

Chapter 4

The Whip on the Heart

I feel that it is necessary to explain how Zhou Xiaodong and I ended our three-year friendship, transparently confessing it. This incident is enough to show my immaturity at that time, and it can even be derived that I am still immature when holding the pen until now.

On that afternoon, while playing in Zhou's yard, I suddenly felt unwell and sat down on the steps. Zhou's mother asked me what was wrong and felt my forehead

saying, "You have a high fever! Let's go inside and let your Zhou grandfather take a look." When I returned home, I held a handful of tender bamboo leaves picked by Zhou's mother from the bamboo grove in front of the reflecting wall. She also gave me a prescription written by Zhou's grandfather, and as soon as I reached home, I told my grandma, "Zhou's grandfather said I have a rash."

I don't know how many days I slept, presumably, I must have taken the medicine my grandma prepared according

to the prescription. Until one day, when I woke up during the day, wanted to get out of bed, and took a short walk in the yard, it felt like a lifetime ago. I remember there was a girl from our neighborhood, also a classmate from our school, who came over to talk to me. However, she was quickly called back by her mom, saying that a rash is contagious.

After the safety period passed, my grandma asked me to thank Zhou's grandfather and even prepared a very small box of mung bean cakes. I

mentioned that their family might not lack this, but my grandma said, "It's a courtesy; he is an educated man." When I asked what an educated man was, my grandma said it was someone knowledgeable who held a high position, and "you should study well so you can become like an educated man in the future."

Following my grandma's words, I carried the small box of mung bean cakes hanging by a long string and went to formally thank Zhou's grandfather. Our family couldn't be considered an

educated and cultured lineage, as we didn't even have a piece of farmland in Beiping (another name for Beijing). Categorized barely, we could only be said to belong to the lower-middle-class of Beijing - what I later referred to as "petty bourgeoisie."

The residents of old Beijing's lower-middle class had a common trait - they placed special emphasis on courtesies, which could be seen in Lao She's teahouse. The children from the lower-middle class were trained from a young age to adhere strictly

to rules and manners. Some individuals from this social stratum could maintain their livelihoods by being particularly courteous. From the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China and the present-day era of reform and opening up in Beijing, the service industry thrived, requiring civility and manners as basic attributes. Thus, holding the mung bean cakes, dressed in the new clothes my grandma had helped me wear, I entered Zhou's house. Upon passing the threshold, I loudly exclaimed, "Zhou grandfather, my grandma told me to come

here and thank you."

Zhou's mother took the small box of mung bean cakes from me, expressing gratitude for my effort. Zhou's grandfather asked me to stick out my tongue for him to see, advising me to eat anything I wanted and that there was no need to restrict my diet further. When I finally had the chance to speak, I mentioned this was also a rule - that one should listen attentively when adults speak and avoid interrupting casually.

I made my first formal

statement, "My grandma said you are knowledgeable and hold a high position, asking me to study hard and learn from you in the future." Probably pleased by a twelve-year-old child praising him in such a manner, he chuckled and said, "What high or low position? I am a soldier."

Instantly, my expression changed. Even though Zhou Xiaodong was shouting loudly on the side, "My dad is not a soldier, he is an official," Zhou's grandfather still said, "What's the difference between an official and a soldier? They

all serve the country." Perhaps due to my weakened state after having the rash, I almost fainted. I quickly grasped the chair back with my hand. Zhou's mother must have noticed something was wrong with me and asked me to sit down, saying that the illness had just gotten better, and I should rest soon. But, I wasn't lightheaded in my "heart" and thought – indeed, officials and soldiers have no difference. They both can bully the people, kick and hit them. The Japanese invaders occupy half of our territory, and the soldiers don't fight against the

Japanese but beat their own compatriots!

How I made it back home, I don't remember. When my grandma asked me about what Zhou's grandfather said, I forgot. Did I hand over the mung bean cakes to Zhou's mother, to which Zhou's mother? I forgot. I don't know if this phenomenon can be considered an "absent-mindedness" common to ordinary people or a manifestation of adept mediums at the shrine. Nevertheless, I completely forgot about Zhou Xiaodong's

family, as well as what happened after leaving their house. Subsequently, in my life, there have been many similar situations. It shows that it must be one of my personality traits. I saw Zhou Xiaodong again next time, on the sports ground after an uncertain period.

We lived in Xingsi Lane, with the sports ground located across from us. Every morning, military academy students marched there, and in the evenings, the military band circled up to practice blowing their bugles. They wore hemp

shoes on their feet, somewhat resembling canvas shoes I later wore in the old market of Sichuan, and you could see their toes tapping in pace to the military tune. Kids like us played around while adults took leisure strolls. Around late spring each year, white and yellow butterflies appeared around the sports ground's grassy bushes, and I caught a few butterflies too. I could recognize some types of plants like dogtail grass, dandelions, and a somewhat rare "plantain" elsewhere, which I later learned from the commentary in the Book of

Songs had medicinal properties to treat female infertility. Married women had to sneak out to collect them to avoid being teased for eagerly wanting children.

There weren't many facilities on the sports ground; there were no basketball hoops or football goals. The only structure present was a simple earthen platform named the Command Stand, facing north and situated at the northernmost point of the sports ground.

This Command Stand was

quite significant; every year on national holidays and days of national shame (May 7th commemorating the day when Yuan Shikai signed the Twenty-One Demands treaty, surrendering parts of China to Japan), elementary school students had to assemble here to listen to speeches by the county governor and Mr. Dou. I could understand half of what the county governor said, but Mr. Dou, being the only bachelor degree holder in Fengxiang County, held a prominent social position. I couldn’t comprehend a word of what he said except when he

mentioned "down with the Japanese invaders."

On that day, the sports field appeared very lively. There was a podium where someone was giving a speech, but not many were listening. The drumbeats attracted a large crowd, and it was surrounded by people. I easily squeezed my way to the front row. It turned out there was an old man with a girl singing a little tune. The old man sat on a small stool playing the qin (zither), and the girl sang songs like the one about Lady

Meng Jiang. After the song, the old man took off his worn hat and asked for money from the audience. I, of course, didn't have any money to give, but looking around at the adults, I also couldn't bear to let go of a few copper coins. The old man sighed and sat back down, saying, "Girl, let's sing two more songs." Just then, a man in a Zhongshan suit walked into the field and said, "Old sir, we're finished talking. Please come up to the stage with your daughter to perform." After a brief discussion with the girl, the old man seemed to agree, and we

all crowded to the front of the podium to watch.

The girl was a great singer, and I knew most of the songs she sang, such as "Facing Outward with the Gun Barrels." The full lyrics were:

Facing outward with the gun barrels,
Marching forward in unison,
Not harming the common people,
Not fighting our own people.
We are an ironclad team,
We have ironclad hearts,
For our Chinese nation,
Forever free,

Forever free.

When she sang this song, she placed her left hand in front of her shoulder, mimicking the posture of holding a long gun, while her right hand moved back and forth in sync with her feet's stationary stepping motion. After finishing the song, she saluted the audience. There was a round of applause, and she sang a few more songs, receiving enthusiastic applause from the audience. Then she sang the "Ballad of the Great Wall." The beginning of the lyrics were:

The Great Wall extends ten thousand miles,
Beyond the Great Wall lies our homeland,
Sorghum ripe, soybeans fragrant,
Golden fields with few calamities.

Since the calamity struck our land,
Rape, pillage, hardship abound,
Hardship abound,
Fleeing to foreign lands,
Blood kin scattered, fleeing in all directions...

That girl started singing slower

from "Since the calamity" line onwards. When she reached the part "Hardship abound, fleeing to foreign land," she was already off-key. Her eyes were red! Yes, tears started flowing. Why was she crying, after all? After the phrase "Blood kin—," she paused, sobbed, and wiped her tears with her sleeve. The old man stopped playing the qin, looked up, furrowed his brows, and angrily shouted, "What's wrong? Keep singing!" The girl just cried, and the old man put down the qin, stood up, bowed to the audience, and said, "I'm sorry, sorry to everyone here."

He then turned back and yelled at the girl, "Why are you crying? Keep singing!"

The girl was quite determined and continued to cry loudly. The old man was truly angered, and before I could make sense of it, he took out a whip from behind him. Was he really going to scare the girl with a whip? At that moment, I heard a scream, and the first lash had already struck the girl. Tears were filling my eyes too. Then came the second lash, the third lash... My heart tightened into a knot. By then, some people in the audience

were shouting, "Put down the whip. Put down your whip!" The old man was so enraged that his eyes bulged, and he couldn't even hear the shouts from the audience. Luckily, a brave man, somewhat resembling a police officer, jumped onto the stage, snatched the whip from the old man's hand, and angrily shouted, "How can you treat someone like this?" As he spoke, he struck the old man with the whip, hitting him hard. The old man jumped up, holding his buttocks with both hands. Before the second lash came down, the girl suddenly

stepped in front of the old man and knelt down before the person holding the whip, crying and pleading, saying: "Sir, please don't hit him, he's my grandpa."

As soon as she said "grandpa," my tears finally burst out. People in the audience kept throwing copper coins and change onto the stage. The next memory is a blur in my tear-filled eyes. The girl said they were from Northeast China. Her father was killed by the Japanese invaders, and her mother was taken away with no trace. She

wandered here with her grandfather just wanting to earn some money to get by. She couldn't continue singing earlier because she thought of her parents and so on. The police said, in the end, we were all harmed by the Japanese invaders... Eventually, many "laters" later but within a short span, I learned that this was a "street play" written by the famous author Tian Han (1898-1968), similar to modern interactive theater, and the play was called "Put Down Your Whip."

As I remained teary-eyed,

Zhou Xiaodong tapped my shoulder from behind and said, "You're here. Why haven't you come to our house in a long time? My mom has been nagging about you." We found a grassy spot by a small ditch south of the main sports field and sat down, letting our feet dangle below. Finally, I asked the question I had been holding in for a long time:
"Zhou Xiaodong, is your dad really a soldier?"
"My dad is not a soldier, he's an officer. Officers and soldiers are different."
"But your dad said officers and soldiers are the same—"

"Officers and soldiers are absolutely different. Soldiers can only ride the train without buying tickets—"
"What? You can ride the train without buying a ticket!"
"And watch shows without spending money..."

Zhou Xiaodong seemed to never understand. His words felt like the old man's whip, striking at the most painful parts of my heart with every sentence. He continued, "Officers are different. My dad said, during a big retreat once, they arrived at a small station on the railway line, holding up

their hands to demand the stationmaster provide train carriages to transport the soldiers under his command. The stationmaster was so scared he wet his pants..." He finally stopped, noticing my distraction, and then changed the subject, mentioning that his dad wanted to invite me and other classmates like Li Yingchao to their house for a meal to celebrate the upcoming graduation from elementary school. Without waiting for him to finish, I blurted out, "Another meal! I wish I could vomit out all the meals I've eaten!" Perhaps

infected by the girl on the stage, I found myself bursting into tears as well. My breakdown probably scared him, as Zhou Xiaodong didn't know what to do for a moment. He stood frozen for a while before turning and running away, his chubby body clearly unable to escape any faster.

We were about to graduate, and my mother said my father had written from Baoji, instructing that if I didn't get into high school, I should prepare to be skinned alive. Probably out of fear of me being skinned, my

grandmother and mother pushed me to study, not allowing me to go out and play. I purchased a guidebook for further studies, printed on wartime paper, thick and bulky. Every day, I sat under the large locust tree protruding in the southwest corner of our yard to study, also watching the ants crawling on the ground. There were two kinds of ants there, one light brown, large in size, solitary and hurried, and the other black, much smaller, moving in groups. Summer was a bustling season for insects, and under the locust tree,

there was a special locust-like insect, white in color and smaller than locusts, with its body arched in the middle when crawling, resembling the arch of the Guandu Bow Bridge on the Tamsui River in Taiwan. These locust-like insects probably lived on the locust tree, primarily feeding on its leaves. Occasionally, when they fell below the tree, they became food for the black ants, which had to struggle and fight amongst themselves to bring the insect back to their colony.

The guidebook worked, as I

got accepted to Fengxiang County Junior High School, newly established next to Donghu Lake. Li Yingchao failed the exam, and Zhou Xiaodong had always talked about attending Jingcun Middle School outside Dongguan, where boarding was necessary for enrollment. Jingcun Middle School was quite famous, and I'll mention it later. My mother arranged to purchase rough white cloth for making uniforms, handwoven and only about a yard and a half wide, roughly eighteen inches in width. My grandmother begged the

landlord's wife's husband to hand-dye the cloth into a grass green color for me.

Let me explain a bit. Our landlord was blind, but he could still push the millstone and grind flour in the millhouse located on the west side of the yard every day. They had a son a year or two younger than me, who, from my memory, didn't go to school. Although the landlord's wife practiced foot-binding and had a husband, she also had a lover, a man from Henan who was probably fleeing to Shaanxi. He often stayed overnight at

the landlord's wife's place, and the blind husband didn't inquire about it or even if he did, it was useless. My grandmother somehow knew that the man from Henan had the skill of hand-tinting fabric. I was present that day, watching as he poured a large pot of hot water into the dye mixture and prepared a large basin of clean water. I saw him quickly submerge the white cloth evenly into the dye pot for color and swiftly transfer it to the water basin, making sure every part soaked but none of his hands got stained. The cloth was long, so it couldn't

soak for too long, yet every corner needed coloring without any parts left untinted. It was my first time witnessing such "skill" or "artistry" in my life. My grandmother and mother had grown up in Beiping (Beijing), and apart from silk and satin, all cotton fabrics they bought were undoubtedly "foreign cloth." My grandmother said this hand-woven fabric was not only durable and thick but could last for three years.

The Industrial Revolution in England has already been ongoing for three hundred years, and the incident of

buying coarse cloth in Fengxiang occurred in 1941. Probably during the eight years of the anti-Japanese war, the seaports were all occupied by the Japanese, and the cost of importing foreign cloth became too high, which allowed the opportunity for hand-woven cloth to be manufactured and sold. At that time, there were many Western items, such as calling cigarettes "Western cigarettes," colorful candies wrapped in paper called "foreign candies," the laundry soap my mother used called "sunlight soap" dubbed as

foreign soap, matches referred to as "foreign fire," and other items like Western candles, paper, and oil lamps, not to mention big things like guns and artillery. Even to this day, aren't we in Taiwan still spending over 600 billion New Taiwan dollars to buy Western fighter jets, missiles, and warships?

Unfortunately, the grass green thick cloth never got a chance to be worn, or even measured by a tailor before the Japanese bombed Fengxiang. Being bombed by the Japanese was my first experience. In a

person's life, there are always numerous first times, and not all of them are worth mentioning. Shortly after the bombing, my father came to Fengxiang and said the house in Baoji was already rented out, suggesting that it was better to be together when facing bombing rather than being separated in different places. I don't remember saying goodbye to Zhou Xiaodong's family; my grandmother had probably already taken my uncle's big car back to Xi'an. The four of us traveled from Fengxiang to Guozhen by mule carriage,

then took the train to Baoji, wearing the yellow scout uniforms that were made by the Baoji weaving factory with foreign cloth but never able to wear the green coarse cloth outfit. It is quite regrettable when I think about it.

Do you remember? I said I wanted to tell Zhu a story about an incident and a person. The incident is naturally about Marcos, but who is the person? I first met her in Guozhen.

Saying goodbye only stayed in the dreamy moonlit night's

flower market can be more magnificent without military academy, maybe I wouldn't have misunderstandings with Zhou Xiaodong, and how would I have imagined that we would never have the chance to meet again after parting ways at the large playground? In April 1990, I went back to Fengxiang to search for old dreams. The city walls were all gone, replaced by crowded vendors on the streets. The only thing left for reminiscence was the large willow tree by Donghu Lake, said to have been planted by Su Dongpo in Fengxiang, with willows

surrounding the lake—some so large that five to six people couldn't even encircle them.

The large willow tree by Donghu Lake, with its leaves still green, perhaps even greener compared to my gradually aging and stooped figure.