Boarding the Westbound 413

Jin Xiping

Jin Xiping, a top student in his class, tried to enter high school by deliberately applying to a school other than his alma mater, only to realize that, given his family background, he stood no chance at all.

It was September 4, 1965. The air that early fall morning was a bit chilly, and the East Railway Station in Tianjin was engulfed in a great hubbub. Everywhere inside and outside the building, one could see colored flags and slogans such as “Cheers to the middle school graduates who volunteer to go to build the country’s frontier region.” Boys and girls in army uniforms gathered and moved around on the platforms. Mostly graduates from middle schools in Tianjin, these young people were waiting for train no. 413 bound for Lanzhou, where they would join the Eleventh Division of the PLA Agricultural Construction Corps in Gansu Province.

A mixture of restlessness, excitement, and sadness pervaded the crowd on the platform. The eyes of the young people spoke of both expectation and confusion. Their relatives and friends were offering some final advice while the faces of most parents were wet with tears. The song “Go to the Countryside and the Frontier” blared from the loudspeakers and mixed with the sound of the drums and cymbals and people’s crying to make a curious symphony.

I was among the young people waiting to depart that day. Only my mother and a colleague of hers came to see me off. Knowing this made my parting a bit sad and lonesome. My father was on a business trip in Beijing while my elder sister had already gone to Gansu to join the PLA Agricultural Construction Corps the year before. My sister was a top student at No. 20 Middle School in Tianjin. Her voluntary decision to go to Gansu caused a great stir at her school. On the day she left Tianjin, our mother was in the hospital and I had class, so only my father went to see her off. Now, when I was about to leave, only my mother was with me. What an arrangement of fate! I did have a younger brother, but he was only a first grader and could not be of any help. In fact, my packing was done with the help of Uncle Feng, one of my mother’s colleagues. To this day, I am still very grateful to my mother’s colleagues. Their kindness toward me reflects the best of human nature in those years. I also marvel at
my parents’ fortitude. It must have taken a lot of strength to send away two children in two consecutive years.

Before the train began to move, my mother left the station, probably reluctant to keep her colleague away for too long or perhaps because she could not bear to see me off. I managed to put on a brave smile and lightheartedly bid Mother goodbye. Before she left, Mother said to me: “When you are there, it’s all right to drink a little alcohol now and then, but don’t ever start to smoke. That’s the tradition in our family. Be a role model for your younger brother.” Sure enough, forty years have passed since then, and I’ve taken up neither drinking nor smoking.

With a long whistle, the train started moving, and people both on the platform and on the train began to cry. From the speakers on the platform, the revolutionary song rang out even louder than before. Someone in our car yelled out: “Hey, guys. Sing along, let’s sing along!” The crowd followed. I cannot recall what song we were singing at that moment probably because I was futilely looking for my mother in the crowd on the platform. As the train pulled out of the station, the crowd on the platform moved with it. Some people were running alongside the train, and the crying grew louder. When the train became too fast to follow, the crowd stopped, and I heard a piercing scream. It came from the elder sister of one of my schoolmates. To this day, I cannot forget the expression on her face at that moment.

As soon as the railway station disappeared from our sight, the young people on the train stopped singing and sank into their own thoughts. Suddenly a wave of indescribable sadness surged inside me, bringing back the heart-wrenching moments from our departure.

In the fall of 1962, I began classes at No. 1 Junior Middle School in Tianjin. This was a topnotch school in the city, with a glorious history, academic excellence, an outstanding teaching staff, a healthy learning climate, and a superb record, which made all its students proud. As one of the two all-boys schools in the city, No. 1 Junior Middle School was also full of masculine vitality.

During my third year at the school, things began to change. The academic atmosphere on campus began to deteriorate under political pressure. With the principle of meritocracy in retreat, teachers and guidance counselors showered the students from working-class families with favors such as membership in the CYL. In the past, such opportunity belonged first to students with good conduct and superior academic records. While joining the CYL had been the dream of every aspiring student, it was shattered for many of us that year.