



## Chapter 18

## The Hungry and Overfed

I think I've mentioned before that we had over a hundred graduates in our cohort, making it an exceptionally large department. Naturally, within that hundred, there were all sorts of people. Some performed exceptionally well in Old Citybank or Chengdu, but didn't necessarily do well in the long run. Others were average but now have my admiration. Reflecting on my life, I've never liked saying things that sound pleasant to others. On the contrary, I hastened to say

things that might make others displeased or even resentful because I couldn't hold back. For example, I never said a single kind word to Li Yulin back in Chengdu, and now I don't have any opportunity to do so.

Now that I am old, I can say some positive things about others. After all, I've learned that complimenting others doesn't diminish oneself. His name is Xiao Liang. Later, when he moved to Taipei, I called him "Mr. Xiao." He sincerely told me that we are old classmates, and there is no

need for such formalities:  
"Calling me 'Mr.' seems overly distant." I replied, "You just have that air about you that makes it seem like you should be called something like 'Mr.'"

Around 1976 or 1977, I was already working as a meteorology editor at the China Television Company's news department but had not yet been assigned to appear on air. Although Xiao Liang and I lived in Taipei, we rarely saw each other. One time, while waiting at a crosswalk for a green light on a road as wide as Ren'ai Road, which seemed

to have a particularly short pedestrian green light, people began crossing after checking for oncoming traffic. In front of me was an elderly couple who insisted on waiting for the green light. I was right behind them. As we started crossing, I took larger steps to pass them, and it was then I realized this couple was actually Xiao Liang and his wife. His wife didn't look old; the "elderly couple" impression came from Xiao Liang's full head of white hair.

Upon reaching the other side of the road, my first words were, "Have you dyed your

hair?" I genuinely thought his white hair was dyed. He replied, "Do you think I should dye it? If you say dye, I'll go dye it." I quickly stopped him, "No, no, it looks good this way, very fitting for 'Mr. Xiao.'"

Xiao Liang, of medium build and slightly plump, originally had a thick head of black hair. It had only been two or three years since we'd last met, and his hair had turned completely silver. Comparatively, his complexion seemed even more rosy. He was the only one among our classmates who reached the rank of

colonel; most retired before reaching lieutenant colonel. I retired as a major. I used to see him in military uniform; now, with his silver hair and a suit, he looked very elegant. He spoke neither hurriedly nor slowly. In our school years, he was almost invisible because he never fought or argued with others, attracting no attention.

His wife, much younger than him, was a chemistry teacher in a secondary school and graduated from a renowned university's chemistry department. Like Xiao Liang, she was modest and polite.

Each time I visited their home, they would offer me slippers and immediately serve tea, later changing to coffee, and eventually used a French press. They would also bring out an ashtray from the cabinet even though neither of them smoked or drank, quite different from me. I thought that with such a well-mannered couple, their children's upbringing was also highly successful. Their son now works as a mid-level manager in the Hsinchu Science Park, their daughter graduated from National Taiwan University, received a scholarship from



New York University, and has now settled in Virginia with her family, including their grandchild.

You might ask, what exactly do I want to say that's related to Xiao Liang? That's a good question—I'll get to it directly. It's Xiao Liang who taught me how to properly eat and drink. You might think that's odd as if I didn't know how to eat and drink before.

Of course, I knew how to eat and drink, and I made eating a major event in life, as in the saying, "I have devoted myself

to a full belly for forty years...." Whether it is my own eating, my family's eating, or the world's eating, it is a major event. If people can't eat their fill or only half-eat, everything else becomes superfluous. Currently in 2005, still one-sixth of the world's population, that is over a billion people, can only barely eat, with 800 million of them still going hungry. In fact, the nutritional level of people in sub-Saharan Africa is lower than it was ten years ago, back in 1993.

The fact that millions are still starving on this planet is a

reality I know, as do the world's leaders, scholars, doctors, and experts. It's regretful that these gentlemen don't seem to take this issue to heart. Their heads of state and foreign ministers are busy holding meetings, while warships laden with planes and cannons conduct "friendly visits." It creates an illusion of a peaceful and prosperous planet. But what are they doing behind the scenes? They are dealing in arms sales and purchases—with expenditures exceeding \$900 billion—without a care in the world for the millions still going hungry.

The United Nations has an organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), dedicated to researching ways to ensure enough food for everyone on Earth. How much funding do they receive annually? A study found that the combined costs of pet care (dogs and cats) in the eight major industrial nations is enormous, and FAO's annual budget is equivalent to merely six days' worth of these pet expenses! Let's not even mention the amount developed nations spend annually on weight loss.

Knowing these figures just makes one angry and anxious in vain.

In reality, global food production increases yearly. Average distribution per person should be more than sufficient, unlike the pessimistic geometric and arithmetic progression Malthus had imagined. So, why do people still go hungry? This brings me to my personal and family experience.

Our family of four (now extended to nine) didn't enjoy the luxury of eating to our

hearts' content until nearly thirty years ago. In the early 1960s, circumstances were very different. Back then, it seemed our family had enormous appetites.

Occasionally, we would buy some pig's trotters and peanuts, simmering them into a large pot of stew that everyone relished, and the leftovers made tasty lunchboxes the next day.

Every couple of weeks, we had to render lard, which was used for stir-frying vegetables. For example, you could easily taste the difference between spinach stir-fried in lard versus

peanut oil. Lard, especially leaf lard, was more expensive than regular pork. The crispy residues left from rendering lard were enjoyed with some chopped green onions and rice, making an instant delicacy. Not everyone ate meat daily back then, and even the soy sauce vendors used the slogan: "The aroma of meat in every family."

Today, few of us crave crispy lard residue stir-fried rice, but more people are seeking to lose weight. Why?

After thinking for a while, I

figured out how to respond:  
"Mr. Xiao, you make me feel a bit crude."

"No, it's not about being crude. When we were young, we all enjoyed drinking big bowls of wine and eating large chunks of meat. But as we age, and with the improvement in people's living standards, our diet should become more refined."

Indeed, that's it — "seeking perfection," a lesson Xiao Liang impressed upon me.

Eating and drinking aren't just



about satiating hunger; they should strive for perfection. The finer the vintage wine, the better it tastes, and rare foods, like caviar, bring about a sense of nobility. Ironically, real Russian aristocrats often despised the taste of caviar, as Russian novels from the imperial era reveal. French truffles have always been rare, and because of their rarity, no one dares claim they don't taste good.

In Taiwan, consuming a bowl of pork liver soup used to be considered a nutritional boost. Later, when pork liver became

too cheap, even street vendors stopped selling it as stewed delicacy, shifting the attention to items like duck tongues—the smallest part of a duck, with hardly any meat and lots of bones. Watching tourism programs about Mainland China, you hear about meticulous eating habits in places like Hangzhou, where they use certain parts of particular fish to make a single dish, often requiring a hundred or more fish. Have they optimized this to the finest detail? But as a Chinese person, doesn't such a diet make you feel ashamed? Even

setting aside the Great Leap Forward famine where millions starved, even today, there are still tens of millions of people in China who lack food and shelter. How much more for those suffering around the world? Kids in Beijing and Shanghai, who eat so well they need to pay for weight loss programs, and their parents should feel guiltier than their American counterparts, because America openly admits to being a capitalist society, synonymous with imperialism for nearly a century. In contrast, the ruling party in China still calls itself

"Communist," and there must still be billions of living Chinese who once wholeheartedly believed that socialism was the shared dream of humanity—ensuring everyone has food, clothes, and shelter. What's going on? Has the world turned upside down? Is the sun rising from the west?

Due to genetic modification of food crops, global yields have indeed been increasing yearly. Some countries even subsidize their farmers to prevent overproduction, yet hunger persists. Why is this? According to the United

Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the top five wheat and corn exporters in 2000 were:

Wheat:

1. USA - 27,830,150,000 tons
2. Canada - 18,771,740,000 tons
3. France - 18,034,060,000 tons
4. Australia - 17,724,360,000 tons
5. Argentina - 11,019,021,000 tons

Corn:

1. USA - 47,970,790,000 tons
2. Argentina - 10,846,503,000

tons

3. China - 10,465,990,000 tons

4. France - 7,947,828,000 tons

5. Hungary - 1,007,202,000

tons

Where did all this wheat and corn go? Naturally, to countries that could afford it. Here are the top five corn-importing countries:

1. Japan - 16,111,190,000

tons

2. South Korea -

8,714,506,000 tons

3. Mexico - 5,347,618,000 tons

4. Egypt - 5,161,556,000 tons

5. China - 4,944,841,000 tons

Japan and South Korea, which both prefer rice, import significant amounts of corn to feed poultry and livestock, possibly to produce premium meat for export.

So, why couldn't Nigeria, a populous African country that often faces food shortages, simply buy wheat, corn, or rice to feed its people? That's as foolish as the question, "Why don't they eat porridge?" Where's the money? Without money, how do you buy food? In May 2004, The New York Times featured a story about a

poor Brazilian who sold a kidney for \$6,000, allowing his family to live lavishly. The article included a photo of the proudly kidney-seller. He recalled splitting a single egg among six siblings and only eating cassava with a bit of salt. With monthly wages barely exceeding \$80 and jobs hard to find, he considered himself lucky to have sold his kidney.

I've also seen articles defending large-scale layoffs by multinational corporations, as though economic dynamics justify everything. According to



one economist, unemployment isn't terrifying; some countries have over a 10% unemployment rate yet remain stable. Bees, with 100% employment, don't make for a happy society. While discussing bees' happiness seems trivial, the truth is countries like Canada had a 10%-plus unemployment rate from 1991 to 1994. But do economists comprehend how many of Brazil's 180 million people are unemployed?

For those who live on cassava, why not buy America's surplus wheat, rice, or corn? It's not

like food-exporting countries jacked up prices because others urgently need it. On the contrary, prices have been falling for the last decade due to overproduction. Still, someone earning less than \$80 a month can't afford to buy even if food were free—they can't pay for shipping. Nigeria, on Africa's west coast, primarily suffers high domestic transportation costs. It's starvation for those who can't pay shipping even when food is free.

The WTO advocates lifting tariffs so goods can flow freely,

claiming this will help the poor eat. Religious advocates encourage compassion, and some even suggest teaching the poor to fish instead of giving them fish.

Compassionate people have always existed. Even before the USSR collapsed in 1989, humanity experimented with communism for nearly a century, starting from a place of compassion. Why then, despite so many compassionate hearts, does hunger still exist?

I recall Lady Chojkowska's words: "Solving the plight of

the poor cannot rely on the wealthy. Rich folks' donations are a drop in the ocean and cannot depend on the poor themselves. If the poor band together to fight for their rights, it would bring disaster. So, what's the solution? Who knows!"