

Chapter 2

Licorice, red dates, WTO

Everyone knows that I have always been very biased since childhood, and many people also know that my story is nothing more than Marcos and her alone. However, I somehow became interested in telling the biased story to Zhusheng, which is a bit funny. The gap between Zhusheng and me is too big, not just in age. I did not taste Coca-Cola until I was twenty years old, still considered someone who only pursues money with a single heart before I turned

thirty, and saw a television for the first time before forty. What about him? The gap between our moral values and perspectives is far greater than the fifty-year age difference. Yet at my advanced age, I actually thought of her and attempted to tell Zhusheng the biased story, hoping he would listen. If I really intend for him to accept my thoughts, I believe I have to spend a bit more effort to explain from the beginning.

The formation of a person's basic personality, perhaps there is no conclusive answer. I deeply believe that before the

age of twelve, the influences of people, events, and the environment on individuals are most significant. Looking back, there were not many people like Li Yulin who had a significant impact on me, but there were at least two before the age of twelve. They were my classmate and teacher, let me start with my classmate Zhou Xiaodong.

周效棟 is also from Beiping.

My grandma is most concerned about the Zhou family, they are fellow villagers and neighbors, and my grandma often has the

opportunity to meet Uncle Zhou and Auntie Zhou (currently known as Uncle Zhou and Aunt Zhou in Taiwan). Uncle Zhou seems to be a bit older than my dad and also doesn't work. Their family rents a separate courtyard, with only four people - his dad, his mom, his mom's two sisters, and Zhou Xiaodong. It turns out, his dad first married the older sister but she couldn't have children, so he then married the younger sister who eventually gave birth to Zhou Xiaodong. At that time, I didn't understand why my grandma often whispered this to my

mom, but five or six years later, I realized that she was lamenting the fact that my aunt, my uncle's wife, had never had children.

I didn't talk about these things with Zhou Xiaodong at that time. Our focus should have been on eating. And, I wasn't best friends with Zhou Xiaodong from the beginning; Li Yingchao was actually my first friend in Fengxiang. When we first arrived in Fengxiang, about 28th year of the Republic of China, my dad still had some extra money. The prices were rising every day

due to the war situation, and a friend suggested to my dad that we could buy red dates and walnuts to store, as these are essential foods for Shanxi people during the New Year season, and sell them at a high price at the end of the year. So, our house ended up with more than ten large sacks of walnuts and red dates, the sack with walnuts seemed to be particularly sturdy. One of the sacks with red dates had a small hole that you could pick out a few red dates from and put in your school bag before going to school every day.

It was the red dates that allowed me to make friends with Li Yingchao. Why could he share two or three red dates every day? It turned out he had licorice, a precious commodity that was basically my first experience of "chewing gum". His licorice was as thick as my dad's finger, definitely chopped by his mom with a kitchen knife because the pencil sharpener did not work when I tried to cut a small piece to share with Zhou Xiaodong. A small piece of licorice was enough to slowly chew on for a morning, sending a good scent

throughout the mouth.

Li Yingchao also has licorice, yes, the licorice used in traditional Chinese medicine. I have been to their house and know that they rent a room at a place called "Tianchang Trading Company." Tianchang Trading Company is grand, with a wide gate spacious enough for two carriages to pass through side by side. Upon entering, on the right is a long row of warehouses, divided into separate rooms, all without doors. On the left are a series of rooms, with Li Yingchao's family living in one of them. Now I understand,

this establishment must have been prosperous during the Tang Dynasty. They were a large company similar to DHL or a freight company. Unfortunately, after the Longhai Railway was constructed, Fengxiang was not on the railway line, causing the freight business to decline, which created an opportunity for Li Yingchao's family to evacuate and rent the place. However, there were still some goods stored in the warehouse. I have seen several neatly bundled sacks of licorice, which was Li Yingchao's source of goods.

The trade of red dates and licorice only lasted for a short time before the international order was disrupted. I remember reading in a book that the earliest form of commercial activity among humans was bartering, where each party traded what they could spare for what they needed. Isn't this like a communist society? Then, cunning individuals intervened, saying that bartering was inconvenient and introduced the concept of "trade." They invented an intangible item called "currency" made from

shells, copper, silver, or paper - something that couldn't be consumed. Who were the winners in this game? Of course, it was the smart and cunning ones.

If we expand the concept of bartering between Li Yingchao's licorice and my red dates to trade between countries, it is called international trade. Some people insist that the broader and freer trade between nations is beneficial for the entire world. Today, the World Trade Organization (WTO) operates as the implementing

body of this principle. The earliest proponent of this idea was Adam Smith, three centuries ago. His work "The Wealth of Nations" and Darwin's "Theory of Evolution" were the first to be translated into Chinese and introduced to the Qing Imperial government as part of the modernization movement. They believed that incorporating these ideas could make the nation strong and the people wealthy. Both men were British and their theories laid the foundation for capitalism.

Adam Smith believed in

allowing people to freely develop their instinct to strive for money, which not only enriched themselves but also strengthened the nation. The thing he most opposed in his lifetime was tariffs between nations because they hindered free trade. It is said that he hurried to publish "The Wealth of Nations" to persuade British parliamentarians not to impose excessive tobacco taxes on the American colonies to avoid triggering the American War of Independence. There's even a notion that Adam Smith believed that if necessary, he would rather move the British

capital to America than allow it to become independent. If the British monarch had accepted Adam Smith's advice, the British Empire might still be the world's dominant power today. I can't recall where I read this information, so just disregard it. Starting with Adam Smith, the opposition to tariffs has continued until today, where the WTO has not been able to fully eliminate them.

Back to my good friend, Zhou Xiaodong. Zhou Xiaodong has the ability to mix between licorice and red dates, and finally, the true reason that both licorice and red dates

gravitate towards him. Let me immediately mention the unfortunate outcomes of red dates and licorice. When it comes to red dates, they were all sold out before Chinese New Year. Since it was a tight margin business, my father probably didn't make much money. Consequently, he went alone to Baoding City to seek a way to make a living. As for the licorice, I once tried to extract a strand of it in collaboration with Li Yingchao, but at that time, without any machines, it was bound so tightly that before we could extract half of it, the adults

found and drove us away. Besides, would the Tianchang Trading Company really leave the licorice piled up in the warehouse for too long?

Zhou Xiaodong's family probably was really wealthy. Please note that I am talking about events during the eight years of the war against Japan. At that time, the living conditions of ordinary people were very poor, and their standard of living was low. The first time I visited Zhou Xiaodong's house, they were eating fried bean sauce noodles. At that time,

Fengxiang County didn't have machine-made noodles like what we eat today; the noodles were either hand-pulled or cut with a knife at home. Fried bean sauce noodles must be made with meat. Our family rarely ate meat; Zhou's family's fried bean sauce noodles resembled the style of a known Beijing dish. On the table, several small dishes contained shredded cucumber, young green beans, mung bean sprouts, and other toppings. Additionally, there was a small plate with peeled white garlic cloves placed in the middle of a large bowl of dark-brown

bean sauce floating in oil. Just looking at it, you could tell that it was made with meat. Of course, there were a dining table and chairs. It was a formal meal presentation. As soon as they saw me, they immediately had his mother (I later discovered the younger woman was his real mother) cook a bowl of noodles for me. It was a solid bowl, as if they were certain that I would finish it. Like our family, they often ate rice, maybe it is common for Beijing people to eat rice; they served four side dishes and a soup every time. Every time I returned from Zhou's

house after a meal, my grandma would playfully ask, "What delicacies did you eat today?" I probably often bragged to my grandma.

Of course, my growing closer to Zhou Xiaodong and more distant from Li Yingchao couldn't all be attributed to food. Despite my love for eating, Li Yingchao lived on Nan Street, while Zhou Xiaodong and our neighbors all lived in the "Xingsi Alley." Our houses were across from this large playground. Moreover, Zhou Xiaodong was really good at playing table

tennis. He was the representative of our school, and I accompanied him to participate in the county-wide elementary school table tennis competition. There were a total of four elementary schools in Fengxiang County, namely Beijie Elementary School, Jingcheng Elementary School, and another one whose name I had forgotten. Our school's full name was "Fengxiang County Normal School Affiliated Elementary School." Zhou Xiaodong didn't win the county championship, and I had more grievances about it than he did.

Although Zhou Xiaodong and I were able to share three years of companionship, it might be considered fate. At that time, there was a song with lyrics that went, "Wandering, wandering, wandering to which year? Escaping to where?" I wandered and completed the first three years of primary school education. This included Taoyuan Shijiazhuang, Xi'an Second Experimental Primary School, St. Joseph Private School, and half a year at a private school. For the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades at Fengxiang Normal

School's attached primary school, it was my most complete education. Only there did I have the opportunity to spend three years with a classmate who also spoke the Beijing dialect. Of course, Zhou Xiaodong also had obvious weaknesses, and I often wondered why he could never grasp how to swing a "big knife."

At that time, we had classes six days a week, with the last two classes on Saturdays being "recreational activities." Sometimes the girls in the front row specially brought their

"dancing costumes" to prepare for a performance. The first two rows of the classroom were all girls, and they were also outsiders from other provinces; few local girls went to school. The remaining rows were all local boys, some even married with children. According to government regulations at that time, those who were still attending school were exempt from being drafted into the military. They stayed at the school and ate with the single teachers. The teachers did not seem to consider them as students, and they themselves were just

drifting through the classes, but they never missed the recreational activities on Saturday afternoons. The female students from other provinces were about the same age as me. At that time, girls matured later, and they didn't think about being peeped on. The female students giggled as they changed into their dancing costumes in the back of the classroom. The so-called "dancing costumes" were probably what we would call "dresses" today, with the top and skirt connected. The married senior male students

eagerly looked back, and the girls simply used a coat to shield each other. When they came out, their pants had turned into skirts. The male students from other provinces in the front rows were particularly attentive, waiting to see what everyone would perform next.

At this point, I cannot fail to mention the second person who had a deep influence on my life; he was my music teacher, Zhang Dade. Teacher Zhang was short and chubby, with a distinctive triangular gap between his front teeth. I once

asked him how he got that, and he said he used to crack watermelon seeds a few years ago. Cracking the seeds too often caused a dent in his front teeth. Till now, I still don't know if he was telling the truth or just joking with children. He played the accordion very well and organized the "Hymn Team" (like today's choir). Whenever they participated in the county competitions, they always won first place. I was a member of the Hymn Team. The practice sessions at that time are still vivid in my memory. I don't know why, but they always seemed to occur during winter.

The winters in the north were very cold. The school didn't have an auditorium or empty classrooms; we only practiced outside. Even though we were wearing padded shoes, standing on the ground for a long time still caused us to numb from the cold. Everyone instinctively kept an eye on Teacher Zhang's conductor movements while singing and stomping their feet. The stomping wasn't related to the beat; it was just to keep a bit warmer. Our breath formed a white mist while singing. After a while, only Teacher Zhang's waving arms could be seen;

his body seemed to be submerged in that mist.

Teacher Zhang had the greatest influence on me through the songs he chose to teach us, like "Song of the Sungari River," "Guns Facing Outward," "March of the Volunteers," and "Graduation Song." I only learned about Xing Xinghai and Nie Er's names when I got to Taiwan, and all their songs were taught to us by Teacher Zhang. Before we practiced a new song, he would explain what the song was about and the story behind it. Both Xing Xinghai and Nie Er had studied

overseas and were considered from noble backgrounds. Both of them had officially joined the Communist Party and eventually went to Yan'an.

One day, Teacher Zhang was playing the accordion in the dormitory and saw me, so he beckoned me in. He told me it was a new song and handed me the lyrics while playing it a few times for me to follow along. The song was called "Guerilla Team Song," and the lyrics were:

The wind is howling, the horses are neighing,

The Yellow River is roaring,
The Yellow River is roaring.
The mountains on the west bank are endless,
The east and north of the river, sorghum has matured.
Inside the green curtains,
Guerilla warriors show their prowess.
Grabbing earth guns and foreign guns,
Raising big knives and long spears,
Defending the Yellow River,
Defending our homes,
Defending North China,
Defending the whole country!

In the end, Teacher Zhang

instructed me that the line "Defend the whole country!" should be sung with full force and high spirits. He said that the next day, the Hymn Team should practice this song, and once mastered, we could divide it into two parts for singing in turns. Later, I found out that this song was also composed by Xing Xinghai and included in his "Yellow River Cantata," renamed as "Defend the Yellow River." Hence, on every Saturday's recreational activities, I always sang the Guerilla Team Song. There was a female classmate who always sang "Song of the

Sungari River," and each time, halfway through, she would become so emotional that she couldn't continue singing. At the end-of-semester exams, she finally finished singing the last line: "When, oh when, can I return to my beloved hometown?" Poor girl, she had already become teary-eyed, and Teacher Zhang gave her a perfect score for the musical performance. Zhou Xiaodong, who sang "March of the Volunteers," received loads of applause from the classmates. The original lyrics of the song were:

The big knife slashes at the heads of the invaders!
The frontline fighters of the resistance,
The day of resistance has arrived,
The day of resistance has arrived.
In the front, there are the volunteer soldiers from Northeast,
In the rear, there are the people from all over the country,
Our brave frontline fighters of the resistance advance,
Targeting the enemy,
Wiping them out, wiping them out, Charge, kill—

The big knife slashes at the heads of the invaders!
One, two, three, four.
One—two—three—four.

This song was very popular in the northwest. Later on, I joined the Air Force, and when I enlisted, I also sang various military songs. It seemed that not many people in Chongqing knew how to sing them. Every time Zhou Xiaodong sang this song, for some unknown reason, he would always forget the lyrics after the fourth line, which is the beginning of the fifth line: "In front, there are the brave soldiers from Northeast." He would pause awkwardly,

being slightly chubby with round cheeks, yet despite singing it so many times, he didn't seem to want to improve. It was obvious that he wanted to continue but couldn't recall the next lyrics. He would then smile, bow deeply to the audience before leaving the stage, and receive even more enthusiastic applause.

There are many more stories about Zhou Xiaodong, but unfortunately, we only spent three years together. Was it a long three years? Or a short three years? It's now difficult to say for sure.