

Chapter 13

The night before

Through Nanjing, I was transferred to Guangzhou Tianhe Airport in December of the 37th year of the Republic of China (1948) and left in August of the 38th year (1949). I named the over eight months I spent in Guangzhou as "The Night Before." What kind of night before was it? The night before the revolution? The night before the great escape? The night before a significant era change? Or was it the night before the most crucial decision I made in my life? It could be any of those.

In a city like Guangzhou, you don't need imagination as it already has a background soundtrack, mainly filled with popular songs of the time played everywhere from dormitories to markets. An example is a song sung by Wu Lian called "Never Meet Again," with lyrics like:
Never meet again,
Never meet again.
The past is like a fleeting cloud of smoke,
Yearning for each other year after year.
Even if love is like flowing water, I no longer fit the past.
Never meet again, never meet

again...

The melancholic and poignant tone of the song seems to foreshadow something. To a young man who grew up singing revolutionary songs, I had no interest in frivolous tunes, but pop songs were everywhere in Guangzhou, and "Never Meet Again" was not just a song; it was a sign of something significant to come.

In the streets, there were clear signs of the upcoming night market. The stalls were selling "Tui Bei Tu" and "Shaobing Ge," two types of booklets.

Only people of my age would understand the significance of these two books, as they have been passed down for hundreds of years, even rumored to be a thousand years old. Using ambiguous and simple language, they explain people's inner sense of uncertainty during times of change. Some people use them to temporarily calm their anxious emotions, which can be considered as a form of psychological therapy.

Someone once said, "Man is an economic animal." I am not entirely clear about the true

meaning of this statement, but during the "pre-night" period in Guangzhou, many facts could confirm one thing – people have a keen sense, similar to hunting dogs, to sniff out opportunities to make money. A long time before the major changes, it seemed like the police were all on vacation. On the streets, people could sell whatever they wanted. Besides "Shaobing Ge" and "Tui Bei Tu," various pornographic novels were also printed. At that time, printing conditions were poor, and unlike today's adult films, even Playboy's nude pictures were not visible.

However, there were textual erotic novels such as "Rou Pu Yuan," "Jin Ping Mei," and even the works of a renowned post-May Fourth sexual scholar, Zhang Jingsheng. There were also many hastily written "novels" by "authors." One can only wonder how much money these people were able to earn in just a few months. What's amazing is that in the summer of 1949, even proper gambling venues were opened, with Pai Gow tables and dice tables offering luxurious amenities, only accepting Hong Kong dollars or silver coins but not gold

yuan vouchers. It's unclear if they could recoup their investments before the arrival of the Communist troops in late September.

The busiest shopping street in Guangzhou is called "Shangxiajiu," full of jewelry stores. At that time, trading in Hong Kong dollars or silver dollars was the predominant transaction. Our salaries were typically paid at the end of each month, causing the personnel manager to be scolded by everyone every month regarding whether the salary was paid on the 29th or

the 30th, as it made a big difference to us. We were paid in gold yuan vouchers. The discussion on gold yuan vouchers was usually rich thanks to Mr. Ma Dingxiang; otherwise, it would have been very impoverished.

Sergeant Ma Dingxiang was the person I interacted with most frequently during my time in Guangzhou. We were also classmates, along with two other classmates, one of whose name I have forgotten. The other was Hua Ziyi. Our relationship was good during our school days, and he was

quite interesting.

I would ask him, "Hua is a rare surname; are you a descendant of Hua Mulan?" He would reply in proper Sichuanese dialect, saying that Hua Mulan was a woman and if she married and had children, they wouldn't be surnamed Hua. "How could I be a descendant of Hua Mulan?" I would then ask about his name "Ziyi," like the Tang dynasty general Guo Ziyi. He would laugh and respond, "Why not?" because Sichuanese people like to use the term "mingtang" (meaning

'foresight') in their conversations. I would joke with him, saying, "Whether your brother's name or surname, there's a lot of 'mingtang' in it. From now on, I'll call you 'Huamingtang,' okay?" He would jokingly respond, "Why not?" and 'Huamingtang' became his nickname among classmates. However, when I saw him in Guangzhou with a wife and his tall son, I felt it wasn't appropriate to tease him in Sichuanese anymore. He, on the other hand, would ask me, "Why not call me that again? Is there any issue?" As he had a

family now, I seldom met him for a chat. The other classmate's surname was Liu, but I have truly forgotten his full name. Later, he took a plane from Taipei to Hualien for an assignment. The plane crashed in the mountains around the middle of the 1950s, and it was not even mentioned in the newspapers.

Thus, in Guangzhou, I interacted most with Sergeant Ma Dingxiang, going to the streets to exchange Hong Kong dollars, chat, and most importantly, borrow books. Under his bed, there was a pile

of "Observation" weekly magazines, considered democratic literature at the time - 'democratic' referring to opposition to the Republic of China government. Unlike today's sensational magazines or those with aggressive content, many contributors were university professors. It was on the expired issues of "Observation" magazines that I read a text by Professor Dingxiang. He discussed the issue shortly after the release of the gold yuan vouchers. From his writing, it was clear that economic principles could also be written in a

straightforward manner. (Professor Dingxiang was later heavily criticized due to his opposition to Mao Zedong's policy of "More people make things easier.")

The issuance of gold yuan vouchers may have started in the second half of 1948, when I was still in Beiping. It seemed like a nationwide directive was issued, requiring all households to exchange their silver coins, gold jewelry, and gold bars for gold yuan vouchers. Non-compliance was severely punished. Many people didn't know, but my

grandfather's family emptied their hidden stash of silver coins and gold jewelry to exchange for gold yuan vouchers. At that time, the newspapers in Beiping even reported about an aristocrat from the Qing Dynasty who took out their family's large gold seal to exchange for gold yuan vouchers, with photos even showing the gold seal being cut in half to determine the ownership.

In Ma Yinchu's article, he mentioned that the gold yuan voucher was destined to fail. He argued that the country

was facing issues of material shortages and inflation, and the government's proposal to convert legal currency into gold yuan vouchers would not effectively solve the problems. Furthermore, the government's new rule requiring the exchange of gold jewelry or silver coins for gold yuan vouchers only added to the problems rather than addressing them.

Currency is a substitute for labor or goods, and whether called "legal tender" or "gold yuan vouchers," it doesn't change its essential nature.

Unless the gold yuan vouchers exchanged from gold jewelry or silver coins were held intact like the original assets or formally stored in banks to earn interest, their circulation in the market would increase the total quantity of currency in circulation. An increase in currency would inevitably lead to a rise in prices. However, the government rigidly prescribed that living necessities must not increase in price from the implementation date of the gold yuan vouchers. Attempting to stabilize prices in this manner is akin to seeking

fish in a mulberry tree.

I wonder if Chiang Ching-kuo has read this article. It isn't an esoteric and incomprehensible economic theory; at the very least, one of his advisers must have explained it to him. Around the end of 1948, apart from the continuous retreat of the Nationalist military, Chiang Ching-kuo's "anti-corruption campaign" in Shanghai became the second-biggest news. He apprehended several wealthy individuals on charges of hoarding and creating anomalies. Simultaneously, rice plundering incidents

occurred in Nanjing, and the value of the gold yuan vouchers plummeted daily. Small traders who sold their goods today might not be able to repurchase the same amount tomorrow with the gold yuan vouchers earned, prompting some to close their shops. Ironically, people discovered this and ransacked the closed shops.

Even now, I still suspect that the gold yuan scheme was nothing but a scam. Afterwards, the government in Taiwan issued the New Taiwan Dollar, regularly publishing

advertisements in newspapers and appointing respected individuals as "supervisors" to certify the quantity of the currency issued and the stock of gold and silver in the treasury. Unless wrongdoing had occurred, why resort to this drastic measure? The government only needs to control its printing press.

Returning to Guangzhou's Tianhe Airport, at the end of each month when we received the gold yuan vouchers, we promptly rushed to "Shangxiajiu" to exchange them for Hong Kong dollars.

By then, silver coins were no longer common, but we could exchange Hong Kong dollars in denominations of ten, five, or one yuan. What use did we have for Hong Kong dollars then? It was very little and usually just supplemented our poor-quality meals. I could satisfy my hunger with a steamed bun, but in Guangzhou, where rice was the staple food, the military-issued rice was of very poor quality. When the pot was opened, it didn't smell of delicious rice but of foul drain water. As for vegetables, forget about it.

As mentioned earlier, man is an economic creature and, in any environment, people will do whatever it takes to make some small fortune. At meal times, two individuals in military uniform would come to sell braised dried tofu or braised pork belly. They claimed it was pork they had purchased from Hunan Province for free-traveling on the train, which explained the low prices and questionable freshness of the meat. I couldn't resist exchanging my last ten Hong Kong dollars for the braised pork, but it wasn't

something I could afford every day. After a while, for reasons unknown, they disappeared entirely. Surprisingly, after becoming an Air Force officer, I found myself experiencing many months of near-starvation.

One day in 1949, I can't remember the exact month and date, we were suddenly issued twenty or slightly more or fewer silver coins each. This was the first time I had earned "big money" since graduating from the Air Force. I immediately went to "Shangxiajiu" to exchange half

or more of the silver coins for gold yuan vouchers to send to Baoji. It was the only opportunity in my life to express gratitude to my parents; the remaining silver coins were, of course, spent on myself.

Sergeant Major Ma Dingxiang was another Li Yulin, there were many like Li Yulin at that time. Intellectuals in the cultural field believed in the Communist Party much more than they believed in our government, although this statement is severely flawed. It should be said that the number

of disillusioned intellectuals towards the Republic of China government was many times greater than those who held favorable views. Ma Dingxiang's guidance for me was direct. He told me that the Nationalist government was on the brink of collapse, the liberation of Guangzhou was inevitable, and the Nationalist government might flee to Taiwan, but Taiwan would also eventually fall to liberation. I believed everything he said, but he never once advised me to save some money.

Guangzhou was different from

Fengxiang. In Fengxiang, I didn't even have pocket money, but there weren't many temptations on the streets there. In my semi-starved state, could I resist the food bait of the thriving and somewhat extravagant metropolis that was Guangzhou? Guangzhou was a bustling and somewhat luxurious big city, with soaring skyscrapers along the Pearl River, including the Zhuhai Bridge that was later blown up by Nationalist soldiers during their retreat. There were rows upon rows of restaurants in the streets, most of which

displayed roasted suckling pig, roasted duck, char siu, and other foods at their doorways, producing fragrant scents as people passed by. Even during that month when I received a large sum, I couldn't bear to splurge on a piece of roasted suckling pig. I remember having tea once or twice, unlike the way tea is enjoyed in Hong Kong or Taipei's Cantonese tea houses where the tea shops only served tea and separate dessert sellers would approach with carts. First, you would inquire about the price of the desserts before making a purchase. There

were, of course, upscale tea houses, it's just that I never went to them.

Despite saving up little by little, my pockets remained empty.

In mid-August of 1949, we received orders to board a plane to Taiwan the following day. This was, of course, a significant event, different from flying from Beiping to Nanjing and being transferred to Guangzhou. This should have been a rational decision—whether to continue fleeing with the corrupt Nationalist government or seek refuge

with the "liberation army," thereby fulfilling the lifelong aspiration instilled in me since my youth to help the people. My choice was clear and evident, but the issue remained large, and it boiled down to the most primitive human need... food.

Newspapers reported that the government was determined not to allow the Communists to capture Guangzhou before Double Ten Day. Four months earlier, the Communists had already crossed the Yangtze River and were advancing southward. If I had stayed

behind and not followed the group, and if by some chance I endured until Double Ten Day, what would I eat during those two months? Most of my colleagues and classmates decided to obey the orders and evacuate to Taiwan, including Huazi and his family. Ma Dingxiang had already decided to await liberation, could I consult him about my food situation?

The Night Before.
In Guangzhou's humid and uncomfortably warm August night, I sat alone by the wall of our meteorological station's

small building, swatting at mosquitoes or other unknown insects landing on me from time to time. Looking up at the sky, the air pollution in the bustling city wasn't severe at that time, allowing me to see the blue sky and stars. Sadly, apart from the Big Dipper, I didn't recognize any other stars. The night gradually deepened, and the radios in the dormitories were turned off one by one, silencing tunes

like "断肠红" (Separation Red)

and "夜上海" (Night in

Shanghai). I even saw a

shooting star, flickering so rapidly that I almost doubted my eyes. Was it a mere illusion or a real occurrence? Back then, I was unaware of the practice of making wishes upon a shooting star, what a missed opportunity! For I did have a wish—I wanted to see her. During my most perplexing times, she had appeared, and tonight she should have shown herself too.

The issue I originally faced was a rational one—making a choice between right and wrong, one where a decision almost seems unnecessary.

However, my current train of thought delved into the test of animal instinctual needs. I remembered the pair of beggars, a father and son, who froze to death during a heavy snow night in Baoji. They had chosen to leave their hometown for a distant place—did they make the wrong choice? If I remained, enduring until October, would Ma Dingxiang help me find food? The mess hall team had disbanded, even the messengers were packing up their cooking utensils. Where do I turn to now?

That night, she didn't appear. Late into the night, when I returned to the dormitory, everyone was asleep, and each bed had neatly arranged clothing boxes and other belongings. I didn't have much clothing on me except for my luggage roll; I only possessed three extensive volumes of dictionaries purchased from the Commercial Press in Beiping, an ownerless collection of Lu Xun's "Two Places," and some thin paperback books such as "Morning Revival of Flowers." I stood at the head of the bed, in

the darkness. I stomped my foot, steeled my heart, and said to myself, "Go ahead, follow your animal instincts, follow the path that leads to food. After all, it's merely a matter of being liberated early or late, nothing extraordinary, better than begging!" And that's how I ended up in Taiwan.