

Chapter 8

Hundred Thousand Young People, Hundred Thousand Army

When I saw Fengxiang again, the city remained the same, still simple and pure.

It turned out that the guidance center was the original site of the military school. At that time, the military school must have been downsized, leading to the closure of the branch in Fengxiang. However, the site was not returned to Fengxiang Normal School but instead managed as a youth guidance center by the military.

For the sake of convenience, we'll refer to the guidance center as our school moving forward. The physical scale of our school was quite substantial, with about six to seven rows of classrooms, alongside as many rows of dormitories, each accommodating around ninety people. There were offices for the teaching staff, a principal's office, single teachers' rooms, a large auditorium, and a playground. The mess hall was quite impressive, with approximately five to six or seven to eight large stoves

burning hay. The courtyard was stacked with hay, and the restrooms, among the highlights, featured a long row of open-air squat-style pit latrines against the wall. During those times, they had devised a method of digging deep wells for sanitation, possibly reaching underground water levels. Due to the unfathomable depth of the latrine pits, rain or snow could not overflow them. I began suspecting whether they were interconnected with the water wells found in every household in Fengxiang County. The only criticism was the absence of a

dining hall; we encircled small stools to sit on the ground while having meals.

Soon after our arrival, the second-year students of our high school department assembled. Each of us received a set of old military uniforms, a copper basin (some still usable, some cracked), a small stool, and a rectangular wooden board with a rope for makeshift desks. It seemed like these items were left behind by previous military school students. With no bedding, Zhang Xianzheng and I slept on the hay in our

clothes since it was still summer vacation. We received two meals a day, one around noon and another at around five in the evening, without breakfast. Both meals consisted of "barrel-shaped steamed buns" known as 'gangzi mo,' with preliminary dishes like bean sprouts or scallion fritters diminishing gradually over time, leaving only steamed buns.

Before long, Zhang Xianzheng sensed that it was not a place to stay for long and sought my opinion. I advised him to find a high school that he could attend, irrespective of the cost,

and learn the enrollment process quickly. He decided to leave and, after insisting on half of the remaining money to be left with me, I agreed, emphasizing that he should clandestinely depart the school premises. Zhang Xianzheng departed Fengxiang, figuring out his way back to Baoji by train to relay information about my uncle and the school to my parents. Approximately two months later, supported by my father's letter, I was able to take leave and return to Baoji with bedding and other essentials.

There was correspondence between Zhang Xianzheng and me, and I learned that he had attended high school in Southern Shaanxi. However, he never recommended the place to me. Later, I was able to correspond from former Chongqing, including exchanging three to four letters, and his classmates in Chongqing teased me, suggesting that his girlfriend was ignoring me while I clung on. They didn't even bother to check the name on the envelopes to see if it was a female recipient.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity for free high school education, and I have Zhang Xianzheng to thank for the valuable information and opportunity. He was not just a good companion who shared books but also lent me the school itself, creating a sense of 'destined' affair. Upon entering high school, my first close friend was Wang Fucheng, who shared my class. Having spent seven years in Shaanxi, I could easily recognize the local Shaanxi dialects. When we were alone, I would jokingly say to Wang Fucheng, "I graduated from the

Fengshi Primary School; how about you?" The question took him by surprise. It turned out that Wang Fucheng graduated from the Fengxiang County Middle School, the same school to which I was accepted and never attended. Since there were no high schools left in Fengxiang, he had jumped straight to the second year. We decided to visit his home to eat noodles, but he seemed reluctant to accompany me to Jingcun Middle School to find Zhou Xiaotong.

In reality, Zhang Xianzheng had accompanied me to visit

Zhou Xiaotong's house on the second day in Fengxiang itself. Unfortunately, they had moved, prompting us to call out the widow landlady without much success in uncovering their whereabouts. We also visited Li Yingchao's family on Nan Street, who had relocated as well. Wang Fucheng informed me that Jingcun Middle School was often raided by military police at midnight, leading to severe consequences for those caught, including possible fatalities.

"Why?" I asked.

"They are all Communists."

That was the first time I heard the term "Communist Party" in my life, making me reflect on my three years reading novels in Baoji and my misguided self-initiated societal learnings. It had been ninety-six years since Marx published the Communist Manifesto, and with only five years remaining until the Communist Party forced us to flee to Taiwan from the mainland, it resonated differently. It later surfaced that the founder and principal of Jingcun Middle School, Che Xiangchen (1898-1971), only

officially joined the communists in northern Shaanxi in 1945. At that time, I might have been nothing more than a sympathizer or admirer of communist ideals similar to intellectuals like Che Xiangchen. Notable figures like J.P. Li and Wen Yiduo, who were assassinated by the Nationalists, belonged to this category.

Wang Fucheng advised me further, stating that even if Zhou Xiaotong had indeed attended Jingcun Middle School, since they lacked a high school, he would have

graduated and left the school premises. Due to this realization, my moment of deep contemplation on the school playground led to an emotional outburst that made him leave swiftly, resulting in our final encounter.

My second friend in high school was Zhao Shuangguai, who always emphasized that his name was Zhao Shuang "Kuai," not "Hui," possibly to avoid confusion with the traitor Qin Hui. He hailed from Gaoyang County in Hebei, a true "exiled student." The students in that region first

arrived in the semi-autonomous area called Jieshou before crossing to the rear areas in large numbers. After many years, I can hardly recall his escape tale. He had spent one year in high school in Beiping (Beijing at the time) and still had a trigonometry textbook with exceptional paper quality. With his assistance, I grasped the understanding of trigonometry, a compulsory subject for first-year high school students.

Our everyday routine was very much like any typical high school, with eight periods and

no evening study sessions due to the lack of lighting. Chinese, history, and geography classes were taught by teachers without textbooks, so we had to take our own notes. Each student received a copy of "Fan's Great Algebra" for math, which was an old textbook - some without covers, some without backs, and very thick. While the teacher taught sincerely, attendance was not taken during classes, resulting in many missed lessons. Our English teacher, Zhao Jiali, had a name that sounded foreign, and during the first

sentence of class, he would greet us in English, asking how we were doing and what we had learned, without leaving a lasting impression. Zhao Shuangguai and I particularly enjoyed the "Three Principles of the People" class. I've forgotten the teacher's name, but I suspect he was a former military instructor. He would enter class with only a piece of chalk, no textbooks. His first lesson began with the Sino-Japanese War, essentially focusing solely on one aspect of the Three Principles, which was nationalism and the injustices faced by the country.

He recounted how the foreign powers invaded, took land, imposed indemnities, and forced unequal treaties upon us with great detail, rousing a sense of indignation among us young people. As he spoke of the Beiyang Navy's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the anger within me almost exploded. Zhao Shuangguai repeatedly exclaimed, "This vengeance must be avenged!"

Soon enough, he found the opportunity for vengeance. At the end of the 33rd year of the Republic of China, Chairman Chiang called for the

movement of educated youth to join the military, with the slogan stating, "With every inch of land, with every drop of blood, one hundred thousand young people, one hundred thousand soldiers." Those days were truly fervent and intense. During a signing ceremony, Zhao Shuangguai used a prepared sharp blade to cut his finger and sign with his blood, inspiring other students to rush forward to sign their names on a long white banner, shouting slogans and pushing forward with emotion-filled tears. Having experienced such an era of

fervor, I firmly believe that such spirited times, whether extreme or moderate, from various angles, will impact one's outlook on life, including mine as a pacifist regarding military affairs.

At our guidance center, as most students had fled and many were joining the military, it seemed connected to the annual performance review of the county chief. The county government provided rewards for students joining the military. Zhao Shuangguai even used his reward money to treat me to buckwheat noodles and

music at a stall in front of the county government office. I don't recall if the book "The Fate of China" had been published at that time. After our meal, we had a long chat, where I shared with him the situation between Zhou Xiaotong and me and my pledge against joining the military. He seemed to sense my inner turmoil and comforted me, encouraging to study diligently and aspire to become an engineer, emphasizing the importance of someone staying back to contribute to our nation's development.

The county government had hired several sedan chairs drawn by mules to transport groups of four people to Guozhen. Following one of these carriages to the South Gate, I trailed alongside Zhao Shuangguai's, and as he stuck his head out, we both teared up. He choked out repeated words, "Go back! Remember to study well. Go back..." I stubbornly continued to follow them until the carriage sped off, and I stood in the same spot, watching it disappear into the distance. Our farewell was undoubtedly more emotional than the parting by the Yi

River, filled with more tears.

Zhao Shuangguai and others did not encounter the Japanese invaders for revenge. Our schoolmates initially went to Kunming before flying to India for military training. We maintained communication, and through his letters, I learned about the delicious treat, chocolate. Trying it for the first time, I realized it was the same as what the May Fourth writers referred to as "Zhugulu." I treasured the Indian postage stamps from Zhao Shuangguai's letters for many

years. In early 38th year of the Republic, when I was in Guangzhou, he received orders to demobilize, planning to return to his hometown. I was advised not to respond to his letters temporarily. His hometown in the southern part of Hebei province had long fallen to the "Communists," posing a puzzling situation for his return. Perhaps during his five years of service in the Youth Army, he came under the influence of certain individuals, though it remains unclear. He never made it to Taiwan.

Looking back, the days of that period were both remarkably challenging and overflowing with fervor. By the time spring of the 34th year came, I realized that soon after the summer vacation, I would be set to enter the third year of high school. However, I regret that my completion of the third year of high school was cut short.