CHAPTER TWO

EDUCATION IN A PRIVATE ACADEMY

After World War One erupted, my family moved to Tianjin, and at age eight, by Chinese reckoning, I began studying with a tutor. This continued for some ten years until I left for Beijing (then known as Beiping) in 1930 to enter university. I was quite young in the years immediately following the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and had for some time been studying with private tutors. I think these facts are not unrelated to my father's thinking about education at the time. Father seemed to have invested no faith in the new-style schools of that period. He did, though, place my brothers only four or five years younger than I in middle school, and the youngest of my siblings entered nursery school before proceeding on to elementary and middle school as well.

In what were dubbed “older families” (jiujia 舊家) in the 1920s, students were provided with a grounding in old-style Chinese learning and the ancient classics before advancing to “Western-style schools” (yangxuetang 洋學堂). Thus, many such families valued private tutoring highly. For example, my colleagues in the History Department of Peking University, Shao Xunzheng 邵循正 (1909–1973, a historian of Mongolia and modern China) and Zhang Zhilian 張芝聯 (1918–2008, a historian of France) had private tutors in place of elementary and middle school, and thereafter they both jumped directly into high school. My case, however, was more extreme in that I did not even attend high school, and when it was time to enter university, I was confronted by a number of difficulties. Although my younger siblings followed the regular track of entering middle school, teachers were hired to come to our home and offer them extra lessons in classical texts.

My ten years of private tutoring can be divided into three parts. For the first three years, I studied with three men from Yangzhou who were professional family tutors. One them, an older gentleman, had also taught my father, my uncle, and my aunt. The first primers I read were not the elementary texts with which private tutors generally began—such as Sanzijing 三字經 (Three character classic), Qianziwen 千字文 (Thousand character classic), and Longwen bianying 龍文鞭影 (Spur to easy reading)—but instead he started with Xiaojing 孝經 (Classic of filial piety) and continued
with the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, and *Shijing* (Classic of poetry). When I reflect back on it now, this was not the educational plan of an ordinary family tutor, but must have been decided in agreement with Father’s views on the matter. Beginning one’s elementary education with the *Xiaojing* and *Analects* was actually an ancient system going back to the Han dynasty.

During the second period, four years, my brothers and I had a younger teacher of whom we were especially fond. His name was Zhang Que 張愨 (courtesy name, Luxue 潞雪), and he was the younger brother of Zhang Zengyang 張曾颺 (1852–1920), the Zhejiang governor who had ordered the execution of the revolutionary Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907). He was twenty-four years old when he came to offer us instruction. I studied two major classics with Mr. Zhang, the *Li ji* 李記 (Record of rites) and the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo commentary [on the Spring and Autumn Annals]), as well as such collections as *Guwen ci leixuan* 古文辭類纂 (Classified collection of ancient text writings), edited by Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731–1815); and I learned the majority of these works to the point of being able to recite them from memory. Step by step, Mr. Zhang guided me patiently and systematically not just for his student to be able to recite back the words from memory, but paying attention to explain the meaning of what we were reading. He extracted the essential points from several commentaries on the *Zuo zhuan* collected in the immense collection *Huang Qing jingjie* 黃清經解 (Qing exegeses of the classics), edited by Ruan Yuan 阮院 (1764–1849) and others, and personally wrote them out in tiny characters no bigger than flyspecks into what became my textbook. At the same time, he also explained such texts to me as the *Shi ji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) and the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, writing in the ancient-style prose of the Tongcheng School. I listened to Mr. Zhang’s textual explanations with rapt attention, finding them always wonderful to hear.

Sadly, when I was fourteen (Chinese style), Mr. Zhang suddenly became ill and died. We were all deeply saddened. As I now look back on those ten years of private tutoring, I believe I gained the most and made the most rapid progress from the four years of instruction I received from Mr. Zhang. He helped me to lay a firm foundation for my subsequent study of ancient Chinese classics and documents.

Mr. Zhang was initially paid a monthly salary of fifty *yuan*, which later increased to eighty, and breakfast and lunch was provided for him as well. Mr. Zhang taught us conscientiously, never with the rigid framework of private tutors of bygone times, and my brothers and I never received any