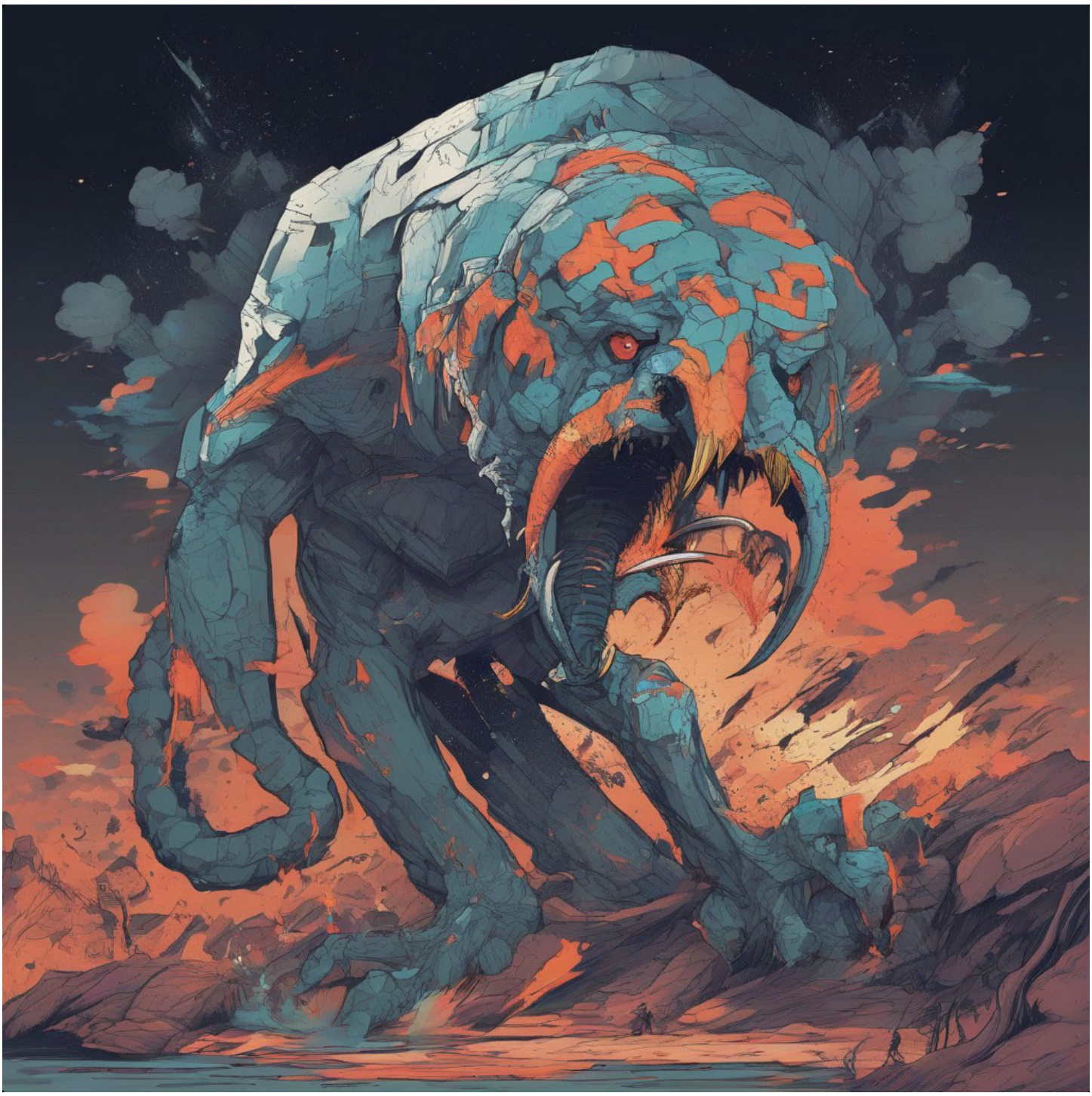


# Chapter 6

## Don't force us to become martyrs

We arrived in Baoji City. Every time I think of Fengxiang, I associate it with playing the guzheng as background music, but sometimes I miss the strings because of the lack of coordination between the soldiers and the military academy. When we arrived in Baoji, we should have chosen the Beijing opera theater, with drums and gongs ringing loudly. Baoji is indeed a "big city." Until we withdrew from the mainland, the only trans-

China railway from east to west, the Longhai Railway, still ends in Baoji. It was later expanded to Lanzhou, then to Xinjiang, and further to connect with the railway in Central Asia and Europe. In recent years, there have been freight trains running, but are there passenger trains? It must be quite a sight to behold the Oriental Express; however, that detail is unknown.

Baoji City has electricity, and only with electricity come movies, theaters, and even plays performed for some time. The tallest and largest building

in the whole city is the Longhai Bath, built specifically for men to bathe. It must be a three or even four-story building, and the grandeur of the building is quite impressive. In the autumn of 1941 when we arrived in Baoji, the Bath was already repurposed as the Garrison Command Headquarters, with the proper title being the "Ninth Administrative District Garrison Command Headquarters of Shaanxi Province." I met the commander, and every National Day and Day of National Humiliation, the commander and commissioner

would appear to give speeches to the students. Every time, the commissioner would invite the commander to the stage first, and the county magistrate ranked below the two of them but higher than the commissioner. How the Longhai Bath turned into the Garrison Command Headquarters, was it bought, rented, borrowed, or seized by force? Perhaps someone knows the details.

Originally, Baoji also had city walls, much smaller than those of Fengxiang. There were no city towers or walls near the

East Gate, which were probably demolished a long time ago. The North and West Gates are still standing, especially the West Gate tower, which still has a high flagpole erected. Our school was outside the West Gate, and whenever we saw a large red lantern hanging on the flagpole next to the tower, we knew that there might be an air raid that day, and the Japanese planes would come to bomb.

The main commercial area is outside the East Gate, called Dongguan Street. South of

Dongguan Street, across the railway level crossing, there was a large area called "Hetan," made up of illegal buildings constructed by evacuees by the Wei River, forming a network of streets, all houses made of reed sheds. On Sundays, I often went strolling with Zhang Xianzheng, where there were acrobats, comedians, sellers of dog-skin plaster, sellers of green bean balls, and sellers of spicy soup. After the fourth year of the Anti-Japanese War since 1941, life became even harder, and the standard of living of ordinary people was

low. I remember that Baoji City was developed in commerce and industry. Still, I did not see any decent restaurants or hotels. Perhaps there were some, but the saying "eat properly at the front, eat properly at the back" was popular in Chongqing at that time. Where would high-ranking officials like commanders and commissioners go for entertainment? It's just that a middle school student's memory does not recall such places.

The three years of junior high

school in Baoji was a time when I greatly broadened my horizons. In addition to watching movies, theater, listening to comedians, and eating street food at Hetan, the most unforgettable experience might be watching plays. It was a formal stage with sets and lighting. After coming to Taiwan, I had the opportunity to consult with seniors and learned that Dai Ya, who led the theater troupe in Baoji and was the leading male actor, was a well-known actor and director in the rear area. At that time, we mainly watched plays by Cao Yu, such as Sunrise,

Thunderstorm, Wilderness, and Peking Man. Of course, we didn't understand everything. For example, I only understood the significance of Thunderstorm after reading the script later. There was also a play by Cao Yu called "Transition," with characters like Commissioner Liang and Doctor Ding, featuring bombing sets and effects, leaving a strong impression. Another play that left a deep impression on me was titled "Apricot Blossoms Viewing Spring Rain in Jiangnan." I have forgotten the story, but the sets, lighting, and sound effects transported

me to a rainy day in Jiangnan, although at that time, I had no idea what Jiangnan looked like.

One play changed my life. This statement may sound exaggerated, as many factors influence the development of a youth's mind and body, and what they consider to have deeply impacted them may not be the true reason. However, I believe that a play called "Loyal Prince Li Xiucheng" changed my way of thinking. I have always had a habit of reading scripts, but during over fifty years in Taipei, I rarely

had the opportunity to watch plays. Still, I read every script I could get my hands on, including works from various eras and countries, even those from the anti-communist period like "Stealing Looks" and more, both before and after coming to Taiwan. But I have never found the script for "Loyal Prince Li Xiucheng," nor do I know who wrote it. The story tells of the loyal prince Li Xiucheng from the late Taiping Heavenly Kingdom era being arrested and subsequently executed. Before his execution, he delivered a long monologue. Stage plays from

the same era like "Death of a Salesman," "A Streetcar Named Desire," and "Mourning for Sorrow" would never have such a long monologue. But Mr. Dai Ya acted it very well; every word was filled with emotion, and at fifteen years old, I was completely drawn in by his monologue. Xiucheng expressed his regret to the already martyred Heavenly King Hong Xiuquan, as well as the East King and Wing King, for not fulfilling their great cause. He also gave detailed instructions to future successors and finally gave advice to the rulers.

I don't know why, but that monologue left such a deep impression on me that I can almost recite it word for word. However, who knows if, when expressed with today's worldly language and words, it has undergone fermentation and maturation to become like alcohol - how many of those words were actually spoken by Loyal Prince Li Xiucheng on the stage? Nevertheless, I will narrate what I remember from memory. He said:
"You, the wealthy and powerful high up above, do you think that chopping off my head will

ensure your peace of mind?
You are wrong. You will never understand. Among all the pain you inflict on us, death is the most easily accepted, especially when we will be bestowed with the title of 'martyr!'
You, terrifying us by slowly torturing us is even more frightening. You make us hungry, make us cold, strip away everything from us. Those poor children also have to endure hunger and cold with us, their arms like withered branches, their bellies swollen. Come, chop me down, the hatred of rebellion against you

has been brewing in our blood for ten years, a hundred years, a thousand years. The ground is filled with our blood!
You, come and chop me down. Even the heads that are cut off will one day resurface, unite together, slit your throats, and drink your blood!"
This was one of the earliest inspirations for Marcos.
In the three years in Baoji, life became increasingly difficult. Prices rose, but I had no idea if my father's income increased proportionally. My parents never discussed it with me. Every school semester, when it was time to pay tuition fees,

buy books, notebooks, and stationery, my mom always had a troubled look and sometimes only gave it to me on the second or even third day. Many of my classmates were even less fortunate. One of them was Song Mingqing. His family lived by Hetan and ran a small snack shop. The day I went to their house as agreed, he and his father were lying dead on the ground that no longer had a roof. They were killed in a bombing by Japanese planes. His mother knelt on the ground, not knowing what to do. This incident left a deep impression

on me. As early as 1972, I had written a short story titled "By the Wei River," which was published in the United Daily News supplement under the pen name "Hua Nian." Another unfortunate person was a classmate who could be considered a "dropout" in today's terms. He only attended one year of junior high and never came back. He was diligent and had discussed homework with me, which left a deep impression on me. Unexpectedly, in our graduation year, we visited a factory to the east of Baoji. It was called "Shili Pu," one of

the limited textile industrial zones in the rear area. The factory was located deep inside a long and deep cave. Northern Shaanxi was known for its abundance of caves, and placing the factory there could protect it from Japanese bombings. The factory had shuttle looms, and one worker could manage more than ten beams of yarn. We were also shown their dormitories and cafeteria. While touring the dormitories, I ran into that dropout classmate. We were queuing, and he recognized me from within the group of students with just one glance.

He called out my name and warmly shook my hand when I approached. It seemed like he wanted to say a thousand words to me, but as the line continued moving forward, I struggled to recall his name. Just as our hands were about to part ways, I suddenly remembered and shouted, "Li Jie," before rushing along with the queue.

He became a worker, and who could know the changes in the world situation in the following five or six years, or the following thirty years? Who could say for sure that becoming a worker wasn't a

stroke of luck for him? Some lucky classmates like Zhang Xianzheng had their significance, but that deserves a separate discussion.
In Baoji, during those three years, I saw many people who were more unfortunate and miserable than Li Jie or Song Mingqing's family who died in the bombing incident. You should remember, in troubled times, life is not valued, or more accurately, "The lives of the poor aren't valued." People in poor countries or regions are even less valued. Looking at recent newspaper articles that talked about the meticulous

care Americans provide to pets - mentioning their food, clothing, medical care, hotels, spas, weight loss centers, and more - the editor titled that news article: "The Lives of American Dogs Are More Valuable Than African Lives." The editor was wrong. Can anyone in many poor regions across Asia, Central and South America compare to the lives of American dogs? While Taiwan is not in Africa and cannot be considered a poor country, recalling events like the 921 earthquake, mudslides, abused children being turned away from

hospitals, or even couples committing suicide with their children using charcoal - whether natural disasters or man-made calamities - who dies more in such situations, the poor or the wealthy? For the poor, every day is a disaster. It's only when the media reports a "disaster" focused on them that thoughts about their situation get a moment of "relief effort."
Baoji had three prominent features: first, there were many air raid warnings. Whenever a red lantern was hung on the flagpole of the West Gate tower, I couldn't concentrate in

class anymore. The moment the air raid siren sounded, the class would be in chaos, and we would all gather in groups to the hill behind the school, where it felt as if we were going on a field trip. From the hill, we could see the Japanese planes flying very low, and Dongguan was surely their primary target for bombing. Occasionally, flames would erupt from where the bombs landed - they were called incendiary bombs. Second, there were many executions. The school was outside the West Gate, and executions were also carried

out there. There was no fixed execution field, and sometimes executions took place right as we exited the West Gate. It went on for a long time without anyone collecting the bodies, making both the journey to and from school a bit scary. Especially when I started boarding at the school, returning late from plays at night became a challenge to my courage every time. Third, Baoji had many beggars. There were truly many beggars.

I often thought, if I weren't this old and had the wealth to travel to major cities

worldwide, delving deep into the lower strata and studying the behavior patterns, organization norms, special languages, etc., of beggars from around the world, I would be able to write a lengthy work that could become a dogged continuation of world cultural history. I had come across a book called "Beijing Customs and Categories," compiled from the late Qing to early Republic era, where the section on beggars in Beijing alone exceeded fifty thousand words.

Beijing beggars seem to have

a kind of profession and are organized in a structure similar to a "guild," with the members of the guild collectively referred to as "on the pole," as seen in the Beijing opera "Bat Punches the Heartless Man" where the elder character is one of the "on the pole." Today, performers such as Numerica, fallen lotus, and others who can go up on stage are all skilled members of the beggar gang. What's most interesting is that south of the Tianqiao Bridge outside Chaoyang Gate in Beijing, there are several inns set up specifically for the beggar gang. The innkeepers

charge a large coin per night, and early in the morning, they're chased out without being allowed to linger. In winter, these inns even have "heating facilities" where they dig a pit in the big house, light it up with firewood, and everyone gathers around the fire to keep warm.
The book mentions that among these people, there are hidden talents and the younger generation takes the opportunity to apprentice and learn. In short, the beggars have their own ways, and those without a skill won't survive in this line of work. The

book goes on to say that one of their most outstanding skills is to beg in the market without any clothing during the severe winter months, only covering their lower body with tile shards or tree leaves. People passing by are taken aback and reluctantly drop a few coins. Furthermore, the book mentions that starting on the first day of October each year, the city sets up a factory to distribute porridge for five consecutive months, giving out a set of cotton clothing according to names. So why do these people still suffer from cold and hunger? Well,

they sell the cotton clothing for money, which then gets squandered on drinking or gambling.
Looking at the perspective of beggars in Baoji, I can't help but feel a bit envious of the beggars in Beijing from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic era. Of course, there is even more envy reserved for a friend who took me to visit "Drunkard Street" in New York. This incident happened more than twenty years ago. He nervously rolled up the car windows tightly, told me never to stick my hand out or use a camera. It seemed like

nighttime, and apart from some people sitting or lying around, everything was as usual. Upon a closer look, all of them had a paper bag with a liquor bottle, and the visit to Drunkard Street ended without much happening. The beggars in Beijing at that time and the drunkards in New York appeared to have chosen their paths. People, by nature, have many different paths to choose from, exemplified by soldiers who opt for the choices of life and death, wearing medals of honor to glorify their communities. Those who choose to perform in Beijing

streets or seek solace under the towering buildings in New York using alcohol as a way to forget life's sorrows may not be deemed inappropriate. The crucial factor is that whether it's wearing medals or drowning in sorrows, it is a choice made by the individual. The beggars in Baoji weren't given a choice.

In Baoji, people don't use the more civilized term "beggars" to address them, but rather refer to them as "those asking for food." Baoji is the last stop at the western end of the Longhai Railway, attracting people who have fled from the

eastern war zones due to military, water, or drought disasters. If they were fortunate enough to catch a train, they would have to get off here. Those with skills could find work, those with knowledge could sell their knowledge, and the wealthier ones didn't have to worry at all. Women, in desperation, might have to sell their bodies. But for the poor—such as farmers or tenant farmers—who have nothing to sell and no money to buy, what can they do? Some brave men might resort to robbery, and if caught, they would face execution. After

eighteen years, they'd be hailed as heroes. But for those without courage, begging becomes the only alternative. Our family rented this large courtyard in Baoji with only a few households. However, the gate always seemed to remain open for some reason. If we were at home on a Sunday, we might hear people shouting at the door, "Sir, madam, please have mercy," which signaled the arrival of people asking for food. At that time, everyone was poor, so those intending to ask for money would head near Dongguan Street Theater District, in hopes of finding a

glimmer of hope. The beggars who roamed from door to door harbored no expectations of receiving money but only sought for leftovers to fill their stomachs.

One afternoon, a beggar arrived at our doorstep, just as it was during the summer holidays, and I happened to be in the courtyard. There were two of them—looking uncertain of their ages, with the smaller one only about four or five years old. After calling out "Sir, madam" a few times and starting to leave, my mom brought out a bowl of leftover noodles that my dad didn't

finish a couple of days ago. No one had eaten it in the last two days, and it should have been thrown out or given to the beggar earlier, but she decided to bring it out only today. I wanted to stop my mom, but it was already too late. The adult thanked us profusely, used a bowl they had brought to scoop up the noodles, eagerly fed the child, and even took a few quick bites himself. Somehow, I felt a sudden pain all over my body, not knowing where the motivation came from. I quickly went inside the house, took two steamed buns from the steamer, handed

them to the adult and uttered just one word, "Here," before swiftly rushing out the door. Looking back now, was what I did right? Absolutely not. To alleviate my pain, was it necessary to cause pain to my dad and mom? The year of winter approached, and one of my classmates and I went out one night to watch a play. When we came out from the theater, it was snowing heavily outside. We walked on the soft snow, all the way from Dongguan to Xiguan. As we approached the execution site, our hearts began to race. We intentionally spoke loudly

about the play's plot to boost our morale. Just before reaching the school's gate, we saw two apparent objects blocking the road, covered in a thick layer of white snow, making it impossible to discern what they were. One was large and elongated, the other smaller and shorter. As we got closer, we saw the black clothes exposed beneath the snow, which someone exclaimed, "It's someone!" The two middle school students ran as fast as they could, racing each other like in a hundred-meter sprint toward the school gate and then back

to the dormitory, quickly locking the door behind them. I crawled into bed feeling very cold, quite cold, very long for the next few moments, as if water droplets were falling on my face. When I tried to reach out to wipe them away, I heard a voice saying:
"You don't have to wipe it; it's your tears.