

China's Youth:

Stories of Modern Chinese Young Adults

By Hannah Becker-Uncapher

Defense Date: April 3, 2015

Type: General Honors

Thesis Advisor: Timothy Oakes (Geography)

Honors Representative: Abby Hickcox (Honors Program)

Other Committee Member: Adriane Genette (English)

Abstract

I arrived in Beijing on June 30th 2014 to complete the groundwork for this book, a creative nonfiction account of youth culture in modern China. A few years earlier, I had lived in China for nine months, arriving a month after my sixteenth birthday. Now back again at twenty years old, I traveled down the east coast, ventured west into Sichuan, and finally looped back to Beijing, interviewing young Chinese adults in the cities where I stopped. I recorded the interviewees' complete life stories and went on to analyze the major elements of these stories in order to discover how they fit into China's wider youth culture. This book incorporates my interviews and analyses, and it delves into topics such as gender equality, wealth equality, family dynamics, and environmental protection, as they relate to China's youth population.

Note

The interviews presented in this book originate from actual interviews conducted with Chinese young adults. The University of Colorado's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program helped to fund the associated travel costs. Identifying details, such as names and certain specific locations, are altered to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

Preface

I arrived in Beijing on June 30th 2014 to complete the groundwork for this book, through which I detail the youth culture of modern China. A few years earlier, I had lived in China for nine months, arriving a month after my sixteenth birthday. I then returned in 2013 to teach English during my summer break from college. Now back again at twenty years old, I planned to travel down the east coast, venture west into Sichuan, and finally loop back to Beijing, interviewing young Chinese adults in the cities where I stopped.

I'm a blue-eyed blonde-haired girl from Colorado, but China roped me in early. My final year of middle school, Mandarin Chinese language classes were introduced in public schools all through my home state, paid for indirectly by the Chinese government. The country's Ministry of Education funds hundreds of its aptly named Confucius Institutes throughout the world in order to promote Chinese language and culture. Fortunately for me, in 2007 one of these institutes was established in Colorado's capital.

My middle school, desperate for money and on academic probation, would never have funded the program without the Confucius Institute's help. Rather, the school administration capitalized on its new class by terminating one of the other two languages offered. Spanish avoided the ax, and the French would be affronted to know that their language was demoted so low as to be kicked out of our school altogether.

The Confucius Institute only supported the Chinese program for two years, and not long after the external funding ended Chinese also received the boot. Only Spanish continued, at that point the sole language option left. While no doubt useful, a significant percentage of the largely Hispanic student body could already speak it.

Thank goodness I attended the school prior to this unfortunate reduction of choices. At the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I found myself in China as a direct result of my 8th grade Chinese class. From October 6th 2009-June 30th 2010, I lived in Yanqing's city region and attended a local vocational school called Liuzhong.

Yanqing is a county just north of Beijing, separated from the capital by forested mountains and with a population of about 317,000 peopleⁱⁱ. Today, it is rapidly transforming into a tourist hub. China recently entered a bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, and its inclusion of Yanqing as one of the host regions heightens the county's visibility even further.

However, in 2010 foreigners almost never ventured into Yanqing. I only saw foreigners once in my nine months living there, excluding the non-Chinese students enrolled at my high school and our one foreign teacher. In contrast, I witnessed a large crowd of foreign tourists biking around on my first day back in 2014. The rapid changes now taking place in Yanqing are

overwhelming in isolation and even more so when viewed as a symptom of China's greater modernization.

When I lived there, before this recent spotlight, the other foreigners at Liuzhong consisted of a young English teacher from Kenya named Will, the three Europeans enrolled at Liuzhong through the same study abroad program as me, and some Kazakh students at the school through a different study abroad program.

Otherwise, I grew close with my Chinese classmates and with other young Chinese people in the city. Almost completely immersed in the youth culture, I could not help but develop an interest in that segment of China's population. In 2014, I returned to a China where my Yanqing friends lived dispersed throughout its provinces. I subsequently traveled to the places they occupied to interview both them and many others.

As I sat on a plane flying from the U.S. to Beijing on the eve of this trip, I worked out potential interview questions, and during the following two months I recorded the interviewees' complete life stories. I went on to analyze the major elements of these stories in order to discover how they fit into China's wider youth culture.

Chapter 1

"Hannah!" I opened my eyes to see my Kenyan friend, Will, looming over me. He must have just arrived back from work. Landing at the Beijing airport only a few hours earlier meant that I felt fairly jetlagged, but I still jumped up from the couch. We hugged, and then he stood back to look me over.

"You're the same as ever." That day marked our second reunion since Yanqing. The first had been the previous summer, when I'd lived with Will and his girlfriend, Suzy, and taught English at a nearby preschool.

"You know I turn twenty-one soon?"

He shook his head. "Nah, because that would mean I'm almost thirty. I'll always imagine you as the little sixteen year old American girl."

I scrunched up my face. "Where's Suzy?"

"Work still."

"You guys are good?"

"Oh yeah, and I'm thinking...I need to get married. I may ask her soon."

"But you want to go back to Kenya eventually? You think she'd go with you?"

"Yeah, maybe."

We talked for a while until Suzy walked in. She grinned and said in choppy English, "Hannah, long time no see!" According to her complaints on Wechat, the Chinese equivalent of Facebook, whenever she tried to speak English with Will he'd answer her in Chinese. Now, she could finally practice with a compliant native speaker.

"I have a gift." She handed me a small makeup bag, and I pulled out the Mary Kay eye shadow kit inside.

"Thanks Suzy. Business going well?"

"Really well. I'm selling many products." She waved at the nearby table, covered with unopened Mary Kay makeup boxes.

“Just a sec.” I grabbed my gifts, perfume for Suzy and a PS4 for Will. The latter had taken a bit of thought to fit into my suitcase. Will asked me to buy it for him, with a promise to pay me back, as a result of the Chinese government’s decision to delay PS4 sales until some unknown future date. However, gifting him the PS4 seemed the least that I could do considering his kindness in letting me stay at his apartment whenever I visit China.

Thankfully, he accepted the gift. I’d worried that he still might attempt to pay me for it, just like when he’d refused any rent money the year before.

Suzy and I went out to buy ingredients for dinner, and then after we finished eating I broached the interview topic.

“Yes. We can even do it now!”

“Great, thank you.” We were sitting on the couch, with Will beside us.

“Can I record you?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Ok, it’s on. You ready?”

Suzy’s Story

“Just start with your name, age, and where you’re from. This is all anonymous so I won’t use your real name for any published version of this.” She nodded and then began to speak, mostly in Chinese but with the occasional English word mixed in.

Hello, I’m Suzy, but my real name is Qu. I go by Suzy a lot now because Will is foreign, and he calls me that. *She raised her voice slightly.* If only he’d speak English with me too, instead of just using my English name!

At this Will looked over from playing the PS3 FIFA soccer video game, with the uninstalled PS4 sitting by expectantly. In Chinese, he said “You can make other foreign friends and practice with them. Right now there’s no need because Hannah will help you.” He turned back to his game. Suzy wrinkled her eyebrows.

Ignore him. Anyway, I’m twenty-nine and from Xinjiang, China’s Uyghur region in the north. The city where I grew up is mostly Han Chinese actually, but there are also lots of Uyghurs.

“You’re Han?”

Partly, but my dad is Manchu.

“Oh, did the child policies not apply to your parents because of that?”

No. Since my mom is Han my parents were still restricted. However, it’s true that minorities are often allowed more children.

“What did that mean for your family? And have the laws changed?”

The limit was two children back then, so I have a little brother named Bao. Later, families were limited to one child. Recently the government relaxed that, and many couples can have two children again.

At this point, Will turned off his game and stood up. I paused the recording for a moment. “What’s up?”

In English he said, “Shopping for dinner. Fish ok?” Suzy could understand these more basic words, and we both agreed that fish sounded fine.

He left, and Suzy pointed a finger at her head. “He. is. crazy.” I laughed and again started the recording.

“So your brother? Describe him, where he lives and so on.”

Bao is twenty-seven. He lives in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital, so I don’t see him very often. I worry for him all the time because Urumqi isn’t safe at all right now.

“Why’s that?”

The Uyghur people are really angry, and Uyghur terrorists keep killing people. A few weeks ago, over thirty people died in Urumqi from a terrorist attack, and every month lots of people are killed in Xinjiang. These terrorists...they are making things bad for everyone.

Don’t think that Xinjiang is always like this! During my childhood, it didn’t have these problems. After the situation gets better, maybe we can visit together and I can show you around.

“I’d love to visit with you one day. I’m curious then about your younger years there. Can you describe your life from before you started school?”

My parents became very successful living in Xinjiang, so I led a comfortable life in my early childhood. When my parents were children they didn’t even have enough money for food. That was a different time though. They were young when Mao Zedong led the country and so his ideas were their ideas. However, by the time of my birth Mao Zedong had died, and my parents already owned two apartments and two houses.

My parents, brother, and I lived in one of the houses, and the place felt huge for only the four of us. We had fourteen rooms, and with all that extra space extended family would come and stay with us for weeks at a time, especially my mom’s parents and her sister.

Before I started elementary school, I had lots of free time. I didn’t have many chores, just helping my mom with the dishes mostly since she did almost all of the cooking - lots of noodles and rice. My brother and I would go out to play with the other children, and I especially liked hacky-sack and hitting a shuttlecock back and forth with rackets.

“And after you started school?”

Then, everything changed. I moved in with my paternal grandparents an hour and a half away to attend a better elementary, and after that I didn’t see my parents very often. I didn’t really understand why I had to leave. I worried that maybe they didn’t miss me, and only now that I’m older do I realize they probably did.

“Describe your life at your grandparents’ home.”

I slept in my grandparents’ bedroom, but in a separate bed. My dad’s two little sisters, plus the husband and daughter of one, lived there too. I didn’t like my aunts at all. They were always nice to my little cousin and yet were nasty to me! They’d even use swear words when they got really angry, though I was only nine years old when I first arrived. My little cousin was three, and I didn’t like her either because she acted spoiled and naughty, and she’d take advantage of the fact that I would get blamed.

Suzy seemed lost in thought for a moment. I stayed silent.

Bao didn’t come to live with my grandparents but instead moved in with my dad’s little brother a few years later. I’m not really sure why we were sent to separate places, but it meant we didn’t see each other much as children.

“Did you like school?”

No, I didn’t. And definitely not my elementary school. I don’t think I received a good education, despite all the trouble that went into moving me.

China’s biggest problem is education and so there was no way my education could end up as very good, even with my school’s decent reputation.

“Where does this education problem come from?”

That’s easy, it all stems from the teachers. If you graduate from college and can’t find work, then you can become a teacher. This means that teachers in China aren’t very competent and don’t encourage creativity. They have low emotional intelligence and don’t accept responsibility for their students.

Rather than creativity, the Chinese school system is all about fitting in and passing the tests.

“Describe your typical elementary school day.”

Once I started elementary, my days went like this:

I got up at 9 a.m. and school started at 10 a.m. I had a break from 2 until 4 p.m., and then I went back to school from 4 until 8 p.m.. During the midday break, I’d go home to eat with my grandparents and to sleep sometimes too. At night I’d have homework, around two hours usually. It included writing Chinese characters over and over so that we’d have them all memorized. This writing takes a lot of time, but it’s really mindless and easy to complete. The teachers didn’t assign enough homework that actually challenged us.

“Did you still have any time to play with other children?”

Yeah, many of my classmates were my friends, and during class breaks we would all play together. Though I’d go to their homes for lunch sometimes and on the weekends, they never came to visit me because I lived with my grandparents and not at my real home.

“I know you didn’t like your aunts. But your grandparents...?”

I really did not like my grandparents when I lived with them.

“Right. So you lived there until you were an adult?”

No, when I was thirteen I moved in with my mom’s little sister and her two children, about an hour’s drive away from my grandparents. I felt so happy the day of the move because I truly loved my aunt.

She had a husband, but since he worked in another city it didn’t feel like he lived with her. He’d come home when he could though.

“How often was that?”

At times once a week and then at others only once in three months. One time he didn’t come back for six months.

“And what about your parents?”

My real parents didn’t visit often because they were too busy running their business.

Just then Will walked in carrying groceries. He said hi to us and afterward disappeared into the kitchen to cook. “So anyway, how long did you live with your aunt? Did your brother ever join?”

I lived with her my last two years of elementary school and my first two years of middle school. Those four years were wonderful.

And no, my brother didn’t. He ended up in Henan Province for three years to study kungfu, so I still rarely saw him.

“Ok.” --- “Where did you move after living with your aunt?”

I moved out my last year of middle school for the “school dorm” experience. I thought it would be good for me. I went to a new middle school only a twenty minute walk away, so I could’ve easily stayed at home.

My situation there ended up as pretty atypical because I slept in a classroom of bunk beds rather than in a dorm room. The dorm building happened to be under construction that year, and so there were thirty-one others in the classroom with me. I found this arrangement to be pretty exciting because I was curious to live with so many other girls.

Every weekend I could still go home, and so I'd stay with my aunt or with my maternal grandparents.

"What was middle school like for you? Your schedule and such..."

Both middle schools that I attended were hard, and even on the weekends I'd always have lots of homework. Class started at 8:30 a.m. and then we'd get off at 7:30 p.m., with a break from 2 to 4 p.m. In China, students are assigned a home classroom that they stay in for all of their classes, and mine had about thirty students. The teacher changed every class period. We were broken into seven teams for cleaning, and each day from 7:30-8:30 p.m. one team had to clean the classrooms and bathrooms while everyone else rested.

I didn't have any good friends for my first two years of middle school, but then I made a lot of friends from living with all those girls.

"Are you still friends now?"

Unfortunately not. Afterward, we all went to different high schools and our friendships faded away because we had to devote most of our time to studying.

"Describe your high school experience."

I attended a high school in the same city as my middle school, and I took an admissions test to get in. The government then looked at my test scores and those of all the other students to decide where each of us could enroll. The city had three high schools, and I got into the best one. When I started there, I didn't know my roommates or really many other students either.

I lived in the dorms again, and we were only allowed off the campus for one weekend every month. I missed my aunt a lot, but with my weekends off I would sometimes visit my maternal grandparents instead of her.

The class hours at the high school were pretty much the same as my third year of middle school, except that my new home classroom had sixty-five students. We still got all of our weekends off, even if we couldn't leave for most of them.

During my weekends on campus I'd finish my homework and wash my school uniform. I also liked to read, and sometimes I'd chat and play ping pong or badminton with the other students. Most schools in China have ping pong tables I think.

At the end of my third and final year of high school I took the Gaokao, the admissions test for college that is basically the sole determination of whether a college or university wants you. I studied hard for it, especially in my third year, and so I did pretty well. In China, the grade school system is almost completely aimed at preparing students for this test.

"And your dorm? Go into more detail about that."

My dorm room in high school only had four students, with four single beds instead of bunk beds. By then, I honestly felt relieved to room with less people because living with all those girls got tiring after a while.

"You've told me you attended university. How did you choose which one?"

I ended up at a public university in Beijing because the school has a good reputation, and I thought Beijing would be exciting. China's public universities are better than private ones, and they are cheaper too. I've lived in Beijing ever since.

“So you really like Beijing? How has it changed these last few years?”

Yes, I like it here very much. That’s why I’ve stayed! Beijing has changed a lot through the years as more people keep showing up. I think that the city is getting better in many ways. When I first arrived in 2004 there were only two subway lines, and now there are around fifteen. There are also so many new buildings, both here and all over China. This is good because the newer buildings are safer and more beautiful.

“Describe your university experience a bit more. What did you study and why? And other information along those lines.”

I studied computer science and technology. I only chose this major because it seemed practical and I didn’t really know what I wanted to focus on. Hmm, I’m not sure what to talk about next...

“Well, how does college compare to high school?”

College was harder than high school in many ways, and I studied a lot. However, I still had more free time, and so I would read more and take on part-time jobs.

Just then Suzy’s phone rang, and I paused the recording.

She listened for a moment and then replied. “Yes, you can come in tomorrow. Absolutely!”

After hanging up, Suzy said to me in English, “Another client. This is very good. Tomorrow I make her beautiful. Ok, begin again.”

“Alright, so you worked part-time jobs during college. Can you describe those?”

I got my first job as a sophomore, holding chocolate and cake samples at a supermarket. I stood for eight hours without sitting down, except for a single one hour break. I handed out advertisements in the streets with one of my roommates for my second job. As a junior I bought slippers and resold them to my classmates. I did this for only two months because by then everyone already had a pair. My fourth year, I didn’t have a job.

“What about your jobs after graduation?”

After graduating I began work as a phone testing software engineer in Beijing, and I did that for two years. I didn’t really enjoy the job and my salary wasn’t good, so I eventually left to sell makeup for Mary Kay. I’ve been doing this for the last several years, and I love it!

I changed my line of work because I didn’t like my major too much or my job afterward. Since I’m a girl, I really like beautiful things. At my first job I couldn’t wear much makeup or pretty clothes, and I had no real dream for my life. But I’d always notice how the makeup of the other female employees didn’t flatter them.

My salary is better now, and I get to look beautiful and to help other girls to look beautiful too. I think that most girls in China still don’t wear eye makeup, but I feel that they should.

“Can you go into more detail about your job at Mary Kay? How do you earn your salary? How many hours do you work a week? And so on...”

I make my own hours since my salary is based on the commission from the Mary Kay products that I sell. I like this freedom, and the number of days I work each week varies. Sometimes it’s all seven days and then sometimes six or five. If I’m really tired just four. I go to a Mary Kay office and call people to come in and try out the products. Hopefully they’ll buy something. If I’m especially diligent I can even make 8,000 yuan in a month.

Sabrina’s ability to earn that much solely through selling makeup products impressed me. A dollar currently equals a little more than six yuan, and so 8,000 may not seem like all that much. However, in China the average wage is less than 3,000 yuan a month.

“Did your education help you at all with finding your job?”

No, my education didn't help me to get my current job. All those long hours of studying didn't mean much in the end.

So, I gotta ask about you and Will. What do others think of you dating a black man? And your family members?

Young people in China are more accepting. Most of my friends don't think it's a problem, but I haven't told my parents. I don't know if they'd accept us, and so I won't tell them unless Will and I are really going to marry. The older generations in China can be a lot more traditional about issues like that.

— — —

Since I conducted Suzy's interview first I couldn't yet compare her life story to my other planned interviews. However, certain elements of her narrative still stood out to me as especially typical.

I remember feeling somewhat shocked when a Chinese person first told me, quite matter-of-factly, that she lived with her grandparents for the majority of her childhood while her parents worked elsewhere. Then, this same story popped up again and again. I realized that sending away one's children to live with other relatives is a common and socially accepted practice in China. In fact, approximately one-fifth of children there, meaning more than sixty-one million, live separately from their parentsⁱⁱⁱ. By the time I sat down with Suzy, I was not surprised to hear this aspect of her story.

The widespread familial separation is largely propagated by the country's strict “hukou” laws, a nationwide household registration system^{iv}. These laws limit a person's ability to receive benefits, such as access to healthcare and a public education, to the geographical region where his or her household is registered. As a result, parents often move elsewhere for better work opportunities, leaving their children behind in the family's hukou region to attend school.

For example, in 2012 a fifteen year old girl named Zhan Haite became something of a celebrity for protesting her inability to enroll in a Shanghai high school^v. She had lived in Shanghai since her parents moved there for work ten years earlier. However, her hukou is registered in her small Jiangxi Province hometown, prohibiting her from enrolling in a high school outside of that area. In cases such as hers, the child must return to the hukou region to receive an education.

These laws were originally meant to create stability through limiting migration to the cities, but people frequently argue that they function together as a discriminatory caste system. Now, the government is relaxing the hukou laws somewhat. Currently, it's in the process of removing the hukou distinctions between many small towns and cities with outside rural areas^{vi}. Still, a complete overhaul of the system is not yet in sight.

Other typical elements of life for young Chinese adults appear in Suzy's story as well.

School is the institution that dominates the lives of Chinese children. In many ways it's a rather uniform system in China, and the long hours and emphasis on tests described by Suzy are normal for most Chinese students. However, the quality of education differs between regions, with the best schools in large cities^{vii}. The hukou system shuts out rural student from a superior education, meaning that these students must study especially hard to match their urban peers on the educational tests.

At each jump in education - from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and finally to university - students take a test that decides where they can enroll. Elementary school and middle school are guaranteed without a test, but students will often try to test into somewhere better. As greater numbers of Chinese students aim for higher levels of education, the competition between them increases. Thus, the pressure placed on these students is enormous, and they devote themselves to raising their test scores.

Teenagers with college aspirations are hit particularly hard. During high school they have no time to develop passions outside of the prescribed test subjects. As a result, when students do end up in college, they don't always know what to do with themselves or what they actually want to study. Many end up with majors that don't interest them, and switching majors is an extremely difficult task. Upon graduation, they are then qualified for jobs that will not interest them either.

Another quality of modern China is consumerism, and Suzy emphasizes her own consumerist tendencies through her love of makeup and her work of selling makeup to other women. Today, China is the world's largest consumer of luxury goods^{viii}. That stands in stark contrast with the utter poverty that enveloped most of China just a few decades ago and the strong Communist ideals that were originally promoted by its government. Now, advertisements constantly tout the items that one should own, the same as in any Western country.

Suzy's story does reveal how traditional values still permeate China's modern culture. The difficulties she faces in dating a black man stand out, and racism is a real problem there. An intense idolization of white skin has existed in the country for thousands of years and continues to persist today, unfortunately strengthened by the beauty standards presented in China's media. Will tells me stories of how some Chinese people will refuse to sit next to him on the subway, and it seems that every other advertisement is describing a skin whitening product.

Although the acceptance of diversity that Suzy exhibits through dating a black man is heartening, her reference to the Uyghur violence connects to the darker story of Uyghur discrimination. The Uyghurs are an ethnic group that primarily lives in Xinjiang, China, with ten million of them in the country^{ix}. They possess a distinct culture from the Han Chinese, with an adherence to Islam and a Turkic based language. In recent years, many Uyghur protests have arisen, and Uyghur radicals have even conducted mass killings. The Chinese media uses these killings to turn public sentiment against the Uyghur ethnic group, an unfortunate transfer of blame for acts committed by just a few individuals.

Chapter 2

I needed to see my Chinese parents. I'd lived with them for almost the entirety of my nine months in Yanqing, aside from the first three weeks spent in the school dorms.

I call them Ba and Ma, literally Dad and Mom. When I mention them to my Western friends and start with, "Oh yeah and my Chinese Dad and Mom--", people will often interrupt with, "Wait, your what?"

No matter. I truly love Ba and Ma and consider them my family.

Moreover my Chinese sister, Chen, was in town, and I hadn't seen her since 2010. She'd been away at college during my 2013 visit.

I left for Yanqing, taking the Beijing subway to the 919 bus stop. “You’re going to Yanqing?” asked the bus driver, worried that I might be confused. The region’s popularity may be growing, but I still almost never see foreigners riding the public bus there.

“Yes,” I assured him.

During the next hour and a half the skyscrapers faded into lush mountains, accented by The Great Wall, and then the much smaller buildings of Yanqing’s city eventually appeared. Beijing encourages the perception of the county as its environmentally friendly district and so construction there is limited.

I arrived at about 6:30 p.m., getting off the bus at a stop just a block away from my parents’ rented home. They live on the third floor of a six story walk up. It’s a quaint place compared to the two-story apartment that they occupied four years earlier. A Liuzhong teacher told me that Ba and Ma rented the larger apartment that year specifically to provide me with my own large bedroom. The Chinese can act almost absurdly hospitable toward their guests, and this particularly holds true for foreign guests in a city where foreigners are still rather rare.

Now, years later, my Chinese family and I are on more familiar terms, and so the great efforts that they first afforded me have diminished quite a bit.

Still, the vague politeness lingers, evidenced by Chen’s insistence that I sleep in the second bedroom and she on the blow-up mat in the study. I tried to give her the bedroom, but she wouldn’t give in.

With the matter settled against my wishes, we drove off to a fish restaurant for dinner. The ingredients in the huge pot of fish soup from which we ate included the Chinese staple mu’er, a black fungus with a taste and texture similar to that of seaweed.

Back at the house, I gave gifts of Native American pottery to Ba, Ma, and Chen. As they examined the pottery, I thought back to the tapestry that Ma gifted to my American parents upon the culmination of my high school sophomore year. I can never outdo that tapestry, no matter what gifts I bring. Ma spent time every day for three whole months embroidering the thing with fifty versions of the Chinese character 福 fú, meaning good fortune.

After thanking me for the pottery, Ba and Ma turned on the TV to watch the Chinese version of The Voice.

“Chen...mind if I interview you now?” I asked. I’d already explained my project to her over Wechat.

“Yeah sure.” We walked into the second bedroom and I closed the door, shutting out the singing now warbling from the TV.

Chen’s Story

“Can I record the interview?”

“Record it..? Why?” She looked concerned.

“Just to have a record of your answers in case I miss something...I won’t include your name. But not an issue if you don’t want me to.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“No problem. Let’s start.”

I’m Chen, and I’m twenty-one. I was born in Yanqing and grew up here, but now I go to a university in Taiyuan, Shanxi. I study package engineering.

“You like it there?”

Honestly, I don't like my major. I do like college life, but I didn't understand my line of study when I chose it. At the time I figured it seemed like a pretty good choice, and so I listed it as one of my five preferences when I applied to the school.

“Go into more detail about your major. Why don't you switch to another one?”

I'd try to switch but in China a school accepts you into a specific major.

I thought before that I'd at least be able to find work pretty easily studying this, but now I don't even think that's true.

I'm currently preparing to find work because I graduate in a year. I'm really anxious about it! China has far too many college graduates and so the work opportunities are too few. Once people are in college, school is easy. Making graduation from university more difficult would help this problem, at least a bit.

It's especially bad for me because I'm a girl. Most people in this major are boys, and it's harder for women studying packaging engineering to find work. Employees worry that they will leave to have children. I think there's a good chance that I'll end up in a completely unrelated job. I know lots of people who have graduated from college and then can only find low paying jobs unrelated to their majors.

“Why is it so hard to change majors in China?”

Schools in China make it hard to switch partly because so many students don't like what they are studying. This problem arises from students not understanding what their majors entail before starting college. In order to switch, I'd have to successfully petition in front of three well-known faculty from the school.

“Oh man! That does sound difficult.” Chen emphatically nodded her agreement. “Can you describe your college classes for me?”

My major-specific classes include mechanics, machinery design, packaging, metal packaging design, and engineering test technology, and these classes have about seventy students each. My common classes, like mathematics, physics, and computer science, average at about two hundred students. Since the classes are so big, most of our time in the classroom is spent self-studying. None of the material is particularly difficult, so I'm not bothered by this.

“Do you regret going to college?”

No. Even though I worry, I still think I'll find work more easily and lead a happier life. Most young people go to college now I think, and so it's hard for those that don't to compete. The majority of my friends from Yanqing attend college.

I'm also happy with my school even if I don't like my major.

“How did you choose your university?”

I scored just high enough on the Gaokao to get in, and while in China as a whole this university is rather mid-level, in Shanxi Province it's quite famous. The atmosphere there is really studious, and I like my classmates.

Taiyuan is beautiful too, and it's easy to get there and back from Yanqing, which my parents are really happy about. I didn't care so much about living somewhere far, but my parents wanted me to stay somewhat close. Taiyuan is still far enough away that it feels different from home. The train ride from there to Beijing takes about five hours, and then I ride the bus or the train to Yanqing. So, other than my major, everything worked out pretty well.

“How does college compare to high school?”

I find college much easier than high school, and I have a lot more time to pursue my personal interests. In high school we needed to study so many different subjects that I ended up devoting the majority of my time to studying. Now we are a bit more focused, so there's less material to cover.

"How do you spend your time outside of class and studying?"

I explore Taiyuan and I've joined a bunch of student clubs. The school has a lot going on.

In my first year I joined intramural teams for swimming, tennis, and basketball. In my second year I continued these sports and started some volunteer work teaching children. Then in my third year I became a tutor to first year students at the university, and I stopped the other activities because I no longer had enough time.

"Describe your high school life."

Before high school I didn't study as much as I should have, and so I scored low on the high school admissions test. My score meant that I could only go to a rather common high school rather than a really good one. I didn't want to redo my third year of middle school and try the test again, so I just went to the common high school.

My home classroom had forty students. The school atmosphere was poor because a lot of the students did not want to take the test for college. Some students, like me, still studied really hard. We went to class from 7:30 a.m. to 12 p.m., 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m., 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., and finally had required self-study until 10 p.m. During self-study, we reviewed the same material as during class because all of our lessons were aimed at improving our Gaokao scores. This was the schedule Monday through Saturday, and on Sunday, I would meet up with my teacher and study for two more hours. So, I had about a half day to rest every week and I used that time to sleep.

This schedule is different than the school schedules in other parts of Beijing because other areas have better schools. In the city the teaching methods are better, so even though schools there usually don't hold classes into the night or on the weekends, the test scores are higher.

"How did your school compare to schools outside of Beijing?"

Beijing schools are among the best in the country, and I'm still lucky to be in the Beijing municipal area. The schools here in Yanqing are not as good as in the city, but compared to other parts of China they are very good.

"What subjects did you study in high school?"

In my first year of high school we had math, Chinese literature and language, English, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, and politics. Then in my second and third years we stopped studying the last three of those subjects because they aren't important for the Gaokao. High school is three years in China and schools in China all include the same subjects, even if some schools are better than others.

"Describe the Gaokao. What do you think of it?"

There is huge pressure to do well on the Gaokao because China has so many people. I had some friends who didn't do well on it and so they either didn't attend university or repeated their third year of high school to try again. We had class grades too, but colleges don't care about those. Only now that I'm in college are grades important.

I think that the Gaokao has the potential to be very fair, but there are a lot of problems with it, and inequality in China's educational system is one of the country's biggest problems. With the Gaokao, a score from a Beijing student might be good enough for a certain school and yet not good enough if the student is from a different part of China. For example, say seventy thousand

people take the college admissions test in the Beijing region but then half a million people take the test in Henan. This makes it easier for students in Beijing because they compete against a smaller number of other people. It might also be harder for students from a region where the test score average is especially high.

“What about college tuition? How much is it for you, and do you find that amount to be fair?”

Tuition at my school is 5,000 yuan a year and then another 1,000 yuan for board in the dorms. This is pretty normal for public universities, and most families have no problem paying that amount. Even with a really low salary, 5,000 yuan can be earned in a couple of months, and it's easier for many families now because they only have one child. But, tuition can still stop some people from going to college. Also, private universities cost around 10,000 yuan a year even though they are not as good as public schools.

“You mentioned families with only one child. Elaborate on that.”

Because of China's one-child policy most people my age don't have siblings. If a couple breaks the child limits then the government forces them to pay a fine, and if they work for a state-run enterprise they could even lose their jobs. Before, only people in certain poorer places were allowed to have two children. Some really wealthy people avoid these laws by going to Hong Kong and giving birth there.

“What do you think of the one-child policy?”

I personally don't like being an only child because it's really lonely, even if my parents have an easier time supporting me.

However, everything in China is getting more expensive and the salaries of many people are now not high enough for what things actually cost. This means that some families struggle to take care of even one child, and children from such families may end up working directly after high school to help out their parents instead of going to college.

In fact, an only child in a poor family may end up with more pressure than if he or she had siblings. If the parents haven't saved enough for retirement or to care for the grandparents, then that child may need to support not just his or her parents but the grandparents as well.

“Are you nervous about supporting your parents and grandparents?”

I'm lucky because my parents earn 12,000 yuan a month, and that is higher than the average. Though my parents are still far from rich, they are able to support both themselves and their own parents, as well as help me with college. My dad and his siblings even helped pay for my paternal grandpa to travel abroad to Europe last year.

“With respect to their jobs, how did your parents get to where they are in life?”

My parents worked hard to get to this point. My grandparents were all common people and worked in factories, and then both my parents took the Gaokao but did not do well enough. At the time very few people went to university, and if you did get a degree then you were pretty much guaranteed a good job. Instead, my dad began working directly after high school and my mom served in the army for four years. Eventually my mom got a job in the human resource department of a company. Now, my dad earns most of their money in a middle management position at a successful egg company.

“What do you think of growing up in Yanqing?”

I'm really lucky to have been born in Yanqing. Not only are the schools here better than in most of the country, but people receive lots of other benefits for living in the capital area. Since

China has such a large population there isn't enough money for all of the other cities. Right now the government is working to solve that problem, and many other less wealthy cities are improving a lot.

In some ways, Yanqing is even better than Beijing's more populated regions. For one, the environment in China has deteriorated a lot, but Yanqing still has pretty good air.

Until the pollution improves, I'm really happy to live in a smaller place. I'm optimistic that the pollution will diminish eventually because the government is working hard to make people more aware. There are government advertisements all through Beijing supporting a reduction in pollution, and trash and recycling classifications are getting better too.

"Do you think you'll come back to Yanqing after graduating?"

I'll probably end up in a bigger city after college because of jobs. When I find a job I'll let you know! I hope that it all works out, and certainly my life is easier than it would've been a generation ago. Life is improving here, and my parents' generation experienced many difficulties that we don't have now.

— — —

I lived with Chen during her final year of high school, and I can attest to the work that she put into her studies. She studied so often that I barely got to know her. Every time I invited her out, she told me she was too busy. She never hung out with others or invited people over. Studying for the Gaokao completely dominated her life.

We really only became friends after Chen started college, even though I no longer even lived in China. Chen finally had the time to explore her other interests and to strengthen her friendships. We messaged each other on Wechat, and she'd tell me about her college life and what she did with her newfound free time.

Through Chen's example, I learned to fear the Gaokao. As a high school student she didn't seem happy at all, just stressed all of the time. Talking with her afterward, both for this interview and on other occasions, confirmed that college turned out differently than the dream that she hoped for beforehand. Her predicament mirrors that of many other college students and echoes Suzy's experience.

Yet, Chen also mentions the privileged aspects of life within the Beijing municipal region. Beijing hukous are coveted possessions. Not only do the municipality's schools boast a high level of academic achievement, but both Beijing and China's other municipalities, such as Shanghai, have especially generous college admittance quotas. As a result, students from within these municipality boundaries are handed another advantage with getting into colleges, exacerbating the double standard placed on students even further.

Still, millions of students graduate from college every year now in China, and in 2014 there were about seven million graduates, many times the number at the turn of the 21st century^x. Chen is graduating into a far more competitive work field than Suzy did in 2008. Official estimates conservatively place the current unemployment rate six months after graduation at 15%, and some experts claim it to be far higher^{xi}. Hopefully Chen will not join this unemployed group upon her graduation or need to take a job for which she is overqualified.

It doesn't help that switching majors has not grown any easier since Suzy's time in college. Another Chinese friend told me that at her college, only the top three students of each major are able to switch to another, a rather paradoxical rule. The thought is that students are accepted into

one major at the school, with some majors more sought after than others. Therefore, the logic follows that it wouldn't be fair for a student to switch from a less popular major to a more popular one. Of course, this system fails students who do not have their passions fully mapped out before college.

Chen also highlights gender inequality, which represents a serious problem in China. Equality between the genders took great leaps forward from the intensely patriarchal system dominating China before the Communist Party. However, some critics now worry that gender inequality in the country might be increasing. China's highest political positions are still dominated by men. Further, Leita Hong Fisher, a PhD candidate at Beijing's Tsinghua University, states that "The gender income gap is widening, and labour force participation among women is declining sharply, particularly in the cities."^{xii}

Chen further touches upon some of the problems caused by the one-child policy even as it succeeded at curbing China's population growth. In particular, she brings up the 4-2-1 problem, which refers to one child needing to support both his or her parents and grandparents. This places a huge amount of pressure on the child. In Chinese tradition, children have an obligation to care for their parents and grandparents. In fact, a law went into effect in 2013 that requires a person to meet his or her parents' financial as well as emotional needs^{xiii}. Thankfully for Chen, her family has the means to live comfortably without extra support from her.

Chapter 3

The next day I planned to meet up with Qian, a friend from Yanqing High School. Qian and I originally bonded over our shared desire to improve at billiards. Neither of us could play particularly well, and sometimes the experts at the billiard lounges that we frequented would help us out. After a few hours of this, we'd relax together over a couple of drinks. As one of the few students I knew who didn't live at the school, Qian had much more freedom to go out with me. Most of my other friends needed to be back on campus by 8 p.m. every night.

I invited Chen to join me in meeting up with Qian, but she wanted to stay in and sleep. With Ma's bike I rode to the mall just a few blocks away. Nearly any place in Yanqing can be reached fairly quickly by bike, and if you keep biking twenty to thirty minutes in most directions then the buildings will fade away into rural structures and finally into farmland.

On my way I passed the massive square marking Yanqing's city center. An abstract metal statue stands at its exact middle, twisting upward to reach the height of a several storied building. The city's main park sprawls out on one side of the square and on the other rises Yanqing's central mall.

Qian waited outside the mall's Walmart, one of the few recognizable foreign establishments in the city. KFC is another, an ode to the fast food chain's runaway success in China^{xiv}. It has far outshined its competitors such as McDonald's^{xv}.

Qian saw me first and zigzagged through the many people to reach me. She had transformed from the slightly pudgy tomboy that I remembered into a thin girl with long hair and makeup. "Hannah!" We hugged, and then she led me to a parked car with three young men waiting inside. After introductions that revealed the driver, Yong, to be her boyfriend, Qian named a restaurant and we drove off.

Her choice was a sleek place, a Western inspired restaurant with such classics as pizza topped with star fruit and fruit salad with mayonnaise. “You’ll like it I think, similar to American food, right?” said Qian as we waited at the table.

Afterward, Qian’s boyfriend dropped me and her off at a nearby park, one of the many parks in Yanqing. We walked through the gate and into a long shaded area of exercise contraptions. The path then continued through grassy hills and to a small pond.

Qian and I sat down on a rock by the pond, and I began to interview her.

Qian’s Story

“Introduce yourself! When were you born? What’s been going on in your life?”

I’m Qian, born in 1995. I’m doing well, and most importantly I met Yong, the love of my life, a couple of years ago. Now I live with him and his family, and we are getting engaged soon. I’m a little young for marriage right now, so we plan to marry in two years.

“What do your parents think of you and Yong?”

They support us because Yong is devoted to me and to building us a good life. He works very hard. My parents and I agree that success stems from hard work.

“Why do you think that about success?”

No work means no source of money, and a life lived without money is very difficult. When you work hard, the quality of your life will usually improve. Most Chinese people agree with this.

“Are there changes in how young people today motivate themselves compared to previous generations?”

In the past people often used religion as their motivation, but China’s young adults are a lot less religious than the previous generations. Before, people generally believed in various types of Buddhism.

I am a typical young person because I don’t motivate myself with religion, but with the thought of living a happy life with Yong and providing for my future children.

“Where do you work?”

I work as a bank assistant now, but soon I’ll leave that job because Yong and I are opening a business together, a shop that sells small packaged snacks. Young people in China like those types of snacks, so I think that we could become really successful. I’ll show you around the shop later today. We’re still fixing it up, but it’s pretty close to finished now. The shop opens in a month, and maybe you can come visit again in August before you fly home.

Yong and I are funding the shop ourselves, and we saved for a long time. I’m a little scared that we won’t make enough money, but I will work hard every day to reach success.

“Why are you starting your own business?”

I’m taking advantage of the freedom in China to achieve my own dream. China has improved a lot since when my parents were younger, and I’m glad for the opportunities available to me and to other young people. Unlike the previous generation, I don’t need to worry about food or clothing. Now, a person can obtain what he or she wants in life through hard work.

I’ve also dreamed of starting a business like this for a long time. In China work can be easy to find, but not work that makes you happy. Yong and I want this business for the lifestyle and to have more control over what we do. I’m very excited.

Aside from our business, I eventually hope to study at a part-time college. Right now I'm too busy.

"How do young people today compare to previous generations?"

The older generation worked more than younger people today, and so they were more independent. Young adults now rely on their parents to a greater extent than before.

In the past, parents decided the path of their children, including what they should study, and that still holds true for most people my age. Some traditions do not change quickly. My parents chose my high school, and for my friends their parents chose for them as well.

This is only changing with some of today's small children, but even my five year old brother won't decide what he studies.

"Your parents had a second child?"

Yes. A couple of years ago China began allowing certain families more children. My parents could have another child because I am a girl.

"What do you think of parents making choices for their children?"

I don't think parents should decide everything because then those children won't be able to develop their own opinions. However, parents are only trying to help, and the choices of my parents certainly helped me out in some ways. I really appreciate them.

Also, since they moved to Hebei in 2009 I ended up a lot more independent than most children. I stayed alone in Yanqing so that I could continue at the same school. I was fourteen at the time.

"Most students at Liuzhong lived in the dorms. Why didn't you after your parents left? They weren't worried?"

Most students at Liuzhong aren't even from Yanqing, and so they have to live in the dorms!

My parents own an apartment in Yanqing. The dorms aren't that expensive, but taking care of my parents' home and not paying anything still made the most sense. I know it isn't common for someone that young to live alone in China, but I was really self-sufficient and responsible.

"Did you like Liuzhong? What did you study?"

I did like it there, and I studied computer graphic design, the major my parents chose for me. I enjoyed this major, but I don't think that there are many jobs for it. After graduating I couldn't find any related work.

"Were you glad to stay in Yanqing rather than go to Hebei?"

Yes, I'm really glad that I stayed in Yanqing, and I want to spend my whole life here. I have a lot of friends, and though I don't see them every day because of work I still meet up with them frequently. It's easier because Yanqing is so small.

Yanqing is beautiful and has a good environment, despite the pollution problems in other parts of China. There are so many parks, and sometimes after work I'll go walking through them. Like this park. Isn't it wonderful?

"Yes. I used to come here a lot. I'm curious then, has Yanqing changed since you were young?"

As China develops, I've noticed some changes here but nothing too drastic. For instance, practically no foreigners visited Yanqing in the past. There still aren't too many, and certainly nothing close to Beijing, but definitely more than before. I don't mind this change because Yanqing

is a great tourist city and the visitors help the local economy. I'm also proud that people appreciate Yanqing's beauty and its good air.

"What do you view as the biggest problem in China right now?"

Definitely protecting the environment. I believe that most people in China view this as a major problem. The Chinese government has begun to move forward at solving it, and many cities have established new environmental rules. Therefore, I'm optimistic that the environmental pollution will diminish quickly.

"Any other major problems?"

The worry in China about maintaining one's reputation represents a big problem too, though it's a benefit in some ways as well. I don't know about in America, but here in China people regard their reputations as immensely important. While people worry far too much over what others think of them, these worries motivate great accomplishments.

The high level of stress placed on people overlaps with this issue of reputation. Even though people in China often grow unhappy from the stress, they keep our country moving forward at a very fast pace.

"You mentioned China's strengths somewhat already, but can you go into more detail about what you think they are?"

This country has a lot of strengths. For one, China has developed amazingly fast. Also, Chinese people are incredibly courteous toward their guests and possess a capacity for true compassion. For example, after we had the terrible 2008 earthquake in Sichuan many schools and businesses organized donation drives, and a great number of people volunteered to conduct rescue missions. Despite the problems I mentioned, China's people are able to unite together when the situation calls for it.

— — —

Qian's story differs slightly from the previous two because she attended a vocational high school rather than a college. Further, she is starting her own business.

As the college graduation boom continues, China hopes to boost enrollment in vocational schools. In fact, the country's State Council issued guidelines that aim to increase vocational students from about twenty-nine million in 2014 to thirty-eight million in 2020^{xvi}. That includes both high school and college vocational students, and so Liuzhong's student body would count among that number.

Even though Qian fits into this new vocational trend, her story also exemplifies the current problems with it. Most importantly, she could not find work related to her vocational major. Vocational institutes are often not sufficiently funded, and now the government hopes to alleviate this problem by making sure that local governments set aside enough funds for their vocational institutes. Hopefully, this reinvestment of resources will assure that the skills taught in the schools match the skills actually needed by the country's market.

Although Qian's vocational degree did not help her with jobs, she took control of her own future by starting a business with her boyfriend. She represents a spirit of entrepreneurship that has flourished in China, with the number of registered private businesses there growing more than 30% between 2000 and 2009^{xvii}. China's fast-growing economy is currently beginning to slow down, and such entrepreneurship could help it to stay strong in the future.

Qian and Suzy do share one similarity that separates them from Chen: they both have a sibling. However, they ended up with siblings for different reasons. Suzy was born before the child laws grew stricter and Qian was simply born a girl. The latter situation insinuates the sexism that still exists in China, with boy children traditionally favored. The one-child policy even leads to sex-selective abortions of female fetuses and infanticide of newborn girls, skewing the population of young adults to be dominated by men^{xviii}.

However, Qian doesn't list sexism as among China's biggest problems, but rather focuses on environmental pollution and other issues. Chen also touches upon the environment in her interview, and it's for good reason that people in China are worried. In 2010 air pollution was a factor in 1.2 million deaths within China, placing it fourth on the list of highest risk factors for deaths in the country^{xix}. Both Chen and Qian agree that the government is working on the environmental problems. Though people tend to stay supportive when talking about the government, unless they have a good reason not to, I indeed saw many recycling bins, bike rental stations, and official signs supporting environmental protection while I was in China.

Qian secondly brings up the issue of reputation. Here, the word "reputation" is a very rough translation of the Chinese idiom "face". Often people will say "to save face" to represent the efforts that people take in preserving their reputations. Another related term is that of "guānxi", which I leave in the original Chinese because I find it even more difficult to translate into a single word. "Guānxi" can roughly be thought of as one's relationship with someone. If you are on great terms with a person, then the two of you have "good guānxi". Chinese people will tell you that relationships are needed to get anything done in their country, and so they regard these concepts of "face" and "guānxi" as very important.

Chapter 4

A few days later I left for Beijing to see another Yanqing classmate, Leilei. We planned to meet at noon outside of the subway station near Beihai Park in Beijing's central region.

I woke up around 8:30 a.m. Like every other morning, Ma laid food out on the table, including bread, eggs, and other toppings. She motioned me over to the stove, where a pot of small sticky rice balls boiled. Chen continued sleeping, still reveling in her first days off from college.

I hoped to visit again before I left later that summer, but Chen would be gone by then. She forced herself awake to say goodbye and fell back asleep.

I got off the subway at Beihai almost exactly at noon. When I called Leilei, she said that they would be there soon; Leilei's mother, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend's sister were joining too.

I sat down in the shade of a tree near the subway entrance, a futile attempt to cool myself down. After they finally arrived, Leilei apologized for being late and then introduced me to the others.

Her boyfriend, Hai, was a slight man with pale skin, and he resembled his sister. However, Leilei's wide pale features looked nothing like her mom's, who had a narrow brown face and a narrow nose to match.

As we walked toward Beihai Park, Leilei explained that her mom had arrived just a few days earlier from her home in Shaanxi and now planned to stay in Beijing for a while.

Just outside of the park a sign communicated the 20 yuan entrance fee. Leilei bought me a ticket as I waited in line behind her. “No, wait!” I protested. “I can pay.” She shook her head.

“It’s no problem Hannah,” she said with a finality that I decided not to argue against further.

After making our way partway around the massive Beihai Lake and observing the ancient structures beside it, we left for lunch. We then walked to Houhai Park, another nearby tourist destination. The heat beat down on us, and we finally stopped at a veranda.

“Let’s rest here, and then we can start the interview that you mentioned,” said Leilei. Everyone agreed.

Leilei and I wandered off a little ways from the others and began.

Leilei’s Story

“We’ll start with some basic information, such as your birthday, where you’ve lived, and more details like that.”

I was born in September 1991, and I grew up in a Shaanxi Province city with a little over one million people. My mom is from Shaanxi too, but my dad is Sichuanese.

Then I lived at a high school in Guangyuan, Sichuan with our classmates from Yanqing. We all eventually went to Liuzhong, where you joined us. Finally, I ended up here in Beijing.

“How many dialects and languages do you speak?”

I speak three Chinese dialects: Mandarin, the Sichuan dialect, and the Shaanxi dialect.

“Ok, let’s focus on your childhood now. Can you describe it?”

Growing up, my life could be hard at times because I got sick a lot. It’s not that I had a serious illness, but I’d catch colds pretty often that lasted for a long time.

My family worked hard to make life good for me, though, and I really love them. We always had delicious food because my mom and my grandparents, who lived with us, cooked our meals. My mom actually worked cooking professionally.

I’m glad to have her staying in Beijing with me now. I’ve missed her, and I get to eat her delicious food again.

“So your mom worked as a chef. What about your dad?”

Yes, and my dad built furniture.

“Ok. And your home? What did it look like?”

We lived in a family house big enough for many people. It had six bedrooms and then many other rooms. However, families are smaller now because of the government’s child policies. My parents could only have two children, me and my little sister, and this meant that the house felt really big.

“How many siblings do your parents have?”

My dad has four siblings and my mom has two. They all mostly live in Sichuan. I haven’t been back to Sichuan in five or six years, so it’s been a long time since I last saw them.

“Now let’s move on to your experience with school. Tell me about your time in elementary school.”

Schools in Shaanxi are pretty easy compared to better schools in places like Beijing. Still, class and homework took up most of my time, and I never liked school all that much. My parents thought I should continue my education, and that’s why I went to the vocational school in Guangyuan.

“Did you choose that school?”

No, my dad chose it for me. He liked the curriculum for my major, hotel services. Also, the school’s history spans more than seventy years.

“What classes did you take?”

We studied a lot of subjects. These included Chinese literature and language, mathematics, English, history, P.E., music, art, and then tour guide and hotel classes.

“In Guangyuan, what class was your favorite? And go into more detail about your life there including how much tuition cost, where you lived, and so on.”

I liked international etiquette the most because I got to study customs from many countries.

I lived at the school but pretty much everyone did. Only, since most of the other students were from Guangyuan they usually went home on the weekends and I didn’t. On certain holidays, like May 1st and National Day, I’d have enough extra time to go home too.

Our teachers weren’t very strict, and the tuition there wasn’t too bad either, just a bit more than 2,000 yuan a semester. Living in the dorms cost a little over 300 yuan a semester. Since my parents paid my tuition, I don’t know the exact amounts.

“Then you and your classmates went to Liuzhong. How did that compare?”

Liuzhong cost more than our Guangyuan school, at 5,000 yuan a semester, and it had stricter rules. We had to keep our rooms very clean, and with regard to our appearance the school required us to wear no makeup, keep our hair up, cut our fingernails short, and much else beyond that. I didn’t like how stringently Liuzhong enforced the rules, but we only attended class there for a semester. Then, my classmates and I went to Beijing for semester long internships in hotels before graduating.

Also, despite the strictness I liked some aspects of my life at Liuzhong. All my classmates were from the same school in Guangyuan, and we were really close. We always had lots of fun together.

“Then you left for your Beijing internship. That was a requirement?”

Yes, we only graduated after the internship.

“How did you like that experience?”

Not much. Although the school called what we did internships, we were really just doing normal work and getting paid almost nothing. I didn’t like working at a hotel because I felt tired all the time. I lived in the hotel’s dormitory, so it felt like I could never leave work.

The school split the class up among several different hotels, and at mine I worked six days a week, from 10 a.m. until 9 p.m. with a two hour break in the middle of the day.

I actually continued working at hotels for another semester after graduating. During the “internship” the hotel paid me under 1,000 yuan a month. I made more after the first few months, but still not enough.

I’m so glad that I left. Now I live in my own apartment, my work is more enjoyable, and I get paid more.

“Does anyone else from Liuzhong still work in hotels?”

Out of the classmates I talk with, almost everyone does other work. They don’t like hotel work either because it’s not only tiring but boring too.

“What’s your job now? Did the program at Liuzhong help you to get it?”

I handle national investments. Attending Liuzhong didn't matter much for my resume, and the school didn't help me to find this job either. I found it myself and proved myself with my own smarts.

It just shows you that attending college or even high school isn't always necessary for success. China does not even require high school because there are so many poor people that can't afford the tuition and the extra time off from work. Some people would rather just start working earlier, and they might still achieve success.

"How many days a week do you work now? How many hours a day? Describe your work a bit more."

Now I work six days a week, from 8:30 a.m. until 6 p.m. I get up at 7:30 and bike to work, and that takes about a half hour. I'm pretty busy but not more than average for jobs in China. I like my job, and it's not too tiring. On an average work day, I stay in the office all day and call people a lot.

I'll probably stay for several years, at least that's my hope. I'm lucky to have found this job because it's not so easy to find good work. I'm happy too that my workmates and I are on good terms, though we don't hang out much outside of the office.

"How much do you make a month, and what do you spend your money on?"

I make 5,000 yuan during the average month now, mainly from commission. I'm happy. I mostly spend my money on eating out, though I cook at home occasionally. Even if the air is not as good as in Shaanxi, the food in Beijing is great.

Although I use up all of my money, I make sure to cover important costs. For example, I have health insurance and that's really important. I make enough money to live pretty close to my work as well.

"Would you have been better off not going to Liuzhong?"

I'm not sure. I guess I learned from my experience there and at the hotel afterward. I certainly have a more comprehensive view of China now, and I'm smarter about my life.

I'm not saying that school isn't sometimes good. For example, my little sister is studying preschool education, and I think it will help her.

"And your mom? Why is she in Beijing right now?"

My mom plans to stay with me for about a year because I haven't been home for so long, other than for shorter holidays. Also, she's resting from work while she lives here. My dad is alone back in Shaanxi right now.

Before my mom came, I still made an effort to see my family. Once a year I return to Shaanxi, and I'd go more often if work didn't keep me so busy. I'm not given enough breaks to travel more.

"Would you like to stay in Beijing more permanently?"

I like Beijing, but eventually I'll return to Shaanxi. I want to start my own family there. Hai is from Shaanxi as well, so if we marry then returning shouldn't be a problem.

"I'll visit you in Shaanxi one day then. Next, what's the religious landscape in China? Is your family religious?"

Most people in China believe in Buddhism and a large number believe in Islam. Very few Muslim people live in my Shaanxi hometown but a lot live in Beijing, even if they are still a minority here. Many people are not religious, though I think less than the number of Buddhists.

Identifying a person's religion can be hard because sometimes people appreciate the traditions of a religion without really believing in it. This holds particularly true with Buddhism, and this type of non-religion describes my family. I'm the same way, and I personally like Buddhism and its stories, even though I don't consider myself Buddhist.

Just then the others, who had been meandering around Houhai after their rest, walked up to us.

"We can stop now," I said, standing up. "You mind if I interview you again some other time?"

"Yes, you can stop by my workplace sometime this week."

"That sounds great."

- - -

I visited Leilei at her work a few days later, arriving at around noon. The area featured massive malls and sleek office buildings. Everything seemed new. Leilei wore a button up white shirt and a black skirt, her company's female uniform. Hai worked nearby and he treated us to lunch at a hotpot restaurant. After eating, Leilei needed to return to the office but she told me that I could interview her when she got off at 6 p.m. I walked around for a while, but the hot, muggy air coupled with the generic quality of the endless malls eventually forced me inside. I found refuge in a coffee shop and messaged Leilei with my location. I wrote and drank coffee until she showed up.

"Hi Leilei. Would you like a coffee? I'll buy one for you."

"No, I'm ok." After asking her about her workday followed by a few minutes of other small talk, we jumped into the interview.

"Before we finished last time, you said that Hai is from Shaanxi too. How did you first meet him?"

We met after he overheard me speaking on the phone with my mom using the Shaanxi dialect. He started a conversation with me, and here we are.

"Go into a little more detail about your life with Hai."

Life is good now with him, and we live near each other. He treats me very kindly, and he often buys me food and little gifts.

"What work does he do? How much does he earn?"

He works in real estate and so his income is based on commission. Sometimes Hai can make 10,000 yuan in a month, and he's using his extra money to buy an apartment in Beijing, the one he lives in now. He went to school and trained to be a pilot for a while, but like me his work has nothing to do with his education.

"Is he your first boyfriend?"

He's not my first, which is good I think because I have some perspective now. I had a boyfriend in Yanqing for three months and then another after I graduated. Not too far in the future we may even marry. We've already been together for two years now.

"What's the normal age to marry? At what age would you like to marry?"

I feel that twenty-five is the perfect age to get married, and I'm getting close to that age. A lot of my friends are already married actually.

"Do you plan to move in with him?"

I don't because it's too early in our relationship. It's not a problem because we live close to each other.

"What do you do in your free time?"

With my one day off every week I generally rest at home and clean and make food. I often hang out with Hai's little sister as well, and we are good friends. She lives nearby with her husband.

"I remember her telling me that she has a son?"

Yes, he's a bit over three years old now and lives in Shaanxi with his paternal grandparents. Hai's sister and her husband don't have time to watch him.

"What will you do if you get pregnant?"

I'll make sure not to get pregnant before marriage. That's a big problem in China, and generally if an unmarried girl gets pregnant then she'll have an abortion. I'll be careful so that I don't need to make such a choice.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Unrelated, but I'm curious. What do you think of wealthy Chinese people going abroad to study?"

I think it's good that Chinese people are at foreign universities, particularly at ones in the United States. The cultures of our two countries are not alike, and this will aid in developing more understanding between us.

I only wish that I could go abroad to visit the U.S. too, but I'm not rich enough.

"What do you think of American culture?"

It has a lot of good aspects that China could learn from, and China is adopting some of these. Economic development in the U.S. is good as well. I can't point out any really bad aspects of American culture because I don't know enough about the U.S.

"Does inequality between men and women still exist in China? Are girls and boys treated differently by their parents? What are your personal experiences, if any, with inequality?"

Inequality is not so bad now. Parents are almost equally strict with boys and girls, though just a little bit stricter toward daughters. My parents were strict with me, but I have no brother as a comparison. Also, I think my parents were worried because they really loved me, and as a child I could be very naughty.

"Any differences between the young adults of today with the previous generations?"

Mainly, younger people are a lot more open!

"Can you give an example?"

Nowadays gay people are relatively common and young adults don't find homosexuality to be much of a problem anymore. Chinese society used to dislike them, and older people still aren't so accepting.

I believe that now gay people are even allowed to legally marry, though I'm not sure about the exact laws.

— — —

Near the very beginning of the interview, Leilei says that she speaks three dialects. These are out of the many that exist in China. Different regions and even different cities boast their own dialects, which are often mutually unintelligible with standard Mandarin. Elderly Chinese people sometimes do not speak Mandarin very well, but in the modern era the dialect is even more standardized as China's common language. It serves as the language of instruction in Chinese

schools, ensuring that the younger generation speaks it well. However the major dialects still hold strong, even as the more obscure ones are fading away. As Leilei reveals, when she talks with her family she uses her home dialect.

Her experience at Liuzhong and in Guangyuan can then be compared with Qian's. Leilei's story reveals a degree of success on her part, but also further emphasizes the problems with China's educational system. Like Qian, her vocational education did not help her to obtain work, and in fact the "internship" comes across as rather exploitative. Even if attending university isn't the answer for every student, certainly Liuzhong fails to provide an adequate alternative.

The girls do exhibit different spending habits, causing one to question how Chinese young adults usually handle their money. Qian saved for her business, while Leilei does not save any of her money. With Leilei as an example, one might assume that Chinese young adults do not save for the future. In fact, in 2009 both urban households headed by twenty-five year olds and those headed by sixty year olds saved approximately 30% of their disposable income^{xx}.

The potential reasons for Leilei not saving her money are numerous. She is still quite young, younger than the twenty-five year olds from the study, and so perhaps she will start saving in the next few years. Or, one could argue that saving is more important for young men than for women, thereby reducing Leilei's motivation. China now has many more young men than young women, and so the argument goes that women can be more picky with choosing a man with assets such as a house^{xxi}. Whatever the cause, though, as a whole China saves at an incredibly high rate, far higher than the rate in most other countries. For example, U.S. households currently save less than 6% a year. U.S. adults under the age of thirty-five actually have a negative savings rate because their debt, such as student and credit-card debt, is increasing^{xxii}.

Leilei also mentions that she returns to Sichuan every year, and she very likely goes back for each Chinese New Year. During the New Year, most Chinese people get at least three days off from work, and the tradition is to return to one's hometown. This tradition continues strong among the younger population. Migrants to the cities take the opportunity to return home and see their families, and two days before the 2015 New Year, there were about eighty million departures in China on various types of transportation^{xxiii}.

Leilei also gives a rather accurate account of Chinese religion. Qian previously described herself as non-religious, and while Leilei also fits this description she delves deeper into how religion is defined differently in China versus in the West. In China, my friends will go to Buddhist temples and pray for good fortune, and yet they will not call themselves religious.

I liken these practices by non-religious people as an example of a super-culture in China. This super-culture is based on the religions and philosophies that shaped the Chinese mindset for thousands of years, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This is similar to how the West is built upon a Judeo-Christian super-culture, which permeates the Western mindset even for those people who are not religious.

Ultimately, the interview ends on the optimistic note of Leilei's tolerance toward homosexuals. Most young people I talk to in China do not have any inherent problem with homosexuality, even though China only removed it from the list of mental diseases in 2001^{xxiv}. The generations older than today's young adults are less supportive. Further, parents with one child particularly hope for that child to marry and produce grandchildren.

Another Liuzhong classmate summed up the view that I find most prevalent among young adults when she told me, "Being gay is fine, but the problem is that you will then have no future."

This takes a very practical approach to the matter, in a society where the pressure to conform to heterosexual norms is still strong.

Further, while Leilei is supportive, she doesn't seem to understand much of the politics going on with homosexuality in China. She assumes that homosexuals probably have the same rights as heterosexual couples, when in fact they still cannot legally marry or have a civil union^{xxv}. Still, China has been moving in the right direction with this issue, and hopefully acceptance, by both the state and the people, will continue to increase.

Chapter 5

The day after venturing out to interview Leilei again, I met up with my friend Jiao. He attended university in Yanqing County and we grew close after meeting through a mutual friend and a classmate of his at the university, a girl named Xia.

Jiao made sure that his work gave him the day off, and I took the subway to his apartment. I arrived a bit past 10 a.m. and waited for him outside the subway stop.

I spotted him pretty quickly because at 6 ft. 2 in. tall Jiao towers over most other Chinese people.

"Jiao!" He turned and saw me.

After our reunion greetings and a quick hug, he insisted on carrying my backpack and we walked to his apartment complex.

The residential skyscrapers seemed to stretch on forever, and finally Jiao stepped into one of them. After a short elevator ride, I followed him into an apartment. I immediately noted the rundown and utilitarian atmosphere of the place. Jiao stopped outside a closed door and pulled out a key. "My girlfriend and I rent out this one room," he explained.

The room, with its nice wooden floors and clean white walls covered in girly decorations, felt utterly mismatched with the dingy area exterior to it. We sat on the bed. After talking for a few more minutes, Jiao said "I know you want to interview me. We can do that now if you'd like."

"Yeah, ok. Also, is your girlfriend coming by later today? I'd like to meet her."

"She works late and has a dancing group after, so unfortunately she won't be back for a while."

"Oh, alright then. You ready?"

Jiao's Story

"Let's begin! When were you born and where are you from? Remember, since this is all about recording your story the more details the better."

I was born in June 1989, and my hometown is Zhaluntun, a city in China's Inner Mongolia region. Nearly a half million people live there, so while it's not that small it feels that way compared to cities like Beijing.

Zhaluntun is famous for the natural beauty of the area, and lots of tourists come to visit for that reason. The Daxing'anling Mountains are nearby, and there are forests and the Yalu River. One day you should visit. The air there is also very clean.

“Ok, I’ll definitely make it there one day. So do you speak more than one dialect? Any other languages too?”

Yes, I speak Mandarin and the Dongbei dialect. Then I know a little English.

“What’s your ethnicity?”

My father is Han and my mom is Manchu. I’m not sure if you know the Manchu? They ruled China in the past.”

“I know a little about them, but tell me more.”

In feudal society Manchu men shaved their heads except for a long braid in the back, and the women wore really tall platform shoes. Nowadays their descendents don’t follow these traditions any longer. However, my family still abstains from eating dog meat, which is forbidden by Manchu custom. Some other Chinese people will eat it. Manchu people used to speak a different language too.

“I don’t think I’d eat dog meat either honestly.” --- “Do you have any siblings?”

I’m an only child. Since my dad is Han, my parents were still limited by the one-child policy.

“How do you feel about being an only child?”

Oh, very happy! My situation turned out really great this way because I received all of my parents’ attention growing up. I wanted all of their love for myself, so I became greedy and spoilt.

Then, on my dad’s side of the family I am the only male grandson and so I will carry on our ancestral line. Therefore, my paternal grandparents have always doted on me as well.

“If you had been born a girl, then what?”

My situation would be different because only boys carry on the family name. Boys are traditionally favored over girls, a custom commonly summed up in the four character phrase:

重 zhòng (attach importance to) 男 nán (males) 轻 qīng (not important [are]) 女 nǚ (females).

“That mindset still exists today?”

Yes, it definitely does. But, now it’s mainly the perspective of the previous generation. They consider men as the ones that belong to their family clan and who can pass on their family blood, not women! Young people still believe this a little, but it’s not that common anymore.

Chinese parents also worry more about their daughters than their sons. They worry that boys will lie to the girls and take advantage of them.

“Do you want a male or female child, or do you not care?”

I personally hope to have a male child first so that he can carry on my family name. However, I will love the child whether it’s a boy or a girl.

“What about your girlfriend? Do you know if she has a preference?”

I don’t know her opinion on this issue.

“Let’s talk about your childhood a bit more. What kind of home did you live in, an apartment or a house? And with which family members?”

As a child I lived in a large stand-alone house with my paternal grandparents, my parents, and my paternal uncle’s family. My uncle has a wife and one daughter. My maternal grandparents live in Zhaluntun too, and all my grandparent are still alive except for my paternal grandpa.

When I was around thirteen, my parents and I moved to an apartment belonging to the company my father worked for at the time. Our other family members stayed at the original house, and we visited them often.

“What would you and your family do with your free time? What were common activities in your city?”

Since the landscape around Zhaluntun is so pretty we often went out to the countryside and climbed the mountains. Sometimes we traveled to other cities, and we even went to Russia occasionally. Russian people come to our city to sightsee too.

As Zhaluntun is so far north people drink way more alcohol there than here in Beijing. However, I personally don't like to drink because I feel alcohol tastes gross, and it gives me headaches.

"Let's move on to your school experience now. What did your daily schedule for elementary school look like?"

During elementary, I went to school five days a week, and I started class each day around 7:30 a.m. and then ended around 4:30 p.m. Class periods were forty minutes long, and we had an hour and a half break for lunch and to rest.

"For middle school?"

The hours and days were the same for middle school and high school.

"How did you do on the exam to get into high school?"

I did pretty well, but I chose a high school that most of my really good friends got into over the best high school that I could've attended.

"Do you regret that decision now?"

I don't because no matter where you go to school if you study well then you can do well on the Gaokao.

"What classes did you take in high school?"

My high school had the same classes as almost all other Chinese high schools, and these included biology, history, chemistry, politics, physics, P.E., mathematics, English, and Chinese. I liked P.E. class the best.

"Did your schools require tuition?"

Yes. For all levels of school in China families usually have to pay tuition. At my high school, tuition ended up at around 6,000 yuan a year and only the very best students didn't have to pay. Most families don't have a problem paying that amount, but a student from a really poor family that wants to go to school may want to study especially hard so that he or she can go for free.

"What were your hobbies throughout school?"

In middle school I grew more interested in sports, mainly basketball, jumping, and swimming. I'm good at these because I'm so tall. People are far taller in Inner Mongolia than in most other parts of China, and since the weather is so cold we have really strong bodies.

I always loved computer games too. I was friends with all of my classmates, but outside of class I became a bit of a loner. I'd do homework, clean my room and my clothes, watch films, and play lots and lots of computer games. I played games so often that I didn't study enough. I don't regret this because at the time playing games made me happy. My parents weren't happy, though, and they'd tell me, "Study harder! It will be good for your future. You'd better do it or you will regret not studying when you are older."

"What video game did you like the most?"

Westward Journey, though it's far less popular than many others. It's an online fantasy game, and it consists of a fun fantasy world with lots of other players. Other way more popular online games include World of Warcraft and League of Legends.

"How did you do on the Gaokao?"

My bad study habits meant I didn't do that well. I still got into universities but only private ones. Of course I wish I could've gone to a public university, since they have better academics and cost less. At my private school the yearly tuition was 10,000 yuan, and at a public school tuition might be around half that. My parents paid for all of my college costs, and now I'm slowly paying them back.

"Are your parents doing ok financially?"

They're doing really well right now, but I feel that it's my duty to pay for my education. My parents always earned enough. Before they made about 10,000 yuan a month. This year they opened a sauna, and now they make about 20,000 yuan a month.

"What work did they do before?"

My dad used to work at a railway and as a side job he sold alcohol. My mom sold clothing.

"Why did you choose a university in Yanqing?"

I chose it because Yanqing is close to Beijing, and so I figured the area would be really exciting. My low Gaokao score meant that I didn't have many other choices that were near Beijing.

"How old were you when you started college and how long did you stay?"

I was eighteen, and I graduated after four years.

"Your major?"

I majored in marketing because I found it to be pretty interesting, and I felt that I'd have an easier time finding work with it compared to other majors.

"Go into more detail about your university. Did you like it? What did it look like? Just give me a picture of your university life."

I studied there for four years, and I liked it a lot. The campus was huge and beautiful and only a fifteen minute drive from the center of Yanqing. We'd sometimes take taxis into town. The school had a lot of activities and fun places for students, such as a massive room of billiard tables. Also, since everyone lived on campus we could easily hang out with each other.

Most students at the school didn't like studying and many played computer games a lot. I played poker in the dorms, and I could win pretty often against the others that joined in. We just played for fun, though, and didn't bet money.

I got along great with my classmates. The other students studying marketing became like brothers and sisters to me.

"Anything else?"

Well...I really loved the Friday night dances. The school had a huge plaza, and every Friday students would gather there to dance and socialize. I could see all of my friends, and the dancing made for awesome exercise. Aside from these dances, I exercised further through participating in running and long jump.

"And the dorms? How many people were in each dorm room?"

Every room had eight people, and for my four years at the university I lived with the same roommates. At the beginning, the school randomly placed us together.

"Your classes? Describe them."

My major-specific classes had between twenty and thirty students, and my common classes had forty to fifty students. Each class lasted forty-five minutes, and I attended classes for about twenty-four hours each week. My major specific classes included philosophy, ethics, real estate, understanding radios, managing, and marketing. I thought they were pretty good.

In English class, one of the common classes, a foreign teacher sometimes taught, and this made the class more fun because I'd never had a foreign teacher before then.

"Did you date anyone while in college?"

Yeah I had my first girlfriend, and she was a model. I met her at a CCTV modeling competition.

"I remember you telling me about that once. Go into more detail about your modeling."

China Central Television is the main television broadcasting network in China, and I decided to try out the competition because a couple of friends told me that I should. I placed fifteenth out of nine hundred people. However, I didn't pursue modeling because I realized I probably wouldn't make much money from it.

"How about your job now? Describe it a bit."

I work for Baidu, which is like Google. Baidu is one of the largest web service companies in China, and my job is to help with optimizing the Internet search engine. I'm paid 6,000 yuan a month. I think there are at least twenty thousand employees at the Baidu headquarters here, and it's the main center for the company.

My girlfriend works at Baidu as well, and we met through a work party about a year ago.

"Tell me about that."

Baidu held a dance at the headquarters, and when I asked my girlfriend if I could dance with her she said yes. Afterward we became friends and then we began dating. Now, we live together.

"Do you and her save any money?"

Her salary is the same as mine, and both of us save about fifty percent of that. We have no need to spend more money, and we don't want to waste what we earn.

"Isn't the cost of living pretty high in Beijing? If so, what do you think of that?"

Housing is expensive in Beijing because so many people want to come here. They feel that Beijing has lots of opportunities.

However, salaries aren't too bad either, and many people are able to save money if they are frugal with their rent and other costs. For example, my girlfriend and I could easily rent a place bigger than this room, but we don't want to spend too much money. We pay about 1,000 yuan a month for rent right now. People like us would rather save our money or use it for traveling, treating friends to food, and maybe even starting a business.

My girlfriend and I still lead a happy life without a bigger apartment.

"Are you thinking of marriage at all?"

No. Life is pretty good for me as it is, and I'm still young. I think that the best age for a girl to marry is before thirty, and that for a guy age matters less.

"Go through your normal workday, and explain what working at Baidu is like for you."

The company atmosphere at Baidu is really good. On a normal workday I start at 8:30 a.m., rest for an hour at noon, and get off at 5:30 p.m. During our working time, the company is pretty lenient about letting us go off for a bit, say on a quick stroll or to play a game. So, for about half an hour each day I can go and do something else.

Baidu also has great facilities for its employees. We can play many sports there such as billiards, soccer, basketball, swimming, yoga, ping pong, and more. My favorite sports now are basketball and swimming, and I often swim after I get off of work.

I'm friends with my workmates too, and I play poker with them a lot and sometimes mahjong. I now bet a little, about 1,000 yuan a month. I usually don't win anything extra, and my biggest surplus was around 1,000 yuan. The winner always treats everyone else to eat.

"Did attending college help you to get your job?"

Yes, it definitely did.

"Would you like to stay in Beijing when you start a family or move somewhere else?"

I'd like to return to Inner Mongolia eventually. The environment there is so much better than here and in other big cities, so going back would be a lot healthier for my future children.

I like living in Beijing, but the city represents a lot of the problems in China. Right now China is the world's factory and this is bad for China's environment.

"What do you view as the biggest problems of modern China? What about its biggest strengths?"

Those overlap a bit. For example, China's large population can be viewed as a strength because it has helped China in many ways. All the people here buy a huge number of products, and so it's easy to make money selling things to others. This creates more opportunities. Plus, we have so many choices when shopping because stores are so big. The supermarkets are huge, and in a place like Beijing there are restaurants everywhere. I mostly eat out now since I feel that it's really troublesome to cook and then clean after. There are so many types of food to choose from.

On the other hand, China's population can be considered a problem too. The large number of people contributes to the pollution and strains systems such as healthcare. China's healthcare system is actually ok in principle, especially in bigger cities like Beijing. I have health insurance, and I think pretty much everyone in Beijing does. However, many people outside of Beijing don't have health insurance.

Also, you have to wait in line to do anything. There are always so many people in front of you and behind you. I hate waiting! Everything gets crowded, such as the subway systems. The high demand placed on housing and other things causes prices to go up as well.

Another aspect of China that can be viewed as both positive or negative is the one-child policy. It's good because it helps China by slowing down population growth, and if you have more than one child then you will spend all of your money and end up with nothing saved.

Then, the one-child policy can be looked at as a problem because lots of single children are lazier. Just look at me. I'm really lazy.

"You seem like a pretty hard worker to me, but I won't argue with you about that right now. What differences do you see between young people in China today and the previous generations?"

The one-child policy is just one factor in the changes that have developed in people my age. Younger people are far less traditional, and so they care less about old customs. These customs include avoiding cool water to only drink hot water and waking up really early.

There are lots of bad changes in young people too, and now many have inflated egos, shop way too often, talk too much, and don't actually do enough. Girls especially shop too much now.

"Anything else?"

Divorce has grown more popular in China, though the rates are still pretty low. Couples sometimes get pregnant before marriage too, but when this happens most still have abortions

because their parents wouldn't approve. Sometimes they might get married before the birth of the baby.

Most importantly, young people are better at working with the new ideas in our world as China continues to develop. As a result, they are way more accepting of Western culture and modern life habits.

"You fit this description of young people?"

I do. I actually dream of going to the U.S. one day because people have more freedom there. My dream would be made perfect if I then got a job with Google.

— — —

Jiao's life story exemplifies the continuing patriarchal traditions in Chinese society, and unfortunately he seems to agree with some of those patriarchal views. In China, passing on one's "blood" and family name is traditionally very important and something that can only happen with a male child. When a woman married she became a member of her husband's family and moved in with them. In more rural areas this tradition of living with a husband's family continues, while in the cities young married couples typically live on their own. However, the concept of a woman leaving her own family still holds strong, and so people continue to make a big fuss about giving birth to at least one son.

For example, a recent reinterpretation of Chinese law may help to sustain the concept that a husband provides the home. Now, property purchased before a marriage stays the property of the person whose name is on the deed, even with a divorce^{xxvi}. Leta Hong Fincher, the doctoral candidate at Tsinghua University previously mentioned, states that women often contribute to the purchase of a home and that this interpretation means that those homes are likely to be registered solely with the husband. Others argue that the law is perfectly fair to both genders, but the debate highlights the continued patriarchal values in Chinese society.

Jiao also discusses his status as an only child and the effect of this on his upbringing. He jokes that he grew spoilt as a child, and with these jokes he touches on another widespread Chinese concept, that of "The Little Emperor"^{xxvii}. The idea is that single children, generally in urban areas, are accorded an excessive amount of attention by their parents and often their grandparents. Certainly, the interviewees, both those who are single children and those with siblings, generally experienced childhoods materially easier than those of their parents. Already, most of the interviewees have referenced the difficulties that their parents lived through.

In the modern era urban parents are able to spend more on their children, and the growing economy continues to lift more people out of poverty. This rise of extra spending money is paired with China's consumerist culture. The new prosperity also allows young adults to devote more of their time to leisurely activities, such as online games.

Even Jiao enjoys the rapidly growing gaming culture. Online gaming in China represents one of the world's most rapidly expanding online markets, and it is now worth over \$13 billion dollars^{xxviii}.

Yet, despite Jiao's jokes about his gaming habits and his laziness, he seems to work hard, carefully saving his money and even paying back his parents for the cost of tuition. Maybe he was "A Little Emperor" as a child, but I wouldn't call him that now.

Somewhat heartening as well is how Jiao's college education did in fact help him to obtain his current job. It's a fairly good job too, with a positive work atmosphere and a higher than

average salary. Perhaps most interesting is that he managed to obtain this job after attending a less-prestigious private school. Maybe the Gaokao and attending a top university are less important than is often believed by Chinese high school students and parents.

Importantly, Chinese students possess the right to a free education up through the end of middle school if they attend their local school. Even then, parents pay to cover costs such as uniforms and books, listed as tuition by some interviewees.

Finally, I find Jiao's answer to the last question significant in the context of the Chinese government's attitude toward Google; at the time of this interview Google's search engine and other Google services were almost completely banned in China. Yet, Jiao displays his independence through sharing his dream of living in the U.S. and working for Google.

Chapter 6

The day after meeting with Jiao, I went to see my friend Lihua. We'd met the previous summer when I randomly started talking to her in a restaurant as a way to practice my Chinese. We'd immediately hit it off, and she'd told me that she and her husband, Long, both work in Beijing as engineers. Upon her request, I described my life in the U.S. to her and promised that I'd visit when I returned to Beijing.

Now, after an hour and a half on the subway and another twenty minute bus ride, I finally stepped off to see Lihua and Long waiting for me across the street. They waved, and I hurried over. Lihua was seven months pregnant with her and Long's first child. I asked her about the baby, and then we went inside a nearby supermarket where Long bought bottled sodas for us. I unsuccessfully tried to pay for my own.

The summer heat beat down on us during the ten minutes walk back to their apartment. Despite Beijing's name literally meaning the "North Capital", the city can get *hot*.

Lihua and Long lived on the top floor of a six story walk-up, easy for me and Long but a rather tiring uphill distance for Lihua with her extra weight. Finally, we all made it up and stepped into their apartment.

It included a kitchen, a bathroom, and two other rooms. As Lihua began to cook lunch Long turned on the air conditioning and beckoned me into the living room, which doubled as a second bedroom. "Wait, Lihua can I help you at all?"

"No Hannah, I'm fine."

After eating, we all relaxed on the couch and I gave Lihua her gift. I felt a little bad because I'd bought American brand baby-bibs and somehow forgotten to pack them, and so all I had to give her was perfume. I'd brought a great number of American perfume bottles with me as gifts for my female Chinese friends.

The three of us talked for a little while. I'd told Lihua about my project before arriving in China, and with the TV mumbling in the background I then began to interview her.

Lihua's Story

"Ok, you ready Lihua? Since I'm trying to share the story of your life, lots of details are good. Where are you from and what is it like there?"

I come from a rural area of Hebei, from a village of about five hundred people. The whole village is built like a compact grid, and every house shares its walls with the neighboring houses on either side. Really, “family compound” is a more accurate word than “house” because our village homes are each large enough for multiple generations of a family. A compound consists of an open courtyard with about ten rooms surrounding it. My family’s courtyard was four hundred square meters, the same size as most of the others, and family life centered around it.

“How many people lived in your compound?”

Only my paternal grandparents, parents, little brother, and I lived there, and so we had plenty of extra room. My dad had a brother who had moved to the city for work, and my mother’s three brothers lived with my maternal grandparents in a different village. Tradition dictates that a wife should move in with her husband’s family, though sometimes exceptions are made if the wife has no brothers.

“Your parents weren’t limited by the one-child policy?”

The policy only started in 1990 for our area, and so my parents were allowed up to two children. I was born in 1985.

“How did your family make a living?”

Almost all families, including mine, own a plot of land outside of the village, and we always had more than enough food from our crops. We grew corn, wheat, cotton, and many vegetables, and we sold most of this to businessmen. These businessmen would resell the food to city people. We stored the extra produce in our empty rooms.

“Did your mom work in the fields? If so, did she stop after you were born?”

She and my father both worked in the fields. After my birth, she at first spent most of her time caring for me. However, since my grandparents could watch me, she returned to the fields soon after. My parents and the others only didn’t work during the winter.

“What would people do in the winter?”

The whole family would gather inside with the heater on. As the villagers waited for the spring they would visit each other to chat and play mahjong.

“How often did you go into cities as a child?”

Very rarely. The closest city was ten kilometers away and we didn’t have a car. Very few villagers had cars then, though nowadays nearly everyone does. Instead, since someone from the village would go to the city every second or third day, if we really wanted something we could ask them to get it for us. After all, everyone knew each other.

Therefore, I really only knew village life as a child, and I had a childhood typical of most village children.

“Did you visit other villages?”

Yes, sometimes. Where I grew up the villages are scattered throughout the countryside, and the closest one to ours is about a ten minute walk away. My first elementary school teacher, though, lived in a village a bit further away, and she was one of the few people with a car. Everyday she’d drive to teach us and then return home.

“How did you spend your time as a child before you started school?”

My younger days were often spent in the living room watching TV. We had air conditioning, and so the house felt quite comfortable. I also remember my grandparents taking me to the other family compounds. The elderly would regularly gather together like this, bringing the children in their care with them. All the parents and able-bodied adults were off working. While the elderly

played mahjong, smoked, and gossiped, the other children and I would entertain ourselves in the courtyard's center. Those were easy days, before I had to go to school. When I was eight, I started elementary school and then everything got busier.

"Describe your elementary school experience."

I attended our village elementary school, located in one of the housing compounds. It had four teachers, each teaching a different grade level. My first class had the eight and nine year olds and there were twenty or so students.

In elementary school we primarily learned math and how to write Chinese characters.

"Outline your daily schedule for school days."

We started school at 8 a.m. and then had a break from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. We had school again until 5:30 p.m., and finally I'd walk back home and usually watch TV for about an hour. After dinner I would do my homework. I didn't have much time to play with the other children on school days, although we did have resting periods between each class. During these breaks, we'd play games with the teacher.

"And your middle school experience? Did you attend middle school in the village too?"

My village had a middle school but no high school. Fortunately, I scored very well on a middle school placement test, and so the best middle school in the nearby city accepted me. Some of my elementary school classmates were accepted into middle schools in the city as well, but most attended the village middle school or began to work.

In China, you must do well enough on the middle school test, the Zhongkao, to be admitted to a middle school. Otherwise, you can wait to take it the next year or just start working. This is the same for high school and then for university.

"Do you remember your first day of middle school? And go into more detail about the school."

I was thirteen when I started middle school, and I remember the first day clearly because I also moved into the school dormitories that day. The date was September 1st, and after all my things were prepared, my parents and I biked to the city. We made sure to leave early, when the air was still cool. The school had about three thousand students, a huge number to me, and since it accepted no one else from my village I didn't know anyone. My dorm room had three bunk beds, and five other girls lived there with me. I didn't know my roommates before then. Since none of them knew each other either we all quickly grew close.

Classes and studying took up most of our time, and we were not allowed off campus on school days. Every morning before class we woke up at 5:30 a.m. to do morning exercises. Then from 6 until 7 a.m. we did self-study in our classroom. The school assigned each student to a home classroom, and all of their classes would take place there, with the teachers rotating by subject.

From 7 until 8 a.m. we ate breakfast, and then from 8 until noon we had class again. Our lunch break lasted two hours, and so we'd hang out with friends, study, or sleep. From 2 until 5:30 p.m. we had class, and from 5:30 until 7 p.m. we had time off to eat dinner. From 7 until 9 p.m. we did self-study in the classroom again. During these self-study periods, a teacher would stay in the classroom to monitor us, and we could raise our hands if we had a question. After this, we'd get ready for bed.

"How many days did you get off a week?"

We only got every other weekend off, and I'd always go home during these breaks. As you can see, our days were very regimented! It was hardest on the weeks when we went to school for seven days and then had school again the Monday right after. However, we were also getting a good education.

“How many classes did you have a day and what were the subjects? Did you like these classes?”

We had nine different classes a day and our subjects over the three years at the school included Chinese literature and language, history, English, mathematics, politics, P.E., music, painting, biology, chemistry, physics, and computers.

My classes were good for the most part, although a Chinese teacher taught our English class and she didn't actually speak English very well. She did know the grammar and how to write in English. In China, students can often write English well without being able to speak it.

“What did you like most at the school?”

Despite the difficulty of my school, I liked aspects of it. I'm especially glad we stayed in the same dorm room for all three years. This meant that even with all of our work my roommates and I became best friends.

“What did you do to get accepted into high school?”

I needed to score well on the high school admissions test, and we were even busier the last year of middle school studying for that. The city only had one high school, and it's quite well-respected. Since I attended a good middle school and also studied a lot, I easily passed the test. Many students from other middle schools did not pass, and these students had to stay in middle school for another year or drop out of school to work. For example, my little brother went to another middle school in the city. He did not pass the high school test and so he started working. He is now a farmer, and he lives in our family home with his wife, his children, and my parents.

“What about the process to get into college?”

By this point you probably see how important tests are in China's education, and the hardest test of all is the Gaokao. It is taken by every single student in the country who wants to go to college and so it is incredibly competitive. The Gaokao is basically the same for everyone, though it varies slightly by province. China has so many people, and everyone wants to go to a good school. All these tests are supposed to make admissions a fairer process that is based on skill rather than on connections and wealth.

I did well on the Gaokao and got into my first choice, a well-respected public school in Hebei.

“Can you describe your college experience? Include what major you chose and any other details.”

I studied mechanical engineering. Most of the students in this major were men and that's still the case today. I didn't find the major all that interesting, but I knew it was good for work. I generally attended twenty to thirty hours of class each week, and my classes included mathematics, machinery, physics, and P.E.

In my home-group I was a good student, the tenth best out of forty. I took my major-specific classes with the students in my home-group, though we didn't stay in the same classroom anymore like in high school.

I had more time in college to hang out with friends, and I lived in the school dorms with five other girls. My best college friend was one of my roommates.

I got into a good master's program in Beijing, at a school that's in the top thirty universities in the country. This program lasted three years, and I met Long there because he attended the same school.

I graduated in July 2013, and then Long and I married in October 2013.

“And you began work after graduating?”

Yes, I work as a patent consultant now, specifically helping people with engineering patents. I work eight hours a day, five days a week and I make 5,000 yuan a month.

However, I'll stop work for a little while after the baby is born, and my mom will come to Beijing to help me.

— — —

Lihua's story is a Chinese dream of sorts, the peasant child who, through hard work, manages to ascend all the way to a top university and become successful. With the hukou system stacked against her, Lihua needed to work especially hard. Lihua herself highlights the competitiveness of the school system by describing how students, such as her brother, do not gain admission to the city's single high school. Further, though Lihua states that the high school is respected, it still would not compare to the very best schools in a city like Beijing.

Lihua's story presents a reversal of tradition, with her attending university while her brother becomes a farmer. In past times, men would be educated over women. The educational system, with all of its problems, still has at least some kind of equalizing influence on Chinese society.

However, I am surprised by Lihua's salary because I assumed that an engineering major graduating from a top masters program would earn more than 5,000 yuan a month. I checked this number with her another time and she again confirmed it. Perhaps it's because she only recently graduated and started working? Or, she's from a more rural area and so doesn't have enough “guānxi” with the right kind of people?

Then again Lihua works less hours than Leilei, who earns roughly the same amount. I will have to check up with Lihua in future years to see how her salary increases. Her mother is coming to stay with her and Long to help them care for their baby, and so then Lihua will be able to go back to work.

I feel that Lihua's low salary is a symptom of the wealth stratification taking place in China. While 3,000 yuan is about an average wage and 5,000 yuan a pretty good wage, both of those amounts sit at the bottom of the income totem pole. Jane Golley sums up this stratification when she writes how “This has resulted in a potentially unstable and highly inequitable domestic economy, in which 251 billionaires and 2.7 million millionaires (in US dollar terms) live alongside 180 million people who must survive on under US\$1.25 per day^{xxix}. So, while 5,000 yuan is fine for a normal Chinese person, it represents practically nothing to China's wealthy.

Lihua's opinion of her engineering major saddened me as well. Like many of the other interviewees, she did not find her studies especially enticing and instead chose her major for the job security. Her choice does make sense. After all, she is the first from her family to go to university and earn a higher wage, and so why wouldn't she take advantage of that with a more practical profession?

Chapter 7

Long's story

Later that day, as Lihua rested in the other room and then began to cook dinner, I interviewed Long.

"Thanks for letting me interview you too."

Really, it's not a problem. I'm glad to help.

"Ok, you ready? Where and when were you born? Tell me about your hometown."

I was born in Shandong Province in February 1985, and I grew up in a village that's part of the municipal area of a city. A few thousand people live in the village.

"What dialects and languages do you speak?"

I speak Mandarin and the Shandong dialect. Everyone my age learned Mandarin since we had to use it during our classes. However, before I started elementary school I couldn't speak it because we use the Shandong dialect at home.

"Ok, can you describe your living situation as a child? What did your house look like and who did you live with?"

The houses in my village all share walls and so they form long rows along the walkways. Each house wraps around a center courtyard and has four to five rooms, not including extra storage space. My family has four rooms for living and two storage rooms. The roofs over the storage rooms are flat so that we can put food on top to be dried by the sun.

I'm a single child, and only my parents and I lived in the house. However, my paternal grandparents lived in the same village and my maternal grandparents were in another village very close to ours. I could walk to their village in about twenty minutes.

"What work did your parents do?"

My parents are both farmers, like most of the other villagers, and they grow corn, wheat, soybean, and peanuts. They don't have a lot of land but it's enough, and aside from growing food for our family they sell a lot of their crops.

My mom stopped farming to teach at a local kindergarten for a while, the same kindergarten that I attended. The government eventually shut the kindergarten down because local people ran it. That type of school is no longer allowed, and afterward my mom went back to farming.

"Describe your time at the kindergarten."

The students were all from my village, and we were all friends. Each weekday, we spent eight hours at the kindergarten, mostly playing games. We also studied a little, with activities such as memorizing simple poems and learning simple math.

"Then what about elementary school? And what classes did you take?"

At age eight I started at a local elementary, and so I still lived at home. I could walk there from our house in ten minutes, and we had school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with an hour off for lunch. My home classroom had about thirty students. Even though we changed home classrooms each year, most grades were split into four different classrooms at the most. My grade only had two classrooms, and so I knew everyone my age.

My classes in elementary school were Chinese literature and language, math, P.E., music, art, geography, nature, and history, though we only studied history for the last two years. A different teacher taught each subject.

After school I first finished my homework, and then I had free time.

“How did you spend your free time?”

I’d watch TV and also sometimes go out with the other kids to swim, climb around the hills, fish, and on occasion to steal apples. My parents never found out about the apple stealing, and they still don’t know to this day!

I had some chores as well, like cleaning the floor and washing the dishes, but nothing too bad.

“Were uniforms required at your elementary school?”

Yes, and they are required in almost all Chinese schools. I had to wear a uniform in middle school and high school too.

“What did they look like?”

Schools try to make the uniforms as ugly as possible, so most students don’t like them. Usually they are really baggy, with bright clashing colors.

“Ok, so how about your middle school? Did you test to get in?”

Yes, I took a test but it didn’t possess any great importance for the children in my village. Even if you did badly you could still go to the same middle school, since there’s only one in my hometown. Different regions have different rules regarding education.

In other areas admission to schools becomes a lot more competitive. Here in Beijing there are many middle schools, and so students must compete to get into the best ones.

Out of my middle school class about half of the students went on to high school, including me.

“Did you stay in the village for high school?”

No, the city nearby had four high schools and everyone who continued school went to one of those. My parents and I didn’t often go into the city before then, and so the move marked a really big change for me. We didn’t have a car, only a motorcycle, and the city was about fifteen kilometers from us. Back then almost no one I knew had a car, though a bus traveled between the villages and the city.

“Go into more detail about your high school experience.”

Since the students from my village split up among the schools, I didn’t know very many people at the one that I attended.

All the village children lived in dorms, but there were also students from the city who continued to live at home. Every month, I could return home for two weekends and during these breaks I would take the bus back.

Each dorm room had ten students, and I didn’t know any of my roommates when I first arrived. We quickly became friends and still are now, even though we switched roommates each year. A student’s roommates always came from the same home classroom.

“Did you get all of your weekends off?”

No, just every other weekend. On the weekends when we had class our class hours were the same as on the weekdays.

“What were your class hours? And what subjects did you study?”

In high school, I had nine classes a day, and each class lasted for forty minutes. Classes started at 6:30 or 7 a.m., and then we had a break from 11:30 a.m. until around 2 p.m. Then we’d be in class again until 6 p.m. After dinner, we’d go back to the classroom from 7 until 8:30 p.m. to

do self-study and homework. Then we were finished for the day and would usually go back to the dorms. There, we did more homework sometimes but we'd also chat with others and play games.

In the second year of high school we separated into two focuses, humanities and science. I chose science, as did most boys. Mostly girls chose the humanities focus. The choice to focus on science or humanities is a personal one, and I guess boys think that the science subjects are easier while girls don't.

"And then you took the Gaokao? How did you do compared to the other students?"

Yes, and I did well. Out of my high school class about half of the students went on to attend college and then the other half studied for another year to take the Gaokao again, attended a trade school, or began work right away.

I chose a very good public university in Beijing based on my Gaokao score and also because I really liked the idea of living in the capital. I'd never been to Beijing before then.

"Describe your experience in university."

I studied mechanical engineering and attended class about twenty hours a week. I had homework, but not nearly as much as in high school. With my free time I visited Beijing's famous places, like Tiananmen Square, Fragrance Hill Park, The Summer Palace, and The Zoo.

I lived in the dorms with the same five students during my four years there, and we are still good friends now. I usually ate at the school cafeterias, and the food tasted far better than at the cafeterias from my high school.

Then, a master's program at another very good public university accepted me and gave me a full tuition scholarship. I still paid 1,000 yuan a year to stay at the dorms. At the time about 20% of students went to the school tuition free.

"At your undergraduate school how much did your family pay for your tuition?"

5,500 yuan a year.

"Describe your work after graduation, with details such as your salary and the number of hours you work per day."

After I graduated, I easily found a job. Now I work seven and a half hours a day, five days a week in an engineering position. I earn 5,000 yuan a month.

"How much is your rent?"

It's 2,300 yuan a month.

"What do you consider the biggest problems in China right now, and what can be done about them?"

The biggest problem is the environment. We can solve this problem through actions such as recycling. Then, with regard to the air and water pollution we can levy taxes against the factories that release this pollution.

Another big problem is the high price of housing. It's a complicated problem, and the government will need to fix it. The government can make housing cheaper for people who are not very rich, and right now it's just starting to address this. However, the housing issue will probably take a very long time to solve.

"What is China's best aspect?"

Definitely that all of my family and friends are here.

Long's and Lihua's stories are similar in many ways, and Long too rose from a peasant background to become an engineer educated at the same top school as Lihua.

A 2012 PISA international education assessment focused on mathematics skills placed Shanghai as number one out of sixty-five world economies, and this reveals what students from the more rural areas of China, where schools hover around PISA's average, have to compete against^{xxx}. Shanghai also topped the PISA's 2009 assessment, which focused on reading skills^{xxxi}. Other regions of China are left out of this world-class education.

The shutting down of Long's childhood kindergarten relates to this issue. That incident took place several years ago, and now the number of private schools in China is increasing quickly. However, they are still monitored by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

Many of the private schools currently set up to educate migrant children exemplify schools in legal limbo. A number of them are both illegal and disliked by the local governments, and so they are often forced to shut down. Yet, the hukou laws mean that the children there may not have any other choices for education^{xxxi}.

Long also specifies the two tracks that Chinese students choose from while in high school, humanities and science. The students in each track enroll in slightly different classes and take slightly different versions of the Gaokao. For example, the humanities focused Gaokao tests geography, history, and politics, and the science focused Gaokao tests physics, chemistry, and biology. Both versions include mathematics, Chinese literature and language, and a foreign language, and nearly all students choose English as their foreign language. Now, the system is changing so that starting in 2017 students will all take the same Gaokao^{xxxiii}.

Long's mention of how he speaks his local dialect at home follows the trend of fluency in multiple dialects present in the other interviews, and this repetition again emphasizes the continuing strength of linguistic diversity in China. During another conversation, Long explained to me how he and his classmates were permitted to speak their own dialect between classes. For me personally, the dialectal differences can get annoying because when locals don't want me to understand their conversation they'll stop speaking standard Mandarin.

At the end of the interview Long mentions what he considers China's worst problems, with environmental pollution again taking the crown. I'm curious to see if it continues as the main answer given to me in future interviews.

Chapter 8

I stayed with Lihua and Long for a full weekend, and then I left with Lihua early on Monday morning to catch a 6 a.m. bus. She had work, and I planned to return to Will's and Suzy's apartment.

The streets were fairly crowded, and three-fourths of the people were past the age of sixty. Little old ladies walked together, sometimes with tiny dogs trotting behind them. Others walked alone practicing Tai Chi. They'd slice their hands through the air and then slowly move on to a new pose. I'd never been out early enough to take notice of this elderly morning crowd.

Lihua and I parted ways as we boarded the subway in opposite directions. I spent the rest of the day with Will and Suzy because I had a ticket to Suzhou, a city rather close to Shanghai, on a train leaving the next day.

I arrived in Suzhou at about 7 p.m. and my friend Xia met me at the train station. “Hello Hannah!” She ran over and gave me a hug filled with the same energy that I remembered from five years earlier. A few minutes later, I sat in the passenger seat of Xia’s new car as she told me all about the wonderful places we’d visit during my ten days in Suzhou. I quickly forgot any nervousness I’d felt at meeting up with Xia after so many years.

Suzhou is sometimes referred to as “The Venice of the East”, and later that night we walked along a canal in a crowded section of the city’s Old Town. Arched bridges crossed the canal at various intervals and little stands lined the streets selling snacks special to the city.

Eventually Xia drove us back to her apartment, located among a large collection of skyscrapers. Suzhou may be smaller than its neighbor Shanghai, but the city’s administrative area population of over ten million people still makes it a behemoth^{xxxiv}.

Up in her apartment, Xia showed me into her bedroom. “You can stay in here during your stay. I’m going to be with my boyfriend at his apartment.”

“Wait.. You don’t need to do that Xia.”

“It’s no problem. My boyfriend is actually quite happy about it.” She winked at me. “You must be tired. Before I leave I’ll help you plan out what to do tomorrow.”

- - -

Xia did her best to keep me engaged at all times. After finishing her work each day, she happily introduced me to new people and places. During her lunch break one day we met with two students from Suzhou University, girls named Liming and Ning. Once Xia felt we were all adequately acquainted she left us and returned to work. She had a way of getting people to show me around and to feel good about it too.

“Would you like to see the university?” asked Liming.

“Yes, that sounds wonderful!”

We took the subway to the campus, a beautiful collection of white buildings and lush trees.

As a result of the humidity, we eventually made our way into the library to rest for a bit. I told Liming and Ning about my project.

“Hey actually, would one of you mind letting me interview you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Liming’s Story

“Thanks so much for helping me with this.”

It’s no problem. Ok, how should I start?

“Just tell me the most basic information about yourself. When you were born and where, that kind of thing.”

I was born in January 1994 in Shaanxi Province’s capital, Xi’an, and now I am a student at Suzhou University.

“What dialects and languages do you speak?”

I speak Mandarin and the Shaanxi dialect, and then I can speak a little English too.

“How do Xi’an and Suzhou compare?”

Xi’an is quite different from Suzhou. The cities are not that alike because Suzhou people are relatively gentle while Xi’an people are more open and lively. As a result of living here, I feel

that I am slowly becoming more gentle. Both cities are beautiful, but Xi'an has a lot of mountains while Suzhou has more lakes and gets much more rain.

"Have you ever been out of China? What about your classmates?"

I haven't, but most of my classmates from high school actually went to colleges abroad, generally in Russia, Australia, the U.S., and England.

My high school always had a more global connection because foreign students would come and join our class, though only for a month at a time.

"Were there a lot of foreigners in Xi'an when you were growing up?"

Since Xi'an is the capital of Shaanxi there are more foreigners there than in most other cities in the province. But still, I didn't see all that many. Now, foreigners are becoming more and more common.

"What's your ethnicity? What ethnicities are in Xi'an?"

I'm of Han ethnicity, and nearly everyone in Xi'an is Han too. The second largest ethnicity would be the Hui, but there still aren't that many of them.

"Are you an only child?"

I'm actually not. I have a seventeen year old sister who is in her last year of high school and then a two year old brother. Generally families couldn't have so many children, but the government allows certain exceptions. Recently the government added more exceptions, making it easier for my parents to have a third child.

"Describe your childhood. Where did you live?"

I first lived with my paternal grandparents. My parents were far too busy with work, and so they didn't have the time to watch me. I think I stayed with them for seven days after my birth before they dropped me off. My grandparents had already retired by then, making it easier for them to care for me.

Their house is in a village of about a thousand people. The village is within the Xi'an municipal area but it's actually pretty far from the city. Mountains border the village and the air is very clean. None of my other family members were there because they had all moved to Xi'an by then.

"What kind of house did you live in? Describe it a little."

My grandparents lived in a house with ten rooms. I had my own bedroom, filled with little stuffed animals.

"Their house didn't share walls with the other houses in the village?"

No, it stood on its own plot of land.

"What did you do as a little child?"

I had many friends and I would often go to their houses, and they would often come to mine. Most of my friends lived with their parents, but there were some who lived with their grandparents like me.

I attended a private preschool where the other children and I would paint and play games. Then, when I turned seven I started school at a public kindergarten in the village. In the mornings before I went to kindergarten, I sang and danced and studied the alphabet with my grandparents. Kindergarten lasted for four hours a day, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. After, I played with my friends. We'd go fishing and pick fruit, and I watched a lot of TV as a child too, mainly cartoons. My favorite cartoons were Spongebob Squarepants and 3000 Whys of Blue Cat.

I sometimes saw my maternal grandparents since they also live close to Xi'an. Either they would come to visit me, or my mom would come to get me and take me to their place.

"Did the kindergarten require tuition?"

At the time my family paid tuition, but nowadays it's free.

"Kindergarten is compulsory?"

Yes.

"What do your grandparents do with their time?"

My grandparents' hobbies include climbing mountains, and I would go with them when I lived at their house. They liked playing mahjong with their friends too and listening to Shaanxi opera, called Qinqiang (秦腔). They listen to it at home and watch videos of it. Sometimes they go to live performances, and as a child I loved accompanying them to those. My grandparents can perform this opera too, and they and their friends sing opera together.

As a result, I really like Shaanxi opera and can sing it as well. However, now I only sing it when I'm with my grandparents. My parents also like Shaanxi opera, but that isn't surprising because it's such a large part of Shaanxi culture.

"Did your sister stay with your grandparents too?"

No, my little sister stayed with our parents, and so for a long while I didn't see her or my parents much. They live in Xi'an, and my grandparents didn't travel there very often. Rather, my parents and my sister would come to visit us about once a month.

"So you stayed with your grandparents until college?"

Oh no. At around eight years old I moved back to Xi'an to live with my parents because the schools in the city are better.

"What did you think of moving at the time?"

I didn't want to move because I liked living with my grandparents. They weren't strict with me, and I had so much free time during preschool and kindergarten.

At my parents' home my dad set his demands very high, and he wanted me to study hard and to form good habits. I do appreciate my dad, because he had my best interest in mind. Ultimately, he told me and my sister that happiness is the most important.

"Tell me more about your parents. Their jobs and so on..."

My parents are very successful even though they did not go to university. They are business bosses, and they do a lot of business within China, though not internationally. None of my grandparents went to university either. My dad had five siblings, and he is the youngest. My mom is also the youngest and she has two older brothers.

"Is your family religious? You? What's the norm in China?"

My family is not religious and I'm not either. I feel that most people in China aren't religious.

"When you lived with your parents what was their house like?"

We lived in an apartment that they own. It has three bedrooms, and I lived with my little sister in one of the bedrooms.

My parents don't live in the same apartment anymore, but they are still in Xi'an.

"When did they move?"

They moved after I started college. Now they own two apartments, the one from before and the one they are in now.

"Your sister still lives with them?"

No, my sister lives in the dormitories at her school, but when it's break time she and I stay with our parents in their new home.

"Describe your elementary school experience, starting with your daily schedule."

I went to elementary school five days a week, from the age of eight until fourteen. Every day I had school from 8 a.m. until noon and then from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m.

I could walk from our home to school in ten minutes. My sister and I ate lunch at my good friend's house because she lived even closer.

My classes were Chinese literature and language, mathematics, English, P.E., nature, science, music, handwork, physical labor, and moral ideology.

"Did you have a foreign teacher for English?"

Yes, we did.

"Were uniforms required?"

Yes, all the way until the end of high school.

"Describe your middle school and high school experience, with school schedules and other details."

My middle school connected to this elementary. Both the elementary and the middle school are pretty average schools. I had to take a test to get into the middle school, and I did fairly well. I had lots of homework, both in elementary and in middle school.

I scored very high on my test for high school and so I got into Xi'an's best high school. All the other students from my middle school grade went to other high schools.

I moved into the dorms, and when I first got there I didn't know anyone. In my first year I shared a dorm room with five other girls, in my second year three others, and in my third year just one other. My high school was far more rigorous than my middle school. We woke up at 6:30 every morning and had class there from 7 a.m. to noon, 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., and 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.. Then, the lights were turned off at 10:30 p.m. and we slept. This time in the classroom included self-study as well. Also, now people are allowed to wear makeup at the school but when I went there we couldn't.

I found the dorms in high school more comfortable than my current dorm room, but Suzhou University is far less strict about cleaning.

My classes in high school were literature and language, mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, biology, politics, history, geography, music, P.E., art, and common technology.

"Did you go home often?"

We weren't allowed off the campus on school days, but I could go home on weekends. It took two hours by car to get home from high school, and I would ride the bus which took a little longer.

"What would you do during your weekends at home?"

I'd rest, see my friends, and do homework. I liked to go swimming on these weekends too, and I'd bike around town to get to places such as to my friends' homes.

"What did the Gaokao test?"

For me, it tested physics, mathematics, English, chemistry, and biology.

"Why did you choose Suzhou University?"

I did pretty well on the test, and I chose Suzhou University because it's a good school and because I'd heard about Suzhou's beauty. I also wanted to go somewhere not too close to home.

"What's your major, and why did you choose it? Can you switch if you'd like to?"

My major now is physics with a specialty in the technology of measurement and control instruments. At first I thought I'd be working with computers for this major, and I only later realized that it's really focused on physics. I didn't really understand my major when I chose it. I just didn't know that much. It's very hard to switch to another major.

"Are you happy with your major?"

I like my major, but I don't really love it. It's fine, though, and I think I'll be able to find work pretty easily. There are a lot of factories in the Suzhou area where I can work as an engineer."

"You'd like to stay in Suzhou after you graduate?"

Yeah, or somewhere close. I hope to work in Suzhou or in Shanghai.

— — —

Liming certainly hails from a more privileged background than Lihua and Long, and Xi'an is a major city in China, giving her access to a wider range of schools. Her assertion that most of her classmates study in other countries places her in a world of privilege far above the students at schools in the smaller cities and towns.

Liming lived with her grandparents until she was eight, and on the face of it this separation seems motivated by her parents' workload rather than by the hukou laws. They all live within the Xi'an district, though perhaps there are other hukou related reasons that Liming did not mention to me. With hers as yet another separation story, it adds to the portrayal of family separation as completely normal in China. Liming's parents even kept her and her sister separate when they were small children, similar to how Suzy and her brother were raised separately.

I did find Liming's description of the Shaanxi-specific culture rather heartening, primarily her explanation of Shaanxi Opera. In other regions of China distinct opera styles exist as well, such as Beijing Opera^{xxxv}. Therefore, opera is a great example of the regional differences that exist in China beyond the diversity in language.

Liming's story emphasizes many other themes that are appearing again and again. She followed the track of studying hard, getting into a good university, and once there not actually understanding her choice of study and having no ability to switch to another.

At least she is a bit more confident about her job prospects than Chen, who is at a similar point in her life. Also, like Qian, Liming has a far younger sibling, a result of China relaxing its child policy and her family wanting a coveted boy child.

Although differences exist in the narratives I've collected so far that reveal great cultural diversity, in many ways they are beginning to mimic each other, and in doing so they provide insight into the country's overarching cultural regularities.

Chapter 9

"Ok, I need to stop by the dorms to get something. Ning can wait here with you," Liming said after we finished. Ning nodded.

"Actually...I'd really like to see your dorms, if that's alright. I'm curious about what they're like compared to the dorms at my college. Would that be ok?"

"Oh, ok. Yeah that's fine." The three of us walked out.

I found the dorm building very utilitarian, all plain concrete covered with thinning white paint. The dorm room itself had a narrow space with two bunk beds and four desks.

Afterward, they showed me around the campus a bit more. The sun began to set, triggering the appearance of a huge number of cats on the campus grounds. "They come because people feed them here," explained Ning.

As the sun finally disappeared, I followed Liming and Ning out the back of the campus and onto a street of shops. We stopped in a casual restaurant.

After dinner, they accompanied me back to the subway station.

- - -

On a different day I visited Xia at her workplace, located on the third floor of a rundown building. When I walked through the office doors, though, I found myself in a sleek, high-scale space.

Xia showed me around. "The company organizes events," she explained.

"What types of events?"

"Oh many different types. Bicycle competitions, anime conventions, and a lot else."

The company was small, with just under ten employees it seemed, and Xia introduced me to everyone there including a tall, lanky man named Wei. He looked about twenty-five.

"Wei's coming with us after we finish."

Xia drove the three of us to another part of Suzhou's Old Town, a different canal region that was just as beautiful as the last one. It also featured arched bridges and charming old two-storied structures. Lots of people wandered along the cobbled pathways.

"Wei, you should explain Suzhou's history to Hannah," said Xia.

"Suzhou's history goes on forever!" Wei stretched out his arms to emphasize this fact. He then wagged his finger at Xia. "You can explain."

"You're the Suzhou native," she retorted

"Why is Suzhou so old?" I asked.

Wei answered. "Suzhou was founded around 500 B.C. by the Wu state and then it continued to grow bigger under various dynasties." We passed by a food stand. "But, snacks sound more interesting than a history lesson. These are actually unique to Suzhou cuisine." We bought the delicacy in question, duck feet cooked in a sweet sauce.

After walking around for a while longer, Xia invited Wei to join us for dinner. However, he had some work to finish. "Wei, would you be ok with me interviewing you at some point before I leave Suzhou?" I'd explained the basics of my project to him.

"Yeah sure. Just let me know. You have my Wechat."

"Awesome, thanks."

- - -

A few days later, Xia took me to a cosplay event organized by Wei for their company. Chinese people, nearly all dressed in elaborate costumes, milled around the large conference hall. As the only non-Chinese person there I probably got more stares than anyone, a fact I felt slightly bad about since I did not dress up. "This is exciting, yes?" asked Xia as we walked around

the hall's perimeters, lined with tables selling anime paraphernalia. A stack of pamphlets for a Japanese language and culture program sat on one table, a heartening reminder that some Chinese people are willing to forgo the animosity between them and the Japanese.

I noticed Wei. "Hey!" I waved at him.

"Hi Hannah, you having fun?"

"A lot, this is really cool." Wei ran off a moment later to help with the event, and I entertained myself by taking a selfie with Kakashi, a character from the Japanese manga and anime *Naruto*.

The next day I stopped by the office to interview Wei. "Just a moment. I need to finish a little more work," Wei said.

"No problem." He typed away at his laptop for about a quarter of an hour. Then he closed it and turned toward me.

"Ready."

Wei's Story

"Ok, let's start. You've lived in Suzhou your whole life?"

Yes, born and raised here.

"And your birthday?"

January 1990.

"You're an only child?"

Yep.

"Ethnicity?"

Han, though way long ago my family had some Mongol blood as well.

"Cool, with all that out of the way let's start with your life. When did you begin school? Describe your school experience a bit. The more details the better."

I've been in schools since I began nursery school at three years old. I'd be there from around 8 in the morning until around 4 in the afternoon. After school I could watch TV and play around with friends.

I didn't take a test to get into my elementary school, but the school did look at my achievements from kindergarten. I've always been good at assessments, so I got into the best elementary school in Suzhou.

"What was elementary school like for you?"

I started studying badly in elementary because I just wanted to play around. The teacher gave us a lot of homework, about three hours a day. My parents were really mad about my studying and sometimes they would even smack me for this! I didn't have a dream of what I wanted to do as a grownup and that might've been part of the problem. Though, for a while I did want to be a teacher because I'd get to scold students.

Now, all of my classmates from elementary are in other countries. They all came from wealthy families and studied really well. I alone chose not to go abroad because my English is bad, and my family doesn't have that much money.

"What about your experience with middle school and high school?"

I still tested ok for middle school and went to a respectable one. Two other classmates from my elementary school went there as well.

Then I got into a pretty good high school. None of my elementary school classmates went there since most of them went abroad for high school, but one other person from my middle school attended it as well. The two of us are still friends now.

I never studied all that well, including in high school. Instead of studying I built models, such as motorized fighter models based on Japanese cartoons. Do you know the Japanese show Gundam?

I shook my head.

Anyway, Gundam got really popular, and so there are mangas and video games based on it. The show has giant robots, and I especially liked to build models of these.

I also liked basketball, though I'd just play with friends. I'm not good enough to be on a team.

"Did you live in dorms?"

No, I lived with my parents all the way through grade school, and most of my classmates lived at home too. I still live with my parents now.

"Is it common for people your age to live with their parents?"

Yeah, it's really common, Most of my friend from Suzhou that are still here live with their parents.

"Describe your parents' home."

We are on the top floor of a six-story building, and we have a two-story apartment. There are eight rooms in the apartment, including two bathrooms.

"Did you go to college?"

I did.

"Describe your experiences related to this, from taking the Gaokao to your time in college."

I went to a pretty good university in Nanjing. I actually did poorly on the Gaokao because I didn't study enough, and so later I took an adult Gaokao. I majored in human resources management. During university I didn't study so well either, though at least I enjoyed myself. I lived in the school dormitories during college with the same seven roommates the whole four years. I also paid for a lot of my tuition through working on the side. I've always loved organizing events and so I did some work with this in college, even going occasionally to places like Shanghai and Chengdu.

"Your parents still helped you with tuition?"

Yeah they did, and they paid all of my tuition through grade school as well.

"What did you do after college?"

I tried to start a business with a friend, a comic themed coffee shop where events could be held. I hoped that this would finally be my shot at success. We started out with around 55,000 yuan, and a lot of this came from family. We actually made money at first. Unfortunately, though, not enough people showed up at some of the events, and our initial money couldn't sustain us until we grew more popular. The company went bankrupt, and so my friend moved to Europe.

"Europe? How come?"

We'd each started the company for different reasons. I couldn't find work because of my bad college grades. My friend didn't want to work abroad even though his family is wealthy enough and his parents wished that he would. Anyway, I have no money to try and start another company.

"What did you do after the shop closed?"

Eventually I found my current job. On the plus side, my hobby of cosplay helped me to get it.

“Describe your experience with this job, including how long you’ve been here, the number of hours you work, and other details.”

I started my job here four months ago. This is a small company that organizes events, and including me there are eight employees. I’m in charge of overseeing anime and manga conventions. I work eight hours a day, five days a week, and most of the conventions are big, with an average of about 2,000 people. You went to one of the smaller events.

“What is your salary, and what do you think of it?”

My salary is 2,400 yuan a month and I save a 1,000 yuan from that. Since I live with my parents my money is enough. I think that it would be enough for me to live on my own too, though maybe I’d end up saving less.

“You want to live on your own?”

Yeah, and I plan to move out soon, probably later this year or early next year. I do like living with my parents, but I feel that it’s time for me to be on my own.

“Are you happy with your life?”

I’m happy enough. But, I’m something of a failure because my peers and family members are so successful. For example, all my elementary school classmates are living throughout the world, and my older cousin works in Finland and Norway. I’d like to try for success now through investing, but I don’t even have enough money for that anymore.

“I know you have a girlfriend. She wouldn’t call you a failure, would she? Can you describe your relationship with her?”

She wouldn’t.

I’ve known her for seven years. During high school, we recognized each other at cosplay events and then became friends. My girlfriend likes Japanese anime too, but she’s not into building models. She’s more interested in Hello Kitty.

Then she went to a college in Nanjing too, and we began dating. We’ve been together for a while now, but we have no plans to marry yet.

She’s pretty successful. She studied broadcast management and was accepted into a doctorate program. She didn’t want to do more school, though, and moved back to Suzhou. Now, she lives with her parents too and works in the advertising department for Suzhou’s local TV. And, do you know the voices that talk in Suzhou’s subway? The ones that tells you in Chinese and then in English what the next stop is and when the doors are closing? The English recording is my girlfriend. It’s nice because every time I ride the subway I get to hear her.

“Yeah, I remember it. That’s very cool.” --- “Do you plan to live with her?”

We don’t plan to move in together before marriage. I don’t think that there’s anything wrong with an unmarried couple living together, but tradition frowns on it. Therefore it’s still somewhat rare, and all the people I know in relationships are waiting until after marriage too.

“In your spare time, what do you like to do?”

I like going to cosplay events still, and since I already oversee the ones that I organize for work I end up attending a lot of them. I also like basketball and video games. I drink with friends sometimes too.

“I’m just curious. Do you smoke cigarettes?”

I do, but only a pack every two or three days. In China, that’s not too much.

“What do you see as the biggest problems in China right now?”

That would be our large population because it puts a lot of pressure on people, such as making work more difficult to find. All those people also hurt the environment, and even in Suzhou the rising population has started to cause problems.

Before, Suzhou had a good environment and there weren't so many big buildings. As a child I could swim in the rivers, but now they are too dirty. The pollution is getting worse and worse, and rent and other costs keep going up.

Another problem is the educational system. It consists of rigid study rather than allowing for people to follow their own path.

However, I do think that China will change for the better. China is still a developing country, and our economy will continue to grow bigger and bigger. China is also addressing some of its major problems, and even the environmental issues are improving a little bit.

“What is your dream for your future?”

Currently my dream is to get a lot of money, travel all over, and eat good food every day. One day maybe.

— — —

Wei is an intelligent but aimless young adult, and he fits poorly into China's regimented school system. He never seemed particularly focused on his studies.

Perhaps he can be understood as an example of how students are pushed into college by both their parents and themselves, with college existing as the “right path”^{xxxvi}.

This creates a major barrier to the government's goal of shifting students over to vocational institutes, mentioned earlier. As job prospects for college graduates continue to decrease, there is still the notion that attending a university is the best option because of the higher societal status that it connotes.

Wei, like Qian, does display an entrepreneurial spirit by starting a business, even if it ultimately failed. He follows a capitalistic dream as well, hoping to invest in stocks and wishing to get rich. This represents China's complete shift away from the collectivist ideals often associated with the Republic's beginning.

Yet, Wei is still living with his parents, a common phenomena among China's young adults. In the decades before China's economic boom, the country's poverty meant that adults often didn't have the means to live away from their parents. That, along with extended families traditionally living together in the villages, has meant that adult children staying with their parents is far less stigmatized than in many other countries such as the U.S.

Now, young people are still experiencing financial difficulties, as a result of factors such as the rising cost of living, difficulties landing jobs, and low wages. Even Wei points out that after graduating from college he couldn't find a job, though he mentions his poor grades as a major reason why.

Another aspect of Wei's interview that stood out to me is his acceptance of Japanese culture. China regards Japan with a degree of animosity, particularly because of Japan's most recent imperialist invasion into China^{xxxvii}. This war started in the 1930s, and by its end Japan had committed many atrocities against the Chinese, including the horrific Nanking Massacre^{xxxviii}.

Anti-Japanese sentiment is still quite strong among China's populace today. Multiple people in China, both elderly and younger, have explained their dislike of the Japanese to me.

The government continues its cautious approach to Sino-Japanese relations largely to avoid angering its own people. Richard Rigby and Brendan Taylor write in the Chinese Story Yearbook 2013 that “Internally, for instance, widespread anti-Japanese sentiment prevents China’s new leaders from deviating too far from their current hardline stance towards Tokyo.”^{xxxix}

As such, to see the embracement of Japanese manga and anime surprised me. Hopefully this cultural acceptance by some members of China’s youth speaks to the possibility of better reconciliation between China and Japan in the future.

Finally, with regard to the question of China’s biggest problem, Wei lists the country’s large population. This connects to the one-child policy. Although the policy is contentious, people in China often support it, and one study in 2008 asserted that 76% of Chinese people support the policy^{xl}. It seems that although people often personally wish to have more than one child, many understand the larger problems that are avoided through limiting the country’s population.

Chapter 10

“You have to meet my friend Lin!” said Xia one day. “He’s so cute, a really beautiful boy. I think he’s about your age, even a little younger actually, and he already owns his own shop. Let’s say we go visit him?”

“Yeah ok.”

“Great. I’ll let him know.”

After eating, Xia drove us and parked her car near Lin’s workplace. Ahead was a street lined with shops. We walked down this, and I saw precious stones and jewelry in the windows. We turned in through one of the doorways.

At a glass counter, with bracelets on display in the cabinet below, sat a boy playing on an Ipad. I noticed that he’d grown out his pinky fingernail to about a half inch long. I’ve asked many Chinese friends about this tradition, and it seems to have developed in ancient China as a way to distinguish oneself from laborers. Now it lingers as a style among a few people.

Lin saw us and started up happily. “Xia, good to see you. This is your friend from America?”

“Yes, her name is Hannah. She’s very nice, and isn’t she beautiful?”

“Hello,” I said awkwardly. Lin really did appear quite young, a perception heightened by his round face. With his well-kept appearance, including hair dyed brown and swept over his forehead, he would have fit perfectly in a teenage boyband.

“Definitely very pretty. Here, would you like anything to drink? Today is far too hot.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said. Xia nodded as well. After a few minutes of talking, Xia and I walked to a nearby shop and bought ice-cream bars. We brought one back for Lin.

As the conversation shifted to a discussion of their mutual friends, I looked more carefully around the shop. Consisting of a single room, it was drenched in ancient and very beautiful jewelry. A Buddhist altar was set up in the back.

“Hannah,” said Xia. I walked back over. “I told Lin about your project and he agreed that you can interview him.”

“Oh that would be wonderful.”

“I just sit in this shop all day, and the weather is so hot that we aren’t getting many visitors right now. So, it shouldn’t be a problem for you to come by and interview me here. Perhaps you can come tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Oh and before I forget, I have gifts for both of you.” He pulled two sets of Buddhist prayer beads from a drawer and handed them to us.

Lin’s Story

“Ok, let’s start. When and where were you born?”

I was born in Suzhou on June 1st 1995, which is Children’s Day.

“You’ve been in Suzhou ever since?”

Yes, I’ve always lived in Suzhou.

“Do you speak any dialects besides Mandarin? Any other languages?”

I speak the Suzhou dialect and a little English as well.

“Go into your family background please. Where are your parents from and can you describe what life was like for them when they were young?”

My mom is a Suzhou native, and my dad grew up in Shandong Province and only later moved to Suzhou. He comes from an extremely poor family, and they decided to leave Shandong to try and find success elsewhere. His parents had worked in a chemical factory, and they found work in another chemical factory here in Suzhou. They arrived when my dad was just a little younger than I am now.

My parents became very successful because they came to own a factory producing medical supplies. Now, they are retired.

“Do you live with your parents?”

Yes, I still live with them but I’m thinking about moving out soon.

“You’ve always lived with your parents?”

No. At seven years old, I went to live with my maternal grandparents because my parents were too busy working at their business. These grandparents were the only ones I knew because my paternal grandparents died far earlier. Anyway, I lived with my maternal grandparents until I was twelve or thirteen.

“Did you like living with your grandparents?”

I did as a small child, but now that I’m older I think back on that time of my life as somewhat troublesome. Before, I thought that love must always be good, and only now that I’m older do I realize that too much love can be bad and cause stress. My grandparents try to look after me far too much.

“Do you have siblings?”

I have an older sister, born in 1987, but that situation is a little odd. We don’t have the same mom because my dad married his first wife, and they divorced after the birth of my sister. After, my dad married my mom and had me. However, in China my sister and I are considered brother and sister. This is especially because we share blood through our dad rather than our mom.

My sister even lived with my maternal grandparents at times. While they aren’t biologically related to her, they still view her as a little girl and as part of the family. She’d also sometimes live with my parents and then sometimes with her mom.

“Is divorce accepted in China?”

Yes, it's not such a big deal, and it's becoming even more accepted as China opens up. With this opening, people's minds are becoming more open too.

It's normal that my dad remarried, and my sister's mom is actually getting married again next year. She didn't before simply because she wanted to focus on her daughter. In my opinion she is a good mother.

"How often do you see your sister?"

My sister and I are very busy, and we see each other maybe two or three times a month. We have family dinners at home or we'll go out to eat. If we eat at home then my father will cook, and it will be just me, her, and my parents. When we eat dinner outside sometimes her mom will join us.

"How did school go for you, from when you were little until high school?"

I used to be a pretty good student. In elementary school I studied hard, and I scored well on the test for middle school. However, when I got to middle school I started developing teenage problems, meaning teenage rebellion. During school the teachers say all these things that you must not do, and I wanted to do them! These were my feelings in high school too.

I find language to be very beautiful, and so I liked Chinese class and English class. I write a lot, and I actually keep a diary that I write in everyday. However, I found some of the other subjects, such as math, and physics, to be really challenging.

I attended high school for two years before deciding that I didn't want to go to university. There are too many students, and the education system in China is corrupt and has too many problems. So, I left school and started my own business, which is this shop.

"How did you raise the money to start this business?"

I had no money at the beginning, but my parents helped me. Since I started my business last year they have given me about 3,000,000 yuan in total.

"What do you sell?"

This shop sells lots of different precious and ancient jewelry. Isn't it all so beautiful? Often, the jewelry I sell is Buddhist. Many people in China like such items since so many people believe in Buddhism.

"Are you Buddhist? Is your family?"

Everyone in my family is Buddhist including my grandparents, my parents, and me. I like the Buddhist ideal of living simply and thinking simply. I visit a Buddhist temple every week to pay my respects, and sometimes I eat vegetarian.

"You say a lot of people are Buddhist. Is that true of young people too?"

Now, many university students are becoming Christians because they still have lots of problems in life that they'd like to balance. They grow attracted to Christianity because they want something fresh.

"How is your shop doing?"

It's quite successful, and almost every day people come in to buy things. This business is very competitive, but because my prices are good and Suzhou has a big population I can do well.

Only, today it's too hot and so I expect very few customers to come.

"What's your profit?"

The profit of course varies because of the nature of selling artifacts like this, but now I've made about 2,000,000 yuan from this business. I also pay 45,000 yuan a year for rent, and I chose this shop because it's in an area with similar stores.

“What’s your daily schedule?”

I wake up at 10 a.m. Then I arrive at my shop at 10:30 a.m. and open it. I will listen to music and play my Ipad when there are no guests. If my parents have time they will come to the shop, so they are here pretty much every day. You’ll probably meet them later. I close up my shop at 5 p.m., and then I have dinner with friends or dinner with my parents. I work seven days a week.

“How do you obtain the products that you sell?”

I get my products from other countries with the help of my friends. Many of them live abroad because most of my classmates from school now study at foreign universities. Since it’s summer break right now, the majority are back in China. I ask them to buy objects there, and then when they return to China they will give the objects to me and I’ll pay them back. For example, turquoise in the U.S. is very inexpensive, so I ask my friends there to buy turquoise for me.

“How do other people in this line of business obtain their products? Describe a bit more the way you get products from friends.”

I don’t know where other people in the business buy their products, maybe sometimes from me because my prices are low. Customers can bargain with prices, and if they are buying for another shop and buy in bulk, then I can give them a discount. Some people buy from me quite regularly.

When my friends help me with this, they simply buy what I want and trust me to pay them back upon their return. In China, people often trust each other like this, and many people are honest even if others are not.

“Do you pay them for helping you?”

I don’t give my friends extra money for helping me. If they help me, then if they ever need my help in the future I will help them.

“Why are so many of your friends studying in foreign countries?”

Since I attended an extremely well-regarded middle school, most of my friends are from families with enough money to afford a foreign education. To get into that middle school, you could either do well on the test or your parents could pay for your spot.

“Have you been to other countries?”

My parents don’t want to travel outside of China, and so I haven’t ever been to another country either. My father’s mind is very stubborn, and neither of my parents can speak English. They like it here and think that every day the country improves. They do like to travel within China and they go to lots of places, such as to Guangdong and Beijing.

However, I will start traveling to other countries for my business. Even my parents see that one day I must go abroad as my business grows bigger. Maybe one day I can have a shop in New York and sell Buddhist items there, like the bracelet I gave to you earlier. Items such as that help people to calm down.

This Christmas I will accompany a friend of my parents to Las Vegas for about a week. She does business there and has grown very rich. She’s actually an immigrant to Canada and lives there, but her husband builds apartment complexes in Chinese cities such as Suzhou. In Las Vegas I will buy new items for my shop.

“You are happy with your business now?”

Unfortunately I still feel like a failure, even as I try to follow Buddhist ideals and as my business continues to grow more successful. I stress myself out far too much worrying over issues that I wish I could just accept.

“What is your dream for your future?”

I dream now of buying my own home. I also dream of traveling more. I want freedom. It's the most important. I feel that living on my own and traveling are both ways to achieve freedom.

— — —

Lin embodies a success story that does not include much education, though he also hails from a very privileged background that enabled his success. Without nearly half a million U.S. dollar investment from his parents and the help of his wealthy connections, it doesn't seem that his business would be possible.

Still, it's heartening to see a privileged member of Chinese society reject a traditional education, even as most of his friend are now enrolled in elite colleges abroad. He exemplifies the discontent with China's education system, and he voices similar complaints as many of the other interviewees. It should be socially acceptable for young adults to instead pursue alternatives paths, such as Lin's, that may actually result in greater success.

Lin also presents a good example of the “guānxi” described earlier, and he is able to rely much more heavily on his friend network to help him obtain goods than perhaps would be socially acceptable in the West.

Despite Lin's wealth, his narrative includes many of the same characteristics as those of the other interviewees. Once again, he ended up living with his grandparents and then staying with his parents as an adult, though he is still far younger than Wei.

Lin also presents his mindset as contrasting greatly with that of his parents, who see no reason to leave China. Lin has a more global viewpoint, hoping to travel and to even work in the United States. Similar to Jiao, he lists freedom as part of his personal future dream.

The inclusion of divorce in Lin's narrative is important as well, because it hints at the growing normality of it. Although China's overall divorce to marriage ratio is under 30%, it drastically rises in the cities, with a rate of 39% in Beijing and 38% in Shanghai^{xii}. Further, Lin's family situation has an undertone of patriarchal traditions. He and his sister are more strongly linked together as siblings because they share the same father, connecting to the idea of lineage as a male affair.

Lin does differ from the others with his very clear belief in Buddhism. As mentioned previously, some people are harder to pinpoint as Buddhist or non-Buddhist. Therefore, I'm rather wary of simple religious surveys in China as a way to judge its religious landscape. For example, one survey asked various countries about whether they feel a belief in God is needed for morality. In China, only 14% of people said that it's necessary^{xiii}. However, the Chinese-language question was written in a way that is commonly associated with a Christian God, certainly not encompassing all of Chinese religion.

Another similar survey framed the question in a broader way focused on moral causality, and 77% of the Chinese respondents said that they believe moral causality to exist^{xiii}. This contrast shows how hard it is to judge the precedence of religious belief in China when it is viewed through a Western lens.

Since religious beliefs were banned in China's recent past and only permitted again in the last few decades, religion has flourished compared to those earlier years of more intense discrimination. Lin is correct that Christianity is increasing, and by 2010 there were already sixty seven million Christians in the country^{xiv}. That number continues to rise.

Finally, I found myself humored by Lin's specific use of the word "Christmas" in his description of his travel plans to the U.S. Christmas is not a traditional Chinese holiday, and while Christianity is increasing Christians are still a minority. However, Western holidays are becoming popular, not just for religious reasons but for commercial reasons as well. I'm reminded of when I walked through a Walmart in China in 2009 and was surprised to see a small section set aside for Halloween products. While Halloween is still not a big holiday in the country, it and others are being pushed by retailers onto the increasingly consumerist and global Chinese market.

Chapter 11

"Hannah would you like to visit a tea house with me after I close up today?" asked Lin.

"Yeah, that sounds interesting."

"It'll be good for you to experience that part of Chinese culture. I'll ask Xia if she wants to come too."

Xia ended up driving us to the shop in question. Inside, the place emanated peacefulness, largely because we were the only guests there. A gift shop selling tea and teapots took up perhaps half of the space and a large wooden table occupied the other half. Traditional Chinese paintings hung on the wall and vases with flowers had been placed on various wooden shelves.

A lone person sat at the table, a young man with a shaved head and dressed in very simple clothing. He sipped from a small teacup. Upon our entrance, the man calmly rose and respectfully greeted us.

"These are my friends Xia and Hannah," Lin said to the man, "And this is my friend Yang," he said to us. Yang inclined his head slightly.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked.

"Yes, that sounds lovely," answered Xia. We decided on a type called Phoenix tea, and Yang set about preparing it.

As he did so, Lin explained that he and Yang became friends over their shared Buddhist beliefs. He then mentioned my project. "You should let her interview you for it. You have a really interesting story."

"I'd be glad to help," answered Yang simply.

We agreed upon my return the next day. So long as no guests were visiting the tea house, I would be able to interview him.

Yang's Story

When were you born and where?"

I was born in 1984, in a small town of about ten thousand people. Our town is known for its very long life expectancy, and the people there often live past a hundred years old. One person lived to be a hundred and twelve.

"Describe what you did there as a small child."

Because we didn't live in a city, we could catch fish in the river and play games in the fields. I would do this with the other children, and I had lots of friends. I lived with my parents while growing up, but my father never stayed for very long since he worked in another city.

“What work did your parents do?”

My dad worked as a painter, and my mom worked in a factory making clothes. Now, though, my mom is retired.

“And your dad?”

He’s no longer in this world.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

Please, don’t feel sorry.

“Alright. So, do you have siblings?”

I don’t because of the one-child policy.

“How about elementary school? Go over your experiences with that.”

As a little boy I needed thirty minutes to walk to school, and lots of the other children and I would walk together without our parents. Now that I’m older, I can walk that distance in ten minutes.

We studied Chinese language and mathematics mostly, and I liked language class the best. We didn’t have that much homework, maybe an hour or an hour and a half of it each day.

“You didn’t study English in elementary school?”

No, I didn’t start studying English until my first year of middle school.

“And then did you have a foreigner or a Chinese teacher for English?”

Chinese.

“Go over your middle school and high school experience.”

In middle school and high school my favorite classes were Chinese and English. I’ve really never liked math much.

When I was finishing middle school my dad passed away. This weighed on me heavily, and I didn’t do well on the high school test. As a result, I ended up going to a high school that isn’t so good. I studied really hard for the Gaokao, but didn’t do well on it either.

“Did you attend university?”

Yes, but I started at a more vocational university focused on broadcasting and television and then took an exam to get into another university. Since I did well on the test, a pretty good school of science and technology admitted me.

“What did you study at your second school and why?”

I studied chemical engineering because I had no choice! It’s very difficult to get into Chinese universities, and so students don’t always have much freedom with their majors. This is a common problem here.

“Did you live in the school dorms while you were there?”

Yes, with three roommates.

“How much did these schools cost and how did you pay that amount?”

The vocational college cost 3,600 yuan a year, and I attended it for two years. Then, the university cost 4,900 yuan a year, and I was there for three years. My mom paid my tuition at the first school and for the second I took out a loan. This isn’t typical, and most students don’t take out loans. I had a slightly more difficult situation because I’m from a single parent family.

“Do you think that tuition in China is too high?”

No, it’s pretty fair.

“Have you paid off your college loan? If so, how?”

Yeah, I paid off the loan on my own. I worked a part-time job in college, and I finished paying it off two month after graduating.

“How difficult was college? Did most people graduate?”

I found my first school to be really easy, especially because I studied so hard to get into somewhere better. My second school was easy too, and we could even skip class without any problems. Students need to pass an exam to graduate, and pretty much everyone passes. I graduated, but I didn't get into graduate school because I'm so bad at math.

“Did a lot of your classmates go on to graduate school?”

Yes. Even all of my roommates got doctorates.

“Where did you work after you graduated? Describe this job.”

I worked at Nalco for three years selling wastewater treatment chemicals to industry customers. I ran experiments with each customer's water so that we could pinpoint exactly what levels of chemicals it needed.

Then I worked at General Electric in Suzhou for two years in a similar job. At G.E. we'd speak Chinese with each other, but we read and wrote in English for company assignments.

“How much were you paid? Did you save any money?”

Nalco paid me 5,000 yuan a month, and G.E. paid me 8,000 a month plus a yearly bonus of between 5,000 and 10,000 yuan. During my time at Nalco I saved 50,000 yuan and then during my time at G.E. I saved 100,000.

“Ok, so tell me how you ended up working at this tea house?”

That story begins with a friend of mine who is a Buddhist disciple. He told me about Buddhism, and I decided that I wanted to learn more. This friend took me to the Lingyansan Temple, and I soon became a Buddhist follower and left G.E. Two months after leaving, I tasted the tea of a tea master and decided to become her student. Tea is one vehicle to reach enlightenment.

Then, for a year and a half I didn't work and instead traveled and studied tea and Buddhism. I relied on the money that I'd saved.

After that, I spent half of a year “working” at a friend's tea house here in Suzhou. I managed the sales and customer relationships. My friend didn't pay me for this work, but I helped anyway because I learned a lot from my time there and I'm really close with him.

Two months ago I got my current job.

“Why did you become a Buddhist?”

I needed a belief. I think that if you have something to believe in you can lead a better life and can do anything with yourself. I feel that studying the Buddhist way of tea is a way to improve my inner spirit and to make myself stronger.

“What is your favorite tea? Why?”

I like white tea the most because it doesn't need the human manipulation that other types of tea require.

“Go into a little more detail about this job. What days and hours do you work, and how much are you paid?”

I do similar work here as in the previous tea house, and I work six days a week. Every day I get up at 7:30 a.m., but I work from 2 p.m. until 10 p.m. My workmate is here in the mornings. I came today at 10 a.m. only because she is having a rest. I'm paid 5,000 yuan a month.

“What do you do with all of your extra time in the mornings?”

Almost every morning I first do a prayer ritual. This takes about a half hour. Then, I spend most of my time reading and sometimes meditating.

"You meditate every day?"

No not every day, but most days. I don't always have the necessary time, but I want to meditate every day because it would help me on my Buddhist path.

"What is the history behind this tea house?"

It's only two months old, and I began working here at its beginning. My boss opened it because she loves tea and she wants her older years to be sunny, happy, and tranquil. She stops by every day. At the moment this place isn't usually busy because the only people who come are my friends or the friends of my boss and my one workmate. For example, today no customers have yet arrived and so I've mostly been reading.

I'm the only Buddhist one working here, and this tea house isn't specifically Buddhist. But, the others like a life lived around tea because it can give everyone a quiet heart whether they are Buddhist or not.

"Is your family Buddhist?"

My mom isn't Buddhist, and my dad wasn't either. However, they did take me to Buddhist temples sometimes as a child. They'd go to the temple so that the Buddha would bless them, protect their lives, and help them to get more money. Asking for such things does not mean that someone must be Buddhist. Rather, my parents made what can be called a trade with the Buddha.

"Do you have roommates, and if so are they Buddhist?"

I have three roommates, and they aren't Buddhist.

"Do you think less young people follow a religion, such as Buddhism, than in previous generations?"

I can't accurately answer this question because I often don't consider people who go to temple to be religious. Many people just want the protection of Buddhism without actually believing its tenets. These people are only at the temple to make requests of the Buddha.

"Does your mom mind that you've become Buddhist?"

My mom really has no preference either way

"Are you in a relationship?"

Yeah, I have a girlfriend and we've been together for one year.

"Where is she from and how did you two meet? Is she Buddhist?"

She's Sichuanese and my tea master introduced us at my friend's tea house. We then became friends really quickly, and a month after first meeting we started to date.

She isn't Buddhist and doesn't believe in any religion, but she understands and accepts my beliefs.

"What work does she do?"

She teaches piano lessons to children at a store that sells pianos. She loves her work, and she taught herself to play rather than attending university.

"Are you thinking at all about marriage?"

We'd like to marry next year because we want to have a baby in 2016, the year of the monkey. In China the zodiac animals all relate to each other in different ways. My zodiac is a mouse and my girlfriend's is a dragon. The mouse, dragon, and monkey all work well with each other.

"Do a lot of people plan when to have children based on the zodiac?"

Most people don't follow it now. Possibly my views on this are a little traditional.

"Will you raise your children to follow Buddhism?"

No, I won't impress my religion on them, but I will guide them so that they can choose for themselves. However, my children must have a religion or philosophy to follow because I think that all people need a way to guide themselves.

"Elaborate on this."

If you have a problem with something, you can find the method to solve it with your beliefs. Most people in China do not follow any religion or philosophy, and this has led to problems. People have become really apathetic and do not connect with each other.

"But your wife doesn't have beliefs like that?"

She doesn't, but I'm able to guide her.

"Do you have a preference for a boy or girl child?"

No, either is fine.

"Do you and your girlfriend have any plans to move in with each other?"

No, not until after we marry. According to Chinese tradition a couple should only live together after marriage. Nowadays, though, lots of unmarried couples live together. These changes in tradition have both good and bad consequences.

"Why? Elaborate please."

Well, after marriage I will respect my girlfriend's parents and she will respect mine. This follows tradition. However, now a section of younger Chinese people don't follow this tradition anymore and instead fight with their parents and their spouse's parents.

"You like your girlfriend's parents?"

I haven't met them yet, but my girlfriend's father actually arrived in Suzhou this morning and he'll be coming to the tea shop tonight. I'll meet him for the first time.

— — —

Yang grew up in a very different financial situation than that of his friend Lin. He presents a case where the cost of education does become a burden and where a loan is necessary. However, even Yang says that his tuition was fair. Moreover, his loan situation is still relatively mild compared to the problem of college debt in places such as the United States. Yang paid off his loan in just a few months, a situation that would be a dream for many American students.

His story is similar to Wei's in that they both did poorly on the Gaokao and then later passed an adult exam in order to attend a university. This type of second chance represents at least a little bit of positive leeway in China's college system.

Yang then did well for himself, starting out with a salary on par with Lihua's and Long's and moving up from there. Yet he was unhappy, symbolizing how the problems with modern Chinese culture are weighing down many young Chinese people.

While Long took an extreme approach in his rejection of the "rat race", discontent can be gleaned from the answers of the other interviewees as well. Long is a serious outlier from the others, but he also still embodies traditions that persist in a wider sector of Chinese society.

For one, he will not live with his girlfriend before marriage. Wei similarly will wait and states that none of his friends will live with their partners before marriage either. These values are shifting for many, and both Suzy and Qian already live with their significant others despite not yet being married. Still, a large portion of young adults uphold this tradition.

Another concept that he brings up is that of the zodiac. The twelve year zodiac cycle has been used through Chinese history as a way to record time, and a great number of beliefs revolve around the twelve animals associated with it. In the zodiac, certain animals fit better together than others. Although in the modern era these zodiac animals hold less importance than in the past, they still represent a part of China's modern life. Media coverage in China claims that many young Chinese couples plan the conception of their children so that the births take place in years with more auspicious animal signs^{xiv}. While this is debatable, the continued discussion of the zodiac's influence exemplifies its persistence.

Finally, Yang also mentions the tradition of respecting a spouse's parents. Just like in the U.S, China has jokes about a spouse and his or her in-laws not getting along. Originally, the focus was on the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law because the wife moved in with the husband's family. In the old family hierarchy, the daughter-in-law is expected to listen to her mother-in-law and to help her. In the modern world, urban couples tend to live on their own, but elements of the early tradition still linger in family dynamics.

Chapter 12

I finally had the chance to interview Xia the day before my planned departure to Jingdezhen, Jiangxi. There, I would meet up with another friend. "Xia, you've been so wonderful to me this entire trip, and you helped me to interview so many other people. But, I'd really like to record your story too." I said this to her as we ate breakfast together that morning. "Of course, if you've changed your mind about it then that's no problem at all."

"No, you can interview me. I was just having so much fun showing you around. I need to get some work done today, but I'll let you know as soon as I'm done. Then you can come by."

As promised, Xia called me upon the culmination of her work, around 4:30 p.m. I then took the subway there. The two of us left the office so that we'd have some more privacy, and Xia drove us to her boyfriend's apartment. I'd met her boyfriend a few times already, but right then he was at work still. Xia and I sat at the table and began.

Xia's Story

"When and where were you born?"

I was born in March 1988 in Songyuan city of Jilin Province, way up in China's northern prairies. Songyuan has a few million people, and so it's quite modern there now.

"What dialects and languages do you speak?"

I speak Mandarin, Cantonese, and the Mongolian language. I also understand traditional characters from watching TV.

"Very nice, you'll have to show me the basics of Mongolian at some point. How do you know it?"

My mom is ethnically Mongol.

"And your dad?"

He's Han Chinese.

"What habits of the Mongols differ from those of the Han?"

Mongol people don't eat many things, for example we don't eat horse meat. We are also very free. Only, Chinese houses are expensive so we don't roam so free now. We have different festivals too, such as Naadam. That's the Mongolian Harvest Festival.

"Do you have siblings?"

Yes, one older sister.

"Did you live with your parents while growing up?"

I did, and in the same house the entire time until high school. Then I moved into the dorms, and in college I lived in dorms too. My parents only moved after I began college, and then only to another place in Songyuan.

"Tell me more about your parents. What is their work?"

Now they're retired. Before, my dad owned a factory that mostly made iron farming tools. My mom taught math, first at an elementary school and then at a middle school. As a result, she ended up as my teacher during both elementary school and middle school!

"Did you like having your mom as a teacher?"

My mom is a funny and happy person, and she isn't a very strict teacher. Other students liked her, but I didn't because I really didn't like studying.

"Does your dad still own the factory?"

He doesn't. During my childhood, the factory probably had about thirty workers, but then it became more old-fashioned and went bankrupt. So, he closed it.

"When did he close it? Are your parents doing ok financially?"

It went bankrupt the year before last. Before then, my parents had a lot of money, and they used to help out me and my sister. Now they don't, and we actually give money to them. They still have some saved, though, enough for them to retire.

"Do your parents have siblings? If so, how many?"

My dad has seven siblings, so including him there are four boys and four girls. He's the fourth born. My mom has three siblings, with an older brother and sister and then a younger sister too.

"Did your aunts and uncles, and your other relatives, live nearby? Did you see them a lot?"

My parents' siblings all live in Songyuan. I saw my mom's side of the family fairly often, but not my dad's. I never knew my grandparents, but they were in the same city too. I'm friends with some of my cousins, though we didn't go to the same schools.

"Do your parents' siblings help them out with money too?"

My uncles and aunts don't help my parents financially. On my dad's side they don't have money, and they live in the rural farming areas of the city. My dad helped out his siblings with money during his period of success. My mom's side does have a lot of money. They had more before the Communist Party formed modern China because after that they became common people. Still, they are well off. They don't help out either because my parents aren't poor but just not as successful as they used to be.

"How often do you see your family members now?"

Only once a year, when I go back for Chinese New Year. I return for ten days generally and see all of my relatives.

"Did your parents attend college?"

They didn't. My parents were young people during the Cultural Revolution, and during those ten years many people couldn't go to school and teachers were punished. It was a terrible

time. My mom really liked school, so when she finally had the chance to study again she studied very hard, and after she married she studied more. She taught herself what she needed to know in order to become a math teacher rather than attend a university.

“Were you a good student as a child?”

Certainly not by the time I got to high school. Before then, I studied decently, and so I got into a pretty good high school, though not the best in the city.

I acted very naughty there. I didn’t wear makeup or smoke, but I’d use a curling iron to make my hair big and I also liked to drink. Among my friends now, I can drink the most! We weren’t allowed off campus in high school, but I’d jump over the fence. Another boy and I would leave campus and skip class to play billiards instead.

“Do you regret not working harder in high school?”

No. I had lots of experiences that other students didn’t, and I’m happy about that. Plus, school achievements weren’t that important. Many of my high school classmates studied a lot and are now less happy than me. Often, they don’t even make as much money.

“How did you do on the Gaokao?”

I didn’t do that well, just so-so.

“I know that you attended university in Yanqing. How did you choose that school over others?”

I chose my university because my Gaokao score meant that I couldn’t get into other schools. The guy that skipped class with me in high school went there too, though he chose a different major. He’s in Beijing now, and we are still friends.

“How much was your tuition? What about other costs?”

My parents paid my tuition, and that together with room and board and other living costs added up to 20,000 yuan a year. I then worked part-time to earn extra spending money.

“What did you study in college?”

News studies. I liked my major a lot and became a good student.

I even worked as an announcer for the school radio station in my free time. I speak very standard Mandarin, which helped me to get that position. Another student and I announced for the music section, and we also got to choose the music that played.

“And you performed in the 2008 Summer Olympics opening ceremony. I remember you telling me about it when we lived in Yanqing. Describe that experience.”

Yes, I danced in both the opening and closing ceremonies. Just college students were chosen for this dance because they represent the new strength of China.

For six months we practiced eight hours a day, and then we made up our missed college classes in the summer.

“How many years did you attend university? You were in the dorms the whole time?”

I graduated after four years. And yes I lived in the dorms, with the same seven other girls the entire time. We are all still friends, though none of them live close to here.

“I know that you and Jiao are still good friends as well. When and where did you meet him?”

I forgot where I first met Jiao. I know we met near the beginning of my sophomore year and his freshman year.

“What about me and the other foreigners? How did you first meet the Europeans?”

Don’t you know?

“All I know is that you met the others late at night in a club. You might’ve forgotten that I wasn’t there. My Chinese parents never let me stay out that late.”

I remember, but I thought you knew the story. Yes, I met them at a club and Benjamin asked for my number. At the time I felt that my English could improve by becoming his friend, and so I gave it to him. Then, when we all hung out later I realized that you are all really nice people.

“Yeah, I remember that Benjamin liked you. But you never dated?”

He liked me, but I told him that I just wanted to be friends. I don’t like to date guys younger than me, and I was already part-way through college.

“You said you had part-time jobs during your years at university? What were those? Go into more detail.”

Yes, I worked part-time all through university. Mainly, I worked as a sales clerk at shopping malls. I helped to sell clothes for one job and toys for another. For eight hours of work, I could make about 100 yuan. I’d spend all of that money.

“You didn’t save any of the money you earned?”

No, I spent it all, except for my last year. Then I began to save for a car. I like to make money and spend it, not save it.

“Do you save money now? What about for retirement?”

I don’t. I only save if there’s something that I want. I don’t save money for retirement because that’s in many, many years. I don’t like money, so I don’t really know how much of it I have. When I have money I know I can buy things, and when I don’t have money I know I can’t. I am a happy person because I don’t have to worry about money. However, I feel that most people in China think money is very important.

“So you have a car. Go into more detail about how you saved for that.”

My car cost 150,000 yuan, and I paid for it in full when I bought it. I worked really hard for many years to save that amount.

“After college, what jobs did you have? Describe those up to, and including, your present job.”

You probably want to know that during my fourth year of college I got an internship at a record company in Beijing. We didn’t attend classes for that year and instead completed internships full-time. I rented an apartment and lived by myself in the city, but many of my neighbors were actually my classmates because we wanted to live close to each other.

No one else from my school interned at the same company as me, because it only had a few interns in total. I helped with creating publicity for the artists. I liked my work, though as an intern I received a low salary, just a few thousand yuan a month.

Then I moved out of Beijing because I wanted to live somewhere new. China has so many interesting cities!

I came to Suzhou not knowing anyone, but now I have lots of friends here. First I worked at a magazine publisher, and I made 3,000 yuan a month.

Then I got this job, and I currently make about 10,000 yuan a month. This varies because my salary is based on commission. For this job I get to organize events, and my commission is high, much higher than some of my workmates because my events always have lots of people.

“What do you spend your salary on each month?”

The rent for my apartment is 2,000 yuan so I pay half of that because I have a roommate. Then, I pay the mortgage for my new house and that's 4,000 yuan a month. This November I'll move into it because right now the building isn't yet finished. So currently, I'm very poor.

"Your salary seems pretty good!"

Really, I'm not extremely successful. I'm quite average. Everyone here is pretty average success-wise.

She gestured around the office and then a wry grin appeared on her face.

But I'm doing a little better because I have a car and a house. They don't.

I nodded in agreement. "Who is someone you know that you would consider extremely successful?"

My older sister. She is only thirty, but she already makes 30,000 yuan a month, and she likes her work. She's in Uganda with her husband, and they are both engineers for the construction of an airport. They live in company housing, and so they don't have to pay rent or for their food.

She's also happy because she knows that Africa is very poor, and she feels that her work there will help.

My sister always studied very hard, and then she majored in civil engineering at a good university. Afterward she worked her way up to her current job.

"Oh wow, how long has she been in Uganda?"

A long time, three years already.

"Maybe I'll meet her one day. Now I'm curious about you and your boyfriend. Can you tell me the story of how you and him began to date?"

I organized a bike riding event near Yangcheng Lake, and he helped to make the signs and other decorations for that. He designs these for a company and then they are sold to events like ours. He actually studied Chinese painting, but it's very hard to make money as a painter. He doesn't paint now, though I've seen his paintings and they are beautiful.

His company and mine interact a lot, and his workplace isn't too far from here. I liked my boyfriend first, and eventually I told him. Then he said he liked me too. We started dating a year ago.

Before him, many guys liked me but I didn't like any of them back. I chose my boyfriend because he's very handsome and he's very good to me. A bonus is his good cooking because I'm a really bad cook.

"Does your boyfriend like his job? How much does he earn?"

Yes, I think he likes it. However, he and his friend want to start a media company together. I don't know much about their plan. I should probably ask.

I'm not really sure about his salary but I think it's around 4,000 yuan a month.

"As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

A police officer. I thought the police were heroes, the same as Batman and Superman. Now, I wouldn't become a police officer because I know that police work is dangerous. Afterward, I wanted a policeman husband, but I'm happy with my boyfriend.

— — —

Xia is very proud of her Mongol heritage. Songyuan is near the border of Inner Mongolia and thus not terribly far from Mongolia itself. The majority of China's Mongols reside in China's

northern regions and particularly in its Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region where they make up about 20% of the population^{xlvi}.

Xia describes some differences between Mongol culture and that of the Han Chinese, but she is also able to fit in with mainstream Chinese society. However, that is not the case for all members of ethnic minorities, and discontent continues among many of them. The government currently employs various techniques to mitigate their unrest.

For example, China's leader Xi Jinping recently pushed for intermarriages as a way to bridge connections between minority groups and the Han^{xlvii}. Mixed marriages are fine in themselves, but China's motives are slightly alarming. Currently, the policy is targeting the populations in Xinjiang, the center of unrest from discontent Uyghurs and also home to some Mongols, and in Xizang, home to the Tibetans. It includes annual provisions of cash to the mixed-raced couples. The potential success of such measures is difficult to predict, as the current rate of intermarriages between such ethnic groups with Han Chinese is low.

Beyond the interracial programs, other programs have also specifically targeted the Mongols. These include shepherd relocations, which incentivize the still nomadic Mongols to sell their flocks and move into the cities^{xlviii}. With all the loss of culture taking place, including a loss of fluency in ethnic languages, I find it reassuring that Xia was still taught how to speak Mongol.

Xia later mentions her sister, and her sister's work touches upon China's global presence in places such as Africa. China's investment in Africa has increased from a hundred million US dollars in 2003 to over twelve billion in 2011^{xlix}. A debate now exists over how this investment will help Africa itself. Some worry that China is exploiting Africa, but at the same time Africa is certainly benefiting in many ways, with China becoming the continent's largest trading partner in 2009.

Also of importance in Xia's narrative is her discussion of marriage, only mentioned briefly in the interview but considered between us more extensively at other points. Xia has told me that she feels pressure to marry soon, even though she isn't sure that she really wants to. She enjoys the freedom now to go out as late as she likes and to drink what she wants, but she says her boyfriend is more traditional about such issues and that she'll be more restricted afterward. Then, Xia informed me about a half year later that she plans to marry at the beginning of 2016.

I wish Xia the best with her intended marriage, and her boyfriend is a very nice person. I could tell that he truly loved her from the times that I hung out with them together. Certainly, plenty of people in the West have pre-marital worries as well.

However, her worries relate to the pressure placed on Chinese men and women to marry early. This is somewhat underhandedly encouraged by China's hopes to increase its number of births again in the face of an aging population, and Chinese men and women traditionally married younger as well. There is a term now in Chinese, "shèngnǚ", that means "leftover women" and refers to women who are not married by their late twenties. It is often used with a negative connotation. Still, people in China continue to marry at ever later ages, and hopefully the societal pressure placed on its people to marry young will ease in the coming years.

Chapter 13

In the early afternoon of July 25th I left on a train headed for Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, located southwest of Suzhou. I arrived at 4:30 a.m. the next day. There, my friend Shu met me at the station. Shu is a student at the same American university as me and a Jiangxi Province native.

I caught sight of her standing in the small crowd waiting for the arriving passengers.

“Thank you so much for coming here this early,” I said as we rode in a taxi back to her aunt’s extra apartment. The two of us planned to stay there together for six days.

“It’s not a problem. You’re my first American friend to visit me in China, and I really appreciate that.”

We walked into a courtyard encircled by a U-shaped two-storied apartment building. I followed Shu into one of the apartments. Inside, we talked for a little while but very quickly fell asleep. After waking a few hours later, I stepped out onto the porch and watched as elderly women hung clothes from their balconies. Shu joined me a few minutes later. “This complex used to belong to a factory, and the factory workers lived in these apartments. Most of the people that have stayed here are elderly now,” she explained.

After getting ourselves ready, we went out exploring in Jingdezhen. The city is small by Chinese standards, with a population of about a million and a half people¹. Jingdezhen’s claim to fame is its status as a capital of pottery and porcelain production. That day we passed countless porcelain shops and visited a porcelain fair exhibiting the work of students from the city’s esteemed ceramics university.

Over the next several days, I explored Jingdezhen further, and Shu and I met with her middle school friends. Most attend universities throughout China but were back home for summer break. Among them, only Shu went to a university abroad.

From Jingdezhen, Shu and I took a bus to a slightly smaller city a few hours away called Poyang. Much of Shu’s family lives in Poyang, and we planned to stay with them for a few days. I interviewed Shu on the bus ride there.

Shu’s Story

“When and where were you born?”

I was born in January 1995 in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province.

“I know you attend college in the U.S. What other countries have you been to?”

I’ve traveled to a lot of places. Besides the US, there’s Nepal, Cuba, France, Switzerland, Italy, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and I don’t remember all the other countries that I’ve been to in Europe.

“Have many of your friends from China traveled abroad too?”

No, most of them haven’t because Jingdezhen is a small city and not that many people can afford to go abroad here.

“Let’s start with a little bit of your family’s history. What work did your parents do when they were younger?”

After college, my parents worked at a government-owned factory in Guixi, a really small city in Jiangxi that’s just a two or three hour drive from Jingdezhen. People primarily lived there to work at one of the two government factories in the area. My parents were sent there after graduating from university. They went to the same college, and back then colleges would line you up with a job directly after graduation.

The other factory became more famous than the one my parents worked in because some important Chinese official visited it many years ago.

“Describe your mom’s family history. Where is she from and what is her family like?”

My great-grandfather lived in Poyang, and he had lots of money, land, and animals. However, he had a huge family and they spent most of this money. I heard that my grandpa is the son of my great-grandpa's seventh or ninth wife, I'm not sure which exactly. My great-grandpa's children liked to smoke and bet, and they spent a lot.

In the end, my family benefited from this because rich people were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Since my great-grandparents weren't so rich they got off more easily. My maternal grandparents inherited my great-grandparents' house, but now they live in an apartment.

"And your dad's family history?"

My dad's parents live in Hunan province. I'm not that close to them, both because of the distance and because they have a lot of really traditional rules. For example, at the dinner table when you chew you can't make any sound and you must use chopsticks in a certain way. Then there are lots of other little but annoying rules too. Also, they think girls need to know how to cook and that they should do all of the laundry.

My dad has four sisters and no brothers. Since my dad is the only boy my paternal grandparents really love him. They pretty much agree with whatever he wants to do. So, since I'm the daughter of my dad, I have a little more freedom than the daughters of my dad's sisters.

My dad's sisters are really closed-minded because they agree that girls have to do the housecleaning. I think one or two of them went to college. In contrast, my mom's side of the family is much more open minded and believes that girls should have access to school and to higher education.

My dad tries to bring me back every year to see his family, but sometimes I don't want to go back.

"Did you live with your parents in Guixi?"

Yes, we lived in an apartment compound for factory workers. Then I moved for a while when I began elementary school.

"Where did you move and why? Describe your life after starting school."

I went to Poyang, which is an hour's drive from Jingdezhen. The normal age to begin school is seven or eight, but my mom wanted to put me in elementary school earlier. She knew someone in Poyang that could help, and so I did my first semester there and lived with my grandparents and my aunt. After that semester, I moved back in with my parents and went to school in Guixi through third grade.

"Then what?"

Then, my parents left to Guangzhou in order to start their own business, and I moved in with them. However, I only stayed with them for half a year.

In Guangzhou, my parents put me into a public school because in China public schools are usually better than the private ones. However, this didn't work out very well. At my new school, students were required to eat breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria. I'm not sure if you know this, but food in Guangzhou is really different from here and I couldn't get used to it. One time I fainted because I didn't eat enough. My mom then decided that I shouldn't stay, and she sent me back to Poyang.

"And you then finished grade school in Poyang?"

No, I only spent my last two and a half years of elementary school there, and afterward I moved to Jingdezhen. In Poyang I lived with my maternal grandparents, and my younger cousin lived with them too. She's three grades below me in school.

My grandparents, cousin, and I moved to Jingdezhen when I began middle school so that my cousin and I could get a better education.

Since my grandpa had a wealthy family background he knows how to read and how to do math, and he'd occasionally help me with my homework. Lots of people his age aren't good with these things. My grandma can read a little, but she still doesn't recognize a lot of characters.

Then, I got into the best high school in the city, but I decided to go school in the U.S. instead.

"Wait, before you describe the U.S., tell me more about your middle school experience."

I attended a very good public middle school, and I tested to get into it. I woke up for middle school twenty minutes before class started every day, and I showed up late a lot. This matters, but my teachers liked me and so they'd let me off pretty easily.

I had a lot of friendships but no truly close friends. Homework and studying just took up too much of my time, and I very rarely had friends over. My classmates and I never had sleepovers like children in the U.S. Sleepovers aren't so normal in China.

My cousin and I shared a room, and we'd do our homework in it. We didn't really play together.

"Did you and your cousin go to the same school in Jingdezhen?"

She attended the same middle school, though our time there didn't overlap. I got into the best high school in the city, but my cousin didn't test high enough and so she went elsewhere.

"Why did you choose to go to high school abroad?"

I really wanted to go to school in the U.S. because I felt that it would help my future and I didn't want to live in Jingdezhen anymore. My parents' factory kept growing more and more successful, and so by the time I planned to begin high school they had the means to send me abroad. Most of my relatives felt I should stay in China.

My parents agreed with me, though, because they knew many parents from Guangzhou that had sent their children abroad too. So, my parents realized that it would help me. I thought about going to England, but it seemed more old-fashioned than the U.S, and the U.S. is newer and more powerful than England.

"I know you said only a few of your Chinese friends have been to other countries. Did anyone else from your middle school go abroad for school too?"

As far as I know, only two others did. I attended a normal middle school, not an international one or anything, and so most people could not afford that.

"Go into a little more detail about your parents' work. Include how they started out, what they do, and so on."

While my parents were still working at the factory, one of my dad's sisters started her own business in Guangzhou. At the time, she needed money and asked my dad if he wanted to join her. Factory work provided a peaceful life but also a low salary. My parents wanted to get out, and so they agreed to go to Guangzhou.

However, my parents and my aunt got into some sort of fight over business matters. A person should never do business with their family members! Afterward, they didn't talk to each other for a couple of years.

My parents then started a business on their own. They have a factory that makes parts for other factories, specifically factories that produce fertilizer.

They became pretty successful, especially for people from a small city like Jingdezhen. In Guangzhou, though, many people are far more wealthy than my parents.

“So back to you. Then you went to high school in the U.S.?”

Yes. I first went through an agency that picked a couple of private schools from which parents could select their favorite choice and that also worked out the applications and visas. My parents chose the first school on the list because that one had the most expensive tuition. It's in Florida.

“What did you think of that school? Describe your experience there.”

The school was really good, but it had too many Chinese students. I think there were two or three thousand students there in total and then a hundred international students. About sixty or seventy of the international students were Chinese. That may not seem like a large number in comparison to everyone there, but the school put the international students together in the dormitory so that the Chinese students were all together.

I didn't have to take the TOEFL test to prove my English ability since it's not required for K-12. So, the Chinese students were all enrolled in the normal classes. Eventually the high school realized that some of us had really bad English, and it started classes specially for the international students. The students would stay in those classes the whole day, and the majority were Chinese. To get out of them and back into normal classes you had to pass a test.

The school put me in that special English class right away. I'd applied to begin at the school as a tenth grader, which is the first year of high school in China. As a result of my poor English, the school switched me to ninth grade.

I mostly made friends with Chinese students, though I tried hard to make American friends as well in order to improve my English. Although the Americans were nice, I found making friends with them a difficult task. Not only did I struggle with basic communication, but they lived with their families while I lived in the dorms. Also, we perceived the world quite differently. I might find something amazing that is quite normal for them. I didn't get a lot of cultural references either, such as references to American cartoon shows.

Still, my English improved because I wasn't shy to speak it all the time.

“What is your first memory at the school?”

I used to have short hair and the taxi driver, booked by the school, picked us up from the airport and then drove me to the boy's dorm building. He mistook me for a boy.

Actually a lot of people, both in China and in the U.S., would ask me if I'm gay. It's not weird to have short hair and in some Chinese middle schools girls are even required to have short hair. I just must have the type of face to make people think that.

“So you lived at the school? Did you have Chinese roommates? Did you become friends with your roommates?”

No, I had a Russian roommate the first semester. She was a year older than me and seemed stereotypically Russian, with beautiful blonde hair. We got along fine but didn't grow close. She wore high heels, makeup, and short dresses, and I felt like an alien in comparison to her.

We lived in a three person dorm room, and the second semester a Chinese girl joined us. She had attended an international school in China, a lot more fancy than my previous schools, and she'd wear makeup, heels, and pretty clothes too. I didn't grow close with her either, and she and the Russian girl did not get along.

“How were your actual classes? How did they compare to your classes in China?”

I found the special English class really boring, and we had the same teacher the whole day. The second semester I got to take two normal classes, and I chose P.E. and geometry. I liked P.E., but I'd learned the math from geometry class in elementary school.

“So you stayed at that high school until you graduated?”

No, I transferred to a new school my sophomore year. I didn't really know the second school that well when I chose it, and I just wanted to go somewhere with less Chinese students. It's also in Florida, and I knew someone already going there.

Also, this time I lived with a host family instead of in a dormitory. I found the family because one of my relatives does international business online and knew someone in the area through that.

“And then you stayed there until graduation.”

I actually switched again and went to a third school my junior and senior years.

“How come? What didn't you like about the second school? Did it have anything to do with your host family?”

I switched host families as well but for different reasons. I lived with three host families during my last three years of high school.

The second school I attended only had ten Chinese students when I arrived, but then the second semester that increased to twenty, and the headmaster told me that the next school year they'd have even more. I liked the school, but although I made American friends I didn't form truly close friendships with them. I still keep in contact with my Chinese friends from there, though.

My third school only had seven Chinese students. I was the sole Chinese student in my grade, and so I liked it there. The other Chinese students were all younger than me. At first the school had no other international students, but because of me they realized that international students pay more. That's when the other Chinese students arrived.

I tried to make American friends there too, but the cultural differences continued to make that difficult.

“Did you still manage to make some American friends?”

Yes, but the friendships were still rather superficial. We only met up to go to movies, shop, and eat out.

None of my American friends came to my host family's house but my Chinese friends did.

“Why did you switch host families? When exactly did you live with the different families?”

I lived with my first family for the first half of my sophomore year, then the second family for the year after, and finally with a third family, really just one person, for a year and a half.

I didn't like my first family because they'd talk with the school and then lie to me about it. So, I moved in with a Chinese woman living with her seven year old son. At first I liked her, but afterward I found out that she just wanted to use me for her own gain. She wanted to start an education agency to help Chinese students come to U.S. high schools, but she didn't know the process well and she asked me to help her. I left and moved in with a seventy-something year old lady living on her own.

I liked her. I didn't have a driver's license or a car, and she'd always drive me to wherever I wanted to go. She did make me do a lot more chores than in the previous two houses, and that bothered me a little. I didn't mind washing my own dishes and clothes, but I don't clean my room that often unless someone is coming over.

Also, she got upset when I didn't stay with her and her family for holidays. I knew the American traditions already. On Thanksgiving everyone eats turkey and on Christmas people exchange gifts. Instead of staying, I left to see other U.S. cities, like Los Angeles and San Diego on the west coast and Boston and D.C. in the east. Other than getting mad at me about this, she treated me really well.

"How did you keep in touch with your parents while you were in the U.S.?"

I talked to my parents almost every day. At first I used Skype, but then I used Wechat and Facetime more often. I used QQ too. I'd talk pretty often with my other friends in China as well.

No one from China visited me in the U.S., but I went back home for summer breaks and occasionally for winter break. My parents still haven't been to the U.S., but I think they will come out for my college graduation.

"Do you keep in touch with anyone from Guixi?"

Just one person, a girl about my age. I met up with her last about three or four years ago.

Since my parents started their own successful business, a lot of people in that factory who used to be friends with them grew jealous. They are upset that my parents started out at the same level as them and worked at the same factory, and yet now can send me to the U.S. and even have a second child. So, we don't often go back to Guixi.

"Oh, you have a sibling?"

Yes, I have a brother. He's only four years old. Since the factory in Guixi is government owned, my parents would've lost their jobs if they'd had more children while working there.

After they went to Guangzhou they worked for themselves and made enough money to pay any fines for a second child, and so they had my brother.

"Why did your parents want a second child?"

Many middle aged people have dogs and cats, but my mom doesn't like pets and so she wanted a baby.

Traditional Chinese families also like boys more than girls. My paternal grandparents didn't have any grandsons before my brother, and they really hoped for one. As a result, my dad wanted a boy.

"How does your brother's childhood differ from yours?"

His childhood is a lot different. I haven't lived with my parents since fourth grade, and so now that I'm grown up I'm not as close with them as before. I think my mom is a little regretful of that, and so she raises my brother by herself instead of hiring any nannies. My mom is now a housewife and watches my brother, and my dad does most of the work for their business.

"What do you think of having a sibling that's so much younger than you?"

I love my brother and I Facetime him a lot. However, it's sort of weird and embarrassing to see him when I came back to China during breaks. I never thought I'd have any siblings, and a lot of my friends and cousins are only children.

"How did you choose to go to college in Boulder? You've just finished your freshman year there, correct?"

Yes, it's only been one year.

I applied to ten colleges, all in the U.S. I got into all of them, and finally I chose CU Boulder. I thought that the area seemed really pretty, and I wanted to hike and ski. I considered Ohio State, Alabama State, and some other state schools too. I wanted to go to a big, public school with lots to do.

I didn't apply to any schools on the coasts because schools there have too many Chinese students. I felt that during college I still needed to improve my English.

CU Boulder had a couple hundred Chinese students overall when I arrived, and I wasn't surprised by that. It's not too many since CU is such a big school, and it's a lot less than the number of Chinese students in East and West coast schools.

"How is your experience at CU? Are most of your friends American?"

I actually still like to hang out with my Chinese friends the most. We have our own parties and we usually cook Chinese food, drink, and play cards games like Uno. We also go to Denver sometimes. As a result, I feel like my English decreased this past year. We don't hang out with others that often, I think because of the big cultural differences.

I've still made some American friends, though, and next semester I'm studying abroad in England. Maybe I'll make more there.

— — —

Shu's narrative follows the typical "rags to riches" story exemplified by many successful Chinese families today. Though her parents did have some advantages to begin with, they were still simply factory workers who made it big.

I've mentioned it before, but I'll reiterate that normal Chinese people couldn't afford to even vacation in a place like the U.S., let alone go to school there. International tuition tends to be high, and at the university that Shu and I attend it is currently about \$35,000 a year, not including any living costs or other costs. That is an enormous sum of money when the average salary in China is less than \$500 a monthⁱⁱ.

Of course Shu's life has had its hardships as well, and like many others interviewed here, she not only didn't live with her parents for most of her life, but now they are raising a coveted son. As Shu states in the interview, this can be somewhat disjarring for her, even as her parents shower her with luxuries such as an international education and trips around the world.

Gender inequality finds its way into Shu's story at several points, from the behavior of her extended family to her parents' happiness at giving birth to a son instead of a daughter for their second child.

The progress of Chinese women isn't helped by their sexualization in the media, a topic I discussed with Shu outside my interview with her, and a problem that became very apparent to me in the reactions to her dark skin. When I arrived in Jingdezhen her skin was much tanner than when I'd seen her last in the U.S. In China the ideal woman is portrayed as possessing very pale skin. At first I thought that maybe Shu had tanned on purpose as a result of embracing U.S. culture. I have a couple male Chinese friends who began to let themselves grow tanner after moving to the U.S.

However, I very quickly realized that she didn't want to be tan and had instead been sunburnt while vacationing in Cuba. Her friends and family made jokes about her skin constantly. A particularly awkward moment, took place while we were eating with her family, and her grandma made the wonderful comment, "Your friend's skin is so white. It's better than yours."

While in Jingdezhen, Shu and I had several discussions regarding the other problems in China as well. She told me that students can get into better schools through knowing the right people and paying more money. A classmate of Shu's lamented to us about how a friend of hers went to a far better university simply because the parents of that friend paid over 100,000 yuan

to gain admission. Studies have revealed bribery in education (and in other spheres) to be quite widespread in China, even while Xi Jinping leads a campaign to crack down on itⁱⁱⁱ. When seats in the best schools at every level are taken by the children of wealthier Chinese families through bribery, then children with poorer backgrounds cannot compete.

Hopefully the government's anti-corruption plans will do something to diminish this bribery problem.

Chapter 14

After two days in Poyang I left early in the morning for Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi, to catch a train from there to Chengdu. I had a ticket for a normal train because the bullet train sold out before I'd bought the ticket a week earlier.

My ticket included a bed, and so the roughly twenty-five hour ride ended up as rather enjoyable. I wrote, talked with other passengers, and watched the landscape pass us by through the window.

The train pulled into the Chengdu station in the early afternoon, and there I waited for my friend Jinghua who is another one of my former Yanqing classmates.

"Hannah!" I turned around and saw Jinghua walking toward me. She looked almost the same, with her hair cut in a bob identical to five years earlier. A man I didn't know walked with her. He seemed to be in his early forties.

"This is Shen, a friend of mine. He's driving us back to my apartment."

"Thank you," I said to Shen.

I looked out at the endless skyscrapers as we sped down the highway a few minutes later. We pulled into a cluster of these skyscrapers. Shen stopped the car and Jinghua and I stepped out. "He's not joining?" I asked as we walked into the lobby of one of the buildings. She shook her head.

"He's busy now, but another time." Jinghua probably had a fairly easy time convincing Shen to help her pick me up, as a foreign visitor must be pretty exciting. Most of the people I know in China don't count any foreigners, aside from me, among their good friends.

I mentioned this observation to Jinghua once, and she explained to me that, "There aren't *that* many foreigners living in China yet. Plus, they keep to themselves or hang out with wealthier Chinese people with really good English."

In the apartment two other former classmates, Hui and Mei, sat on the couch. They sprang up upon seeing me. "Hannah, I've missed you!" Mei cried out as she hugged me. Hui, one of the few boys from our female dominated class in Yanqing, lived in the apartment with Jinghua and Jinghua's cousin, Sheng. Hui currently wore a shirt with "Working Girl" emblazoned on the front.

"Very cute, no?" he said as we talked together.

Then, the three of them began a slew of picture-taking so that their Wechat friend group would see them with their American pal. After Sheng arrived back from work Jinghua began to cook dinner. Later in the night the others sat around the TV, and I began to interview Jinghua.

Jinghua's Story

“Ok Jinghua, you ready? Let’s begin with when and where you were born.”

I was born in 1991, in a village within the Guangyuan area.

“You once told me that you were adopted. You were born in Guangyuan and then also grew up there? Or...?”

My biological parents and my adoptive parents both lived in Guangyuan. I know them all. In small villages like that everyone knows each other.

“Can you go into more detail about your adoption, if you’re ok with talking about it?”

Yes, that’s ok. I actually have three dads and three moms.

It began when my biological parents gave me up for adoption. That left me with two sets of parents. Both my biological parents and my adoptive parents eventually divorced. My biological dad and my adoptive mom then each remarried.

“If I may ask, why were you given up for adoption?”

It all started because I’m a girl, the third daughter of my biological parents. They were only allowed two children and so they paid a fine for me. My biological dad wished for his third child to be a boy, and so he decided to give me up.

“How much older than you are your two sisters?”

One is three years older than me and the other one is one year older.

“And why did your adoptive parents adopt you?”

Since they didn’t have their own kids, and also in China adopted children don’t count toward the child limits. This meant they could still have more children if they ever wanted.

“Describe your life as a small child, before beginning elementary school.”

I lived with my parents at first. Usually one of them lived at the house while the other went off to work in a factory. Then they both left, and I moved in with my maternal grandparents. The two of them lived in a big, old house.

My grandparents also lived in a rural village near Guangyuan, but a different one than my parents. It takes about an hour to walk between the two villages. My grandparents had pigs, chickens, and a cow, and they used the cow to work their farmland. They grew rice, corn, and wheat. The pigs were kept because we’d eat pork during the Chinese New Year.

My grandparents were really wonderful to me. I didn’t have chores yet, and I instead played by myself a lot.

“You’d walk to get between the two villages? Did your family have a car?”

Sometimes we’d walk, and we’d also sometimes take the bus. My parents and my grandparents didn’t own a car, though my dad had a motorcycle. We didn’t use his motorcycle to get to my grandparents though.

“Why did you move in with your grandparents instead of staying with your parents?”

My parents worked in factories, and so they were too busy to watch me. They wanted more money to care for me. At the time of my adoption, they didn’t really have any money.

First they worked in Fujian Province and then in Zhejiang Province. In both places they worked in factories that created wood products, I think wood boards. Then, when I started elementary school, my parents came back to their village, and I lived with them again. I was seven at the time I think.

“Did you go to kindergarten or any school before first grade?”

Yes, while living with my grandparents I started attending kindergarten because it's required for all children. We had just one kindergarten in the village and so there were lots of students because all the other village children went there too.

"What kind of home did your parents live in?"

My parents owned a house. At the time my village had no apartments, though now it does. However, that doesn't mean the population is increasing much. It's still quite low because all the young people leave to work in the cities so that only the old people are left.

"What work did your parents do when they came back?"

My parents also have land to grow crops. They had animals too. However, while they were gone working in the factories they only kept one cow and nothing grew on their land. Other people watched their cow and then gave it back once my parents returned. Upon coming back, they bought some pigs.

"Then you stayed in that village for a long time?"

No, only for first and second grade. Then I moved with my parents to Jiaxing, a city in Zhejiang.

"Oh ok. Did you like living with your parents during those two years in the village?"

Since I'd been living in my grandparents' village, when I started elementary school I didn't know anyone in my class at first. I made friends quickly, though, and so I enjoyed school.

I didn't mind moving in with my parents because they are very good to me too. They'd come back since they wanted to take care of me when I started school.

"What did you think of your move to Zhejiang? Why did your parents move again?"

The move didn't bother me because my parents and I were going together. That mattered the most to me.

We moved so that my parents could go back to work in a factory producing wood products again.

"Then did you stay in Zhejiang or eventually move?"

I moved back to my parents' village when I was fourteen.

"How come?"

My parents divorced, and they hadn't been living together for a long time before then. My mom already had a child with a new boyfriend, who she eventually married. This child is my sister, and she was just a few years old at the time. Now she's thirteen.

I'd been able to stay with both of my parents while they were separated because they both still lived in Jiaxing. After the divorce, the court said that I should live with my dad. I had no part in this decision, and it didn't make me happy or sad because I didn't have a preference. After that, my dad and I moved back to the village.

"After your parents separated did they continue to work in the factory?"

My dad worked there until the divorce. My mom and her boyfriend began selling seafood at a big outdoor market. After two years they tried other work, and my mom made clothing for a while. Eventually she began selling seafood again, and today she still does.

"How long have your mom and her current husband been married?"

I don't know. I didn't go to their wedding.

"How was life for you back in the village?"

Even though I moved back, I ended up living with my mom's little sister because my dad worked at a construction site so that he could earn money to help me and to pay my school fees. He's still doing construction work now.

I liked living with my aunt. She had her own kids and we got along pretty well. However, I only lived with her for my third and final year of middle school before going off to high school. Of course, I finished my first two years of middle school in Zhejiang. I'd tested to get into that middle school and it had been an alright school, certainly far from the best.

The village only had one middle school, and I found it a little easier than my middle school in Zhejiang. I had friends there from when I'd lived in the village in elementary school, and so I got used to my new middle school pretty quickly.

"You said you moved for high school? Elaborate please."

Yes, I moved into the dorms on my high school campus.

"Describe why you chose your high school."

I didn't really mind what high school I went to. I took the high school entrance exam and didn't do all that well, so I didn't get into very good schools. My parents helped me pick which to attend, and I decided on a vocational school that's located in Guangyuan.

"What's it like there? Please describe your experience at the school."

I formed a pretty good impression of the school on my first day there. It's a big school, with about three thousand students. I didn't recognize any of my high school classmates before then, even though almost everyone came from Sichuan.

I lived in a dorm room with seven other girls. These dorms were comfortable enough, and I became friends with my roommates. We are still in contact now.

I studied hotel services, and the school put me with roommates in the same home classroom as me. Our classes weren't hard and included Chinese cultural studies, P.E., English, geography, music, and hotel classes. After two years we went to Yanqing.

"Did you have a native speaker as your English class teacher? Were there any foreign students at your school?"

We didn't have any foreign teachers, and our school didn't have foreign students.

"What hours did you go to class each day in Guangyuan? Can you think of any other details?"

I woke up around 8 a.m, and we started class at 8:40 a.m. From noon until 1:30 p.m. we had a break. I would eat lunch and then usually take a nap in my dorm room. We had class again from 1:30 until 6 p.m.. From 6 until 7 p.m. we had a break again for dinner. Finally, from 7 until 9 p.m. we had self-study and then we were off for the night.

I didn't have to study much because the classes weren't hard, and we could cheat on the tests instead of memorizing the lessons. We'd write notes on a really small piece of paper and use that. Me and lots of other students did this.

The rules were pretty relaxed in other ways too, and we could wear our own clothes instead of uniforms.

"Did the school require tuition? Was it public?"

Yes, it's a public school, and we paid a bit more than 4,000 yuan a year for tuition. That isn't too expensive, and my parents paid this. It included the cost of the dorms but not of food.

"While in high school how often did you see your parents?"

Not that often, just a couple times a year. However, I started seeing my biological mom a lot because I stayed at her home every weekend. I didn't have my own bedroom at her place, so I shared her bed. She lived in a rented apartment in another section of Guangyuan not that close to my school. I'd take the bus to get there and the ride is about half an hour.

My two older sisters still lived with her at the time, and they were both in high school. Before then I'd barely seen them, but we grew closer after that.

"How did you use your time at your biological mom's home?"

I would just hang out there and watch TV or sleep. Sometimes I'd go out shopping with friends too.

My biological mom did all of the chores, and sometimes my older sisters helped her. She also did the cooking, and her food is very tasty.

I returned to school every Sunday afternoon because we had self-study in the classroom from 7 until 9 p.m.

"After high school what did your older sisters do?"

After graduating, they both started working. My oldest sister works in a part of the Guangyuan city area during the week, in an office building for China Mobile, and then she stays at my biological mom's apartment on the weekends. My second oldest sister still lives with my mom, and she works in the pharmacy of a hospital. If I worked in Guangyuan I'd probably live with my biological mom too.

"What about your biological dad? I remember you saying that he divorced and remarried. Where did he go? Did he have more children?"

I don't know as much about his life, and I didn't see him very much as a child either. He moved to Yunnan Province and now has two sons. One is seven or six and the other is four I think. I'm not exactly sure about their ages. I haven't seen them or my biological dad for about two years.

"How often do you communicate with each of your respective parents?"

I don't talk to my biological dad that often, but I talk to my biological mom a few times a month. Then, I talk to my adoptive mom about two times a month and my little sister about once a month. I talk to my adoptive dad once a week.

"So, after two years at your school in Guangyuan you went to Yanqing? Explain please."

Yes, everyone in my class went to Liuzhong in Yanqing, Beijing. First, though, we stayed in Beijing hotels for a week.

We took a train from Sichuan and arrived on October 1st. Then we were put into dorm rooms at these hotels and began working. The dorms were fine. Each room had four people, and we ate at a cafeteria for workers. For our work, we served dishes in the restaurant, and we got paid several hundred yuan for our week there. Even though I'd never been in Beijing before, we didn't get any time off during the week, and so I couldn't go out and see the city.

After that, we took a bus to Liuzhong.

"How did life at Liuzhong compare to life at your school in Guangyuan?"

When I first got to Liuzhong, it seemed really pretty to me. Inside, though, I didn't like the dorms. Our dorms in Guangyuan had been better, and there each room of eight girls had its own bathroom, while in Yanqing everyone shared bathrooms. The dorm managers, two old women from Yanqing, didn't like Sichuanese people, and they acted quite mean towards us.

The schedule in Yanqing followed pretty much the same hours as in Guangyuan, except that we didn't have class on either Saturday or Sunday.

"I remember that the dorms had people from all over China, including Uyghurs from Xinjiang. Did you make friends with the Uyghurs?"

I didn't talk with the Uyghur people.

"Why not?"

I have no reason why not. I don't like them. In China, most people don't like Uyghurs because they are really violent. So, most people didn't talk to them while we were at Liuzhong.

"What about students from other provinces outside of Sichuan? And the Kazakhs?" At Liuzhong, the only other foreigners beyond me and the three Europeans had been fifty-seven Kazakh students. Unlike us they stayed in the dorms the full school year rather than move in with host families.

I rarely talked to people outside of the Sichuanese students. This includes the Kazakhs, though I had no problem with them. They were fine, but the teachers told us how the Kazakh students were really naughty.

I can attest to the naughtiness of the Kazakhs, as I roomed with two Kazakh girls my first three weeks in Yanqing before moving in with my Chinese family. Many of the Kazakh students didn't care about school rules. They complained that the rules were too strict, and they often smoked cigarettes on campus, stayed out later than allowed, and wore their own clothes rather than the school uniform. This flashed through my mind as I continued my interview with Jinghua.

"Did you have tuition at Liuzhong?"

Yes, we paid about 5,000 yuan for our one semester there, and this included the dorm costs. We put money onto cards and swiped these in either of the two dining halls for food, which was inexpensively priced.

"How were your classes at Liuzhong?"

They were ok, but we couldn't cheat on the tests anymore. Liuzhong strictly upheld the rules. The classes were more hotel focused, and they included a class for making beds and a class for setting restaurant tables for high-end hotels. I liked these classes, but English class was my favorite. A Chinese teacher, Ms. Li, usually taught it and then Will, the foreign teacher, came on Fridays. They both made class fun and didn't assign too much homework.

So, overall I didn't mind Liuzhong.

"What would you do on the weekends?"

I'd go out in Yanqing to walk around, shop, and eat food. I like Karaoke TV too, but I couldn't go that often because I didn't have that much money. The dorms got boring quickly because we didn't have TV or Wifi in them, and phones back then couldn't go online very easily.

I wanted to explore Beijing, but I couldn't do that often either because we had to be back at the dorms by 8 p.m. every night.

I'd hang out with you and the other foreigners too. The first time, I hung out with Benjamin, Pierre, and Will and they all played basketball while I watched. I can't play basketball!

"So you stayed at Liuzhong for one semester. And then?"

Then Liuzhong set us up at hotels in Beijing for a semester and after that we graduated. We were given a list of hotels to choose from. We weren't given pictures of the hotels, just descriptions. This meant I couldn't really tell which would be the best, but I chose one that

sounded large and more high-end. Two other students from Liuzhong went to work at that hotel too.

“What was your experience working at the hotel?”

It was tiring, and I didn't like my work. I worked for eight hours a day as a room-cleaner, six days a week. I earned 700 yuan a month, and after three months my salary went up to 1,500 yuan. When we selected the hotels we weren't told what the salaries would be. Compared to some of the other hotels, I ended up with a pretty bad salary. Most of the normal workers at the hotel earned more because they were not interns.

I stayed in the hotel dormitory, and we didn't have to pay for that or for our food. I think ten people shared my room. The dorm wasn't bad, and we had air conditioning. There were washing machines and microwaves shared between all the dorm rooms. At my hotel, we didn't pay to use the washing machines. When I first arrived, I thought the food in the dining hall tasted good.

I liked my roommates, and I keep in contact with three of them. Two are the girls from Liuzhong. They are also from Guangyuan and are back there now. The third girl is from Hebei, and she is still in Beijing.

“What would you do with your free time at the hotel?”

Mainly I would sleep.

“When did you graduate?”

We graduated on July 10 2010.

“Then what did you do?”

I continued to work at that hotel for another year. My salary stayed at 1,500 yuan a month. A couple of months before I left, Hui came to work at the same hotel. I quit before him, and then he quit too.

After I left that hotel, I went to another hotel in Beijing and worked in its restaurant. I earned 2,100 yuan a month there, but I lived in my own apartment. I paid 1,000 yuan a month to rent one room. Other people that I hadn't known before then lived in the other rooms, and we almost never talked. I worked at that second hotel for six months before coming back to Guangyuan.

“And then?”

I lived with my biological mom again. After I got back, my family members helped me get a job, and I worked for China Mobile in its IT department. I made 1,800 yuan a month. I stayed in Guangyuan for three months before moving to Chengdu, and here I continued to work for China Mobile. After two months in Chengdu I got promoted to a managerial position, and I moved into an apartment provided by the company where I didn't have to pay for rent, water, and other utilities. As a manager I earned 3,000 yuan a month.

Even though I earned more, I didn't feel happy at that job because of the pressure that it placed on me. I led a five person team, and we worked on getting students to use China Mobile. Every day we'd each go to a school and provide the teachers and students with China Mobile service plans.

I worked at that job for a year, and then I quit and rested for three months. I rented an apartment in Chengdu for 700 yuan a month with money I'd saved.

After, I found new work as a sales representative at Huawei, a huge company that sells communication equipment, and I worked in an office building. My salary for that job was 2,150 yuan a month. I didn't like that work so much, and so I only stayed for six months.

I next found work in the human resources department of a mall, with a base salary of 3,000 yuan. I stayed there for three months and then left for my current work at Mary Kay. So far I like this, but I've only been at Mary Kay for three weeks. At Mary Kay there is no basic salary, so if I don't sell anything I don't get any money. However, I get commission on everything I sell. I haven't had customers yet really, since I just started. Hopefully I'll get some soon.

“What is the best aspect of China now and the worst?”

The best is that China is very peaceful. We don't have any wars. The worst aspect is that the cost of everything is too high while salaries are too low.

— — —

Jinghua's story ties back into the major concepts that permeate the other stories, such as sexism, racism, divorce, education, and wages.

Her account of being given up by her biological parents as a result of her gender also touches upon adoption in China. The majority of international adoptions by American parents in 2013 were of Chinese children, at 2,306^{liii}. That is actually a large decrease from the 2004 peak, when Americans adopted 7,038 children from China. Much of the decrease is a result of stricter adoption laws as China continues to flourish, leaving more of the country's children to be adopted by Chinese citizens. In 2012, 24,635 mainland Chinese children were adopted, and among those 87% were adopted by couples within China^{liv}.

Even as China's middle and upper classes increase and adoptions taking place within the country therefore increase as well, the problem still exists that girls are given up simply for their gender. This issue then pales in comparison to the infanticide that takes place in China, and baby girls there have a mortality rate up to twice that of their male counterparts in the first year of life^{lv}.

Beyond the issues of adoption and sexism, another problem highlighted here is racism. Jinghua makes racist blanket statements regarding the Uyghurs, revealing the unfortunate mindset that many Chinese people exhibit today^{lvi}. It is especially ironic because she says this while also mentioning the unfair treatment she herself received as a result of being Sichuanese.

Certainly, life hasn't been that fair toward Jinghua. Like the other Liuzhong graduates that I interviewed, her education at the school did not help her with jobs. Now, she is once again starting at a new job after a string of others that worked her too hard or didn't pay enough. She exhibits a dissatisfaction at the inequalities present in China's system with her assertion that everything costs too much and people earn too little.

Chapter 15

As a result of Jinghua's new work, she had plenty of free time to accompany me around Chengdu. We visited some of the major sites in the first few days, such as the Panda Research Base and the Wide and Narrow Streets. Upon our return to her apartment each afternoon, she'd turn on the TV and watch Chinese dramas and American movies.

Sheng joined each evening after arriving back from work. On one of my first days there, I'd asked him if I could interview him too. “Yeah, that's no problem,” he said. Each evening, as American superheroes and Chinese mythical figures saved the world on the screen across from us, I asked Sheng questions about his life.

Sheng's Story

"Hi Sheng, you ready? Ok, when and where were you born?"

I was born in July 1989, in a town outside of Guangyuan.

"You and Jinghua are cousins, correct?"

Yes. Jinghua's paternal grandpa and my maternal grandma were siblings.

We had discussed Jinghua's and Sheng's familial connections outside of my interviews, and I knew that Sheng meant Jinghua's grandfather through her adoptive father.

"You and Jinghua grew up in the same area?"

We didn't exactly, but my town is pretty close to her village. It has about forty thousand people.

"Do you have siblings?"

I have one older sister. My parents were permitted two children because we were born in the 1980s. The government limited families much more strictly in the 1990s.

"Did you live with your parents as a child?"

Yes, I lived with them in the Guangyuan town until I turned fifteen.

"What does your parents' home look like? Is it standalone?"

Yeah, they have a standalone house. It's one story tall and very old. Inside are four bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and one bathroom.

Houses in towns and villages often share walls with each other, forming long rows. Our house, though, is only connected to my paternal grandparents' house. Theirs is the same size as ours.

"Can you describe the layout of your town and of your family's property?"

Like most other people in the town, my parents own land outside of the town and they would make their living through farming. My grandparents were also farmers.

All the houses are clustered together with the land outside. This is the normal layout for towns and villages, at least the ones that I know of. Jinghua's village is like this too. For my family, it takes about a half hour to walk out to our farmland from our house.

"Did your parents keep animals?"

Yes, my parents had three pigs. When New Years came, they would kill a pig to eat and lots of family and friends would come to the house to eat together.

We had cats and dogs too, but no other animals.

"What did your family eat?"

As for food, my family ate rice a lot. That's common for pretty much all Chinese people. We also often ate noodles and then a lot of meat too, generally pork, chicken, or fish.

"What's an activity that you especially enjoyed while living in the town?"

There are lots of lakes near it and I loved going fishing with other children, though I didn't actually go all that often. When we did make it out to the lakes we almost always successfully caught some fish, and then we ate them. The only downside is the mosquitoes. They are very common in Sichuan and especially at the lakes.

"And you went to school in the town?"

Yes, all the way through middle school. I didn't go to high school.

"Describe your school experience, with what you did, daily schedules, and other details."

I went to kindergarten because it's required in China. My kindergarten was public and my parents had to pay tuition, just a really low amount. We mainly sang and played around there, and we didn't have much homework at all.

Then at age six I started elementary school. I didn't study that well, but better than average. My parents had to pay tuition for me then too, though still not too much, I think maybe 400 yuan a year.

For elementary, I attended school five days a week. If I remember correctly, classes began at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. That included a two hour break in the middle of the day.

I had homework, but not that much then either. My parents helped me when they could. Their math and Chinese characters aren't that great.

After elementary I went to the town middle school. My town has six elementary schools, one middle school, and no high school. There were 3,000 students at the middle school when I was there. I then started at 8 a.m. and got off at 6 p.m., again with a two hour break around noon.

Basically, all children went to middle school and most went to our local one. After, about two-thirds enrolled in high schools located in the city. Both my sister and I started working instead.

"How long did your parents attend school?"

Probably five or six years, and then at around ten years old they started working. My parents can both read but aren't that good at it.

"Why didn't you go to high school?"

My dad has a lot of health problems, and so I had too much family pressure placed on me. My parents would've liked me to go to more school, but I knew what a burden it would be on them. My sister felt this pressure too, and so she also didn't go to high school. We didn't want our parents to pay tuition for us because they were already financially strained.

I didn't take the test for high school because I knew that I wouldn't go. If my dad hadn't gotten sick my sister and I probably could've attended university

My dad became sick when I was in middle school, and he still has the same problems today. He went to the doctors and got x-rays and everything. He even went to the big hospitals in Chengdu. This cost a lot of money and added to the pressure on our family. But, no doctor could figure out how to fix his health problems.

"Are you ok with telling me a little about your dad's health problems?"

Yeah, I don't mind. It's a problem with his stomach. He can't eat many things now because acidic or spicy food makes him sick, and also food that's too cold or too hard. He is at home sick most of the time.

"Describe your first job. How old were you when you began?"

At fifteen, I got an internship at a car repair shop because my parents and I thought I should study a trade. My sister's husband is friends with the boss there and recommended me to him. I didn't get paid for this, though my boss did give me and the other two workers free food. I stayed there for about a year, and I worked seven days a week, so in a month I had no breaks. However, the number of hours varied each day. Sometimes I got off at 6 p.m. and other times I'd work until 1 or 2 a.m. It all depended on whether people needed their cars fixed. I probably worked ten hours a day on average.

I liked my boss, and he taught me a lot. He and the other two workers would go out after work sometimes, but I didn't join them because I had no salary to spend and was much younger.

After that year the boss closed the shop. Otherwise, I would've stayed as an intern for one more year. Since car work is so tiring I decided not to find another car shop to work at, and instead I went to Shanghai.

"Did that year at the car shop help you with finding a job in Shanghai?"

It didn't. However, I don't regret that year because I didn't know what I wanted to do before then. Now I know that working at a car shop is not my favorite type of work. It's too tiring.

"Why did you pick Shanghai and not another city? And why did you go to a city in the first place?"

My paternal aunt lives in Shanghai and works at a factory. My aunt and I are on really good terms because she and her family come back to Guangyuan every Chinese New Year. I knew that I didn't like working with cars, and so my aunt helped me to get a job at the factory she works at. Also, back then the salaries in Shanghai were much better than in Sichuan. Now, salaries are higher here and the pay gap isn't so big with the east coast cities.

"Did most of your friends go to cities to work too?"

No, most of my friends went to high school or university.

"Did you know anyone else in Shanghai besides your aunt when you first arrived?"

I just knew her, her husband, and their son. That's it.

"Describe your experience upon arriving in Shanghai. Where did you live? How was your first job? The more details the better."

I first stayed with my aunt and her husband. My aunt works at a factory that makes postcards, and I worked there. I moved into the factory dormitory after starting.

I worked eight hours a day, from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. with an hour lunch break, six days a week. My salary was pretty low, just 1,000 to 1,500 yuan a month. My aunt earned 2,700 yuan because she'd worked there for many years. I operated a machine that cut a large piece of paper into smaller pieces, and I didn't mind this work.

The dorms were fairly nice, and I made a lot of friends. I'm still in contact with many of them now. Three other people lived in my room, with two around the same age as me. I felt quite lucky because the factory randomly put us together, and most of the workers were around my parents' age. Even my third roommate was only in his mid-twenties.

"Describe the dorms a bit more please."

We didn't have air conditioning, a heater, or Internet in the dorms, though the company did use air conditioning in the actual factory. Shanghai gets really hot in the summers and really cold in the winters, so the dorms were not the most comfortable. However, we had a TV in our dorm room with lots of channels, and we would watch TV every day.

"Where did you eat? Did you like the food?"

I almost always ate in the dining hall because we didn't pay for that. The food in Shanghai differs a great deal from Sichuanese food, so when I first moved in I found the food to be pretty bad. Shanghainese food is mostly very sweet, while in Sichuan we like to eat spicy food. Over time, though, I got more used to the food there.

"What would you do when you finished work each day, and also with your one day off every week?"

My friends and I would go out together. We'd shop and sometimes go to Karaoke TV, which we call KTV. I'd also do my laundry.

"Did you save any of the money that you earned? If so, what did you do with it?"

Yes, I saved about 500 yuan a month, and I gave this all to my parents. My sister gave money to my parents too. Since the dorm and the dining hall were both free, I used the rest of my salary to go out and buy clothes.

“Did your two roommates that were the same age as you come to the factory the same time that you did?”

No, they’d already been working there for a while. Back then, people could still work in factories at a very young age. I think they were around fourteen when they started. Nowadays, you can’t work in the factories before eighteen.

“How long did you stay at the factory?”

A year and a half. Then I left to work at another factory.

“Why did you leave? What are the details of your next job?”

The salary was too low, and my friend helped me to get a job at another Shanghai factory, one that makes clothing. There I earned a better salary, between 2,000 and 3,000 yuan a month.

Still this wasn’t that much money because I rented my own apartment and the cost of living in Shanghai is very high. The work itself mirrored my work at the other factory, and this time I used a machine to cut a huge piece of fabric into smaller pieces. However, my shift lasted for twelve hours, often from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m., and this left me far more tired. I still had one day off a week.

I rented a room for 600 yuan a month, and I saved a 1,000 yuan a month, which I always sent to my parents. I spent the rest of my salary on going out and buying food for myself. I went to KTV about four times a month. I could also eat for free in the factory dining hall.

I left this factory after two years to work in a factory in Guangzhou, Guangdong. This third factory constructed subway parts.

“And what are some details of that job? Like the salary and how long you stayed...”

I made 3,000 to 4,000 yuan a month at the Guangzhou job, a decent salary, especially because I stayed in a dormitory and ate in the dining hall for free. As a result, I saved 1,500 yuan a month to send to my parents and then I still had 1,500 yuan to use for myself. I also saved 6,000 yuan in a personal bank account during my time there.

I had two days off a week at this factory, and five days a week I worked from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m., with a two hour break in between. This work really tired me out, though, and I also started dating a girl living in Shanghai. So, I only stayed a year.

“And then?”

Then, I got a job in a Shanghai factory again, this time cutting the glass used in prescription glasses. I made 3,000 to 4,000 yuan a month. I worked at this factory for two years and lived in an apartment with my girlfriend.

“How did you know her?”

She’s from the same Guangyuan town as me, so I knew her from years earlier and we were QQ friends. We hadn’t talked for many years, but then we began to message each other while I lived in Guangzhou. We were both twenty-two at the time. We began dating and were in different cities for three months before I moved back.

“How long did you live together? Describe that time of your life.”

We lived together for two years. She worked in a factory that made computers, one very close to mine, and she earned about the same amount as me. Our time off didn’t usually match up because she always worked from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m. I generally worked from 8 a.m. until 8

p.m., but sometimes I worked at night. We still had time to hang out because I got two days off a week while she got one off.

With our time off together we'd walk around outside, go to amusement parks, and watch movies, sometimes in theaters and sometimes on our own TV. I'd cook for us because I can cook well and she didn't know how.

"Did you save money during this time?"

I didn't. I paid our rent, which was 1,300 yuan a month. We had our own apartment with a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Then I spent the rest on going out and buying things.

"What did your parents think of this?"

They didn't mind because they knew about my girlfriend. In China, people traditionally marry young, and so my parents were happy about us.

"But you didn't marry?"

No. We lived together for two years, and then she broke up with me because she loved another person. Afterward, I returned to Chengdu.

"Then what happened?"

Then, I moved in with my older cousin, the son of my dad's older brother. I lived at his house for a month, and he helped me to find a job. Now it's been more than a year, and since coming back I've worked at a large electronics store. I work six days a week from 9:30 to 6, with a half hour break for lunch. I earn 3,000 to 4,000 yuan a month, with a base salary of 1,500 yuan and the rest from commission. After getting my job, I moved into a different unit in this apartment complex. I had a second girlfriend here in Chengdu after I came back, but we were only together for four months.

Six months ago I moved in with Jinghua and Hui. Through talking to Jinghua I realized we could live in one place.

"How much is your rent? Do you save money now?"

Our rent is 600 yuan each, and our shared utilities are 450 yuan. I don't save that much now, and I use most of my money to buy food, tea, and other things. If I start saving more again, then I'll send that money to my parents.

"What do you do with your free time?"

Well, I ride an electric scooter to work and back every day, and that takes forty minutes each way. I like to ride though.

After work I come home. I watch TV, and sometimes I go out. Truthfully, I spend most days after work just resting and watching TV, and I go out with friends probably two times a month. My workmates are my friends too now so sometimes when I go out it's with them. We'll go to KTV, to eat food, or to hang out at someone's house. I generally eat at home, and either I cook or Jinghua cooks. Hui can't cook that well. If I work really late, though, then I will eat out.

"How often do you see your parents?"

They live separately for work right now, and so I see my mom more often than my dad. My mom works in Chengdu, and my dad is still back in our Guangyuan town because of his health problems. He farms there and relatives help him when he's feeling sick. I see him at least once a year because I always go home during the Chinese New Year. In China, almost everyone goes home then.

I see my mom every two or three months. She lives a little far from here, about an hour away by bus. I talk to her twice a week on the phone though. My parents don't use the Internet and so they don't know how to use Wechat.

"How often does your mom see your dad?"

Only once or twice a year. She goes back to Guangyuan very little because she's too busy. My mom would like to retire, however she can't because they don't have enough saved.

"What do you consider the biggest problems in modern China?"

That's hard to say, because everything is improving. Renting and buying houses is a problem I suppose because both are so expensive. Also, the average salary now is probably around 3,000 to 4,000 yuan a month, and I think a fairer average salary would be around 7,000 to 8,000 yuan a month. However, finding work isn't hard and the education system here is fairly good.

— — —

Sheng's life has been difficult as well. Although the cost of attending a local elementary school and middle school is inexpensive, with no tuition other than certain extra fees, high school tuition can be a financial barrier for very poor families. Therefore, Sheng began working in east coast factories instead of continuing his education. In doing so, he joined a great migration of young rural people leaving for China's cities to find work. In fact, estimations predict that migrant workers will compose 40% of the urban labor force by 2025^{vii}.

The child labor mentioned in Sheng's story reveals the lack of regulation that has plagued work in China, but it's reassuring that he perceives child labor laws as growing stricter. Still, exploitation of workers continue. A 2014 BBC report revealed the problems at one factory, with an undercover journalist claiming to have been forced to work eighteen days in a row despite asking for time off^{viii}.

Sheng complains very little about his factory life, though hints of labor practices that the West would deem unfair are revealed occasionally. For example, at one factory he works twelve hour long shifts without breaks.

A positive side to the factory work can be argued for as well. For one, Sheng was still able to earn more than he could helping his parents with their land. Secondly, the growth of factory work has often increased the place of women in the workforce, as his ex-girlfriend in Shanghai exemplifies. Women can earn a wage and send back money to their parents, increasing the women's value in their families' eyes. Of course, factory work is far from an end-all for gender equality and as a way for rural people to earn better wages. Hopefully, factory conditions continue to improve and wages to increase so that factories provide better opportunities for the workers there.

Another point that is touched upon by Sheng is marriage, and Sheng again reveals the pressure to marry young that Xia talked about with me.

Outside of this interview, Sheng and I also discussed the sexualization of women by Chinese media, and he mentioned the white skin craze as well. He agreed that it's a problem, and that it's perpetuated by advertisements. He then said, with a bashful grin on his face, "However I still prefer white skin."

This comment of his reminded me of another time in Sichuan, when I was out with my friends and needed to discard some trash. I carefully separated the items to throw them away in

the correct trash and recycling receptacles installed by the road. The others laughed at me and said, “No one in China does that.”

Their response connects to the assertion by some of my interviewees that the problems in China, such as the continuing pollution, can only be solved if the country’s individuals each make an effort to help. Hopefully, both China’s government and its people will work hard at strengthening advancements such as gender equality and environmental protection. Certainly, the country’s youth will play an integral part in this process through utilizing their greater understanding and acceptance of China’s modernization even as they themselves push it forward.

— — —

I eventually left Chengdu to visit a few more classmates in Guangyuan. Then I took the train back to Beijing and flew home a few days later. Once back I began to work on organizing these interviews.

They reveal the incredible similarities linking together so many of China’s youth, from their school system that fails many to the gender inequality that affects work opportunities, family dynamics, and many other aspects of life in China.

Even as China’s youth continue to embrace much of their cultural diversity and to follow age-old traditions, they possess much more forward thinking and global perspectives than their parents’ generation. Many of the interviewees wish for success but also experience discontent with the constant race for money and the difficulty in finding an occupation that is actually meaningful to them. At the same time, they are worried about issues such as environmental pollution and income inequality. Hopefully these new adults can utilize their understanding of China and the world to solve these problems, and as Qian would say to unite together when the situation calls for it.

Footnotes

-
- ⁱ Sarah.Scott. "Confucius Institute." *Community College of Denver*. 7 June 2014. Web. <https://www.ccd.edu/org/confucius-institute>
- ⁱⁱ "Yanqing." *Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Bid Committee*. Web. <http://www.beijing-2022.cn/en/yanqing.htm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ding, Guodong, and Yixiao Bao. "Editorial Perspective: Assessing Developmental Risk in Cultural Context: The Case of 'left Behind' Children in Rural China." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 55.4 (2014): 411–412.
- ^{iv} Afridi, Farzana, Sherry Xin Li, and Yufei Ren. "Social Identity and Inequality: The Impact of China's Hukou System." *Journal of Public Economics* 123 (2015): 17–29.
- ^v Cohen, David. "The Curious Case of Zhan Haite." *The Diplomat*. 19 Dec 2012. Web. <http://thediplomat.com/2012/12/the-curious-case-of-zhan-haite/>
- ^{vi} Hui, Eddie Chi Man, Ka Hung Yu, and Yinchuan Ye. "Housing Preferences of Temporary Migrants in Urban China in the Wake of Gradual Hukou Reform: A Case Study of Shenzhen." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.4 (2014): 1384-1398.
- ^{vii} Tam, Tony, and Jin Jiang. "Divergent Urban-Rural Trends in College Attendance State Policy Bias and Structural Exclusion in China." *Sociology of Education* 88.2 (2015): 160–180.
- ^{viii} Zhao, Yiou. "Analysis of Chinese Luxury Market Status Quo." *Proceedings of 2014 1st International Conference on Industrial Economics and Industrial Security* 8. Ed. Menggang Li et al. Springer Berlin Heidelberg, (2015): 603–606.
- ^{ix} "Uighur | People." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2015. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/612772/Uighur>
- ^x Shi, Xiaoguang. "The Path Toward Mass Higher Education in China." *Mass Higher Education Development in East Asia*. Ed. Jung Cheol Shin, Gerard A. Postiglione, and Futao Huang. Springer International Publishing 2, (2015): 63–88.
- ^{xi} Bai, Limin. "Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China's Move to Mass Higher Education." *The China Quarterly* 185 (2006): 128–144.
- ^{xii} *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.

-
- ^{xiii} Wong, Edward. "A Chinese Virtue Is Now the Law." *The New York Times* 2 July 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/03/world/asia/filial-piety-once-a-virtue-in-china-is-now-the-law.html>
- ^{xiv} "Restaurant Counts." *Yum! Brand*. 2015. Web. <http://www.yum.com/investors/restcounts.asp>
- ^{xv} McDonald, Joe. "KFC Struggles with China Growth." *The Courier Journal*. 31 July 2014. Web. <http://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/companies/2014/07/31/kfc-struggles-china-growth/13429457/>
- ^{xvi} Roberts, Dexter. "China Wants Fewer College Grads, More Skilled Workers. Sound Familiar?" *BloombergView*. 24 June 2014. Web. <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-06-24/china-wants-more-vocational-students-fewer-universities>
- ^{xvii} "Let a Million Flowers Bloom." *The Economist* 10 Mar. 2011. Web. <http://www.economist.com/node/18330120>
- ^{xviii} Hesketh, Therese, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing. "The Effect of China's One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years." *New England Journal of Medicine* 353.11 (2005): 1171–1176.
- ^{xix} Wong, Edward. "Air Pollution Linked to 1.2 Million Deaths in China." *The New York Times* 1 Apr. 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/world/asia/air-pollution-linked-to-1-2-million-deaths-in-china.html>
- ^{xx} Marcos Chamon, Eswar Prasad. *Why Are Saving Rates of Urban Households in China Rising?*. International Monetary Fund, 2008.
- ^{xxi} Wei, Shang-Jin, and Xiaobo Zhang. "The Competitive Saving Motive: Evidence from Rising Sex Ratios and Savings Rates in China." *Journal of Political Economy* 119.3 (2011): 511–564.
- ^{xxii} Zumbrun, Josh. "Younger Generation Faces a Savings Deficit." *The Wall Street Journal*. Web. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/savings-turn-negative-for-younger-generation-1415572405>
- ^{xxiii} Sheehan, Matt. "39 Hours Inside The Biggest Human Migration On Earth." *The Huffington Post*. 19 Feb 2015. Web. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/19/chinese-new-years-train-largest-human-migration-beijing-urumqi-xinjiang_n_6713648.html
- ^{xxiv} The Associated Press. "Homosexuality Not an Illness, Chinese Say." *The New York Times* 8 Mar. 2001. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/08/health/08PSYC.html>

-
- ^{xxv} Branigan, Tania. "Beijing's 'happy couples' launch campaign for same-sex marriages." *The Guardian*. 24 Feb. 2009. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/25/gay-rights-china-beijing>
- ^{xxvi} *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.
- ^{xxvii} Cameron, L. et al. "Little Emperors: Behavioral Impacts of China's One-Child Policy." *Science* 339.6122 (2013): 953–957.
- ^{xxviii} "Let's Take a Look at China's \$13.5 Billion Online Gaming Industry." *Tech in Asia*. 21 Jan 2014. Web. <https://www.techinasia.com/china-online-gaming-industry-2013-2014-infographic/>
- ^{xxix} *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.
- ^{xxx} "PISA 2012 Results." *OECD*. 2012. Web. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results.htm>
- ^{xxxi} "PISA 2009 Key Findings." *OECD*. 2009. Web. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa2009keyfindings.htm>
- ^{xxxii} Lu, Yao, and Hao Zhou. "Academic Achievement and Loneliness of Migrant Children in China: School Segregation and Segmented Assimilation." *Comparative Education Review* 57.1 (2013): 85–116.
- ^{xxxiii} Zhao Xinying, Luo Wangshu. "Changes to Gaokao Will See All Students Equal." *Chinadaily.com.cn*. 4 Sept. 2014. Web. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-09/04/content_18547320.htm
- ^{xxxiv} "Suzhou | China." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/570403/Suzhou>
- ^{xxxv} "Chinese Opera | Music." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/112672/Chinese-opera>
- ^{xxxvi} Ling, Minhua. "'Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!': Education, Social Reproduction and Migrant Youth in Urban China." *The China Journal* 73 (2015): 108–131.
- ^{xxxvii} "Sino-Japanese War | 1937-1945." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546188/Sino-Japanese-War>

-
- xxxviii "Nanjing Massacre | Chinese History." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/402618/Nanjing-Massacre>
- xxxix *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.
- xl Street, 1615 L. et al. "The Chinese Celebrate Their Roaring Economy, As They Struggle With Its Costs." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*. Web. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/07/22/the-chinese-celebrate-their-roaring-economy-as-they-struggle-with-its-costs/>
- xli Wang, Qingbin, and Qin Zhou. "China's Divorce and Remarriage Rates: Trends and Regional Disparities." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 51.4 (2010): 257–267.
- xlii Johnson, Ian, and Jonathan Mirsky. "Chinese Atheists? What the Pew Survey Gets Wrong." *NYRblog*. 15 Mar. 2014.
- xliii Johnson, Ian, and Jonathan Mirsky. "Chinese Atheists? What the Pew Survey Gets Wrong." *NYRblog*. 15 Mar. 2014.
- xliv "Regional Distribution of Christians." *PewResearchCenter*. 19 Dec. 2011. Web. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>
- xliv Sim, Shuan. "Chinese Mothers Not Keen On Births During Year Of The Sheep Because of Zodiac Superstitions." *International Business Times*. 19 Feb 2015. Web. <http://www.ibtimes.com/chinese-mothers-not-keen-births-during-year-sheep-because-zodiac-superstitions-1821524>
- xlvi Hays, Jeffrey. "Mongols (Mongolians) in China. *Facts and Details*. Jan 2014. Web. <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub88/item1687.html>
- xlvi Kaiman, Jonathan. "Chinese Authorities Offer Cash to Promote Interethnic Marriages." *The Guardian*. Mar. 2015. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/02/chinese-authorities-cash-inter-ethnic-marriages-uighur-minority>
- xlviiii Shepard, Wade. "Mongolian Culture Struggles To Survive In Changing Inner Mongolia." *Global Chronicle*. 11 July 2013. Web. <http://theglobalchronicle.com/mongolian-culture-struggles-to-survive-in-changing-inner-mongolia/>
- xlviix *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.
- l "A Brief Introduction of Jingdezhen." *China.Jingdezhen*. 2011. Web.

http://eng.idz.gov.cn/Brief/introduction/201112/t20111201_122542.htm

^{li} “China Average Yearly Wages | 1952-2015 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast.” *Trading Economics*. Web. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/wages>

^{lii} Levin, Dan. “In China Schools, a Culture of Bribery Spreads.” *The New York Times*. 21 Nov. 2012. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/world/asia/in-china-schools-a-culture-of-bribery-spreads.html>

^{liii} “Intercountry Adoption.” *Bureau of Consular Affairs: U.S. Department of State*. Web. <http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/about-us/statistics.html>

^{liv} “Infant Abandonment Statistics.” *All Girls Allowed*. 2013. Web. http://www.allgirlsallowed.org/infant-abandonment-statistics#_edn13

^{lv} “Infant Abandonment Statistics.” *All Girls Allowed*. 2013. Web. http://www.allgirlsallowed.org/infant-abandonment-statistics#_edn13

^{lvi} Tapp, Nicholas. “The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang.” *Central Asian Survey* 34.1 (2015): 140–142.

^{lvii} Hui, Eddie Chi Man, Ka Hung Yu, and Yinchuan Ye. “Housing Preferences of Temporary Migrants in Urban China in the Wake of Gradual Hukou Reform: A Case Study of Shenzhen.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.4 (2014): 1384-1398.

^{lviii} Richard Bilton. “Apple ‘Failing to Protect Chinese Factory Workers.’” *BBC* 18 Dec. 2014. Web. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30532463>

Complete Works Cited

Note: All URLs last accessed successfully by the author on March 31 2015.

Afridi, Farzana, Sherry Xin Li, and Yufei Ren. "Social Identity and Inequality: The Impact of China's Hukou System." *Journal of Public Economics* 123 (2015): 17–29.

"A Brief Introduction of Jingdezhen." *China.Jingdezhen*. 2011. Web.
http://eng.jdz.gov.cn/Brief/introduction/201112/t20111201_122542.htm

Bai, Limin. "Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China's Move to Mass Higher Education." *The China Quarterly* 185 (2006): 128–144.

Branigan, Tania. "For Richer, for Poorer: How China's Laws Put Women Second." *The Guardian*. 24 Feb. 2015. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/24/chinese-women-equality-laws-land-housing>

Branigan, Tania. "Beijing's 'happy couples' launch campaign for same-sex marriages." *The Guardian*. 24 Feb. 2009. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/25/gay-rights-china-beijing>

Cameron, L. et al. "Little Emperors: Behavioral Impacts of China's One-Child Policy." *Science* 339.6122 (2013): 953–957.

Chen, Yuanyuan, and Shuaizhang Feng. "Access to Public Schools and the Education of Migrant Children in China." *China Economic Review* 26 (2013): 75–88.

Cheng, Yinghong. "From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism." *The China Quarterly* 207 (2011): 561–579.

"China Average Yearly Wages | 1952-2015 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast." *Trading Economics*. Web. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/wages>

"Chinese Opera | Music." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Web.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/112672/Chinese-opera>

China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China. Ed. Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn. Australia: Australian Center on China in the World & The Australian National University, 2013.

Cohen, David. "The Curious Case of Zhan Haite." *The Diplomat*. 19 Dec 2012. Web.
<http://thediplomat.com/2012/12/the-curious-case-of-zhan-haite/>

“Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China .” *China Education and Research Network*. 2005. Web. <http://www.edu.cn/20050114/3126820.shtml>

Côté, Isabelle. “The Enemies within: Targeting Han Chinese and Hui Minorities in Xinjiang.” *Asian Ethnicity* 16.2 (2015): 136–151.

Ding, Guodong, and Yixiao Bao. “Editorial Perspective: Assessing Developmental Risk in Cultural Context: The Case of ‘Left Behind’ Children in Rural China.” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 55.4 (2014): 411–412.

Hays, Jeffrey. “Mongols (Mongolians) in China. *Facts and Details*. Jan 2014. Web. <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub88/item1687.html>

Hesketh, Therese, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing. “The Effect of China’s One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 353.11 (2005): 1171–1176.

Hu, Biliang, and Chunlai Chen. “New Urbanisation under Globalisation and the Social Implications in China.” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 2.1 (2015): 34–43.

Huang, Yasheng. “How Did China Take Off?” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26.4 (2012): 147–170.

Hui, Eddie Chi Man, Ka Hung Yu, and Yinchuan Ye. “Housing Preferences of Temporary Migrants in Urban China in the Wake of Gradual Hukou Reform: A Case Study of Shenzhen.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.4 (2014): 1384-1398.

“Infant Abandonment Statistics.” *All Girls Allowed*. 2013. Web. http://www.allgirlsallowed.org/infant-abandonment-statistics#_edn13

“Intercountry Adoption.” *Bureau of Consular Affairs: U.S. Department of State*. Web. <http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/about-us/statistics.html>

Johnson, Ian, and Jonathan Mirsky. “Chinese Atheists? What the Pew Survey Gets Wrong.” *NYRblog*. 15 Mar. 2014. Web. <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/mar/24/chinese-atheists-pew-gets-wrong/>

Jun, Kong. “Main Factors Determining Job Chance and Initial Wage: An Empirical Analysis in China.” *International Labour Review* (2015). Web. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1564-913X.2015.00030.x>

Kaiman, Jonathan. “Chinese Authorities Offer Cash to Promote Interethnic Marriages.” *The Guardian*. Mar. 2015. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/02/chinese-authorities-cash-inter-ethnic-marriages-uighur-minority>

Kaltman, Blaine. *Under the Heel of the Dragon: Islam, Racism, Crime, and the Uighur in China*. Ohio University Press, 2014.

"Learning Chinese, Experiencing Culture." *Confucius Institute Online*. 2014. Web. <http://www.chinesecio.com/>

"Let a Million Flowers Bloom." *The Economist* 10 Mar. 2011. Web. <http://www.economist.com/node/18330120>

"Let's Take a Look at China's \$13.5 Billion Online Gaming Industry." *Tech in Asia*. 21 Jan 2014. Web. <https://www.techinasia.com/china-online-gaming-industry-2013-2014-infographic/>

Levin, Dan. "In China Schools, a Culture of Bribery Spreads." *The New York Times*. 21 Nov. 2012. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/world/asia/in-china-schools-a-culture-of-bribery-spreads.html>

Ling, Minhua. "Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!': Education, Social Reproduction and Migrant Youth in Urban China." *The China Journal* 73 (2015): 108–131.

Liu, Jenny X., and Kyung-Hee Choi. "Emerging Gay Identities in China: The Prevalence and Predictors of Social Discrimination Against Men Who Have Sex with Men." *Stigma, Discrimination and Living with HIV/AIDS*. Ed. Pranee Liamputtong. Springer Netherlands, 2013. 271–287.

Liu, Zhengkui, Xinying Li, and Xiaojia Ge. "Left Too Early: The Effects of Age at Separation From Parents on Chinese Rural Children's Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression." *American Journal of Public Health* 99.11 (2009): 2049–2054.

Lu, Yao, and Hao Zhou. "Academic Achievement and Loneliness of Migrant Children in China: School Segregation and Segmented Assimilation." *Comparative Education Review* 57.1 (2013): 85–116.

Marcos Chamon, Eswar Prasad. "Why Are Saving Rates of Urban Households in China Rising?" *American Economics Journal: Macroeconomics* 2.1 (2010): 93-130.

McDonald, Joe. "KFC Struggles with China Growth." *The Courier Journal*. 31 July 2014. Web. <http://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/companies/2014/07/31/kfc-struggles-china-growth/13429457/>

Mochizuki, Takashi. "Sony to Sell PS4 in China Next Week." *Wall Street Journal* 10 Mar. 2015. Web. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sony-to-sell-ps4-in-china-next-week-1425983763>

“Nanjing Massacre | Chinese History.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/402618/Nanjing-Massacre>

“PISA 2009 Key Findings.” *OECD*. 2009. Web. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa2009keyfindings.htm>

“PISA 2012 Results.” *OECD*. 2012. Web. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results.htm>

Pope, Arden C. et al. “Lung Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease Mortality Associated with Ambient Air Pollution and Cigarette Smoke: Shape of the Exposure-Response Relationships.” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 119.11 (2011): 1616–1621.

“Preparing for China’s Urban Billion | McKinsey & Company.” Web. 31 Mar. 2015. http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/urbanization/preparing_for_urban_billion_in_china

“Regional Distribution of Christians.” *PewResearchCenter*. 19 Dec. 2011. Web. <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>

“Restaurant Counts.” *Yum! Brand*. 2015. Web. <http://www.yum.com/investors/restcounts.asp>

Richard Bilton. “Apple ‘Failing to Protect Chinese Factory Workers.’” *BBC* 18 Dec. 2014. Web. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30532463>

Roberts, Dexter. “China Wants Fewer College Grads, More Skilled Workers. Sound Familiar?” *BloombergView*. 24 June 2014. Web. <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-06-24/china-wants-more-vocational-students-fewer-universities>

Sarah Scott. “Confucius Institute.” *Community College of Denver*. 7 June 2014. Web. <https://www.ccd.edu/org/confucius-institute>

Sheehan, Matt. “39 Hours Inside The Biggest Human Migration On Earth.” *The Huffington Post*. 19 Feb 2015. Web. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/19/chinese-new-years-train-largest-human-migration-beijing-urumqi-xinjiang_n_6713648.html

Shepard, Wade. “Mongolian Culture Struggles To Survive In Changing Inner Mongolia.” *Global Chronicle*. 11 July 2013. Web. <http://theglobalchronicle.com/mongolian-culture-struggles-to-survive-in-changing-inner-mongolia/>

Shi, Xiaoguang. "The Path Toward Mass Higher Education in China." *Mass Higher Education Development in East Asia*. Ed. Jung Cheol Shin, Gerard A. Postiglione, and Futao Huang. Springer International Publishing 2, (2015): 63–88.

Sim, Shuan. "Chinese Mothers Not Keen On Births During Year Of The Sheep Because of Zodiac Superstitions." *International Business Times*. 19 Feb 2015. Web. <http://www.ibtimes.com/chinese-mothers-not-keen-births-during-year-sheep-because-zodiac-superstitions-1821524>

"Sino-Japanese War | 1937-1945." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546188/Sino-Japanese-War>

Street, 1615 L. et al. "The Chinese Celebrate Their Roaring Economy, As They Struggle With Its Costs." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*. Web. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/07/22/the-chinese-celebrate-their-roaring-economy-as-they-struggle-with-its-costs/>

"Suzhou | China." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/570403/Suzhou>

Tam, Tony, and Jin Jiang. "Divergent Urban-Rural Trends in College Attendance State Policy Bias and Structural Exclusion in China." *Sociology of Education* 88.2 (2015): 160–180.

Tapp, Nicholas. "The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang." *Central Asian Survey* 34.1 (2015): 140–142.

The Associated Press. "Homosexuality Not an Illness, Chinese Say." *The New York Times* 8 Mar. 2001. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/08/health/08PSYC.html>

"The Flight from Marriage." *The Economist* 20 Aug. 2011. Web. <http://www.economist.com/node/21526329>

"Uighur | People." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2015. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/612772/Uighur>

Wang, Haiping, and Douglas A. Abbott. "Waiting for Mr. Right: The Meaning of Being a Single Educated Chinese Female Over 30 in Beijing and Guangzhou." *Women's Studies International Forum* 40 (2013): 222–229.

Wang, Qingbin, and Qin Zhou. "China's Divorce and Remarriage Rates: Trends and Regional Disparities." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 51.4 (2010): 257–267.

Wang Xiaoyi. "Representation, Equity, and the Environment." *World Resource Institute*. Aug. 2007. Web. http://pdf.wri.org/wp32_ftoni.pdf

Wei, Shang-Jin, and Xiaobo Zhang. "The Competitive Saving Motive: Evidence from Rising Sex Ratios and Savings Rates in China." *Journal of Political Economy* 119.3 (2011): 511–564.

Wong, Edward. "A Chinese Virtue Is Now the Law." *The New York Times* 2 July 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/03/world/asia/filial-piety-once-a-virtue-in-china-is-now-the-law.html>

Wong, Edward. "Air Pollution Linked to 1.2 Million Deaths in China." *The New York Times* 1 Apr. 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/world/asia/air-pollution-linked-to-1-2-million-deaths-in-china.html>

Wong, Gillian, and Takashi Mochizuki. "Sony Is Closer to Shipping PlayStation 4 Videogame Consoles in China." *Wall Street Journal* 9 Oct. 2014. Web. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sony-closer-to-shipping-game-consoles-in-china-1412851408>

"Xinjiang | Autonomous Region, China." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2015. Web. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546118/Xinjiang>

Yan, Chunmei. "We Can't Change Much Unless the Exams Change: Teachers' Dilemmas in the Curriculum Reform in China." *Improving Schools* 18.1 (2015): 5–19.

Yan, Fang, and Terril Jones. "McDonald's to double China restaurants by 2013." *Reuters*. Dec. 10 2010. Web. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/15/us-mcdonalds-china-idUSTRE6BE0VJ20101215>

Yan, Hao. *China's Vocational Education and Training: The Next Key Target of Education Promotion*. Singapore : East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 2010.

"Yanqing." *Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Bid Committee*. Web. <http://www.beijing-2022.cn/en/yanqing.htm>

Yu, Wonsoo. "A Report on Some Mongolie Languages and Their Dialects Which Are Facing the Danger of Disappearing." *Central Asiatic Journal* 55.2 (2011): 275–293.

Zhan, Lingjing, and Yanqun He. "Understanding Luxury Consumption in China: Consumer Perceptions of Best-Known Brands." *Journal of Business Research* 65.10 (2012): 1452–1460.

Zhang, Gaoming, and Yong Zhao. "Achievement Gap in China." *Closing the Achievement Gap from an International Perspective*. Ed. Julia V. Clark. Springer Netherlands, 2014. 217–228.

Zhang, Lin, and Anthony YH Fung. "Working as Playing? Consumer Labor, Guild and the Secondary Industry of Online Gaming in China." *New Media & Society* 16.1 (2014): 38–54.

Zhang, Mingqiong, Cherrie Jihua Zhu, and Chris Nyland. "The Institution of Hukou-Based Social Exclusion: A Unique Institution Reshaping the Characteristics of Contemporary Urban China." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.4 (2014): 1437–1457.

Zhang, Tao et al. "Clinical Characteristics and Direct Medical Cost of Respiratory Syncytial Virus Infection in Children Hospitalized in Suzhou, China." *The Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal* 33.4 (2014): 337–341.

Zhao Xinying, Luo Wangshu. "Changes to Gaokao Will See All Students Equal." *Chinadaily.com.cn*. 4 Sept. 2014. Web. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-09/04/content_18547320.htm

Zhao, Yiou. "Analysis of Chinese Luxury Market Status Quo." *Proceedings of 2014 1st International Conference on Industrial Economics and Industrial Security* 8. Ed. Menggang Li et al. Springer Berlin Heidelberg, (2015): 603–606.

Zhao, Xu, Robert L. Selman, and Helen Haste. "Academic Stress in Chinese Schools and a Proposed Preventive Intervention Program." *Cogent Education* 2.1 (2015).

Zumbrun, Josh. "Younger Generation Faces a Savings Deficit." *The Wall Street Journal*. Web. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/savings-turn-negative-for-younger-generation-1415572405>