

Chapter 3

Great Famine and Great Depression

During the eight years of the War of Resistance, my family lived in Shaanxi Province. After the victory, I left because I was recruited into the Air Force. My parents and sister remained in Shaanxi. Their graves are there, so it’s like our family is registered in Shaanxi. My sister married one of her college classmates, who is from Baoding, so my nephews and nieces have both Yan and Qin heritage.

After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, why didn't we flee elsewhere but went to Shaanxi Province? Also, why didn't we stay in Beiping like my grandpa, uncle, and third uncle, who were all living well and were not harmed by the Japanese invaders? The reason was my uncle. My uncle played a significant role in the changes in my fate. Even before the start of the War of Resistance against Japan, my uncle, aunt, and grandmother were already living in Xi'an. My uncle was a driver for the Shaanxi Provincial Bank. During that

time, being a car driver was a very profitable profession. The bank only had one car and one driver, and he often drove the route from Xi'an to Chengdu, gaining a broad experience. Thanks to his recommendation, after Xi'an was bombed by Japanese planes, our family found the peaceful and rustic Peach Garden in Fengxiang County to take shelter.

Fengxiang was famous during the Tang Dynasty. When our family moved there, there was no running water, no

electricity, the city layout was neat, reminiscent of the Tang era. However, even if it were truly the Tang Dynasty, during the An Lushan Rebellion, it might not have been as idyllic as described in the "Peach Blossom Spring" story. Fengxiang had a military academy branch. I'm not sure if it was also because people wanted to avoid Japanese bombings. Whenever my friend Zhou Xiaodong and I strolled around the streets on weekends, we often witnessed military academy students bullying or even kicking locals - the Tang warriors wouldn't

have acted in such a manner.

Upon arriving in Fengxiang, I realized that many other refugees had similar experiences as my uncle. It wasn't just the military academy - there were many other evacuees. Two-thirds of my classmates were from other provinces, with the majority being from the Northeast. Northeasterners were easy to identify by their accents similar to those from Beiping. However, when they shouted "Down with the Japanese," it sounded like "Down with the Japanese

'silver'." Additionally, their occiputs were flat. Wang Zhenwen, who sat at my table in the classroom, was from the Northeast. Occasionally, when he turned his head, I could clearly see his flat occiput, likely related to the Northeastern troops led by Zhang Xueliang retreating to Shaanxi Province.

Regardless of whether they were from the Northeast or other provinces, their families surely rented housing. It was certain that rent wasn't high; otherwise, it wouldn't have attracted so many evacuees.

Just looking at the military academy, which was the seventh branch of the Wangqu School in Xi'an, our house was across from the main square. Every morning, the cadets would exercise there. Given my later experience with military drills, I estimated that there were about eight hundred to a thousand students. Not only did the students need accommodation, but their instructors also brought their families and needed rented housing. Because of my uncle's connections, in our rented property in Fengxiang,

there were my fifth uncle and his wife, and for a while, my aunt also came to live there.

We rented a large courtyard. Apart from the landlord's family, there was also a couple from Henan. In the northern room, my Boy Scout teacher named Wang lived; her husband was a military academy instructor. The night before I had an exam in that semester, I went to her room for tutoring; she revealed a lot, which helped me score a perfect one hundred in the Boy Scouts course.

Zhou Xiaodong's family rented a small courtyard with two stone lions at the gate and double doors. Inside was a mural screen, adorned with carved brick cloud patterns on the walls. In front were thick bamboo groves. The main house faced south, with three steps leading up to the entrance. I never went up, and Zhou Xiaodong probably hadn't either. The main house was inhabited by the landlord's widow and her daughter. Occasionally, the landlord's daughter would come out and exchange a few words with us, often asking about school-

related matters. The conversations were brief, always cut short by her mother calling her back. Perhaps due to her bound feet, she looked older than us.

Talking about these trivial matters, is it meaningful? Of course, it is – I will tell you immediately. Additionally, my friend Zhou Xiaodong and I wandered around every inch of Fengxiang County, inside and out, every Sunday during the three summer vacations. We even explored the legendary "Phoenix Spring." In the

northwest corner outside the city, there was indeed a marshy area filled with tall reeds; it was impossible to enter without taking off shoes and socks. A stream of clear water flowed from this marshy area, forming the moat of the northern and eastern parts of the city, irrigating a large vegetable garden outside the north gate. Occasionally, women with bound feet could be seen kneeling by the stream, using washboards to clean clothes. Truly, we saw everything in and around Fengxiang but never encountered what? A movie

theater? Fengxiang didn't have electricity, so where would a movie theater come from. What we never saw was a new house being built, or in modern terms, we never saw "construction sites." This led to the preliminary conclusion that the residential vacancy rate was high in Fengxiang County. Why was this the case? The answer would only be known in the seventieth year of the Republic of China – surprising, isn't it?

The military academy also didn't build new buildings. The reason the whole school

moved to Fengxiang was known first. In the early 1940s, I was transferred from Danshui to serve at the Air Force headquarters. The bus we took, route 42, had a bus stop labeled as "Engineering Station." At that time, the air force headquarters were surrounded by rice fields on three sides, with only Jinan Road facing the back gate being a residential area. The three-story red brick buildings at the air force headquarters were both windproof and earthquake-resistant – originally, they were the school buildings of the engineering

school. How the engineering school's buildings became the air force headquarters is something I am not entirely clear about. In any case, the engineering school didn't suspend classes, whether by force or voluntarily, I am not sure. In a field near Liu Gongtun, near Fengxiang, they built simple new school buildings. From this, I first understood the issue of the Fengxiang military academy; it was located in the buildings of the Fengxiang Normal School, where I attended elementary school.

The Fengxiang Normal School gave up its buildings but didn't construct new ones. They settled in several large warehouse-like buildings opposite Fengxiang Elementary School. How the military academy took over these buildings, by requisition, borrowing, or purchase, and whether this was similar to how the Taiwanese Air Force headquarters used the engineering school, these were questions that couldn't be answered without evidence, and I had none – just guesses. The real question was why, in Fengxiang County, no new

houses were built, yet a military academy and so many refugee families were accommodated, leading to a high vacancy rate. This puzzle remained unsolved. It wasn't until after the 1970s of the Republic of China that I suddenly realized – this had something to do with a book called "Disaster."

"Disaster" was compiled by the editorial staff of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, published by the American Bantam/Britannica Book Company in the first edition in 1978, which was the one I

saw. I later learned they had multiple updated editions, with the 2005 edition surely including the South Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Besides describing the causes of earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, typhoons, floods, avalanches, landslides, droughts, etc., the book also included records over the years. For instance, in the chapter on earthquakes, it recorded the deadliest earthquake in human history occurring on January 24, 1556, in Shaanxi Province, China, where 830,000 people died. On page 172 of the book, it

documented the deadliest drought in terms of human deaths, happening between the years 1876 and 1879, during the Qing Emperor Guangxu's reign, also in Shaanxi Province – how many people died? The book stated around 9-13 million! Due to three consecutive years of drought and difficulties in transport, rescue food – both domestic and international aid mentioned in the book – was hard to deliver, resulting in mass graves everywhere. At that time, China's population was barely under 400 million, with 10 million representing

one-fortieth of the total population, all concentrated in Shaanxi Province. How many tens of thousands did Fengxiang receive?

It may have been a major event in history for over ten million people to starve to death. However, in our country's history, since the Opium Wars during the Daoguang era, recorded events mainly focused on the Anglo-French Alliance, Eight-Nation Alliance, and the Sino-Japanese War. After the Republic of China era, the

historical records revolved around figures like Yuan Shikai, Sun Yat-sen, Cao Kun, Zhang Zuolin, but events like people starving or drowning did not make it into the official histories.

There are both distinct differences and similarities between deaths caused by drought and other natural disasters. Let's first discuss the differences. In regions like the Gobi Desert in outer Mongolia or the Sahara Desert in Africa, drought is rarely heard of, as these areas are not suitable for agriculture, and no one relies

on farming for sustenance. Even if it doesn’t rain for ten or a hundred years, nobody is affected. But the Yellow River basin is where Chinese culture originated, including Shaanxi Province, where forests have disappeared, agricultural land has been overused, and the Wei River, perhaps now more turbid than the Yellow River, illustrates the phrase "clear as the Jing and Wei rivers" paradoxically. It's odd that during the Qin Dynasty, Li Bing and his son built the Dujiangyan irrigation system in Sichuan and the Zhengguo Canal was completed during

that era, yet ancient capitals during the prosperous periods of the Han and Tang dynasties were all in Shaanxi. So why was there no significant water conservation project in Shaanxi?

After visiting Datong, to sweep my parents' graves, I climbed a hill north of Baoji City where my younger sister showed me a narrow one-meter-wide cement structure that diverted water from the Wei River upstream for irrigation. The clear water inside indicated that the Yellow River was not naturally yellow; it became so

as it washed through the loess plateau. In a province like Shaanxi where tens of millions depend on agriculture for survival but lacks large water conservation projects, it's truly unfortunate that ten million people starved to death. Even ten years before I arrived in Fengxiang in 1929, Shaanxi faced a drought that led to deaths and subsequently created more vacant houses.

The differences between drought and other natural disasters have similarities as well. For instance, snow avalanches, landslides, floods,

etc., occur when humans encroach upon areas originally not meant for them and believe that with tall buildings, levees, and floodwalls, they can exploit the land freely. They might survive a day, a year, or a hundred years, but when the land strikes back, human frailties are starkly evident. If all natural disasters stem from human calamities, it wouldn't be considered far-fetched.

1929 might've been the year with the most natural and man-made disasters globally, or at least in the United States. Let's start with natural disasters,

closely linked to drought and excessive land development. Even now, Beijing experiences sandstorms every spring. Cyclists have to don masks to avoid their hair being filled with sand or loess. The Great Plains of the United States, including parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, saw a massive influx of settlers who inadequately considered local rainfall statistics. They found the land incredibly easy to develop and began planting wheat, corn, and the like. During rainy years, the harvest was good, but they didn't

anticipate the consecutive years of drought post-1929, resulting in no crop yields and the previously developed land turning into dry, cracked "Dust Bowls." In November 1933, officially recorded, dust was blown by strong winds up to 8,000 meters high and carried northeastward by high-altitude southwestern winds. The dust covered the skies, reaching as far as the northeastern states of New England, depositing 25 tons of dust on one square acre of farmland. The nearby newly developed regions of the Great Plains suffered even more – irrigated crops were

also buried under dust. John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize for Literature winner in 1962, addressed this catastrophic event of the 1930s in his novels "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Of Mice and Men," punctuating the dire straits of both a significant natural disaster and the accompanying human-induced Great Depression of the same era.

"The Depression" or "Great Depression" here does not refer to meteorological low pressure or a person's

emotional low mood. In uppercase "D," it represents an exclusive term in economics. There are numerous books on the Great Depression, but those I have encountered tend to criticize capitalism. At that time, the Soviet Union had been established for over a decade. Chinese books I have read alleged that during the Great Depression, no one dared to stroll on Wall Street in New York as they might be crushed by falling capitalists attempting suicide. It was also said that the wealthy dumped masses of flour into the ocean to boost prices, yet despite

frighteningly low prices, the poor still couldn't afford it. Adam Smith, the founding father who advocated capitalism, now dubbed as a classical economist, suggests that his ideology is no longer in vogue. Smith promoted eliminating all forms of regulation, tariffs included. He believed that people should be greedy like animals. Survival of the fittest suffices. This predatory doctrine only applies when tigers hunt deer, as they do not have stocks, savings accounts, or engage in trade within their society. Tigers only hunt when hungry; they

wouldn't even consider killing extra deer to store for later. But what about humans?

The responsibility of salvaging capitalism fell upon another economist, Keynes. About three years ago, I took a Dragonair flight from Xi'an to Hong Kong and sat next to an economics professor from National Tsing Hua University or National Chiao Tung University. He said he commuted weekly between Xi'an and Xinzhu to teach Economics. At that time, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji was implementing

"macroeconomic regulation and expanding domestic demand." I seized the opportunity to seek advice from this economic expert. I asked if the whole world, aside from Keynes, had no other masters since the collapse of the Soviet Union and even China, so-called communist, followed Keynesian economics. He pondered my question, seemingly puzzled by how this old man posed a complex query that wasn't easily answered. He replied that most economists believed the fundamental principles of Keynes were correct, but as

economics becomes increasingly specialized, interpretations vary slightly. Little did I expect I would remember his response now. I should have asked for a business card to remember his name as a testament.

Previously, Taiwan criticized communist and Russian resistance movements as a "regulated economy" and dubbed the American and British groups as a "free economy." If freedom means laissez-faire and regulation implies government interference, then since the

Great Depression of 1929 worldwide, it is not a laissez-faire scenario, and government intervention is in place.

Keynes (John Maynard Keynes 1883-1945), a British economist, influenced the construction of the Hoover Dam, the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, and inspired President Roosevelt's New Deal, passing on to Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao subsequently. Keynesian theory advocates expanding government credit, accruing debt when necessary, and spending money whenever

possible. The primary duty of a capitalist government is to reduce unemployment because a population without purchasing power leads to a downturn in all sectors. The employment for constructing the Hoover Dam essentially equated to an increase in purchasing power and consumption of products in the market. Keynes saved capitalism's inadequacies, prompting capitalist nations to understand the administration of social welfare programs and even realize that international aid doesn't necessarily require monetary exchanges. He

served capitalism for seventy years with his countless contributions.

Should he step down? At least Marcos thinks that Keynesian systems could easily encourage humans to waste resources unnecessarily. As humanity dwells on a resource-limited planet and aims for sustainable development to survive effectively, fostering environmental protection and resource conservation concepts must be implemented promptly. Procrastination in adopting

these practices would only lead to regret. What am I even saying? Does this resemble something a ten-year-old would say?

I thought I was still editing for the "Old Heaven Monthly." It turns out I am quite senile!

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