Prologue: Looking Backwards at Worlds Apart

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There is an old Chinese expression, huang ru ge shi or “as vague as separated by two worlds,” which is often used to describe changes so drastic that things before and after the change seem not to be able to connect, as though they belong to different life cycles. Tinged with Buddhist ideas, that phrase is of course a hyperbole, a rhetorical device to highlight an extremely high degree of change of things, people, or conditions. Sometimes when I look back at the changes that have taken place in my own life, however, that phrase does not seem to me so hyperbolic, but rather descriptive, in a way expressing a sense of surprise at the changes that have indeed been most extraordinary and unusual. This is so because, ultimately, China has in the last three decades gone through incredibly big changes, unprecedented, perhaps unimaginable even for the Chinese themselves thirty years ago. It is in this context that changes in our personal lives become intelligible. Individual lived experiences cannot be separated from the living condition of the society as a whole, but at the same time, each individual life is different and in some sense unique, following a path all its own. Did not the German poet Heinrich Heine express the idea most beautifully, with his characteristic brilliance and poetic vividness? “For every single man is a world which is born and which dies with him,” says Heine; “beneath every grave-stone lies a world’s history.”1 The changes that have occurred during the life time of my generation are unprecedented, possibly unrepeatable, but each individual tells a different story, and when I look back at my own, the sense of worlds apart well describes the feeling I have.

Born in 1947 in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, in a family that had declined from its better days, I was the last of three siblings of my father’s second marriage, with three more brothers from his previous marriage. At the time, my father was already over sixty, and he passed away when I was only eleven years old, but he left a deep impression in my mind, for he was my first teacher and made me curious about lots of things. He often took me to tea houses and taught me how to write characters with water on the wooden table way before I reached the age for elementary school, thus giving me an early start. He came from a humble background but had some basic traditional schooling, and he moved from Xuning to Chengdu in his youth, set up his own business, and eventually became a manager in a small private bank. That was a difficult

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1 Heinrich Heine, Pictures of Travel, chapter xxx, p. 292.
time for all Chinese, however. Japan invaded and occupied much of Chinese territories from 1937 to 1945; though Chengdu was not directly occupied, it was bombed and constantly under the threat of Japanese air raids. After two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered in 1945, but the civil war between the Kuomintang and the communists broke out and made life very difficult for the average people. Amidst such hardships and chaos, that small bank in Chengdu went bankrupt, and the living condition of my family rapidly deteriorated. My childhood memory is rather vague, but not without some memorable moments. My father used to tell me ghost stories from Liao zhai or the Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, which scared the wits out of me; he would give me traditional novels to read, such as the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and the Water Margin, and he would teach me to practice calligraphy and paint rocks and pine trees with ink and brush. My mother was a fantastic cook and always made some simple but delicious dishes. My dream as a young boy was to become a painter, as I was fascinated by the great works of both Chinese and European artists reproduced in art books, but at the same time, reading novels and other books also made me interested in literature, history, and many other subjects. When I entered high school at the age of 13, my mother also passed away and I began living in a school dormitory by myself. The three elder half-brothers of my father’s first marriage were all college graduates, but perhaps for that very reason, they were all politically suspect under the new regime. Two of them were labeled “rightists” in 1957 in Mao’s “anti-rightist” campaign and were sent to labor camps, where the eldest died miserably, and the third one survived as a broken man, with his conviction revoked not until some twenty years later. My sister was an elementary school teacher, and my brother, almost ten years my senior, went to a secondary professional school and became a radiologist in a county hospital far from Chengdu. Because of the deteriorated family condition, neither my sister nor my brother went to college.

As a high school student, I was doing exceedingly well. During my junior high school years (1960–63), our teachers used to give pencils as awards to the first three students with the best scores each semester, and as I recall, I never had to buy pencils myself as I was always one of the top three in class. Life was simple then, as we had very little entertainment or diversion, but I loved reading and was completely infatuated with classical Chinese poetry and foreign literature in translation. I started to learn English and became increasingly engrossed in things European and Western, and soon my English was good enough to have special permission from my teacher to read my own book in class, while the other kids had their lesson or grammatical drills. In those days, Russian was taught in high schools as a major foreign language, and students learning