

Chapter 12

Grandfather's Story

I was assigned to go to Beiping Nanyuan Airport with a classmate whom Li Yulin disliked the most. Li Yulin referred to him as "Xiaozhi," but his real name was Tang Bin, a Tianjin native of medium height. He had a seemingly punched-in nose bridge that was unforgettable at first sight.

As early as during our military training in Tongliang, he already stood out among us. He completely fulfilled the slogan of "hold your head

high", with well-developed chest muscles. At that time, we often did calisthenics shirtless, and he had many opportunities to show off his chest muscles. He was even called out by the squad leader to stand in the middle of our concave-shaped group and demonstrate to us, saying, "To be a soldier, you must be like Tang Bin, hold your head high...".

After arriving in Chengdu, he couldn't stand out with his chest muscles anymore, but Tang Bin still found ways to demonstrate his excellence. For example, he was the first

to strike up a conversation with American sergeants at our school. The other party seemed to not understand his English and didn't seem interested in learning Chinese from him, so his "friendship" with the American sergeants did not continue.

As for why Li Yulin called Tang Bin "Xiaozhi," it's not detailed. "Xiaozhi" is a term for the petite bourgeoisie class, which Li Yulin looked down upon compared to nobility and the proletariat. Nevertheless, Tang Bin was a person among our classmates who was willing to

work hard. After coming to Taiwan, he was fortunate to be the first in our class to be selected for a three-month training in the US. After retiring, he somehow moved his whole family to the US and now lives in the eastern part, rarely attending class reunions due to being robbed multiple times. Some say he opened a grocery store.

In short, Tang Bin and I set off from Chengdu together, first flying to Hankou and staying overnight at the Air Force Freshmen's Club before flying to Nanjing the next morning.

The day we arrived in Hankou, I wanted to visit the Yellow Crane Tower because the poem "Since ancient times people have ridden on the yellow crane" was very famous. However, he wanted to go to the concession area of Hankou to see the "exotic atmosphere," which I found unimaginable. We argued about this for a long time, and finally, I blurted out, "No wonder Li Yulin calls you Xiaozhi, you're really selfish!" This finally made him agree to go to the Yellow Crane Tower, but the condition was that after we formally started working at

the base, I couldn't call him "Xiaozhi" anymore.

From Hankou to Nanjing, we also stayed overnight at the Air Force Freshmen's Club before taking a plane to Beiping the next morning. The first time I drank Coca-Cola in my life was in Nanjing, recommended by Tang Bin. While shopping around Xinjiekou, I wanted to buy a famous Jinhuaham from Nanjing to present to my grandfather in Beiping. We were at a street vendor when I heard Tang Bin yell, "Coca-Cola!".

I thought he saw someone he knew and was greeting them, so I followed his gaze to the vendor. They were selling goods from the American PX, such as chocolate, Colgate toothpaste, and such. As they didn't have pull-tabs back then, he asked for the price and quickly had the bottle opened. I had seen the Taiwanese movie "The Taste of Apple" where each family member got a piece of an apple by the hospital bed, and the director clearly wanted to show the audience that they were tasting an apple for the first time. This scene of the child biting into

the apple made me tear up immediately.

What I really wanted to talk about was Tang Bin's expression as he drank Coca-Cola. Holding the bottle in his right hand, tilting his head to the right and up, the bottle facing his mouth, resembling the stance of "When will the bright moon appear, asking the blue sky while drinking wine." After the first sip, it seemed like his flat nose became taller as it made a squeaky sound. He then turned to me and said, "Good, good, Lao Feng, have a bottle too."

I had stolen a sip of Fengxiang highland barley in my youth and drank Mianzhu Daku in Chengdu, and I wasn't sure if Coca-Cola was better than those two. Upon knowing the price wasn't unreasonable, I also opened a bottle to drink. It had a soda taste, sweet and easy to drink but not exceptionally delicious. Till now, I still wonder about its charm that makes over a billion people on Earth see not drinking American Coca-Cola, and whether these billion people really want to drink Coke or long for an American

lifestyle.

The day after we drank Coca-Cola, we took a plane straight to my estranged hometown Beiping.

Whether in time or space, everyone's sensory world experiences either long or significant changes, without needing intricate explanations of relativity. When I got off the trishaw at our doorstep with my suitcase and ham, I realized the gate had become much smaller, making me wonder if I had come to the wrong place. I knocked on the doorknob

twice, and a middle-aged woman came out to answer. I even asked, "Is this the Feng residence?" She hurriedly responded, "Big year has returned! Your father just sent a letter, how did you arrive so quickly!" It turns out she was my aunt, referred to as "big mom" in the Beiping dialect. Surely, after the long thirteen years, I hadn't changed much, but the changes in the Feng family in Beiping were too many. The family in Beiping was smaller than I remembered; when I left, my aunt had no children. I was the only child among my father's

three brothers, and now my aunt had three children. I knew my grandmother passed away during the war, and I knew my grandfather was still healthy. The house was smaller now, and the guest room didn't look as spacious as it did when I ran around as a child. Since my third uncle didn't live with my grandfather, the remaining room was rented to a couple and their child who ran a potsticker shop at the entrance of the alley. Consequently, I had to share a room with my grandfather.

I had arranged with Tang Bin

that he would go back to his home in Tianjin, and I would stay at the family house in Beiping. We both had a week off before heading to report at Nanyuan Airport together. I had the opportunity to stay in the same room as my grandfather, who loved talking, and I enjoyed asking questions. We often chatted until midnight, listening to my grandfather tell stories while also snoring, which sometimes made us stop.

Each grandfather has a story, or even many stories, but I firmly believe that my

grandfather's story is the most fascinating. My grandfather lived through the end of the Republic of China in 1937, the Japanese occupation of Beiping, and further events like Feng Yuxiang's and Zhang Zuolin's entry into Beijing, Yuan Shikai's self-proclamation as emperor, and the entry of the Eight-Nation Alliance in Beijing. When I asked my grandfather about the burning of the Old Summer Palace by the Anglo-French forces, he said, "That year I was just born, how would I know?" and added, "Why do you keep asking about these

irritating things? Why not talk about Tang and glorious Tang Dynasty rule. My grandfather's conclusion was, "Throughout my life, all I've seen are these unpleasant things, changing Beijing to Beiping, it makes no sense!" Little did he know, just waiting for a little over a year more, they would witness Mao Zedong declaring the establishment of the People's Republic of China from the Tiananmen Gate tower. Beijing would revert to being Beijing, the capital of China.

My grandfather always liked to go off on a tangent when

answering questions. By then, at seventy-seven years old, his memory might have begun to deteriorate. He had never left Beijing in his life and believed Beijing was not only the center of China but also the center of the world, and he had countless thoughts and connections to various events, people, and places, some very fascinating. Even I forgot what I originally asked him as I became engrossed in his stories, urging him on with questions like, "And then what happened?" Many of the stories my grandfather told were worth writing down

without any embellishment, having high readability, but unfortunately, I am not a novelist.

My grandfather passed away at the age of eighty-six, a fact I only discovered after visiting. If I were to say that my grandfather was born in an era of turmoil, his passing during a time when Mao Zedong's accomplishments could satisfy the entire Chinese population likely also pleased him. However, the years after his passing were too painful to look back on.

During my week of vacation in Beiping, I naturally visited places like the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, Beihai Park, the National Library, Tianqiao, and the Summer Palace. The Summer Palace was colorful and gaudy; upon entering the gate, Wolong mountain was to the right, Kunming Lake in the middle, and in the distance was the Long Corridor, like a framed glass-painted portrait. It never crossed my mind that when leaving Beiping, the most touching and unforgettable moment would be at the Summer Palace, but that's a

story for later.

After Tang Bin and I reported to the airport and started my 22-year career as an Air Force meteorological officer. Tang Bin returned from Tianjin with a US military cap to replace our large-brimmed hats back then. I cautioned him saying, "With that cap, will the airport guards let you in?" Surprisingly, not only did they let him in but they also saluted him instead of me.

Our job was to provide flight personnel with the necessary weather information. Nanyuan Airport was a fighter base with

one or two squadrons of P-51 fighter planes. They were armed with bombs and ammunition ready for combat missions as the national civil war was at a critical stage, and the communist forces had no air force or anti-aircraft capabilities. Our fighter planes carried bombs and ammunition for bombing raids and strafing. Around 1950 when I served in Qingguan at Taichung in Taiwan, I met a friend named Zhang, who flew P-51 fighters in Xi'an in 1948. He shared details about their missions, the briefings they received before missions, the enemy

situation, weather, and others. He described their relaxed approach in battle, sometimes bombing trucks and shooting if enemy soldiers jumped out, but they had never encountered a large group of enemies like portrayed in movies. I asked him, "Doesn't it bother you to kill people?" He replied, "We call it going on a mission; we didn't consider the idea of killing and would always submit a 'battle report' upon returning, counting how many vehicles were bombed and how many enemies were shot, often exaggerating our achievements. Sometimes

when we arrived at the target area and couldn't see any enemies, we couldn't take the bombs and ammunition back, so we just dropped and shot randomly. You see, what if civilians were injured, what would happen? Do all warriors around the world fight like this?"

Let me ask again, do all warriors around the world disregard the lives and livelihoods of civilians during combat?

I only stayed at Nanyuan Airport for a little over four

months. On the morning of November 13th, I received a sudden order from the base commander asking Tang Bin and me to return to our dormitories to pack up. We were driven into the city in the afternoon, heading to the Meteorological Corps stationed on Dongjiaomin Xiang. The Meteorological Corps was housed in the former German consulate building, complete with flush toilets - my first experience, but the bathtub facilities were broken, and there was no hot water. The commander informed us that we were "trainee officers"

whose roles in "combat" were minimal, so we were sent to Nanjing for standby as the plane was scheduled for the next day. That night, we slept on the floor at the Meteorological Corps.

Near my family's home in Xijiaomin Xiang, it was not far away. I walked back home and informed my grandfather, uncle, and aunt that I was temporarily being evacuated to Nanjing, but I would return in a few days. This wasn't a lie, as I had every intention to do so. My grandfather wanted to take me to see Li Duogui's "Long

Robe" at Sanying Theater in front of the Qianmen Gate, but I postponed it for my return. I bid a casual goodbye to my grandfather, never thinking more about it.

The next day was November 14th, even after a century, I still remember that it was indeed November 14th. I woke up to a white world, realizing it had snowed heavily the night before. We had no winter attire, just khaki clothes and one piece of fur-lined coat for the cold purchased in Chengdu. This time, a Zhigfu car came that could

accommodate about five or six of us, likely all officers deemed unnecessary for combat roles. The car whisked us to West Nanyuan Airport. Sitting in the back, I gazed outside to see the once snow-covered Beijing, now transformed into a solemn and desolate scene. Passed by the Forbidden City, Zhongshan Park, and after exiting Xizhimen, we quickly caught sight of Wan Shoushan, blanketed in dreamy, vivid white snow, appearing otherworldly against the white backdrop.

Speaking of this, I don't know

why I'm reminded of a scene from "A Dream of Red Mansions," where Jia Zheng, in the midst of a snow-covered landscape, accepts a bow from Bao Yu draped in a crimson cloak. What connection does this have to my departure from Beiping or Beijing?

Beijing at that time still had its city walls without any ring roads or elevated highways. In reality, I did not bow down, nor did I even have thoughts of farewell. Yet, where was I a year later? I was in Danshui. Where am I forty years later? I am still in Taiwan, up until

today. Bao Yu bid farewell, not just to his father but also to his life of luxury and sophistication. As for me, I may not have bowed down like Bao Yu did, but I certainly bid farewell to something, certainly more than just my home, my hometown, my motherland, mine...

My next journey took me to Guangzhou, where I stayed for another ten months.