Institute of Humanities and
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HISTORICAL ESSAY

What They Left Behind

—War, Revolution, and Memory in a Family from Northern Shanxi, China

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From 2010 onward, the elders of my grandparents' generation began to die, one after another. These ordinary people, born in the early years of the Republic of China, had grown up amid war and lived through the Beiyang era, the Nationalist government, the Japanese invasion, and the establishment of Communist rule. They had now disappeared entirely from the stage of history.

After my maternal grandfather and grandmother died, they left behind a small wooden box. There was nothing valuable inside, only things my grandfather had used during his lifetime: an old watch, an old-fashioned razor, a few tools whose years of use I could not begin to count, some photographs and negatives, a retirement certificate, and a yellowed property deed. There was also an old newspaper, folded by my grandfather around photographs and negatives of himself and my grandmother when they were young.





Later, I unfolded that newspaper, little by little. It was from 1985 and carried news about Hu Yaobang. I do not know why my grandfather used it to wrap the photographs. Perhaps there was no particular

reason. Perhaps it was simply an old newspaper that happened to be within reach that day. Yet sometimes I find myself staring at it.

Decades earlier, my grandfather had folded it with his own hands and placed the photographs of himself and my grandmother inside. Decades later, I was the one who opened it again. Between those two moments lay a man's old age and death, and my entire childhood. Gradually, I came to realize that when someone dies, what most readily survives is not necessarily the story of their life.



(Possessions left by my maternal grandfather and grandmother, including photographs and work documents)

After an elder dies, their children deal with the savings, furniture, and property. Sometimes siblings quarrel over sums of money that are not even very large. But hardly anyone quarrels over an old photograph. Still less over a razor used for decades.

A yellowed retirement certificate, a watch that has stopped, an old newspaper kept for reasons no one knows: none has much monetary value. And so they are all the more likely to disappear.

Only later did I understand:

An estate has heirs. Memory has no legal heir.

An inheritance will eventually be spent; a house will change hands. But why someone left home when young, what wars they lived through, what they feared, what they said, what they kept—once the last person who knows these things dies, they may disappear forever.

I want to preserve these stories of my paternal grandparents and my maternal grandparents.

My Paternal Grandfather's Revolution: Escaping Poverty and Injustice

My paternal grandfather, Cui Bin, was born in 1925, the fourteenth year of the Republic of China. His home was in Shengouyao Village, Zhangxihe Township, Tianzhen County, Shanxi. I went back there later. Rows of dilapidated earthen cave dwellings still stood. The loess walls had collapsed, and weeds grew from the cracks. Some dwellings still had wooden lattice windows, though the paper that once covered them was long gone. I stood there taking many photographs. When I showed them to friends, they thought they were looking at a prehistoric human settlement.



(Cave dwellings in Shengouyao Village, Tianzhen County, Datong, Shanxi Province. Photograph by the author, 2011)

This was the kind of place where my paternal grandfather grew up.

His mother died young, leaving his father to raise several children alone. How poor were they? My paternal grandmother later said they were so poor that people bullied them. As a child, my grandfather tended sheep for others. He had spent two or three years at a traditional private school and could write and do a little accounting. The family said he was quick-minded. In the countryside of that time, that small measure of literacy may later have changed his whole life.

My paternal grandmother once told me why he joined the revolution. She said the family was too poor, bullied and looked down on in the village. She put it very simply: **if a family had money and land, who would go and join the revolution?** I have always remembered that sentence.

Another story was later told in the family. While tending sheep as a young man, my grandfather met an Eighth Route Army cadre passing through the village. The man told him that the Communist army was fighting to win a country for the poor. He urged him to join the revolution. My grandfather later invited this cadre home for a meal made with yellow millet flour.

In time, my grandfather really did leave the village. He went in search of the army that had promised to win a country for the poor. Looking back now, it is easy to write all this as an orderly progression: poor peasant—joining the revolution—becoming a cadre. But the young man tending sheep in Shengouyao probably had no idea where he would end up. He was simply very poor. He wanted to leave. He wanted to escape a place where poverty offered no hope.





(A temple at the entrance to Shengouyao Village, my paternal grandfather's hometown, later converted into a school. Photograph by the author)

Working for the Communist Party

By 1948, my paternal grandfather was working for the local Communist administration around Zhangxihe Township in Tianzhen County. At the township office of the Sixth District in Zhangxihe, he was responsible for collecting grain for the Communist forces and also took part in local armed activities. Later, he led guerrillas or militia as well. The family told the story of one battle. They had surrounded a man named Bai Yucai, a leader of a local Nationalist armed force in Tianzhen County. Fleeing capture, he hid in a cave, shot and killed several militiamen surrounding it, and finally turned his gun on himself.

My paternal grandmother remembered another side of it. After my grandfather left to join the Communists, she was afraid he would be captured. She said Nationalist forces and landlords' "return-to-the-village corps" would enter the village looking for Communists. For a time, she even thought he was dead, because a rumor in the village said the Nationalists had killed him. Today, the word "revolution" readily brings to mind victory, defeat, political power, and the course of history. But for a young woman left in a village, revolution sometimes meant only this:

Would her husband come home tonight?

The New Regime

After 1949, my paternal grandfather went to Zhangjiakou, then the capital of Chahar Province. It was not his first time there. When he was younger, before Japan had surrendered, poverty had driven him there to earn a living, and he spent a few months as an apprentice in a shop. Back then, he was just a poor boy from a mountain village looking for something to eat. When he returned, he was an employee of the new regime. He worked as an ordinary staff member in an institution connected with the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Chahar Province. When Chahar Province was abolished in 1952, he was reassigned to Youyu County in Shanxi. From then on, he worked in Youyu for decades, until retirement. Over the years, his workplaces included the Rural Work Committee, the Water Conservancy Bureau, the Organization Department, and the Political Consultative Conference.



(The site of the old county town of Youyu, Shanxi Province. Photograph by the author)

But his path was not always upward. The Cultural Revolution came. My grandfather was subjected to public denunciation, made to wear a tall dunce cap, and sent down to do manual labor. The bitterest irony was that those few months as an apprentice in Zhangjiakou in his youth became a problem again. Zhangjiakou had been under Japanese occupation at the time. A poor boy in his teens had worked in a shop for a few months so that he could eat. Decades later, he had to explain:

Why had he been there? Whom had he worked for? Had he had any connection with the Japanese? My grandfather gave an account of that period. It became part of the investigation into his past. To whom does a person's life belong? A small thing done in youth to stay alive could, more than twenty years later, suddenly be given a new meaning by another era. A past someone thought long behind them could return to seek them out.

In the later years of the Cultural Revolution, large numbers of veteran cadres were rehabilitated. My grandfather, too, was formally restored to work and became head of the Organization Department. His final post was chairman of the Political Consultative Conference.



(Group photograph of the members of the First Youyu County Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. My paternal grandfather is third from the right in the front row)



(Group photograph of the chairman and vice-chairmen at the 1984 Political Consultative Conference meeting. My paternal grandfather is at the far right)

I once found a yellowed color photograph at home. Zhao Ziyang, then premier of the State Council, was seated in the middle, surrounded by local officials. My paternal grandfather stood at the far right of the second row. He was chairman of the Political Consultative Conference at the time. Zhao Ziyang visited Youyu County in late January 1985. I set this photograph beside the ones I later took in Shengouyao. One shows abandoned cave dwellings in the loess. The other shows neatly dressed local officials with a national leader. My grandfather is among them. **One photograph records where he came from. The other records where he eventually arrived.** Between the two photographs lies a man’s life.



Youyu County officials with Premier Zhao Ziyang, January 1985. Zhao Ziyang is in the center of the front row; my paternal grandfather is at the far right of the second row.

My Maternal Grandfather's Story

My maternal grandfather took an entirely different path. Liang Shengmao was born in 1931, the twentieth year of the Republic of China. His ancestral home was Wujiayao Village in Huairen County, Shanxi. Unlike my paternal grandfather's family, his family had not been poor for generations. In the late Qing period, his ancestors had gone to Beijing to open a pawnshop and made money. They also owned property in Tianjin before returning to Shanxi. But later generations managed their affairs badly and gradually squandered the family wealth. By my maternal grandfather's generation, the family was very poor. His father, too, died young. So both my grandfathers ended up as poor children, but by entirely different routes. One family seemed never to have been wealthy. The other had once possessed things and then lost them, little by little.

Sometimes history is not about how a nation rises and falls, but simply about how a family spends everything its ancestors left behind.



（*Family photograph of my maternal grandparents. In the center of the front row is my maternal grandmother's mother, with my maternal grandmother on the left and my maternal grandfather on the right. The second and third rows include their children, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law.*）

A Japanese Army Convoy and the Cheers of Children

My maternal grandfather saw Japanese troops as a child. He told me about a very, very long convoy of Japanese military vehicles. They came along the mountain valley, one after another, seemingly without end. The village children ran to the roadside, because the Japanese soldiers on the vehicles would throw down sweets. Excited, the children ran alongside, cheering and picking up sweets from the ground. My grandfather picked them up too. These children did not know what a war of invasion was. They did not even know why an army had appeared in their hometown. They knew only this: **the vehicles were coming. The men on them were throwing sweets. Everyone went to pick them up.** Sometimes a war enters a child's memory as a piece of candy.

My maternal grandfather also remembered gunfire. There was a Japanese garrison nearby. One night, guerrillas from somewhere he did not know attacked, and both sides opened fire. He did not know how many people died either. Decades later, all that remained in his memory was the gunfire filling the night sky.

Around the time of Japan's surrender, my maternal grandfather also went briefly to Zhangjiakou to earn a living. There, he saw a different kind of Japanese soldier. They had been defeated. In groups of seven or eight, hungry as beggars, they searched the streets for food. He remembered them asking in Chinese with a Japanese accent:

"Any yellow millet flour? Any yellow millet flour?"

At the beginning of the war, poor Chinese children chased Japanese military vehicles to pick up sweets. At its end, hungry Japanese soldiers begged Chinese people for food. History books tell us when a war began and when it ended. What ordinary people remember may be only this:

Who was asking whom for a bite to eat.

A "Deserter" from the People's Liberation Army, Trying to Stay Alive

What truly changed my maternal grandfather's life happened during the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. Communist troops came to Wujiayao Village in Huairen County to recruit soldiers. In telling the story, the family did not shy away from a very blunt expression: **"rounding up men for forced conscription."** Many young people are surprised to hear this. Wasn't it only the Nationalists who forced men into the army? In fact, the Communists did so too. But it is the victors who have the power to interpret history.

My maternal grandfather was about fifteen or sixteen. The conscription took place around 1946–1947, when the civil war dragged China into years of extreme brutality and bloodshed. When the People's Liberation Army took him away, his mother was beside herself with grief. As the Chinese saying goes, better to be a dog in times of peace than a person in times of turmoil. In an age of war, a human life was worth no more than a blade of grass. At fifteen or sixteen, my grandfather was supporting his mother with the meager income he earned by gathering scraps of coal at the mines in Wujiayao. I do not know whether the army that claimed to be fighting to win a country for the poor ever considered how a poor, aging mother was to survive without her child.

At noon, my maternal grandfather left the village with the troops. Another boy from his hometown happened to be in the group. The two agreed: they would run away that night. And that night, taking advantage of lax guarding, they did escape. My grandfather dared not go home. He knew that if he did, he would probably be hunted down again. So he fled to the village where his older sister lived and never

returned to his home village. Later, Communist personnel did indeed search the family home in Wujiayao several times, trying to find the “deserter.”

His sister’s family had a sand-casting workshop. It was there that the boy who had run away learned the trade. Many years later, he became a sand-casting worker at the Youyu Machinery Factory. He did that work for the rest of his working life and trained many apprentices. A person’s fate is a strange thing. What if there had been no conscription that day? What if my grandfather had not escaped? What if he had not gone to his sister’s home afterward? What if her family had not had that workshop? The master caster who later spent decades in the machinery factory might never have existed.

Sometimes the steadiest occupation of a person’s life begins with the most desperate flight of their youth.



(My maternal grandfather’s work ID, trade union membership card, and retirement certificate. The union card bears the words “Workers of the world, unite!”)

After Liberation, Workers Were Revolutionaries Too

My maternal grandfather entered regular employment around 1949. His retirement papers state: **"Year of entry into revolutionary work: 1949. Continuous length of service: 36 years."** His status, however, was simple: **worker.** For decades afterward, his life revolved around the factory. As a master sand caster at the machinery factory, he worked himself to exhaustion to meet the targets set by its leaders under the planned economy. He was very skilled and trained more than a hundred apprentices. After more than ten years of hard work and frugal living, my maternal grandparents finally bought a house of their own near the eastern wall of the county town.



(This 1964 property deed records my maternal grandfather's purchase of the courtyard property for 100 yuan)

Then came the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps to emphasize the pure revolutionary character of the working class, whenever disgraced cadres, "capitalist roaders," intellectuals, or "counter-revolutionaries" were paraded through the streets, the leaders would go to the factory to find workers to beat them. The iron fists of the working class were to educate these people of "impure class background." My maternal grandmother said that whenever workers were recruited to beat people, my grandfather was never asked, because they knew he was honest and kind and could not bring himself to do it. They always chose the ruthless ones.

The Working Class Was Abandoned

After my maternal grandfather retired, the machinery factory was restructured. China was also entering its first waves of mass layoffs. The state-owned factory was bought by its own leaders, who then sold it on, turned it into large sums of cash, and pocketed the proceeds. The pensions they had promised the retired workers were never paid. My maternal grandparents' house was plain, even somewhat run-down. I vaguely remember my grandfather sitting there with several other retired workers, discussing the wording of letters. They wrote to county officials and petitioned the authorities. One letter after another. For their pensions. And for a promise once made to workers and never kept.

I remember my maternal grandfather picking up a finished petition letter and reading it word by word. I was too young then to know what reform of state-owned enterprises meant, what retirement benefits were, or why a few workers who were already old had to keep sitting together and writing to the government. I just watched them write. Only many years later did I understand that this, too, was history. Whenever society undergoes upheaval and change, the weakest classes and groups are always the first to be sacrificed. It has always been so. But when history happens before our eyes, we usually do not know to call it history.



(My maternal grandfather's retirement certificate records 36 years of service when he retired in 1985, with a pension that should have been 78.75 yuan per month)

My Maternal Grandmother's Memories of War: A Row of Heads Hanging on the City Wall

My maternal grandmother's war was different from my grandfather's. Her family lived at the foot of the wall of Weiyuan Town in Youyu County. As a child, she saw Japanese aircraft. She once recalled that one day a roar suddenly came from the sky. Soon people were shouting that Japanese planes were coming. Everyone was terrified and ran into the woods. She ran too. The planes circled a few times, then flew away.

She also remembered Japanese soldiers. She remembered that they ate well and disdained the coarse grains ordinary people lived on. But they sought out young women and new brides, and the women were afraid of them. She remembered something more terrible as well. During the Japanese occupation, people were arrested. Later, when she went into town, she saw a row of severed heads hanging at the entrance through the wall of the county town.

Many years later, when I consulted local sources, I learned that these were members of the local Communist underground organization. After the Communist Party launched the large-scale Hundred Regiments Offensive, the Japanese army dealt the entire underground county Party committee a devastating blow. The whole committee was wiped out. My maternal grandmother knew nothing then of an "underground county Party committee" or the Hundred Regiments Offensive.

What a little girl saw was this:

Heads hanging on the city wall.



(The wall of Youyu County town. Photograph by the author, 2022)

The Nationalists Came, and the Grain Was Gone

After the Japanese left, the war did not end. My maternal grandmother remembered the arrival of Nationalist troops. She said people called them the "diehard army." The term had in fact come from Communist propaganda and passed into common usage. She said that at first she thought the Japanese were finally gone and at least the newcomers were "our own people." But these troops needed to eat too. They went to people's homes looking for grain.

Once, the Nationalists came again to search the house for food. My maternal grandmother's mother said there was none left. Even so, the soldiers found half a sack of wheat flour hidden in the cellar. As they carried it away, they cursed:

"More of this being saved for the Communists."

Whether the flour had actually been intended for the Communists no longer matters. It was simply an ordinary family trying to keep its last bit of food from being taken. My maternal grandmother also remembered the army's horses. When troops stayed at her home or nearby, there were many horses in the courtyard. She was very small then, so the horses in her memory were enormous. To get home, she had to find gaps behind their hindquarters and squeeze through. Their tails kept swishing in front of her face.

The Armies in My Maternal Grandmother's Memory

My maternal grandmother also remembered Communist troops. She said that when they came to the village, they addressed people as **"fellow villagers."** She remembered them being polite and not taking the villagers' food. This was only her own experience. I do not want to use her memories to prove that any army behaved the same way everywhere. There is no need to force an ordinary person's memory to substantiate a sweeping conclusion.

She only tell us: **What she saw. What she feared. Who entered her home. Who took what. How they addressed her.** That is already precious enough.

My maternal grandmother also often spoke of a man named Qiao Richeng. I still need to examine the historical sources carefully to establish what he actually did. The family's memories do not entirely agree with the political label later assigned to him. The Communists later classified him as a bandit.

Yet my maternal grandmother said quite clearly, **"His troops were good."** She said they had fought the Japanese. She also said that, at least where she lived, they did not harass ordinary people. Later, Qiao Richeng's troops and Communist forces fought at Weiyuan. Her family lived right at the foot of the town wall. The battle took place at night. She hid at home, but heard the sounds outside with perfect clarity.

She said the fighting was fierce. Guns, knives, clubs—it seemed they used everything. Decades later, when she told the story, she still imitated the sound: **"Bang, bang, clang, clang." The fighting around and on the walls of Weiyuan Town seemed like a vast brawl involving both firearms and hand weapons.**

I no longer know the date of that night. I do not know how many men were on either side. I do not know the exact casualties. But I remember the scene my maternal grandmother described. And so I sometimes wonder: where is history preserved? In battle reports in archives? Or also in the few syllables an old woman made as she imitated the sounds of a battle seventy years earlier?

The Cost of “Liberation”

My maternal grandmother saw many dead people. Late in the civil war, Communist forces attacked Youyu County town. She remembered that afterward many bodies were brought to Weiyuan. The threshing ground, normally used to thresh grain, was packed with dead soldiers. **“It was awful,”** she said. Later, I consulted the county gazetteer. The casualties in that battle were heavy; more than a thousand people died.

In my maternal grandmother’s memory: yesterday it had been a place for drying grain. Today it was full of the dead.

Later, as the People’s Liberation Army’s foothold in the villages and towns grew more secure, Nationalist prisoners were often brought to my maternal grandmother’s courtyard. She said they sat on the ground while Communist cadres gave them political instruction. Afterward, she heard the prisoners privately cursing the Communists in very coarse language. After years of hostility and fighting, they scorned Communist propaganda and considered it a deception. Prisoners also escaped from time to time. She often heard Communist cadres mention that a few more had run away.

Liang Shengcai’s Story: Leaving the Revolution and Keeping Away from Both Parties

My maternal grandfather also had an older brother. His name was Liang Shengcai. He had studied through the sixth grade of primary school, which made him fairly well educated for the time. As a young man, he joined the Communists. One of his tasks was to hand out leaflets publicizing Party policies. Once, he and two companions went out to work carrying Communist publicity material and were cornered in a courtyard by Nationalist forces. The men outside dared not enter, unsure what they would find inside. The men inside dared not leave. The standoff lasted a long time. Finally, two of them decided to venture out and see what they were up against. Perhaps there were only a few men outside, or perhaps they had already left, and escape was possible. Both were shot dead, one after the other.

Liang Shengcai remained alone in the courtyard. He knew he could not stay there forever. In the end, he steeled himself and walked out. The man leading the force outside suddenly recognized him and said:

“Hey, isn’t that Liang Shengcai?”

He was from the same village, Wujiayao, and they knew each other well. So he let him go. He survived.

After surviving, Liang Shengcai was frightened. He was done. He withdrew from Communist activities and went home to carry coal out of the mines. Later, people from the Nationalist side came looking for him, wanting him to work for them. He refused them too. One remark of his has been passed down in the family: **“I won’t even serve the Communists anymore. Why would I serve the Nationalists?”**

I do not know whether, after decades of retelling, every word of that remark is still exactly as he said it. But I want to preserve it. After an encounter with death, an ordinary person’s most direct response to politics is there in those words: **I’m done.** Yet history did not leave him alone just because he was “done.”

During the Cultural Revolution, what had happened in that courtyard decades earlier was brought up again. He suffered severely and underwent a long investigation. “The other two died. Why were you the only one who survived?” He was suspected of informing the Nationalists or otherwise betraying the revolution. He had to explain why he had not been killed. In the end, it is said, someone who knew what had happened was finally found to testify, and the matter was cleared up.

Sometimes survival itself can become evidence of a crime that must be explained.

I think of the minor Nationalist commander who let him go out of loyalty to a fellow villager. What became of him? If he did not flee to Taiwan, he was very likely sacrificed by the new regime as a show of power.

A Woman Waiting for the Nationalist Army to “Retake the Mainland”

Liang Shengcai later married a woman who had been the wife of a Nationalist army officer. She already had a son. Around 1949, her husband went to Taiwan with the army, leaving her and the child on the mainland. According to the family, she could not support herself alone and later married Liang Shengcai. But the family always said she did not treat him well and never wholeheartedly settled into a life with him. In their accounts, she never gave up the dream that the Nationalists would retake the mainland.

She kept waiting. For the husband who had gone to Taiwan. For the Nationalists to retake the mainland. For the day that man would return. I do not know how many years she waited. Nor do I know what she thought about at night. So I do not want to decide for her whom she loved throughout her life.

I can only write:

She kept waiting, holding on to a hope that never came to pass.

In the end, she waited until she died. The man never returned. “Retaking the mainland,” a phrase that would later enter political history, could end up meaning something so private and sad in an ordinary family: **a woman waiting for someone to come home.**

Entirely Different Paths Through Life

This is also why I am increasingly unwilling to turn my family’s history into a simple political story. Poverty led my paternal grandfather to join the Communist revolution, and he later became a cadre. My maternal grandfather, by contrast, was conscripted by the Communists at fifteen or sixteen and escaped that same night. His eldest brother, Liang Shengcai, had joined the Communists, but withdrew after two companions were killed. Later, he also refused an invitation from the Nationalists.

My maternal grandmother did not judge every army she encountered by the political categories of later history books. If they did not harass ordinary people, she said they were good. If they took the family’s food, she remembered who had taken it. And she remembered who called her a “fellow villager.”

The woman my maternal grandfather’s eldest brother later married went on waiting for decades after another man had left for Taiwan. None of them stood neatly on one side of history.

They simply lived within it.

Zhao Ziyang’s Story: A Man Deliberately Erased from History

There is an incident from 2005 that I remember myself. I was about thirteen then, sitting in my maternal grandparents’ home watching television. The news said Zhao Ziyang had died. The national evening news gave him only a few brief sentences, in stark contrast to the obituaries for other Party and state leaders.

But I remember my maternal grandfather’s response. He expressed sympathy for the injustice Zhao Ziyang had suffered. This general secretary, who had visited Youyu County, had left local people with a story of speaking up for the poor. The story told locally was that when Zhao came on an inspection visit, county leaders tried to present a picture of peace and prosperity, reporting that the people were

well-off and lived comfortably. As his convoy was leaving, however, he suddenly saw a group by the roadside roasting potatoes to stave off hunger. Ragged, gaunt, and sallow, they looked like famine victims. Zhao got out of the car to ask about their situation. They told him how hard people's lives were and how officials deceived their superiors and concealed the truth. Zhao then drove back to the county town and had Youyu designated a poverty-stricken county. I have heard many local elders tell this story. There will be no official record of any of it, but I choose to believe it is true. What is still more real is the simple affection for Zhao Ziyang felt by the ordinary people who lived through Youyu's poorest years.

Those Who Once Lived Are All Gone

Later, the elders left us one by one. My paternal grandfather died. My paternal grandmother died. My maternal grandfather died. My maternal grandmother died too.

While they were alive, I did not realize that I ought to record their stories. I did not interview them systematically. I made no recordings. I never brought a map and asked my maternal grandmother to show me where the wall was. I never asked my maternal grandfather to draw the route of his escape from Wujiayao. Nor did I ask my paternal grandfather what he was thinking when he first walked from Shengouyao to Zhangjiakou. Now I cannot ask any of them. This is the most painful part of putting these materials together.

Only after I began studying history did I truly understand: **sometimes history disappears without a sound.** It is not an archive suddenly burning down. It is not a book being destroyed. It is only an old person dying. And with that, a few things become known to no one in the world.

I salvage photographs. Documents. Property deeds. Negatives. The old watch that is no longer of much use. My maternal grandfather's razor. The old books he read. I put away my paternal grandfather's photographs. I return to Shengouyao and photograph the cave dwellings on the verge of collapse. I photograph the old building at the village entrance, once a temple and later a school. My paternal grandfather left from there. My father later went to school there. In my generation, I returned to photograph its ruins. For three generations, the same place had become three different things:

Home.

School.

Ruins.

As I put these stories together, I have sat at my desk and sobbed. Not because of any one especially tragic event, but because, as I wrote them down again, one by one, I suddenly realized that those people were truly gone. The little boy who chased Japanese military vehicles to pick up sweets was gone. The boy of fifteen or sixteen who was taken away and slipped off that night was gone. The little girl who feared airplanes and squeezed past the hindquarters of army horses was gone. The woman who stood by the threshing ground and said, "It was awful," was gone. Liang Shengcai, who waited in the courtyard until his two companions had died and then walked out alone, was gone too. The officer who went to Taiwan and never returned may have been gone long ago. The woman who waited for him all her life was gone as well. Even my maternal grandfather, sitting in a shabby single-story house, painstakingly writing to the county authorities for his pension, now exists only in my memory.

Epilogue

Sometimes I wonder: **what if one day I die too?** Will someone put my story together? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I do not know. But the question suddenly helps me understand why I am so determined to keep these seemingly worthless things. It is not because the property deed is valuable. Not because the watch is valuable. Nor because an old newspaper is valuable. It is precisely because they are not.

So I know that if I do not keep them, perhaps no one ever will.

I do not want to turn my grandparents' generation into heroes. They were just a few ordinary people born in the first half of the twentieth century. They had been poor, afraid, and on the run. Some joined the revolution; others tried to avoid it. Some became cadres; another spent his whole working life as a

worker. Some once believed in a political cause; others later wanted no part in any politics. Some lost companions in war; another waited for someone who never returned. They could misunderstand things and forget things. Not every year in the stories they told me was necessarily accurate. Even the same story might be told differently by different people. I do not want to erase those contradictions for them. A person's life is not, after all, a neatly ordered file.

The history in books may tell me how a revolutionary army fought for the poor, yet never record this:

A mother watching her son of fifteen or sixteen being taken away, beside herself with grief.

An archive can record the casualties of a battle. But it will not tell me this:

Decades after seeing the threshing ground where grain was normally dried suddenly filled with bodies, a village girl could still say only one thing: it was awful.

When we read a brief line in a history book—"The Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan; a counteroffensive to retake the mainland"—we do not know that behind it there really was a woman who remarried with a child, waiting desperately for a husband who never returned. So history needs archives, and it needs them too.

This is not history on a grand scale. It cannot explain twentieth-century China as a whole. It cannot even fully explain one county. It is only the fragments of a few ordinary lives. A piece of candy. A gunshot. Half a sack of wheat flour. A few army horses that were too tall. The words "fellow villager." A cry of "Hey, isn't that Liang Shengcai?" A boy who fled after being forcibly conscripted by an army claiming to fight for the poor. A woman waiting for her husband to return. A property deed. A retirement certificate. A group photograph of cadres. An old newspaper wrapped around photographs of a married couple. And a wooden box.

But perhaps this is how the history of ordinary people survives.

They Are Gone, but They Once Lived

The wooden box is with me now. Sometimes I feel that, in the end, this box is all that remains of their lives. Then I think again: it is not.

As long as someone still knows who used this razor, who stood in that photograph, why half a sack of wheat flour was hidden in the cellar, they have not yet become entirely nameless.

So I put these things away. I scan the photographs. I write down what the elders said. Because what I truly want to preserve is not a perfect family story.

What I want to preserve is this: **they once lived.** They went hungry in the winters of northern Shanxi. They ran from airplanes. They chased military vehicles to pick up sweets. They joined an army, and they fled from another—or from the army of the very same revolution. They heard gunfire in the dark. They married, had children, cooked, cast metal in sand molds, tended sheep, carried coal, served as cadres, and wrote petitions. They loved people. They also waited for someone who never came back.

In the end, they grew old. They sat beside me and told me some of these things. Perhaps it never occurred to them that the child sitting there listening would one day become a historian. It never occurred to me either. Still less did I imagine that, after they had all gone, I would sit down and try to recall every word they had said.

What I can preserve is already incomplete. Some names have been forgotten. Some years are wrong. Some things can never be proved. And much more has probably disappeared with them. But whatever can still be preserved, let it be preserved now.

Because now I finally understand:

Death does not take someone away only on the day they stop breathing. A person disappears a second time when the last person who remembers them no longer does.

So I write these things down. I write about the little wooden box. About the collapsed cave dwellings of Shengouyao. About gunfire at the foot of Weiyuan's walls. About the boy who fled Wujiayao. About the bodies on the threshing ground. About the woman who kept waiting, looking toward Taiwan. And about myself. Because one day, I too will belong to the past. If someone happens to open these pages then, they may not know any of us.

But at least they will know this: in northern Shanxi in the twentieth century, there were once a few ordinary people like these. They left behind nothing great. **They simply lived.** And I once loved them. So I keep them here.



(My maternal grandfather and grandmother)



(My paternal grandfather and grandmother)

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