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A Beautiful China

Two

A Life in Pursuit of One Dream

The Ancient Course of the Yellow River

I was standing atop the low wall outside my home, gazing upon the Northern China Plain. A boundless expanse of wild and desolate beauty stretched out before my eyes. This is the very first memory from my childhood.

I grew up in the 1970s, in a quiet village nestled within the former course of the Yellow River. When I was little, my friends and I whittled away the time digging 'wells' in the dried-up pond bed, where we would unearth layer upon layer of sand and soil. Back then, the elders in our village told us these were sediments deposited from the old Yellow River that flowed through the plains. Later, I learned, this had occurred during the 1938 Yellow River flood at Huayuankou: a tragedy which foreshadowed much suffering ahead for the Chinese people.

The first time I really grasped the ancient course of the river was on an autumn day in junior high. I was biking northeast to where Henan meets Shandong, when the yellow dirt track of my village suddenly sloped steeply downwards. A sprawling expanse of drying lotus ponds unfolded before me; they marked the so-called North Embankment that we had been taught about. It dawned on me then; originally, my hometown stood atop what had once been the river's lofty bed. I felt a profound sense of the passage of time and its slow, momentous shifts.

Culture is a series of beliefs and symbols embedded into a person's soul. Chinese culture makes me think of the Yellow River; it is an ever-flowing force through our lives, one which compels us to step out of ourselves and reflect when we are confronted by it. It's also like China; at certain moments, it brings tears to our eyes.

My mother's childhood was very similar to the story depicted in the story *To Live*. When she was only seven or eight years old, her father gambled away all of the family's worldly possessions, their property and their land. After this, he left his family, departing with the passing Eighth Route Army. My grandmother was left to care for my mother and her two younger brothers, and fell into such abject poverty that she and the children had to beg for a living. During the subsequent land reform, they were

brandished as impoverished peasants; dependent on the military to survive. The neighbors who had gained land through this reform became landlords, and later, they suffered such protracted torture at denunciation meetings that they died untimely deaths. These times were marked by extreme upheaval. Countless individuals were swept off their feet in the torrents of feverish emotion; elation, fear and despair.

In her early twenties, my mother was already considered old for a single woman when she married my father, a poor but educated man. They married during the Great Leap Forward, a period of immense turbulence when villagers toiled day and night plowing the fields — a relentless, monotonous fervor, which played out under the red flag. This was followed by the brutal Great Famine. Everyone was locked into a desperate, wild fight for survival. Every weed was plucked from the grass; the trees were stripped bare of their bark. Everything remotely edible was eaten. Many people developed painful swellings over their whole body. The elderly and those in poor health gradually became too weak to move and quietly passed away.

There was a terrible, icy winter in 1959. My father rushed to and fro throughout the whole Xinyang region, treating the shocking numbers of people succumbing to sickness and famine. Years later, he would sigh deeply as he recalled the villages he had visited where scores of entire families had died. No-one was left alive to bury the dead, so the bodies piled up in heaps on the streets.

My father specialized in radiology, but his intelligence and eagerness to learn meant that, for all intents and purposes, he became a general practitioner. During the daytime, he worked at the local hospital; in the evenings he treated our neighbors free of charge. One of the most vivid memories from my childhood is being jolted awake by urgent knocking and sobbing in the middle of the night. Rushing to gather his things, my father left hurriedly for the neighboring village and returned only at dawn.

Every Spring Festival, our home was a hive of activity, bustling with distant relatives, strangers and countless friends. It was only years later, when I learned the meaning of the word 'gratitude,' that I understood my father's devotion to our village. This filled me with a strong sense of pride.

We were surrounded by natural beauty. In the open fields, clusters of purple Paulownia flowers stood regally against the white clouds and azure skies. Verdant wild grasses lined the creeks, soaking up warm sunlight. Colonies of ants scuttled tirelessly beneath the canopies of mulberry trees. I remember walking through the fields, grazing my fingertips over the ears of wheat as it rippled and whispered in the breeze. My very favorite season was at the end of Spring. Those beautiful moments are preserved forever, no matter how distant they may be.

My first love was the prettiest girl in our class. Both her parents were teachers, and her mother taught us Chinese class in second grade. Everyone in the village knew that her family came from a landlord background. One day, my friends and I secretly gathered outside her house and overheard her asking her father, “Do landlords eat people?” Her father replied, “Some do, some don’t.” Our classmates often teased the two of us when we were together. After graduating from middle school, I never saw her again.

Life in the countryside was far from idyllic. Under communism, honesty and kindness were eradicated, and privilege and class distinctions became more pronounced. A boy my age, a neighbor's son and the village secretary's child, would ride on the heads of other children, whipping them, while everyone laughed heartily. Also whipped for fun was a small bird, called a buttonquail, which I saw bloodied and dying beside the pigsty.

Neighbors argued bitterly and would come to blows over a chicken, a tree, or a strip of wheat. When a child managed to steal something from the “brigade,” it wasn’t seen as shameful but rather as a sign of bravery and sharpness of wit, and adults heaped praise on them. When the village's sole supply store received a new batch of vinegar, the adults would make us children run over to buy it immediately. Everyone knew that it would be watered down during the night. The relentless torment of political campaigns evaporated the simplicity of village life. It became a memory so distant that it existed only in whispered, disbelieving conversations between the villagers.

The household responsibility system implemented in the decollectivization of the 1980s brought the first wave of prosperity to the countryside. This was soon followed by a second wave of development, driven in by the forces of a market economy and urbanization, with droves of young people leaving their rural hometowns in search of new beginnings. Rumors circulated during this time; it seemed that everyone's hometown was slumping into decline. The whispers in the cities painted a bleak picture of countryside towns, with only the elderly and children left behind in now desolate courtyards. The crows of roosters and barks of dogs echoed hollowly in the chilling, gray air. Despite this, the decline also brought a rebirth. It marked a departure from the anxiety of mere survival which had scarred the previous decade. Neighbors gradually became friendlier to each other and started to build relationships based on trust. The market economy didn't destroy morality; rather, it brought it back to life.

My mother often said that I was naive. I was reserved and absorbed in my daydreaming — ill suited to rural society. In truth, she was the same. She never had any interest in forming relationships with the powerful or influential families in the village, and instead focused her care and attention on the impoverished and those in need. Later, after moving to the county town, she made a habit of bringing food to the homeless.

Out in the vast plains, a young boy gazed up at the eastern sky, tears silently rolling down his cheeks. This is the childhood of my memories; a silhouette of melancholy. It is a life rooted in a distant past and imbued with inexplicable sorrow. From thereafter, it stretched out towards an infinite future. Fortunately, as the years passed, my life became happier and happier.

My Lifelong Dream

Around two kilometers northwest of the village, nestled amidst the fields, stood my middle school, a solitary expanse of red-brick buildings. Half of the schoolyard was designated for crops: cotton and corn bloomed in the warmth of summer, and in winter, it transformed into a sea of green wheat. The classrooms were situated atop an old graveyard. Just two meters from the doors, a tiny, worn grave was so frequently leapt upon by the braver students that it was polished smooth.

Each morning, I woke up at five, and crossed the fields under a canopy of stars. Sometimes, I could see blue flames flickering in the graveyard – these were the so-called ‘ghost fires’. Though I knew these were just caused by burning phosphorus, they still sent icy shivers down my spine; often, rationality cannot quieten our instincts.

In middle school, I nurtured a new discipline. After the mornings’ lessons, I sprinted all the way home. I had been frail in elementary school, and now, I resolved to become strong and fit.

On the first day of 1987, before dawn had broken, a heavy blanket of snow enveloped the eastern Henan plains. The classroom hummed with the sounds of children studying under the soft glow of a kerosene lamp. Just before we were due to start class, our English teacher walked in from the cold, powdered head to toe with snowflakes. On the blackboard, she scrawled in big, hopeful letters: “HAPPY NEW YEAR.”

That winter became a crossroads in my life. Previously, I’d dreamed of becoming a scientist. Somewhere, I’d read that bioengineering would be important in the future, and I aspired to master the field and even win a Nobel Prize. As a teenager, however, something changed in me as I pounded across the Henan plains, chasing the rising sun. Every time that I slipped, I jumped up again, and continued to run with my head bowed low. I was a lone figure heading into a boundless horizon.

What truly defines a meaningful life? My father spent his lifetime healing and saving others, yet he couldn't bring substantive change to our village. Science alone is not sufficient for China, just as medicine alone cannot heal China. This society deeply needs truth, freedom, and justice. I realized that my calling lies in politics, in striving for a free and democratic China. That winter, I started to keep a diary, and began to document my growth as an idealist.

It really was just a distant dream back then. At the time, my whole world was confined to a radius no more than ten kilometers. I’m not sure why that sort of village produced such far-off dreams — dreams that sometimes seemed so distant that they led me to lose hope. Many years later I could only chalk this up to fate.

Many things in this world happen without reason; perhaps that’s what destiny is. Each person comes into this world with a unique destiny and role. It plants a seed deep in every soul, waiting for the right moment to awaken and sprout.

I’m grateful I had these realizations so early in life. I understood where China was heading, I understood that suffering was inevitable, and I understood that I would dedicate my life to her glory and rebirth. From that point, even through the darkest and most turbulent times, I always knew that I was on the path towards dawn.

My middle school graduation photo shows a young boy, gazing up towards the distant skies above. The melancholia of childhood had passed.

Civil Rights

In 1928, General Feng Yuxiang, inspired by the concept of “Civil Rights” from Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People, established a new county in the regions of Qi and Sui counties. During the same period, the General also founded three other counties in Henan named Ziyou (Liberty), Pingdeng (Equality), and Bo'ai (Fraternity). This was an era both buoyed by soaring ideals, and fraught with difficulties — both in China and around the world.

My first visit to the local county town was in May 1987, to compete in a selection exam for a prestigious high school. Our teacher led us selected students, clutching umbrellas, on a three-hour trek through muddy fields to reach the main road to the county town. We waited there for another two hours before catching a bus.

My high school was called Minquan High. It was located on the north side of the Minquan county seat, backed by vast apple and pear orchards and locust tree forests. Further beyond lay the southern dike which marked the former course of the Yellow River, something that I would later come to associate with my hometown. This is a place which stirs fond memories for me; one from that time is of a lazy spring afternoon, where I shuffled in slippers through the orchards to the dike and read beside stacks of wheat straw until I dozed off.

The 1980s in China was a time of fervent passion. A whole generation of students was influenced by the book series *Towards the Future*. I was not a meekly obedient student, and spent much of my time reading books which hadn't been assigned to us, such as Nietzsche, Hegel, and The Communist Manifesto. I began to document my thoughts about them all in a journal.

Our political textbooks then were full of hyperbole, extolling the virtues of socialism and describing capitalism as a decadent system in decline. I remember our political science teacher solemnly lecturing us on how, though an American worker's wages might seem higher than ours on the surface, they were offset by exorbitant rent and living expenses, and the average worker might even land up in debt. The conclusion we were supposed to draw was that American workers lived in destitution and misery — but, by then, I already knew that the welfare of American workers far surpassed those in China. That teachers would deceive generations of naive young minds into believing something they themselves knew to be a lie, struck me as a profound disgrace.

Can political indoctrination truly inspire belief? No. Its aim was not to convince but to subdue - compelling every Chinese person into unanimous conformity - and to parrot falsehoods as truth.

During my final exam for my first-year high school politics class, I spent most of the time writing a lengthy essay on the back of my exam paper expounding on the meaning of *true* socialism. (I continued to reflect on this question for many years subsequently). Then, I anxiously awaited my kind female teacher to give me her verdict. The outcome was a little disappointing; the teacher said nothing, and I barely scraped a B.

Every evening, our dormitory's shared sleeping quarters buzzed with heated debates about capitalism and socialism; often, it was me pitted against nine roommates. Years later when we met at reunions, we consciously skirted around political topics to avoid damaging our friendship. Many people lacked a clear ideological stance of their own, and were generally swayed by whichever views were then mainstream. Whether left-wing or right-wing, those firmly committed to a faction are born that way.

In February 1988, then a young teen concerned about the country and its people, I wrote in my diary:

“I love China, but we can't be blindly self-congratulatory. Over thirty years have passed since the founding of the New China, yet our living standards remain low, our industry is outdated and backwards, and our agriculture is still predominantly reliant on manual labor. Shouldn't we feel ashamed when we compare ourselves to developed countries around the world? We are all humans, belonging to the same nation, and our Chinese heritage is enriched by a glorious civilization of five millennia. Why, then, should our generation lag behind?”

As we prepared to graduate to the second year of high school, our teachers busied themselves advising students on whether to pursue education in the arts or sciences. I decided to ignore the advice of others and follow my own path. My diary entry from May 25, 1988, read: “The time came to decide our course of study. Without a moment's hesitation, I chose the arts. This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision: I have been looking forward to this for a long time now...”

During the second semester of my second year of high school in 1989, my classmates and I crowded around the small shop next to the cafeteria, standing on tiptoes and craning our necks to see the TV. The university students' hunger strike in Tiananmen Square had the whole country in suspense. Some university students brought photos, which I and a few classmates pasted up at the gates into the county seat.

Another time, my classmates and I called for a boycott of the broadcasts from the administrative office, writing our demands in big, bold letters on the school bulletin board. They broadcast Yu Opera every day, which infuriated us. On the rare occasions when they played a pop song, the whole campus would burst into life. But the head of the office preferred traditional operas.

Gunshots rang out in Beijing on the night of June 3. I spent that night wide awake, the first sleepless night of my life. Together with some friends, we listened to the radio, drinks in hand, consumed by anger and sadness.

I felt sure that the country would change substantively, and rapidly. Everywhere you went there was fury and despair. But this nation was too timid. I found myself deeply at odds with my family due to differences in political beliefs — a disagreement unrelated to right or wrong, but instead focused on perceived risk. This was the beginning of my mother's worries. For many Chinese, the haunting shadow of political movements lingers for a lifetime.

That summer was filled with pain. I took the college entrance exams a year ahead of schedule, but my scores were only good enough for a junior polytechnic. I also experienced the pangs of my first love. I developed a crush on a girl from the remote grasslands of Xinjiang.

One day after the college entrance exams, I lingered for a long time at the train station, hesitating, with only a couple of yuan in my pocket. Eventually, I boarded a train heading west. I wanted to see the grand mountains and vast seas, and this became my first long-distance journey. En route, we passed by the Taihang Mountains, eventually arriving at the Tanggu coast. Years later, I looked out to Tanggu through a barred window, reminiscing on that day in my youth when I daydreamed on the coast, the sea breeze passing through my hair.

Though I'd already thrown away all of my books, I had to return for my final year of high school. It was a year fueled by pride. I relied entirely on books borrowed from others for my studies. The 1990 college entrance exams came as a shock to me: that year's exams were unusually tough - especially the arts exams. Despite this, I remained arrogantly confident. I believed any university would accept me.

When it was time to choose universities, Changfeng suggested I apply to Lanzhou University - heading up to the great Northwest would be pretty good, too, he said. Just a year before, the top thirteen universities in China had been advertised on our school university board. Lanzhou University was among them.

Changfeng was my sworn brother. We had taken an oath at a friend's house. I was the thirteenth of thirteen brothers. The eldest brother dropped out of school early to join the army and, in 1989, was dispatched to Tiananmen Square with the martial law troops. He was the first to leave us. In 1999, he fell gravely ill and passed away.

It was at Minquan High School that I learned about the connection between my life and civil rights, as well as the ideals cherished by our forefathers in the Republic of China. I felt pride in my birthplace; the cradle of Chinese civilization and a vision for modern civilization.

My Youth at Lanzhou University

Lanzhou University topped a state media-produced list of China's fastest declining universities. During my eight years there, many excellent teachers left.

Nonetheless, it's my alma mater, and it left a profound imprint on my formative years. Just like China — regardless of its poverty and autocracy, it will always hold a special place in my heart.

Years later, when lecturing at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, I told students: do not complain about your circumstances, but have purpose in your life. Don't waste time. Cherish the beautiful days of university, study well, and make each day fulfilling. Enjoy yourself — some journeys and joys are unique to youth, and love well. Don't miss out on the bliss of true love.

I loved the summers at Lanzhou. The Yellow River meanders through canyons under a vast blue sky with drifting white clouds. The sun radiates fierce heat, yet there is always cool relief under the trees. Storms rush in and out swiftly, while one side is still shrouded in rain, the setting sun smiles from the other.

On many weekends, I would start my day with a bowl of beef noodles and two large pancakes at a small restaurant behind campus. Then, I'd spend hours at the Gansu Provincial Library, immersed in *The Glory of Humanity: A Biography of Lincoln, Napoleon, Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance, The Cambridge History of the Republic of China, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich ...* By 4:30 in the afternoon, I'd have wandered down to the Yellow River, and there, I would contemplate the grandeur of history in the glow of the setting sun.

Education is about awakening. In the daily influx of information from books, TV, and teachers, we hold onto only what moves our hearts. One day, a phrase struck me so profoundly that I spelled it out with stones on the Yellow River beach: "This is a grand epoch, one which requires and must bring forth giants."

During my four years as an undergraduate, I covered nearly three disciplines: Law as my main subject, Public Relations as a minor, and International Politics for graduate exams. All three were essential for my career. I wasn't particularly talented at law, ranking near the bottom of my class for at least three semesters. However, I devoted a great deal of time to reading books. My eight library cards were a testament to my near constant presence in the university library. I was of the view that a person's accomplishments aren't necessarily related to their degrees; they are, in actuality, related to reading. True growth is to continuously absorb the wisdom of others.

Twice each semester, we had a labor class — during which, we planted trees on Gaolan Mountain. The whole time turned into joyful games on the mountains. We went to the slopes managed by Lanzhou University, where we dug holes, planted trees, watered them, and then relaxed with card games and told jokes to each other. I would often sneak away to climb the mountain's peak, gazing down over the mist-enshrouded city below, daydreaming, and practicing speeches.

In my four years at university, I wrote nine diaries. In each, two-thirds were dedicated to politics, and the remaining third to life and love. I closely followed the Soviet Union's August 19 incident, jotting down my predictions and assessments.

On December 25, 1991, the Soviet Union's hammer and sickle flag was lowered solemnly. Posters popped up on campus, posing the question "Why did the Soviet Union break up?" I never missed such lectures. This monumental transformation had not yet finished, nor had the Cold War. Little did I know then that China would take a thirty-year detour.

In the "Socialist Construction" course, we were assigned to write an essay for the final exam. Much as I had in high school, I took a risk, choosing the topic "On the Necessity of Market Economy in China." The prevailing ideology at the time was to criticize the market economy. My score was the lowest in the class, a 62. I still remember in 1990, the People's Daily declared "human rights" a capitalist concept, and even in 1992, it claimed the market economy was a feature of capitalism.

Two months later, Deng Xiaoping's southern tour talks took place. “No matter how circuitous the route,” he claimed, “the grand trajectory of history remains unchanged.”

In the spring of 1993, I found myself spending many days alone in a classroom writing *Free China*. This was the initial version of *A Beautiful China*. I would continue to write it for many years to come, indeed, for the rest of my life.

In my fourth year of undergraduate studies, I applied to the International Politics program at Peking University's School of Government, dreaming of a world government.

I submitted two essays to my prospective supervisor. The first, “The Final Act of the Cold War: The Future of China-U.S. Relations,” argued that the Cold War was not yet over but had entered a new phase, with divergences in ideology being the principal issue between China and the U.S. The second, “On the Legalization of International Relations,” argued against a jungle-like international order. My years-long reflections on how to establish a new global order continued, including during my doctoral studies, culminating in “On World Government.”

I didn't pass the entrance exam. Originally, I planned to try again the following year, but my prospective advisor sent me a letter telling me that my essays contained political errors. I was deeply disappointed and ultimately, gave up on pursuing International Politics at Peking University. I didn't regret this decision. Sometimes a small event can alter the entire course of one's life, but in reality, it's not by chance.

Rights Defender

I truly believed I would be admitted for graduate studies and as such, I had scarcely looked for jobs. My graduation was marked by a profound disappointment. I returned to my hometown in a somber mood in early June, right at the beginning of the wheat harvesting season.

A major incident had unfolded there just three days prior — a violent clash over a land dispute between a local village and a state-owned farm. The farm workers, under police protection, attempted to harvest wheat from the contested land, leading to a violent confrontation. The police opened fire, resulting in four villagers dead and seven wounded. Amidst the turmoil, the villagers captured two hostages from the opposing side, along with two handguns and a jeep.

In today's internet age, this kind of incident would have caused a major uproar — but at the time, it happened without anyone from the wider public knowing.

On that day, the government and the villagers were still engaged in a standoff at the entrance to the village. I rode my bicycle past them, passing by four coffins which had been placed in a prominent position in the street. Telling the villagers I was a student, I asked them several questions about what had happened, and they led me to the home of the village representative. After many discussions over the course of that afternoon, I persuaded them to release the hostages and offered to provide them legal assistance.

That was my first involvement in a public dispute. Eager to assist the villagers, I sought a resolution amidst the confrontation. I couldn't encourage violent resistance, as it would only bring them greater harm. In my later efforts to defend farmers' rights in places like Tieling, Liaoning, and Dangshan, Anhui, I always did my utmost to find mutually agreeable solutions. Always, ever since I began, the outcome was immensely important to me. When walking on the path to democracy and freedom, prioritizing the interests of individuals in rights-defense cases is paramount. Using people as a means to an end should never be considered as an option. For a better China, politics must be ethical.

I made it clear to the villagers that I was just a university student, not a journalist, but this still caused concern at the local government. That evening, the county party secretary visited my home, ostensibly to offer concern and his gratitude — but in reality, he was gathering information. I explained to him that my aim was the common good, and I simply hoped to assist in finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict. I found out later that the head of the municipal Public Security Bureau had also come to visit my house that night.

The next day, the villagers released the hostages, and the government made some concessions.

For many years, I was a proponent of gradual reform. I advocated citizens' rights in the hopes that democracy and the rule of law could be fostered progressively, through the pursuit of justice case by case. That was until I witnessed the system gripped by paralysis. Thereafter, I lost all hope.

After I'd graduated from undergraduate studies, I had the opportunity to work at the municipal Public Security Bureau. However, their policy required a whole three years of service before one was able to apply for postgraduate studies, so I left and returned to Minquan County. Luckily, Bingxiong Freezer Factory took me in. After three months of workshop training, I was assigned to the corporate management office. It wasn't clear what everyone's responsibilities were, and employees were perfectly content with the time to slack off. For me, this was an excellent opportunity to revise for exams. Eventually, I smoothly passed the entrance exams to study once again at Lanzhou University.

That summer was the most leisurely period of my life — I was free from worries in the present and concerns about my future. As the sun set, my friends and I would stroll over to the square by the train station, eating watermelon and drinking beer, and chatting about everything under the sun.

I often reminisce about those beautiful, carefree days. Those fleeting moments of happiness are all the more poignant because of the hardships that followed.

Western Wilderness

I read countless books, and traveled thousands of miles in the great Northwestern plains. I loved the wild beauty of the wilderness; the great winds of the Gobi Desert, and the journey westward from Yumen Pass.

In July, Qinghai Lake is a deep sky-blue, with rapeseed flowers blanketing the gently undulating mountains right up to their snow-capped peaks. The waters of the Black Horse River are shallow and so clear that one can see the riverbed, teeming with frolicking carp. Crow Island is lined on one side with

pristine beaches; the other is lined with precipitous cliffs. I remember the peaks of the cliffs being densely studded with cormorants, nurturing their young. Each nest was filled with three of their chalky-blue eggs. Once, I picked one up, feeling its warmth in the palm of my hand, before gently replacing it back in the nest.

Casting its path from the ethereal Dunhuang to the towering Jiayuguan, the highway unrolls itself directly into the embrace of the horizon. At the very edge of the Gobi, a boundless tableau unfolds in front of your eyes; the inverted image of water, houses and trees mirrored in the desert. It forms an otherworldly realm, beckoning one to step out of the car and explore it. The locals say there is no water, it is merely a mirage which dances there on the landscape every day. It leaves me pondering, in this world which opens up in our line of vision, what truly is real, and what's merely an illusion?

I took my first journey to Tibet in the summer of 1996. With a tent strapped to my back, I hitchhiked along the roadsides, making my way in increments to the Ruoergai grasslands. Flowers blanketed the earth, forming a tapestry which merged into the dark cloud-capped peaks at the horizon. Plump groundhogs stood sentinel, their small hands dangling in front of them as they gazed at the visitor approaching from afar. Suddenly, a great horse galloped over to the car window. Its rider, called Zaxi, stretched out a finger and made gestures at us, which eventually, we understood, meant we could mount the horse and take a photo for 1 yuan. When we said our goodbyes, Zaxi spurred his horse to follow our car, accompanying us for a very long distance. Our path along the Sichuan-Tibet line was cut short by torrential rains, forcing us to turn back from the Ruoergai grasslands.

In the following summer, I joined a desert exploration team, taking a long distance bus from Lanzhou to Minqin. In the early hours of the morning, we dismounted and set off towards the desert on foot, using a compass to guide us. Each of us was laden with a backpack crammed with flatbreads, pickled salty vegetables, and cotton clothing; and about 10kg of chilled boiled water in Coca-Cola bottles, hung from our waists.

Together, our group of ten ventured into the Badanjilin Desert, home to the remnants of the ancient Han Great Wall. The scorching sun beat down upon us. Our group, aside from me, comprised the members of two separate bands. Two of them were close friends of mine: Zhao Bing, who was a judge and played bass for his hobby, and Bing Che, a policeman who doubled as a guitarist.

The Great Wall was constructed from earth. Withstanding over two millennia of wind and rain, the surviving sections of the wall undulate and twist like the spine of a dinosaur, until they vanish into the sand dunes. The remaining watch towers, approximately three stories high, stood as waypoints on our journey forward.

At dusk, we set up camp among the ruins of an ancient battlefield. Two walls had survived, standing facing each other across a dried riverbed. It's said that in 121 B.C., Huo Qubing defeated the Xiongnu at this very site. We pitched our tents under the shadow of an ancient beacon tower. In the lingering light of the setting sun, we must have resembled a group of ants, erecting a canopy of dried leaves.

Night fell, enveloping everything in utter darkness and a profound silence. Reclining on the warm sand, we stretched our hands to the heavens as if to touch the stars that filled the sky. They seemed to crowd the vast expanse of the cosmos, stretching all the way to the distant horizon. In unison, we all held our breath, staring, transfixed.

The first hints of the arrival of dusk appeared in the east. Climbing atop a tall sand dune, we witnessed a huge full moon silently ascending into the sky. Our tent was cramped, barely squeezing in eight of us. The others took turns keeping watch in shifts. My turn was between 2 and 3 AM.

I stood guard under the moonlight, wrapped in a thick army coat and grasping a long knife. The icy wind howled and the shifting sands whispered softly, as if invisible herds of horses were neighing in the distance. The sand dunes, beacon towers, and ancient walls seemed to come alive, echoing with sounds indistinguishable as joyous song or mournful wailing. Standing there, at a loss, on one shore of the river of time, in tumultuous plains of sand, I felt the presence of my ancestors.

I often reminisce about the distant times when my ancestors were alive. Back then, there were no cities and no neon lights — only moonlight bathing the tranquil wilderness, the forests, and the ancient caves. The people who prayed there harbored dreams of distant places, endured loneliness and isolation, and nurtured hopes for a joyful future. How would they understand that which would come to follow them? How would we relate to each other — how would I explain who I am?

The True Cost of Honesty

For my master's degree, I studied Economic Law. The most valuable part of my degree was a year-long course in Economics: this made me start to reflect on the costs associated with legal systems and question the necessity of a regulatory body to monitor the government. Years later, as a representative in the Haidian District People's Congress, these considerations laid the groundwork for my engagement with social governance.

Economics and sociology represent thought, and explore the essence of human nature. Law and management studies, on the other hand, are technical fields, concerned with controlling human nature. Philosophy, from its lofty vantage point, reflects on the mortal realm of humanity. Humans are inherently driven by self-interest, rationally seeking to maximize their personal gains. Economics bases its analysis of societal dynamics upon this very axiom. However, the interests which individuals pursue vary. Some pursue the attainment of wealth until the day they die — others would sacrifice their life for the sake of honor. There are other vast worlds lying beyond the realm of rationality — the realms of culture and faith.

As graduation approached, I once again faced the dilemma between reality and my ideals. I took the civil service examination and afterwards, I spent weekends interning in the south. My decision to become a civil servant in the State Council's Legal Affairs Office was driven by a desire to understand government operations.

I ran into trouble at graduation with a computer language course. Almost no student from the humanities took this course seriously — to pass the exams everyone would just copy the answers from textbooks.

However, in high school, I had made a vow that I would never cheat. I could only fill in two of the answers.

Since my early childhood, I was honest, as simple as a blank sheet of paper. But growing up under an authoritarian regime, I gradually learned to lie. This tendency peaked during a crucial exam in my second year of high school. I had performed poorly in the midterms, and my pride drove me to copy the answers of a classmate, surreptitiously, during the finals. My cheating did not escape the attention of Jinshan, a classmate who always spoke his mind and who sat behind me — Jinshan shot me such a scathing look of contempt that I swore never to cheat again.

I wasn't too concerned about my grade for this course until I learned that failing it meant I would not be allowed to graduate. Our kind and beautiful teacher asked me what I intended to do. I admitted that even with a retest, I'd fail. She pointed out that all of the answers were in the book, to which I responded that it was a closed-book test. She thought about this for a moment, then said she would let me take an open-book exam instead. She asked how many points I needed, and I asked how many were needed to pass. Seventy, she said. So, I asked for seventy.

Before long, a bigger problem arose. My dissertation, titled "The Cultural Fallacies in the Localization of Economic Legal Systems," challenged Su Li's theory on China's domestic resources. Not all naturally emerging customs are justifiable. In a climate of oppression, how much is genuinely spontaneous? Consider foot binding, a practice unique to China and which persisted for a millennium. Would anyone argue that foot binding was virtuous?

After three millennia of autocratic rule, the path to rejuvenating Chinese civilization lies in adopting a market economy and constitutional democracy, while simultaneously preserving our rich cultural heritage. This journey, however, is fraught with challenges.

I was open about my views and always refused to speak against my conscience. My advisor sent my thesis to a professor at Renmin University for external review. His six-page critique accused me of advocating for "privatization" and "national nihilism." Unsurprisingly, my thesis was rejected.

The most critical challenge facing China is the political constraints that have stifled China's academic freedom for over half a century.

Professor Cai Yongmin suggested that I seek an external review from Professor Wang Yongping at Sichuan University. That night, I stayed awake the whole night reworking my thesis and then flew out to Chengdu to meet him. I am indebted to both of these professors — mercifully, after Professor Wang's invaluable assistance, my thesis passed an external review. The following day, as soon as I had returned, the Law Department scheduled my thesis defense.

For three and a half hours, from 10.am to 1:30pm, I defended my thesis to a total of five professors, concluding only when everyone became too hungry to continue. More than a dozen of my friends had come along to support me, and they all filled the seats in the spectator gallery. When I had finished, we all left the meeting hall and awaited the verdict together. Some tense minutes later, the decision was

announced: I would receive my graduation certificate, but not my degree. The outcome, it seemed, had been decided in advance.

After hearing the results, I addressed the five professors, my voice choked with emotion. “These past seven years at Lanzhou University have been the most valuable of my life. I could have never expected they would end like this. You have all been my teachers, and every one of you knows that I’m someone that lives for my ideals. I will reflect on my mistakes — but please, I implore you, give me one more chance. I promise you, wherever life takes me, I will make sure to uphold the honor of Lanzhou University.”

Some of the teachers were visibly moved, tears welling in their eyes. One of them proposed a re-vote. My friends and I left the room again, and waited outside. After another few moments, the chair of the defense session exited and told me firmly that the university regulations didn’t permit a second vote. I had to wait for a whole six months and then defend my thesis again.

I underwent a period of deep reflection after this setback, eventually gaining a more lucid and profound understanding of Chinese society. I also acknowledged my shortcomings as a scholar; firstly, my thesis wasn’t as robust as it should have been. Secondly, I had been too arrogant, and I had failed to show the respect owed to my mentors and seniors. The experience also exposed flaws in China’s postgraduate education system. Often, the relationship between academic supervisors and students resembles that of an employer with his laborers. Naturally, this limits opportunities for independent thought and academic exploration.

By the end of July, I faced complications at work, too. Initially, I faced the issue of not having received a degree, but, fortunately, the Ministry of Education deemed my graduation certificate adequate for my role. But soon after starting my job, I ran into fresh challenges — ones of a different nature entirely.

With a few classmates, I organized a forum at Lanzhou University called 'Twenty-One Days' where we hosted discussions on societal issues every three weeks. Once, we held a discussion on the book *China Can Say No*, which was open to the public. During this session, I delivered a heated speech where I sharply criticized hyper-nationalism. This did not go unnoticed: from then on, I was on the radar of the security department. Though I was not a Party member, I would now be drawn into politics.

The 1997 publication of *China Can Say No* sparked a wave of patriotic fervor. In China, this kind of phenomenon erupts periodically every few years. This ancient civilization has been scarred deeply by humiliations and hardships in its modern history; inherently, it longs for its former strength and supremacy. The Chinese crave belonging to a *formidable* collective. Nationalism itself isn't the issue; rather, it's about the direction in which it is channeled. Nationalism must be guided towards the righteous path of democracy and freedom.

Moments of Sincerity

My father passed away in the summer of 1998. I didn’t know about this for some time, though, as my family couldn’t get in contact with me to let me know. My final memory of my father is when I was

leaving home: he saw me out of the front door, and said: “It’s always been difficult to be both filial to one’s parents and fulfill one’s loyalty to the country, ever since ancient times.”

Around this time, my life hit a new low, and I was forced to seek a new direction. I decided to travel to Nanjie Village and carry out a sociological investigation. Only a week later, I found I was struggling to make ends meet, and I started to think about finding work at a nearby company to finance myself while I carried out fieldwork. I approached the chairman of a commercial enterprise; a Mr. Wan Long. After a brief chat with him, he gave me a job as his secretary.

I worked for long hours; waking at six in the morning and returning home exhausted at around eight or nine at night. It felt gratifying to be so busy, and I could see that a future in the corporate world would offer me a stable income and a comfortable life. Yet, my heart was not in it. I was acutely aware that my ideals were straying further and further away from a life in business. So, I decided to leave, aiming to secure a role in a university or research institute.

Thankfully, Henan University of Economics and Law took me in. The Spring Festival holiday in 1999 temporarily interrupted my plans to carry out a grassroots democracy investigation, so, I spent my time revising, preparing for the Ph.D. entrance examination. After I had taken the exam, I considered staying in Beijing to examine the problems with the petitioning system. But staying in Beijing would mean, first of all, dealing with the problem of everyday survival, and finding an ordinary job would mean that most of my efforts would be spent on earning a living. I didn’t want to waste time.

On April 25, crowds surrounded Zhongnanhai, with row after row of people sitting down on the sidewalks that bordered its red walls. Around midday, my good friend Lin Zhenyu rushed over to my flat to tell me: something big was happening at Tiananmen Square. I rushed there that afternoon and remained until the deep hours of the night, watching Chang’an Avenue fill with an endless stream of people as they departed from Zhongnanhai in droves.

Since the winter of 1998, I had begun to pay attention to this religious group Falun Gong. Later, I witnessed the terrible persecution they suffered. This was a religion that originated and grew within China, and, as such, they are an essential component in the future reconstruction of our society.

At the end of April, I found out my results for the doctoral exams. I had failed two out of the three subjects, and according to standards outlined in previous years, this meant I had no hope of being accepted into a PhD. program. I thought for a while of saying goodbye to Su Li, and promising him that I would someday return to Beijing. However, when I arrived at the law school, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I lingered outside for a long time before I turned around, and quietly left.

I didn't resent my fate; I had faith that everything was happening in the way it should. I resolved to stay in Zhengzhou, and devote the next three years to thorough research of grassroots democracy. After that, I would be able to leverage the impact I was building in academia to return to Beijing. In Zhengzhou, I could make a living at universities or social science institutions and still have plenty of free time to devote to research.

After I had secured employment and my living arrangements, I set off to worship at the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum and the Yellow River. In my mind at the time, this was a form of sacred pilgrimage. My life so far had felt like I was climbing a mountain; suddenly, I had missed a step and tumbled down the slopes into a ravine. When I had come to, after my fall, I knew that I needed to reorient myself, pray, and tell my ancestors that I refused to give in. I would never abandon my dreams, no matter how many hardships I was to encounter ahead of me. I was ready, now, to get back up and start anew.

I will never forget those moments of reverence. On the morning of July 10, around 9 am, I solemnly ascended the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum, my steps heavy and deliberate. In the midst of a ceaseless stream of people, I stood in silence before Dr. Sun's vault, meditating, "Here I am, Dr. Sun..." At some point, imperceptibly, my vision slid out of focus. Later, I went out and sat on the stone steps, gazing at the sprawling expanse of hazy mountains and reflecting on all the turbulence endured by the Chinese people throughout the last century.

I returned to Zhengzhou on the evening of July 11, and set off early the next morning to see the Yellow River. Oh, timeless Mother River of our civilization, I am coming to see you.

While on the bus that would take me to the river, I received a message from my friend Wang Jianxun, telling me that I had been accepted to a doctoral program.

Fortune really does favor the devout. We cannot know what destiny holds in store for us; we can only have faith. No matter what we encounter in life, we should not ask for more; we should just express our gratitude. Our universe is brimming with miracles; maybe this too bore the traces of one. I had once thought that I could use a doctorate in law to enter into politics. Down in the trough of my life, a gentle tug from the divine helped me pass that test.

My Cherished Teacher

At Peking University, my friend Wang Jianxun accidentally discovered an admission letter addressed to me in the law school office. The university was on summer break and couldn't reach me to deliver it.

That night, I called Professor Su Li for the first time. We had never had any previous contact, and had met each other only once during my interview. I asked him, "I heard I got in?" He replied, "Proud of yourself, aren't you?"

I had been lucky. Over twenty people had applied for Professor Su Li's PhD program, including a classmate from my master's program who had both outperformed me in exams and had frequent contact with Dr Su. Later, Su Li mentioned he'd chosen me because he disliked students who tried to ingratiate themselves with him.

Next, I took care of all the necessary formalities for my program, and went traveling in Tibet. Squeezing onto an overcrowded bus, we traversed the breathtaking Yarlung Tsangpo River Valley. The fields of barley lining the valley unfurled gently like Van Gogh's harvest paintings, only splashed with vibrant green hues. As he drove, the driver sang "I am a child of Tibet." At every turn in the road, when a Buddha statue would be revealed under the cliff, the bus erupted in cheers and whoops.

I arrived at Peking University at the end of August. Not long after I got there, Prof. Zhu left for Harvard in the US. Teng Biao and I were handed off to be advised by Prof. He Weifang.

I took great pride in having studied under two prominent scholars at Peking University's Law School, each a proponent of different schools of thought within legal studies. He Weifang championed a tradition of enlightenment which spans over a century in China, advocating, amidst ongoing disorder, for more education and dissemination of common sense in China's journey towards modern civilization. Conversely, Zhu Suli cautioned against the idealism of intellectuals. China had its own practical circumstances and would discover its own unique path. In his view, China's existing system possessed its own rationality.

After graduation, my contact with Professor He increased, as we both believed in the promotion of common sense.

A year later, when Zhu Suli returned to China, we met up for weekly academic sessions, dedicating time to reading and discussions. Zhu never took on the role of a demanding boss but instead focused on nurturing our personal and academic growth. My academic journey, which began at Peking University, was significantly influenced by Zhu, along with mentors Teng Biao and Yu Jiang.

Sometimes our discussions veered into politics, leading to intense debates with no clear winner. On one occasion, just as I reached the office door, I saw Zhu Suli angrily throwing his chopsticks onto the floor, berating his junior colleagues because of an article I had written criticizing Chairman Mao.

It was clear that our journeys were destined to part ways. Our individual temperaments were too different. My PhD thesis was a direct critique of his work. Later, we both deliberately avoided topics related to Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution. Each of us was assured beyond convincing in our own beliefs, and so we came to understand that further discussions on these topics were no longer possible.

Zhu Suli was famously stubborn. Professor He once told us of an incident from Zhu's childhood, where his pet chicken was killed and served up for dinner. Zhu never ate chicken again. I personally witnessed his infamous inflexibility: during a trip to Wuhan, where a group of us students accompanied him on a trip to watch him lecture, he turned down a dinner invite from a high-ranking judge. He had already made plans to watch *Princess Pearl* instead.

Zhu even took the time to discuss my application to join the Communist Party with me. Back in those times, it was rare that people held high hopes for communism, but he took my request seriously.

There wasn't a shred of dishonesty in my application, and none of the customary high-flying rhetoric. It simply conveyed my support for the reform and opening-up policies, and my desire to serve my country and her society in part of this transformation. Zhu Suli questioned me on my motivations: membership to the Communist Party was a matter of faith. Could I guarantee that I would obey the Party's orders during crucial historical moments? I responded; what if a scenario like the Cultural Revolution were to happen

again? My loyalty lies with my conscience. I could not commit to blind obedience. He told me, Party members must be brave enough to confront the tides of history. I assured him, I will.

In March 2001, I traveled to Tieling to provide my assistance to a group of villagers in a rights defense case. After this, the Ministry of Education began to exert pressure on Peking University, urging that they consider expelling me. It was very clear that Zhu Suli disapproved of my “trouble-making” — however, it was through his support that I was allowed to continue my studies. Later, one of my teachers told me that Zhu had outlined his position with the university very clearly: if they were to expel Xu Zhiyong, he stated, he would step down as dean.

Zhu never mentioned this to me. Though he disagreed with my views, he respected my intellectual freedom. He didn't agree with my behavior, but I was his student; and he protected his students' safety at all costs. That very day, Zhu Suli invited me to his office, where he painstakingly helped me write a letter of self-criticism addressed to the university.

After I graduated, we drifted apart. Yu Jiang, Tengbiao and I were facing charges of deportation for our political activities. Together, we had launched a court case to challenge the legal grounds of the attempted repatriation.

Zhu wrote to me personally to criticize my actions, arguing that a scholar's *raison d'être* lies in analyzing and elucidating society - not in reforming it. He argued that I had begun to meddle in society before gaining a serious understanding of how it operates.

One day in May, in 2005, the teachers gathered to have a meeting. When Su Li asked who they were waiting for to begin, one of his supervisees replied that Teng Biao and Xu Zhiyong were on the way. Su Li replied brusquely that there was no point in having a meeting with the two of us. “I'll leave when they get here.” Teng Biao and I were very sad when we heard about this later. From that day onwards, we were closed out of the teachers' circle.

A few months later, I went to the law faculty to have a meeting with Professor Chen Xingliang, and decided, while I was there, to meet with Professor Su. After knocking on the door, he called out for me to enter, and I walked in. He didn't invite me to sit down. I asked him directly: “Professor Su, why didn't you allow me and Teng Biao to attend the last meeting?”

“I thought about it. Our paths are not aligned.” He said, with a little difficulty; “For that reason, it's better that we minimize the contact we have with each other.”

I replied, earnestly; “We just wanted to convey our respects, genuinely. I mean that.”

“Thank you. I'm grateful for your defense of my thesis last year. I'm grateful to both of you, for the birthday presents you send me every year. But you've already graduated from this university — and we are taking different paths in our lives. I'm disappointed by the route you're choosing to take — but you're adults now, and this is your decision. Let's each go our separate ways.” His voice was soft.

“Okay.” I shut the door behind me quietly as I left.

On April Fool's Day in 2006, Professor Su Li's birthday, Teng Biao and I went to the Time Grocery store to pick out a gift for him. We took our time choosing and eventually settled on a charming little piece of pottery — four cats standing in a row playing instruments. We added a small note inside, on which Teng Biao wrote: “In life, some beautiful things are everlasting. Happy Birthday, and thank you.”

We had chosen our words carefully and deliberately. “Thank you.” Full stop. In this nation, in these times, we're all rather odd in our own ways, each of us stubborn, compassionate, and simple. Strangely enough, Teng Biao and I were the only two students in Su Li's first class.

Su firmly refused the birthday gift over the phone. We tried to visit him to deliver the present, but, sadly, we couldn't even remember his house number. We searched and searched right until the middle of the night, when we finally had to abandon the effort. I said to Teng Biao, someday, when we've made it in our careers, we'll go to see Teacher Su Li again. By then he'll be an old man, and when he throws our gift out, we can just sneakily put it back in front of his door.

The Trip to Tieling

In March 2001, I was approached by a man called Liang Guilin from Dizhenyunsuo Village, in the suburbs of Tieling, Liaoning. The Shenha Expressway's construction had led to the expropriation of 678 *mu* (around 100 acres) of the villagers' land, and all of the compensation owed to them was embezzled by local officials. Liang had put himself forward to petition on behalf of his fellow villagers, and he wanted my assistance.

I accompanied Liang Guilin to Dizhenyunsuo Village. After two days of thorough investigation, the crux of the issue became clear to me: in an attempt to cover up the misallocated compensation funds, the village committee planned to redistribute the land within the entire village, reallocating land from those who had more, to compensate those who had less. This attempted balancing of discrepancies would mean the eighth group of villagers would lose 80 *mu* of land. Naturally, the villagers opposed this.

I made an effort to help resolve the issue from a neutral standpoint — a move which, in effect, inadvertently aided the local government. Gathering the representatives of the villagers, I evaluated the situation and suggested a middle-ground solution: allocate a portion of the land and demand appropriate compensation from the township government. The corruption issue within the original village committee was undergoing inspection by the relevant authorities, making further progress difficult. The best course of action for everyone, I reasoned, was to take the elections seriously, elect a village committee that the villagers could trust, and then establish standardized accounting procedures and a robust supervisory body. This way, corruption would be prevented in the future.

Having persuaded the village representatives of this plan, I convened a village assembly, hoping to resolve the conflict there and then. I really wanted to find a practical, lasting solution for the villagers before I left.

On the afternoon of March 24, two to three hundred villagers gathered in the courtyard of the Dizhenyunsuo Village committee. I was told that officials from the township were on their way, so I went out to welcome them. The group that confronted me was hostile. Straight away, the Tieling City Petition Bureau Director challenged me, barking: "What authority do you have to come here!" Incensed, I replied, "As a citizen of the People's Republic of China, I have every right to be here!" This sparked a heated debate in front of the hundreds of villagers. Infuriated, the group wrestled and pushed me into a police car parked outside the yard. A big group of villagers immediately encircled it, shouting. From the back seat, I urged the villagers to step aside, and not to obstruct the car. A convoy of police cars, sirens blaring, escorted me to the local police station.

At some point, the villagers had contacted my roommates by phone and made them aware of my situation. In response, my classmates from Peking University launched a rescue operation on the Wuming and Hutu BBS forums, bombarding the police station with phone calls, demanding information and answers about me, and calling for a march.

Eventually, the deputy bureau chief came to me for a talk. I was honest about my position, explaining that I was there to help everyone. Six hours later, they were forced to release me. Though I was cautioned against returning to the village, I stated that I had to — otherwise the villagers would worry.

Snowflakes started to drift in the night sky as I caught a taxi to the village. I was greeted by a crowd of villagers, waiting anxiously for my return at Liang Guilin's home. As I stepped out of the car, they rushed over, and I could see that some of the elders were on the verge of tears. I said my goodbyes to them. Looking out of the window of the taxi as we departed the village, I noticed some shadowy, unidentified figures lurking on the streets.

The next day, I was back at school. Almost exactly as I arrived, Tieling officials showed up at Peking University. They accused me of causing social unrest, and asked the university to take disciplinary action against me. They also used their connections to involve the State Security Ministry, who in turn referred the case to the Ministry of Education. The MIE then began to put pressure on Peking University. Fortunately, my supervisor once again stood firm against this pressure, allowing me to continue my studies.

However, I felt deeply regretful that I was not able to provide the help the villagers needed. Liang Guilin was later sentenced to a year of re-education through labor, a fact which pained me very deeply. This incident brought me into contact with someone: Wang Lijun, then the police chief of Tieling City. It was probably his directive that led to my detention at the police station. In late 2011, he was appointed as an adjunct professor at the Law School of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, becoming, in a way, my colleague. During his inauguration ceremony, he expressed his respect and admiration for me. Just months later, he sought refuge in the American consulate and was subsequently sentenced to 15 years in prison. He appeared in court in a wheelchair. We had represented individuals he had wrongfully persecuted. I wondered, once, did he ever think about who would defend him when his time came?

At Peking University

Many of my happiest memories were days spent in the company of Teng Biao and Yu Jiang.

Teng Biao and I were students under the same mentor. Joining Peking University in 1991, he spent eleven years there: taking his undergraduate in Law, master's in Library Management, and his doctorate in Jurisprudence. During this time, he absorbed brilliant ideas, blossomed into a poet, and entered into a blissful romantic relationship. Together, their most treasured possession is a box full of love letters which they exchanged during their dating.

Teng's worldview underwent a radical change two years into his studies. Astonishingly, someone had dared to display a big-character poster at the Triangle Area. With their heads held high, they were escorted to the university's security office.

Yu Jiang, after completing his university studies, worked as a police officer for three years. One time, after having too much to drink, he shared a story from his time as an officer: he had once violently beaten a robbery suspect and then, turning to leave, broke down in tears.

This large, imposing man, who started his career at a local police station, eventually rose to become an academic elite at Peking University's Law Faculty. During his three years as a doctoral student, he published more than twenty academic papers, distinguishing himself among our cohort of Ph.D. students. Thus, upon graduation, at just 30 years old, he was immediately recruited as a professor at Huazhong University of Science and Technology.

I first got to know Yu Jiang properly on May 24, 2000, during a sit-in on the lawn of Jinyuan. There were 108 doctoral students at the Law School, and many of my classmates were strangers to me. Earlier that month, a first-year female student at Peking University's Changping campus had been murdered. An enormous group of students gathered in mourning for the girl, and also to express their dissatisfaction with the Changping campus. The university authorities, fearing an incident, tried to prevent the memorial. Soon, what was a criminal case turned into a student rally in protest on the Jinyuan lawn. During the rally, I delivered a speech, expressing my thoughts on the incident and criticizing how the university administration was handling it. Someone began videotaping it, and many of the surrounding students yelled out to smash the person's camera. "Don't be afraid of being filmed," I urged them; "our actions here are honest and transparent."

Eventually, the incident was resolved peacefully, and the Changping campus rally became a thing of the past. During that assembly, though, I had received a note from Yu Jiang, who cautioned me to be careful about my safety. Just like this, the event at Jinyuan lawn had crystallized the beginnings of Peking University Law Faculty's very own "Three Musketeers." The three of us were often absorbed in discussions about liberalism, the New Left, rule of law, democracy, tradition, culture, language, postmodernism, and much, much more. For me, my philosophical awakening took place in a small pub by the Weiming Lake.

Our “petty cash fund” came into existence for our meetings. Initially, these began at a Sichuanese restaurant near the East Gate, where we’d discuss academia over spicy fish boiled in chili oil, and Erguotou rice wine. Eventually, that place got razed, and we moved to Laohudong near the South Gate. When Laohudong also faced demolition, we shifted to Lao Ma's near the West Gate. Soon, in the spring before graduation, even Lao Ma's was demolished. We ended up in the Triangle Area eateries, which we had once scorned. The benefit was that it was close to Weiming Lake, so we would drink until the restaurant closed and then continue our debate on the shores of the lake.

On one day in May, shortly before graduation, we had finished drinking at about one o'clock in the morning. We were riding our bicycles around Weiming Lake, singing, when suddenly a young man rushed over to us, saying that someone had tried to commit suicide. We abandoned our bicycles and raced over to see. I was the first to arrive and saw that a girl had jumped into the lake. I plunged into the lake and grabbed her by the arm, and the three of us pulled her over to shore. Fortunately, the lake was not deep, and we only got wet up to our waists.

We all went over to Yu Jiang's place on the 27th floor so that the girl could change into dry clothes. Slowly, she began to speak with us. Her boyfriend was studying for his master's at Peking University, and she had moved to Beijing to be with him, leaving behind a stable job. Following this move, she had struggled to find work, and the stress led to near constant arguments with her boyfriend. That evening, the latest argument with her boyfriend had left her utterly despondent, to the point where she felt that suicide was her only option.

That dawn, on the walk back from Yu Jiang's place to my dormitory, I felt a surge of pride. A strange thought then occurred to me: over these three years, my story by the Weiming Lake seemed to have come full circle.

Jubilant skating on ice on the eve of the new millennium, a voice calling out for a free and powerful China. Farewells to brothers, a drunken cycle ride resulting in a chipped front tooth. Being snagged by security on a midnight swim, praying for baby fish to have a joyous life under the shade of weeping willows in spring. Singing for the whole night long, gathered together in a stone boat. Gazing up at a rainbow in the dawn ... These are all memories from when I sailed through the beautiful harbor of youth. Its pools of spiritual water are like countless pensive eyes, as rich and vast as the sky.

A Common God

I first logged on to the “Yi Ta Hu Tu” (“一塔湖图”) BBS (Bulletin Board System) in the spring of 2000. This forum opened up a whole new world for me - finally, a place where I didn't need to keep my thoughts locked away in my own head. The arrival of the internet era brought a haven for free thought and expression.

My login ID on the YTHT and PKU Weiming BBS systems was “sunnypku.” My screen name was “Free China” and my signature line read “Living for a Dream.” Here, I soon came to know other users like “monic,” “bridged,” “bambi,” and “puccini.” We all gained a reputation online, known for being “rightists” who frequently got into heated disputes with “leftists.”

The night of September 11, 2001 saw the "YTHT" message board filled with images of America's World Trade Center, caught in a fiery blaze. At first, I couldn't believe it, convinced it must be a prank. Soon after, it was confirmed to be a terrorist attack. 9/11 marked a pivotal turning point in history; for the next decade or so, the ideological Cold War was put on hold as the civilized world focused on combating the pressing threat of extremism.

Numerous online users celebrated. For me, their exultations perfectly revealed the deep-seated rage of society's downtrodden. Authoritarianism breeds a facade of arrogance that only thinly veneers its own fragility.

In response to those cheering the incident, I joined "monic," and several other users to issue a signed statement. Together, we condemned the terrorist attack and called on others to cherish life.

Over the next two days, I got into heated online arguments with many people. I firmly opposed the terrorist attack and lambasted those who rejoiced it as allies of terror. The article that drew the most intense online criticism was one entitled "To the Henchmen of Terrorists" which contained many fierce statements, such as: "It would be too kind to call you fascists. You don't deserve to be called human, let alone Chinese. I'm ashamed of people like you, without a shred of conscience, and the way you insult the dignity of Chinese people infuriates me."

Later, I came to regret such statements. It took me some years to realize that everyone in this world has their fate and role. Those who were cheering represent a different value system. Often in this world, there is no simplistic division between right or wrong; rather, we must observe all the diverse aspects of the issue and the great variety of roles played by different actors. The notion of right or wrong is contingent upon the circumstances and opinion of the majority.

For example, left-wing and right-wing perspectives each see a different world, identify different problems, and propose distinct solutions. In different times and spaces, as conditions change, so do the outcomes. Nothing is fixed. Things which are deemed wrong today are done so in light of the past and present circumstances, but values shift as societies evolve. The ideas advocated by one side which are considered wrong today, may be acceptable to a society in the future.

In terms of 9/11, both Bush and Bin Laden held firmly to their beliefs, each behaving as befitting of their respective roles. Should we argue that Bush represented justice, while Bin Laden represented evil, or vice versa? No: it is better to see each of them as being committed to very different sets of beliefs within humanity. Justice in this world is agreed upon by the majority. Everyone fights for their own cause of justice, experiencing the highs and lows within their respective roles, and reflecting on these processes from a higher perspective. Anything can become a belief, and the spectrum of human faiths is incredibly broad and varied. The resolution to clashes between civilizations lies not in one side gaining supremacy over the other, but about reaching a higher understanding of the divine and cultivating a more inclusive journey.

Before graduating, I wrote "On World Government" and "Our Common God." These two seemingly whimsical works were more than academic musings from a bystander; they were the declarations of an activist who was establishing his goals.

"On World Government" conceptualized a new order for humanity's future. Wherever there are human groupings, there is a need for public power, a power broadly exists throughout the structural levels of human society. What international society needs now is a public power that transcends national borders.

In "Towards a World Government," I conceptualized a new order for the future of humankind. It detailed an improved global community, where humanity is governed by a transnational public authority. This would include a fully representative democratic decision-making body to serve at the head of government; armed forces to prevent invasions and maintain order; judicial organs to resolve disputes and punish crime; economic institutions to reduce trade barriers, protect against financial risk, and coordinate economic development in each country and region; and environmental protection bodies, a space-exploration body, and social insurance institutions to eradicate poverty.

World government is no novel, utopian idea, and neither is it something that needs to be created out of thin air. Rather, it is something that has already begun to appear as a response to the changing times. Looking at the institutional structure of world government, the institutions all currently exist in various forms, albeit in their infancy. For example, the United Nations serves as a decision-making body and the Hague Court serves as a judicial institution.

So, humanity needs a clearer consensus on its formulation. Building a public authority that transcends the nation-state requires initiative and concerted effort. Every effort should be exerted to avoid the creation of an all-powerful totalitarian system, but instead focused on affording necessary power to the public. With technological advancement, economic integration, and the democratization of China, we are witnessing this trend unfold.

"Our Common God" is about my spiritual realizations. I had a kind of epiphany on one summer evening: all religions worship the same God. Across different eras and regions, God appointed messengers to spread the gospel and impart spiritual wisdom. These envoys were human, and thus flawed. As a consequence of their limitations, people attributed different names to God, each believing their own faith to be the only correct one, and condemning other forms of worship. Of course, then, this led to religious wars and insurmountable conflicts.

Civilizational conflict can be prevented if only humanity were to recognize that the different religions are merely vestiges of historical culture and different paths by which people of different temperaments come to understand God.

In the years that followed, I read widely about different religions, seeking to understand all of the different paths humanity has taken to reach God. During this research, I discovered Sufism and the Bahá'í Faith.

All of this is in the past now. Humanity needs a new path, one that embraces all major religions and the scientific advancements of the past three centuries. As the ancient sages dreamed, humanity is one family.

Human social order needs the establishment of democracy and the rule of law. Building a transnational world government to resolve cultural conflict and common human problems like environmental protection is not a far-off, unattainable dream. It is a long journey ahead, comprising two separate stages. First, we must forge a new China, one with democracy and the rule of law. Second, we must assist in the creation of a world government, to herald the next era of human civilization.