

Chapter 7

His First Significant Lie

In the three years of junior high school in Baoji, if you were to ask me what I learned, I honestly couldn't come up with a proper answer because my mind wasn't focused on academics. There were too many distractions, such as picnics to avoid air raid alarms, observing executions where the reactions of the convicts paraded varied every time, leading to long discussions afterward with classmates. Additionally, there were the plays, with each play requiring several days to digest.

However, what truly captivated me was novels, and for that, I owe a debt of gratitude to Zhang Xianzheng. Just like in Fengxiang, the older, married students sitting in the back rows were from the local area, escaping the draft from the countryside, while the girls in the front and first rows were from other provinces and around my age, making it easier to socialize. Among them, Zhang Xianzheng and I grew particularly close. He was one of the luckier students as his father was supposedly the chief secretary of the county government and like me, had a

special fondness for reading "idle books," paying little attention to schoolwork.

Back then, our reading habits were not based on searching for specific books to read but rather reading whatever books happened to come our way. Zhang Xianzheng was a swift reader with diverse sources of books, and after finishing one, he would often show it to me, but typically with a time limit imposed on when I had to finish so he could move on to the next one. While we had read works like "Wandering" and "Call to Arms" by Lu Xun,

most of the novels we enjoyed were episodic novels. Zhang Henshui was known for his writings in the early days of the Republic of China, and we had also read his episodic novel "Spring Evening History" featuring a reporter with severe acne who was always nervous and fidgety, earning the nickname "Neurological Paralysis" from his colleagues. This detail was still etched in my memory, but I found that my recollection of his later work "Eighty-One Dreams," composed during his time in Chongqing, had faded. We also delved into a collection of

essays from a magazine writing competition titled "Genius Dreams," and according to later writings by popular Taiwanese author Eileen Chang, the winning piece in that collection, "Genius Dreams," was authored by her. Though not deeply impressed, I do recall another piece in "Genius Dreams" that didn't win first place, which left a lasting impression on me, although I can't quite remember the title. Additionally, we read books like "Polar Romance" by an unnamed author, which served as a source of relief during the

war that was raging at the time.

Reflecting on this eclectic mix of novels, it now feels like I didn't attend a junior high school in Baoji for three years, but instead, enrolled in a "socio-economic university." In the summer of 1944, I completed my junior high education, and my father had expressed his wishes for me to proceed to high school and even hope for me to attend college, as he had felt the repercussions of having inadequate education and didn't want the same for his

only son. Surprisingly, as graduation approached, my father never broached the topic again.

I had gambled with the idea of going to high school, but the lack of a high school in Baoji and the distant location of the National High School in Tianshui, Gansu, left me with insufficient information. Staying at my uncle's house in Xi'an, the prudent choice was to aim for a high school and would have happily accepted my uncle's financial support if needed. However, my father never mentioned my uncle

throughout the process.

Now, I truly understand the importance of information. Fire was the first wave of human civilization as noted in history, followed by the industrial revolution. The Chinese have long believed in the adage "Land is wealth," but they failed to realize that harnessing abundant funds through banking was key to achieving effective endeavors. Recently, mainland leaders have openly stated, "Let a portion of the population get rich first." Whether this proclamation holds true remains debatable.

The third wave of human civilization and breakthrough is undoubtedly information. Future societies will no longer be based on land and money as the foundations of socio-economics but rather on knowledge and information.

In the summer of 1944, without the information provided by Zhang Xianzheng, I might not have had the chance to attend high school. What might have been the outcome? I still wonder.

Around ten days after summer vacation, Zhang Xianzheng

approached me about applying to a high school in Xi'an called the "Guidance Bureau." Neither I nor my father had heard of the school, but we trusted Zhang Xianzheng's information. Consequently, after being provided with funds, when the departure date arrived, there were numerous discussions with my mother, and with some hesitation, my uncle's address in Xi'an was finally revealed to me. Armed with limited funds and my uncle's address, I, along with Zhang Xianzheng, purchased train tickets to Xi'an. To this day, I can understand my

father's emotions at that time and his inexpressible pain, which my heart still aches for. Alas, the pains of parenthood are universal. At the time, my father was unaware of my uncle's struggles and the tragedy that transpired with my aunt. It wasn't until I reached Xi'an that I learned the truth. I speculate that my father had written letters to my uncle advocating for my high school application but received no reply, perhaps sending more than one letter in vain.

Following my father's instructions, upon our arrival in

Xi'an, we didn't immediately seek out my uncle but settled into a small hotel on Nan Da Street. Back then, Xi'an had yet to unveil the Terracotta Army, as they were still buried beneath the ground. The streets of Nan Da were predominantly Muslim, or today called Islamics. Differentiating the Muslim population from the Han was easy— Muslims had deep-set eyes, high bridges on the nose, and thick beards, primarily focusing on beef and mutton cuisine. Without exposure to this, one wouldn't know that such diversity

existed in China's demographics, similar to the distinctions between Euro-Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans in the United States.

The so-called "applying to high school" matter turned out to be unexpectedly simple, and this requires an introduction to the "historical context" that I eventually came to know. By the end of 1943 in the Republic of China, the war had entered its sixth year. Japan had been delayed too long on the Chinese battlefield and, facing significant pressure from

the U.S. Navy at sea, wanted to swiftly resolve the "thorn in the side" that China had become. China was a thorn, not retaliating when provoked and only resorting to guerrilla tactics. Japan wanted to tackle the Chinese issue simultaneously on two fronts, with the southern route aiming to capture Guilin, advancing through Guiyang toward Chongqing, while the northern route sought to seize Luoyang, passing through Tongguan toward Xi'an. Witnessing the disastrous retreat of China during this time was heartrending. Later, when I

saw a writer's recollection of the southern route in Taiwan, the situation was indeed dire. Black and white news clips also captured the events.

National Geographic Channel once aired a segment on the footbinding practices of Chinese women, including a scene from the chaotic retreat in Guilin, in which a woman with bound feet crawled on the ground amid the congested road. Japan easily captured Luoyang in the north but faced genuine resistance at Tongguan. The Japanese never reached Chongqing from

the south or Xi'an from the north. Their ultimate goal was to occupy Chongqing and Xi'an, believing that control over these cities would annihilate China. It wasn't that they lacked territory or control; rather, their military resources were severely limited. Areas including Manchuria, Beiping, Tianjin, Qingdao, Shanghai, Changsha, Guangzhou, and Hankou were under their occupation, but these areas were merely "templates." Once beyond city limits, guerrilla squads were omnipresent, with some seeking advantages from both the Kuomintang and

the Communist Party, although a majority were Communist Party-organized, extending as far as the guerrilla squads in Wuzhishan, Hainan Island, which was also under Japanese occupation at that time. After victory, the U.S. military flew planes to transport high-ranking Kuomintang members to major cities for surrender agreements. Similar to the Japanese occupation, rural Communist guerrilla squads continued their activities.

Luoyang, located in the

western part of Henan Province and a significant city not yet occupied by Japan, witnessed a sudden exodus, with many civil servants, students, and civilians fleeing to Xi'an. How the government handled the students' exile government in Guilin to the south, I cannot attest to, yet the government's attention toward those in the north was due to its substantial interest in the Yan'an government in the northern part of Shaanxi Province, which was actively absorbing intellectuals. I found myself in this intervention zone, gaining access to high

school education and, more importantly, receiving it for free.

Some claim never to tell lies in their lifetime, but perhaps they avoid small lies while engaging in bigger falsehoods behind the scenes. George Washington spoke the truth about cutting down a cherry tree, yet who knows if he told significant lies in other instances later on.
Subsequently, I will share about the first major lie I told in my life.
Together with Zhang Xianzheng, we went to meet

Mr. Lu, a senior of Zhang Xianzheng's father, who was expecting us. He promptly retrieved two yellowed pieces of paper from a drawer, each smaller than a standard page, about six hundred characters in size, instructing us to write our names, hometowns, and ages on separate white sheets. He then wrote the information onto the two yellowed sheets. He then said, "Keep these safe, don't lose them, and you can report to the coaching office at the South Gate." I was about to ask if there would be exams or other subjects to consider, but Zhang Xianzheng

intervened, advising me to follow Mr. Lu's instructions. Before we left, Mr. Lu reminded us, saying, "If you have enough money, you can spend a couple of days sightseeing before reporting. Xi'an is much livelier than Baoji."As soon as we left, I promptly looked at the yellowed paper from Zhang Xianzheng's hand, which read:
Certificate of Study
Student Feng Peng, a native of Beijing, aged seventeen, attended the first year of high school at this school but is currently on leave due to personal reasons.

This certification is hereby provided.
Principal
High School Department of Xigong Second Middle School, Luoyang City
Republic of China, 1944

I feel ashamed to admit that I have yet to visit Luoyang until now. I had wanted to go and see the peonies that bloom in April and May each year there but missed the chance. Nevertheless, I am considered a former high school student of Luoyang Second High School.

Since there was no urgent

need to take exams or report for enrollment, the first important thing was to visit my uncle and aunt. Zhang Xianzheng, being from Anhui, rarely ate noodles at home. I told him to come on an empty stomach, ready to enjoy my aunt's dumplings. My aunt was quick and fond of making dumplings, so she easily prepared the filling and wrapper before cooking them. Surprisingly, when we arrived at the address, no one answered the door. After asking around, a neighbor informed us that I was their nephew, leading us to further

inquire with other neighbors. Eventually, we were given another address on a secluded lane off West Street. With my insistence, Zhang Xianzheng finally agreed to abandon the movie screenings in Xi'an and accompany me there.

It turned out to be a hospital, not resembling the modern concept of a hospital at all. Instead, it was a long line of houses divided into many rooms, more akin to a sanatorium. My uncle and aunt's address bore a sign on one of the doors, with several other doors leading to different

rooms. I heard my aunt's voice calling out, "Come in! Why are you standing out there? It's not like I'm giving birth!" Approaching the door, which was wide open, we found my aunt sitting on a large bucket with mostly empty surroundings. She sat disheveled, with redness in her eyes, while my uncle perched along the edge of the bucket. Spotting us, my uncle hastily rose to usher us into the courtyard, seeming somewhat awkward as he informed me that he received letters from my father, but you can see... no need to say more, I

understood fully.
"What's wrong with Auntie?" I inquired.
"She's gone mad."
"And what did the doctor say?"
"No cure. Just some tranquilizers now, which aren't helping at all."

From inside came my aunt's cries, "Is that Dànian? Dànian is so tall now. Come here, Dànian, let Auntie hold you..." for some reason, her voice sounded somewhat grievous. She then alternated between sobbing and howling, "It'd be so nice to give birth to a chubby boy, so nice!"

I shared the purpose of my visit and the encounter with my uncle. Despite my repeated refusal, my uncle handed me some money, waved us off, and let us leave. In a moment of distraction, I stood there dumbfounded, uncertain of what to do. My uncle, especially my aunt, had always been close, almost no different from my parents, so why this stark contrast now? Zhang Xianzheng must have noticed my bewilderment and bowed to my uncle, thanking him, and then asked me to do the same. With wooden-like movements,

I imitated Zhang Xianzheng's gesture, bowed, and thanked my uncle. Zhang Xianzheng pulled me outside, and only when we reached the gate did I have the urge to glance back at my uncle, who stood in the same spot looking our way.

Shortly after I entered high school, I received a letter informing me of my aunt's passing.
The incident with my aunt greatly impacted my reading habits in the following years. Around the early 1950s, I borrowed a book called "Abnormal Psychology" by Zhu

Guangqian in the library of the Air Force General Headquarters. It might have been in that book that I first read about Freud. Thereon, wherever I could find books by Freud and his disciple Jung, I devoured them eagerly, akin to a starving man finding food. Did Chinese women truly face such heavy pressures to bear and raise children in 1944? It inevitably brought to mind Zhou Xiaotong from Fengxiang, whose biological mother perhaps only agreed to engage in a shared husband with her sister under desperate circumstances.

In 1990, during my first visit back to the mainland, I first traveled to Baoji to visit my late parents' graves. Upon arriving in Beijing with my sister and sharing my address and phone number, I met my step-cousin, born after my uncle's remarriage. He not only bore a striking resemblance to my uncle but also followed in his footsteps. He worked as a driver, a testimony to the saying that hard work pays off. When Zhang Xianzheng and I reached the bustling commercial area known as "Nan Yuan Men" in Xi'an at the

time, it appeared to be a square or plaza surrounded by high-rise buildings on three sides. The only side enclosed by a high wall had a sign hanging above the gate that read "War-displaced Youth Guidance Center." Stepping inside, a large panel bore the words "Courtesy, Integrity, Sense of Honor" before revealing the "school" we were about to enter.

The staff inside were clad in military uniforms. After inspecting our documents and casually filing them, one of them remarked, without

looking up, "Alright, I'll enroll you into the second year." He instructed us to meet the class monitor, also dressed in military attire, who immediately asked, "Have you eaten?" Each of us received an oversized steamed bun and instructions to head to the designated dormitory. The "dormitory" was a vast room with no furniture or decorations. The floor was covered with hay, piled higher in the corners. Several students were gathered chatting together, with really nothing else inside.
Zhang Xianzheng and I

glanced at each other, both seemingly wondering if this was really a school. In a hushed tone, I whispered to him in the corner, "Looks like we've been deceived into enlisting." "Absolutely not!" Zhang Xianzheng quickly responded, "Mr. Lu wouldn't be like that." It was only after conversing with others present in the room that we learned this was a temporary shelter, with the actual guidance center situated in Fengxiang.
About three to four days later, led by the class monitor in military uniform, we boarded a free train and hiked to

Fengxiang County bidding farewell after three long years. Seeing Fengxiang again elicited a sense of nostalgia. Unfortunately, I never got to see her again on the train to Guozhen.