

Chapter 11

Metropolises Under Baptism

In the majority of the 20th century, Chinese individuals who had received some education inevitably underwent either American or Soviet "baptism." Dr. Hu Shih was exposed to American influence at a very young age, while my own experience began in Chengdu.

Our school was located next to a runway known as Fenghuangshan Airport, which was once a base for the US Air Force during World War II. When we arrived, the

American troops had already left, leaving their accommodations for our school to use as classrooms. The library still housed numerous English pocketbooks and magazines like True Story, with only Li Yulin among us being able to comprehend them.

Although the US military had departed, two Americans remained behind – a captain and a sergeant who worked daily in the meteorology practice station on our school premises. The school authorities never considered

having them instruct us in English conversation. Both individuals were Caucasian, with the captain notably short in stature, oddly dangling his cap from his belt. I couldn't help but think he should wear the cap for a more presentable appearance. Completely bald, except for a few hairs above his ears, he further aggravated the situation by slicking back the remaining hair with hair oil, a sight that did not sit well with me.

The sergeant, on the other hand, resembled the stereotypical American seen in

movies. Occasionally, I would encounter him in the restroom, a setup involving a large basin and a cement ledge where everyone would stand to relieve themselves. Given the short breaks between classes, the ledge was often occupied by a queue of students. The American sergeant's lengthy toilet breaks puzzled us, as he would spend an extended period posturing or adjusting himself after urinating. Was there an issue with his equipment or was he trying to impress us Chinese? Honestly, neither scenario seemed particularly impressive.

I never exchanged words with them, but Li Yulin was different. Hailing from Wuxian County in Jiangsu Province (now known as Suzhou), he was a graduate of the renowned Suzhou High School, a prominent institution in that era. He effortlessly conversed with the American officers and eventually managed to visit the meteorology practice station. Shortly after entering the school, Li Yulin summoned me to the station, claiming he had something to show me. With the Americans absent, I

followed him inside.

He led me to a large drafting table where we would spend a lifetime drawing weather maps. Pointing to a detailed weather map spread out on the table, he beckoned me to look. It was the most magnificent piece of foreign paper I had ever seen. In the wartime China region, weather maps typically featured East Asian backgrounds. This map depicted oceans, landmasses, mountain ranges, rivers, and even the positions of China's provinces. A perk of studying meteorology was daily map

reading, granting me a clear understanding of global and domestic geography. Li Yulin directed my attention to a part of Northeast China on the map and asked what it was. Wasn't it obvious? "Northeast Three Provinces, now known as Northeast Nine Provinces, are you testing me?" I retorted dryly. "Look at how they've labeled it." He inquired, evidently mocking my English proficiency. "How am I supposed to know!"

It turned out that Li Yulin's true intent was to reveal that the Americans had labeled

Manchuria as "Manchukuo," Xinjiang as "East Turkestan," and had excluded Tibet and Outer Mongolia entirely from China.

Many years later, I considered documenting the conflicting yet amicable relationship between Li Yulin and me in approximately 30,000 words, a memoir resembling recollections with a touch of fiction. Drafts were composed, but the realisation struck – even if written, where could it be published? After visiting the mainland for family visits, I learned that Li Yulin had been

branded a rightist and perished in captivity eleven years earlier.

As the great wheel of time intersected at a specific juncture, it instigated debates among individuals with opposing viewpoints. Ancient Chinese courtiers once fiercely contested over who should be crowned the heir apparent to the throne, some even sacrificing themselves. During my two and a half years with Li Yulin at Old Tongliang and later in Chengdu, our classroom arrangement, seniors and juniors, aptly

represented the complexities of my formative years. I confided in him about the gunshot deserter in Guozhen and the frozen beggar in Baoji, tales that he patiently and willingly listened to. His usual conclusion often included, "The Nationalist government is undoubtedly detestable."

However, the tale of the sunflower, exclusive to me and myself alone, remains unspoken. The sunflower belonged to me and me alone – inaccessible to anyone else.

Li Yulin sought to teach me

something, but as a rustic youth, hailing from Fengxiang and Baoji, thrust into the heart of Chengdu – although not America, certainly closer geographically – his teachings did not resonate with me. The entire city of Chengdu had fallen under a frenzy for everything American.

Is there anything in particular you would like me to assist you with?

On the first holiday in Chengdu, I immediately went to the city, a journey that required a one-and-a-half-hour

walk each way. I made it a point to visit every weekend, as I had become enchanted with American films. On the bustling Chunxi Road, the shops sold items like ballpoint pens, stockings, and raincoats adorned with atomic motifs. Occasionally, American soldiers would stroll by, arm in arm with Chinese girls. Observing this, locals on the streets would flash a thumbs-up gesture, exclaiming, "Excellent! Awesome!"

American films were truly captivating, especially the colored ones referred to as

"new comprehensive art." After watching many films, I naturally began to draw some conclusions. I noticed that Americans drove sleek, stylish cars wherever they went, especially the ladies in their convertible vehicles. Carefree Americans spent their days either singing or dancing – white and Black people equally content. The sight of a Black man displaying pearly white teeth while singing with his deep, melodious voice was a scene to remember. Their abundance of creamy cakes with thick layers of white cream went mostly uneaten; it

seemed they had their fill, using the cakes instead to smash on someone's face or on the bald head of our school's captain for the audience's amusement.

Every Sunday night, fellow classmates who had watched American films in the city would return excitedly to our dormitory to discuss the plotlines, characters, or scenes they found enticing. More often than not, such discussions would last until a dormitory, housing around thirty individuals, was hushed by Li Yulin warning us not to disturb

others' sleep. Everyone would silence themselves, reserving any conversations for the following day. We weren't afraid of him per se; rather, we all understood that this was not a person to be trifled with. Despite this unspoken understanding, I inadvertently crossed that line one day, causing a month-long silence between us. The incident transpired when I purchased a pair of secondhand American soldier boots from an older schoolmate, claiming they were specially sold to me due to my innate large shoe size. Although secondhand, these

American boots were undoubtedly made of genuine American leather and gave off a sense of swagger when worn. Naturally, this invoked a sense of pride in me, which backfired when Li Yulin curiously asked how much I had spent. When I disclosed the amount, he icily retorted, "Even American farts smell good!" Could such an encounter end well? Overwhelmed by the offense, I threw a punch that didn't connect, immediately being restrained by classmates. Thus, we would not exchange a single word for the following

month. It wasn't until the next examination, focused on "dynamic meteorology," that I found him seated in front of me. With every tap on his back and a whispered clue of the question numbers, our clandestine communication ensured the answers were swiftly passed down the line to the front rows, bringing an inevitable camaraderie between us.

The first book recommended to me by Li Yulin was "Popular Philosophy" by a writer named Escher, an easily digestible text delving into topics like

quantitative shifts leading to qualitative differences. At the time, I yearned to understand a bit of "philosophy," the abstract notions about life and beyond. However, as expected, "Popular Philosophy" didn't address those aspects, yet I failed to notice any compatibility issues between Popular Philosophy and my infatuation with American films and wearing American soldier boots. The second book recommendation was considerably thinner and titled "Outline of New Economic Theory," or something similar. Cover to cover, the book

adhered to the typical rhetoric of economics textbooks, often explaining complex terms with other difficult jargon. Upon returning the book, I candidly admitted my lack of comprehension and, to this day, find myself hesitating to read economics-related texts or short essays chiefly due to the struggle to understand.

Li Yulin also recommended that I watch a Soviet film called "Gem Flower," which was colored. I've forgotten the exact storyline, but the climax typically involved a joyous

reunion between the leads. Anxiously awaiting my return, Li Yulin sequestered us in a grassy patch to discuss our thoughts post-viewing. His enthusiastic declaration painted the Soviet film as superior, touting its vibrant visuals, engaging storyline, and beautiful female leads. He belittled American films by comparison, questioning their standing. However, failing to find "Gem Flower" captivating, I confronted him, drawing attention to the inconsistency between the Soviet adage of materialism and the film's romanticized resolution – the

bloom of a gem flower inspired by the intense devotion of the female lead. Unfazed by my inquiry, he rationalized it not as a clash between materialism and spiritual focus but indicative of the consequences of devout belief and pointed action resulting in eventual fruition. Jesting with Li Yulin, I humorously confessed that the Soviet film lacked the sparkle and vibrancy of American films, airing bold themes with levity unmatched in the Soviet presentation.

"That's because you're too deeply indoctrinated. I see you

and those guys are just blindly idolizing America. Let me tell you, American culture is toxic, do you understand? You guys practically treat American culture as a religion to worship. Where is your national pride gone? I see you, you just have a touch of petite-bourgeois sympathy, you don't understand how to turn sympathy into intellectual strength." His words became increasingly incomprehensible to me. I stood up and retorted, "I can't argue with you. Anyway, I believe in the American doctrine, and you believe in the Soviet doctrine,

is that okay?"

After graduation, we all immediately knew that a classmate named Zhang was the true undercover Communist among us. Zhang didn't show up at the airport he was assigned to report to; instead, he disappeared without a trace. He now lives in retirement in a care home in Nanjing, while Li Yulin's academic pursuits were seen as self-serving, causing him to fade into obscurity.

In reality, Chengdu at that time wasn't as "Americanized" as

described. Our school went to different neighboring towns daily to buy groceries, akin to "haggling" at Tong Liang. During my procurement duties, I witnessed Sichuan opera performed in outdoor venues for the first time and recognized the unique feature of Sichuan opera in their harmonizing voices; the male and female roles augmented the drama's tension and atmosphere significantly.

The second bustling street in Chengdu was called "Ci Tang Street," possibly where Du Fu’s former residence was

located, housing most of the bookstores in the area. I purchased a copy of "Selected Tang and Song Poems" from Chengdu's "Zhong Bookstore," edited by Ye Chucang (1886-1946). Over thirty years later, I found my first post-retirement job at the editorial department of Taipei's "Zhong Bookstore," and to my surprise, that same book was still on the shelves for sale. I couldn't ascertain which edition it was, but undoubtedly, that book had experienced the test of time.

On July 1, 1948, we officially concluded our education,

marking the end of my school life. There's a saying that within one's life, they experience three different forms of education: familial, school-based, and societal. Evidently, my school education was lacking, as I wasn't a diligent student in the eyes of our school. I was considered naive and incompetent, particularly in comparison to Li Yulin's teachings. Hasty farewells were bid to Chengdu, as the city boasted numerous anecdotes, miscellaneous matters, and rhymes, yet my urgency to head to Beiping prevailed. Being assigned to

Beiping, a city I hadn't visited in thirteen years, it held a personal connection as my ancestral home, where my grandfather, uncles, and aunts resided. Li Yulin was sent to the Baiji Airport in Chongqing around the end of 1948, eventually resigning from his post to await the arrival of the People's Liberation Army in his hometown of Suzhou.

Farewell, Chengdu, farewell, Li Yulin. From then on, I never returned to Chengdu. I've heard that Chengdu is now more prosperous and lively, possibly with the advent of

Coca-Cola and McDonald's burgers, making it more Americanized than during my time in Chengdu.

What became of Li Yulin? I wonder if he left behind any children.