so involved in the great mission of Communism! As a teacher and mother of teens, I knew just how concerned with themselves teenagers could sometimes be. It was another testament to Chairman Mao's leadership that he is able to inspire these young people to be so active.

Scanning the crowd of students, one face in particular caught my eye. It was Meihua! She too was chanting, filled with the spirit of the glorious revolution. I swelled with pride for Meihua. She was holding high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought!

Suddenly, the crowd seemed to turn angry. "Stinking intellectuals! We know what you are doing here. You cannot teach capitalist material!"

I was concerned by this. I must admit that even I used to teach counter-revolutionary material in my class, but now thanks to Chairman Mao and his teachings, I know better. I have removed the Four Olds, old customs, culture, habits and ideas, from my lessons. Were other teachers still teaching some of the old ideas? Hadn't they realized how wrong and terrible they were? How could they still be teaching such dangerous lies? Someone else shouted, "We must cleanse this school of the rotting counter-revolutionary material." I could not agree more.

A loud roar of noise suddenly interrupted my concentration as I planned lessons after class one day. I peered out the window to see the schoolyard filled with a hoard of students, all with little red armbands, yelling and waving their Little Red Books in the air. I had heard about rallies and protests happening at other schools, sometimes ending in violence. I had hoped that we would be spared, but I knew it only a matter of time before I would be personally affected by the strong wave of anti-revisionism and anti-intellectualism being pushed by the Party.

They had not entered the school building yet, but I could hear what they were screaming.

“Stinking intellectuals! We know what you are doing here! You cannot teach capitalistic material!”

“We must cleanse this school of the rotting counter-revolutionary material!”

“Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zhedong Thought! That is the real truth!”

“Disgusting revisionists!”

A familiar face in the crowd caught my eye. Was that...Meihua?! I squinted and moved closer to the window to get a better view. Yes, it was! My sweet daughter was part of the crowd that was essentially protesting against all thought except Chairman Mao's teachings.

A tap on my shoulder made me jump. I was so distracted by the scene in the schoolyard that I hadn't even noticed that Weimin had entered my classroom. He whispered forcefully, “We must go!” Together we slipped out a back door to avoid being seen by the throng of angry students in the Red Guard. As we snuck away, I heard the crash of the school door being knocked down.

Meihua didn't come home that night. As it got late, Weimin and I became more and more worried. We decided to walk by the school to see if she was still there. As we approached, we saw a huge fire burning in the school yard. Students were taking turns flinging in books. As each book turned to ash, the other Red Guards cheered. I spotted Meihua's face among the throng, her face lit red by the fire. A stray page out of book was rustling on the ground. She snatched it up, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it into the roaring flames. Weimin and I knew we could not draw attention to ourselves with the Red Guards still in the throes of idealistic passion, and so we returned home, our hearts heavy.

The next day, we found our school in disarray. A black ring was still smoking in the school yard from last night's fire. Principle Zhang had closed the school for the day, and he informed all the teachers that Teacher Lin would not be returning. We all know what that meant. He had been a casualty of the Red Guard's rage against counter-revolutionary material. I was pretty sure that he wasn't actually against the revolution, but these things did not always matter to the Party. More critically, I was fearful to know if Meihua had been involved.

This time, Meihua was waiting for me when I got home. “I wasn't part of it,” she said quietly, still not looking at me. “Well I was technically, but I couldn't do what they did.” Then she started to cry.

I gave Meihua a huge hug. “I just wanted to follow Chairman Mao's good vision. I didn't want to hurt anyone!” she said between sniffles. “Teacher Lin shouldn't have taught capitalist ideas in class! You would never do that, right Mother?”

I instinctively stiffened. “Of course not,” I assured her. “Mao Zhedong Thought is superior!” I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness. Meihua was still my daughter, but more and more lately I could no longer recognize her. The Party was manipulating her good, earnest naive heart into believing false claims, using her for their own agenda. And now, I had to be careful about what I said in my own home. My teenage daughter had more power over me than she probably realized.

1967



One Hundred Clowns - Drag out the counterrevolutionary revisionist elements and expose them! (1967)

Red text:

"Supreme command

It is up to us to organize the people. As for the reactionaries in China, it is up to us to organize the people to overthrow them. Everything reactionary is the same; if you do not hit it, it will not fall. This is also like sweeping the floor; as a rule, where the broom does not reach, the dust will not vanish of itself."

(Quotation from *Quotations from Chairman Mao*)

It is a critical time for our country. We are under bombardment from revisionist, capitalists, and counter-revolutionaries. So many people, even those in high ranking positions such as mayors and heads of universities, have been exposed as counter-revolutionaries. It is mindboggling to me that some of them were actually in the government themselves. Even in our own school, Teacher Lin had been dragged out and exposed for his revisionist beliefs. With these stinking revisionists hidden everywhere, we had to be vigilant.

Our principal has actually decided to shut down the school temporarily. Too much education is dangerous for the young comrades of the revolution. Better to just have the youth read from the Little Red Books, for Chairman Mao's quotes and sayings will never lead them astray. Although this meant that I would lose my teaching job, I was fine with the decision. These are the sacrifices that much be made for the good of the revolution. There is a place for each individual in our society, and I know Weimin and I will find another way to contribute!

Principal Zhang has made the decision to close the school down indefinitely. Not many students attended class anyway, and he informed the teachers that, like Chairman Mao, he believed too much education was dangerous for the young comrades of the revolution. Better to just have the youth read from the Little Red Books, for Chairman Mao's quotes and sayings would never lead them astray. Of course, we also chimed in and said that too much education was dangerous. Meanwhile, a representative of the party looked on from the back of the classroom. He had been coming around the school often, and I had a feeling Principle Zhang did not decide to close down the school of his own volition.

Nor could I fault him for his actions. I had already greatly modified my lessons. Removing the Four Olds left me with very little material that would be deemed acceptable. Basically all I was left with was Chairman Mao's teachings. The same party representative sometimes stood in the back of the classroom as I taught, causing sweat to drip down my back. Watching what you say is exhausting work. I could not get Teacher Lin's face out of my head. However, being labeled a counter-revolutionary was a fate that I had to avoid. We lived in fear of saying too much or too little.

Thus, it was almost a relief to be relieved of the pressure. Almost, but not quite. Teaching was my passion, and now we all had to find new jobs. Of course, the party representatives claim that there are enough jobs for everyone, and everyone can find a way to contribute to the noble mission. I wasn't so sure.

Weimin and I walked home together slowly from work for perhaps the last time. Neither of us said much. We could no longer call ourselves teachers. Being a part of the revolution was an all-consuming proposition.

When we arrived home, Weimin asked me, "Who do you think this revolution is for?"

"Shhh, that's a dangerous question," I warned. I instinctively looked around, even though we were by ourselves. One could never be too careful. It wasn't just Teacher Lin who had suffered at the hands of the impassioned Red Guard and Communist Party. Many people, from mayors to heads of Universities and prominent government members, had been labeled counter-revolutionary revisionists. They were publically humiliated and forced to wear paper boards around their necks with horrible insults, imprisoned, or worse. Sometimes it was unclear whether they were counter-revolutionaries or not. All I knew was that I did not want to end up with the same fate. If even high-positioned individuals could face such harsh punishment, what would they do to a lowly family such as mine?

1968



Give a warm send-off to educated youth who go up the mountains and down to the villages to wage revolution. (1975)



Criticize the old world and build a new world with Mao Zedong Thought as a weapon. (1966)

Meihua has had the honor of being part of Chairman Mao's Up to the Mountains, Down to the Farm Movement. She will be re-educated by the rural peasant farmers, who have much to teach urban youths like her. Since most of my family members are peasant farmers, I know just how much she can learn by going down to the countryside. Although I am sad that I must be separated from my only daughter, I am happy that she will be re-educated for the betterment of the revolution. Only Chairman Mao could have devised such a good and wise policy!

Our entire family gathered together at the train station to send off Meihua. As we waved at her departing train, I felt such a sense of pride that we were each playing our part in Chairman Mao's noble vision. Under his superior leadership, the future was bright, and I was excited for a new world under Mao Zedong Thought. How far we have come, and how far the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution will continue to go! Long live Chairman Mao, our Great Teacher and Great Leader!

“Just one more hug! Let me have just one more hug,” I begged.

“Mother, stop it!” Meihua said, squirming her way out of my embrace. She adjusted her hat on her head, her newly shortened hair barely sticking out from beneath the hat. Today, Meihua was being sent to the countryside to be re-educated. As a mother, I couldn’t bare to have my daughter leave me. It didn’t seem right. I could teach Meihua all she needed to know about farming. Much of the first part of my life had been spent working the fields after all! I kept such thoughts to myself, of course.

“I am so jealous! I wish I could be a farmer so I didn’t have to go to school!” whined Zhixiong. I stared at my son, remembering all the miles I had gladly walked barefoot so that I could go to school. I looked back at my daughter who was being sent to the countryside for “re-education”, remembering how proud my mother had been to have a child leave our humble rural home for an urban job.

The next week, Zhixiong’s wish partially came true. His school also closed. Zhixiong laughed and clapped his hands when I told him the news. I thought about how far I had come, and how far back our family had somehow slid.

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