

Chapter 10

Chongqing Tongliang Old Market

During the era when I was growing up, it was almost impossible to choose my own path. The overall environment was like a mighty river, sweeping not only young people but also adults and middle-aged individuals like my father, who could only drift along in the current filled with whirlpools. Eventually, I became a professional soldier. Just a year ago, I had promised Zhao Shuanggui to become an engineer and serve the country!

Together with Wang Fucheng, I traveled from Xi'an by military plane to Chongqing Jiulongpo Airport, where we received travel expenses to enlist in Tongliang County's old market. Anyone who entered the Air Force Academy during that period went through this baptism here. The area near Chongqing is mostly hilly terrain, and any relatively flat land was called a "marketplace," often serving as a town or market. The old market in Tongliang was no different, with the central flatland used as a parade

ground surrounded by several traditional Sichuan-style courtyards where each "platoon" was stationed. Only the seventh and eighth platoons were housed in the grass huts to the west of the parade ground. For some reason, our government always hesitated to build decent housing for soldiers. It was either requisitioning civilian houses or constructing temporary grass-roofed buildings.

Our formal title was the "Air Force Enlisted Training Division," with the supreme

leader being the "Division Commander." The Division Commander eventually went to Taiwan. Each platoon had a "Lieutenant," and I was in the ninth machinery cohort, assigned to the seventh platoon. Wang Fucheng was placed in a different platoon. After arriving in Chengdu, I learned of Wang Fucheng's untimely death through classmates from the communication school, marking a tragic and premature loss of a passionate man from Shaanxi. Our training division was housed in various barracks without a

formal main entrance, with a road passing through the base that could accommodate a large truck. The planners of the old Tongliang base placed two columns at the entrance from Tongliang County to the training area, each inscribed with:
National Revival Road
First Checkpoint of the Air Force

Classmates lined up in front of the columns for photos. It was evident that these ten characters carried two meanings. Firstly, to become a man of the Air Force, this was

the first test. At the end of training, there were unfortunately classmates who didn't make the cut. Secondly, to rejuvenate our Chinese nation, we must first develop the Air Force. Without an Air Force, how could the nation avoid being bullied? During the eight years of the War of Resistance Against Japan, Japanese aircraft could bomb cities like Chongqing, Xi'an, and Baoji, but did we ever strike Tokyo or Osaka in retaliation? Yet, it was surprising that such a significant national infrastructure was so poorly

planned. Perhaps they might argue that returning to Hangzhou Jianqiao was where a true air force base was nurtured, and here was simply a place of "evacuation," so to speak.

To the south of our parade ground was a small stream where we often bathed in the afternoons after training. Beyond the creek lay the famous Daba Mountains, referenced in the line "In the evening rain of the Ba Mountains, the autumn pool swells." We could see the mountains clearly in front of us.

Often guided by our platoon leader, we climbed the winding stone steps up the mountain, passing numerous grayish-white water pools along the way. With repeated visits, I learned that these pools were soaking bamboo, allowing the fibers to separate for paper-making, known as "fire paper," an essential material for tobacco pouches. Rolled into paper sticks using fire paper, the material would burn slowly, and a slight blow would ignite it, just like a modern lighter. After turning fifty, I started smoking a pipe, and before acquiring a twistable lighter, I

often thought of the Sichuan fire paper to light the pipe from different angles without the initial sulfur smell of a matchstick lighting.

While climbing the mountain, we often saw porters descending from the mountaintop. This was a unique occupation in the Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou regions. They wore white headscarves, blue cloth garments, and carried large, lightweight loads of fire paper down the mountain slung by a flexible bamboo pole. The pole flashed intermittently as they

descended, a method likely developed through accumulated experience to conserve energy.

Years later, I came across a watercolor sketch by Feng Zikai (1898-1975) depicting the simple Chongqing-style hilly stone path with only one porter carrying a large, bulky load resembling fire paper. The porter was inevitably walking alone on the lonely ancient road, with the inscription on the drawing reading:

Carrying the burden of ancient and modern sorrows.

I once stared at that painting for a long time. This incident should have occurred in Taiwan, many years after arriving in Taiwan, and before mainland visits were open. Surprisingly, the painting touched upon my homesickness and brought to mind the old market in Tongliang, the Phoenixville in Baoji, and even the tears shed when I bid farewell to my father.

The contents of the enlistment training were ad mediocre. Approximately three to four months later, at the beginning

of the thirty-fifth year of the Republic of China, I encountered her again. Why do you still ask who she is? Didn't I mention that I had already met her three times before? My classmate, Zhang Chunxiang, and I were selected as the room representatives for the "Zhongshan Room" in our platoon. Our task was to receive travel expenses to purchase cultural and educational books in Tongliang County. We had to walk a long distance, have a quick lunch with meal allowance, and rush back to the platoon

headquarters before dinner. Zhang Chunxiang was also interesting. His father ran a grocery store near the Qingmuguan Music School in Chongqing, where students and teachers were his main customers. He had planned to pursue music studies after graduating from high school in the thirty-third year but was bombed in early thirty-three. Japanese planes primarily targeted the music school, causing significant damage to the store. He then enlisted in the Air Force, presumably to fly to Japan and seek revenge. Likely, he, like me, failed the

physical exam and switched to the machinery training. After graduating from the Air Force Aviation School, he was deployed to the Jiangwan Airport in Shanghai. Soon after moving to Taiwan, he applied for retirement. By about the fifty-ninth year of the Republic of China, Zhang Chunxiang had become the owner of a farm implement factory in Sanzhong. But that is another story.

At that time, we walked together to Tongliang. He still had a Sichuan accent and was very straightforward. As a

bicycle passed us, he watched it all the way until it disappeared around a corner, then exclaimed in Sichuan dialect: "Foreign horses run fast!" His envy was evident. Zhang Chunxiang was easy-going; I decided which books to buy as money was limited. We didn't find any decent books, but we bought a newspaper, supposedly to subscribe to a daily for the platoon. Back then, there were newspapers like Da Gong Bao, Zhongyang Ribao, but I was immediately drawn to the leading photo on the front page of the Xin Hua Ri Bao

with Mao Zedong. Zhang Chunxiang questioned if subscribing to the newspaper was a good idea, to which I agreed. Later, I learned it was the only Communist Party organization in the rear area. At that time, perhaps Mao Zedong was in Chongqing discussing post-war reconstruction with Chairman Chiang, or more accurately, figuring out how to distribute war spoils. As the victor, they could only sweep their own yards, leaving everything else for the taking. The Nationalist government had a term for it: "receiving," and those

responsible were known as "receiving officials," a position bound to be profitable. It remains unknown how the Communists referred to that process.

The journey back from Tongliang seemed much longer than the way there. We found a small hillside by the roadside and lay down to sunbathe. The winter sun in Chongqing was truly pleasant, and coming from the northern region, I was almost intoxicated by its warmth. In that hazy moment, she appeared again. She had

grown slightly, but her eyes still held that innocent childlike purity. She smiled at me and said, "Do you like that person?" There seemed to be a telepathic understanding between us, and I immediately knew who she was referring to. I replied, "I like him. I felt immediate affinity for him. He is kind and compassionate, and will protect our people, leading us to a world where every day feels like the Lunar New Year."

"You're right!" She drifted away once more.

If I were to say now, I had a connection with her, but my ties with her were not as strong as with the United States, you would surely wonder about the strange comparison. One is a person, and the other is a country, how could there be any connection? In reality, there is no far-fetched link, for my first profession as a meteorologist was due to the United States.

When I began my service training, I was initially selected as the ninth-period science student at the Air Force Aviation School, and after

enlistment training, I was to continue my studies in Chengdu's School of Aeronautics. This traces back to the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 8th, 1941, which altered my career from an Air Force mechanic to a meteorologist. Before the attack, the United States was reluctant to get involved in the Sino-Japanese War but later declared war on Japan and had to assist the endangered China. They sent the "Volunteer Air Force," including professional military aviators to China, forming the "Flying Tigers" squadron. Upon arrival

in Kunming, they discovered that China's so-called "Air Force" had only a few old Soviet planes, and the lack of complete weather reports in various regions hindered flight operations. The Chinese aviation authorities, then known as the Aeronautical Commission, hurridely trained a group of selected students from the Kunming Military Academy for a brief six-month training to supervise weather observations in different areas. They were not required to forecast the weather, only provide real-time reports of the current weather conditions.

This became the foundation of our first cohort of meteorologists, of which I belonged to the eighth cohort, with an extended professional training period of one year and six months.

The meteorology science students from the old Tongliang were less than ten in number, and they were placed in our mechanical team. However, due to the insufficient number, a class could not be formed. Among these ten students, two were from Beijing. They tried to convince me to switch and join

them based on our shared hometown. I contemplated this for a long time as both meteorology and mechanics were affiliated with the "Air Force," contradicting my reluctance to become a military person. I simply felt that the word "weather" offered more imaginative possibilities than "mechanics." While mechanics were invariably tied to aircraft, weather encompassed the vastness of the sea and sky. Thus, I agreed to sign the authorization to switch paths. Shortly after, my two fellow townsmen realized that I was redundant as over 120 new

recruits from Nanjing and Hankou had joined the old Tongliang, surpassing the hundred and thirty-mark. We were now the largest team at old Tongliang, belonging to the ninth platoon with our headquarters located in a courtyard at the northwest corner of the playground. Adjacent to the courtyard was a low farmstead, possibly belonging to the original owners of the courtyard. They cultivated rice paddies and raised pigs while also selling Sichuan specialties like maltose and sesame bars. I was one of their regular

customers.

The so-called recruit training was likely similar to the standard drills performed ever since Yuan Shikai trained the "New Army" at the small station. It revolved around basic formations, marching, and tedious chores like folding bedding into brick-like blocks. This was not aimed at shaping brave soldiers but rather seemed intent on turning us into mindless puppets at the whims of authorities. Hence, beyond a few instances of me being punished with physical exercises like holding half-

squat positions with a folded blanket on my head or performing twenty body-straightening exercises, there was little to see. However, there were two noteworthy scenes related to "eating" that are worth recalling.

These incidents occurred during our visit to Dazu in Sichuan province. I was unaware at the time that Dazu's stone carving Buddha statues ranked as China's fourth-largest grotto after Longmen, Yungang, and Dunhuang. Instead, my sight randomly caught a middle-

aged monk having a meal, and I cannot explain why this moment left a lasting impression on me. As we marched in single-file along a narrow path, admiring the various Buddha statues carved from giant rocks on our right, the monk eating caught my attention. He sat cross-legged on a flat stone at a slightly lower point next to the path, with a large bowl of freshly cooked white rice before him. The contrast with the small dish of red-pepper paste as his sole side dish made the rice starkly white. Absentmindedly, he lifted the bowl with his left

hand, shoveled a hefty portion into his mouth with chopsticks, and then dipped the chopsticks into the spicy paste to savor. He showed no concern or awareness of the long line of soldiers passing by him. Many years later, as I delved into Zen literature by Japanese authors like Daisetz Suzuki and stories of Zen enlightenment in Taiwan, I learned that the fruit of enlightenment came through the transmission of heart to heart. Just like that, I couldn't articulate what that earnest monk eating taught me, and any proclamations of reaching

an epiphany seemed exaggerated. In retrospection, I must have gawked for a significant time until classmates from behind, including myself, hastened to catch up with the rest of the group since we had lagged over thirty meters behind. While others likely absorbed the historical significance of the sites, I could only recall a monk eating, revealing how worldly my impressions were.

Another scene worth rewinding involves General X, a retired military commander in Dazu County, Sichuan. Each time

new Air Force recruits from old Tongliang visited Dazu, he hosted a feast for all students at his residence. The feast was elaborate, complete with plates of assorted appetizers, stir-fried dishes, main courses, and desserts, sans alcohol but rich with camaraderie. However, of greater significance were the General's motivational speeches, delivered in the courtyard before his opulent home in front of us. Sporting civilian attire accompanied by a rank resembling that of an aide-de-camp, he stepped out in front of us and initiated the customary military salutes and

commands before presenting us to the General. His speech reiterated China's century-long subjugation by foreign powers, calling for our future efforts to rely on the Air Force for strength. Later on, I learned from literature within a genre akin to "biographical literature" that some warlords were genuinely patriotic, priding themselves on integrity. This particular General, seemingly retired before a public life and holding a substantial fortune for himself, had built a mansion in his hometown for lifelong enjoyment.

Having dined at his house, I didn't retain the General's name. Taiwan still has many retired Air Force personnel who underwent similar experiences at old Tongliang, and perhaps some might remember this General. Over the next three to four years, the situation drastically changed on the mainland. Could he have retained his property, wealth, or even his life amidst these turbulent times?

The experience at old Tongliang only reinforced one notion for me: irrespective of a

soldier's nation or rank adorned with medals, behind their seemingly fearsome facade lay a singular origin—recruit training. To embody the role of a soldier demanded initially acting foolish, obediently following commands with regimented movements, akin to a thoughtless puppet. Only by successfully donning this guise of ignorance could one rightfully claim the title of a soldier. I happened to masquerade convincingly in this role.

As the recruit training

concluded, we boarded a military truck from old Tongliang, stayed overnight in Suining County, passed through Leshan County, and reached the main campus of Chengdu the next afternoon. We formed into an inverted V formation, and the long row of students, along with the roster, was handed over to the main campus authority in Chengdu by the Tongliang superiors.