In Remembrance of Those Long-Gone Years

Han Xiu

Han Xiu was born in China during World War II to a Chinese woman and a U.S. diplomat posted there. Although Han was a top student in her class, she was not admitted to the college of her choice, despite being qualified, because she refused to denounce her American father. Instead, she began her arduous journey to rural Shanxi. Han Xiu hardly mentions her mother in the story, which raises questions about her mother’s role in her life.

Everything happens for a reason. When talking about my going to the countryside, I have to relate some earlier stories. It is indeed a sad thing that, although I have published nearly thirty books in Taiwan and the United States since 1982, my life in the countryside is always missing from the author biography. This is because, among other things, readers in neither Taiwan nor the West understand the term shangshan xiaxiang.1 Consequently, I keep that part of my life buried deep in my heart.

My father was an officer in the U.S. Army. Between 1943 and 1945, he was the U.S. military attaché at the U.S. embassy in Chongqing, China’s wartime capital. He spent two years there primarily to help with the transport of the lend-lease materials over the Hump to Free China. So he did the Chinese people a good service in their war of resistance to Japan. It was in Chongqing that my father met my mother. In 1945, World War II came to an end in the Pacific with the surrender of Japan. My father left China and returned to New York with my mother. As a result, I was born in Manhattan in 1946. My father never set foot on Chinese soil again.

Naturally, such a story was not looked upon favorably by the new Chinese government after 1949 because, until the 1970s, Sino-American relations were antagonistic and tense. My father was not only a U.S. Army officer but had collaborated with the Nationalist regime. To the new regime in Beijing, he was an enemy.

---

1 See glossary.
When I was born, my father was away in New Zealand, on a diplomatic mission. After a brief visit to New York to see me, he returned to his job. When I was eighteen months old, however, my mother asked a young American couple to take me back to China. The person to receive me in Shanghai was my maternal grandmother, accompanied by a distant relative, Ms. Zhao Qingge. Not until 1978, when I returned to the United States, did I realize that I was sent away without my father’s knowledge. By the time he arrived in Washington, DC, to stop the scheme, I was already in Shanghai, and he passed away in 1968. So the only time I saw him was when I was a newborn—this remains a deep and unspeakable regret, a wound that never heals.

Grandma was from a large, prosperous family in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. After her father’s death in 1937, she passed the civil service exam and became a government employee. When state power changed hands in 1949, she lost the opportunity to flee southward because of me. Realizing that Nanjing was not a safe place for us, we moved to Beijing and settled in a quiet courtyard on Rice Market Street. When I was a baby in the United States, I had a Japanese nanny, so my first utterance was Japanese. During my voyage across the Pacific to Shanghai, I picked up some English from the young American couple. After living with Grandma for a while, I learned to speak the Wuxi dialect. Now I can still understand Wuxi and Shanghai dialects but cannot speak them fluently. Since leaving Beijing, I have lived in many different places and learned different languages, but I have retained Mandarin which I learned during my long stay in Beijing.

Grandma was an extremely intelligent woman. She understood that I was totally dependent on her. To raise me, she needed to take good care of herself. For this, she stayed at home making a living by binding books. As many people had left Beijing haphazardly, numerous valuable old books were discarded in the streets. China Bookstore sent Grandma these broken books in huge gunnysacks, and she reassembled them. The job required both familiarity with classical Chinese, which does not have punctuation marks, and special tools and skills. In a novel called *Inkheart*, by the German author Cornelia Funke, the hero is a master bookbinder named Mortimer Folchart. His bookbinding toolkit reminds me of Grandma’s tools, which were wrapped up in a very neat, dark blue cloth bag. In addition to scissors of different sizes, it also contained some bamboo pieces that were shiny and looked warm.

Grandma told me that she learned her bookbinding skills at a very young age from her own mother. It was a family tradition for centuries. The bookbinding toolkit was, in fact, part of my great-grandmother’s dowry. From Grandma, I learned that one could never have too much talent, a truth that I have never forgotten. I still remember the wooden framed bookbinding machine, which