

THE  
LITTLE  
RED  
GUARD

*a family memoir*

WENGUANG HUANG

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

*a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.*

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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For my father

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# Part One



## DEMAND

**A**t the age of ten, I slept next to a coffin that Father had made for Grandma's seventy-third birthday. He forbade us from calling it a "coffin" and insisted that we refer to it as *shou mu*, which means something like "longevity wood." To me, it seemed a strange name for the box in which we'd bury Grandma, but it served a practical purpose. It was less spooky to share my room with a "longevity wood" than with a big black coffin.

In 1973, Grandma had turned seventy-one, or seventy-two by the Chinese counting in which you are already one at birth. All of a sudden, she became obsessed with death and was scared. My sister, Wenxia, and I still remember the night when Grandma first broached the topic. Over dinner, Mother had launched into her usual tirade over household chores. She had visited a neighbor's house the night before and seen how their eldest son willingly pitched in to wash dishes after dinner. "He polished the stove squeaky clean," Mother said, looking at the four of us. "Too bad I have given birth to a bunch of lazybones." We all hunched over our bowls silently. Grandma, impatient with Mother's whining about mundane household tasks, announced that she might die soon.

It never occurred to us children that Grandma would die someday. Ever since I could remember, she had seemed old, with wrinkles and brownish age spots on her face.

Father put down his chopsticks, looking startled and concerned. "Are you feeling sick?"

"Not . . . yet."

Mother couldn't resist. "What do you mean by that?"

It turned out her fear was based on the old Chinese adage, "When a person reaches the ages of seventy-three or eighty-four, the King of Hell is most likely to make his call." Considering that she had only one year to reach that first threshold, Grandma wanted to be ready. She asked Father to start planning her funeral. Following her death, Grandma wanted to be buried in her native village in Henan Province, next to my late grandpa.

Annoyed that she had been upstaged by Grandma, Mother left the table. Father looked relieved that his mother wasn't suffering from some serious physical ailment. "Don't start imagining things," he said. "It's a new society now and people no longer believe in those superstitious sayings." He picked up his chopsticks and went back to slurping his noodles.

Grandma never went to school, but she had a library full of sayings in her head and dispensed them freely. A few months before, a neighbor was planning a small banquet at home to celebrate her father's upcoming fiftieth birthday. She came to Grandma to seek advice on a proper gift for her father, but ended up getting an earful on why she should give up on the plan. "Back in our village, people never celebrated their birthdays before they turned sixty," she said, and backed up her point with a Chinese saying, "Enjoying a banquet of meat and drink at sixty, one's life would never cease." Grandma warned that making a fuss over one's birthdays too early could harm longevity. Our young

neighbor nodded gratefully.

When I heard the story, I asked Grandma to explain the science behind it. She brushed me off. “If it has been passed down from generation to generation, it has to be true,” she told me. In later years, I was surprised to hear friends who grew up in different parts of the country repeat a similar saying about celebrating birthdays at sixty, echoing what Grandma had said to our young neighbor.

We thought Grandma’s new obsession with death was a phase and she would snap out of it soon, but as the cold, dark winter approached, she began to sleep less and less and the subject seemed to linger on the edge of every conversation. Oftentimes, Grandma would pretend to chat with me and my siblings at dinner, but we all knew she meant for my parents, especially Father, to hear. She said people in her native village were very particular about burials—the location and maintenance of *yin-zhai*, or residences of the dead, were believed to be critical to the well-being of the future generations. In addition, people spent extravagantly on funerals because it was considered an ultimate expression of filial duty. Grandma then recounted the story of a virtuous young woman in a poor family near her village, kneeling on the street and offering to sell her body so she could collect money to give her deceased father a proper burial.

According to Grandma, the Huang family clan had a harmonious and prosperous life in a village in the northwest of Henan Province, on the northern bank of the Yellow River. In the late 1920s, tuberculosis hit the village and Grandpa was one of the first to succumb. It was a bloody death. The family paid a well-known feng shui master who recommended moving the family cemetery plot outside the village, next to the Yellow River, as a way to stem the outbreak. In those days, there was a popular legend about a big dragon resting under the Yellow River at the very point where it bordered Grandma’s village. The feng shui master assured everyone that the spot he had chosen for Grandpa straddled the dragon’s back. “The new burial ground will bring luck to our family,” Grandma continued. “When I reunite with Grandpa in my next life, a generation cycle will be complete. It’s good for all of you.”

Grandma repeated the story countless times. We would look at one another and mouth her words as she spoke them. My elder sister would call Grandma a superstitious woman. Even Father agreed and told Grandma not to tell the story again.

At first, my parents ignored Grandma’s plea, but she only became more determined. During a chat with a neighbor, she learned a startling fact—burial had been outlawed in our city of Xi’an. The neighbor said that if a city dweller died in the hospital, the doctor wouldn’t allow relatives to take the body home. It went to a big icebox in the morgue and then was sent for cremation. A young man had bribed the morgue keeper and retrieved his mother’s body so he could have it buried. He was caught, and the police intercepted the corpse and sent it straight to the crematorium, so he had no time to perform even perfunctory rituals.

Grandma was in a panic. She seldom left our residential complex and was clueless about the changes sweeping China. She got most of her news from neighbors, from my parents and from me. Sometimes, knowing the kind of stories she liked to hear, I would make one up to get her attention, but I didn’t dare lie when Grandma asked me about the cremation law. Yet in telling the truth, I scared her. She waited until Mother was outside chatting with her friends and approached Father, who was sipping tea by a coal-burning stove near the front door. She sat down on a chair next to him, had me bring her a basin of hot water so she could soak her tiny bound feet. “Jiu-er,” she said, using Father’s pet name. “Please don’t burn me after I die. Will you promise me that?”

My sister and I were doing our homework under the light of the single bulb that lit the room. The word “burn” caught my attention. I watched Grandma and Father from the corner of my eye.

“I’ve told you, there is nothing to be afraid of,” Father said, sounding a little impatient. “What difference does it make? When we die, our mind and body cease to exist. You won’t know or feel

anything.”

Grandma shook her head; her face was a grimace of horror. “No . . . I don’t want to be *tortured* in fire after I die,” she said. How would she reunite with her husband in the next life if her body was reduced to ashes? As they talked, Grandma grew more and more agitated, and began stomping her tired feet, sending the water from the basin splashing across the floor.

Father stood up and grabbed a towel for her to dry her feet and spoke softly, “We’ll talk later. Let’s not interrupt your grandchildren’s homework.”

Father found himself in a difficult situation. Initially, he fully intended to follow the regulations—bring Grandma’s ashes home, hold a simple ceremony, and then bury the urn next to Grandpa. The practice of burial had been banned since the Communist takeover in 1949 and the government stepped up its crackdown in the mid-1970s. The mandate for cremation carried both practical and ideological reasons—burial wasted land that might otherwise be used for agriculture or buildings. Land for farming was scarce; urban residents were crammed into smaller and smaller dingy apartments. Father saw sense in the policy and tried to reason with Grandma. In the 1960s and 1970s, China faced threats from the Soviet Union and the United States, which then had a heavy military presence in Southeast Asia. To protect China’s industry from possible attack by “Soviet Revisionists” and “American Imperialists,” the government moved many strategic industries inland. Xi’an was chosen for the manufacture of military equipment and heavy machinery and as the site of universities and scientific research institutions. Within a few years, the city’s population exploded to six million (now eight million). As a result, Father said many young people at his company couldn’t get married because there was nowhere for them to live. They waited years to be assigned an apartment. In other words, the dead had to make room for the living. And traditional funeral rituals were expensive, and rife with Buddhist and Taoist tradition, which was contrary to Communist ideology.

At the time, the Cultural Revolution, though winding down, had not yet run its course. Chairman Mao’s political campaigns in the early 1970s included condemnation of Confucius and the eradication of old traditions and rituals. Funerals and weddings were simplified to reflect these views. Father said he had attended a public denunciation against a company official who gave his son a traditional wedding ceremony. Someone from the village with a grudge against the official tipped off the authorities that he had hired a red sedan chair to carry the bride and paid a band to play traditional operatic tunes. The official’s denunciation was severe. Walls were plastered with big white posters painted with black characters: TRANSFORM OLD TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS! LIVE SIMPLY AND OPPOSE WASTE! Posters even covered an outside wall of the communal lavatory in our residential complex.

For me, the thought of dumping Grandma’s body into a furnace was rather scary, but at school we were taught that the traditional burial was a symbol of the decadent and cruel past of the pre-Communist era. There was a popular picture book for schoolchildren, *A Silver Dollar*, which told of a poor family in Father’s home province of Henan. During the famine of 1942, the family sold the daughter to a wealthy landlord as a maid. When his mother died, the landlord killed the girl by putting mercury in her drink so that she could serve his mother in the afterworld. At the funeral procession, pallbearers carried the girl sitting on a seat in the lotus position, with a fake lamp in her hands. The mercury preserved her peachy skin color, making her look as if she were alive. The story horrified me, making me believe traditional funerals to be abhorrent.

Superstition, I thought, was worthy of condemnation. At school, I was the head of the “Little Red Guards.” During the annual singing contest, my classmates and I performed a song called “Down with Confucius, Oppose Old Rituals.” I even helped put together a display on the school bulletin board that featured a cartoon of a big “revolutionary” fist pounding on an old man who was supposed to be Confucius. Grandma would hear nothing of my political activities at school. She even said Confucius was a saint. I was often vexed by her adherence to the old ways. On most things, I could bring her

around with Father's help, but on burial, she was firm and resisted all of our attempts to dissuade her. A filial son, Father had always respected Grandma's wishes and seldom argued with her in front of us. This was different. At dinner, he talked for the sake of Grandma about how Communist leaders Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai had embraced the idea of cremation back in the 1950s. "If our great leaders don't even ask for exceptions, what's so special about us?" After attending a coworker's funeral at Sanzhao Crematorium, in the southern part of the city, he told her, "It wasn't bad." The body of the deceased was brought over; relatives, friends, and coworkers gathered for a brief wake. Instead of the traditional sutra chanting and wailing, sad yet upbeat Communist-style mourning music played over a loudspeaker. Government or company officials delivered eulogies; family members thanked the officials and gave brief talks. After everyone bid good-bye, the body was slid into a furnace and the ashes were gathered at the other end and placed in a cinerary urn, which was taken to a big hall, like a library. Important leaders were accorded a bigger memorial service, and they didn't have to wait in line for the furnace, but everyone went the same way. On Qingming, or Tomb-Sweeping Day, relatives retrieved the urn and paid tribute to the deceased in a big yard behind the crematorium.

Grandma was skeptical. Neighbors had told her how crematorium workers never completely emptied out the furnaces after each cremation. "When they scoop out handfuls of ashes from inside the furnace, how would you know they're mine? You might pay tribute to someone else's mother at Qingming." Grandma ended the conversation by standing and clearing the table.

Mother couldn't bear to see her husband beaten so easily. "Where do you expect us to bury you? Have you ever seen a cemetery around here? What makes you think your husband's tomb is still there in Henan?"

Grandma dismissed her with the wave of a hand. "I'm sure the Huang family maintains the tomb and they have kept a place for me." She made it clear to Father that she would be buried in her native village with a traditional funeral, and that she would not be denied her last request.

## VENERATION

**A**s one of the few survivors of wars, floods, and famine in the pre-Communist era, Grandma was always venerated in our neighborhood. On the first day of the Lunar New Year, while most of my classmates got to sleep in after a night of firecrackers, Mother woke us before sunrise, had us dressed in new clothes, and rushed us through breakfast, shouting, “Hurry up and eat your dumplings . . . people will be here any moment.”

Then neighbors and friends would stream in early in the morning to wish Grandma a happy New Year. They believed that some of her longevity might rub off on them if they started their year by visiting her. Grandma would sit on her bed at the far end of the living room, a new quilt covering her feet and legs, looking fresh in her baggy navy blue shirt with buttons down the side, a black velvet hat on her head. She would nod and beam as our guests described her as a “faithful widow” and complimented her for raising a big family like ours.

“Huang Mama, your sufferings and sacrifices haven’t gone wasted,” they would shout into her ear. “Look at your family—it’s a full house with four grandchildren. They will grow up to honor you and take good care of you.”

A couple of times, with her eyes glistening, she’d respond, “Let me tell you, it wasn’t easy!”

Our neighbors, especially Mother’s female friends, made a big thing of Grandma’s being a “faithful widow.” It was true that Grandpa had died a long time ago and that Grandma had never remarried, but her widowhood never struck me as anything unusual. Families portrayed in revolutionary propaganda movies always had a tough, gray-haired grandma figure wearing a loose blue garment with buttons on the side and patched-up holes on the sleeves. Of course, in the movies she would be a fervent revolutionary who faced the enemy guns heroically to protect her children and other comrades. There was never a grandpa.

In the spring of 1974, on a class field trip to a village outside Xi’an, some friends and I came across a crumbling stone arch with faded Chinese characters standing lonely amid piles of garbage. My teacher said it was a chastity arch from the nineteenth century, erected in honor of a young widow who remained faithful to her husband after his death. My teacher pointed out that it was a testimony to the suffering and oppression of women in feudalistic society, where they were regarded as “possessions.” Noticing that we looked baffled, she explained by citing a different story, which was a familiar plot in traditional opera.

In the city of Suzhou during the sixteenth century, a young woman lost her husband. Grief-stricken, she vowed to take care of her in-laws and make raising her son her sole purpose in life so that her husband’s bloodline could continue. However, her loneliness became too much to bear, and she flirted with her son’s tutor who turned her down out of righteousness and lectured her on the importance of being faithful. Ashamed of her lapse, she chopped off two of her fingers to express her

remorse and determination that her son should come first. In the end, her son passed the imperial exam and rose to a high government position. Touched by her story, the emperor crowned her a noble mother and she became an example for other women to follow, sustaining a rigid Confucian moral code that put men before women and deprived women of happiness.

“Confucian moral code” meant little to me, but the story sounded a lot like Grandma’s life, though my father never attained a senior government position and Grandma never received any recognition as a noble mother from Chairman Mao. I wanted to learn more about Grandma’s life, of which I had heard only fragments. In the evenings, after I was done with homework, I would beg her for stories. She was at first a little surprised and embarrassed, perhaps even suspicious, that I was suddenly interested in her story. “There is nothing to tell,” she would say. “It was so long ago and I don’t remember.” But when she was in the right mood, she would let herself wander and tell a story. I became entranced by her Henan accent. Sometimes she kept talking long after I had fallen asleep.

Grandma was born in the Year of the Tiger, which comes every twelve years and, knowing that, my sister Wenxia and I calculated that it must have been 1902. My sister had rummaged through Father’s files and found our family registration document, which listed her birthday as April 14. Grandma said she made that up because people in the rural areas didn’t pay much attention to a girl’s birthday when she was young. When she arrived in Xi’an, the Public Security Bureau wouldn’t accept that as an excuse so she plucked a date out of the air. “It’s a lucky thing not to remember your birthday—you can live forever,” she said.

Her parents were farmers in a village in Wen County in northwest Henan. They owned some land which seemed the standard to measure one’s family wealth. Her only childhood memory involved the binding of her feet. She was six when her mother began wrapping her feet tightly with cotton bandages. A younger sister began the same ordeal four years later, even though the practice was banned when the revolutionaries toppled the Qing Dynasty in 1912. Grandma said the most insulting thing that could be said about a woman was “She has ugly big feet.”

“Most well-to-do families would bind their daughters’ feet,” she said. “With big feet, a girl would never find a husband.” The first three months were excruciatingly painful, even though her mother claimed that the bones in her feet were soft and relatively easy to bend inward without having to break them. Grandma could scarcely leave her bed and passed the time learning to sew and knit. Her feet became badly infected, so each time her mother rewrapped her feet, she would put thin shards of porcelain against Grandma’s soles, tighten the bandages, and make her walk around to drive the shards into her flesh. The idea was that drawing off the blood and pus would make her feet even smaller. Grandma would sometimes pass out from the pain, but her mother would not relent. After soaking Grandma’s feet in herbal water, her mother would put the bandages back on, tighter than before. “I cried a lot,” she said. A lifetime later, her feet are wrapped with strips of wide cloth in the morning and unwrapped at night, though in winter she often left the strips on for extra warmth.

As a small boy, I shared Grandma’s tiny bed, sleeping at the opposite end. I would sometimes clutch her tiny feet in my arms. Her toes bent inward, like tiny pieces of dough flattened by a rolling pin, the feet themselves pyramid shaped, like the pig trotters that Mother sometimes cooked.

Grandma said she had several suitors at the age of fifteen. Her family was cautious and, after much negotiation through a village matchmaker, settled on the Huang family, which owned a large swath of prime farmland along the Yellow River and lived in a big courtyard house. The Huang were descended from a military officer who served the Qing Emperor Tongzhi in the 1860s.

She was seventeen when she married, so long ago that she had no recollection of what Grandpa looked like on their wedding day. Photography had reached China’s big cities but was unheard of in the countryside. When my sister pressed her about Grandpa’s looks, she said he was “short, like your father, but had big eyes and pale skin.” To her, big eyes and pale skin were the epitome of good looks.

She acknowledged that Grandpa had a farmer's bad temper, something that flared in Father from time to time, but he treated her well. "Your Grandpa would pick some apples or apricots in the orchard, wrap them in his shirt, and bring them home for me," she said, which I took to mean, in her shy and roundabout way, that she was saying he loved her.

Everyone lived under the same roof, Grandma and Grandpa, his parents, his younger brother. Grandma gave birth to two boys. Father was born in 1928, the Year of the Dragon, traditionally an auspicious year but one that brought calamity to the family.

At the beginning of that year, a member of the Huang clan married a young woman from a wealthy family in a faraway village. "The dowry came in dozens of carts—clothing, bolts of fabric, quilts of silk, beautiful wooden cases, jewelry, several big horses." It seemed that the family had struck gold in what everyone said was a "perfect match." No one noticed the bride had also brought with her a cough which worsened over time until she could scarcely breathe. A few months after the wedding, she died. Everyone said it was a tragedy, until her husband began coughing, too.

The bride had brought *laobing* into the village—tuberculosis. Soon Grandpa developed a cough. Instead of sending for a medical doctor, the Huang family consulted a local shaman, who prescribed the burning of incense. The shaman said a former tenant, who harbored grudges against my great-grandfather, had put a curse on the Huang family, and he tried to lift the curse with chanting and incense. Soon the house was so filled with smoke that it was suffocating.

The chanting and incense burning failed to save Grandpa, who died soon after. Grandpa had left word with his parents, saying that Grandma could remarry after his death, but if she did so, she would have to leave their two sons behind to be adopted by his brother and sister-in-law.

A feng shui master was summoned to find an auspicious spot for Grandpa's burial, one that would drive away the deadly cloud that seemed to hang over the Huang family. Perhaps the feng shui master took too long over his calculations, because on the day of Grandpa's burial my uncle collapsed at the cemetery. This time the family took him to a doctor who diagnosed him with TB. He died a month later at the age of eight. And so it went, until Father was the only surviving male of the Huang clan.

Grandma was only twenty-seven and had lost her husband and eldest son. She cried day and night. At one point, she claimed that she even lost her sight. She said that she thought of hanging herself, but my father was only four months old and she pitied him. Like a "faithful widow" in those ancient Chinese stories, she vowed to protect her son and continue the Huang family bloodline.

Father was raised in a house of widows. They banded together to share the running of the farm, hiring laborers to plant and harvest grain. They were difficult years, though there was still worse to come. In the summer of 1933, the Yellow River flooded. The dam that was supposed to protect the region collapsed and the whole region was submerged. Houses were destroyed; people and livestock drowned; everything of value was washed away. Grandma and Father climbed an old tree and waited three days for the water to recede. A relative told me that the county chief was an incompetent transplant from the south and had grossly underestimated the severity of the Yellow River flood. There was no flood relief, no rescue operations. Instead, he encouraged people to pray and promised a three-day opera festival if their prayers stopped the rain and stemmed the flood.

Disaster struck again in 1938 when invading Japanese troops marched into Henan, and the region was rife with bandits and Japanese collaborators who looted grain and livestock and robbed the villagers of their valuables. Without any men, the Huang family was an easy target. "Bandits broke into our house, snatching grain and valuables," Grandma said. "They used wooden sticks to knock on the floor and walls. If they heard any hollow sound, they would dig a hole to see if we had hidden anything.

"When a family is in decline, even the animals want to leave," she said. "We owned ten big horses. Before the Japanese troops arrived, we hid them in a secret garden behind the house. As the troops

were passing, the horses started to whinny and the soldiers seized them all.”

~~There was little food and the wheat never had a chance to ripen. Peasants picked the fields clean of wheatgrass, which they ground for juice or dried and ate as a powder. The family’s priority was to keep Father nourished, often at the expense of everyone else.~~

Soon Grandma realized that the family would face starvation if they stayed put. She decided to take Father and make for a city in Shanxi Province, which meant walking several hundred kilometers on bound feet. Grandma’s sewing skills served her well. During the day, Grandma made clothes for wealthy families; at night, she slept in an abandoned temple with her relatives and fellow villagers. When a wolf snatched away a three-year-old boy playing outside the temple at sunset, and all the adults could find were his bloodstained and tattered clothes, she and Father returned to her home village, which offered no sanctuary. In the spring of 1942, not a single raindrop fell in the region. Starvation was widespread. In the autumn, a plague of locusts ate everything that was left. Grandma said they lived on grass roots and tree bark. Others lived off the recently dead or the passing strangers they trapped, killed, and cooked. Half of the surviving Huang family died, including both her in-laws. Mother took Father, who was now twelve, and fled Henan.

During the hardest times, Grandma and Father begged on the streets, until they contracted typhoid and lay racked by fever in an old crumbling temple. A woman living nearby saw them when they crawled out to beg and took pity on them, leaving food and drinking water each day for Grandma to find.

It was Xi’an, the capital city in the neighboring province of Shaanxi, that finally offered Grandma and Father a refuge. The invading Japanese never reached Xi’an. The fertile land and mild climate made a haven for Henan refugees. For a rural woman who had never seen a lightbulb, the big city was baffling. Through fellow villagers, Grandma found work as a maid to the owner of a large jewelry store, Mr. Ren, who needed help looking after the children of his wife and his concubines. Grandma and Father moved into a small one-room house adjacent to a spacious courtyard mansion in the eastern section of the city. Grandma cooked, washed clothes, and nursed Ren’s children. I remember Grandma as a proud woman, and I asked how she handled the transition from sheltered daughter of a wealthy rural family to a maid. “I did it for my son,” she said. “Only a parent would understand.”

Grandma gained a reputation as a tough and capable woman, but there were limits. When one of Ren’s concubines accused her of stealing a gold ring, Grandma grew angry in her denial, mortified by the attack on her character, and the concubine slapped her so hard she fell unconscious to the ground. Rather than leave, Grandma stood her ground. Three days later, the concubine found the ring, which she had simply misplaced. She never apologized. Whenever Grandma talked about the incident, her bottom lip would tremble. She and Father lived under Ren’s protection for fourteen years, raising five of his children. The job provided an anchor for my teenage father who was eager to start out on his own, working during the day and attending school at night.

When the Communist government was established in 1949, all their suffering turned out to be a blessing. Grandma and Father were classified as poor peasants, true proletariats, and all the opportunities of the new society were open to them. Father was given a job at a textile factory. In the late 1950s, the government took over Ren’s jewelry stores and he became an employee. He could no longer pay for Grandma’s help, but Father had a stable income and she felt it was time to retire as a maid.

In 1956, Father married a woman who grew up not far from his native village and had been brought to Xi’an by her aunt. The woman was my mother. Father was twenty-eight then, but Grandma never let go of him. They all lived together inside a tiny two-bedroom house in Ren’s courtyard. When my older sister and I were born, Grandma took it as a sign that the Huang family might again prosper. She took care of us when Mother was away at work.

Often, to the frustration of Father, Grandma never showed any interest in the revolution that had ended her suffering and the subsequent political campaigns against those who had exploited her. Instead, she always blamed the family's hardships on her own fate and the vengeful ghost of a former tenant who, she said, had placed a curse on the family.

In 1966, at the outset of the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards took over Ren's courtyard house, confiscated all his possessions, and pushed his family into a corner room. The rest of the house was opened up to families of revolutionary activists. Grandma, a member of the oppressed and exploited proletariat, was offered a bigger room in the mansion and was asked to speak against her former boss at public denunciation meetings. Grandma declined both offers and insisted on staying in her little room. The Red Guards didn't know what to do about this illiterate old lady with bound feet, this ally of the revolution. When Ren was paraded through the streets, Grandma secretly took care of his children. "After all, I had raised them like they were my own," she said.

When I was in elementary school, Grandma constantly embarrassed me in front of my friends. My elder sister and I participated in different kinds of after-school music performances and parades to promote the latest Party policies. Grandma would wobble outside and look for us. When we appeared she let us have it in her richest Henan accent. "You goof off outside after school, doing this revolution and that revolution, but never bother to come home and take care of your brother and sister. What kind of crap is that?" She made such a ruckus that many of our friends had come out to watch and they were all laughing. We were mortified. From then on, classmates would mimic Grandma's actions and accent to tease us.

In high school, I was taught that a Communist society meant that there would be fewer differences in wealth, power, and status. Everyone would have all the food and clothing they needed. Nobody would be selfish. We would all want to work hard and help others. When I shared these sentiments with Grandma, she laughed at me and mocked my Communist faith. "That's the perfect dream for a lazy person like you." She wrinkled her nose. "Just who will provide the food and clothing that everyone needs? They don't fall from the sky, do they?" Grandma's sarcasm made me angry, and I told Father what she had said. Father gave me a serious look and said, "Don't listen to your grandma and don't tell others what she says. She is illiterate and backward in thinking." As I left the room, I heard him tell Grandma, "Watch out. He doesn't know any better and could talk to his friends. If they report us to the authorities, they might think those were my ideas." It was true. A neighbor's child shared with his classmates that his grandpa had said that most of the landlords that had been executed by the government were diligent and kindhearted people. A few days later, his father, the personnel director, was under investigation for attacking the government's Land Reform Movement.

Grandma never changed what my siblings called "her backward and nonrevolutionary ways of thinking." After reading the story about the faithful widow, I asked Grandma if she felt she was a victim of reviled Confucianism by being forced to remain a widow all her life. I was hoping she would condemn the oppressive feudalistic system and praise the liberation of women under Communism. What I got was a look that showed she thought I was crazy. "What did I have to do with Confucius? I didn't want my son to be mistreated by a stepfather. That was all."

I turned to Father who, to my surprise, agreed with Grandma. "She sacrificed for my sake," he said. A merchant from Henan once had expressed interest in Grandma when they first arrived in Xi'an. He had proposed several times through a matchmaker. Many of her friends and relatives tried to persuade her to consider his offer. "With a man in the family, it's easier to raise a son and you don't have to work as hard," they said. Grandma did not relent. She was always careful about her reputation too. Mother thought the story good enough to spread around, with the unintended result that respect for Grandma went even higher. Looking back, I saw two subtly different reactions. When men praise her, it was about her sacrifice "for the sake of your father and family—so rare in these days." While

women admired her devotion, they also sympathized. “Can you imagine how tough it was for a young widow to take care of a boy all by herself? Treat her nicely.”

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Thus, when Grandma talked to other elderly women in our neighborhood about her burial plan, none thought it excessive. Those to whom Father confided his dilemma—close friends at work, most men, and a few relatives—urged prudence. A distant grandnephew of Grandma’s and a regular at our house strongly opposed Grandma’s idea; we respected his advice because he had joined the Party at twenty-three and had embarked on a promising political career. “It would be a big political blunder,” he warned. “The ban is quite strict. You could get into serious trouble. Why don’t you promise Grandma a burial now and then do whatever you want to do after she passes away.”

“If I did that,” Father said, “Grandma’s ghost would come back to haunt me the rest of my life. She’s a tough woman and I owe my life to her.”

## DILEMMA

Grandma's request presented a dilemma for Father, who felt obligated to give Grandma the burial she wanted but feared for his political future. For many years, Father had been a postchild for the Chinese Communist Party, having been voted model Party member at his workplace several years in a row. His black-and-white photograph was a regular feature on the company's bulletin board. And every year on July 1, the day that marks the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, he would be presented with a red certificate at an all-staff meeting or sometimes coworkers would beat gongs and drums all the way to our house to deliver the honor.

In today's China, red certificates mean nothing—cash-stuffed red envelopes at year's end are what count—but things were different then. Bonuses were a capitalistic practice that corrupted the soul and lacked honor. Father had his certificates framed and they hung within view of the front door. Grandma was unimpressed and, in her disdain for the impractical, muttered: "What good are they? Can you exchange them for steamed buns?" But realizing that she had offended Father, she conceded that red was a lucky color and that the certificates did look nice on the drab white walls.

Membership in the Party involved not only embracing its ideology and policies but also having oneself held to a higher moral standard. Party members were supposed to work harder, inspire leadership, and live harmoniously with their families. The Party idealized its members and the people did so too.

Father was a warehouse manager, which sounds grander than it was; he was more a warehouse keeper. He worked for a state-run company that manufactured cast-iron cookware and industrial water pipes. There was coal and lead dust everywhere in the factory, and it spread to the trees and rooftops. Workers coming out of the workshops looked like coal miners, their faces and hands smeared with soot from the cast-iron molds. Father only needed to visit the workshops once a day to check up on the quantities of cooking utensils. His face and overalls were clean. I used to visit his office after school and do my homework there. He always seemed to be hunched over in the backs of trucks, checking the quantity of cooking utensils loaded against the quantity ordered and tallying it against incoming and outgoing shipments. Often, the lines of trucks lasted all day, and once they were gone, he had to reconcile the books. He never complained.

When my political-study teacher was looking for a speaker who could talk about the "bitterness" of life before the revolution and how much better things were in the new socialist society, I volunteered Father. I had heard him talk about those years, though I was still nervous because any gaffes would be magnified by my classmates and used to torment me. I was afraid that, like Grandma, he might blame the hardships on the vengeful ghost.

Father was well prepared. A manager at his company's propaganda department drafted a script that made it clear which regime to condemn and which to praise. The teacher said afterward that Father's

story was just what she wanted.

This was how Father described his early years. He was born on December 16, 1928, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. He told us how, at an early age, he lost his father and other relatives to the TB epidemic. He pointed out that rural folks did not have access to education and were ignorant of modern medicine, relying on shamans and incense instead. China's backward public-health system lacked the basic capacity to stem the epidemic.

According to Father, his home village relied on a rich region of loess, good for wheat and peanuts but flood and drought brought much sorrow. It was the 1942 famine that turned him into a fervent supporter of the Communists. He was fourteen, and the drought had created a severe food shortage. Local officials continued to levy their taxes, and grain reserves and livestock were sold to satisfy the demands. The famine and the ensuing locust plague killed more than three million people, aided by the Japanese invasion of Henan and the looting and burning of villages and the rape of women. In many places, peasants collaborated with the Japanese invaders because they were so fed up with the corrupt Nationalist government. Father and Grandma joined the other famine refugees walking west. The dead and dying were everywhere. Father didn't tell of the gangs who killed and ate lone strangers on the road, but he did mention that a family, no longer strong enough to push their two boys and a girl ahead of them in a wheelbarrow, lifted their daughter out and left her by the road. They begged Grandma to take her, as a maid or a daughter, but her sole responsibility was Father and she walked on. Tears welled up in his eyes as he told how the little girl had been left to die.

"At this point, one would assume that government officials would realize the extent of the emergency and would rush in with food supplies to help the refugees," Father said to my class. "But no, the corrupt Nationalists were too busy helping themselves to what was left before running away from the Japanese, and then they went looting, too. It was hopeless," Father said. "Without Chairman Mao and the Party, we would still be eating tree bark." There was a degree of stiffness to Father's delivery of that line and I could tell the part was written by the propaganda manager. Having lived through humiliating poverty in his childhood, Father said he embraced Chairman Mao's promise of a new society built on equality and plenty.

"When I was your age, I couldn't afford to go to school," he said. "I was envious of children who could sit in brightly lit classrooms and read books without worrying about food and shelter." He recalled how close to death he and Grandma were in the abandoned temple as they lay stricken with typhoid. I stole a glance at my teacher and saw the light reflect a tear in the corner of each eye.

While researching this book, I looked up the 1942 famine. It was true that the Nationalist government, which was preoccupied with war with Japan, acted indifferently, and its rescue efforts were slow in coming. About three million people perished in the famine. However, between 1959 and 1961, the famine caused by Chairman Mao's radical policies led to the death of an estimated thirty to forty million people. With the Party's relentless blocking of news and information, there was no way Father could know about it.

In front of the whole class, Father declared how much better things were for us, how our lives had been changed for the better under Communism, how even his own family of seven could have two bicycles, two Red Flag-brand watches, a sewing machine, and a two-bedroom apartment. He even mentioned a giant mahogany armoire that he had bought for five yuan at a sale organized by the company's Revolutionary Committee, which had confiscated furniture and other valuables from capitalists and counterrevolutionaries during the Cultural Revolution.

At the end of Father's speech, my teacher led a vigorous round of applause. Though my classmates mimicked his Henan accent, Father's talk made a huge impression.

When Father told my classmates about his life as a poor peasant in the pre-Communist era, he left out the fact that his family had been wealthy landowners. In Mother's words, "The Huang family was

lucky to have lost all its fortune in the flood, war, and famine. Otherwise, you could have been standing on the stage with a big dunce cap to receive public denunciation rather than lecturing other young people.” Father never mentioned the fact that at the age of eleven, his family had arranged a marriage for him to a sixteen-year-old woman. Child marriage, a sign of old society, had long been outlawed in Communist China. Father’s marriage took place right after Japan had invaded China. Young women in well-to-do families would either marry or smear their faces with soot and dirt to hide their looks so that the Japanese soldiers at the checkpoints would not see them as beautiful young virgins and rape them. A matchmaker fixed up Father with that woman from a nearby village. Grandma, eager to see her son establish a family, consented. A small perfunctory ceremony was held and the woman moved in with the Huang family. A year later, as tales of Japanese brutality against young married women reached the village, Grandma sent Father’s wife home for fear that they wouldn’t be able to protect her properly. The marriage dissolved. In fact, Father had never shared this episode with Mother. I found out about it during a recent trip to his native village, long after he had died.

More important, Father hardly talked about life in his twenties and thirties. One of his colleagues once hinted that Father used to be a laborer. I couldn’t reconcile myself to the image of Father pulling long wooden carts filled with cooking utensils. In our family album, there was a portrait of a young handsome Father wearing a western-style turtleneck, his hair neatly parted on one side. He said the photo was taken on his twenty-fifth birthday. He looked more like a scholar than a laborer. His body seemed too delicate, his mind too sophisticated. Most laborers at Father’s company were illiterate and wore dirty uniforms and talked crudely, while Father was well versed in Chinese literature and tradition, and was sharp with his abacus. I asked him several times if he had really been a laborer. He evaded the question by saying, “I’ll tell you when you grow up.”

In 1984, Father and I went on a trip together. On the long train ride, he opened up to me about his past. It was like a sequel to his “speak bitterness” session with my class, but more honest, more revealing.

After the Communist takeover in 1949, Father joined a textile factory. He worked during the day and attended night school. Father would always credit the Communists with giving him the liberating experience of being able to read and write. Within a few years, he read all the major Chinese literary classics, and enjoyed movies and opera. The Party noticed Father’s diligence and he was moved to the government’s cultural bureau.

Father truly viewed the Party as an elite group of the best in society and he longed to be part of it. To become a member is a long, rigorous process, and to help his application, Father became actively involved in every political campaign. During the Great Leap Forward, when Chairman Mao hatched an ambitious plan to industrialize the nation within a short time, Father and his coworkers spent days and nights at work, with only a few hours of sleep every day. He truly believed that China could produce enough iron and steel to fight the Western economic embargo against Communist China by using only makeshift furnaces. “We were such a large country. If we could beat the United States in Korea, we would surely be successful with industrialization. We were so confident,” he said. At the height of what he called his youthful passion and enthusiasm, he submitted his first application for Party membership. It was 1958.

“I was young, enthusiastic, outspoken, and reckless,” he said. And, by his tone, he might have added “foolish.” At the beginning of 1959, the local Party secretary encouraged young people to voice criticism against Party officials to help them improve. Father took him at his word and said the Party secretary should be more open to the suggestions of others. He was too “dictatorial.” Father believed the Party secretary sincerely appreciated the criticism and had even noted it down. But for days after, there was coldness in the Party secretary’s attitude toward him, and not long after this, Father was

informed that the Party needed him to launch a literacy project in a mountainous village in the northern part of Shaanxi Province. Father knew it was retaliation for his outspokenness. Two months into the assignment, he received a telegram from Grandma, who had fallen down a flight of stairs and seriously injured her legs. He rushed home to care for her and returned to the village after her condition had stabilized. When Father was accused by the Party secretary of putting his family ahead of the revolution, he was sacked.

Being jobless in 1960 was not a good situation to be in; famine caused by Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign began to spread nationwide. Food rations were cut in urban areas, and Father was stripped of his government food subsidies. Mother's income was low and the family savings were soon exhausted buying food on the black market. He picked up odd jobs at shoe-repair stands on the street, and on weekends he would bike Grandma out of the city to pick over harvested fields for loose cabbage leaves. The Communist Party hid its mistakes by blaming the famine on drought and Father easily accepted what he was told. Even so, it was a humiliating experience for him and others. "You can't believe how desperate people became," he said. A middle-aged man neatly dressed in a Maoist uniform passed him on a bicycle and stopped a little farther on. The man got off his bike, bent down, and picked up something from the ground. Father assumed it was a coin, but as he drew closer, he saw that it was a discarded pear stem. The man put it in his mouth and, sucking on it greedily, slowly peddled away. "People developed edema, and their faces and legs were all swollen. Some fell to the ground and died," he said.

In 1964, a friend had helped secure him a job at a cookware company. It was a laborer's job, loading and unloading cast-iron cooking utensils and pulling a huge wooden cart. This was after I was born. He didn't think he was strong enough to handle the tough work, but with two children and a mother to support, he had no real choice.

The sacking and his experience as an unemployed young person in the subsequent famine of 1960 diminished Father's belief in the Party and damaged his confidence. "I learned a valuable lesson about keeping my mouth shut," Father said. Fortunately, he got off lightly. Though Father lost his job for his act of criticism, it wasn't classified as a political case. In addition, the offended Party secretary was ousted at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when Chairman Mao mobilized millions of young people, known as the Red Guards, to attack government officials and intellectuals and seize power from those whom Mao believed had strayed from the path of Communism. Several years later, Father's name was cleared and he received a small sum of money as compensation for lost wages. He was asked to return to his job in the cultural bureau, but he no longer understood what was happening in that sphere and felt safer as a worker.

Father's affability and his diligence served him well at his new job. He soon moved up to be in charge of the company's warehouse. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Father was a spectator rather than a participant. He showed up at work every day and tried to maintain amicable relations with all sides as the company's employees split into factions, each accusing the other of betraying Communist principle as they fought for control of the company. Father's proletariat background and his low status as an ordinary worker shielded him from assault as he sat back and watched verbal warfare turn physical. Each faction took over a building and started shooting at the other with handmade guns. No one did any work.

In 1969, the situation in Xi'an settled down, political lines became somewhat more stable and work resumed. Father's fortunes seemed to be taking a turn for the better. Around that time, Chairman Mao pushed to purify the ranks of the Communist Party by recruiting ordinary workers and peasants. The attention of the Party leadership fell on Father. I like to think it was because he did nothing in times of political turmoil and made few enemies. He was asked to apply for Party membership. Mother opposed the move, worrying that he could be burned again. Father was hopeful. Membership

was good for his career and the children. Father drafted an application essay about his past sufferings under the Nationalist regime, his gratitude to Chairman Mao and the Party, how he viewed the Party as the vanguard of the working class, and how he felt inspired to serve the Party. Since he never liked his own handwriting, he had me copy the statements neatly on a brand-new template that he had gotten from the company's Party Organization Department. After laboring over them for hours, I showed them to Father. He examined them and shook his head. "Your handwriting doesn't look sophisticated enough," he said. Eventually, he enlisted the help of the company's newscaster whose shrill voice could be heard on the loudspeaker, reading editorials from the Communist Party newspaper every day at lunch.

Soon an official at the propaganda department tipped off Father that the leadership was considering his application. The Party assigned him a sponsor, who would conduct a talk with Father to gauge his political thinking every month and point out areas for improvement. Nine months after Father submitted his application, two Party officials were dispatched to conduct background checks at Father's native village. Letters were sent to former employers and neighborhood committees soliciting feedback. The dangled promise of Party membership was coming within reach.

One day, a company official took him aside and explained there had been a "hiccup" in the process. The company had received an anonymous letter from a neighbor who accused Father of selling shoes on the black market during the famine in 1961. It was a serious allegation. Using the black market was an illegal capitalistic practice. Father explained that he had worked for a time with a shoe repairman after he was fired from his former employer, but he never sold shoes on the black market.

It was not until much later that Father learned the name of the complainant—Mr. Ren, the jewelry store owner, who had held a grudge against him since the start of the Cultural Revolution because Father had rebuked him at public meetings for exploiting and mistreating Grandma when she worked as his maid. Further investigation, which involved talking to more people in the neighborhood, verified Father's explanation. That the defamatory letter was written by a former capitalist and was aimed at a "revolutionary worker" sealed the case.

In 1972, Father became a member of the Chinese Communist Party, fulfilling a wish that he had held since 1958. On the day of the announcement, one of Father's colleagues brought me to the meeting room. We stood outside and peeked in from a window. I saw him raise his right arm and pledge his loyalty to Chairman Mao and the Party. The Party membership rekindled his hope in life and brought him unexpected benefits. A year later, Father's company, noting his good work record, assigned him a large unit in a newly built apartment complex adjacent to the company—in reality, six tightly packed rows of drab tenements with mud walls and redbrick edges.

Everything we owned fit into a truck, which drove us from Ren's old courtyard through noisy, crowded downtown Xi'an to a developing northern suburb. We were one of the first families to arrive. The place was deserted. Grandma's pride in her son's success turned to panic when she learned that the residential complex was built on an old execution ground where criminals and counterrevolutionaries were shot. She feared their ghosts. We children faced our own challenges. In the city, there was the constant danger of getting lost. Here, there were wolves. We were taught never to leave the house after dark and, in an emergency, how to use a flashlight to ward off attacks by wolf packs. There was no indoor plumbing and the public latrines were two blocks distant. It was like living on an island in a sea of wheat fields and collective farms. Grandma called our house "a cave in the boondocks." Even so, Mother saw it as a big improvement over our cramped apartment in the city.

After we had moved to our new place, Father's political fortune continued to rise. A "progressive worker" and "model Communist Party member," he was elected as a delegate to the district Party Congress and his name even appeared in the local newspaper.

With his newly gained political status, Father said he was deeply torn between his loyalties to the Party and his mother. He was afraid that arranging a traditional burial for Grandma in Henan would erase all the honors he had painstakingly accrued within the Party.

As Grandma became more vocal and persistent, Father became more withdrawn. He seldom talked at dinner. Sometimes, when I woke in the night, I could hear him murmuring to Mother about Grandma. He later admitted that Grandma's death had always weighed on his mind, long before she had turned seventy-two. He had relied on the Chinese saying that "the cart will find its way around the mountain when it gets closer," and he hoped that the issue would resolve itself. Now, he was being forced to act. In those trying months, his hair had started to turn gray.

Eventually he went to one particular friend, Li Haoshan, to seek advice. Li, a former government official, was removed from office by the Red Guards in 1969. After they locked him in a detention center, Father snuck him food and blankets while everyone else deserted him. In 1973, the government reversed its verdict against him and he resumed his leadership position at the city's Light Industry Bureau, the agency that regulated Father's company. "You are taking a big risk in granting your mother's final wish," he said, jokingly. "If this had been in the old days, you would have been written into the book of filial children." Li promised to cover for Father if anything went wrong, though he doubted there would be a problem. "Your mother used to be a poor and illiterate maid, and your family background is clean and pure," he said. "They'll probably let you get away with it." Li indicated that if Grandma's body was shipped to another province, as was planned, Father's company would not have jurisdiction. In any event, he doubted Father would get more than a letter of self-criticism. Li's suggestions emboldened Father. He was ready to make a plan.

## OBLIGATION

Before Lunar New Year in 1974, a colleague who reported to Father at the company warehouse was planning to visit his native village during the long holiday. He was from the same part of Henan as the Huang family and his trip gave Father an idea. He asked the colleague to deliver a letter and a gift of blue cloth to a cousin of Grandpa's, who lived in a village not far from where the colleague was going. In the letter, Father inquired about Grandpa's tomb and sounded out the cousin on the possibility of Grandma being buried there, too.

We treated Father's colleague like a long-lost uncle when he showed up at our house a month later. He had brought back a bottle of peanut oil, a specialty of the region, and a verbal message from Grandpa's cousin—Grandpa's tomb was intact and it would not be a problem for Grandma to be buried there. Grandma was thrilled, but Father remained unconvinced.

"The local government is under pressure to impose bans on burial," the colleague reported. "But village people, especially older folks, are still traditional and they are resisting the order." He said Grandpa's cousin seemed to be a powerful figure, and so long as we could get Grandma's body to him and keep the funeral low-key, it would be okay.

"It is a big taboo to leave your father buried alone," the colleague advised before he left. "Uniting our parents in death is a time-honored custom in our hometown and it's good for the future of the family." He admitted that it would not be acceptable to bring Grandma's ashes home for a joint burial. "It doesn't count," he added.

Grandma seized on the colleague's report as proof that her request should be respected. She had recruited other old women in our neighborhood to pressure Father into agreeing to the burial. "Considering what she has gone through for you, you certainly don't want to deny her last request," they said.

As time went by, Father realized that he was engaging in a losing battle. With warmer weather came Father's final decision. One night after dinner, he had us stay at the table. He seemed to be in a jovial and chatty mood, and told a story that bewildered us initially because it was not related to any topics that we had discussed that evening.

"Sun Zhong grew watermelons and diligently served his aging parents. One hot summer day, three gray-bearded men passed his field, searching for water. Sun offered them a large watermelon, which they ate quickly and with relish, slurping up the juice and not letting a drop fall. They asked for more. Sun brought a bigger one from his field and he refused to take their money. Touched by the young man's generosity, the strangers decided to give him a gift. One of the old men said to Sun, 'I'm going to reveal a good feng shui spot. You should continue to take good care of your parents, and when they die, bury them at this spot. If you do this, there will be an emperor in your family.' Sun was skeptical but paid attention and when one of the men ordered him to walk up the hill—'Don't stop until I tell

you'—he did as he was told. After about one hundred steps, he turned to see what the three strangers were up to in his field. The scholar sighed. ~~'Aiya, you turned your head too early. Just stop where you are.~~ The feng shui is also good there, but instead of an emperor, you will have a king who will rule in the south.' As Sun marked the spot, he saw the three men turn into white cranes and fly away. Sun Zhong was more attentive to his parents, and after they died, he buried them where the three old men had advised. He married a young woman in the village. They had a son. His name was Sun Jian, who later ruled the kingdom of Wu."

Father then issued his usual disclaimer. "This is an old fable, of course. We are living in a new society now and no longer believe in feng shui and other superstitions." We knew that he was committed to fulfilling Grandma's final wish that she be buried. "We do this for the future of our family," he told us. "More importantly, it is about paying back Grandma's hard work. She has sacrificed much for our family. It is our turn to make some sacrifices for her. We are going to find a way."

"Do you think the good location of Grandpa's tomb will make me a powerful man when I grow up?" I asked.

"It depends on you," Father said. "If you are a filial grandson at home and generous with others at school, the magic will work. You might grow up to be somebody."

That story had a tremendous influence on me. Even now, each time a street person, especially a gray-bearded man or a ragged old lady, approaches me for money, I always wonder if the person is a saint or a fairy in disguise to test my generosity. I will offer some money, hoping they could turn into cranes and fly away with their blessing. When I ignore a beggar's plea, I am hit with a fleeting sense of guilt, worrying about possible retribution.

Meanwhile, as if to underscore the urgency of our plan, Grandma fell ill in the spring. She suffered from severe dizzy spells that left her nauseated for hours. At first, we were not too concerned; Grandma had high blood pressure, which she blamed on my older sister, a tomboy who constantly upset her by getting into fights. Each time a dizzy spell hit her, she would be treated by a Dr. Gao, who headed the company's medical clinic. I had heard that Dr. Gao, who had graduated from the prestigious Beijing Medical College, was assigned to Father's company because his parents who were university professors had "political" problems during the Cultural Revolution.

"Mama Huang, your pulse is strong as ever," Dr. Gao said to Grandma. "You'll live a long time. In the meantime, take the pills I prescribe, and you'll feel much better." It was my job to run to the clinic and get the prescription filled. When she forgetfully took double the prescribed dosage, I ran to Dr. Gao's apartment, afraid for her life. "Don't worry. There is no danger. Simply ask your Grandma to drink lots of water." I learned later that the pills that sustained Grandma were merely vitamin B and C supplements.

Her condition was different this time. Grandma soon developed a fever that persisted and Dr. Gao put her on a course of antibiotics, but when that didn't work, he suggested a trip to the hospital just in case. Father disliked hospitals and thought the long trip across town and the interminable wait in the emergency room would only worsen her condition. On the recommendation of a coworker, he went to see a Dr. Xu, who was not really a doctor but an expert in traditional medicine who had been branded by the government as a "charlatan." He was not allowed to practice medicine and worked as a technician for a clothing manufacturer. But he had four children and practiced traditional medicine on the side to supplement his paltry salary.

Xu came to our house, took Grandma's pulse, examined her tongue and eyes, and diagnosed *shanghuo*—too much heat—which was fuelling infections inside her body. He jotted down a list of herbs, which were to be boiled in a clay pot. Charged with getting Grandma her medicine, I went to a state-run herbal store, which smelled musky. Tall glass jars filled shelves that reached the ceiling and

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