



Chapter 16

A Spectacular Show on the World Stage

As a person grows older, they often mellow out. Even if they were prone to making wild statements and had extreme ideas in their youth, when their steps become slower and their mind reacts less sharply, they should learn some self-restraint. Do they still think they can transform the young?

I often felt that the times I lived through were quite absurd. The Chinese and Japanese fought for eight years—what did either side gain? During the

Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union, how many people died and how much explosives were used in their struggles? For example, Americans used toxic Agent Orange in Vietnam, causing birth defects that affect the Vietnamese people even today. Looking back, why were we so serious then?

Regardless, I still support certain competitions between them, such as the space race. I once even got into a big fight with a classmate over supporting the U.S. space race. Let's call that classmate

Jia. He is now also an elderly man with many descendants, and his viewpoints back then turn out to be completely correct today, while mine were biased.

I barely knew Jia; from old Shiba to Chengdu, we hardly exchanged a word. We only got to know each other when we both moved to Tamsui in Taiwan. Tamsui winters were cold. One day, Jia came running into the dormitory from the rain outside, wearing his khaki uniform from Chengdu. He often pretended to be cold. Everyone knew he carried a

belt pouch filled with gold rings, which he never parted with even while bathing or sleeping. Such people were not popular back then. That day, wearing his army cap, he crashed in, shivering, and I, without thinking, said:

“You miser, how many gold rings have you hoarded?”

He didn't expect such a reception and was red with anger. Laughter erupted from all around. Finally, he understood what was happening and shouted:

“Lao Feng, stop bullying people like this. Let’s see who will be richer in ten years!” He slammed the door and dashed back into the rain.

But it didn’t take ten years for him to be wealthier than me. To openly declare “being rich” as a life goal was something I had never heard before that December of 1950. I saw him as a weirdo. Nowadays, everyone talks about how to save money and get rich, with even numerous TV channels teaching stock buying. The times have certainly changed. This proves that it’s hard to say

who between Jia and me was the “weirdo.”

Regardless, I rarely interacted with him after that, and when we did run into each other on different bases, we didn't even greet each other.

Unexpectedly, almost twenty years later, we got into a fight, which had something to do with the United States. You know, besides caring about events on Earth, I also care about space. During the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, their achievements in the space race made me frequently applaud. Unfortunately, the

U.S. now allocates less and less budget to NASA, while military spending increases.

Those under fifty might not have witnessed what I am about to recount. How much historians will write about it, I don't know, but it was an incredibly spectacular moment on the "world stage."

First, on April 12, 1961, without any prior notice to the U.S., Soviet cosmonaut Gagarin blasted into space, orbiting the Earth in one hour and forty-eight minutes. The Americans were shocked—how could this

happen? Surely their President, Kennedy at the time, was furious at NASA, demanding they quickly surpass their enemy. Indeed, less than a month later, on May 5, the U.S. hurriedly launched a rocket that sent astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. into space. Unfortunately, he only stayed outside Earth's atmosphere for fifteen minutes without trying to orbit. The Soviets sneered, and the Americans claimed they were confident of surpassing the enemy soon.

It took two more years of effort

before American astronaut Gordon R. Cooper successfully orbited the Earth on May 15, 1963, circling twenty-two times in thirty-four hours and nineteen minutes. Thus, the Americans regained face, proving that a democratic country could achieve more even in technology. However, their joy didn't last long. Only a month later, the Soviets astounded them again. On June 14, Valery Bykovsky went into space, and just two days later, on June 16, Valentina Tereshkova became the first female astronaut in space; both spacecraft performed a

three-minute “rendezvous.”
Their stay times were record-breaking: Bykovsky stayed for 119 hours and 6 minutes, and Tereshkova for 70 hours and 50 minutes. Both records were unprecedented.

Isn't it ironic that a country without human rights or democracy could achieve such feats? Perhaps this prompted the U.S. to launch the Apollo program, offering us a grand show to watch.

When the Apollo moon landing occurred on July 20, 1969, the U.S. broadcast it live to the

world. It seems everyone knew about it in advance, and I specifically went to our unit's Sun Yat-sen room to watch. A lot of people were there, including Jia. Everyone was focused on the television; some were casually chatting about technological advances. When Armstrong landed on the moon, President Nixon congratulated them, saying, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Everyone in the room, including myself, found this very profound. The moon landing was very successful, truly a big step for humanity.

Suddenly, a voice from the crowd exclaimed:

“That’s fake!”

The one who made the remark was Jia, someone who typically wasn't the type to oppose anything, since few things besides money ever caught his attention. It was rare for him to speak up, but he went on to explain adamantly that the entire moon landing appeared like a movie, with the lunar scenery looking like a set. Moreover, his main point was how much money it cost—was it really necessary

for the U.S. to spend so much on something so meaningless? Back then, I hadn't yet read NASA's "Apollo Expedition to the Moon" published in 1975, which detailed the entire Apollo program with 17 launches, six of which landed astronauts on the moon. But at that time, I just thought he was incredibly ignorant, and his emphasis on the cost was even more ridiculous. Once again, I criticized him for his obsession with money, perhaps even hurting him with "verbal violence." He stood up, came to me, glaring angrily, and said, "Who doesn't care about

money? Do you not care about money? Why did you make your wife work for the U.S. Military Advisory Group then...?" Before he could finish, I had already thrown a punch, but it missed him. That escalated things; he shouted, "You're hitting me!" and charged at me like a bull. If it weren't for the people around us who broke up the fight, I might have gotten seriously hurt since he was much stronger than I had anticipated.

In March 1972, when the U.S. launched the Pioneer 10 to explore Jupiter, my admiration

for America's spirit of space exploration reached its peak. Long before I knew that Earth was one of the nine planets and that the Sun was a common star in our Milky Way galaxy, I had already been amazed by the countless stars in the Milky Way and the myriad galaxies beyond. What lies outside all these galaxies? Whenever I contemplated the vastness of the universe compared to the smallness of Earth, I felt stifled, as if trapped in a well, only able to perceive the universe through a tube. The Pioneer 10 carried an aluminum plaque depicting

Earth's location in the solar system as well as two figures, a man and a woman. The idea was that once Pioneer 10 completed its mission to explore Jupiter, it would continue beyond the solar system into the infinite universe, hoping one day it might land on a planet with an advanced civilization that, upon learning about Earth's loneliness, would use their superior technology to contact us, thus alleviating our solitude. What a wonderful and romantic thought! It's profoundly admirable that a nation could conceive such a

romantic idea and have its government allocate the budget to fulfill this dream. That was America at the time!

Not only should we thank America for its space exploration, but also for my career. Over my life, I had two main occupations and received my paycheck from three different entities. The first was being a soldier, although I never had the chance to kill anyone directly; I only provided meteorological data for those who did. My second profession was as a magazine editor, and my third was as a TV

meteorologist. The second job had nothing to do with weather, but the first and third were related to it. When I was studying meteorology in Chengdu, I never imagined having a photograph of the Earth taken from space, showing the cloud cover over the entire planet. Imagine seeing a typhoon from a thousand miles away and being able to track it continuously. How amazing! Thanks to the efforts of American scientists, who invented and launched such satellites, I was able to use satellite images to explain

weather changes on TV before I retired from meteorology. Being grateful to America for this is like drinking water and remembering its source.

There are many more reasons to be grateful to America. For instance, after the Great Depression, the U.S. adopted Keynesian theories to expand consumption, proving its efficacy. Many countries followed suit, including Taiwan with its Ten Major Construction Projects. I clearly remember the opposition saying, “Do we have that many cars in Taiwan to justify such wide highways?”

Are they planning to use them for fighter jets to take off and land? This is wasting so much farmland.” This was before the introduction of foreign labor during the Ten Major Construction Projects era. Think about how many workers were employed and how their wages were spent in the markets, whether it was buying leather shoes or oyster omelets—everyone benefited. When Japan had an economic downturn in 1997, it also vigorously adopted these policies, though the results weren’t as successful as the theory suggested. Nowadays,

even China, with its 1.3 billion people, is learning from this approach. When it's time to be grateful, we should be grateful; when it's time to reject something, we should resolutely do so. But that's a topic for another time.

Do you remember Xiao Zi Tang Bin? He and I drank Coca-Cola together in Nanjing. Long before 1961, he had gone to the U.S. for three months of study and came back with tales of the real America beyond the movies. Once in Taiwan, I no longer called him "Xiao Zi" since the

term wasn't popular here, and no one understood its meaning. He told me that America was even more lovable than in the movies. At officer mess halls, meals were served buffet-style, meaning he could eat as much as he wanted, with no limit on steaks! "American honey is so pure," Tang Bin recalled with nostalgia, "you can eat it however you like, as much as you want, and it's all genuine, unlike the fake stuff we often find in Taiwan."

Tang Bin's information didn't heighten my admiration for

America but made me wonder when I'd ever get a chance to visit. That wish would have to wait a long, long time.

However, some youngsters got to America before me, contributing greatly to our country. Back then, I thought of America as the beacon of human civilization, with its history symbolizing human progress. Even before the moon landing, they had figures like Benjamin Franklin, Edison, and the Wright brothers, along with human rights and democracy...

For some reason, after the Soviet Union dissolved, America seemed to have changed. But that's a discussion for another time.