

Chapter 16

The World’s Grand Stage: A Spectacular Show

As people grow older, they tend to become more even-tempered. Even those who were outspoken and radical in their youth, as their steps slow and their minds become less sharp, should learn a bit of self-restraint. After all, do they still think they can reshape the younger generation?

I often find the years I've lived through to be quite absurd. The eight-year war between China

and Japan—what was it for? The US-Soviet Cold War era saw two major blocs fighting endlessly, resulting in countless deaths and a tremendous expenditure of explosives. For example, during the Vietnam War, the Americans used toxic defoliants, causing Vietnamese children to be born with deformities even today. Looking back, one questions—was all that really necessary?

Nonetheless, I do support some of these competitions between nations, such as the

space race. I once got into a fistfight with a classmate over my support for the American space race. Let's assume his surname is Jia. He is now an elder with numerous grandchildren, and looking back, his views were entirely correct, whereas my own were biased.

Classmate Jia and I were not close. From our time in the old market in Chengdu, we had scarcely exchanged a word. It was only after first arriving in Taiwan and living in Tamsui that I got to know him. Tamsui winters were cold, and one day

Jia ran back to the dorm in the rain, still wearing his khaki uniform made in Chengdu. He often shivered from the cold. Everyone knew he always carried a waist pouch filled with gold rings, which he never parted with, even for bathing or sleeping, making him quite unpopular. One day, he huddled in the dorm, and I couldn't help but tease him:

"Stingy, how many gold rings have you hoarded now?"

He seemed unprepared for such a greeting and stood silent and flushed while our

classmates laughed. Finally grasping the situation, he shouted:

"Lao Feng, don’t bully me! Let’s see who’s richer in ten years!"

He slammed the door and ran out into the rain.

He was already wealthier than I'd ever be. Making wealth one’s life goal and openly declaring it was unheard of in the winter of 1950. Now, everyone seems to talk about saving money and getting rich, with entire TV channels dedicated to stock trading.

Times have certainly changed! It's hard to say which of us – Jia or I – is the "weird" one now.

After that, we rarely interacted. We didn't even greet each other when we met by chance at different bases. Yet, nearly twenty years later, we ended up in a scuffle, indirectly linked to America. Aside from earthly matters, I also care about things beyond Earth. During the US-Soviet Cold War, their achievements in the space race had me applauding. Unfortunately, U.S. funding for NASA (National Aeronautics

and Space Administration) keeps shrinking while military budgets increase.

Those under 50 haven't witnessed what I'm about to share. Whether history books cover it in detail, I can't say, but what played out on the world's grand stage was a spectacular historical drama. First, on April 12, 1961, Yuri Gagarin of the Soviet Union, without prior notice to the U.S., launched into space, orbiting Earth in 1 hour and 48 minutes. Americans were bewildered. How could this happen? Surely, Kennedy, the famed president

then, must have furiously urged NASA to surpass their rival quickly. Barely a month later, on May 5, Americans launched a rocket sending Alan B. Shepard Jr. into space. Though he only stayed for 15 minutes without attempting orbit, the Soviet Union scoffed. The U.S. claimed confidence in eventually overtaking the enemy.

After two years of hard work, American astronaut Gordon Cooper successfully orbited Earth on May 15, 1963. Completing 22 orbits over 34 hours and 19 minutes, the

Americans regained face. This demonstrated that democratic nations respectful of human rights could progress further in technology than a non-democratic Soviet Union. Unfortunately, American pride was short-lived. Just a month later, on June 14, the Soviet Union launched a rocket commanded by Valery Bykovsky, followed by another captained by the first female astronaut, Valentina Tereshkova, on June 16. Their crafts even performed a formation flight for three minutes and broke records by remaining in space for 119

hours and 6 minutes and 70 hours and 50 minutes, respectively – several days!

A non-democratic nation achieving this was almost laughable. Perhaps motivated by this, the U.S. developed the Apollo Lunar Program, giving us a fascinating spectacle.

On July 20, 1969, the lunar landing was broadcasted live globally. I had gone to see it at our squadron's main hall, where a large group, including the frugal Jia, gathered to watch. As Armstrong stepped on the moon with Nixon

celebrating their success, saying "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," we felt the profound meaning.

Suddenly, Jia interrupted:

"It's fake!"

Unexpected from someone not usually vocal unless money was involved, Jia’s claim that it looked like a movie set questioned the need for such expenditures. Criticizing his ignorance and focus on money, it might have angered him to retaliate. Before his argument finished, I had thrown a punch,

nearly sparked a full-blown fight if not for bystanders.

In March 1972, the launch of Pioneer 10, aimed for Jupiter exploration, deepened my admiration for American passion in space endeavors. Understanding Earth in relation to our galaxy and beyond evokes an overwhelming sense of insignificance and isolation. Pioneer 10 bore a plaque indicating Earth and our solar system's position, designed for potential extraterrestrial civilizations millennia advanced, hoping to establish communication and

end Earth’s loneliness. The imagination and determination win thorough respect—such romantic aspiration reflected in the American spirit.

Much of American advancement benefitted various fields. For instance, my military meteorological services, editorial work, and weather forecast evolutions were enhanced by American technological innovations. Satellite imagery in forecasting, allowing distant cyclone observation, owes gratitude to American scientific investment.

Economic strategies post-Great Depression, prominent Keynesian models applied widely – especially Taiwan’s "Ten Major Construction Projects" emulated productive growth periods—illustrate American progress contributions.

Early accounts from colleagues, precluding popularization of American culture, revealed the endearing American experiences deeper than public façade—a legacy of evolutionary impact.

Post-Soviet America appeared

altered hopeful for continued respected contributions—a significant era reflecting global evolution narrative.

The entire Apollo program launched seventeen times, with six successful moon landings where astronauts set foot on the lunar surface. Back then, I thought that person was utterly clueless; his emphasis on the costs was tiresome. I criticized him again for his obsession with money, perhaps even using "verbal violence" and unintentionally hurting him. He stood up, came

before me, glared furiously, and said, "Who doesn't want money? Do you not want money? Then why do you make your wife work at the U.S. Military Advisory Group..." Before he could finish, I had already swung a punch at him but missed. Things got heated—he started shouting "He's hitting me!" while charging at my stomach like a bull. If it weren't for the many people around pulling us apart, I might have gotten hurt in that fight; his brute strength was much greater than I anticipated.

In March 1972, the United States launched the Pioneer 10 space probe to Jupiter. This action left me deeply admiring America's spirit of space exploration—an admiration I cannot fully express. Long before, I understood that Earth is one of the nine planets in the solar system, with the Sun being an ordinary star within our Milky Way galaxy, which itself contains an uncountable number of stars. The universe holds countless other galaxies like ours. Beyond these galaxies, what else is there? Whenever I thought about the vastness of the universe and

the smallness of Earth, it made me feel like we lived at the bottom of a well, understanding the universe with only a limited view. This engendered a sense of being suffocated and trapped. Pioneer 10 carried an aluminum plaque with symbols depicting Earth's relative position in the solar system and the figures of a man and a woman. The designers' intention was that after finishing its Jupiter mission, Pioneer 10 would venture out of the solar system into the infinite universe. They hoped it might one day land on a civilized planet, ideally more

advanced than Earth's civilization by thousands of years. Such a civilization might learn of Earth's loneliness and use advanced technology to contact us, alleviating our isolation. Isn't that idea wonderful? So romantic! Just the fact that a country could have such romantic ideas and that its government would allocate a budget to realize them is worthy of admiration—that was the America of those days!

We should thank America for more than just the previous example; I also owe my career

to it. In my life, I have worked in two professions and received monthly salaries from three different units. One was as a soldier, where I had no opportunity to kill directly but provided essential meteorological data for those who did. My second profession was as an editor and my third as a meteorological editor and anchor at a television station. The second job had nothing to do with the weather, but the first and third were reliant on it. When I was studying meteorology in Chengdu, I never dreamed that we could have images that provide a

bird's-eye view of the entire Earth, displaying cloud cover worldwide. Imagine being able to "see" a typhoon from thousands of kilometers away and track it continuously—how magical! Thanks to the efforts of American scientists who invented and launched such satellites, before I retired from meteorology, I had the opportunity to use satellite images on television to explain weather changes. Grateful to those who made this possible, we owe thanks to America.

There are countless other reasons to thank America, one

of which I'll briefly touch on. After the Great Depression, America adopted Keynesian theories to expand consumption and proved them effective. Many countries then modeled this approach. In Taiwan, forward-thinking economists proposed what came to be known as the "Ten Major Construction Projects." I remember quite clearly; opponents questioned whether we needed such wide highways given Taiwan's limited number of vehicles, suspecting they were for military aircraft and lamenting the waste of arable land. But

nobody mentioned "foreign labor" back then. Just think about how many workers these projects employed and how their wages drove the economy, benefiting everyone from shoe sellers to oyster pancake vendors. Even Japan adopted these ideas in 1997 during an economic downturn, though not as successfully as theorized. Nowadays, China, with its 1.3 billion population, is following this method. We should express gratitude when it is due but also decisively criticize aspects that deserve it.

Do you remember Xiaozi Tang

Bin? He and I drank Coca-Cola in Nanjing over fifty years ago. He studied in the United States for three months and returned with real stories of America beyond Hollywood movies. After moving to Taiwan, I stopped calling him "Xiaozi" since that term wasn't popular here. He said that America was even better than in the movies. At military officer restaurants, meals were buffet-style, meaning you could eat as much as you wanted, and there were no limits on steak! "And American honey," Tang Bin reminisced, "you can eat however much you want, and

it's real honey, unlike the fake stuff often found in Taiwan."

Tang Bin's stories didn't make me admire America more; they just left me longing for the day I could go there—a day that would come much later.

Some young friends went to America before me and made significant contributions to our country. Back then, I thought of America as the benchmark of human civilization. Their history was synonymous with human progress, marked by figures like Franklin, Edison, and the Wright Brothers, and

ideals like human rights and democracy...

But somehow, since the Soviet Union's collapse, America seems to have changed. We'll talk about that another time.